

The Humour Techniques of BBC's "Letter from the President": An Insight

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Abstract

This paper examines the relevance of pragmatic considerations to the explication of humorous discourse. The "Letter from the President" column of *BBC Focus on Africa Magazine* is taken as the reference data. The incongruity theory of humour in its various manifestations is subscribed to in examining the relevance of juxtaposing linguistic and situational factors in humour creation. The analyses found that the key to the humour in all these situations in the extracts lies in juxtaposing several discordant linguistic or situational elements. Lexical items are not given their usual collocations but serve as tools that reflect words or expressions in the language or allude to references in the extra-linguistic world. This explains the fact that the language of humour necessarily involves the integration of linguistic code and contextual elements. The latter is more important here because whereas a given physical movement can produce laughter, it is inconceivable for a linguistic item to produce hilarity exclusively by itself.

Keywords: *comic locus, genus, humour, inference, pragmatics*

Introduction

Humour is a phenomenon that is common to the human species; for in all societies, it occurs in different contexts and modes as a natural part of everyday communication or integrated in socio-culturally conditioned linguistic forms such as caricatures, cartoons, comic poems, comic strips, prose, plays, proverbs, puns, riddles or songs. Wherever it comes up, humour gives rise to laughter – described as a distinctively human quality that has puzzled scholars for long. Indeed, it is quite a baffling phenomenon because if one were to be asked why we laugh at jokes or comic acts one might need to look deep and long for the right answer. Are linguistic elements responsible for the humour in comic discourse? What linguistic knowledge is needed for comprehending instances of humour? What is the relationship between humour and the socio-linguistic context in which it occurs? In relation to such questions, this paper will basically examine the use of some lexico-syntactic techniques in written humour in *Letter from the President* [Henceforth LFP] as well as their interrelatedness with pragmatic elements.

LFP is a humorous feature column that was published in the magazine from the nineties up to about 2010. It satirises the antics of African leaders as well as other events on the continent – especially in relation to human rights, corruption and good governance.

Methodology

For this study, a random selection of twenty-five LFP columns between 2006 and 2010 is used as data. Extracts from the columns are categorised based on the type of humorous device that is identified as being predominantly used. A mega-analysis of pragmatic elements is made to clarify the situational background that forms the humour frame-of-reference. Thereafter, a micro-linguistic analysis is carried out by correlating the linguistic patterns of the jokes with the contextual elements. Probing the interplay of syntax, sounds, spellings and senses with social, psychological, historical and contemporary facts or fiction unravels the patterning of the jokes and shows why a given set of linguistic items is chosen for humour creation.

Theoretical Framework

In humour studies, attempts to find a descriptive or analytical framework for humour resulted in several theories that attempt to explicate the phenomenon of laughter occasioned by jokes and other instances of humour. Among these are: Incongruity Theory (Koestler, 1989; Coulthart, 1977; Nash, 1985), Semantic Script Theory of Humour [SSTH] (Raskin, 1994), Release Theories (Freud, 1905; Raskin, 1994) and General Theory of Verbal Humour [GTVH] (Attardo, 1993); Ontic-Epistemic Theory of Humor (OETC) (Martinson, 2006) and Computational-Neural Theory of Humor (Suslov, 1992) among others.. Notable among these is SSTH which is based on the notion of script which is a structured unit of information about words in a language or situations in the world. A piece of discourse is considered funny if and only if it fulfilled two conditions:

- That it is fully or partially compatible with two different scripts
- That the two scripts are opposites or they negate each other

For example, *real* versus *unreal*, *heavenly* versus *celestial* and so on.

