

Relevance Theory, Humour, and the Narrative Structure of Humorous Novels

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ABSTRACT

Recent work on the application of relevance theory to humorous speech-acts (jokes) defines these as being characterised by an increased demand in processing effort for the attainment of maximum contextual effects. This increase, however, is limited to the resolution of incongruities typically presented in this sort of utterance. Humorous novels, because of their greater length, are rather more complex, and base the process of incongruity-resolution largely on an interplay of internal coherence established by the use of strong implicatures in the depiction of character, and external incongruity established on the level of the narrator's appeal to the reader's encyclopaedic knowledge. The use of strong implicatures, which characterises these works and seems necessary for the sustained creation of humour, would probably explain the fact that they are intuitively and almost invariably considered third-class literature, since "good" literature, according to relevance theory, is characterised by a complexity and multiplicity of contextual effects produced fundamentally by the use of weak implicature.

1. Introduction

It now seems to be accepted that, contrary to Austin and Grice's initial view of literature as a parasitic use of language, literary works may be categorised as complex communicative acts which draw upon certain mental processes both in their production and their reception,

and which are therefore open to the insights of Pragmatics, and more specifically of relevance theory. Hence, for example, Adrian Pilkington has recently written:

Poets (and novelists and playwrights) may spend a considerable amount of time making sure the right words are placed in the right order. They take this trouble because the thoughts they wish to communicate are extremely rich and subtle. Only by adopting a theoretical approach of the kind that relevance theory offers, concentrating on thoughts as complex sets of assumptions of varying degrees of strength and weakness, interacting dynamically on-line with other sets of assumptions, can justice be done to the complexity of the thoughts that may be communicated. As I have argued elsewhere ... the notion of literariness might more satisfactorily be defined in terms of mental representations and mental processes, of the specific kind described here [through the analyses of Relevance Theory], than in terms of the linguistic properties of texts (1996: 160).

Andrew Goatley, also, in an article on register, relevance theory and metaphor, argues against the belief of Grice and his followers that "linguistic exchanges have as their main aim the efficient exchange of information, or the maximal mutual expansion of cognitive environments with the minimum processing" (1994: 150), and defends the idea a) that many uses of language do not have the exchange of information as their primary purpose and b) that different types or genres of communicative acts demand different ways of computing relevance involving different degrees of processing effort and different amounts of time taken in the process. In this context he classifies literature as being typified by the fact that it puts the receiver face to face with "conflicting possibilities for the most relevant contextual assumptions, none of which can be categorically claimed as the most relevant, since the contextual effects produced by literary texts are typically both multiple and weak" (1994: 150). This, according to him, is why literature lends itself to and is enriched by re-reading, whereas other types of communicative act are not.

The idea that weak implicature is a prime characteristic of literature is generalised. Pilkington, for example, writes that "the notion of weak implicature, developed within relevance theory, is crucially important for explaining poetic effects. Poetic metaphors, for example, are characterised in terms of the communication of a wide array of weak implicatures. This notion of weak implicature helps to explain the indeterminacy of poetic effects" (1996: 159). The work on metaphor carried out by writers such as Giora (1997; 1999) or Vicente (1992; 1996) corroborates this idea, placing the "creative" or "rich" metaphors typical of poetry at the extreme end of a continuum at the other end of which lie the literal or "salient" interpretations of conversation or rapid exchange. But it is not merely a matter of metaphor. Other writers point out that the process of reading a text, whether literary or not, is in itself a peculiarly lengthy one, and occupies a considerable space of time (Prieto Pablos, 1996). Also, since they require no immediate practical response on the part of the receiver, one of the fundamental traits of "literary" texts, exploited by both producer and reader, is that in perusing them the latter is at leisure to devote an amount of time and processing effort which he cannot afford in other communicative contexts such as normal conversation, and can therefore draw multiple "weak" implicatures from the

illocutionary acts with which he is presented, exploiting relevance to the utmost (Varela, 1993).

