

The implicit expression of attitudes, mutual manifestness, and verbal humour

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Abstract

This paper argues that intentional humour often consists in implicitly expressing an attitude of disengagement towards an attributable assumption which is made strongly mutually manifest by the implicit import of an utterance, and suggests that such cases should be regarded as instances of echoic use. The role of the entertainment of the incongruous in the recovery of a humorous interpretation is discussed, and the status of the notion of incongruity in a theory of verbal humour is reconsidered. The analysis proposed here accommodates humorous cases of verbal irony as sub-cases of the generalization suggested and separates in a principled way those which are not.

1 Introduction

A search in the psychological literature on humour shows a growing predominance in the field of what has become known as 'the incongruity theory of humour' (e.g. Nerhardt 1976, Hillson and Martin 1994). The basic assumption in this framework is that humour arises as a reaction to what we perceive as incongruous. In philosophy, Kant, Schopenhauer, Spencer and many other philosophers interested in humour have also advocated some version of the incongruity theory. Pervasive as this position is, still a consistent and well defined notion of incongruity is unavailable. Besides, there are only very few scattered insights as to *why* the perception of the incongruous should trigger a humorous reaction at all.

This paper argues that a great amount of intentional humour, if not all, consists mainly in implicitly making a specific type of comment about some aspect of the world. As such, the study of humour is closely linked to the study of how speakers express — and hearers retrieve — propositional attitudes implicitly. In the type of verbal humour on which I concentrate here, speakers lead hearers to entertain mental representations that are attributable to someone other than the speaker at the time of the current utterance, while simultaneously expressing towards such representations an attitude of self-distancing.

This particular use of representations is what in relevance-theoretic terms is called echoic use. Traditionally, however, the term has been applied to material encoded by an utterance (e.g. the material within the scope of a negation operator (Carston and Noh 1995), the proposition expressed by an utterance, or the utterance itself (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1990, 1992). I argue here that communicators often use mutually manifest implicit assumptions in precisely the same way, and that these should also be acknowledged as targets of echoic use. Humorous effects, in particular, often arise through such use. My second point concerns the role of the entertainment of the incongruous in arriving at a humorous interpretation, and it is followed by a reconsideration of the status of the notion of incongruity in a theory of humorous interpretations. I claim that incongruity theories have tended to confuse the core of humour with a mechanism used in its creation. The entertainment of the incongruous is often present in verbal humour, but merely as a device that cues the hearer into the recognition of the speaker's echoic use, which has as its target one of the representations involved in the generation of an incongruity. My analysis accommodates humorous cases of verbal irony as sub-cases of the generalization I propose and separates in a principled way those which are not.

2 Pragmatic mechanisms of humour: entertaining the incongruous

I have discussed in detail three mechanisms commonly at work in the production of humorous effects (Curcó 1995), which I summarize below. First, **the entertainment of contradictory propositional content**. This is normally triggered through leading the hearer to supply a strongly implicated premise that clashes with an accessible assumption in the current context of interpretation. The contradiction arises in the search for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. Notice that entertaining contradictory propositional contents conveyed at the explicit level does not produce humorous effects. The following examples are illustrations of this device:

- (1) Don't keep telling the lady you are unworthy of her. Let it be a complete surprise.
(Henry 1966, cited in Dolitsky 1992)

In the context of interpretation, the first part of the utterance makes weakly manifest (1.1) (or at least, the desire of the hearer to believe that (1.1)).

(1.1) The addressee is worthy of the lady in question

However, in order to assign pronoun reference in accordance with the principle of relevance, the hearer needs to supply (1.2) as an implicated premise.

(1.2) The addressee is not worthy of the lady in question

Let us consider another example:

(2) There is something tragic about the enormous number of young men there are in England at the present moment who start life with a perfect profile and end up by adopting some useful profession.
(Oscar Wilde)

As a social value, (2.1) is mutually manifest in the context of interpretation.

(2.1) A useful profession is a cause for congratulation

But in order to interpret the second part of the utterance as consistent with the principle of relevance, it is the adoption of a useful profession that must be taken as the source of the tragic outcome, therefore, the hearer is strongly encouraged to supply (2.2) as an implicated premise.

(2.2) A useful profession is a cause for commiseration

A second mechanism refers to **the treatment of foreground assumptions as if they were in the background**, as in the case below:

(3) There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is how far it is from midtown and how late it is open.
(Woody Allen)

Here, the propositional form of the second part of the utterance is represented by (3.1).