A revised version of this theory, the GTVH, (Attardo, 1993) uses five knowledge sources that must be utilised when generating humorous discourse. These are:

1. Script opposition
2. Logical mechanism
3. Target
4. Narrative strategy
5. Language and situation

Incongruity is a fundamental element in the two theories and thus central to the creation and comprehension of jokes. Bring incongruity to play on a given linguistic or situational elements and there comes the humour. Though it is centred on the illumination of what makes humour possible, it is crucial to all explications of humour. For long, humour is explained as the product of a sudden juxtaposing two incompatible situations for which the joke offers unexpected links. Collision of contrasting frames of reference creates comic effect. These include instances of metaphorical versus literal meaning, formal versus colloquial style, professional versus common sense logic, irreconcilable codes of behaviour, altercation of the inconsequential and reasoning joined in opposite directions. For instance, in the incongruity resolution model, Suls (1972) holds that the degree of incongruity is directly related to the amount of surprise experienced and the amount of surprise that the punch line creates should produce a corresponding need to solve the problem. Thus, the higher the surprise level of the punch line, the higher the need to solve or overcome it. Thus, by solving the problem, the receiver of a joke experiences a degree of appreciation that amuses and consequently leads to laughter.

Humour cannot be fully explained by incongruity because of its social nature. That is, some entities or events that actually violate our standard mental patterns and normal expectations and lead to incongruity may differ depending on society or culture. Thus, the hostility theory is put forth to explain humour as a civilised form of aggression; a channel through which bottled up emotions such as fury, worry, horror, lust and so on are released. Renaissance critics like the Italian scholar Gian Giorgio Trissino and Sir Philip Sidney, for example, stressed the derisive force of comedy as an adjunct to ethics. Related to this is the release theory that sees humour as emanating from a strain or tension with the resulting laughter serving as an outlet for mental, nervous and psychic energy after some distressing experience (Raskin, 1994) usually stemming from rebellion against moral, ethical and societal constraints of everyday life. The emphasis here is on the expression of abhorrent things the comedian sees but which he has no power of overcoming. For Freud, however, the explosive response often produced by successful humour owes its power to the orgasmic release of unconscious impulses, aggression as well as sexual tensions (Freud, 1905). Jokes are deliberate and draw on the rational dimension of the ego [the part of the mind that mediates between the conscious and the unconscious and is responsible for reality testing] and the irrationality of the id [the part of the mind in which innate instinctive impulses and primary processes are manifest]. Freud, in his psychoanalytic analysis examines how jokes relate to the unconscious. Apparently, innocent phenomena like puns or jests are as open to interpretation as more obviously tendentious, obscene, or hostile jokes. In other words, humour is used as a cover for nasty and abhorrent acts or yearnings which a society or group censors but which nonetheless need expression for the emotional health of the individual or group.

The Structure of the Humour of “Letter from the President”

A. Ironic Questions and Illogical Answers

In the LFP, question and answer sequences with incongruous elements are used to project some ironic and comic propositions or to imply a bizarre idea or state of affairs. At times, the questions appear as a normal innocent question in a dialogue but the answer is absurd or vice versa. In all the cases, however, knowing the background to the situation being referred to or implied is necessary for the interpretation and comprehension of the humour in the sequences. Thus, here, long tracts from the column will be quoted so that the technique is clearly shown. For instance, consider Extract 1 which is a form of mathematical question but in this case, the questions and their answers are mostly inappropriate or absurd ones:

Extract 1

Q: If the Arusha genocide tribunal has dealt with ten cases in five years, how long will it take to complete its work?

A: 100 years, or until the lawyers involved become millionaires.

Background: The Arusha tribunal was set up after the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi to try the perpetrators but it was notoriously slow in its proceedings, thus, the exaggerated 100 years.

Extract 2

Q: If colonel Ghaddafi spends \$100 billion to prop up ten African dictators and his son spends \$20 billion buying up Italian football teams, how much will George W Bush have to spend buying Manchester united and the remaining 40 African countries?

A: Not applicable. George W. Bush can't name any other African country and doesn't know any American football team called Manchester united.

