

## ***On The Relationship Between Grice's Maxims And Humorous Discourse***

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### ***Abstract***

This paper sets up to find a relationship between humorous discourse and Gricean Maxims. Arabic humorous texts have been chosen for analysis. It is found that the violations of the maxims are interdependent and that the maxim of relevance subsumes the other three maxims: Quantity, Quality and Manner.

### ***1. Introduction***

Grice (1975) looks at language utterances as having more functions than they say. To him, the meaning of a given utterance is the totality of its implicature to the mutual knowledge of the speaker and the hearer in relation to the Cooperative Principle (CP). To use Pratt's example (Pratt, 1977:155),

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if A says, "I have a headache" and B replies, "I have some aspirin in my purse" B implicates that she is willing to make aspirin available to A, and A is entitled to assume this willingness. The possibility of this implicature derives from a principle whereby four categories operate in a discourse or text: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Grice's categories, with their related maxims, may be presented thus.

Quantity: 1. Make your contribution as informative as required in the circumstances of the exchange.

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality: 1. Do not say what you believe to be false

2. Do not say what you lack evidence for

Relation: Be relevant.

Manner: 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.

2. Avoid ambiguity

3. Be brief

4. Be orderly. (Grice, 1975: 45)

Grice's principle attempts to describe an assumption made by speaker/hearer about the nature of language use, that it is an activity in which users work together in order to bring about consequences of benefit to both speaker and hearer. Along with this assumption is that language is used instrumentally to get things done and is not, except in literary forms, an autonomous display. The cooperative principle, then, may be regarded as the highest of all the conventions which govern language use and within which the conventions of illocutionary force operate. While a speaker observes the principle by making himself as informative, truthful, relevant, and clear as he can, his hearer makes a similar effort to look for the speaker's intended meaning, distinguishing, if necessary, between the literal meaning of the speaker's expression and the underlying illocutionary force and implicature that represent the speaker's intention.

In this paper we claim that the study of humorous discourse can provide an interesting insight on the nature of cooperative linguistic communication and particularly on the status of the Gricean maxims.

## 2. Grice's maxims and humour

Let us look at the following humorous discourses as represented by the Arabic jokes:

1. المعلم: ماذا فعل الرومان بعد خروجهم من البحر؟  
التلميذ: عصروا ثيابهم

The teacher: What did the Romans do after leaving the sea?

The pupil: They wrung their clothes dry.

2. الأستاذ: ما هو الفعل الماضي لجمله (أنا أعيش)  
الطالب: أنت ميت.

The teacher: What is the past of the clause (I am alive)?

The student: You are dead.

3. أحدهم قدم عريضة خرجت رفيعة.

Lit: One made (a petition / wide); it came out thin.

4. المعلم: لماذا يبنون الجسور على الأنهار؟  
التلميذ لكي تحمي الأسماك من المطر.

The teacher: Why do they build bridges on rivers?

The pupil: To protect fish from rain.

Example (1) violates the maxim of quantity in that it does not provide enough information. Example (2) is an absurd joke showing the naivety of the pupil and his bizarre answer. Example (3) violates the submaxim of manner 'avoid ambiguity', as in general do all forms of verbal humour based on ambiguity, such as puns. Example (4) is a deliberate infraction of the maxim of quality.

The above texts violate the maxim rather than flout or exploit them, i.e., they fail to conform to their recommendations and thus constitute examples of non-cooperative behaviour. However, the examples do, to an extent, make sense, and are seen and taken as jokes.

### ***3. The processing of humorous texts***

Grice (1975: 49) sees that by violating one of the maxims the speaker "will be liable to mislead"; and this is the case in the text of a joke in a literal processing. The processing of a joke can be described as finding out a second sense in a text by resorting to disambiguation. The script theory suggested by Raskin (1985) describes this phenomenon as the imposition of a second 'script'; the structuralist-based theories as the discovery of a

second 'isotopy' (cf. Attardo, 1988:351-2)<sup>(1)</sup>. The violation of the maxims is related to the unexpected presence of the second sense (script, isotopy). The speaker producing the text uses the violation of a maxim to mislead the hearer into believing that 'normal' reliable information is being supplied, while in effect the text, or the utterance, is rigged (cf. Morreal, 1983: 79-82).

The process of getting a joke can be approximately taken as the

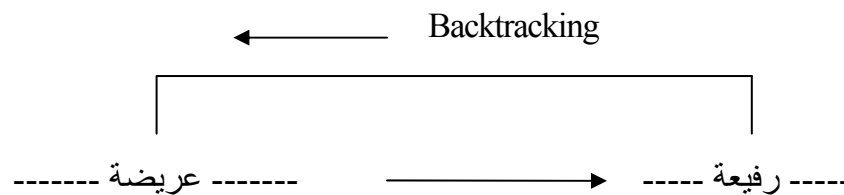
أحدهم قدم عريضة خرجت رفيعة.

