Analysis of English Joke Structures: A Socio-Discoursal Perspective

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Abstract

Drawing on Vahid Dastjerdi & Ahmadvand (2013) concerning different modes of communication through jokes as a way for people to express their philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, and political concerns, the current study tries to reconsider 20 strategies used in English jokes, but not in SMS domain, rather in Instagram and Facebook. Simply put, this study intends to find and analyze strategies used in English jokes on Instagram and Facebook to make people laugh and to compare them with the results of the above-mentioned research. The findings will have implications for discourse analysts as well as EFL material developers to have a better understanding of the English native speakers' joke structures and humorous discourse.

Introduction

Jokes are deeply rooted in the social and cultural memory of mankind and covers countless spheres of life, public and private, religious and political, human weaknesses and differences, etc. Joke belongs to the genre of humorous discourse, and are the oldest forms of storytelling. They have been around since at least the fourth century A.D. when Philogelos (Love of Laughter), a book of jokes, was published in Ancient Rome. Early jokes were simple stories, but they evolved

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over the centuries. Today, jokes are regarded as a universal form of human expression. As such, there are many different types of jokes.

A joke is a brief story, observation, or thought that has a setup and a punchline that triggers a physiological response—laughter. Jokes present a humorous take on a subject. They are a form of entertainment. They can be spoken, like during a stand-up routine, or written down in comedy writing, poetry, and even song lyrics. In *Wikipedia*, jokes are defined as:

Small stories or a short series of words, both made up, in a spoken or written format, intended to make the hearer or reader laugh. Normally, its main point is to be humorous, but there are also jokes with political connotations, jokes that stress sports rivalry, etc. It is said that there are good jokes and bad jokes, depending on the final effect produced.

This definition exhibits two basic features of jokes: they are *intentional* and they seek an *effect* on the hearer. This effect is sustained in a number of interpretive steps and context-seeking inferential activity that can be predicted and manipulated to a certain extent, as was mentioned above. Specifically, the hearer of a joke is supposed to:

(a) Look for a specific interpretation of the joke (which, very often, turns out to be an incorrect one) following the general cognitive tendency to aim at the highest interest (*cognitive effects* in relevance-theoretical terms) in exchange for the least mental effort required to obtain it. This relevance-seeking inferential activity is one of the varied cognitive operations that human beings ordinarily perform in their daily lives. Indeed, relevance is sought not only in what people say to us but also in the information coming from our environment (most of which has to be filtered out so as not to suffer from information overload). Even information already stored in the brain is subject to relevance assessment, in the sense that some thoughts are more likely to be entertained than others in a specific situation. Finally, also part of the (unintentionally) exuded information from people around us may call our attention and be worth processing, even leading to humorous effects, as the examples below suggest:

a. A passer-by slips on a banana peel.

b. A passer-by has water splashed all over him by a passing car.

c. A passer-by hits his head against a streetlight because he was looking at a girl on the other side of the street.

(b) Access contextual information in order to interpret the joke correctly and obtain relevant conclusions (normally humorous effects). All utterances, jokes included, underdetermine the interpretation that the speaker intends to communicate with them, that is, there is an informational gap between (2a) and (2b) and also between (2b) and (2c), whose relationship is a matter of interpretive resemblance rather than identity, and the task of the hearer is to fill this gap inferentially by accessing the right (*i.e.* intended) contextual information:

   a. What the speaker intends to communicate. [only resembles]

   b. What the speaker says. [only resembles]

   c. What the hearer interprets.

(c) Accept that being a humor-intended utterance, the joke will probably be irrelevant in terms of the objective information provided, cohesion, coherence, etc., although it may well be worth the processing effort if the joke fulfills its main task of generating humorous effects.

Similarly, the humorist is expected to perform a number of tasks in order to generate humorous effects in the audience:

   a. To choose an utterance that leads to the intended interpretation and eventual humor.

   b. To predict that, from the whole range of interpretations that the utterance can have in a specific context (all of them plausible, in theory), one of them is very likely to be selected by the hearer (wrongly, as the 'multiple graded interpretations strategy' claims, cf. below)

   c. To predict that some information from context will be accessible (manifest in relevance theory terms) to the hearer and that he or she will use it as part of the inferential activity leading to a correct interpretation of the joke.

