A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF JOKES

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Abstract: The present study focuses on jokes from a linguistic perspective, trying to describe the dual specific structure a joke is built on in order to define the specificity of jokes, in general. Being considered as forms of oral literature, jokes detain a large diversity of forms, from riddle jokes to puns and ethnic jokes, but the structural dualism remains persistent. Subsequently, the study refers to the isotopies a joke might be constructed on, to the opposed scripts, to the surprising switch from an interpretation of a joke first meaning towards a secondary unexpected interpretation, to the mechanisms that produce the funniness of a joke.

Keywords: joke, punch line, incongruity, verbal humour, contrastive scripts.

Humour has been chosen as object of study by many researchers, often becoming the centre of their sociological, psychological, philosophical and literary scholarly interests. The examples of such study works are numerous. In this respect, Salvatore Attardo's chapter dedicated to a chronological Survey of the literature written about humour is more than useful. Starting with Plato and Aristotle and ending with Freud and Bergson, Attardo's both historical and analytical enterprise underlines the diachronic depth of the problematic. Nevertheless, there are less linguistic studies on humour, even if many scholars have tried to compensate this lack in the late years.

Most of the researchers who focused on humorous texts and language tried to create a paradigm of analysing and defining a joke (as long as jokes are to be considered the humorous typical production of the language). The paradigm we refer to is generally coined by using the term theory. Raskin (1985), and later on, Attardo together with Raskin (1991) tried to configure what was to become the most known theories in the domain: SSTH (The Semantic Script Based Theory of Humor) and GTVH (General Theory of Verbal Humour). Still, these models of approaching verbal humour are being continuously reshaped and sometimes put

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under question, as in the case of Graeme Ritchie's The linguistic analysis of jokes. (2004. For further study see pages 69-88 of the mentioned study) and others.

When dealing with linguistic humour, especially jokes, scholars tried to engage themselves into quest for answers regarding different aspects form outside and inside the phenomenon of verbal humour, such as:

- Adequate definition of a joke;
- The mechanisms of a joke;
- The qualities that make a good joke;
- The relation between locator and allocator and the jokehood conventions;
- The prior experiences of both hearer and speaker and their historical, national, social, psychological individualities;

The present study intends to describe the dualism of a joke, one of the linguistic mechanisms scholars have been interested regarding verbal humour, specifically jokes, so that we may establish the approximate frames for such a notional sphere the term joke has got. The scientific enterprises made in the direction of these marginal pieces of literature have been confronted with what Raskin called the volatility of humor.[1]Hence, the humour phenomenon, with its Fata Morgana-like contours, implements a hardly defining effort with reference to joke.

Before dealing with the problematic this study is assigned for, we consider appropriate to describe in a nutshell the three well known linguistic theories of humour as theoretical basis for our research. Many researchers described these three theories, but we would prefer to mention Rodica Zafiu's delimitations. The theories in discussion, though interdependent, are confined to two categories, according to which human linguistic register they address to. Theories of Incongruity are oriented towards the cognitive mechanisms; meanwhile the Hostility Theories and the Release Theories deal with the psychological causes and effects of humour.[2]

The two types of theories focus on the causes that determine a person to verbalise a joke and the effects it produces within the person's psychological forum. Firstly, the Hostility Theories refer to the aggressive aspect of humour. Such jokes imply a condescend humour, patronizing the other for a weakness, for low social class, for upper social class, for ignorance,

[1] Victor Raskin, Semantic Mechanisms of Humour, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht, Holland, 1985, p. 111
[2] Rodica Zafiu, Evaluarea umorului verbal (p. 497-505), in G. Pană Dindelegan (ed.): Limba română. Stadiul actual al cercetării, Bucharest, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, p. 498

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for stereotypical behaviour and so on. The comic literature aimed in a certain historical period to penalise social/ human defects through humour and laughter. Bergson considered humour a "social corrective"[3], but this perspective increases and denounce the jokes speaker's sense of superiority, and, consequently, this person's aggressiveness and lack of empathy towards the other. This aggressive side of jokes has been largely debated, mostly because of its specific controversies. A following section of the present study will describe more clearly the consequences of such humour.

Secondly, the Release Theories deal with the joke's cathartic power. Humour and laughing, sometimes seen as therapies, release cognitive and emotional tensions, abolishing inflexible laws exactly the way playing does through its gratuitousness. That is why word games are such modalities of suppressing even the linguistic rules, becoming redemptory. Certain jokes play with words and distort them in such a way so that the catharsis could be produced.

Theories of Incongruity focus on the dissonance every joke seems to build on in order to produce funniness. Salvatore Attardo names it a "mismatch between two ideas"[4], focusing on the contrast between the hearer's expectations and the surprising resolution given by the speaker.

