HUMOUR IN LINGUISTIC STUDIES: COGNITIVE MECHANISMS, LANGUAGE STRATEGIES, AND CULTURAL FUNCTIONS

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Abstract: *Humour, a ubiquitous and complex human phenomenon, pervades all aspects of communication, ranging from casual conversation to literature, media, and political discourse. As an object of linguistic study, humour offers insight into cognitive mechanisms, semantic structures, pragmatic contexts, and stylistic features. The analysis of humour within linguistics has evolved through significant contributions from scholars such as Victor Raskin, Salvatore Attardo, Debra Aarons, Delia Chiaro, Paul Simpson, and Tony Veale. This article explores humour through four key dimensions: its role as a form of comedy, its etymology and evolving definitions, its nature as a cognitive phenomenon, and the linguistic means employed to create humorous effects.*

Keywords: *Humour, cognitive linguistics, semantic structures, pragmatics, script-based semantic theory of humor, irony, parody, satire, phonological ambiguity.*

Introduction

Humour plays a significant role in human communication, providing insight into cultural norms, cognitive processes, and linguistic creativity.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of humour as a linguistic phenomenon, focusing on four key aspects: its role as a form of comedy, the historical development and definitions of the concept, the cognitive mechanisms that facilitate humorous understanding, and the linguistic strategies that enable humorous expression. By synthesizing theoretical insights and illustrative examples, the article seeks to illuminate the complexity and richness of humour within linguistic studies.

Humour as a Form of Comedy

Comedy is one of the oldest forms of artistic expression, dating back to ancient civilizations such as Greece, where Aristophanes wrote comedic plays to entertain and critique society. Humour is a central element of comedy, but it also transcends theatrical performance to manifest in everyday speech, literature, visual arts, and digital communication.

Comedy often seeks structured laughter through performance, timing, and narrative, whereas humour can arise spontaneously and exists wherever linguistic or social incongruities occur. As Chiaro (1992) emphasizes, humour is not always intentional; sometimes the perception of the absurd or the unexpected by a receiver results in humour even when the sender had no comic intention.

Humour serves multiple vital functions:

• **Social bonding:** Shared laughter strengthens interpersonal relationships.

• **Tension relief:** Humour can ease conflict and stress, serving as a "social safety valve."

• **Identity construction:** By using humour, individuals can align themselves with particular social groups or ideologies.

• **Subversion and critique:** In literature and political discourse, humour serves as a tool for criticizing authority or exposing societal flaws.

Linguistically, these functions are realized through a variety of strategies, including irony, sarcasm, wordplay, and parody, each relying on specific language mechanisms to achieve comic effects.

Etymology and Definition of the Concept of "Humour"

The concept of humour has its roots in the **ancient medical theory of the four humours**, prevalent in Greek and Roman medicine. According to Hippocrates and later Galen, human health and temperament were governed by the balance of four bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. Each humour corresponded to particular personality traits; for example, an excess of blood produced a sanguine (cheerful) disposition.

The term "humour" began to shift in meaning during the Middle Ages, gradually losing its strict medical association. By the 16th and 17th centuries, "humour" came to describe peculiar moods and odd behaviors, and by the 18th century, it adopted its modern sense associated with wit and comic amusement.

Modern linguistic treatments of humour focus on cognitive and communicative processes.

• **Victor Raskin** (1985) defines humour as a phenomenon involving two opposing scripts, where a listener recognizes an unexpected shift in meaning, thus triggering laughter.

• **Salvatore Attardo** (1994) extends this by framing humour as the intersection of several knowledge resources that interact within a specific linguistic and communicative context.

These definitions reveal that humour is not simply a spontaneous reaction but a structured interaction between language, cognition, and culture.

Humour as a Cognitive Phenomenon

In cognitive linguistics, humour is often explained through the concept of incongruity: the simultaneous perception of two incompatible interpretations.

Victor Raskin's **Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH)** proposes that humour arises when a text is compatible with two distinct scripts that are opposite in nature, such as "*life*" vs. "*death*" or "*good*" vs. "*bad*" [Raskin, 1985, pp. 99–120].