Is There a Basis for Every Joke?

Why do we tell jokes? Jokes are a form of entertainment. But they also serve a higher purpose. Comedy unifies people through laughter and the ability to identify with the premise of a joke. It is like a universal language. All good jokes are based on two important things:

   a. A good joke is part storytelling and part social commentary. It gives people a way to process and reflect on the world around them through humor.

b. Every good joke disrupts expectations. If someone's mental momentum is going one way, a good punchline changes that direction. The element of surprise is the foundation for any good joke.

Laughter

Laughter and humor are ubiquitous aspects of human behavior (Gervais and Wilson 2005), and laughter at least has a very ancient origin that may even predate the origins of the hominin lineage (Davila Ross et al. 2009; Dunbar et al. 2012). Despite this, laughter itself has been the focus of only limited research (Provine 1996). Although humor has attracted much more attention, this has primarily been the province of philosophers, psychologists, and language scholars rather than evolutionarily oriented researchers. More recently, however, there has been growing interest in the ultimate functions of laughter and humor. Laughter and humor may play a number of different (not always mutually exclusive) roles in human communication, including expediting courtship, facilitating the flow of an interaction/conversation, synchronizing emotional states, and social bonding (Bachorowski and Owren 2001; Bressler et al. 2006; Cowan and Little 2012; Curry and Dunbar 2013; Dunbar et al. 2012; Flamson and Barrett 2008; Gervais and Wilson 2005; Grammer 1990; Grammer and Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1990; Hurley et al. 2011; Li et al. 2009; Mehu and Dunbar 2008; Owren and Bachorowski 2003). However, the underlying cognitive mechanisms that both enable these effects to work and determine the maximum complexity of jokes are much less well understood.

Types of Jokes

Jokes have been classified into the ten following types:

1. *Observational*. "Have you ever noticed…" If you've ever seen Jerry Seinfeld perform comedy, you're familiar with observational humor and jokes. They are an examination of everyday things or situations through a comedic lens. Observational comedy covers topics familiar to almost everyone, even the most trivial aspects of life.

2. *Anecdotal*. Anecdotal humor is pulled from the comedian's personal life and is popular with audiences because we can identify with their stories. Writer, producer and director Judd Apatow, who also performs stand-up comedy, believes that stand-up gets better as it becomes more personal—that comic who lay themselves bare to the audience are often the strongest

performers. He gives the following example: one of his daughters has gone to college. His remaining daughter is unhappy that she is the only one left in the house with Judd and his wife, because four people is a family, but three people is a child observing a weird couple. You get the most laughs when the audience recognizes themselves in your story or joke. Learn more about writing comedy from Judd here.

3. *Situational*. Situational humor is used to describe a genre of comedy and jokes that rely on a set of characters, a place, and an event. Television is a popular medium for situational comedies—or sitcoms, as they're called—that follow recurring characters in different scenarios. Some examples are Friends, Big Bang Theory, and Black-ish.

4. *Character*. Some comedians create a different persona, or personas, for their comedy routine. Stephen Colbert played a fictional version of himself on The Colbert Report, staying in character even when he interviewed guests.

5. *One-liner*. "I've had a perfectly wonderful evening, but this wasn't it." That one-liner was delivered by Groucho Marx. Robin Williams once joked: "Why do they call it rush hour when nothing moves?" One-liners squeeze a setup and punchline into one succinct thought.

6. *Ironic*. Ironic jokes are contradictory, with two opposing concepts tugging at one another. For example: why do people park in a driveway but drive on a parkway?

7. *Deadpan*. Deadpan jokes are delivered in a matter-of-fact, monotone voice with no expression. Steven Wright is a deadpan comedian. The humor in his act comes from the combination of the trivial content and his emotionless utterance of the joke: "I've been getting into astronomy so I installed a skylight. The people who live above me are furious."

8. *Farcical*. Farcical jokes and comedy are over-the-top plotlines (think The Hangover) with exaggerated stories, characters, and events.

9. *Self-deprecating*. Some comedians make fun of the person they know best—themselves. Rodney Dangerfield made a career of self-deprecating jokes poking fun at his looks and his love life with jokes like this: "I went to the psychiatrist, and he says 'You're crazy.' I tell him I want a second opinion. He says, 'Okay, you're ugly too!'"