It is within this framework of ideas that I wish to put forward certain suggestions about the communicative structure of humorous novels. These texts, seen intuitively and collectively as a second or third class sub-genre of the novel as a whole, and normally categorised as "light" entertainment and hardly (in general and save for certain very notable exceptions) as "good" literature, are characterised by certain marked communicative conventions which stem, obviously, from those of verbal humour in general. Nevertheless, I think, the pragmatic analysis of the structure of short pieces of verbal humour (jokes) cannot be applied exactly to humorous novels. My observations in this case are founded on the evidence provided by more or less contemporary works generally held to have an overall humorous effect (as distinct from "serious" novels with elements of humour in them), such as Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* or *One Fat Englishman*, William Boyd's *A Good Man in Africa* or *Stars and Bars*, or the novels of Tom Sharpe.

2. Relevance Theory and Humour

Coinciding with Andrew Goatley's theory that there exist genre-based ways of computing relevance, various authors (Jodlowiec, 1991; Curc6, 1995; Yus Ramos, 1997), arrived at a re-formulation in terms of relevance theory of the cognitive, incongruity-based theories of verbal humour and joking expounded by writers such as Victor Raskin, Jerry Suls, John Morreall, or Arthur Koestler. Succinctly expressed, this would run as follows: the teller of a joke produces an utterance which the receiver processes in the usual way, that is, to use Sperber and Wilson's terms, deriving the maximum contextual effect for the minimum processing effort. In producing his utterance, the teller works on the assumption that the receiver will (logically) detain his processing effort at the first valid interpretive hypothesis he arrives at, ignoring automatically the possible existence of other alternatives. However, as the joke proceeds, the teller introduces an element of "cognitive dissonance", or incongruity, which surprises the listener, and brings up short his processing activity as he tries to adapt this new information to that provided by the narrative context created up to now in conjunction with his encyclopaedic knowledge. Faced by the fact that his processing chain has been abruptly interrupted, the receiver tries to find a solution to the problem, and, indeed, does so in a process of reinterpretation which accommodates the new information, and which he realises is also possible, though not initially accessible in terms of relevance. The receiver realises that he has been led up the garden path, so to speak, by the teller and, according to psychological theories of humour, it is a mixture of surprise, appreciation of incongruity and satisfaction at having solved the problem presented by the latter in a quick and efficient manner (having "got" the joke), that accounts for the pleasurable effects which give rise to laughter.¹

Thus, as Andrew Goatley says, joking belongs to those genres of communicative acts which involve the receiver in a computation of relevance in which the latter, to quote

Levinson, is to be regarded as having "a comparative measure, so that the best of the competing interpretations are selected" (1989: 463). Goatley puts joking in the same category as crossword puzzles, in which, he says, "one is generally reasonably certain when one has solved a clue correctly; one simply has to go on expanding and selecting different contexts until the answer 'clicks'" (1994: 150). Humour belongs to those kinds of genres which deliberately increase processing effort as a means of achieving a specific perlocutionary effect, in this case laughter. But processing is relatively limited in that the receiver clearly perceives when he has reached the desired interpretation.

All that has been set out thus far refers to jokes, that is, brief acts of verbal communication which entail a relatively simple narrative structure. My question here is, can it be applied to the far more complex and elaborate structure of humorous novels? It seems to me that such much more sustained humorous efforts do not and cannot correspond to the structure of jokes as described above, if only because of the difficulty involved in keeping up such a cognitive structure over such a greatly extended length and through a necessarily more complicated construction. Also, another factor which leads me to think that the overall structure of humorous novels cannot correspond to that ascribed to jokes (though, admittedly, isolated jokes within them may work as described above) is that we very often find ourselves, when reading them, laughing at their protagonists and the situations they get themselves into. Now, psychological theories of humour, including Freud's theory of tendentious humour and others which have since elaborated on it through more empirical research², state that this type of communicative act necessitates in order to be successful an element of positive identification with the producer and of negative identification with the object of humour. Yet it cannot be denied that in novels such as *Lucky Jim* or *Wilt* many of our laughs are produced at the expense of Jim Dixon and Henry Wilt, despite the fact that the narrators go to considerable lengths to gain the reader's sympathy for these characters, and to cultivate antipathy for those others who oppose them. So, what is the mechanism put into play here?

