

*Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences,
Senior Lecturer at Department
of Foreign Languages
for Humanitarian Faculties,
Ivan Franko National University
of Lviv*

PRAGMATIC STUDY OF HUMOUR IN THE ENGLISH TEXT

Humour has been for centuries a subject for an extensive scholarly research in various fields of study including psychology, sociology and linguistics. It is an important part of human interaction in which it serves as a multi-functional tool. The roles and functions of the phenomenon of humour are discussed by several theories of humour all of which put emphasis on a different aspect of its multimodality.

A huge attention to the issues of humour are given by such well-known scholars as Günther Ulrike, Koestler Arthur, Palmer Jerry, Bell Nancy D., Norrick Neal R.; various features of the language of humour are discussed in detail in the works of Ross Alison; detailed discourse analysis of humour is given by Dynel Marta, some aspects of the theories of humour are raised in the scientific research of such scientists as Apter M. J., Attardo Salvatore, Kotthoff H., Raskin Victor.

The allocation of previously unpublished parts of the general problem consists in determination, explaining and systemizing verbalization of humour and ways and means of its reproduction.

The objectives are to define humour through different linguistic theories and depict humour as a certain kind of potential to be funny or to induce amusement indicated by laughter, to provide an insight into pragmatics of humour and its different theories.

Many scholars have been trying to define humour for centuries, but no single definition has been given. Research has been made in several different fields such as linguistics, psychology or sociology with an attempt to define certain boundaries of its functions. Different points of view on this issue from different fields of study, caused ambiguity and defining humour has become a problematic question: "...the lack of rigorous, or at least reliable, definition of humour...is represented by the fact that denominations of processes...are often used as if they were synonyms...This denotes that the semantic field to which they belong does not have precise boundaries" [2, p. 4]. S. Attardo thus suggests that it is impossible to give a definition of humour that will be completely unambiguous [2, p. 3]. Humour means "the quality of being funny". It refers to "an ability to perceive and express a sense of the clever or amusing thing". Humour consists principally in the recognition and expression of incongruities or peculiarities present in a situation or character. It is frequently used to illustrate some fundamental absurdity in human nature or conduct, and is generally thought of as a kindly trait: a genial and mellow type of humor. It is "the quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech. It is the ability to express humour or amuse other people" [12]. It can be said that humour is a certain quality or potential of somebody or something to be funny and amusing.

Humour has a frequent occurrence in society and is considered to be a very important part of human interaction [11]. Verbal humour can be found in written as well as spoken forms such as puns, jokes or teasing. The varieties of these forms became popular in television broadcasting which has become an inseparable part of everyday entertainment. It is also a powerful tool to present one's opinions and attitudes and create bonds between certain groups of people and make them distinguishable from the others: "Humour is influential – from political satire to joking as a way of establishing friendships and excluding others" [11].

Humour itself has several roles which are difficult to tell apart and in fact function together to achieve wanted effect: communication; cognitive development; indication of laughter, pleasure or entertainment [8, 68]; reduction of stress and anxiety; promotion of self-image [5, p. 17-18].

Concerning the social aspect of humour, probably the most frequently recognized role of humour is to induce laughter. It can be used in lightening of some situations, in showing a gesture of sympathy or to arouse good mood by causing amusement. In connection to this, A. Ross defines humour as "something that makes a person laugh or smile" [11, p. 1]. To build up on this simplistic definition, J. Palmer provides a more sophisticated interpretation when he says that humour is "everything that is actually or potentially funny, and the process by which this funniness occurs" [9, p. 3]. Not every humorous event has to be funny for everybody, though. The recognition and appreciation of humour depends on many factors such as culture, gender or age.

To A. Koestler's mind, humour involves a paradox, because laughter is a universal physiological reaction to a very great variety of different complex intellectual and emotional stimuli. A. Koestler argues that humour is motivated by aggressive and/or apprehensive, self-defensive or assaulting impulses, and laughter is said to be an act of overt or covert unloading of these impulses. Our biological evolution, he says, has fallen dangerously behind our mental development. Aggressive-defensive emotions descend from our neurobiological "deep layers" and have greater persistence and inertia than our evolutionarily later developed flexible reasoning. Therefore, a sudden bisociation of a mental event with two habitually incompatible matrices – associative contexts – frames of reference causes a sudden jump from one matrix to another, but our emotions cannot follow such quick toggling and so our psychological tension finds the solution in laughter, i.e. along the "channel of least resistance" [6].

Humour is different from laughter. These two terms are not interchangeable and cannot be considered to be the same concept. Although humour is a primary cause of laughter, the laughter does not inevitably depend on humour and can be in some situations a release of mental tension (as the Release Theory of Humour suggests), instead of expression

of amusements well as sign of fear or embarrassment [11, 1]. Also, not every humorous situation causes one to laugh. As has already been mentioned, laughter depends on a context which certain groups of people share.