10. *Slapstick*. Slapstick jokes are also known as physical comedy. Comedy Legend Steve Martin credits Laurel and Hardy, two of the earliest slapstick performers, as an influence on his career. The Three Stooges are another famous slapstick group, getting into absurd situations where

they would repeatedly get hit, slapped, or bonked by someone or something in a comedy of errors.

How do Jokes Work?

The joke is a genre of humor that is most flexible in definition and covers almost all types of verbal humor. Jokes make up the repertoire of popular wisdom. They are means of carnival subversion. They make the seriousness of life bearable. Jokes can subvert rituals of everyday life. Jokes make the sacred seem profane and vice versa. They present a topsy-turvy world. Take for instance the following mobile joke.

Once 3 eggs fell to d ground but only 2eggs broke….!

Why….!

Sometimes happens

You don't take tension

Just relax: -

Study the above you will find that it is on the one side, directed to the world. It draws upon the laws of existence the fact of gravity, anything that falls must break. The question evokes our knowledge of this law but this expectation is punctuated in the punch line by asking us to suspend this law. A person who appreciates this joke should be aware of this simple fact of existence but the person must also be able to suspend one's belief. *Jokes are worldly*. They derive from our knowledge of the world. But they usually subvert these laws. Jokes make silly things look big and big things silly. That is why jokes always help to see the world in a different way from normative.

On the other side, this joke provokes us to play a circular game. We accept the evasion of answer in the above joke because it announces its verbosity. *Jokes are language games*. They require us to be logocentric and draw our attention away from the world to the verbal construction itself. Thus, jokes are in addition to being directed to the world are directed away at the language in which they are couched. The logic of jokes Is not the logic of things but of language. That's why jokes can be our duex ex machine from a tight spot, the magical escape from the tensions of life. Just relax.

There is yet another dimension to jokes that is their formal aspect. Most *jokes are rituals, a performance that follows a certain formal rule of execution*. They must have a punch line and an organization. The cleverest joke always manages to elicit this ritual and they subvert it like the above joke does with the cool evasion of a substantial answer. Notice most jokes are 'cracked' or 'burst' like Diwali fireworks at a certain point in the ritual of telling. This point is known as the 'punch line'. The exact location of the laugh usually comes at the end of the telling. But what precedes it is equally important for the joke to work successfully.

Instagram

Instagram is an American photo and video sharing social networking service founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger. In April 2012, Facebook Inc. acquired the service for approximately US$1 billion in cash and stock. The app allows users to upload media that can be edited with filters and organized by hashtags and geographical tagging. Posts can be shared publicly or with pre-approved followers. Users can browse other users' content by tags and locations and view trending content. Users can like photos and follow other users to add their content to a personal feed. As of December 2021, the most followed person is Portuguese professional footballer Cristiano Ronaldo with over 373 million followers. As of January 14, 2019, the most-liked photo on Instagram is a picture of an egg, posted by the account @world_record_egg, created with the sole purpose of surpassing the previous record of 18 million likes on a Kylie Jenner post. As of January 2019, the picture has over 55 million likes. The second most-liked photo is a wedding photo of Ariana Grande and her husband Dalton Gomez. Instagram was the fourth most downloaded mobile app of the 2010s.

Facebook

Facebook is an American online social media and social networking service owned by Meta Platforms. Founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg with fellow Harvard College students and roommates Eduardo Saverin, Andrew McCollum, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes, its name comes from the face book directories often given to American university students. Membership was initially limited to Harvard students, gradually expanding to other North American universities and, since 2006, anyone over 13 years old. As of 2020, Facebook claimed 2.8 billion monthly

active users, and ranked seventh in global internet usage. It was the most downloaded mobile app of the 2010s. The subject of numerous controversies, Facebook has often been criticized over issues such as user privacy (as with the Cambridge Analytica data scandal), political manipulation (as with the 2016 U.S. elections), mass surveillance, psychological effects such as addiction and low self-esteem, and content such as fake news, conspiracy theories, copyright infringement, and hate speech. Commentators have accused Facebook of willingly facilitating the spread of such content, as well as exaggerating its number of users to appeal to advertisers.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this section, the materials collected for analysis are mentioned, the results of analysis are discussed in details, and the conclusions of the study are presented.

