

LINGUISTIC HUMOUR IT'S NOT THE WAY YOU TELL IT!

Janet Holmes
Victoria University of Wellington

This analysis of linguistic humour represents an initial attempt to describe a function of speech, as manifested in the English language, which may well be a sociolinguistic universal. Jokes may be regarded, from a sociolinguistic point of view as examples of verbal play or verbal art; as expressions of "the ludic and aesthetic motives" of speech (Hymes, 1964). A socio-psychological approach might regard jokes as one means of expressing the solidarity between members of a group, or of manipulating power and status relationships in a social situation. These are possibilities which need to be explored in detail in the future. For the present I intend to postpone discussion of the social function and context of humour and concentrate on the linguistic features of jokes.

Linguistic jokes are analysed here according to the ways in which the various levels of language are exploited for humorous purposes: graphological, phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical and semantic. Some reference is also made to the sociolinguistic variables which may be manipulated with humorous effects within the framework of jokes. Two broad categories of jokes have been established: (A) jokes which exploit surface structure ambiguities in standard English; (B) jokes which make their point by deviating from the norm in some way. This classification is not altogether satisfactory but it seems well suited to the material collected. It will become apparent that the second category exploits a wider range of these variables than the first, although this may be true only for the examples discussed in this paper.

William Hazlitt in his essay "On Wit and Humour" says: "The essence of the laughable . . . is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another." The disconnection of ideas can often be achieved linguistically by a manipulation of the various levels of language. If humour derives, at least in part, from a perception of the absurdity or incongruity of juxtaposed ideas, this suggests that the listener holds certain expectations or makes predictions about what he is about to hear, which are in some way subverted. He hears something unpredictable and absurd, but still meaningful; he is forced to reinterpret the utterance in the light of the unexpected element, and the meaningfulness of the unexpected interpretation functions against the background of the predicted or expected interpretation. It is this juxtaposition of the expected with the unexpected and absurd which seems to give rise to the response of laughter. The perception of two meanings where only one was expected can be intellectually very satisfying. Ambiguity alone, however, does not guarantee humour. The element of incongruity is essential: the two or more possible interpretations must be sufficiently dislocated and disconnected to provide an absurd contrast. In the majority of jokes the surprise element occurs in the last two or three words. The decoding process is a continuous one, involving constant modification as the listener receives more information. Towards the end of the utterance the listener generally feels relatively confident that he can accurately predict the last few words on the basis of the input received; the possibilities become more restricted both grammatically and lexically with each additional piece of information. So the listener's mind is tuned in to a particular structural framework and lexical set; and then, in a joke, the whole framework collapses and his predictions prove to be inaccurate or inadequate.

Puns provide excellent examples of these principles in category (A). They generally depend on the ambiguity of at least one lexical item: in other words, puns generally exploit the existence of homonyms in the language. There is some confusion in the literature over the distinction between homonyms, homophones and polysemantic words. The confusion arises largely from the lack of any generally accepted definition of a word. For the purpose of this analysis a homonym is defined as one sound sequence or phonological structure representing two distinct meanings or semantically differentiated concepts. Each of these concepts is called a "word". This definition eliminates the need for the terms "homophone" and "polysemantic

word", since each meaning of the sound sequence is regarded as a distinct "word". In some cases the meanings will be semantically quite different; in others they will be more closely related. An example of the homonym as the basis of a pun is provided by an introductory remark made by a Professor in a lecture to his urban geography students:

(1) I would like you to consider Liverpool as a whole.

Here one sound sequence /həʊl/ may be interpreted as two distinct words (which also happen to be distinguished graphologically): *whole* meaning "entirety" and *hole* meaning "dull place". It is a clear example of the exploitation of phonology for humorous purposes, since it involves two distinct meanings at the level of semantics which are by coincidence phonologically identical in their surface structure. There is no intra-textual syntactic or lexical clue to indicate the possibility of more than one interpretation; nor is there any syntactic ambiguity. The linguistic competence of the listeners, however, enables them to perceive two meanings, one contextually appropriate, the other absurdly inappropriate.

Jokes in category (a) involve the exploitation of a surface structure ambiguity. An analysis of the reasons for the ambiguity, however, involves focussing on different levels of language in different types of jokes. At the morphological level, for example, there is a particular type of joke (usually presented in written form) which depends on a false morphological analysis of a particular word. The word could in fact be described as a pseudo-homonym. Examples are:

(2) Badminton: the reason the lamb tasted so awful.

(3) Inundated: sitting home all alone waiting for the telephone.

The perception of an ambiguity depends in this type of joke on a recognition of the potential polymorphemic analysis of a word which is in fact a monomorpheme. The morphological pseudo-homonym can also occur in narrated jokes:

(4) "I'm really having trouble with this syntax. Do you understand it?"
"Understand it? I didn't even know it *was* taxed."