The answer to this question, I think, lies in the examination of that type of joke which is based most directly on stereotypes. Stereotypes may be described as mental pictures formulated by human beings to depict the world beyond their reach (Apte, 1985: 113). They are at least partially culturally determined, and although they may contain a certain element of truth, their contents show that they have little or nothing to do with "empirical" truth, corresponding more with "social" than with "objective" reality (Dundes, 1971: 188). Their contents are therefore factually incorrect, but they tend to persist even in the face of knowledge and education, and to be universally present in societies. Stereotypes are, as Apte points out, crucial to humour and its appreciation because within any specific culture they constitute a shared set of assumptions which are readily available with a minimal expenditure of mental effort. That is, to put it in the terms of relevance theory, they render a maximum contextual effect with a minimum processing effort. Since humour appreciation decreases when it depends on a concept that cannot be understood without an effort or when critical examination is required, speed of development being essential for the success of a joke³, it seems evident that such ready-made conceptualisations are of maximum utility.

Thus when someone tells a joke which begins with "There was an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman", for example, this introduction not only announces that a joke is going to be told and hence produces humorous expectations, but it also immediately evokes the corresponding stereotypes from the listener's encyclopaedic knowledge. The humour in such jokes lies in the tension between on the one hand the fact that the receiver thinks immediately of certain characteristics inherent to his stereotyped images and therefore conceives specific expectations, and on the other the fact that the outcome of the situation thus introduced is incongruous in view of the listener's general sense of appropriateness and, in the best jokes, surprising even in view of his expectations, but is nevertheless in some way coherent with the latter. The pleasure of the receiver would seem to derive, therefore, not only from surprise and incongruity, but also from the satisfaction of having his expectations confirmed and in the worst of cases, his prejudices reaffirmed. For example, there's the one about the Scotsman who is staggering home after a night out at the pub, with a half-empty bottle of whisky in his coat pocket. He sways around, trips over his feet and suddenly falls over. As he is lying on the ground, he feels over himself to see if anything is broken, and finds that his leg is covered in a warmish liquid. "Please God", he says, "Let it be blood!" This narration produces a variety of contextual connections with the cognitive schema of the receiver, who uses his encyclopaedic knowledge to form suppositions like those suggested below:

- (a) The speaker is about to tell a joke ("there's the one about ...").
- (b) The joke is about a Scotsman. The stereotyped image of the Scots is that they are stingy and tight-fisted.
- (c) This one has been in a pub and he staggers. Therefore he is drunk.
- (d) When one falls over one is likely to hurt oneself, which gives cause for concern.
- (e) Hurting oneself may well imply loss of blood, which is undesirable.

But the Scotsman says "Please let it be blood", which is incongruous for the listener's sense of appropriateness in view of the context created. However, his automatic search for relevance takes him straight back to the stereotype of the Scotsman as initially suggested by the mention of his name in the joking context, thus solving the incongruity -the Scotsman would prefer to bleed rather than lose the half-bottle of whisky- and deriving pleasure not only from so doing, but also from having the stereotype confirmed.

3. Narrative Structure in Humorous Novels

The humorous texts which are the object of my interest here follow, I believe, much the same pattern, although, I hasten to add, I do not mean by this that they necessarily exploit previously-established cultural stereotypes. However, if we take a literary character to be a construct created by the illocutionary acts of the narrator, which include, of course, description of the character and of his actions and reactions, and report of his locutionary

acts, we find that in humorous novels a wide range of illocutionary acts are employed, which constantly reinforce each-other to generate a very limited range of implicatures. This generates the creation of characters which constitute stable and relatively simple propositions for the reader to assimilate, so that they become, in the course of reading, elements as easy to access as national stereotypes in the jokes described above.