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(1) Scripts are a part of a person's world knowledge. A script is a standard, predetermined, stereotyped sequence of events "that defines a well-known situation . . . and that has associated with it a number of roles" (Shank and Abelson 1977 quoted in Dolitsky, 1992:36).

In order for the reader to get this joke he or she should resolve the

1. The reader reaches the script / isotop "thin - رقيقة"
2. The joke does not make sense.
3. The reader backtracks and examines the lexical item عريضة and is offered the senses 'wide' and 'petition' as shown in the following figure.




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(2) The punchline contains the most fundamental element in the joke text, viz. the incongruity. Oring (1989:351) claims that it is the presence of the punchline, which differentiates a joke from a funny story.

(3) In this paper it is assumed that the jokes are written to be spoken; therefore, the word 'reader' rather than 'listener' is used.

It is to be noted that Grice's maxim of quantity (calling for sufficient and appropriate information) and the maxim of quality (that warns against pointless conversation) besides the maxim of manner are breached.

Mention should be made of the fact that the disambiguation process described above is but one of the possible configurations of the 'punchline' found in jokes. The punchline may not involve a backtracking, i. e., the ambiguity and the element that forces the reevaluation may coincide, or may be scattered along the text, for instance, in jokes based on alliteration (see Attardo et al., 1994: 35-37).

#### ***4. The communicative aspects of humorous texts***

As an act of communication, humour has a number of variables: a speaker, an audience, a topic-message, a setting, and feedback. Armed with their own past experiences, abilities, moods, information, and expectations both sender and audience embark on the interaction.

Nilsen (1994: 930) suggests that there are at least four characteristics in any humorous incident that need to be considered: 1 .the subject, 2.the tone, 3.the intent, and 4.the situation, including the teller and the audience. Nilsen (ibid.) proceeds to say that "the tone and the intent of a joke are so

interrelated to its situation that once a joke is removed from a particular situation it is sometimes impossible to understand what was intended".

Nash (1985: 19) states that a joke requires an executant and a respondent within the text the interchanges of whom are observed by respondent-outside the- text, as in:  $(E \rightarrow E_t \longleftrightarrow R_t \leftarrow R)$  where,

E = executant: author, poet, wit, original 'I'.

$E_t$ =executant- within- the- text: the persona, who speaks for the author, perhaps, without necessarily being the author.

$R_t$ =respondent- within- the- text: the persona controlled by the executant within- the- text, and making responses shared or disclaimed by the respondent- outside- the- text.

R= respondent: the reader, as observer and censor (ibid.).

It is obvious that there are some variables mentioned above which are considered to be elements in the structure of a joke, namely, the setting and the subject. Put simply, the humorous process involves:

The initiator, the person who tells the joke or triggers the humorous act; the target, the person to whom the joke is told, and the butt, the person at whose expense the humour is directed. Individuals or groups who observe or hear the joke are the audience.

One may expect humorous texts to be non-cooperative or meaningless if they violate the Gricean maxims. Never the less, jokes are understood and are not seen as lies or as ill-formed texts. To account for this fact, Raskin (1985) suggested that joking involves a different kind of 'communicative mode' governed by a different set of maxims. The maxims for that 'non-bona-fide' mode are the following:

Quantity: Give exactly as much information as is necessary for a joke.

Quality: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke.

Relation: Say only what is relevant to the joke.

Manner: Tell the joke efficiently. (ibid. : 103)

Thus, the paradox is solved: the reader will backtrack, after realizing that he/she has been misled, and will reinterpret the information provided in the text on the basis of the humour maxims, switch to the non-bona-fide mode of humour, and react accordingly (i. e., laughing, smiling, etc.) (see

Drew (1987) and Zhao (1988) for further detail on the communicative functions of humorous discourse).

### ***5. The element of 'unsaid' in humour***

Humour differs from nation to nation, and that what speakers of one group find funny, those of another do not. Many people are of the opinion that other nations have a type of humour that they can not grasp. What is not realized is that when humour is based on the 'unsaid', readers will not find a story funny unless they can identify that which was not said, but was a necessary underlying element, or that which was said, but should not have been. The unsaid is consistently present in a humour whose base is language. Language use is dependent on the interlocutors' knowledge and assumptions as regards the world they live, which, in turn, affect the speaking context, both mental and physical, in which they find themselves (Dolitsky, 1992:35).