Humour is social rather than individual phenomenon. The social aspect of humour is supported by the notion that people usually laugh in company of other people and certain jokes can only be appreciated in groups [11, p. 64]. Even in television there appears a substitute for conducted laughter of other people in order to create a grouping effect: “Because it’s important to sense other people responding to humour, „canned laughter” is used for television or radio comedy” [11]. It is less probable that people will laugh when alone, since laughing is a sign of “allegiance to a group” or, on the other hand can as well serve as a tool to distance oneself from the speaker. People laugh when they are given an initial trigger to laugh sometimes even before the actual joke is expressed [11, p. 1-2]. Laughter certainly does not serve as the only essential marker of humour, but is generally recognized and thus for an initial definition of humour is a useful tool to use.

Considering these aspects of humour and laughter it is difficult to state a general definition. Humour is a complex issue which needs to be treated in this respect as dependent on many factors such as context, age or a sense of belonging to a community. In relation to its definition, a few linguistic theories of humour will be discussed.

Incongruity-Resolution Theory is one of the first linguistic theories of humour dating back to 18th century. Two most famous pioneers of this theory are I. Kant and A. Schopenhauer. The core of this theory can be explained by A. Schopenhauer’s definition of laughter: “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity” [2, 48]. The idea of incongruity is based on the notion that there is a certain pattern to the relationships between components of ideas. When the system of arrangement does not match with the expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous [2, p. 48]. Many theorists agree that not incongruity, but congruous outcome of the incongruity contains the funny element. This theory is a two-staged model of comprehension and appreciation including incongruity and resolution.

Incongruity Theory is an essentialist approach and therefore does not have a psychological or sociological, but rather general outlook on the issue of humour [2, p. 49]. This theory is widely used in humour discourse because of its general nature. It contains elements which co-occur in other theories as well and therefore it is compatible for example with hostility or release theories. These theories address the negative element of humour. Probably the most influential from these theories is the superiority theory advocated to a great extent by H. Bergson. According to this theory, “humour is a social corrective used by society to correct deviant behaviour” [2, p. 50]. The original idea was proposed by T. Hobbes who thought that laughter is an expression of „sudden glory” and realization of being better than someone else [2, p. 49]. In general, this theory, which is based on sociological approach and emphasizes the aggressive aspect of humour, assumes that people laugh at the tragedies of other people and laughter which occurs when such a situation happens is a reflection of one’s superiority. Humour is thus an expression of spite and aimed at people who are being considered inferior in any kind of way.

The basis for Release Theories, which take into account a psychological aspect of humour, was proposed by Freud, who believed that humour releases tension or mental energy and relieves a person from inhibitions imposed by conventions and laws. People live under these prohibitions and suppressions and release themselves by bursting out in a laughter. The release theories have a significant contribution to linguistic research about humour in a sense that they liberate from the rules of language which are typical for puns and word-plays in general [2, p. 50]. This theory also encompasses social and behavioural elements of humour itself.

The Semantic Script Theory of humour is different from the theories above, because it works within a different framework. The previous theories mentioned are associated with a cognitive field, while the Semantic Script Theory is a part of generative grammar [2, p. 195]. The theory of humour was proposed by V. Raskin in 1985. V. Raskin’s idea suggests that all humour includes a semantic-pragmatic method and this method includes a semantic opposition between the scripts. The Semantic Script Theory operates with an earlier notion introduced by N. Chomsky in 1965, which was intended to participate in the native speaker’s humour competence. The speaker can recognize if a “sentence belongs to a set of grammatical sentences” and therefore can tell whether a text is funny or not [2, p. 196].

The postulate about joke-telling as a specific kind of “non-bona-fide” communication which violates the Cooperative Principle and the so-called conversational maxims is set for the “bona-fide” (i.e. usual, information-bearing, serious, sincere) communication. In the case of joke-telling four different situations may occur, depending on whether the speaker makes the joke intentionally or unintentionally, and/or whether the hearer expects or does not expect the joke. If the receiver does not assume a joke, he/she would try to understand what was said in a one way and, after a failure to do so, seek some other mode of interpretation (joke, lie, nonsense, etc.). If an addressee is attuned to the “joke wave”, the Cooperative Principle starts to operate again, but in a specific “joke-oriented” manner and with modified maxims, e.g. “Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke” instead of the usual Maxim of Quantity, “Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke” instead of usual Maxim of Quality, etc.

