

The Violation of Grice's Maxims in Jokes

Author(s): Salvatore Attardo

Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1990), pp. 355-362

Please see "How to cite" in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

THE VIOLATION OF GRICE'S MAXIMS IN JOKES

Salvatore Attardo
Purdue University

The principal claim of this paper (1) is that the study of jokes and other kinds of humorous texts can yield interesting insights on the nature of cooperative linguistic communication and, more specifically, on the relative status of the maxims. It is also claimed that these insights would be difficult to achieve without taking humor research into account.

A basic assumption which underlies the following remarks is that a large number of jokes involve violations of one or more of Grice's maxims. Consider the following examples:

QUANTITY (1) 'Excuse me, do you know what time it is?' 'Yes.'

RELATION (2) 'How many surrealists does it take to screw in a lightbulb?' 'Fish!'

MANNER (3) 'Do you believe in clubs for young men?' 'Only when kindness fails.' (Attributed to W.C. Fields)

QUALITY (4) 'Why did the Vice President fly to Panama?' 'Because the fighting is over.' (Johnny Carson 1-19-90)

Example (1) violates the maxim of quantity by not providing enough information. Violation through providing excess information is also possible and, for instance, was codified in medieval French literature under the form of 'enumeration' (e.g., Garapon 1957:22-25). Example (2) is an 'absurd' joke, with a certain twisted appropriateness from the well known surrealist taste for bizarre associations. Example (3) violates the 'submaxim' of manner 'avoid ambiguity,' as in general do all forms of verbal humor based on ambiguity, such as puns. Example (4) is a deliberate infraction of the maxim of quality.

It should be noted that what is being claimed is that the above texts do not flout or exploit the maxims, but that they violate them, i.e., they fail to conform to their 'recommendations' and thus constitute examples of non-cooperative behaviour. Nevertheless, the examples do 'somehow' make sense, and are understood and recognized as jokes. The solution to this apparent puzzle will be presented in the first part of the paper. But first some necessary observations on the processing of the joke texts will be introduced, as a precondition to the explanation.

Grice notes that by violating one of the maxims the speaker 'will be liable to mislead' (1975:49); and this is exactly the case in the text of a joke in a literal processing. The processing of a joke can be described (in theory-neutral terms) as the discovery of a second 'sense' in a text that had initially seemed to be headed in the direction of a 'normal' disambiguation. The script theory proposed by Raskin (1985) describes this phenomenon as the imposition of a second 'script'; the structuralist-based theories, summarized in Attardo (1989) as the discovery of a second 'isotopy'

(cf. Greimas 1966 and references in Attardo 1988, 1989). 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 provided, while in effect the text, or the utterance, is rigged (cf. Morreall 1983:79-82; Hunter 1983).

The process of 'getting a joke' can be roughly schematized as the processing of the text, establishing 'on line' its sense (first script/isotopy), until an element is encountered (the punch-line) that defeats that sense and forces a backtracking to the beginning of the text (or to some other significant point) and a reinterpretation (second script/isotopy) of the processed text.

Consider example (3) again. The polysemous word 'club' introduces a first (unnoticed) ambiguity, while 'kindness fails' is the part of the sentence which redirects the interpretation of the text onto the second script/isotopy. During the process of disambiguation the reader selects the 'social activities' meaning of the polysemous lexeme 'club.' Nothing up to the point when the VP 'fails' forces the reader to correct his/her choice. When the word 'fails' is reached, however, the disambiguation process is brought to a halt. It is impossible, at that point, to make sense of the sentence. The reader is then faced with an option: either discard the text as ill-formed, and thereby assume that the utterance did not convey any meaning (besides its own ill-formedness, and the inferences thereof), or backtrack and check for possible ambiguous or polysemous lexemes, constructions, etc., that might be given another reading. The option of declaring the text ill-formed is undesirable under the principle of cooperation (see below). While backtracking, the reader encounters once again the lexeme 'clubs.' The sense 'stick' offers itself to the reader, who can then reprocess the second part of the text as a (very) elliptic sentence having roughly the form (I would use clubs on young men) 'only when kindness fails.'

It should be pointed out, for the sake of precision, that the disambiguation process described above is only one of the possible configurations of the 'punchline' found in jokes. The punchline may not involve an actual backtracking (i.e., the ambiguity and the element that forces the reevaluation may coincide), or may be 'scattered' along the text (for example, in jokes based on alliteration) (cf Attardo et al. in print for further details).