Another example goes beyond the word level and takes the analysis into the area of syntactic ambiguity:

(5) A drunk staggering home tripped over a friend who was lying underneath his car. "Why are you down there?" he asked.
"Piston broke" was the answer. "Ssame here" replied the drunk.

An analysis of the ambiguity here involves recognising the existence of two different grammatical structures underlying the surface-structure phonemic identity of the crucial sound sequence. The semantic significance of suprasegmental features such as stress and intonation is sometimes discounted in linguistic jokes which rely solely on phonemic identity for their ambiguity (see also examples 21 and 22).

There is a related type of joke which involves the exploitation of grammatical homonyms for humorous effect. The simplest examples depend on the ambiguity of a form like *runs*, which may be interpreted as a plural noun or as a third person singular verb form.

(6) "What has one wheel and flies?"
"A barrowload of manure."

More complex examples also rely on the potential ambiguity of forms which may function as more than one part of speech, and similarly involve two quite different underlying structural analyses.

(7) A lightning conductor gets through Beethoven's *Fifth* in twenty minutes.

(8) She married a sailor because she wanted to have children and rear admirals.

The latter example relies firstly on the possibility of interpreting *rear* as both verb and as an adjective, and secondly on the ambiguity of *have* which here provides an example of syllepsis – a device which will be discussed in more detail below. Another method of exploiting syntactic ambiguity in jokes is the use of anaphoric pronouns where the referent is ambiguous.

(9) Mrs Jones finally boarded the plane for New York. Shortly afterwards her huge nose was turned into the wind, and, like some enormous beast, she crawled along the runway.

In more complex jokes the ambiguity of a particular lexical item may be the result of the deletion of some element of meaning by regular transformational rules. This process occurs generally in contexts where there is no possibility of misinterpretation. One example is the transference of an action from one noun to another which occurs in phrases such as *the kettle's boiling* and *the tap's running* where it is the water which is in fact *boiling* and *running*. Many linguistic jokes exploit the potential ambiguity of surface structures which result from deletions of this kind by deliberately emphasising a possible but inappropriate interpretation of such phrases.

- (10) "It's time I changed the baby."
"Well make sure you get a quieter one."

- (11) He wasn't earning enough money so he took a job in a film studio trying to pick up a little extra. Her name was Sally.

The listener's initial interpretation of *extra* as "extra money" depends on the assumption that a regular transformational rule has deleted the second occurrence of the noun *money*. The final sentence forces a reinterpretation of *extra* and exploits a potential ambiguity of which the listener was initially unaware. Similarly in the next example the potential ambiguity of *fill* is made use of, and the listener becomes aware of the elements of meaning which are present in the deep structure but deleted from the surface structure.

- (12) I would like to introduce Mrs Betty Brown: the only woman who could fill this hall.

Jokes which exploit the ambiguity of lexical items such as *fill* depend on a linguistic and non-linguistic context which allows the listener to perceive both interpretations: the appropriate and the absurd. These factors contribute to the perceptive set or framework of those listening to the joke. In the next two examples the extra-verbal context steers the listener towards one interpretation of the homonyms, while the final intra-textual lexical items bring the alternative unexpected interpretation into focus.

- (13) Letter from wife to husband: "Bert I missed you yesterday. Come home and let me have another shot."
(14) Comment on a famous actor: "He played the King as if he were in constant fear that someone else was about to play the ace."

The alternative interpretations of *play* in the last example also involve the semantic features of the word *King*. One interpretation relies on its having the feature +ANIMATE, the other on its being -ANIMATE. These semantic features are frequently the basis of the alternative meanings of items which may be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. The close relationship between syntax and semantics is clearly demonstrated in the following example which exploits this potential ambiguity.

- (15) A proportion of the Church Building Fund will be used to get the choir properly plastered.

The choice of ± ANIMATE, as a semantic feature of *choir* determines its grammatical status as subject or object of *plaster*; and consequently *plaster* may be interpreted as intransitive or transitive.

The use of words in both their literal and metaphorical senses within the same sentence is a common literary device. Syllepsis is another closely related device whereby one word is made to refer to two others in the sentence, but where it applies to them in different senses. The verb *have* in (8) provides a simple example of the way this device may be used in jokes; *have* was clearly being used in two quite different senses. More complex examples may involve the manipulation of idioms and clichés, where the substitution of an unexpected item within the idiomatic phrase emphasises the potential ambiguity of the words.

- (16) Some husbands come in handy around the house; others come in unexpectedly.
(17) In most places cleanliness is next to godliness; round her it's next to impossible.