Materials and Methods

In this study, an online compilation of 1000 jokes selected as the funniest of all time, 175 really bad jokes, 200 Funny Jokes Guaranteed to Make Kids Laugh, 101 Funny One-Liners, 101 Clean Jokes, 150 Best Dad Jokes, 741 Top Jokes, 101 Corny Jokes, 50 best jokes for kids 2021, and 40 best Blue Monday jokes 2021 were used as the source of analysis. Some of these jokes are short and would count as "one-liners" (a single sentence with a punchline), and others are longer and more complex.

In the present study, an attempt was made to identify the most common strategies used in Instagram and Facebook English jokes. Considering this, the following results were obtained: Jokes related to technology specially using mobile phones have increased sharply:

Doctor: You must exercise daily

Patient: I play football, tennis, cricket daily sir.

Doctor: Good….! Where do you play?

Patient: On the mobile sir!

A strategy seen in recent jokes is the increasing use of wisdom of the folk against logical scientific method. Intuition even though considered illogical can be funny and hilarious:

a student in a biopractical exam.

Examiner: See d bird's leg & tell its name.

examinee: I don't know

Examiner: U've failed d exam. What's ur name?

examinee: Now see my leg & tell my name. —

A man was buying movie tickets …again…and…again...!

Angrily the man at the ticket counter asked him: "Y R U repeating selling tickets again and again!

The man answered in anguish: Some fool standing near d door is TEARING my TICKETS

In the past people used more "Did you know ……...?" or "Do you know………?" types or jokes. The postcolonial jokes against the non-American people still remains as highly-used jokes. Here is a subversive joke on the power politics among nations in a postcolonial world riddle with competition and rivalry. It actually is in the form of a tall tale. But the presentation relies not on ritual routine narration but rather the interplay of words projected like metaphors in a poem or a literary piece.

American: We will go to the moon.

Indian: WE will go to the sun.

American: Impossible you will be burnt.

Indian: I know that. But we are going during the Night!

Using irony is also one of the mostly-used strategies.

Man was looking at his marriage certificate

Wife asked him, "Dear, why do you look at our marriage certificate?

Man: I was looking for the expiry date!

There is a type of verbal irony, that is double vision or looking at the same thing from two different but juxtaposed angles. The thing about irony is that it saves explanation. It communicates by formal technique where elaboration fails. The wife of course would have been expecting a declaration of love and faith when she asked the question. But this is deflated by the contrary answer. The double vision is the expectation and it's contrary. The locus of the joke in the punch line 'expiry date' uses a snide homonymic pun. Expiry dates are found on labels of goods sold in

the market. But here it refers to the end of marriage, divorce or even death of one of the spouses in the Indian context.

Another common strategy is using puns, a good way of indirection to refer to political issues too:

A man held a birthday party for his <u>*six-month*</u> *baby*

Someone asked, "How come birthday for a <u>*6-month-old*</u>*?"*

man: we follow semester system here.

The irony of the above joke is that it is a brave play upon a risky matter, something like dancing gracefully on thin ice. It juxtaposes the world of the joke with the real world where the semester system associated with English education is a point of anxiety among parents of growing children. There is so much focus on proper schooling and education in the making of individuals now a days that every Indian parent is eager to induct the child from the beginning like fish in water as it was into the academic routine of our modern English education system. The perfect achiever is one who will grow up smart enough to beat the system at its own game and become its master.

Another very common strategy used in jokes is using 'parody:

2 frogs chatting

Frog 1: tur

Frog 2: tur tur

Frog 1: tur tur tur

Frog 2: tur tur tur tur

Frog 1: tur tur tur

Forg2: kur kur kur

Frog 1: don't change the topic!

The humor in the above joke is the parody on communication itself. Parody is a frequent device of humor: the noises "tur" and "kur". But the point here I want to make is not of parody as comic discourse which is in no doubt but that jokes are language oriented. Jokes manipulate the system of the language to bring laughter. There are numerous ways of doing it:

Interviewer: Just imagine you are on the third 3rd floor, it catches fire. How will you escape?

interviewee: It is very simple. I'll stop my IMAGINATION!

Surely it is not the MAN's fault for knowing that refusing to play the language game is the easiest escape. So, it refers to another commonly used strategy in making jokes which is 'word game' or 'playing language game'. Here is another example for word game:

In college…

Boy: I love U

Girl: I'll tell the principal.

