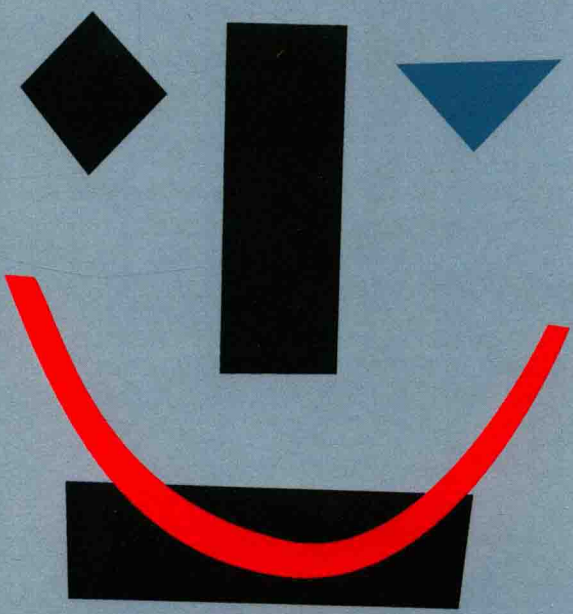
Topics in Humor Research 4

Humour and Relevance

Francisco Yus



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Humour and Relevance

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Volume 4

Humour and Relevance
by Francisco Yus

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To my mother.
She left us when I had just started writing this book.
But her lessons, her advice and the memories
of the time spent together will always remain vivid

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Bryn Moody for his stylistic suggestions on a draft of this book

Introduction

This book is an application of relevance theory, a cognitive pragmatics theory of human communication, to different types of humorous discourse (jokes, stand-up monologues, humorous ironies, advertisements, cartoons, etc.). It takes an explicit cognitive approach to what is at stake when speakers attempt a humorous outcome of their discourses and what inferential strategies interlocutors perform in order to process these discourses and obtain the expected humorous effects. Like cognitive pragmatics in general and relevance theory in particular, this book exhibits an explicit interest in the inferences needed to understand the speaker's (humorous) intentions and his/her coded stimuli (jokes, monologues, cartoons, etc.), and in the mental representations and processes that underlie the comprehension of (humorous) communicative phenomena. The main aim of the book is therefore to demonstrate that different humorous discourses and the way they are processed can be accounted for by resorting to the claims made within relevance theory. Besides, several taxonomies are also proposed in the book, for example concerning types of incongruity-resolution patterns, jokes and punning configurations. These result from the very specific ways in which texts and contexts are combined in the hearer's (or reader's) search of a relevant interpretation and eventual humorous effects (see Yus forthcoming, for a general review).

Relevance theory makes very precise claims about what mental mechanisms are used both in interpreting coded inputs (mainly utterances) and turning them into contextualised propositions (eventual interpretations). These mental mechanisms are universal and biologically rooted in human psychology and, as a consequence, they should also be applicable to how humorous discourses are interpreted and how humorous effects are eventually generated (as predicted by the speaker). In other words, we do not have a special interpretive procedure for processing humorous discourses but a single unitary cognitive criterion, and all the claims made by this theory on how discourses are interpreted are also at work in the interpretation of humorous discourses.

Among others, several relevance-theoretic claims are essential to understand the analysis of humour carried out in this book. These claims make up the theoretical foundations of this relevance-theoretic application to humorous discourses, as summarised below:

1. Human cognition is geared to the maximisation of relevance. It pays attention to what might turn out to be relevant and dismisses what seems not to

be worth the mental effort. Regarding humour, it is clear that it does not offer the hearer much informational reward. Besides, very often the hearer has to devote additional cognitive resources to understanding jokes and getting their humorous point. However, this apparent irrelevance is compensated for by a number of effects, not only the humorous effects themselves (perhaps accompanied by laughter), but also other interesting effects such as increased solidarity and group bonding, among others.

2. Humans cannot enter people's minds, but they can mind-read their inferential strategies. When a speaker tells a joke or utters other types of humorous discourse, he/she can make certain predictions about how this discourse is going to be interpreted, which inferential strategies are going to be used in enriching the discourse into fully contextualised interpretations, which implications will probably be derived in the hearer's search for relevance, and how much quality and quantity of contextual information the hearer is likely to access and retrieve in order to comprehend the discourse appropriately. This human capacity is invaluable for designing discourses so as to generate eventual humorous effects.
3. We have a cognitive ability to assess candidate interpretations for the same utterance in a specific context and rank them in terms of relevance. When we interpret an utterance, there are several possible interpretations in the specific context in which it is uttered, and we have an evolved capacity to assess the strength and likelihood of these interpretations and end up selecting only one of these candidates, specifically the one yielding the best balance between the interest that it provides (positive cognitive effects in relevance-theoretic terminology) and the mental effort that its processing entails. Only one candidate interpretation is selected and the others are dismissed. Crucially for an analysis of humour, human cognition performs this assessment of interpretations at a sub-conscious level (we would go mad if, on every interpretive occasion, we had to stop to compute all possible interpretations and then select the most relevant one). Therefore, the speaker can play with the likelihood of interpretations, predict that one of them will be the most likely to be selected (and that any other interpretation will unconsciously be discarded), and then invalidate it at a subsequent stretch of the joke in order to cause an incongruity and eventually an outcome of humorous effects.
4. There are substantial gaps between (a) what the speaker says and what the speaker intends to communicate and (b) between what the interlocutor hears and what the hearer eventually interprets. These gaps are filled by inference. For relevance theory, human communication involves the use of a code (we do use utterances, monologues, cartoons, etc. to communicate our thoughts) but coding and decoding amounts to a very small portion of what goes on

during interpretation, mostly dominated by inference, i.e. by turning the schematic coded discourse into meaningful and relevant interpretations. In order to do so, hearers extract the logical form of the utterance (context-free operation) and engage in a number of (context-bound) inferential strategies such as reference assignment, disambiguation, free enrichment and conceptual adjustment. As will be analysed in this book, all of these strategies may be manipulated or exploited for the sake of generating humorous effects.