For instance:

Joke: *"Why did the scarecrow win an award? Because he was outstanding in his field!"*

Here, "outstanding" is first interpreted metaphorically (excellent) and then literally (standing out in a field).

The sudden realization of the second, incongruent script creates a humorous effect.

Salvatore Attardo (1994) advanced humour studies by proposing the **GTVH**, which identifies six critical parameters—or Knowledge Resources (KRs)—involved in the generation of verbal humour:

1. Script Opposition (incongruity between two frames)

2. Logical Mechanism (how the two scripts are connected)

3. Situation (contextual information)

4. Target (the butt of the joke)

5. Narrative Strategy (the genre or format)

6. Language (the wording and phrasing)

Each KR offers a lens through which the complexity of a joke can be analyzed, thereby allowing scholars to systematically compare different jokes and humorous texts.

Debra Aarons (2012) emphasizes the crucial role of the audience's linguistic competence in humour appreciation. In Jokes and the Linguistic Mind, she notes that many jokes presuppose familiarity with grammatical structures, phonological patterns, and semantic nuances.

Example:

"Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana."

This joke requires recognition of both syntactic structure and lexical ambiguity, engaging the listener's cognitive linguistic abilities.

Thus, humour processing is not passive; it demands active mental participation and linguistic agility.

Language Means of Implementing Humour

Humour employs a variety of linguistic strategies, exploiting the richness and flexibility of language at all levels: phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic.

Humour frequently manipulates sounds and word forms to create puns, spoonerisms, and malapropisms.

Debra Aarons (2012) discusses the significance of phonological ambiguity in jokes, where similar-sounding words lead to unexpected reinterpretations.

Examples:

• **Puns:**

"I used to be a baker, but I couldn't make enough dough."

(homonymy: "dough" as money and bread ingredient)

• **Spoonerisms:**

"You have hissed all my mystery lectures."

(sound swap between "missed" and "history")

Such manipulations require and showcase a deep sensitivity to the phonetic structure of language.

Delia Chiaro (1992) emphasizes the importance of **pragmatics**—the study of language in context—for understanding how humour is interpreted.

Factors influencing humorous effects include:

• **Shared knowledge:** The listener must recognize references or cultural norms.

• **Expectations:** Humour often subverts what the listener anticipates.

• **Timing:** Precise delivery enhances the effect.

Example:

• Irony:

"Oh great, another rainy day. Just what I needed!"

The literal meaning is positive; the pragmatic meaning is negative, understood through shared cultural norms about weather [Chiaro, 1992, pp. 13–35].

Paul Simpson (2003) discusses the linguistic construction of satirical humour, where hyperbole, irony, and parody expose societal contradictions.

Satirical humour often relies on:

• **Exaggeration:** Amplifying flaws to absurd levels

• **Parody:** Mimicking styles to ridicule

• **Irony:** Saying the opposite of what is meant

Simpson's stylistic model demonstrates that satire is not only linguistic but deeply ideological, challenging prevailing power structures through language.

Tony Veale (2012) explores how humour can be modeled computationally. In Exploding the Creativity Myth, he investigates how artificial intelligence (AI) can simulate the cognitive flexibility required for humour.

Challenges include:

• **Ambiguity recognition:** Computers must detect multiple meanings.

• **Contextual awareness:** Effective humour often depends on cultural and situational cues.

• **Creativity generation:** AI must not only recognize but invent new humorous constructs.

While fully automated humour remains limited, Veale's work highlights the intricacies of human creativity embedded in linguistic humour.

Conclusion

Humour occupies a central position in linguistic studies because it simultaneously challenges and illuminates our understanding of meaning, context, structure, and cognition. Through the exploration of humour as a form of comedy, its etymological evolution, its cognitive mechanisms, and its language-based realization, this article has demonstrated the complexity and richness of humour as a linguistic phenomenon.

The contributions of scholars such as Victor Raskin, Salvatore Attardo, Debra Aarons, Delia Chiaro, Paul Simpson, and Tony Veale have shaped contemporary approaches, revealing humour as an intricate interplay between mental processes and linguistic structures. By continuing to study humour through linguistic lenses, researchers can further unravel the deep connections between language, thought, and society.

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