“The Semantic Script Theory models the humorous competence of an idealized speaker/hearer who is unaffected by racial or gender bias, undisturbed by scatological, obscene or disgusting materials, not subject to boredom, and most importantly, who has never heard it before when presented with a joke...the context of the telling of the joke (its „performance”) is irrelevant to its humorous nature” [2, p. 197].

Explication of the relationships of the scripts involved ‘script overlap’ and ‘script opposition’. V. Raskin gives empirical examples of semantic common parts perfectly compatible with both scripts under discussion, and others that fit naturally with one script but only conditionally with the other. Some of the jokes’ script oppositions are usual antonymous (contradictory or contrary) oppositions, but the bulk of them is what J. Lyons has called local antonyms, i.e. “linguistic entities whose meanings are opposite only within a particular discourse and solely for the purposes of this discourse” [10, p. 108]. Each joke describes some “real” situation and evokes another, “unreal” situation. They can be manifested

as oppositions between the: actual and non-actual, non-existing situation; expected and abnormal, unexpected states of affairs; possible, plausible and impossible, less plausible situation [10, p. 111].

And the scripts evoked by jokes often involve double categories which are essential to human life, like real/unreal, true/false, good/bad, death/life, obscene/decent, rich/poor, etc. [10, p. 113–114]. Many jokes contain special semantic script-switch triggers that highlight the need for substituting scripts, the two main types of such triggers are ambiguity and contradiction. Scripts, which are important elements in this theory, could be generally explained as organized pieces of information about something; “cognitive structure internalized by the speaker which provides the speaker with information on how things are done” [1, p. 198].

As a response to above mentioned Semantic Script Theory, the General Theory of Verbal Humour has been formulated in 1991 by S. Attardo and V. Raskin to expand the scope from semantics and include other areas of linguistics such as textual linguistics, the theory of narrativity and pragmatics [2]. “The General Theory of Verbal Humour broadened the Semantic Script Theory to include all linguistic levels, including an interest for social and narratological issues absent in the Semantic Script Theory” [10, p. 109]. This extension is achieved by five other Knowledge Resources except for the opposition which is to be found in Semantic Script Theory.

The six-level hierarchical representation model of verbal jokes is proposed which pursues to be, at the same time, a device for evaluating the “semantic distance”, or degree of similarity between particular joke texts. The model is limited to seven variants of the light bulb joke. Each variant differs from others exactly in one particular way. The hierarchy of the knowledge resources is as follows:

1. Language. “It includes all the choices at the phonetic, phonologic, morphophonemic, morphologic, lexic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels of language structure that the speaker is still free to make, given that everything else in the joke is already given and cannot be tinkered with” [10, 298], or further: “...basically, it is the content of the joke which has to be expressed within the parameter of language”, and still further, even: “parameter of language is responsible for exact wording and placement of the punchline” [10, 299]. Or, in simplified perspective, the Language level is considered responsible for any change not delegated to some higher level Knowledge Resources.

2. Narrative strategy. This means “the genre, or rather microgenre ... of the joke, in other words, whether the text of the joke is set up as expository, as a riddle, as a question-and-answer sequence, and so on” [10, 300]. The joke also can be expanded to a longer dialogue, customary to folk narratives triple sequence can be constructed, the newspaper advertisement form applied, etc. When building the narrative strategy, it is important to keep the text sufficiently nonredundant in order not to spoil the punchline [10].

3. Target is the personalized “object” of the joke. S. Attardo & V. Raskin [10, 301–302] provide examples of the rich choice of ethnically, socially or politically marked personages who have been considered apposite to fulfil the role of targets in the light bulb joke. They admit that the number of jokes without clear targets is quite small, but emphasize the exclusively conventional character of ethnic or other choices for embodiments of stupidity and deny any correspondence between such stereotypes and reality.

4. Situation consists of the rest of the content constituents or “props” of the joke, like other participants beside the target, activities, objects, instruments, etc.

5. Logical mechanism is the most problematic element in the General Theory of Verbal Humour. Here, “logical” does not stand for deductive logic or strict formal logic but rather should be understood in some looser quotidian sense ‘rational thinking and acting’ or even ‘ontological possibility’. For example, the usual reverse method of bulb-screwing has proved successful and is therefore “fully justified logically”, the reverse method of car washing is “somewhat faultier logically”, but the method of emptying the ashtray and turning the ceiling instead of the table in the bulb joke are “equally faulty” [10, 303–304]. The common logical mechanism for the whole joke series under discussion is called figure-ground reversal.

6. Script opposition. This is the only level of V. Raskin’s Semantic Script Theory incorporated into the General Theory of Verbal Humour model. The authors find the oppositions of the lowest level in Semantic Script Theory not to be equal in generality and put forward proposals to overcome this shortcoming.