Downing, writing about the humour of Tom Sharpe, points out the existence of two levels of incongruity in his novels: incongruity of content and incongruity of realisation. The former refers to "comic juxtaposition of characters, details, incidents, etc. ..." (1983: 136), and the latter to the author's use of language as a component of the humorous situation, having to do with stylistic devices such as register-shifts, hyperbole, unusual lexical collocations, and so on. While accepting this distinction as valid, I feel that it is necessary to make a further one between what might be called "internal" and "external" incongruity. With the former term I would refer to those elements in a story which deviate from the reader's expectations as created within the context of the novelistic discourse itself, and which pertain to what we might call a "first level of narration", concerning the characters and their interaction and being relevant for the reader in his apprehension of these. With the term "external incongruity" I refer to those elements of the discourse which clash with the reader's encyclopaedic knowledge of the everyday world outside the novel, with his concept of what, in general terms, is appropriate and to be expected, and which pertain to a "second level of narration", that of communication between the narrator and the reader, englobing not only the characters and their interaction, but also the narrator's discourse. The type of novel that I am referring to in this paper is, I believe, characterised by the presence of very little "internal" incongruity and a great deal of the "external" type, and much of their humour is created by the reader's perception of both levels. This "internal" incongruity is created, in turn, by the narrator's constant use of strong implicature.

Strong implicatures are produced within the context of these novels by series of illocutionary acts whose possible richness of implicature is limited by the repetition of the same, or similar, salient connotations, which reinforce each-other and at the same time condition the reader's search for relevance within the on-going text. This process begins in the initial chapters of the novels, when the main characters are established through a series of (frequently) indirect illocutionary acts of high organising power, which allow the reader to form a defined image of each of the personages in question, so that specific expectations may be conceived as to his behaviour and reactions. These characters are caught at a particular point in their lives, and undergo experiences which may (or may not) bring about an ultimate change in them. However, these transformations, if they occur, do not take place until the end, or very near the end of the novels. During the development of the plot the characters bring to bear the characteristics and attitudes attributed to them from the beginning, so that the initial description of them will be valid to the reader throughout the length of the novel, and is essential to much of the humour created around them. If we think of them as verbal constructs, which, of course, is what they are, they constitute propositions initially established, which interact with other propositions, and further reference to which

provides illocutionary acts which generate a limited range of implicatures that in turn reinforce those originally made.

In this way the very mention of a character's name comes to conjure up a specific "script"⁴ for him in the reader's mind, in exactly the same way as the mention of the Scotsman does in the joke-telling context given above. And in the same manner as in a joke, what happens in these humorous novels is that the expectations aroused as to the character are played with in the plot in manners surprising to the reader and incongruous with his encyclopaedic knowledge of the real world and also often with his contextual knowledge of the fictional world created by the narrator up to the point in question, but which, on examination, he finds coherent with the scripts he has for the characters concerned, and therefore ultimately satisfying to his expectations. In this way all the elements necessary for the production of humour are provided: incongruity, surprise and satisfaction, and the specification of cognitive-perceptual theories of humour, namely that it must engage the receiver in a two-stage process involving the discovery of incongruities which constitute a jolt to our picture of the way things are supposed to be, and which is followed by the resolution of those incongruities by the application of a different cognitive rule (Koestler, 1964; MacGhee, 1979; Suls, 1972, 1977; Shultz, 1976; Morreall, 1983), is fulfilled.

The overall structure of humorous narrative is not, however, exactly the same as that of isolated jokes where, as we have seen, the receiver is made to perceive incongruity through a culminating punch-line, and given the task of re-reading all the previous elements according to a new value for relevance in order to accommodate them to a second interpretation. Though, as I have said, this technique is sometimes used on the micro-level of discourse, on the macro-level two (or more) scripts are posited from or near the beginning, together with the basic characteristics of the characters involved in the action. The equivalent to the punch-line in humorous narrative is provided by those highlights in the plot in which the elements of incongruity come to a head, provoking in the reader the problem-solving activity indicated above.