Some of the issues raised by this apparently non-cooperative behaviour are as follows: 1) the nature of the communicative status of humorous texts, 2) the implicit/explicit balance, 3) the relative status of the maxims.

1) The communicative status of humorous texts.

The first step towards the solution of the apparent puzzle of the understanding of non-cooperative texts, such as jokes, will be looking at an alternative set of maxims, proposed to account for the 'non-cooperative' behaviour of jokes. Next, attention will be given to socially accepted activities performed 'using' jokes. Finally, we will consider the status of the communicative mode of jokes.

If humorous texts violate the maxims, one would expect them to become non-cooperative and/or to lose meaningfulness. Nevertheless, jokes are 'understood,' and are not perceived as 'lies' (lying is non-cooperative), or as ill-formed, or cryptic

texts. To account for this fact, Raskin (1985) suggested that joking involves a different kind of 'communication 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 the 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 (Raskin 1985:103)

Thus, the apparent paradox is solved: the hearer will backtrack, after realizing he/she has been misled, and will reinterpret the information provided in the text on the basis of the 'humor' maxims, switch to the non-bona-fide mode of humor, and react accordingly (i.e., laughing, smiling, etc.). It is necessary, then, to distinguish a first reading of the joke, in which the reader notices the violation of Grice's maxims, and a second reading, in which the reader, having switched to the non-bona-fide mode of humor, reinterprets the text as a joke, and thus accepts strange and unrealistic events ('suspension of disbelief'), activates particular stereotypes, and in general 'tunes in' to the idiosyncrasies of the non-bona-fide mode of humor.

What is then the communicative status of jokes? As it has been shown, jokes involve the violation of one (or more) maxims in the first reading. Jokes have, however, been shown to perform various communicative functions. Drew (1987) analyzed reactions to humorous teasing and found that many speakers take teasing seriously, at face value, thus clearly showing that they assume that the utterer of the tease is communicating effectively. Zhao (1988) has shown that jokes can convey relevant 'bona-fide' information as, for example, in the case of jokes about an unfamiliar situation/culture. Mulkey (1988) discusses several 'uses' of joking (including sociological accounts of the use of humor among the members of a staff hospital, and in a restaurant, as a method of 'picking up' members of the opposite sex); he concludes that by using humorous utterances, the speakers can avoid committing themselves too strongly to what they say. Jefferson (1984) analyzes narratives relating problematic situations and finds that in their narratives speakers intersperse humorous remarks to show that 'they can take it.'

It has been noted (Raskin 1985) that after a hearer experiences an apparent failure to reconcile utterances with his/her own belief system, he/she engages the default communicative mode of 'joking.' If the speaker is faced with an utterance whose contents he/she cannot reconcile with his/her knowledge of the world, the speaker will try to assimilate it, either by including the new information in his/her world representation, or by refusing the conflicting information status of 'reliable' knowledge. The joking mode ('Are you kidding?') seems to be the first option, which reflects the premise that joking is more socially acceptable than lying or not making sense (cf. Raskin 1985:104). Raskin thus hypothesized an 'extended form of bona fide communication' incorporating humor (and governed by both Grice's maxims and the 'humor maxims'). From the foregoing discussion, it should be clear that 1) speakers use humorous texts cooperatively (thus corroborating Raskin's thesis),

but also 2) they rely on the 'subversion' of the maxims to achieve socially desirable effects. Consider, for instance, the possibility of 'backing out' of an utterance, by claiming that one 'did not really mean it' (i.e., that one was infringing the quality maxim).

It seems that a radical dichotomy between 'serious' bona-fide use of language, and 'humorous' non-bona-fide cannot be maintained. Grice's hypothesized speaker, totally committed to the truth and relevance of his/her utterances, is a useful abstraction, but should be considered only as such. In reality, speakers engaged in everyday communication use humorous remarks that the hearers decode, interpret as such, and use along with other information to build their vision of the communicative context.

The consequences of this recognition—that communication which violates the maxims can still be 'cooperative'—are far ranging. Any attempt to characterize linguistic interaction will have to incorporate rules and inferential mechanisms to handle humorous violations of the principle of cooperation.

Now that we have assessed the communicative status of jokes and other humorous types of texts, it is possible to consider more carefully the 'implicit' dimension of jokes.

2) The importance of the implicit in jokes.

