What Makes Jokes Tick

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Introduction

The main goal of the present paper is to characterise pragmatic mechanisms that are involved in the production and comprehension of verbal jokes. The production part should not be identified here with the process of inventing new jokes but rather with what the speaker does in a typical joke-telling situation. I will use the relevance theory framework (Sperber and Wilson 1986) as the model of utterance comprehension, and I will try to show how the interpretation of mini-texts[1] such as verbal jokes can be conducted along relevance theoretic lines, suggesting that this type of analysis offers some interesting insights into joke processing.

Let me start by specifying what I mean by 'verbal joke'. A verbal joke is defined here as an ordered sequence of utterances, planned as a unit, with a humorous climax or punchline, which is intentionally used by the speaker to amuse the hearer. A verbal joke is then a kind of mini-text with well defined boundaries, in the sense that it is usually pretty obvious at which point the joke telling starts and where it ends. Even when there is no proper introduction by what has been called the 'preface sequence' (Sacks 1974:340) of the type "Did you hear the one about..." or "Stop me if you've heard this one...", the text of the joke *stands out* as a unit in its own right from whatever may precede or follow it (observe that spoken jokes are usually a part of some larger discourse).

There are just two parts to every verbal joke: the setting (the text of the joke minus the punchline) and the punchline (cf. Navon 1988:211), each of them assigned a particular role in creating texts that are potentially funny[2].

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[1]The term 'text' is used here with reference to both the spoken as well as written medium.

[2]Whether the desired laughter occurs at the joke completion or not and why some people laugh at certain jokes whole-heartedly while others do not, or why a particular hearer may find a joke funny on one occasion and completely unamusing at some other time, are problems which the present paper does not address.

1 A Relevance theoretic account of 'ambiguity' jokes

One of the crucial observations about the nature of communication that Sperber and Wilson make, which seems very important for characterising jokes, is its asymmetry. Just as with ballroom dancing, in which the responsibility of leading the step rests with one of the partners, so is it with verbal communication. 'It is left to the communicator to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information that the audience will have accessible and be likely to use in the comprehension process ... all the hearer has to do is go ahead and use whatever code and contextual information come most easily to hand' (Sperber and Wilson 1986:43). This short passage is the quintessence of the division of labour between the two parties involved in communication. The speaker's task is to provide a verbal stimulus which the hearer uses as a basis for recovering the intended message. Relevance theory sees both the speaker and the hearer as actively participating in the verbal exchange, with the former devising his utterances with the view of achieving optimal relevance, and the latter formulating an interpretation of what he has heard, relying in this enterprise on the assumption that optimal relevance has been aimed at, if not achieved. The criterion used is called by Sperber and Wilson the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance. Can a single psychological principle, suggested by Sperber and Wilson, be used to account for complex interpretation processes going on in joke telling situations?

The control over contexts that the hearer will access and contextual effects he is supposed to work out are a pivotal aspect of verbal joke production and comprehension. The utterances that constitute the setting of a given joke must be such that a particular kind of context or contexts are activated and an intended set of assumptions used by the hearer. In other words, the setting plays the role of strongly biasing the hearer towards a specific hypothesis (H1) in forming assumptions about what is being, or what is about to be, communicated. When the punchline comes, the hearer discovers a new, unexpected interpretation which surfaces as (H2). The crux of the problem is that both hypotheses that he arrives at are formulated in the belief that consistency with the principle of relevance is preserved.

Let us have a close look at the joke in (1)[3].

(1)   Henry was trying to sell his battered old car for £65. His friend
       Tom said he would pay 10% less than the price Henry was asking
       for the car. But Henry was not very good at figures so he said he

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[3]In suggesting that the hearer brings to bear a certain context or forms a particular assumption in the process of joke comprehension, I do not claim that the formulations I am using are precisely the expressions the hearer comes up with; it should only be supposed that similar thoughts are entertained by him.

would think about Tom's offer. That evening when he was in his usual bar Henry asked the barmaid: 'If I offered you £65 less 10% what would you take off?'