If on the one hand the effectiveness of the type of humorous discourse I am referring to in this paper depends on the reader's awareness of internal context as created by the narrator, on the other, and on the second level of narration I have spoken of above, we find that there is a strong dependence also on the reader's external, cultural context for the effect of the narrator's illocutionary acts. The narrator of the humorous novel strives to create from the very beginning points of reference common to himself and to his reader by appealing to the latter's encyclopaedic knowledge with the fundamental end in view of cultivating a feeling of "positive identification" with himself and often also with certain of his characters, which will enable him to "carry" the reader successfully through his narrative. This is so not only in more obvious cases where contemporary reference is important for humorous effects, but also where more general aspects of the reader's knowledge and experience are concerned. Humorous discourse, in short, is based on the assumption of presuppositions, moral, social, cultural, and even generic, shared by narrator and reader, which should be readily accessible to the latter, and which are played with by the former through speech-acts which cause the reader's thought to move from the specific

to the general. The reader, in fact, is constantly being presented with locutionary acts characterised by their specificity, and is asked to draw from these implicatures of a more general nature. These implicatures are subsequently reinforced in the course of the narration by further illocutionary acts. One of the pleasures, indeed, in the successful reading of a humorous novel, and one of the sources of satisfaction which generate humour and place the reader, as superiority theories of humour would have it, above the level of its objects, is his constant feeling that the implicatures he has drawn and the expectations he has formed are correct.

The use of strong implicature which I have described on the one hand makes for, and on the other is created by the presence of clearly defined and unchanging narrative attitudes. If a humorous novel is to have the desired effect, that is, if it is to cause more than sporadic amusement in its reader, the latter must be manipulated into well-defined identification classes. It is, of course, obvious that in any sort of novel the reader is manipulated by the narrator into taking one position or another. There is nothing new about this. But in the case of the humorous novel the stance to be adopted by the reader, and the relationship established between the narrator and the reader, and between them and the various characters tends to be made clear from the start and to be consistent, so that the reader does not have to "grope around" to position himself. This would appear to be required, indeed, by the factor of positive and negative identification attendant on the appreciation of humour. If "mirth is said to vary proportionally with the negativeness of the affective disposition toward the disparaged party, and with the positiveness of the affective disposition toward the disparaging party, and jointly so" (Zillmann, 1983: 92), it seems obvious that what appears to be fundamental for traditional fiction as a whole is of paramount importance here, namely that the relation between the narrator and the receiver must be "friendly, cooperative, and mutually satisfying; the speaker attempts to create a fictional community, gradually drawing readers into the world of the text. As instigator of the contact, the speaker assumes control and 'creates ... an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves ... can find complete agreement' ".⁵

Another of the effects of the use of strong implicature in humorous novels and of the "internal coherence" created by it, is the air of inevitability which permeates their plots. In almost all of them one of the characters, usually the protagonist, seems unavoidably drawn by the logic of circumstances to a bad end. In some, these circumstances are largely materialised by the implacable inner coherence of the characters into whose hands the protagonist falls. However, in others, it is not only the characters around the protagonist who threaten his downfall, but also traits inherent to himself. In this respect the plots of humorous novels bear something of a resemblance to those of tragedy, where the combination of the protagonist's failings and the circumstances in which he finds himself (or simply these latter) lead him to certain misfortune. Robert Murray Davis writes, "Characters in the [humorous] novel for the most part lack volition, or at least the ability to make their wills effective. Instead, they are pushed along by what might be called the pressure of events: not exactly determinism in the mechanistic sense, but a set of

circumstances produced by whim, coincidence, or manipulations by remote or impersonal forces which the characters cannot control and often cannot even perceive" (1969: 10). This "determinism" is due, I feel, not to whim or coincidence, but to the workings of strong implicature as I have described them above. The difference between tragedy and comedy in this respect, of course, lies in the element of "external incongruity" which I have mentioned, established on the second level of narration. Whereas on the first level of narration internal coherence of character would seem to lead the protagonist of the humorous novel to an inevitable fate, the awareness of incongruity created by the narrator on the second level causes the reader to see this fate as ridiculous, not as tragic. This effect is often heightened by the fact that the reader's attitudes are manipulated in such a way as to make the external elements against which the protagonist is pitched seem ludicrous in themselves, which in turn, of course, forms part of the critical content of the macro-illocutionary act of the text.

