

Humor appreciation in the digital era

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Abstract

This research compares audience ranking of popular Internet jokes and the mechanisms of humor underlying their successfulness. It explores the audience's point of view, in order to shed light on a possible correlation between high rankings and specific mechanisms, as well as different preferences of specific languages. Jokes were chosen as the research object, since they are considered to be “prototypical members of humorous discourse” (Tsakona, 2007:35).

The study is based on the pragmatic analysis of 540 occurrences in context, presenting examples in three languages – English, Spanish and Hebrew – extracted from nine popular sites (540 jokes in total). The findings indicate that Internet jokes have some common traits. However, comparison according to popularity ranking has revealed differences in the existence of a clash between human's physical and moral nature (Bergson, 1911), and the use of incongruity resolution mechanisms (Dyner, 2012): popular jokes relied more on the garden-path mechanism and less on the red-lights, while with regard to non-popular jokes, the opposite occurred.

Differences were also revealed in the choice of the “butt” of the joke, and in the comparison of the three linguistic cultures: jokes in Hebrew targeted women and minorities to a greater extent; while in English jokes were more prone to target men and refer to sexual relations. In comparison, a preference of verbal humor, as opposed to superiority humor, was noticeable in Spanish, along with the extensive usage of the riddle narrative strategy and the crossroads mechanism.

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1. Introduction: humor in the digital era

In the digital era, people share jokes on the many platforms of social media, facilitating the spreading of humor as well as scholarly harvesting. Ordinary Internet users participate in distributing content across the globe (Shifman et al., 2014). For instance, in order to investigate phenomena such as globalization and Americanization, Shifman and Thelwall (2009) tracked the translation of a hundred popular jokes from English into nine other languages, with the purpose of examining cross national diffusion.

This study explores the audience's point of view, in order to shed light on a possible correlation between high rankings and specific mechanisms. It focuses primarily on jokes, which are also considered to be “prototypical members of humorous discourse” (Tsakona, 2007:35) – i.e., they are small units containing typical humorous traits, and are thereby conducive to examination. My purpose is to shed light on the preference of different mechanisms of humor in various cultures, as reflected in the jokes that the users upload and rate on line. It is important to stress that this research focuses on the mechanisms of jokes as an influential factor, more than on their content. As Kuipers

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(2006) states, the question of the quality of jokes seems to be directly connected to their form and style, not only their content (p. 149).

As claimed by many studies in the area, “the appreciation of humour varies individually” (Vandaele, 2002:150). Research has shown that these preferences may depend on certain traits of the interlocutors, including age, character and ethnic group (Ziv, 1981:127, 159). This study seeks to examine whether the variation in humor appreciation may also be the result of factors such as cultural and social differences, in addition to the response to certain mechanisms.

The idea that some mechanisms of jokes are better appreciated than others could be deduced from Raskin (1985), when he pins the quality of a joke on the relations between its various components, claiming that “In the right frame, however, with all the necessary components in place, the pun may trigger an excellent joke” (p. 142). In his view, much of the joke’s success depends on the timing and positioning of the punch line, although other elements of the joke-presenting technique are also at play (p. 145). In a similar vein, Kuipers (2006) postulates that humor appreciation is influenced not only by content issues, such as boundary transgressions and possibilities for identification, but also by variations in the form of jokes (pp. 148–149). She connects these differences to age, gender, class and culture.

Intercultural differences in forms of humor have been addressed as early as the 1970s. Shultz (1977) assumed that humor is prevalent in all cultures, but “different cultures joke about different things” (p. 178), and that there may be variations in the cognitive-structural features of humor. Goldstein (1977) warned against drawing conclusions about one country’s humor on the basis of another (p. 171), suspecting that cultural differences would more likely be found in the particular content of the humorous material.

Humor calls attention to shared expectations, which also arise from what interlocutors intuitively know about discourse in their given culture (Vasconcellos, 1986:134, 171–172). Hence, the contextual information needed for the humorous effect includes not only conceptions about society and the world, but also about the internal structure of the message and its linguistic form. Rojo Lopez (2002) contends that some jokes seem funny to members of one linguistic community, while not to others, due to differences in the repertoires of the addressees’ available prototypes, which influence their perception and interpretation of humor (Rojo Lopez, 2002:35–36). These repertoires may include not only cultural stereotypes which form the content of the joke, but also linguistic conventions which affect its form.

Studies have referred to some common traits, such as brevity, novelty, and others, as contributing to the humorous effect of a joke (Raskin, 1985; Oring, 1989, and others). However, there is still room to explore whether specific mechanisms of humor are a contributing factor to the audiences’ preference of one specific joke to another. One assumption of the present research bases several of these influential factors on Attardo’s knowledge resources (2008; Raskin and Attardo, 1994); Dynel’s three incongruity resolution mechanisms (2012); Ziv’s concept of “local logic” (1984a, b); and Bergson’s clash between the physical and moral (1911). A second hypothesis is that favorite mechanisms and traits may differ across cultures.

In order to address these issues, jokes in three languages – English, Spanish and Hebrew, extracted from nine popular sites (540 in total), were analyzed according to the theoretical frameworks to be described in section 2. The article then continues as follows: section 3 describes the research design and data collection; section 4 demonstrates the analysis through various examples; section 5 provides the results; section 6 discusses the findings of this study.

2. Theoretical background: humor mechanisms

The following section provides the analytical tools employed in classifying the jokes that form the present corpus. It is by no means an extensive review of the vast body of research conducted in humor studies. However, my account builds on some influential theories in the field, such as GTVH (Attardo, 2008:108; Raskin and Attardo, 1994); Dynel’s tripartite division of jokes (2012); the concept of “local logic” introduced by Ziv (1984a,b); and finally, Bergson’s perception of the clash between the physical and moral nature of men as inducing a comic effect (Bergson, 1911).

2.1. GTVH – General Theory of Verbal Humor

Raskin and Attardo (1994; Attardo, 2008:108) proposed a revised theory, the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), in order to resolve some of the issues that were not addressed by Raskin’s (1985) famous Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH). According to Raskin (1985), for a text to be “a single-joke-carrying-text” it has to be compatible, fully or in part, with two opposite scripts – a concept that he introduced (p. 99).

The script is a cognitive structure (Attardo, 1994:198). It is the semantic information surrounding the words in the utterance or evoked by them, and it represents the native speaker’s knowledge of the world (Raskin, 1985:81), “such as well-established routines and common ways to do things and to go about activities” (Attardo, 1994:200). “Script opposition” has been argued by Attardo (1997) to correspond to the concept of “incongruity”, or its psychological definition “violation of expectations” (Attardo, 1997:403), which is perceived when “the arrangement of the constituent elements of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern” (Attardo, 1997:398).

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