The barmaid hesitated slightly, then replied: 'Everything except my ear-rings.'

(*The Right Joke for the Right Occasion* by K. Goldstein-Jackson, 1985, joke 52)

In the short span of time in which joke processing takes place, the hearer may or may not calculate the implicit import that each of the utterances in the setting potentially carry, apart from what is necessary for discovering what propositions have been expressed. The implicatures (some of the most obvious ones are presented in (a-e) below) are very weakly communicated, which means that recovering them is not essential for the interpretation of what is said. It seems reasonable to assume that a not-very-hard-working hearer may refrain from formulating any of these.

(a) The price is ridiculously low.
(b) A car sold at such a price must be junk.
(c) Henry is not very bright.
(d) Tom is a clever bargain-hunter.
(e) Henry frequents bars.

Whether or not the hearer cares to formulate any implicatures and how extensively he does this is really up to him; he is free not to go beyond what is necessary for deciding on what has been explicitly stated.

In this case, as in any other instance of processing linearly ordered utterances that form a unit, the hearer automatically uses each of the preceding discourse portions as supplying contexts in which to interpret what follows. The role of the introductory utterances in the setting of the joke is to provide access to a set of immediately available assumptions (C1), or what Sperber and Wilson call the initial context, for the interpretation of successive utterances. This set of assumptions is supposed to direct the hearer towards the intended interpretation (H1) of the final utterance in the setting. Observe that in this way the utterance 'If I offered you £65 less 10% what would you take off?' achieves relevance only if it is interpreted as a request for information about how much is 10% of £65. So establishing the relevance of this utterance in the context supplied by the setting leads the hearer to formulating the first hypothesis (H1), roughly something like:

(H1)   HENRY WANTS TO KNOW HOW MUCH HE NEEDS TO SUBTRACT FROM £65 IF HE IS TO DEDUCT 10%.

The second estimate of relevance occurs when the punchline is being processed. The hearer discovers that the only interpretation of the punchline consistent with the principle of relevance is (H2):

(H2)   THE BARMAID IS READY TO TAKE OFF ALL HER CLOTHES APART FROM HER EAR-RINGS.

(H2) is the outcome of applying the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance to what is said in the punchline. The utterance responsible for the humorous climax achieves optimal relevance in the context (C2), which is the assumption that the punchline makes highly accessible to the hearer.

(C2)   The barmaid thinks Henry has offered her money to take off her clothes.

Observe, moreover, that the joke under discussion, similarly to a vast majority of such texts, falls within the realm of the so-called secondary speech situations, that is acts in which the speaker reports to the hearer on somebody else's linguistic behaviour. By definition then, two sets of speakers and hearers are involved: on the one hand, the joke teller and his audience, on the other, the characters in the joke. This suggests the presence of two parallel communication - and hence comprehension - processes that are taking place: utterance comprehension as performed by the characters in the joke and the overall joke production/comprehension, one embedded in the other. Coming back to the joke in (1), note that Henry's question is, evidently, optimally relevant to the barmaid in a way that he did not intend: as an offer of financial reward in exchange for a strip-tease. This is, we are made to believe, the interpretation that the most accessible context she has facilitates and, because she is unaware of anything that would rule it out, this is the interpretation she comes up with.

This suggests a generalisation about the mechanisms used in verbal jokes which rely on ambiguity as a humour-generating device. Such jokes crucially depend on the discrepancy between the optimally relevant interpretation the audience arrive at in processing the setting, and the unexpected interpretation, optimally relevant to a protagonist in the joke, which the audience discover only when the punchline is reached. This strongly indicates an affinity of this kind of jokes and garden-path utterances, the processing of which inevitably involves interpretation and reinterpretation (cf.Sperber and Wilson 1986:184-5). However, there seems to be an important difference between the two in that with garden-path utterances only one overall interpretation is consistent with the principle of relevance, which is not the case with the jokes under discussion, where both interpretations are consistent with the principle of

relevance, each in a different but highly accessible context (note similarity with Raskin's idea of 'script overlap' (1985)).