Finally in this category the ambiguity of surface structure may involve not just one or two lexical items, but the whole utterance. In literature extended similes and even allegories provide examples of surface structures which may be interpreted in two or more ways. They

often exploit a semantic coincidence just as homonyms exploit a phonological coincidence, where one surface structure may refer equally to two disparate objects. An example of the use of such ambiguous reference in jokes is provided by the following definition:

- (18) A good speech should be like a woman's skirt: short enough to arouse the interest but long enough to cover the essentials.

Throughout category (A) the progression from the simple homonym to the more complex ambiguities of the later examples demonstrates the ways in which the inter-relationship between the various levels of language may be exploited for humorous purposes. The analysis has moved from a consideration of the homonym which involves the coincidental phonological identity of two different words to an exploration of the mutual network of relationships between the phonological form, lexical collocations, syntactic status and semantic features of the lexical items in linguistic jokes.

The second major category involves deviations from the norm or the mishandling of language with humorous results. The humour derives, as in category (A), from the perception of two meanings one of which is appropriate and the other absurd. The interesting difference however is that this category involves two alternative surface structures, one explicit and one implicit: the absurd and unpredictable surface structure is provided, but it functions against the background of the appropriate and predictable surface structure. The listener hears only the inappropriate or marked forms, but his knowledge or competence (both linguistic and sociolinguistic) supplies the unmarked and appropriate forms with which it contrasts; he appreciates the deviations against the background of his knowledge of the norm. A simple example at the graphological level will illustrate the point. The following paragraph appeared in a newspaper column.

- (19) To-day I am MAKing aN inno6£vation, as you mayalready have gessed, I am typng this article myself Zz¾Instead of writing it, The idea is to save time and exvBKpense, also to demonstrat0 that I can type /ust as well as any blessedgirl if I give my mind to iT''''

Newspaper readers have reason to expect a high standard of correctness in spelling and punctuation. This paragraph relies on these expectations in order to deviate from the norm. The content of the paragraph explicitly acknowledges that a deviation from normal practice is involved, yet pretends to ignore the impeccable orthography and pronunciation associated with it. This kind of tongue-in-cheek "competence for incompetence" is a feature of many jokes in category (B). To the extent that the narrator of the joke is aware of the "mistakes", the joke involves a conscious manipulation of language for humorous effect. A different example at the graphological level illustrates another variation in this category where the narrator is conscious of the incompetence involved although the original perpetrator of the "mistakes" is not.

- (20) Letter to the Town Council:

Dear Sirs,

Would you please send a plumber to inspect our metre as there is a mouse in it and it is most unerving to hear it squeal.

Many of the jokes in this category of inappropriate handling of language involve a second person recounting the mistakes of others, so placing the listener and the narrator in a superior position, and this seems to be one of the sociopsychological factors involved in the joke situation.

A coincidence of phonology in what could be regarded as an "extended homonym" may lead the listener to misinterpret the meaning. This often happens when children encounter language which is unfamiliar in some way, such as the specialised register used in prayers and hymns.

- (21) Gladly, my cross-eyed bear. (Gladly my cross I'd bear.)

- (22) We can sing full though we be. (Weak and sinful though we be.)

These interpretations, which are totally inappropriate in the context, reveal the child's attempts to make sense of unfamiliar syntax and vocabulary, despite inadequate or underdeveloped communicative competence in this area of language. A similar type of

ambiguity is exploited in jokes which depend on a phonological coincidence of a regional accent with R.P. in the pronunciation of two quite different words.

(23) Oyster: a lift or crane used in East London.

(24) Furry: found at the bottom of a Liverpool suburban garden.

Some jokes in category (B) depend on mispronunciations which result in the use of a meaningful but inappropriate word: the listener's knowledge of the appropriate word is essential for appreciation of the joke since the inappropriate form functions against the background of the unmarked or appropriate form. The following two examples involve a very conscious exploitation of phonological confusion:

(25) Sign outside a church: Help stop truth decay.

(26) Twins: womb-mates.

Another less deliberate type of phonological and morphological confusion is exploited in jokes which relate the incompetence of a third party; these often take the form of malapropisms or schoolboy howlers.

(27) The Mediterranean and the Red Sea are connected by the Sewage Canal.

(28) King Solomon had two hundred wives and five hundred porcupines.

(29) You must come and see our Nativity play Dad. I'm playing one of the three kings: the one who carries the frankenstein.

These are all examples of the mishandling of language by native speakers whose linguistic competence is in some way underdeveloped or imperfect. An obvious source of further examples in the mispronunciation of English by foreigners which often results in a meaningful but humorously inappropriate linguistic item. One well-known example is the air-hostess's greeting:

(30) We hope you will all have a nice fright.

Another type of linguistic joke involving the foreigner's misinterpretation or mishandling of language exploits the humorous potential of an inaccurate morphological analysis of English. The following exchange between a foreigner and his hostess provides an illustration.