A brief summary of the chapters in this book follows. In the first chapter, a general review of relevance theory is provided. Some key issues are described, such as relevance theory's inheritance of some of Grice's ideas (even though the theory is rather critical of Grice's main claims such as the need of a cooperative principle and its maxims), the two principles of relevance and the general steps of interpretation. Other notions are also addressed such as (mutual) manifestness and the explicature/implicature distinction. The chapter ends with the discussion on whether this theory is suited to explain social aspects of communication.

The second chapter is on general implications of relevance-theoretic ideas for humour research. It contains the same Sections as the previous chapter and for each of them there is an explanation of its applicability to research on humour. In this chapter, two pairs of terms introduced in chapter 1 are now applied to humorous communication: *positive/negative contextual constraint* and *positive/negative non-propositional effect*. The former accounts for non-propositional qualities of the interaction that *underlie* communication and hence *constrain* the successful outcome of the speaker's humorous intent (for example, the hearer's sense of humour, the hearer's beliefs, the speaker's (in)ability to tell jokes, etc.), while the latter refers to non-propositional effects that are generated during communication and are hence added positively or negatively to the effects arising from the processing of the utterance (e.g. the humorous effects generated by the comprehension of a joke).

Chapter Three studies one of the most well-known theories of humour: the *incongruity-resolution pattern*, which fits the relevance-theoretic proposal of how humorous discourses are interpreted and how humour is eventually generated. Several terminological proposals are reviewed and, at the end of the chapter, my own proposal of a taxonomy of incongruity-resolution cases is proposed and exemplified. In this chapter the notion of *make-sense frame* is also introduced. It refers to stereotypical ways of building up scenarios for the comprehension of humorous discourses and covers terms previously proposed in the bibliography such as *frame*, *schema* or *script*.

The next chapter reviews my proposal of an *Intersecting Circles Model* of humorous communication that yields seven types of joke depending on the

intersection (or lack of it) of three areas depicted as *Circles*: the aforementioned make-sense frame, the cultural frame, and utterance interpretation. Many jokes base their humorous potential on the combination of two of these areas or *Circles*. One of the most productive ones is the intentional use of a make-sense frame that biases the way some subsequent portion of text is understood (utterance interpretation). However, some jokes do resort to just one of these *Circles* for the derivation of humorous effects.

Chapter Five analyses stand-up comedy performances and takes a more social line of analysis. Instead of the typical humorous strategies found in short jokes, stand-up monologues mainly rely on the strengthening or contradiction of collective representations held by the audience regarding their society and culture, and also on the communal status that the assumptions made (mutually) manifest by the comedian acquire during the performance. Very often, the audience realises that previously thought-to-be private or personal representations have, in fact, a collective quality, thus resulting humorously surprising. The chapter also applies the theory of epidemiology of representations to stand-up comedy performances, since the comedian's assumptions made manifest through his/her monologue spread epidemiologically throughout the audience in a virus-like way, eventually acquiring a cultural status.

The next chapter is about humorous ironies. Several analyses of irony comprehension are reviewed, starting with my proposal of a contextual source-centred view of irony, according to which the hearer can detect incongruities between the propositional form of the ironical utterance and one or several of these sources, either simultaneously or in succession, and this multiplicity of contextual options saves mental effort upon detecting the ironical intention. Secondly, the chapter reviews the role of a special metarepresentational ability, *epistemic vigilance*, in the identification of an ironical intention. Finally, a proposal of a second-order affective attitude identified during irony comprehension is made. This affective attitude aids to explain why ironies entail a typically negative or dissociative attitude (e.g. some opinion or thought that one disagrees with, an event that did not turn out as expected), but nevertheless result in a praising and even humorous interpretation.

The seventh chapter is about humour and translation (specifically joke translation). It updates a previous proposal of a chart of cases of translatability of jokes depending on a number of factors or *scenarios*, as they are called in the chapter. The basic premise of the chapter is that, in order to translate a joke, we have to try to be as faithful as possible to the inferential strategies envisaged by the source-language speaker for the source-language interlocutor, even if that entails changing the text of the joke completely. In other words, translators have to try to preserve

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the inferential steps and resulting balance of cognitive effects and mental effort, even if drastic alterations of the text have to be undertaken.

Chapters Eight and Nine deal with multimodal discourses: cartoons in the press and advertisements, respectively. Both are similar in the way relevance is achieved and humorous effects are generated, though they differ in the kind of topics and expected background knowledge in the audience. In both cases, the most interesting strategy for a relevance-theoretic analysis is the combination of the processing of a visual item in the discourse that alters the normal processing and choice of interpretations for the textual part of the discourse. Especially in the case of advertisements, the reader or viewer is forced to entertain several interpretations simultaneously aided by visual context, and this simultaneity puzzles him/her, resulting in the desired *stop-to-think strategy* that advertisers expect from readers in this advertisement-saturated world we live in.

Finally, chapter Ten very briefly addresses the analysis of conversational humour from a relevance-theoretic perspective. Traditionally, this theory has not studied conversations, but has preferred to concentrate on a more specific one-to-one type of communication (a single hearer who makes sense of a single speaker's utterance). Although there are prospects of research in conversational humour, there are to date very few studies of interactions within this theory. As a consequence, the same applies to studies of conversational humour. The chapter briefly reviews the importance of humour in conversation and opens up some possible areas of research (and parallel terminology) for this new conversation-oriented analysis of humour within relevance theory.

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