The conditional question *If Colonel Ghaddafi...* alludes to the allegation that Ghaddafi is helping dictatorship in Africa. Then in the answer, the writer refers to the fact that when George W. Bush was campaigning for the American presidency, he showed himself to be ignorant of many facts about Africa and some parts of the world. Thus, the writer makes it a fact, which we know it is not, that Bush cannot name any African country. However, the writer further stresses the point about Bush's ignorance of current world affairs with the reference to an American team called Manchester United. The writer's assuming the proposition *an American football team called Manchester United* to be true by stating it in a matter-of-fact fashion in his answer produces an amusing situation where the answerer thinks he is right whereas in fact we know he is wrong. (The fact is that Manchester United is not an American team but a well-known English soccer side). This illustrates that giving a false analytical proposition and assuming it is true is a good way of revealing incongruity and hence creating amusing remarks. This shows that through question and answer sequences humorous implicatures are derived, as in the extract below where a president is campaigning for re-election and in his speech goes on like this:

Extract 3

"Who is the president?" I Shouted. They shouted back:

"You sir!"

"Are you alive?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you want to stay alive?"

"Yes sir."

"Who'll be the next president?"

"You sir."

In this extract, the sequence of questions by the president culminates in an implicit threat in the question *Do you want to stay alive?* One immediately read the implicature *I will kill you if you don't vote for me*. The cruelty of this proposition clashes with the sombreness with which it is stated. In addition, it beats our expectation of the reality of a campaign where a death threat is hardly a winning strategy to be employed in electioneering campaigns. In some instances, the questions are rhetorical and their implications, obvious when the references are known, allude to facts whose very suggestion clash with the question's implicature thereby producing humour. In extract 4, we have a slightly different pattern of the question type joke. Referring to the violent ousting of the Ivorian military head of state, General Robert Guei in September, 2001:

Extract 4

Guei ousted in Ivory Coast. I ask you! How can a man with a big hat, a large uniform and a massive army allow himself to be pushed aside by a couple of students clutching nothing more than a few meaningless principles?

Though this sounds like a serious remark, the use of out-of-place descriptions like *man with a big hat* and *large uniform* as well as the use of the phrase *pushed aside by students clutching meaningless principles* - rather than *toppled by soldiers or rebels flaunting guns, cutlasses or hatchets* make us marvel at the circumstantial and linguistic absurdities. For example, it is hard to fathom a couple of students clutching meaningless principles daring one with a massive army. The likelihood of such is remote and thus appealing to the imagination. Linguistically, on the other hand, we know that *clutch* does not collocate with *principles* but with weapons and hence the suggested mockery:

A: army → guns, tanks, rockets → strength

B: students → books, ideas, principles → weakness

Therefore, according to what can be called *the logic of likelihood*, if A is stronger than B, A should win. However, the reverse is the case here and this results in the real but ironic event described in the column. The trick sometimes is that the writer puts forth his ideas or 'theories' after refuting others' or just states

someone's proposition and proffers a counterproposition. The questions in those cases acquire comically philosophical leanings. Consider this example:

Extract 5 (Logical fallacies)

Question: Remember what those liberal socialists used to tell us?

Proposition: ... If you put human beings in decent surroundings, they'd behave decently.

Counterproposition: The more beautiful the surroundings, the worse people behave.

The Yugomads with their lovely countryside... insist on killing each other. (Back up proof 1)

Burundi: pretty country, with panoramic views, but they kill their president and then each other. (Back up proof 2).

The striking thing about the counter-proposition here is that though it appears sardonic, its proofs are undeniable historical truths. For instance, the Yugoslavians [Yugomads = "Yugoslavian mad men?"] fought a civil war that claimed many lives and led to the break-up of the country; the Burundian Tutsis and Hutus fought and over half a million died in what had been described as "the most gruesome genocide in recorded African history". Though these events are by no means comic, the triviality with which the writer presents them in the columns results in a clash of the sombre and the silly. The silliness here is his suggestion that he gives no heed to the deaths but his luxury:

Extract 6

They insist on killing each other. Worse still, they made a terrible mess of my favourite holiday resort, Dubrovnik. Just think of it. I might have been there at the time. My morning swim might have been disturbed. My breakfast ruined.