Boy: Are you crazy!? He is already married.

Similarly, another change that should be mentioned as a conclusion here is an increase in the use of 'cross-culturing English jokes'. Puns are a stock of humor. Punning is one of the oldest tricks in the joker's trade. Commonly recognized as word play or quibble the pun uses the polysemy of language. Subversively it is the recognition of the polyvalence of verbal utterances and the indeterminacy of meaning. Punning involves different kinds of code manipulation. The following is an extended pun in the form of acrostic:

Teacher: What is the meaning of Maths?

Student: M-mental   A-attack   T-to   H- healthy   S-students

In the joke cited below the pun is etymological, playing on the root meaning of the word 'interest.'

Bank manager: Our bank now gives loans without interest.

Sardar: It's does not draw interest why do they bother?

After all, bank 'interest' does mean 'interest. Anybody who lends money is interested to make a profit. Additionally, more language of military and war has been added to jokes:

Teacher taught English grammar and asked student, "Give me an example for compound sentence"

Student answered, "Beware of dogs"

The word "compound" is the legacy of colonial English. It refers to the enclosure around a house or barracks. It is commonly used while talking of houses with a courtyard. I doubt if the native English today can appreciate the pun on "compound sentence". It is worthy to say that such jokes are made as a kind of criticisms against war and warmongering of the governments as the students are so mentally occupied with the concept of ear that they answer a simple grammatical question at school with barracks literature.

Problems of nonnatives with "Idiomatic English" is another very common strategy used in 2021 jokes. Idiomatic English has always posed a special challenge to the anglophiles learning English:

Wife: This is the third time today I see you in my kitchen looking at the sugar jar. Husband: Didn't the doctor ask me to do a <u>sugar check</u>?

Actually, this joke is funny because of 'sugar check'. There are many English expressions and idioms which are used as they are and for which we have not bothered to find vernacular equivalents. Even a person who does not know any other language but the regional uses the English expressions unthinkingly. So that's the joke. Of course, this is a sore point among Nativists who are anxious that the domination of English is retarding the process of our regional languages. But they would be calmed to think that English is a language that has a greater number of borrowed expressions than original, from Greek, Latin, Hebrew. French. Norwegian and Germanic. Here is another similar one just meant to show off the skill of the English savvy populace:

A lady went into a clothing store and asked, "May I try on that dress in the shop window?" "Well,", replied the sales clerk doubtfully, "don't you think it would be better to use the dressing room?"

Of course, using grammatical ambiguity or misunderstanding deriving from such ambiguities was also used as a common strategy. Here the ambiguity stems from the structure "in the ……" while the woman is referring to the place of the dress the sales clerk is thinking of the place of trying it out!

'Derivation of implicated conclusions or implicatures' is an already existing strategy of jokes also used commonly in English jokes. Sometimes the main point of a joke does not lie in some manipulation of explicit interpretations but, rather, in the number of contextual assumptions that the hearer has to retrieve from the context in order to make sense of the joke and derive relevant conclusions. Some of these assumptions are strong, in the sense that they are expected, backed up by the speaker and utterly necessary to yield the correct implicated interpretation, whereas on other occasions these assumptions are weak, the hearer's responsibility and, to a greater or lesser extent, unpredictable. For instance, the joke below is only humorous if the hearer can retrieve from context several assumptions and conclude implications such as the ones listed in:

A woman in bed with a man. The phone rings and she gets the call.

-Yes darling… No problem… OK… I'll see you later.

-The man asks: "Who was that?"

-It was my husband. He's going to come home very late tonight because he is in an important meeting with you.

The assumptions and conclusions that must be driven by the hearer include:

a. The man and the woman that are in bed are lovers

b. The woman's husband has a lover.

c. She knows that her husband has a lover.

d. Her lover and her husband know each other.

e. Her husband does not know that this man is his wife's lover.

One-liners are among mostly-used jokes especially with a focus on vocabulary and semantic meanings:

I failed <u>math</u> so many times at school, I can't even <u>count</u>.

I used to have a handle on life, but then it broke.

I want to die peacefully in my sleep, like my grandfather… Not screaming and yelling like the passengers in his car.

It takes a lot of balls to golf the way I do.

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