It has been frequently noted that some part of the information must be left implicit in jokes. Explication of the mechanisms involved in the humorous effect of the text results in the destruction of the humorous effect: i.e., a joke loses its humor when the jокeteller explains the punchline. Eco (1981), after claiming that all jokes involve, among other mechanisms, the violation of a 'rule,' notes that the rule must be left implicit. Dolitsky (1991) mentions that the way in which the information is organized is relevant to the 'structure' of the joke—that is, not every formulation of the information contained in the joke text (and inferrable from it) will be considered a successful joke. It is precisely because part of the information is present only in the implicit part of the text that the joke acquires one of its characteristics. In other words, for the joke to 'function' as such, some information must be left unsaid: i.e., Grice's maxim of quantity must be violated.

The modality of this delicate explicit/implicit equilibrium has yet to be explored fully. A few preliminary remarks will serve the purpose of delimiting the range of the problems involved.

It has been noted that the resolution of incongruity in humor involves mental expenditure (cf. for instance Freud 1905). This fact alone would require that the hearer of a joke be required to infer some implicit information, or to perform some cognitive task.

Another well known requirement of the 'punchline' of a joke is that it should come 'unexpectedly' (this is commonly referred to as the 'surprise' theory of humor). Once one takes into consideration such notions as surprise, or expectedness, it becomes necessary to refer to the linear aspect of the text of the joke (for a discussion cf. Attardo 1989). In short, as we have briefly mentioned, the decoding of the text of the joke is a temporally structured activity in which the various elements are

necessarily introduced in a linear order. This implies the necessity of avoiding the introduction of the 'second script' in a text engaged in actualizing the first one, i.e., giving away the punchline early, thus violating the need for surprise. This fact seems to account for the often noted but scarcely explored fact that the punch-line of the joke comes towards the end of the text. In fact it has been claimed (Oring 1989, Attardo 1989, Attardo et al. in press) that the punch-line must occur finally in the text, and that the exceptions can be predicted fairly accurately.

The requirement that the presence of the second sense not be introduced early in the text applies not only to explicit mentions of elements of the second script, but also to any related element which could enable the hearer's actualization of the script via inferential channels. This is clearly connected to the concept of 'manifestness' introduced by Sperber and Wilson (1986) for all the contextual information which can be brought into the focus of the speaker's attention. In this terminology, the text of the joke must render non-manifest the presence (or the future presence) of an alternative script.

Consider the following example:

(5) A young lady was talking to the doctor who had operated upon her. 'Do you think the scar will show?' she asked. 'That will be entirely up to you,' he said.

The joke rotates on the passage from the 'medical' script to the 'nudity' script. The allusion to nudity cannot be topicalized before the end of the text otherwise the joke would lose its effectiveness. If the first sentence were substituted by 'A young nudist lady...' the punchline would not only lose its suddenness, but would probably lose its evocative side (nudity- weakly-implies sex).

The quantity maxim for jokes: 'Give as much information as is necessary for the joke' can now be viewed as an informal algorithm for the computation of the quantity of information to be left implicit.

3) Relative position of the maxims.

In this section, evidence for a hierarchical organization of the maxims will be presented, first from an empirical analysis, and then on theoretical grounds.

In an analysis of some 243 jokes extracted from a corpus of 6500, Van Raemdonck (1986, 1989) found that all the jokes violated the maxim of relevance, while only some violated another maxim as well (Van Raemdonck 1986:62-63). Furthermore, the violations were interdependent. Although the figures are not claimed to be statistically reliable, they still retain interest as a well grounded example.

This seems to suggest that when any of the other three maxims is violated in a joke, the maxim of relevance is necessarily violated as well. If the speaker does not believe in the truth of what he/she is saying, the content of the utterance can hardly be expected to be relevant (though the speaker could be lying, thus producing a relevant but not-cooperative utterance; however, this would not qualify as a joke). 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 fail 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 hearer will not be able to evaluate whether the information provided is 'to the point.' Thus, it seems that the maxim of relevance subsumes the other three, in the sense that in order to be relevant, one must first be sincere, orderly, and exhaustive.

It should be recalled now that the 'obligatory violation of the maxim of quantity' was individuated as the underlying motivation for the presence of implicit information in the text of a joke. If all jokes must abide by the non-bona-fide quantity maxim (i.e., must violate by not giving enough information Grice's maxim of quantity), there seems to be evidence for a maxim of quantity at the same level of the super-maxim of relevance. The speaker is required, per Grice's maxims, to provide 'enough' information for the text to be processed without problematic falls into ambiguity (cf. (3)). Similarly, the speaker is supposed to provide collateral information that would prevent the sudden introduction of an unexpected second sense or, in other words, to set communication on a 'safe' base of information which will clearly delimit the 'topic' of the interaction, and thus prevent a premature switch in the topic of a text like (4), where the topic switches from politics to a 'Dan Quayle' slur.