The irrationality of grumbling about ones spoilt luxury as others are suffering is a clear case of incongruity, albeit a cruel one. Nevertheless, this creates the humour. The use of various interrogative patterns in constructing humour is by no means exhausted in the discussion above. The examples given, however, reveal the vast potentialities inherent in such syntactic forms to produce comic texts. More of such occur under other headings below for, as said earlier, the various patterns of humorous language are intertwined in most instances of humour. Texts like the LFP are no exceptions.

Rhyming Structure with Context

In humorous discourse, structures of the same syntactic components are used in conjunction with comic words, homonyms, deviant collocations and rhyming. In these cases too, contextual elements play significant roles in the creation of humour with the linguistic elements serving as vehicles through which the jokes are conveyed.

Sometimes in LFP parallelisms take humorous patterns where, in addition to the repeated structure, there is repetition of words of similar morphological make up:

Extract 7

For years, we have struggled with the rest of the world for our rights. We have begged, we have borrowed, we have stolen, we have danced to the tunes of communism, capitalism, fascism, militarism, and jingoism. We have worshiped at the altar of Catholicism, Anglicanism, Mohamadism, Buddhism, atheism and born-againism. We have dug for oil, we have dug for gold, we have dug for diamonds. We have offered the world our coffee, our cocoa, our tea, our fish and our soul.

The elaborate use of the perfect tense creates the rhythmic quality of the extract. The writer, however, charges this with expressions that deviate from the general pattern. For example, the idiom dance to somebody's tune [do what somebody wants] gives the suggestion of subservience. On the other hand, the use of the word stolen after begged and borrowed implies desperation that results into a censorious act. The three words beg, borrow and steal form a kind of climax-cline of increasing desperation: Beg, but if you are not given, borrow. However, if you cannot afford to pay after borrowing then steal. The president implies that they have gone through all the stages. In addition, the isms are acceptable and legitimate political beliefs except for jingoism and militarism that are not seen as legitimate. [Jingoism: the extreme belief that your own country is always the best often exhibited in belligerence; militarism: the belief that it is necessary to have strong armed forces – especially to win political or economic power]. Indeed, knowing recent African political history, one can see the deliberate introduction of these terms to reflect the tradition of coups, life-presidencies, untouchable presidents, dictators and pseudo-dictators in Africa since the 1960s. Using fascism, militarism and jingoism along with capitalism suggests that the president believes in both honest and dishonest political structures, thus giving us another clash of the good and the bad, the tolerable and the objectionable. This is similarly done with the religions which are somewhat made to echo political beliefs that one can switch at will if it did not work which implies insincerity to faith. Finally, mention of soul

together with fish, coffee, tea and cocoa makes it the odd one out and further reflects what is earlier said about the cline of desperation. Here we derive the implication that when material things cannot achieve one's needs, one turns to immoral or indecent things like offering one's soul. In addition, the repetitions in the texts echo what we know of African history, especially the present political reality. In addition, the extract has a speech-like form reminiscent of war speeches. Consider similar instances below where parallelisms are presented in sentences with words or expressions that do not collocate, deviate semantically from the others or are contextually incompatible:

Extract 8

I've been thinking good thoughts. I've been taking my mind back to the times before power was so cruelly trust upon me the times when men were men and women did all the work the times when you could lock up who you wanted.

Extract 9 (About UNITA leader, Jonas Savimbi)

...the angel of Angola. Thirty-five years he's been at it... Thirty-five years of struggle. Thirty-five years of suffering. Thirty-five years of being despised and insulted. Once the friend of America, once the friend of apartheid South Africa. Now he's the enemy of America and the enemy of South Africa. Come rain, come shine, come cold war, warm war or hot war my boy sows land mines like a farmer sows seeds and reap opprobrium in sacksful.