Generally seen as a narrative creation, a joke has been studied from the perspective of its inner dualism. This aspect has become the centre of numerous research works on verbal humour. Turning back to Attardo's study, the researcher analyses A. J. Greimas's joke semantic analysis entitled The Isotopy-Disjunction Model. It defines this dualism through isotopies (in his book Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method). The term isotopy defines a perspective the meaning of the text is directing to. Being a semantic category, isotopy includes repeated semes and classemes. While semes represent the smallest semantic unit, classemes are contextual semes, as Greimas (cited by Attardo) explains: "context must be present the semic variables which alone can explain the changes in the meaning effects which can be registered."[5] Repeated classemes group in two directions of meaning, forming the two parts of the joke, the two isotopies. The first one is launched by the starter of a joke and the second one interferes homogenously through the dialogue that frames the second part. (1) "Bacon and eggs enter into a bar.

[3] Apud Salvattore Attardo, Linguistic Theories of Humour, Mouton de Gruyter, New York, 1994, p. 50
[4] Salvattore Attardo, ibidem, p. 48
[5] Idem, ibidem, p. 67

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The bartender says: 'Sorry, we don't serve breakfast here!"[6]

Besides the two isotopies, The Isotopy-Disjunction Model also includes a connecting term that "produces the collision of the two isotopies"[7]. In the case of (1), the connector is the word serve that moves from the first isotopy (also humorous and absurd: bacon and eggs, personified, enter into an inappropriate place for what they represent, namely breakfast, probably to serve something), to the second, when the bartender uses ambiguously the verb serve which installs the second isotopy on the basis of the verbal polysemy: the bartender refuses to serve/to eat breakfast, i.e. the bacon and eggs, because this does not happen into a bar;/ the bartender refuses to serve with a drink the personified breakfast.

Following Greimas's model, Attardo studies the linearity of the joke. This is how he explains it: "The introduction of linearity is equivalent to the introduction of a chronological axis i.e. of a temporal organization of the joke in which its elements are processed one after another."[8] This gradual processing has an important part in the joking successfully performance. As different elements are gradually inserted into the text of a joke, the hearer's initial expected tension is turned/ switched, because of the context, to zero, by the end of a joke. This process was called by Attardo dizambiguization[9]. The verb serve represents the lexical ambiguator. Ambiguators may be not only lexical, but also syntactic, morphological, semantical, pragmatic. Graeme Ritchie states that ambiguity is produced "when a linguistic item has only one representative at one level, (e.g. phonetically), but more than one representation at another level (e.g. semantically)"[10], as in the case of the verb serve.

The ambiguator is called by Attardo disjunctor, as being the element that creates the transfer from one isotopy towards the other. Also, he adds that the term connector is different from the disjunctor. The first reflects the similarities between the two isotopies, as the verb serve does through its polysemy; the second reflects the differences, changing the meaning of the connector from a semantic direction to another. In the case of (1), the disjunctor seems to be the word breakfast "which redirects the interpretation of the connector"[11]

Greimas's theory on isotopies had probably a good influence on Raskin's scientific approach of joke. The theory of contrastive scripts he states also underlines the dualist

[6] Billy Brownless, The Best A Man Goes Into a Bar Jokes, Allen & Unwin, Australia, 2009, p. 22
[7] Salvattore Attardo, ibidem, p.63
[8] Idem, ibidem, p. 94
[9] Ibidem
[10] Graeme Ritchie, The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 40
[11] Salvattore Attardo, ibidem, p. 95

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character of a joke. Raskin's central hypothesis his study starts from refers to the fact that a text "can be characterised as a single-joke-carrying text" if satisfies two conditions: "the text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts; the two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite;"[12] The contrast between two or more scripts within the text of a joke is a premise for its success.

(2) Wife: "I look fat. Can you give me a compliment?" Husband: "You have perfect eyesight." (www.laughfactory.com)

In the example above, the two scripts opposition is created by a change of perspective: first script, also known as the build-up/set-up of a joke[13], reflects wife's need for improving her self-esteem; in the second script husband apparently makes the compliment, but the word eyesight as a marker of the punch-line, the specific ending of a joke, creates the contradiction, as the wife gets, instead of a compliment, her husband's opposed reaction. The two scripts overlapping creates the humorous effect of the joke. Sometimes, these scripts overlap totally, sometimes they overlap partially. Raskin identified three types of opposition[14] between the scripts of a joke, starting from the binary categories jokes evoke: real/unreal, true/false, bad/false, bad/good[15]:

- First opposition may be identified between actual situation from the set-up and the un-existing situation form the second script, incompatible with the first:

(3) A MAN WALKS INTO A BAR with a duck on his head.
The bartender says, 'Hey, where did you get that?'
The duck answers, 'Outside, there's thousands of 'em!'[16]

Example (3) describes a situation from the first script (a man with a duck on his head), but the dialogue inverts the perspective as the unexpected answer of the speaking duck presents an impossible situation.

