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But seriously: On conversational humour and (un)truthfulness[☆]

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Abstract

This paper addresses a thorny theoretical problem concerning the workings of conversational humour, which is frequently seen as a special mode/frame of communication but, simultaneously, as a vehicle for communicating meanings outside this frame. The first aim is to tease out the different terms prevalent in humour studies that attempt to capture this distinction (such as playfulness, jocularity, or non-seriousness). Second, a proposal is made in favour of the concept of (un)truthfulness, approached from a neo-Gricean perspective, as a notion that can help elucidate this twofold problem better, giving a full spectrum of humour manifestations without causing any terminological contradictions. Grice's first maxim of Quality is thus invoked to account for the main categories of humour distinguished here: autotelic humour (which resides in opting out of this maxim) and speaker-meaning-telic humour (which communicates truthful or covertly untruthful speaker meaning by means of fulfilment, flouting or violation of this maxim and the other ones as well). Speaker meaning may arise as what is said (as a result of maxim fulfilment) and/or implicature (as a consequence of maxim flouting), and both levels of meaning may recruit maxim violations, which lead to deception. This article contributes to the debate on the position of humour in the Gricean framework.

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1. Introduction

Many studies on humour, not only in linguistics but also in other disciplines, tacitly take as their point of departure an assumption that humour involves non-seriousness, jocularity, play(fulness) and the like. Understood only intuitively, these notions have been elevated to the status of widely accepted academic terms without adequate consideration of their actual meanings or technical definitions. As will be shown in the course of this paper, humour is juxtaposed with seriousness, which captures any kind of communication that is not orientated towards causing amusement. In this vein, a distinction is traditionally drawn between a humorous frame and non-humorous frame (captured also under several other labels). At the same time, researchers emphasise that the two frames can, and frequently do, overlap inasmuch as humorous utterances can carry serious meanings. This seems to render the seriousness vs. humour dichotomy otiose.

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The central aim of this paper is to critically revisit the prevalent terms and notions associated with non-seriousness, as discussed in humour research and outside this field, notably in the philosophy of language, and to propose alternative concepts that capture the distinctions better. Referring to a neo-Gricean view of conversation, this paper gives pragmatic-philosophical insights into the complex relationships between conversational humour and truthfulness/untruthfulness. For this purpose, following a neo-Gricean tradition, a distinction is drawn between *overt* and *covert untruthfulness* (Dynel, 2016a,b; cf. Vincent Marrelli, 2003, 2004, 2006), based on the type of *nonfulfilment* of the first maxim of Quality. A postulate is put forward that the concepts of *truthfulness* (together with *covert untruthfulness*) and *overt untruthfulness*, as well as *overt autotelic untruthfulness*, may be employed with reference to humour (in various forms and guises). A distinction is thus made between *speaker-meaning-telic humour* which carries *speaker meaning* (in Gricean parlance, the meaning intended by the speaker) relevant outside the humorous frame and *autotelic humour* (humour for the sake of humour), which carries no speaker meaning. Several methods of communicating speaker meaning are also depicted.

The focus here is on *conversational humour*, a notion which encompasses utterances capable of affording (chosen) interactants amusement. The examples of humour (used for illustrative purposes in the course of the discussion) have been sourced from the medical drama series “House MD”. Its plot revolves around the life and work of the eponymous diagnostician and his co-workers. The series (conceived by Paul Attanasio and David Shore) originally ran on the Fox network for eight seasons (November 2004–May 2012). Since that time it has also been aired internationally on other channels, syndicated on DVDs, and streamed on the Internet around the world.

This choice of data is predicated on the premise of the *verisimilitude* of contemporary drama discourse (i.e. its qualitative similarity to real-life discourse), as well as the interpretative availability of scripted mass-mediated interactions (for discussion and references, see Dynel, 2011a, 2017a). Fictional interactions on the screen are the fruit of the labour of scriptwriters, language users who devise characters’ interactions based on the workings of real-life communication and their psychological underpinnings. Production crews operate on the assumption that characters’ interactions should be tacitly accepted as natural relative to the socio-cultural context and should not strike the viewers as being artificial. Fictional discourse does show statistically infrequent communicative/linguistic features, though. A case in point is Dr House’s use of humour. Witty, albeit frequently aggressive, it frequently serves as a defence mechanism or a vehicle for self-amusement and an exhibition of his superiority, rather than being deployed for the sake of standard entertainment of others. This explains why House’s interlocutors are only intermittently shown to be amused by his utterances (which do exhibit the hallmarks of humour, though) or to respond with humour. Nonetheless, the humour found in the series’ scripted interactions suffices to pursue the theoretical discussion of the universal workings of humour. This analysis does not take account of the humorous effects exerted on the viewers of the series, for whom the humour is, indubitably, constructed by the production crew. The viewer’s perspective, however, affords insights into the fictional characters’ intentions and beliefs (as designed by the production crew), which are crucial for the theoretical distinctions made here. The result of this academic “mind-reading” carries a greater degree of certainty (but not full certainty) concerning the fictional speakers’ communicative intentions than real-life data would.

This paper is organised as follows. Section 2 gives a critical overview of the notion of non-seriousness and several other nearly synonymous terms reverberating across the literature on humour, which is presented as being enclosed in a special frame or mode of communication. Section 3 reports on the widely endorsed postulate that humour frequently merges with seriousness, which is why the seriousness-humour dichotomy seems to be otiose. Section 4 introduces an alternative concept that helps account for the fact that humorous utterances can communicate intended meaning outside the humorous frame. After a few mentions of truth(fulness) in humour scholarship have been addressed, a proposal is put forward in favour of defining truthfulness, as well as overt and covert untruthfulness, in the light of Grice’s (1989) first maxim of Quality. Thus, a postulate is made that, in conversational humour, this maxim (together with the other ones) may be fulfilled, violated, flouted or opted out of. Section 5 elaborates on autotelic humour, which originates in overt autotelic untruthfulness that does not communicate any speaker meaning, and section 6 focuses on speaker-meaning-telic humour, the type of humour that does communicate speaker meaning in various ways and forms. In section 7, a number of final conclusions are offered.

2. Non-seriousness, playfulness, jocularity, joking and kidding

Humour is frequently taken as a communicative activity in which people engage solely for the sake of causing amusement (of self and others). This presumption goes back to classical philosophy: “As Thomas Aquinas said of *ludicra vel jocosa*, playful or joking matters, they are ‘words and deeds in which nothing is sought beyond the soul’s pleasure’” (Morreall, 2009:34). In addition, the “serious” vs. “humorous” dichotomy can be found as early as in Plato’s writings on poetry. A generalisation can be made (cf. Holt, 2013:69) that in the bulk of contemporary studies, humour tends to be juxtaposed with *seriousness*, and thus equated with *non-seriousness*. Many authors (e.g. Emerson, 1969; Berlyne, 1972; Mulkay, 1988; Kotthoff, 1996) have made this distinction, and it has frequently been taken as a bedrock premise in the conversational analytic approach to humour, the authors’ focus being its specific categories (see e.g. Drew, 1987; Schegloff, 2001;

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