At the beginning of the extract, note the contrast between the title given to Savimbi, Angel of Angola and the things he went through in thirty-five years. See the similar contrast between friend and enemy. At the end of the extract, the expression come rain or shine is extended into come cold war, warm war or hot war. Though there is cold war [state of extreme unfriendliness between countries expressed through political threats and pressures] there is no warm or hot war. These are coinages based on the familiar expression. In addition, the grading cold>warm>hot seems to underlie the logic: if there is a cold war, then, we can have warm war. If there is a warm war, there must be a hot war too. The logic is formally right but we know it is faulty because the meaning of cold here is cold1 [at a low temperature] not cold 2 [showing unfriendliness and hostility]. Thus, the use of these different meanings in a confused logic is the source of the joke.

Bogus Collocations and Flawed Logic

Many jokes are created out of unlikelihood, deviant collocations or unusual propositions. This is the greatest source of humour in the LFP as seen in the previous extracts. In the alliterative patterns, question and answer, parallelisms and word games for instance, we have seen the juxtaposition of conflicting lexical items, ideas or words. Note that the locus of humour is mostly in the introduction of items into realms they normally do not belong to. In addition, a great deal of background knowledge is required for interpretation because the meaning of the lexical items alone would not suffice because the pieces of information alluded to are inherent in social rather than linguistic reality. There are cases however where jokes are created when what we know to be so are contradicted. They also occur when rules of logic or simple reasoning are broken. Some of the forms they occur in are given below.

Logical Discordances

These are jokes that involve some breaking of the rules of likelihood. In Extract 17, for instance, the writer categorises as abuse what cannot normally be referred to as such:

Extract 14

This man will start abusing the Americans. He can call them overweight and under-brained ... accuse them of playing silly sports like baseball and American football ...ask who won the war in Vietnam... why they are so useless at soccer...

We know that being overweight, under-brained (?) and playing baseball are hardly blameworthy things, but rather recognized facts about Americans. They are however presented as pejorative remarks that would incite them. The expected things to abuse one about are not there, but rather, innocent things attributable to Americans and which they cannot help. Similarly, in the same column a list is made of everything we need after a war: golf courses, swimming pools, limousines cufflinks, apple pies and enough dresses to keep our wives quiet for ever. The context makes these items ridiculous because after a devastating war, what would be needed ought to be food, shelter and medicine rather than luxurious things like swimming pools and of all things, apple pies. This boggles our minds because they are not things that one can reasonably think about under this circumstance. Compare that to this extract:

Extract 15

The secret of survival is to make other people frightened of you. [How?] Have a few public executions, test a nuclear device, and threaten world peace, ANNOY AMNESTY AMNESIA, WIN THE WORLD cup.

Testing an atomic bomb can frighten people, certainly, but not winning a world cup. More raucous is the similar use in Extract 18 of ideational dissociation where things that would not fit into the frame of confessables are classed as so. Talking about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] set up by the South African government where crimes committed during the apartheid era were confessed, forgiven and the different parties reconciled, the President (in “Letter from the President”) writes:

Extract 16

... even I have a thing or two to confess: pulling the wings off flies, not doing the washing up when my mother asked, cheating at tiddlywinks. All this hangs on my conscience.

The locus of this joke is the fact that the lexical item ‘confess’ connotes serious misdeeds especially in this context where the subject is the TRC and serious crimes like murder, rape and abductions not the glaringly child-like crimes of pulling wings off flies or cheating in games. Other instances of bogus collocations presented below show a contradiction that creates the humour.

Humorous Illogicality

Violation of conventional logical rules is used in the composition of the humorous discourse in LFP. Propositions that do not follow our human reasoning become comic because either we interpret them as crazy remarks or we infer the joke by assuming that the speaker or writer’s violation of logical or conversational maxims is ostentatious. This can be termed humorous illogicality. For instance, in extract 20 commenting on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in South Africa, where people are confessing crimes committed, the President comments:

Extract 17

...And the world shouts BRAVO! Except, of course, the people who were bombed or tortured to death...because they are dead and can’t shout.