Another ingredient present in these jokes is a sudden reorganisation of contexts, from (C1) to (C2).

The speaker's and hearer's tasks have now become evident. By producing the utterances constituting the setting in the joke the speaker intentionally assists the hearer in his choice of context (C1). When the humorous climax is reached, the hearer must search for an appropriate context that would minimise his effort in processing the punchline, at the same time yielding the required level of contextual effects.

Relevance theory makes some obvious predictions about what may be involved in killing such jokes: the speaker may fail in assuring that the hearer builds up (C1) in the first place, which in turn may impair the formulation of the intended (H1), or even worse, produce a setting consisting of an utterance that would activate (C2) before the humorous climax is reached. There is yet another way in which the joke teller may fail, which has to do with the way the punchline is formulated: it has to be an utterance which would facilitate the recovery of (C2). Therefore, if the final line in the joke under discussion were changed to (1f) there are good grounds to believe that the funniness would be lost.

(1f) The barmaid hesitated slightly, then replied: 'A lot, my dear, a lot'.

This punchline simply risks becoming uninterpretable, because the context which would make it optimally relevant seems much harder to access. How much work the hearer is ready to invest in his quest for the intended interpretation is the function of his immediate communicative needs, intellectual and physical predisposition at the time of utterance processing, the reward in terms of contextual effects, what else he could be paying attention to at the time, etc., and may vary from hearer to hearer and even for one hearer on different occasions (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986:160-161). That is not to say that the effort the hearer is likely to spare is minimal in absolute terms, it is just the smallest he needs to engage in deriving the utterance meaning, that is the meaning consistent with the principle of relevance.

2 The role of implicit import and weak communication in creating funniness

In the analysis of verbal humour offered here I would like to suggest that there are jokes that create funniness by utilising the resources that are part of the language system or code, thus relying in generating humour on *what is said in the joke and how it is said*, as well as those whose funniness is the outcome of

what is not explicitly said in them. The distinction between the two boils down to explicated as opposed to implicated meanings that have to be recovered in the process of joke comprehension. The joke analyzed above belongs to the first class, together with sample jokes (2) and (3).

(2)   'Do you like beans?'
        'Yes, very much.'
        'What sort do you like eating best?'
        'Human bein's.'

(3)   'Why are you in such a hurry?'
        'I'm on my way to the doctor - I don't like the look of my wife.'
        'Oh! Then I'll come with you - I hate the sight of mine, too.'
        (The Right Joke for the Right Occasion by K. Goldstein-Jackson,
        jokes 46 and 64)

Before I proceed to discussing jokes whose comic effects depend on *what is not said*, I would like to say a little about how relevance theory treats the explicit/implicit contrast.

Any communicated assumption that is constructed as 'a development of one of the logical forms encoded by the utterance' (Sperber and Wilson 1986:181) is called an explicature. Thus both hypotheses (H1) and (H2) that the joke recipient recovers while processing the text in (1) are explicatures. The explicatures of an utterance are generally made strongly manifest and the hearer guided in his comprehension by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance cannot help but formulate some of them. Apart from what the utterance communicates explicitly, it may make manifest to the hearer a number of implicatures, that is assumptions conveyed implicitly. Sperber and Wilson distinguish two kinds of implicit import: implicated premises and implicated conclusions. If the hearer necessarily needs to bring in from his memory certain assumptions to arrive at the interpretation of an utterance consistent with the principle of relevance, these assumptions are classified as implicated premises. If, on the other hand, an utterance achieves optimal relevance when the hearer deduces the intended conclusion from its explicatures and the context, then the assumptions reached in this way are referred to as implicated conclusions. (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986:195). As has already been indicated, the comic element in a great many jokes is inherently connected with the recovery of implicit import.