The theory also includes the notion of „joke similarity“. This term suggests, that “jokes are predicted to be more similar in direct proportion to the number of parameters they have in common, and conversely to differ more if the values of many parameters are different...two jokes differing in only one parameter will be the more different, the higher the parameter is in the scale” [10, p. 228].

The Conversational Humour Approach is the most recent from the above mentioned theories. The core for this view is consideration of “direct address” as a resource for humour and the main trigger to create humour in everyday conversation. “Direct address always has both an “attention, identification” function and a “contact, expressive function” while showing that both these functions play several roles in creation of humorous discourse [8]. In this sense, this theoretical approach develops the notion of competence present in Semantic Script Theory and adds an aspect of performance as a crucial aspect in humorous interaction. Thus there are no general signals that would lead the listener to appreciation of humour embedded in the very words, but rather that there are procedures such as prosody or marked wording that help to identify the humorous instances [7, p. 51]. N. Bell in her “Impolite Responses to Failed Humour” emphasizes the role of context: “Behavioral norms can influence, for example, whether humour is even acceptable within a certain context, or what type of humour is appropriate” [3, p. 145]. She also suggests that “this principle is made up of components of involvement, empathy, and respect” [3] which supports the notion of humour as a co-operative interactional phenomenon rather than a set of grammatical capacity.

One of the crucial themes in humour studies is discourse analysis. Since discourse analysis puts emphasis on the functions and purposes of a language in use, analysis of humour discourse will investigate language of humour in use and what functions it serves in human interaction. Pragmatics addresses communicative processes and “presents a wide interdisciplinary

spectrum of topics capitalising in the interactions of cognitive, social, and cultural phenomena” [4, p. 2]. Thus the discussion about humour as a pragmatic tool puts emphasis on its observation as a communicative phenomenon. Humour can be conveyed by language as well as non-verbal impulses which both have their own ways of communicating a message between the participants. Humour is a part of interpersonal communication. Therefore it is common to observe humorous instances within a conversation with a function to amuse a conversational partner. Humour can be used in different discourses such as advertising, films, series, serials or literature [4, p. 3] which are in fact using a model of human interaction in their fictionalised surroundings.

The role of the article was to define the term humour and explain the phenomenon which it represents in many fields of study including linguistics. We further provided a brief insight into the theories of humour all of which consider different aspects to be crucial in humorous event and roles humour might play. The issue of laughter also came into consideration in connection to social aspect of humour which cannot be ignored in discussion about pragmatic principles of conversation. The laughter itself is a key issue of one of the humour theories – Relief Theory, which is a psychological approach. Other theories show that humour can be studied from several other perspectives such as sociology, generative grammar, or pragmatics. Examination of irony and humour correlation needs further research. Irony is regarded as a type of humor, as a complex speech act in which the intended meaning of a statement differs from its literal meaning and can take many configurations.

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Анотація

Н. РОТОН. ПРАГМАТИЧНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ГУМОРУ В АНГЛОМОВНОМУ ТЕКСТІ

Стаття присвячена теоретичним та методологічним засадам дослідження гумору в англomовному тексті. Особлива увага приділяється визначенню, поясненню та систематизації вербалізації гумору та засобам його відтворення. Гумор визначається через різні лінгвістичні теорії і зображається як певний вид потенціалу бути веселим або викликати сміх, досліджується прагматика гумору та його різні теорії.

Ключові слова: теорія несумлінності – розрізнення, теорія семантичного сценарію, загальна теорія словесного гумору, принцип кооперації, розмовний аспект гумору.

Аннотация

Н. РОТОН. ПРАГМАТИЧЕСКОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ЮМОРА В АНГЛОЯЗЫЧНОМ ТЕКСТЕ

Статья посвящена теоретическим и методологическим основам исследования юмора в англоязычном тексте. Особое внимание уделяется определению, объяснению и систематизации, вербализации юмора и средствам его воспроизведения. Юмор рассматривается сквозь призму различных лингвистических теорий и изображается как некий вид потенциала быть веселым или вызвать смех, исследуется прагматика юмора и его различные теории.

Ключевые слова: теория недобросовестности – различия, теория семантического сценария, общая теория словесного юмора, принцип кооперации, разговорный аспект юмора.

Summary

N. RHOTON. PRAGMATIC STUDY OF HUMOR IN THE ENGLISH TEXT

The article deals with theoretical and methodological principles of study of humor in the English text. Special attention is paid to determination, explaining and systemizing verbalization of humor and ways and means of its reproduction. Humour is defined through different linguistic theories and depicted as a certain kind of potential to be funny or to induce amusement indicated by laughter, an insight into pragmatics of humour and its different theories is provided.

Key words: incongruity-resolution theory, semantic script theory, general theory of verbal humour, cooperative principle, conversational humour approach.