We are thus faced with two claims for 'underlying' maxims: relation and quantity. It is interesting to note that both positions have been claimed by independent research. Sperber and Wilson (1986) propose an underlying super maxim of relevance, while Horn (1984) proposes two 'principles' 'Q' and 'R' to 'evoke,' á la Chomsky, Grice's maxims of quantity and relevance. This is not the place to go into the details of an evaluation of both proposals, but it may be noted that, since both quantity and relevance have been noted to be necessarily infringed upon in a joke, Horn's dualism seems better supported by the facts.

This necessarily brief discussion suggests that the violation of maxims in jokes provides an independently motivated external confirmation to the so-called 'relevance' theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986) and to the 'revised' maxims proposed by Horn (1984), both of which grant to the maxim of relevance (and of quantity) a higher status than the original Gricean text.

Conclusion.

The cooperative aspects of humor as a non-bona-fide mode of communication have been stressed, as well as the need for a revision of the idealized 'bona-fide' mode of communication. It has also been shown that jokes and other kinds of humorous texts can yield information, both on the principled construction of texts which violate the maxims to exploit the deception of the hearer's expectations, and on the hierarchical organization of the maxims.

NOTES

(1) The author wishes to express his gratitude to Victor Raskin, Monica Macaulay, Donalee Hughes and Dan Van Raemdonck. All imperfections, however, should be attributed to the author.

REFERENCES

- Attardo, Salvatore. 1988.** Trends in European Humor Research: Towards a Text Model. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*. 1:4. 349-369.
- . **1989.** Morfologia della barzelletta. *Studi Italiani di Linguistica Teorica ed Applicata*. 3. 1989.
- Attardo, Salvatore, Paul Baltes, Donalee Hughes, and Marnie J. Petray.** (in print) The Linear Organization of Jokes: Statistical Analysis of Two Thousand Texts. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*.
- Dolitsky, Marlene. 1991.** Aspects of the Unsaid in Humor. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*. 4:4. 1991.
- Drew, Paul. 1987.** Po-faced Receipts of Teases. *Linguistics*. 25. 219-253.
- Eco, Umberto. 1981.** Il comico e la regola. *Alfabeta*. 21. 5-6. In *Sette anni di desiderio*. Milano: Bompiani. 1983. 253-260. Tr. *Travels in Hyperreality*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1905.** *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*
- Garapon, Robert. 1957.** *La fantaisie verbale et le comique dans le théâtre français du moyen-âge à la fin du XVIIIème siècle*. Paris: A. Colin.
- Greimas, Algirdas Julien. 1966.** *Sémantique structurale*. Paris, Larousse. Tr. *Structural Semantics*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1983.
- Grice, H. P. 1975.** Logic and Conversation. In Cole, P. and J. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics*. Vol. 3. *Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press. 41-59.
- Horn, Lawrence. 1984.** Toward a New Taxonomy for Pragmatic Inference: Q-Based and R-Based Implicature. In Schiffrin, D. (ed.) *Meaning, Form, and Use in Context: Linguistic Applications*. Washington: George-town University Press. 11-42.
- Hunter, Lynne. 1983.** On Misapplying the Maxims: a Gricean Look at Wit. *Papers from the Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society*. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society. 19. 195-204.
- Jefferson, Gail. 1984.** On the Organization of Laughter in Talk about Troubles. In Atkinson, J. M. and J. Heritage (eds.) *Structures of Social Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 346-369.
- Morreall, John. 1983** *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Mulkay, Michael. 1988.** *On Humor. Its Nature and its Place in Modern Society*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell.

- Oring, Elliott. 1989.** Between Jokes and Tales: on the Nature of Punch Lines. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*. 2:4. 349-364.
- Raskin, Victor. 1985.** *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Sperber, Dan and Deirdre Wilson. 1986.** *Relevance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Van Raemdonck, Dan. 1986.** Laughstory. Du traitement du principe de coopération et des maximes de conversation dans les histoires drôles. Doctoral Dissertation. Free University of Brussels (Belgium).
- 1989. Laughstory. Modèle psycho-pragmatique d'explication du comique dans les histoires drôles. Manuscript.
- Zhao, Yan. 1988.** The Information Conveying Aspect of Jokes. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research* 1:3. 279-298.