With jokes whose humorous effects are created as a part of what and how things are said in them, it is possible to separate out the stages of interpretation and see the mechanisms used; the situation with the other class of humorous texts is not so straightforward. Some jokes in this group will be interpreted in

pretty much the same fashion as "ambiguity-jokes" but with others the processes involved will depart from the pattern.

Let us examine, in some detail, the interpretation process that the audience exposed to the joke in (4) may possibly go through.

(4)   Fortune-teller, gazing into crystal ball, to Frog: 'You are going to meet a beautiful young woman. From the moment she sets eyes on you she will have an insatiable desire to know all about you. She will be compelled to get close to you - you will fascinate her.'
Frog: 'Where am I? At a singles club?'
Fortune-teller: 'Biology class.'
(The Reader's Digest, January 1984)

The function of the setting in this joke, as in the previously analyzed one, is to provide access to the initial context, the essence of which is, tentatively, summarised as (C1) below:

(C1)   The fortune-teller foresees that Frog and an unspecified young woman will develop a very close relationship.

The hearer may extend this initial context to include additional encyclopedic information available to him about fortune-telling, beautiful women, frogs (or any other concept associated with the words used in the joke), and come up with some auxiliary assumptions, possibly similar to those presented in (C1A) below:

(C1A)   Fortune-tellers are frequently gypsies.
Fortune-tellers receive money for telling people's fortunes.
Fortune-tellers tell you things which they believe you want to hear.
Fortune-tellers tend to foresee glorious futures ahead of their clients, because they want them to be satisfied with their services.
When a woman kisses a frog, the tale goes, he turns into a handsome prince.
Frogs are very ugly.

Which of these extensions of the context a given hearer might come up with will depend on the organisation, scope and accessibility of the relevant chunks of encyclopedic knowledge, his mental predisposition, psychological state, involvement in the discourse he is currently engaged in, the conditions in the physical environment, to mention just a few internal and external factors that may come into play. It is also possible that the hearer may refrain from building up (C1) beyond what is necessary for establishing of what is said in the setting: to interpret the utterances in the optimally relevant way he may not

need to resort to bringing in additional assumptions (C1A), these being communicated only very weakly. It is quite legitimate to speculate that none of them will find its way to being actually represented in the hearer's mind. Let me just point out that the speaker may encourage context extensions by enlarging the setting, making deliberate pauses in the telling sequence, playing with the intonation patterns used (particularly as far as stress goes) to give the audience more time to dig out appropriate chunks of knowledge and actually form some representations. Weak communication seems to play a non-accidental role in joke telling[4].

When it comes to processing Frog's question at the end of the setting, the hearer has all the necessary contextual information in the forefront of his attention (in the form of (C1)) to recover the proposition expressed as, putatively, conveying something like (H1) below:

(H1)   FROG WANTS TO KNOW WHETHER THE PLACE THE BEAUTIFUL GIRL WILL COME INTO AN INTIMATE CONTACT WITH HIM IS A CLUB FOR PEOPLE LOOKING FOR PARTNERS.

So far the text of the joke itself has maximally facilitated the hearer's task. But now he needs to supply some input assumptions from his own long-term memory store. The reason for this is that the punchline achieves a level of optimal relevance only if the hearer can calculate its implicit import, only if he can bring into processing a set of contextual assumptions concerning what happens in biology classes, or more precisely, what happens to frogs during biology lessons. In this way a second major context (C2) having to do with a 'biology-class frame' is brought into action in comprehension; it is this time a set of implicated premises summarised below:

(C2)   In biology classes schoolboys and schoolgirls dissect frogs and the animal experimented on dies as the result.

The hearer who has processed the finale of the joke in the belief that the utterance used has been produced as optimally relevant must interpret it to convey (H2), an implicated conclusion:

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[4]For instance, the joke teller could add another utterance to the setting and the initial line might go: ' There was this male Frog who one day decided to consult a fortune-teller to find out what wonderful future there lay ahead.' In the light of the preceding discussion, the problem of what contributes to good and bad joke telling might be pursued.

