

Leprosy, prostitution and the significance of the tip; a relevance-theoretic account of puns

Humorous discourse constitutes a particularly interesting topic in the study of communication: how is it that jokes, which are often based on deception, ambiguity, untruthfulness and withholding of relevant information, nevertheless constitute successful acts of communication?

I argue for a relevance-theoretic account of the humorous effect of puns based on and somewhat expanding Yus' (2003) influential account. I exemplify my analysis with the following joke:

- (1) Q: What did the leper say to the prostitute?
A: Keep the tip.

Jokes as successful acts of communication appears as a paradox when seen with Gricean (1975) eyes: Joking involves breaking the principles and maxims that were introduced precisely to *explain* communication.

Yus' account is based on Sperber and Wilson's (1995) *Relevance Theory*. At the core of Relevance Theory is the hypothesis that human communication is based on a single *principle of relevance*, which states that when an utterance is interpreted, the first interpretation that gives an optimal balance between mental effort exerted and positive cognitive effects achieved, is the correct interpretation. As Yus points out, this principle is meant to hold for all cases of ostensive communication, and as he illustrates, it can be successfully used to account for a wide range of humorous interpretations, given the assumption that the 'joke frame' creates specific expectations of cognitive effects.

In the case of puns, the hearer recognizes "a duality of meanings in a single surface manifestation" (Yus, 2003:1320). Since discovering the "covert interpretation of the pun is costly in terms of mental effort, [...] the offset of this cognitive operation—basically an enjoyment of humor—must be positive in terms of cognitive effects." (ibid.)

While Yus' account explains the success of a significant number of examples of jokes, he says nothing about what makes jokes *unsuccessful*. That is, a hearer can fail to arrive at the correct interpretation or the correct interpretation can fail to yield the necessary positive cognitive effects for a humorous effect to be achieved. An adequate account of jokes must explain also these facts, and I show through a detailed analysis of the interpretive process of (1) and certain significant permutations of it how relevance theory provides the necessary tools to achieve this result. Specifically, I argue that Yus' account does not provide the detail

necessary to explain (a) why the first and most accessible interpretation of the pun-word in (1) ('tip' = 'gratuity') is deemed insufficiently relevant and (b) why the discovery of the second interpretation ('tip' = 'extreme end of limb') has the strong cognitive effects that it does. I argue that an adequate explanation of (a) and (b) must take into account how the different pieces of information introduced in the joke interact in the process of interpretation. The success of the joke, I argue, requires that in the end all the pieces of information – as exemplified by leprosy, prostitution and 'the tip' in (1) – fall neatly into place and contribute to relevance.

References

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