- Second opposition Raskin talks about is established between a normal situation and an abnormal state of affairs, as in the example:

(4) A science teacher tells his class: "Oxygen is a must for breathing and life. It was discovered in 1773." One student responds: "Thank God I was born after 1773! Otherwise I would have died without it." (www.laughfactory.com)

[12] Viktor Raskin, ibidem, p.99
[13] Marta Dynel, Beyond jokes: Types of Conversational Humour, in Language and Linguistics Compass 3/5 (2009): 1284–1299, 10.1111/j.1749-818x.2009.00152.x , p 1285
[14] Viktor Raskin, ibidem, p.111
[15] Idem, ibidem, p.113
[16] Billy Brownless, ibidem, p. 74

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- Third opposition appears between a plausible situation and fully/partially impossible situation.

(5) If you ever get cold, just stand in the corner of a room for a while. They're normally around 90 degrees.

What makes the passage from a script to another is named by Raskin switch trigger. The switch triggers referred to are ambiguity, we already mentioned as a result of overlapped scripts, and contradiction/ dichotomy. Rodica Zafiu explains[17] that incongruity, the mechanism at the root of a joke, is based on ambiguity as sequential overlapping implying various elements with ambivalent character such as homonyms, polysemy words which actually reflect two opposite registers as in the case of the verb serve (1). Also, incongruity may be built on contradiction between juxtaposed sequences. Within this juxtaposition, the first sequence redefines the meaning of the next sequence, as in the examples: (2), (3), (5). The greater the semantic distance between the two scripts is, the better the joke is, as the hearer could be fully surprised.

Sometimes, as in the case of the repeated sequences in a joke, the procrastination of the punch-line intensifies the tension of the joke and accentuates the contradiction the hearer succeeds to get used to:

(6) A CHIHUAHUA, A DOBERMAN AND A BULLDOG WALK INTO A BAR for a drink. A great-looking female collie comes up to them and says, ‘Whoever can say liver and cheese in a sentence can have me.’ So the Doberman says, ‘I love liver and cheese.’ The collie replies, ‘That’s not good enough.’ The bulldog says, ‘I hate liver and cheese.’ The collie says, ‘That’s not creative enough.’ Finally, the chihuahua says, ‘Liver alone … cheese mine.’[18]

The perspectives of each character, simple as they are, are successive steps towards the unexpected way the underestimated Chihuahua succeeds to deal with the problem. This type of incongruity present in the above-mentioned joke is defined by Graeme Ritchie[19] as dynamic. The dynamic incongruity implies a sequence of images, ideas to create some effect on the hearer. There is also a static incongruity present in a joke that creates a spontaneous and brief contradiction. (3). It is also important, as Attardo asserts, that the punch line should

[17] Rodica Zafiu, ibidem, p.502
[18] Billy Brownless, ibidem, p. 10
[19] Graeme Ritchie, ibidem, p. 49

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contain in its final sequence the disjunctor[20], not only for the sake of postponing the resolution of the text, but also to avoid useless words in the economy of a joke, as good jokes must be concise and must use the minimum number of words. Nevertheless, Graeme Ritchie affirms the fact that real jokes do have some supplementary information, defining it as: "extraneous information, information which is not relevant to the logical or presentational structure of the joke"[21] Such pieces of information that the researcher enumerates and describes are: embellishment, disparagement, inappropriateness, funny words, ingenuity, dramatic tension as in the example (6) and facilitation. These supplements, despite their apparent futility may increase the funniness of a joke[22]. The example (6) contains the two sequences with the answers of the Doberman and of the Bulldog. They seem supplementary, having insignificant purpose, but they prepare the hearer who gets accommodated with the set-up and intensify the predicted effect.

In another train of thoughts, incongruity appears differently, according to the specific nature of jokes. Generally speaking, there have been detected two categories: the linguistic jokes and the propositional jokes, as Graeme Richie classifies them[23], or verbal jokes and referential jokes as they have been named by Attardo[24]. The propositional jokes or the referential jokes visible in the examples (3), (4), (2) may be defined only through their meanings and their double opposed interpretation. The verbal /linguistic jokes involve different types of ambiguities, phonetic similarities, homonyms and paronyms. These jokes generally cannot be translated into another language, as they depend on the versatility of each language. Example (6) demonstrates this assertion. Some other examples:

(7) A MAGICIAN WALKS DOWN AN ALLEY and turns into a bar.[25]

(8) Q: What kind of food talks the most?

A: A talk-o.

(9) Q: What starts with T, ends with T, and is filled with T?

A: A teapot.[26]

[20] Salvatore Attardo, ibidem, p. 100
[21] Graeme Ritchie, ibidem, p. 88
[22] Idem, ibidem, pp. 181-182
[23] Idem, ibidem, p. 183
[24] Salvatore Attardo, ibidem, p. 95
[25] Billy Brownless, ibidem, p. 13
[26] Pam Rosenberg (collector), Food Jokes, published by The Child's World, Mankato, Minnesota, 2011, p. 23

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Therefore, we tried to underline the intrinsic dualism of a joke by dealing with isotopies and their connections, by explaining the theory of opposed scripts and the nature of the clashes, by contradictory mechanism of incongruity, but also by the semantical, grammatical, lexical, phonetical overlaps. Not being holistically conceived, the present study aims just to legitimate through several arguments the dual structure of jokes.

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8. www.laughfactory.com (the 28. 11. 2015)

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