4. Conclusions

Humour is based on the perception and resolution of incongruity. In terms of Pragmatics and relevance theory this implies an increase in processing effort for the attainment of relevant contextual effects, but this processing effort, though important for the desired perlocutionary effects, must have a limited extension, or value, or humour vanishes into thin air. Humorous narrative, apart from stylistic effects, is largely based on situational ones; we laugh at the characters, and the situations they get into and provoke. I have argued in this paper that one of the characteristics which decisively mark humorous novels is the fact that the illocutionary acts of their narrators are characterised by the assiduous use of strong implicature, and that this factor constitutes the axis on which much of their humour turns, since the internal coherence created in the depiction of characters and their actions, interactions and reactions creates, especially at certain points, a relation of incongruity with the reader's sense of external appropriateness which would seem to be one of the factors necessary for the creation of humour. In this respect my analysis fits in with and corroborates Goatley's definition of humour as a type of discourse which generically demands an amount of processing effort for maximum contextual effects which is not minimum, but which is not unlimited, either. For if the reader is to make sense of what is narrated, if he is to "get" the joke rather than leave it at a lot of irrelevant nonsense, he cannot -and does not- leave it at a face level of incongruity with his sense of appropriateness, but must expand his search for relevance to include the inner or "first" level of narration I have mentioned above, thus solving the incongruity by reference to the coherence of the characters he is dealing with. However, in a sort of vicious circle, this is easy to do, because the characters are defined by strong implicature, and all their manifestations reinforce each-other.

This is also why, of course, humorous narrative provides such an efficient vehicle for criticism. For the "point-driven reader", who is "trying to construct a global speech-act, and

therefore will be attempting to establish coherence over the text as a whole" (Vipond and Hunt, 1984: 270), and endeavouring to reconstruct the "pragmatic gesture" of an "implied author", the use of strong implicature, together with the narrator's marked and unchanging attitudes, and his care to establish positive identification with the reader and certain characters, and negative identification with others, plus the outcome of the novel, in which positive characters (generally) come off well or relatively so, and negative characters come off badly according to the values established by the text, the search for relevance over the macro-level of discourse is hardly a complex one.

Last, but not least, Pragmatics and relevance theory have, as we have seen, defined the intuitive but intangible notion of what is "literary" or "poetic" in terms of the presence in texts of contextual effects characterised by their complexity and multiplicity, which induce in their receivers correspondingly complex mental processes. Recent work on metaphor has suggested that "poetic" metaphor is marked by the communication of a wide array of implicatures weakly communicated, which encourage a special kind of pragmatic processing involving a wide-ranging search through the receiver's encyclopaedic entries for certain concepts for assumptions that might be used in the process of interpretation. Humorous novels, however, do not, in general, answer to these specifications, because they are marked by the more limited type of pragmatic processing attendant on the appreciation of humour. This, I feel, may well provide a reasoned explanation for why these works, irrespective of their success within their genre, are not in general considered to qualify as "good" literature, but are classified, as I have said at the beginning of this paper, as "light" by-products of the far more weighty novelistic genre.

Notes

1. See Yus Ramos (1997: 503-504).
2. Freud (1991: 197). Also, for example, Suls (1977); Zillmann (1983).
3. The point is made by many commentators, among them Freud, who writes that "a joke loses its effect of laughter ... as soon as he [the receiver] is required to make an expenditure on intellectual work in connection with it. The allusions made in a joke must be obvious and the omissions easy to fill; an awakening of conscious intellectual interest usually makes the effect of the joke impossible" (1991: 202).
4. The notion of "script" as defined by Victor Raskin seems to me a fertile and useful one in this context: "The script is a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it. The script is a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker and it represents the native speaker's knowledge of a small part of the world. Every speaker has internalized rather a large repertoire of scripts of 'common sense' which represent his/her knowledge of certain routines, standard procedures, basic situations, etc. ... Beyond the scripts of 'common sense' every native speaker may, and usually does have individual scripts determined by his/her individual background and subjective experience, and restricted scripts which the speaker shares with a certain group, for example family, neighbours, colleagues, etc., ... but not with the whole speech community of native speakers of the same language" (1985: 81).

5. Malmgren (1986: 477). He quotes Booth (1974: 138).

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