(H2)   THE FORTUNE-TELLER PROPHESIES FROG'S DEATH IN A
        BIOLOGY EXPERIMENT.

Notice that the utterance 'Biology class' does not itself carry the meaning
'FROG WILL BE DISSECTED AND WILL DIE'. The initial context creates
a particular expectation of relevance: the audience are made to look for the
interpretation that will be about the outcome of Frog's "close encounters" with
the beautiful girl and that is how they inevitably arrive at (H2). Observe also
that the clash between what is optimally relevant to one of the protagonists and
what turns out to be optimally relevant holds in this joke too: there is
misinterpretation again and the recovery of the final meaning yields a flood of
extra contextual effects. As relevance theory suggests, a yes-no question
communicates that the proposition it expresses will be relevant if true. Thus
Frog's question communicates that it will be very relevant if the girl is to get
close to him at a singles club. The implied message behind this question is that
the answer will be relevant if it confirms very positive feelings of the girl
towards Frog, feelings that those who come to such places are supposed to
cherish. The recovered interpretation intended by the fortune-teller-cum-joke
teller is optimally relevant in a totally different way.

Moreover, the principle of relevance underlies the two interpretations (H1)
and (H2), as was the case with the joke in (1), and again reorganisation of
contexts is involved.

It would be tempting to postulate the features mentioned above as common
to joke processing in general. Unfortunately, there are jokes whose processing
necessarily requires the recovery of the implicit import which do not involve
formulating two distinct interpretations or bring about context reorganisation,
as it has been described so far. Let us see what might be happening when a
joke like the one in (5) is being processed.

(5)   An office manager asked his employee why he was late for work
        again.
        'It's not my fault,' said the man. 'It's that woman across the street.
        She's so fastidious that when she goes skiing she wears a complete
        ski outfit, when she goes jogging she wears jogging clothes, and
        when she leaves for work, she wears a business suit.'
        'So what?' asked the manager.
        'Well, today was her birthday.'
        (*The Reader's Digest*, February 1982)

The setting introduces here the context (C1), which we can assume to be
based on the propositions expressed by the utterances it is composed of. The
main implicit import comes into play only when the punchline is reached: the
utterance used achieves optimal relevance as an explanation of why the

employee is late. The hearer arrives at the intended interpretation if he recovers the implicit conclusion (H):

(H)   THE WOMAN WAS NUDE.

Is a reorganisation of contexts from (C1) to (C2) involved here? Not in the sense that totally unrelated or new assumptions need to be brought in. Certainly an unexpected modification of the initial context occurs: (H2) is calculated in the context (C2) which the hearer needs to construct on the basis of (C1) and the explicit content of the final utterance in the text:

(C2)   Birthday clothes are no clothes.

The difference between the interpretation of the joke in (5) and the previous analyses is the presence of a single hypothesis as to the meaning of the utterances in this joke; there are no "competing interpretations" recovered and relevance in the processing of the text under scrutiny is assessed just once. A temptation difficult to resist would be to postulate at this point that the mechanism always present in joke reception is a sudden and unanticipated switch from one context to another. Again, though, examples such as joke (6) below undermine this suggestion.

(6)   As a passenger boarded the Los Angeles-to-New York plane, he told the flight attendant to wake him and make sure he got off in Dallas. The passenger awoke just as the plane was landing in New York. Furious, he called the flight attendant and demanded an explanation. The fellow mumbled an apology and, in a rage, the passenger stamped off the plane.
'Boy, was he ever mad!' another crew member observed to her errant colleague.
'If you think he was mad,' replied the flight attendant, 'you should have seen the guy I put off the plane in Dallas!'
(*The Reader's Digest*, December 1984)

Without going into the deep analysis of the set of assumptions the setting might be weakly communicating, let us say that the message the setting is used to put across is a rather complex (H1):

(H1)   A PASSENGER WHO SPECIFICALLY ASKED FOR BEING WOKEN UP IN DALLAS SO THAT HE COULD GET OFF THE PLANE, GOT FURIOUS BECAUSE THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT HAD NEGLECTED HIS DUTIES AND HAD NOT DONE WHAT HE HAD BEEN SUPPOSED TO DO.