(3.1) The problem (about the existence of an unseen world) is (the answer to) q_1 and q_2

Let us represent the logical form of q_1 and q_2 by p' , where

$p' =$ An unseen world is _____ from midtown and is open until _____

What the utterance conveys is that there is some completion of the logical form p' into a proposition that would be relevant if true. Therefore, any analytic implication of p' obtained by filling the empty slots with logical variables will be less than propositional and should not be relevant in its own right. Hence, it will be a background assumption. One instance of such an analytic implication of p' is p'' , which the speaker indeed treats as a background assumption.

$p'' =$ An unseen world is SOME MEASURABLE DISTANCE from midtown and is open until SOME REAL TIME.

However, the fact that a supernatural world should have a physically determined spatial-temporal location would yield enough contextual effects to make it relevant in its own right, which in effect makes of p'' a foreground assumption that the speaker has presented in the background.

The third mechanism is in many cases a consequence of the first two, but sometimes, as in the case of (5) below, it can operate independently of both. It may be described as **a clash between the expectations of the way in which upcoming material will achieve relevance and the way in which it actually does**. In a sense, the distinction between background and foreground assumptions divides the cognitive environment of a hearer into two distinct spaces. These can be conceived as relevance search fields. A speaker normally exploits this fact to direct the hearer's search for relevance. The natural tendency will be for hearers to search for relevance in the answers to questions that the foreground assumptions raise, i.e. within what I have called the foreground relevance search field (Curcó 1995), given that information contained in the background is standardly treated as not relevant enough to be worth the hearer's attention, but consider for instance (4):

- (4) It is perfectly monstrous the way people go about nowadays saying things against one behind one's back that are absolutely and entirely true.
(Oscar Wilde)

This clash between the expectations of the way in which upcoming material will achieve relevance and the way in which it actually does need not involve the swapping between

foreground and background assumptions that I have just described. Relevance can be found in a less specifically deviating direction, such as in the example in (5):

- (5) Inspector Ford burst into the study. On the floor was the body of Clifford Wheel, who apparently had been struck from behind with a croquet mallet. The position of the body indicated that the victim had been surprised in the act of singing 'Sorrento' to his goldfish. Evidence showed that there had been terrible struggle that had twice been interrupted by phone calls, one a wrong number and one asking if the victim was interested in dance lessons.
(Woody Allen)

A formal category of the incongruous should be able to capture instances of deviation from cognitive models of reference (Forabosco 1992: 54), where *a cognitive model of reference* is taken to be a mini-theory or a model that the subject constructs and uses as a result of the interaction of general cognitive principles with his experience. The three mechanisms above are forms of the perception of the incongruous in this sense. In general, what is left implicit is information that can be taken for granted, not information that will be relevant in its own right. Also, hearers normally tend to search for relevance in the answers to questions that the foreground assumptions raise, not in those raised by background assumptions or analytic implications of preceding utterances.

Relevance theory predicts that the inferential part of processing cannot stop with the entertainment of the incongruous. An incongruity created by the means described above arises from an ostensive stimulus, hence a hearer will take it as a potential source of cognitive effects. Most likely, a rational speaker will not put forward and endorse two obviously contradictory assumptions at a time. The possibility that he be attributing one of them to someone else, or to himself at a time removed from the time of his utterance becomes accessible to the hearer, as is the likelihood that the speaker be holding a non-endorsing attitude to it.

3 Echoic use

A speaker uses a representation echoically when he attributes it to someone other than himself at the time of his utterance, and simultaneously expresses one of a range of possible attitudes to it. In cases of echoic use, an utterance achieves relevance by informing the hearer that the speaker has in mind some attributable representation, and

also that he has a certain attitude to it. The attributable representation may be an utterance (actual or potential) or a thought, and in fact, any representation, not necessarily one with a propositional form. Consider for instance the exchange in (6).

- (6) Mary: Yes
Peter: Yes?

Carston and Noh (1995) have shown that it is also possible to echo segments of a representation (e.g. part of the material falling within the scope of a negation operator in the cases of metalinguistic negation), as in (7-8).

- (7) We didn't see the HIPPOPOTAMUSES, we saw the hippopotami.

- (8) Around here we don't eat tom[a:t uz], we eat tom[eiD uz].

