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Incongruity-resolution cases in jokes

Francisco Yus

University of Alicante, Filología Inglesa, Apartado 99, E-03080 Alicante, Spain

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Abstract

The incongruity-resolution model is one of the most popular theories that propose an explanation for the strategies underlying humorous texts. In this paper, a taxonomy of incongruity-resolution Cases is proposed according to a relevance-theoretic stance. Then, the extent to which these Cases are exhaustive enough to cover the whole range of possible incongruity-resolution patterns is checked with a corpus of jokes. Furthermore, an analysis is carried out concerning the implications of matching certain kinds of jokes with specific Cases of the taxonomy. Some conclusions on their pragmatic quality and their overall humorous effects are also drawn.

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1. Introduction

Incongruity-resolution (henceforth IR) theory claims that most jokes follow a similar pattern: the hearer processes the text of the joke and suddenly an incongruity is encountered. The hearer then has to find a resolution so as to obtain the intended humorous effects. Since IR predicts a linear processing of the joke until some form of cognitive dissonance turns up (Yus, 1997), it fits the relevance-theoretic model of comprehension (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), according to which hearers engage in a mutual parallel adjustment during the interpretation of every chunk of text making up the utterance, centered upon (a) determining the intended explicit interpretation (*explicature*), (b) deriving possible implicated premises and conclusions (*implicatures*), and (c) accessing as much contextual information as necessary (*contextual assumptions*) so as to achieve relevant interpretive outcomes for (a) and (b). Needless to say, this chunk-by-chunk processing is predicted and manipulated by the humorist for the sake of generating humorous effects.

Although several authors have, one way or another, proposed this dual-phase¹ framework of humorous texts, the research by Suls (1972, 1977, 1983) is among the most influential proposals, according to which most (if not all) humorous texts follow a fixed pattern:

the perceiver meets with an incongruity (usually in the form of a punch line or a cartoon) and then is motivated to resolve the incongruity either by retrieval of information in the joke or cartoon or from his/her own storehouse of information. According to this account, humor results when the incongruity is resolved; that is, the punch line is seen to make sense at some level with the earlier information in the joke. (Suls, 1983:43)

E-mail address: francisco.yus@ua.es.

¹ Typically conceptualized as two phases, but also understood as a three-phase phenomenon. For example, Hull et al. (2016:3) claim that Suls' is a three stage information processing model, according to which humor involves: "a *set up stage* where an expectation is created, an *incongruity stage* where the expectation is violated, and a *resolution stage* where the discrepancy between the expected and the actual state of affairs is bridged".

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This simple schema accounts for most instances of humorous discourse (Ritchie, 2006:252). Hirt and Genshaft (1982:453), correctly stress that “the sudden discovery achieved by a reorganization of symbols and meanings into a surprising new relationship is the source of gratification in humor... [which] reflects a successful mastery of the environment or resolution of the challenge presented by the humor paradox on incongruity”.² However, as will be pointed out in Section 2.3, the way this incongruity-resolution is achieved varies according to two broad areas of joke processing. On the one hand, incongruities may arise when constructing an appropriate scenario for the comprehension of the joke (so-called *make-sense frame*, see below). On the other hand, incongruities may turn up when processing the text of the joke for relevance (involving cognitive strategies such as reference assignment, disambiguation, concept adjustment, etc.). Beyond this broad classification, several Cases will be proposed in Section 3. Before, in Section 2 some issues concerning IR will be commented upon. Finally, Sections 4 and 5 will be devoted to an analysis of the corpus of jokes collected for this paper and possible conclusions that may be drawn from this analysis.

2. Some issues concerning IR

2.1. Role of expectations

Suls (1972:85) states that the information obtained from the processing of the initial part of the text serves as an aid to predict the forthcoming text (Dyner, 2012:158). But there is little that a hearer can actually expect from subsequent text, apart from a congruence with the situation just constructed in order to make sense of the joke. When Martin (2006:64) writes about how “joke setup causes the listener to make a prediction about the likely outcome. When the punch line does not conform to the prediction, the listener is surprised and looks for a cognitive rule that will make the punch line follow from the material in the joke setup”, he is mainly focusing on the initial construction of a situation (frame, schema, etc.) in order to make sense of the joke. No doubt, this mental construction allows for expectations which are eventually disconfirmed (Fearman, 2014:4). However, concerning the forthcoming text of a subsequent part of the joke, only on very few occasions can the hearer anticipate which text may be coming up. Suls proposes examples such as (1):

(1) One prostitute said to another, “Can you lend me ten dollars until I get back on my back?”.

This is probably one of the few examples in which the hearer is indeed entitled to expect a specific chunk of text, given the fixed structure of the idiom “get back on one's feet”. In this joke, these expectations are contradicted, hence generating an incongruity. On normal occasions, though, hearers can only build up expectations of congruence with the situation previously constructed or with interpretations already selected for that initial part of the joke. In other words, the subsequent part of the joke is indeed incongruous, but not with some expected text, but with previously inferred situations and interpretations taken on board so far during the comprehension of the joke.

2.2. Incongruity, resolution, or both

In this paper, it will be assumed that incongruities must be resolved before any humorous effects may be produced. Incongruities are not generally welcome, and only by finding a resolution that reconciles the incongruous parts, can the hearer obtain the expected outcome. Indeed, ruling out incongruities is a natural, biologically rooted mechanism of human cognition, and “any organism interested in improving its cognitive environment will attempt to minimise inconsistencies in its representation system. . . A hearer aiming at an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance must find an interpretation that either eliminates or prevents the inconsistencies that the incongruous propositional contents might give rise to” (Curcú, 1998:311–312).

² Although Suls is indeed regarded as the main analyst of the incongruity-resolution model, other authors have previously hinted at this humorous pattern. For example, Keith-Spiegel (1972:8) underlines the importance of Beattie (1776), for whom “laughter arose when two or more inconsistent or unsuitable circumstances were united into one complex assemblage”, and also comments on other authors such as Kant (1790) and Schopenhauer (1819). According to the former, laughter is “an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing”. Similarly, Schopenhauer viewed laughter as arising from “the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through in some relation, and the laugh itself [to be] just the expression of this incongruity”. Freud (1916) is also worth mentioning in stressing the contrast between frame and situation, including effects of cancellation and/or confirmation of expectations and presumptions, and the resolution. The list of authors who, one way or another, deal with incongruity-resolution is long. In this paper I have centered upon those which fit more nicely a relevance-theoretic stance. For further references on the subject see, among others, Attardo (1994) and Thielemann (2015). I am grateful to a reviewer for pointing the latter out to me.

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