The punchline, if processed in the belief that optimal relevance has been aimed at, must be interpreted as the implicated conclusion, something close to (H2) below:

(H2)   THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT MADE A MISTAKE AND A PASSENGER WHO HAD NO INTENTION TO GET OFF IN DALLAS HAD BEEN FORCIBLY MADE TO LEAVE THE PLANE.

It is rather difficult to see any dramatic context change taking place. How is funniness created here then? When the punchline is processed and interpreted, the hearer is left with a whole range of weakly communicated implicatures and it is entirely up to him to recover those that are most manifest to him. Thus he may choose to represent to himself the passenger, still half asleep, being removed from the plane at the wrong destination, or come up with the assumption that the airline service is hardly ever satisfactory and seems to excel at making the customer's life as difficult as possible, or concentrate on the unconcerned and careless attitude of the flight attendants towards what has happened. The potential set of assumptions communicated by the punchline is vast and underspecified and each individual hearer is welcome to recover the subset he wishes, quite possibly one that departs from the set of assumptions in the speaker's mind.

Conclusions

Thus we are led to believe that no exhaustive generalizations about the mechanisms involved in the production and comprehension of all verbal jokes can be put forward.

The question that was posed at the beginning of the present paper about the suitability of using a single psychological law, the principle of relevance, to account for intricate comprehension processes put to operation in joke production-reception can unquestionably be answered in the affirmative. Relevance theory makes it possible to analyze the course of what is going on in jokes from the speaker's as well as hearer's perspective in a non-ad hoc manner, that is not by suggesting various maxims or rules that might be appealed to in explicating different types of jokes, but a single one responsible for getting the intended meaning across. Joke processing analyzed within the model postulated by Sperber and Wilson need not be treated as a special kind of discourse, let alone discourse that necessarily results from breach in certain norms that are otherwise obeyed in everyday communication. It also offers some insights into what killing a joke might sometimes consist in.

Another merit of the theoretical framework used in this presentation is that the distinction between strong and weak communication it postulates opens an interesting avenue of research into the factors responsible for degrees of funniness in jokes and joke telling. I would like to put forward a highly speculative hypothesis, which might find support from empirical studies, that the more weakly communicated assumptions the hearer comes up with in joke processing, the more humorous he is likely to find the text. Deirdre Wilson has pointed out to me that a crucial feature of a funny punchline seems to be that it yields a huge range of weak effects. That is why the joke in (1) is no longer funny if the barmaid's response is changed into 'I find this suggestion insulting', even though the misunderstanding and hence double contexts are still present. The point is that the original reply of the barmaid gives a vast bonus in contextual effects of the type: the barmaid finds nothing strange about being asked to do a strip-tease, she is quite willing to comply even when casually asked, she probably has a scale of charges for different services she provides, etc., which are lost when the substitute punchline is used.

I believe that not all cognitive effects that the text interpretation yields bring about the same intensity of cognitive satisfaction. For instance, the contextual effects brought about by an indirect answer are very rewarding, because the modification of the hearer's cognitive environment is multidirectional and not unidirectional, as is the case with utterances that, from the point of view of processing and comprehension, yield nothing more than fully propositional forms. This thesis requires a deeper analysis and survey of data that goes beyond the scope of the present paper.

The funniness of jokes is essentially connected with weak communication. This corroborates yet another hypothesis of Sperber and Wilson's, namely the view that recovering a huge amount of implicatures, searching a vast array of weakly communicated assumptions involves some sort of emotional response on the part of the individual engaged in such a process. This might explain the affective response of the audience to poetry, which relies to a large extent on what is weakly communicated.

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