(31) "I am only sorry I have cockroached on your hospitality."

"You mean encroached."

"Of course, I was forgetting; you are a woman."

Or the inappropriate item may be a paradigmatically related but in other respects completely different part of speech from the item it is replacing, as in this notice on a menu in Venice.

(32) If you are satisfactory please tell your friends. If you are unsatisfactory warn the waitress.

Non-standard dialects may also be a source of linguistic jokes when they provide a grammatical form which coincides phonologically with a different form in the standard dialect, thus providing a potential ambiguity.

(33) "Did you seed the grapefruit Nellie?"

"Yes madam, I seed 'em."

Cliches and idioms are a further potential source of confusion for foreigners. Again the inappropriate use of such forms functions in contrast to the listener's knowledge of the appropriate usage or meaning. The following example is the result of a confusion of lexical items which was heard in a Nairobi radio report of a race:

(34) "The drivers will now be keeping their toes closed for the last leg."

He corrected himself however, and added, "Of course I mean their toes crossed." The inappropriate use of language may also be due to an idiom being interpreted in a literal sense.

(35) Thank you for a lovely meal. We are thoroughly fed up.

(36) The man in the bunk above me was very seasick. And he kept on shouting 'Look out' when he meant 'Look in!'

From a sociolinguistic point of view many of the examples already discussed involve some specification of participants and context in order that the listener may appreciate their point.

The importance of such factors becomes even more explicit when the handling of different styles of language is involved. Fishman (1971) has said: "Humour during a formal lecture is realised through a metaphorical switch to another variety or code." And humour can often result from the use of an *inappropriate* variety or code as in the following example:

- (37) We normally inform our customers that their dentures are ready for collection Miss Brown, not that their choppers are off the block.

A second example provides evidence of the problems faced by a foreigner who is trying to manipulate formal written English:¹

- (38) "After forming my resolution of writing a large novel, I confided it to my crony, Mr Ram Ashootosh Lall, who warmly recommended to persevere in such a *magnus opus*. So I became divinely inflated periodically every evening from eight to twelve p.m., disregarding all entreaties from feminine relatives to stop and indulge in a blow-out in ordinary eatables. And at length my colossal effusion was completed, and I had written myself out: after which I had the indescribable joy and felicity to read my composition to my mothers in law and wives and their respective progenies and offsprings, whereupon, although they were not acquainted with a word of English, they were overcome by such severe admiration for my fecundity and native eloquence that they swooned with rapture."

Fishman (1971) has also discussed the concept of congruent and incongruent elements in a situation. A consideration of such factors leads beyond jokes which are strictly speaking "linguistic" and into a broader area of humour than can be covered in this paper. A few examples, however, will serve to illustrate the way in which sociolinguistic variables may be manipulated for humorous purposes. The jokes discussed so far in this second major category have generally involved the use of an inappropriate linguistic form in a context where the listener perceives the marked usage against the background of the expected or unmarked form. In the examples which follow the humour lies in the incongruity of some situational element or sociolinguistic variable. The first example involves the efforts of an elocution teacher who taught his class of Liverpool slum pupils to speak with an R.P. accent.

- (39) He was greeted one morning by a boy with a black eye who explained: "Me Mam battered me for talking like a fruit."

This is a good example of insensitivity to the context in which the code was to be used. At the other extreme there is this exchange between St Peter and an applicant at the gates of heaven:

- (40) "Who's there?"
 "It is I, Jonathan."
 "Go to hell. We've had enough Eton blokes for today."

The social dialect here clearly provides a clue to social identity. The schoolboy who wrote the following note was similarly heedless of his addressee:

- (41) Dear Sir I have wrote 100 times I have gone home and then I have went home.

And finally there is this story from a newspaper where the humour lies in the incongruous physical setting of the message:

- (42) Loss of the Boeing Supersonic Transport and cuts in the space programme have brought financial hardship to the U.S. city of Seattle. Although many people are leaving Seattle to find work elsewhere, not everyone has lost his sense of humour. Two young businessmen erected a huge billboard on Highway 99 for motorists heading out of the city. Its message reads: WILL THE LAST PERSON LEAVING SEATTLE TURN OUT THE LIGHTS.
 -UPI

To summarise briefly, linguistic jokes seem to depend on some unexpected manipulation of language which involves upsetting the listener's expectations and predictions. This may be related to two disparate underlying interpretations, one of which is predictable and appropriate, the other absurd and unexpected; secondly by the exploitation of some kind of

linguistic incompetence, so that the listener perceives a marked, inappropriate but meaningful utterance in the context of the norm from which it deviates, and relates the two contrasting surface structures (one explicit and one implicit) to the shared underlying meaning. Jokes in both categories may be usefully analysed by examining the various levels of language which they exploit in order to achieve their effect.

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