As Carston and Noh mention (1995: 4), a range of linguistic properties may be the target of an echoic utterance: phonetic, grammatical or lexical properties, aspects of dialect, register or style, as well as a number of paralinguistic features: tone of voice, pitch, gestures.

It is possible to echo utterances or thoughts implicitly, as in (9), where the range of attitudes that can be expressed varies from full endorsement to complete dissociation, or explicitly, as in (10).

- (9) The ban on British beef should be lifted.

- (10) He said so cynically that the ban on British beef should be lifted.

Echoes can be explicit or implicit, a diversity of mental representations can be used echoically, and a number of linguistic and paralinguistic properties can be the targets of the echo. In the next section I suggest that a crucial ingredient in the process that leads to at least some humorous interpretations is the recognition of the speaker's implicit expression of his attitude of self-distancing from an attributable implicit assumption. Such assumption, made strongly mutually manifest by the utterance, functions as the target of the echo.

4 The implicit expression of the speaker's self-distancing from an implicit assumption

I have been suggesting that the perception of the incongruous is not a source of humour *per se*. In this section I want to discuss a variety of humour that makes use of the perception of the incongruous to cue the hearer into the recognition of the speaker's implicitly expressed attitude.

In the humorous examples illustrated in (1-4) above, hearers are led to entertain two conflicting assumptions. For future reference, I will call one of them the *key assumption*, and the other the *target assumption*. I reproduce the examples (from (1) to (4)) below, together with their key and target assumptions.

(11) Don't keep telling the lady you are unworthy of her. Let it be a complete surprise.

(11.1) TARGET ASSUMPTION: The addressee is worthy of the lady in question.

(11.2) KEY ASSUMPTION: The addressee is not worthy of the lady in question.

(12) There is something tragic about the enormous number of young men there are in England at the present moment who start life with a perfect profile and end up by adopting some useful profession.

(Oscar Wilde)

(12.1) TARGET ASSUMPTION: A useful profession is a cause for congratulation

(12.2) KEY ASSUMPTION: A useful profession is a cause for commiseration

(13) There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is how far it is from midtown and how late it is open.

(Woody Allen)

(13.1) TARGET ASSUMPTION: An unseen world has no physically determined spatial-temporal location

- (13.2) KEY ASSUMPTION: An unseen world has some physically determined spatial-temporal location
- (14) It is perfectly monstrous the way people go about nowadays saying things against one behind one's back that are absolutely and entirely true.
- (14.1) TARGET ASSUMPTION: the things people tell against one behind one's back are false.
- (14.2) KEY ASSUMPTION: the things people tell against one behind one's back are not false.

My suggestion is that in all cases, the speaker is implicitly expressing his attitude of self-distancing from the target assumption. As an attitude, self-distance is a variety of dissociation. It is possible to dissociate oneself from a propositional representation for a number of different reasons, and with different accompanying emotional overtones: anger, bitterness, surprise, reproach, incredulity, mockery, scorn, regret, etc. In cases of self-distancing, emotional overtones are either not present, or not relevant. In cases of humour, only mockery remains.

In all the examples above, before the key assumption is recovered, the target assumption is only weakly manifest in the context of interpretation. Target assumptions are usually instances of downright taken for granted assumptions, not relevant enough to be worth foregrounding. Besides, the target assumption usually represents an attributable thought. In (11), the thought represented by the target assumption (or at least the desire to believe it) is attributable to the hearer, while in (12) the thought is attributable to a group of people. Oscar Wilde is known for his incisive and scathing attack on Victorian values, which are echoed through his utterance. Notice, additionally, that the form of his utterance also echoes the speech of Victorian upper classes, which gives it an added feel of parody.

Let us consider the Woody Allen case. The target assumption that the supernatural has no physically determined spatial-temporal location is an assumption shared by most human beings, moreover, one that would be difficult not to endorse. What can the point of echoing it with an attitude of distancing possibly be? What we have here is a case of recursive interpretive use. The target assumption is an interpretation of a complex thought, which we can simplify as the view that the supernatural and all we relate to it (the afterlife, the mystic, the superior, the occult, the unknown) is of a totally different nature

from the concrete mundane day-to-day. By questioning this rather uncontroversial assumption, the speaker is suggesting that indeed the supernatural can be somehow reduced to the concrete. This reduction of the supernatural, the mystic, the superior, the unknown to alarmingly specific and material obsessions and doubts is also interpretive in the following way. The speaker depicts himself as someone obsessively and neurotically concerned with properties, values and doubts of middle-class life. Only such people could conceivably question the diverging nature of mystic and temporal issues. It is this type of people — interpretively represented by the speaker, who is a comedian — who implicitly express an attitude of dissociation (not distancing) to the target assumption. The distancing emerges from our recognition of this interpretive relation between the actual speaker — the comedian — and the potential speakers — the targets of the mockery. The assumption that the supernatural has a physical spatial-temporal location merely resembles interpretively the behaviour, concerns, and attitudes of such people. Something similar occurs in (15).

