

HUMOR THEORIES AND RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF JOKES AS UNIQUE SPEECH ACTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the central philosophical inquiry into the nature of humour: what causes laughter? We will adopt the incongruity theory, which suggests that laughter is triggered by the perception of inconsistent elements within a statement. To support this, the study examines how linguistic pragmatics – specifically conversational implicatures, speech acts, and presuppositions are utilized in both written and spoken jokes to elicit amusement. While acknowledging that other factors, such as semantics, also play a role in comic disharmony, this analysis focuses on the pragmatic mechanics of humour. Finally, we will evaluate whether jokes constitute unique category of speech act rather than being merely a secondary linguistic function.

Keywords: Humor, superiority theory, relief theory, incongruity theory, speech acts.

Аннотация

Данная работа посвящена философскому вопросу о природе юмора: что заставляет нас смеяться? Мы придерживаемся теории несоответствия (инконгруэнтности), согласно которой смех вызывает восприятие противоречивых элементов в высказываниях. В подтверждение этого в поведении такие методы, как лингвистическая прагматика — в частности, конвенциональные имплицатуры, речевые акты и пресуппозиции — используются в письменных и устных шутках для создания комического эффекта. Признавая, что другие факторы, такие как такая семантика, также играют роль в комическом диссонансе, данный анализ представляет собой совокупность прагматических механизмов юмора. На последок мы оценим, что шутки являются особой категории речевого акта, а не просто второстепенной лингвистической функцией.

Ключевые слова: юмор, теория превосходства, теория разрядки, теория несоответствия, речевые акты.

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqola hazilning tabiati haqidagi markaziy falsafiy savolga javob beradi: bizni nima kuldiradi? Biz nomuvofiqlik nazariyasini qo'llaymiz, bu nazariya kulgi gapdagi qarama-qarshi elementlarni idrok etish natijasida yuzaga keladi, deb ta'kidlaydi. Buni qo'llab-quvvatlash uchun tadqiqotda lingvistik pragmatika - xususan, an'anaviy implikatsiyalar, nutq aktlari va presuppozitsiyalar - yozma va og'zaki hazillarda qanday qilib komik effekt yaratish uchun ishlatilishi o'rganiladi. Semantika kabi boshqa omillar ham komik dissonansda rol o'ynashini tan olgan holda, ushbu tahlil hazilning pragmatik mexanizmlariga qaratilgan. Va nihoyat, hazillar shunchaki ikkinchi darajali lingvistik funktsiya emas, balki nutq harakatining alohida toifasini tashkil qiladimi yoki yo'qligini baholanadi.

Kalit so'zlar: Yumor, ustunlik nazariyasi, yengillik nazariyasi, nomuvofiqlik nazariyasi, nutq aktlari.

INTRODUCTION

The central question in the philosophy of humour concerns the underlying cause of laughter. Aristotle acknowledged that humor can involve surprised expectations, he generally shared Plato's view which suggested that laughter arises from observing the flaws or vices of others (Morreall, 1987). This category is categorized as Superiority Theory, which found its most famous expression in Thomas Hobbes' description of laughter as a "sudden glory" felt upon perceiving our own advantage over others. This theory suggests that all humor requires a target to be belittled. Roger Scruton (1987) supports this, arguing that the universal aversion to being the object the object of a joke proves that laughter is essentially, form of a social devaluation.

Due to the limitations of the superiority theory, scholars developed the Relief Theory as an alternative. Associated primarily with Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud, this theory states that laughter is physiological release of pent-up emotional or mental energy (Carroll, 2014). Although this literal energy model is scientifically outdated by modern physiological standards, the theory remains relevant if reframed. By substituting energy with expectations, the theory explains humor as the resolution of mental tension that occurs when a joke subverts our anticipated interpretation of a statement.

To address the issues inherent in earlier models, the incongruity theory was developed as a more comprehensive explanation for humour. This approach, currently the most widely accepted and the foundation for modern stand-up comedy (Morreal, 2023), suggests that amusement is sparked by the abrupt recognition of something inconsistent or mismatched. For instance, a joke may be funny because the audience perceives multiple meanings in a single word, an effect that can be strengthened by the structural delivery of the setup.

Furthermore, many proponents of this theory argue that it is broad enough to account for the examples used to support older theories (Carroll, 2014). In this context, "incongruity" is defined loosely, spanning from logical contradictions to violations of social, moral or behavioral expectations. However, it is vital to note that incongruity alone does not guarantee humor. As noted by Carroll (2014) and Kulka (2007), inconsistencies can just as easily produce feelings of anxiety, fear or revulsion. To elicit a comedic response rather than a negative one, certain conditions must be met, such as the audience perceiving the situation as safe or non-threatening.

Speech acts

Austin was a foundational figure in the study of speech acts, highlighting that speakers often use utterances to perform actions rather than merely state facts. Although his framework classifies descriptions and assertions as speech acts alongside promises and warnings, Austin explicitly excluded fictional discourse from his primary analysis (Austin, 1962). Some suggest that this omission is occurred because the theory lacked certain concepts later introduced by scholars like Paul Grice (1957) and John Searle (1979). Throughout his work, Austin repeatedly emphasized that his research was restricted to "serious" linguistic communication,

intentionally setting aside “non-serious” examples such as theatrical performances or stand-up comedy (Austin 1962).

The exclusion of fiction by early theorists need not prevent the application of speech act theory to the study of humor. There is a significant connection between speech acts and creation of fiction, particularly regarding how assertions are performed through pretense. To address the complexity of fictional language, Searle (1979) proposed a solution rooted in a Conventionalist Approach. In *Expression and Meaning*, he argues that fictional discourse functions as a unique language game distinct from ordinary, serious communication. In this mode, the standard rules that govern our everyday use of illocutionary acts are temporarily suspended by mutual agreement between the speaker and the audience.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion this paper has traced the evolution of humor theory analyzing Superiority theory, Relief theory and theory of Incongruity. By bridging these philosophical foundations with the pragmatics of language, we can move beyond seeing jokes as mere non-serious deviations from standard communication. While Austin initially sidelined humor, Searle’s (1979) conventionalist approach allows us to view joking as a sophisticated language game built on non-deceptive pretense. Ultimately, humor is not failure of language, but a specialized speech act that uses conversational implicatures and presuppositions to create a comic effect. This pragmatic analysis demonstrates that what makes us laugh is not just the content of the words, but the way we collectively navigate and suspend the rules of communication.

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