Complexity theory and conversational humour: Tracing the birth and decline of a running joke in an online cancer support community

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that a fuller understanding of conversational humour, in all its multi-functional, multifaceted, and heterogeneous nature, could be achieved by conducting at least some conversational humour research from the perspective of complexity theory (an umbrella term covering 'complex adaptive systems theory', 'dynamic systems theory', 'chaos theory', etc.). Complexity theory encourages questions that are not usually asked about conversational humour and provides ways of answering them. It 'aims to account for how the interacting parts of a complex system give rise to the system's collective behaviour and how such a system simultaneously interacts with its environment' making 'change central to theory and method' (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008: 1). The 'objects of concern' are no longer entities or things (e.g. the joke, a pun, etc.), but processes, changes and continuities: how do particular jokes, puns or humorous lexemes come into being in a given discourse community, how do their uses and meanings develop? The paper demonstrates the potential of a complexity approach to conversational humour by applying it to one particular manifestation of conversational humour: 235 instances of a running joke centred around the lemma rolo*, in approximately 680,000 words of online peer-support data (2544 forum posts, 47 blogs and blog comments), produced by 97 contributors over a period of 13 months in 2011—2012.

1. Introduction

We already know a lot about conversational humour, yet there are still questions that are not being asked. In this paper, I argue that our understanding of conversational humour, the multifunctional, multifaceted, and heterogeneous phenomenon that it is, would be improved by a complexity theory perspective. I suggest questions that are not usually asked about conversational humour, arguing that complexity theory both encourages the asking of precisely these kinds of questions and provides ways of answering them. I demonstrate the potential of a complexity approach by tracing the appearance and disappearance of running joke involving the lemma[1] rolo*, a reference to a brand of chocolates available in the UK, on the forum and peer-to-peer blog of a UK cancer charity.

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[1] The base form of a word, or a word stem. In corpus linguistics, lemmas are denoted by * at the end of the word to show that what is meant is not just one particular inflected form of a word, but all forms from the same stem.

Conversational humour (henceforth 'CH') is an umbrella term covering a range of linguistic manifestations of humour, e.g. humorous lexemes, puns, witticisms, irony, teasing, banter, put-downs, self-denigration, anecdotes, etc., which can occur in conversations (Dynel, 2009). It is well-established that CH is a co-constructed, context dependent, multi-functional and multi-formal, protean phenomenon, where 'punchlines turn into wisecracks, witty repartees grow into anecdotes, anecdotes develop into jokes, and so on' (Norrick, 2003: 1338, see also Dynel, 2009; Norrick and Chiaro, 2009).

What is much less well understood, is how specific 'punchlines turn into [specific] wisecracks' or specific 'anecdotes develop into [specific] jokes' or indeed how a particular lexeme or anecdote comes to be humorous in the way that it does for a particular group of interlocutors. What kinds of factors influence these changes? Why do specific anecdotes, jokes, phrases, even words end up running on, while others don't? Why do they eventually stop running? In an example such as the following, written by a contributor to an explicitly humorous thread on an online cancer support forum, why has 'hunt the Rolo action' come to refer humorously to a rectal exam, and why a 'Rolo'?

1. 'I am off to GC [Gorgeous Consultant] on Friday for hunt the Rolo action'. [HoneyBee]

In folklore studies, the notion of joke cycles (e.g. Dundes, 1987) captures the phenomenon of certain types of jokes (e.g. so-called 'elephant', 'sick' or particular kinds of political jokes) going through a period of popularity within a 'culture' (equated with country) and then being replaced by others. Dundes argues that these cycles are always meaningful and reflect contemporary anxieties and taboos: 'The joke typically provides a socially sanctioned outlet for talking about what normally cannot be discussed openly' (1987: 14). Although, this rationale certainly applies to the running joke discussed in detail below (see Demjén, 2016; Semino and Demjén, 2017 and Semino et al., 2018 for more on this function of conversational humour in a related data set), such a perspective does not easily facilitate the detailed examination of how and why the use and meaning of a particular running joke varies at the micro-level within conversations in smaller discourse communities.

Linguistic approaches to conversational humour are generally more suitable for micro-level analysis of such humour (for good overviews of linguistic approaches to conversational humour see Attardo, 2015; Dynel, 2009; Glenn and Holt, 2017; Schnurr and Plester, 2017) but even these tend to focus more on the functions of different manifestations of humour (e.g. chapters in Norrick and Chiaro, 2009). They do not tend ask the questions outlined above. This may, partly, be due to the kinds of data generally used to investigate CH. Especially when looking at face-to-face contexts, researchers often only have excerpts or snippets of interactions rather than multiple interactions between the same group of people gathered over time. Arguably, this is like trying to understand a film from one or more screenshots; a lot is missing. The reliance on this kind of data is, to some extent, a consequence of circumstance and access, and also a result of the traditions within which (conversational) humour research is usually conducted. Yet, the kinds of questions outlined above — regarding the how and why of micro-level change — have direct relevance for our understanding of humour functions, such as how in-group meanings develop, and the mechanisms by which humour bonds or creates a community (cf. Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Chimbwete-Phiri and Schnurr, 2017; Coates, 2007; Martin, 2007), and therefore deserve more focus. As I ague in the next section, adopting a complexity theory perspective facilitates the asking of such questions and organizes influencing variables and multiple layers of context into a coherent model of conversational humour, even when applied in a 'light-touch' manner.

2. Complexity theory

Following Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) I use 'complexity theory' (CT) as a generic umbrella term covering various versions of what is sometimes called 'complex adaptive systems theory', 'dynamic systems theory', etc. They each emphasise slightly different aspects of systems (De Bot, 2017; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008), but all focus on systems that are 'dynamic, complex, nonlinear, chaotic, unpredictable, sensitive to initial conditions, open, self-organizing, feedback sensitive, and adaptive' (Larsen-Freeman, 1997: 142). CT originated in the natural sciences, where it has the specific purpose of mathematically modelling systems. Outside of the natural sciences, the purpose and indeed terminology are necessarily somewhat looser (cf. Baake, 2003).

Broadly speaking CT, acknowledges that not everything around us can be explained via cause and effect relationships; certain effects 'emerge from random interactions, without any deterministic cause' (Kretzschmar 2015: 1, italics in the original). CT 'aims to account for how the interacting parts of a complex system give rise to the system's collective behaviour and how such a system simultaneously interacts with its environment' (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008: 1; see also Gibbs and Van Orden, 2012). A complex system[2] is one that has large numbers of heterogeneous interdependent and interacting elements, which, in themselves, can also be complex systems. As this suggests, the theory can be applied at different temporal scales and levels: from weather patterns, over the spread of diseases, to neural activation in response to a stimulus. In terms of language, everything from the evolution of language, over the language use of a specific discourse community, to the developments in meaning of a single word can be seen as complex systems and this view helps us to appreciate and account for language's inherent complexity and variability (Kretzschmar, 2015).

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[2] This overview owes much to Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008: 25–41).