(15) Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends.

Here the search for relevance forces us to supply an implicated premise that there is some connection between the difficulty of proving the existence of God and the difficulty in getting a plumber on weekends. This key assumption makes manifest the target assumption that there is no connection between the two facts. The target assumption here has been as weakly mutually manifest as anything involved in communication can be. People simply do not entertain assumptions like this which are so strongly taken for granted, but by being forced to entertain its negation, it emerges forcefully from the background and becomes strongly mutually manifest. The next inferential step is that the speaker is questioning the sensibility of holding such an assumption. But what kind of speaker could do this? Either an insane speaker, or a speaker who is presenting himself as being in interpretive resemblance to a specific sort of person who in turn is ridiculed. Again, it is the neurotically obsessed, educated middle-class.

5 Pragmatic mechanisms of humour: generating the overall effect

The mechanism that underlies these cases can be generalized as follows:

- i) An utterance is produced that makes strongly mutually manifest a *key assumption*. The key assumption is in overt contradiction with the *target assumption*, so far only very weakly mutually manifest.
- ii) The overt contradiction suddenly makes the target assumption strongly mutually manifest.
- iii) The entertainment of an incongruity produced by an ostensive stimulus signals to the hearer the possibility that the speaker is implicitly expressing an attitude of dissociation towards one of the assumptions.
- iv) Because the key assumption is either strongly implicated or explicated, the expression of an attitude is attached to the target assumption
- v) The dissociative attitude is extended to one of distancing. There are presumably a variety of indicators that may cue the hearer in this direction, such as tone of voice, gestures, and the recognition of multiple and recursive interpretive use.

It is conceivable that this analysis may be extended to cover other types of humour, but I won't pursue this here.

6 Concluding remarks

I have argued that humour is to a large extent a matter of implicitly questioning some aspect in the world — often an attributable thought — and expressing an attitude of self-distancing to it. Also, I have proposed a mechanism through which an assumption representing this aspect in the world becomes mutually manifest through the implicit import of an utterance, and the attitude implicitly expressed gets recognized. I have shown how the entertainment of the incongruous plays an instrumental role in this. In doing so I have suggested that echoic utterances can have as targets of their echo assumptions which they make strongly mutually manifest.

In verbal irony what is echoed is usually the proposition expressed by the utterance, though not always. Sometimes, as in the case of an ironist who means what his utterance says, what is echoed is the act of uttering it itself — another case of recursive interpretive use. So, for instance, if I am trying to explain something to someone who is clearly

ignoring me I may say 'I love it when you pay attention to me'. What I am dissociating myself from is the fact that I should utter such a thing at that particular time. So, instead of echoing the proposition expressed by my utterance, I am echoing one of its higher level explicatures, represented in (16) below:

(16) The speaker says that p

The reasons for dissociating oneself from a thought or an utterance, actual or potential, are numerous. The fact that one can express dissociation without distancing explains why not all instances of verbal irony are humorous, though all remain instances of verbal wit. Contrary to the cases of verbal irony, the examples discussed here do not have as targets of their echo any of the assumptions explicitly conveyed by the utterance. Instead, the echo concerns assumptions that become strongly mutually manifest by the implicit import of the utterance. I think there are good reasons to allow an extension of the current notion of echoic use in this way. The analysis above suggests that therein may lie the route to a more unified picture of the workings of verbal humour and wit.

It may be that the enjoyment of incongruity is, after all, the essence of certain forms of humour. At a very early age children enjoy observing things that look or behave non threateningly in an incongruous way. In attaining such amusement, a child has not had to recognize the implicit expression of attitudes or anything of the sort. However, what he has gone through is a change in the relative manifestness of some of his assumptions. He has found a new way of looking at an aspect of the world he had already come to take for granted. The perception of the incongruity has suddenly made some so far weakly manifest assumptions become strongly manifest. This stage is probably preliminary to the complex abilities involved in the recognition of intentions and attitudes that we later develop.

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