In both linguistically and pragmatically based jokes, the humour lies in the seen but unstated gap between the expectation of the rule- following audience and the rule- breaking speaker (p. 37). Let us consider the following example from Coulthard (1977:65):

Linus: Do you want to play with me, Violet?

Violet: You're younger than me (Shuts the door)

Linus: (puzzled) She didn't answer my question.

The humour involved in this story is that the reader shares the unsaid assumption that Violet has made, i. e. that children only play with children their own age. The amusement resides in our knowledge of this and in our knowledge that poor Linus unfortunately does not share this most necessary presupposition and therefore does not understand either why the door was slammed, why Violet said what she did, or why she did not give him an existential answer to his question, i. e. yes or no.

In sum, humour conveyed through language is located at the point of the unsaid, i. e. unstated presuppositions, inferences, references, and associations etc. For the joke to function as such, some information must be left unsaid. Put differently, Grice's maxim of quantity must be violated.

## ***6. The relative position of the maxims***

It should be noted that any violation of quantity, quality, and manner maxims in a joke necessitates the violation of the maxim of relevance as

well. This lies in the fact that if the speaker does not believe in the truth of what he / she is saying, the content of the utterance can hardly be said to be relevant<sup>(4)</sup>.

If the speaker does not provide enough information or provides too much information, he/she will not be relevant, either because his/her information will not succeed to cover some of the relevant issues, or because the information will cover issues which are not relevant. If the speaker is obscure or ambiguous, his / her contribution will not be relevant since the reader will not be able to evaluate whether the information provided is to the point. Hence, the maxim of relevance subsumes the other three.

Sperber and Wilson (1986) expand the maxim of relation: "be relevant" (Grice, 1975: 46) into the Principle of Relevance on the basis of which they forward their 'relevance theory'. The theoretical basis of the relevance theory is that relevance is fundamental to communication not because speakers obey the maxim of relevance, as Grice supposed, but because relevance is not only necessary but basic to cognition. The hearer, therefore pays attention to any information that seems relevant to him.

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(4) The speaker might be lying and thus produces a relevant but not cooperative utterance; however, this would not be a joke.

They (p. 125) maintain that an utterance, on a given interpretation, is optimally relevant if and only if the following conditions are achieved:

1. It achieves enough contextual efforts to be worth the addressee's attention.
2. It puts the addressee to no unjustifiable effort in achieving those efforts.

Thus, Sperber and Wilson describe the principle of relevance in terms of contextual effects and processing efforts: the greater the contextual effects presented with as little as possible processing effort involved the greater the relevance. They (p. 109) argue that contextual effects are achieved when a speaker's utterance interacts with a context of existing assumptions or when this utterance is combined with a new assumption to yield some new contextual implications. Thus, newly presented information is relevant in a context only when it yields contextual effect in that context, and the greater the contextual effect the greater the relevance.

The other axis on which Sperber and Wilson's principle of relevance hinges is that of effort. This axis is seen in such a way that the greater the processing effort is required the smaller the relevance (ibid). They (p.224) remark that taking the hearer beyond standard contexts and premises is typical for poetic efforts. The same can be said for humorous effects which

may be integrated under the rubric of aesthetic pleasure. It can be noted that in both, literary and humorous language, the communicators accept to pay extra efforts if they can expect to gain effects such as joy, aesthetic, pleasure or enlightenment. Thus, extra efforts paid for humorous texts are justified by the additional effects obtained from the texts themselves. Hence, humorous discourse can be tackled in accordance with the main hypothesis of relevance theory, viz., contextual effects and processing effort.

## ***7. Conclusion***

This paper has stressed the cooperative aspects of humorous discourse as a non-bona-fide mode of communication. It has discussed the communicative status of humorous texts, the importance of the unsaid in humour, and the relative position of the Gricean maxims. Some Arabic humorous texts have been chosen for analysis. It has been found that the violations of the maxims are interdependent. If a humorous discourse represented by a joke violates one maxim, it will be violating other maxims in effect. However, the maxim of relevance has been found to subsume the other three maxims: Quantity, Quality and Manner.

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## ملخص

# العلاقة بين النصوص الفكاهية وأحكام غرايس

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يتمحور هذا البحث حول إيجاد علاقة بين النصوص الفكاهية و أحكام غرايس (Gricean maxims). إذ تم اختيار نصوص فكاهية عربية لغرض التحليل. وقد تبين ان خرق هذه الأحكام متوقف على العلاقة المتبادلة بين الأحكام وان حكم المواءمة (maxim of relevance) يتضمن الأحكام الثلاثة الأخرى: الكمية والنوعية والأسلوب.

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