The illogicality lies in the association of SHOUT and DEAD PEOPLE: shout has the semantic feature + life and dead, -- life. Thus, the presence of one of the words logically excludes the other.

In the next extract the writer suggests that Colonel Gaddafi has assumed the position of African dictator and is so powerful that countries and streets are named after him and he appoints and fires leaders at his whim:

Extract 18

I was chatting to the union’s president for life, Colonel Mu’ammar Graffiti... strolling along Graffiti avenue in central Graffitiville (capital of what used to be Ethiopia). Graffiti was complaining about the declining value of the Graffiti (the African union’s currency) against the dollar.

The repetition of Graffiti in Graffiti avenue, Graffitiville and the currency Graffiti imply the domination. The joke is taken a level higher in Graffitiville, for the suffix --Ville is a combining form of French origin, [ville ‘town’], used in fictitious place names with reference to a particular quality. For instance, a dull town may be called dullsville. ; it is used in many US town names Nashville akin to shire in English place names like Yorkshire, Lancashire. Thus, Graffitiville implies Gaddafi’s town or city. Furthermore, Gaddafi’s extreme power is implied in the next extract:

Extract 19

President: Why is it that you have always been a Colonel?

Graffiti: Colonel is not a military rank. Colonel means the nuclear or central part of everything. That’s me: the central part of everything.

Captain Bob: Excuse me, colonel. I think you’ve got the wrong *colonel*. You’re thinking of *kernel*, the nutty kind of kernel...

Graffiti: Are you implying that I’m nutty, soft in the head...?

Captain Bob: ...I’m just implying you can’t spell.

Graffiti: You traitor you coward. You plotter. You ex-leader of the AU’s southern provinces.

In addition to the *kernel / colonel* word play, there is another with *nutty* of nut, [a hard or tough edible part of some fruits or the hard kernel of such a fruit] and *nutty* of nut [somewhat mad]. Finally, Graffiti’s last remark is funny because it is an unexpected response to being shown your mistake or told the truth. The repeated pattern pronoun + Noun phrase[you traitor...you coward...you plotter...] ending in the implied sack of Captain Bob also makes it amusing for it moves in a kind of climax – beginning with the obviously inapt description traitor to the surprised, unconventional pronouncement of Bob’s dismissal : ‘you ex-leader’

used instead of the expected you are dismissed. This as well implies Graffiti's immense power to do and undo as well as his whimsical mind. We thus see that we arrive at the joke in this piece through a series of associated inferences. Our knowledge of English synonyms, homonyms and as well our knowledge of contemporary African politics and leadership enables us construe what the writer implies and via it the humour.

Conclusion

Humour is a phenomenon found in many aspects of our lives. It is found in everyday speech, literary works, the mass media and theatres among others. It is an important aspect of our psychological make-up because it is believed to be a channel through which bottled up tension is released. In addition, it performs certain sociological functions as it is used for corrective purposes in satire, entertainment in poetry, prose and the theatre and as for other beneficial interactional purposes such as the elimination of nervousness, face-saving, assertion of authority and enhancement of group interaction and cohesion. The key to the humour in all these situations, however, lies in its linguistic make up which involves juxtaposing a number of discordant linguistic or situational elements. We thus find that in the study of the humour in the Letter from the President column of the BBC Focus on Africa magazine, lexical items are not given their usual collocations but are actually false lexical items that reflect words or expressions in the language or allude to referents in the extra-linguistic world. This explains the fact that the language of humour necessarily involves the integration of linguistic code and contextual elements. The latter is more important here for while a given physical movement can produce laughter; it is impossible for a linguistic item to produce hilarity exclusively by itself.

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