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Mental models and humorous intent

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Abstract

In this paper the concepts of humorous intent and meta-motivational states are integrated in Van Dijk's mental-model theory. It is assumed that, when they communicate, people present public mental models of (aspects of) situations to others, which are not necessarily identical with their private mental models. Recipients are aware of this, and using their mind-reading skills in interaction, they do not only try to infer a speaker's public mental model, but they also try to re-construct the speaker's private mental model. Perceived discrepancies give rise to the re-construction of a speaker's a priori intent by the recipient. Humorous intent is defined as a form of a priori intent, which can be manifested in a playful manipulation. Such a manipulation can be detected by the recipient when a public mental model appears to be a tweaked version of a private mental model and when the public mental model appears to be presented in a playful or para-telic mental state. In the case of unintentional humour by very young children, a fantasy mental model can be constructed to make a manipulation and humorous intent plausible. In three examples the theory is applied to demonstrate its potential.
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1. Introduction

People have a choice whether they want to joke or not, and the choice they make has significant consequences, both for the emotional state of the recipient and for the social status of the humorous speaker. When people are seen as humorous this can, for example, affect the quality of their intimate (Barelds and Barelds-Dijkstra, 2010) and of their hierarchical relationships (Wisse and Rietzschel, 2014). When humour is not recognised as such, there is a risk of prestige-loss (Hay, 2001) and embarrassment (Billig, 2005), and failed humour may evoke impolite responses (Bell, 2009; Bell and Attardo, 2010; Priego-Valverde, 2009). This suggests that if humorous discourse is to be successful, a two-fold inference is essential. Its *meaning* needs to be established among interactants, and its *strategic nature* as a humorously intended message from the producer needs to be detected and accepted by the hearers (de Jongste, 2013).¹ In this paper, we will try to shed light on the nature of the inferencing process involved in humorous discourse from the perspective of mental-model theory (Johnson-Laird, 1983, 2004; van Dijk, 2008, 2009, 2014). In Section 2, we will first discuss this theory, and in Section 3, we look at the way it enables us to explain how we can re-construct people's strategic, or a priori intent (Haugh, 2008, 2012) and, for instance, detect a speaker's humorous intent. In Section 4, we discuss three examples of humorous discourse to show in what way mental-model theory can contribute to the analysis of humorous intent. In Section 5, we present some conclusions.

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¹ This paper is about the perceived strategic use of humour in discourse. No claims are made about "funny" situations and incidents in which the humour perceived has no author.

2. Mental models

Discursive acts, like any other acts, are not isolated events, but they affect the *situation* in which people find themselves. Consequently, we need to make sense of situations, as they play a key role in the way we process our experiences (see Gelfand and Lun, 2013 and sources therein). In his three latest books, van Dijk (2008, 2009, 2014), following Johnson-Laird (1983, 2004), suggests that we interpret situations through the construction of *mental models*. Such mental models are dynamic representations of situations in our minds. They integrate our assessment of the *relevant* components of situations, as well as the way these components inter-relate with each other, and with us. The relevant components of situations can be such phenomena in the situational context as the setting, the interactants, the expected behaviour patterns and the expected common objective(s), as well as the actual behaviour and the mental processes of the interactants. The behaviour and the mental processes include the actions, transactions and interactions (including discourse) which result from the interactants' objectives, motives, intent, expectations and so on (see Matsumoto, 2007). To give an example, when we are in a theatre, we need to have a model of what the building and what its components mean as well as of what the performer(s) and the audience are doing, why they are doing this and how this affects us. Moreover, we can assess what behaviour is appropriate and how our behaviour is likely to affect others. Our mental models, in short, enable us to manage situations, and they constitute the frameworks within which we operate strategically ourselves and assess the strategic operations of others.

When we create a mental model of a situation, the components which we select for our attention are integrated with our intentional states in the form of our beliefs, feelings and desires. Situations are dynamic, and through time they develop and change their nature. Combining the focus of our attention with our beliefs, feelings and desires and our awareness of time, we can entertain emotions, hopes, wishes, intentions (in the every-day sense of the word), objectives, expectations, opinions, evaluations and so on, about specific situations or ranges of situations. As our unique, dynamic, subjective mental representations of situations, mental models serve as our working hypotheses about what is going on, as well as how we and others can, want to, and do affect a situation by our actions. Mental models are continuously updated and modified, and in extreme cases they may have to be dropped and a new model needs to be created.

When we construct mental models, we are not only concerned with the situations in which we act or interact here and now. We also occupy ourselves with situations or ranges of situations which are located in other times and/or in other places, and with situations which involve other people. We can also construct mental models of *fantasy* situations. This includes all forms of fictional stories, alternative realities, counter-factual thoughts (Byrne, 2002) and so on. Mental models of the current situation, of future, past, near or remote, or fantasy situations can be exchanged and co-ordinated with other people when we communicate.

2.1. Private mental models and public mental models

Van Dijk (2014) distinguishes between mental models of *experience*, which are private and non-discursive, and mental models of *discourse*, the models we publicly exchange, compare and co-ordinate with others. These models have the same general properties, but they are different in that the models we exchange and co-ordinate in discourse are adaptations from our models of experience in order to make them suitable for social interaction. I will call the models which we present to others in discourse *public mental models*. The underlying models of experience, which represent the innermost beliefs, desires and feelings entertained by an individual in and about the situation at hand,² will be called *private mental models*. Public mental models, then, are the results of strategic adaptations of private mental models. They are constructed on the basis of our assessments of the possible short and long-term effects which publicly available information about our take on a situation or range of situations might have on others.

The foundation of these adaptations is our wish to realise our material and social interests in the best possible way. Haugh calls the intentions we pursue through the strategic use of discourse our *a priori* intent. He defines this form of intent as "intentions that lie solely in mental space [*sic*] of the speaker" (Haugh, 2012:165). This implies that this form of intent is not meant to be *overtly* communicated to others, but it does affect the management and design of people's discourse in terms of the possible effects it may have. Consequently, we will interpret *a priori* intent as the strategic link between private mental models of experience and public mental models of discourse.

² This includes the embedded mental models of other situations discussed or thought about.

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