Incongruity in the generation and perception of humor on Facebook in the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution

Asma moalla *

Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sfax, Tunisia, Research Laboratory on Approaches to Discourse

Abstract

In this paper, the way the use of humor is enforced and anchored in the incongruity inherent in Tunisians' psychological and social experiences is investigated. The paper focuses on the way original semantic scripts are decontextualized from their non-humorous original contexts to be re-evaluated, replayed and transformed. The data consist of 195 jokes posted on Facebook in the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution and of two hours of recorded discussions of 60 Tunisian students. The data revealed that humor linguistically stemmed from the simultaneous activation of six incongruous semantic script classes and from the contradictions and ambiguities underlying the cultural and socio-political context. Additionally, the generation of the six script opposition classes was found to be related to three major social and psychological functions of humor; those were: taking revenge, expressing liberation and relief, and providing implicit criticism. Humor was also found to be a simultaneous process of identification and differentiation where positive evaluative language was related to the in-group cohesiveness and relational identity, and negative evaluative language was related to the out-of-group effect of humor differentiation.

> "Every joke is a tiny revolution. Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny" George Orwell

1. Introduction

Unlike in Egypt, where humor has always been a way to circumvent and resist subjugation and oppression before and after the revolution (Williams, 2012), social and political humor in Tunisia emerged immediately in the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution. Never before has there been so much humor and creation of funny political situations (Moalla, 2013). Before the revolution, Tunisians were obliged to conform to the expectations and orders placed on them by the ex-president. They, as a result, felt suppressed, destroyed, and enslaved, and they lost their sense of humor. Humor on Facebook (FB) came as the working out of overwhelming happiness, uncertainty and confusion. It emerged to fill the void caused by the absence of security and feelings of confusion and arose as a powerful means providing a space for Tunisians to reveal their attitudes, feelings and experiences. The situation of Tunisians after the revolution can be summarized by Kallen's (1968) words: "I laugh at that which has engendered or degraded or has fought to suppress, enslave, or destroy what I cherish and has failed. My laughter signalizes its failure and my own liberation (p. 59)."

* Tel.: +216 21 466 881.
  E-mail address: asma.moalla130@gmail.com.

The jokes posted on FB walls in the immediate aftermath of the revolution can be classified as canned jokes that have been heard or created by a narrator to amuse and elicit laughter (Norrick, 2003). Those jokes are context-dependent (Norrick and Chiaro, 2009) and are related to shared experiences, attitudes, and events that Tunisians went through before and after the revolution. They serve as a source of information through which we can delve into Tunisians' miserable world, difficult experiences, and confused feelings. The paper focuses on the semantic and sociocultural incongruity embedded in the humor used on FB in the aftermath of the revolution. It seeks to relate the linguistic and social aspects of humor by showing how incongruity within the humorous text reflects the overall mood and can be extrapolated to echo the psychological confusion before and after the revolution. The incongruous semantic scripts activated to generate humor show how non-humorous texts have been transformed and reproduced to carry new semantic and cultural elements and to make them coherent, effective and memorable within a specific social context. The incongruity of the semantic scripts led to the emergence of new centers of powers and shared meanings that were enforced and anchored in an incongruous and incoherent setting.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Incongruity humor

The paradox envisaged in the humorous scripted text accounts for the paradox and incongruity of the sociopolitical conditions Tunisians experienced in the aftermath of the revolution. Kant's definition of humor provides a plausible interpretation of humor as incongruity: ''Laughter is an affection arising from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing'' (1952:223).

Incongruity theories suggest that humor arises from the integration of two contradictory incongruous ideas. What is funny is what is surprising, unusual, unexpected, and different (Martin, 2007). In order to explain the mental processes involved in humor perception, Koestler (1964) developed the concept of *bisociation*. According to him, bisociation occurs when a single word or phrase has simultaneously two meanings or interpretations. Thus, the activation of two incongruous ideas is what makes something humorous. Incongruity in humor has also been the foundation of two linguistic theories of humor where humor is generated by simultaneously activating two opposite frames or scripts. These two linguistic theories of humor emerged as a result of research on the communication of humor through language: The Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) and the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH).

To be able to understand the SSTH, certain notions must be defined. The first is that of ''script''. Attardo (1994:198) defined a script as ''an organized chunk of information about something'' That is to say, a cognitive structure that is internalized by the speaker and that provides him/her with information on how things are organized. In Raskin's (1985) SSTH, all the scripts and their possible links form the semantic network the speaker has about his/her culture. The words in a sentence are supposed to evoke the scripts and a set of combinatorial rules that allow the speaker to combine all the possible meanings of the scripts evoked by the words.

According to Raskin, when trying to understand a humorous text, the individual starts with activating the mental scripts evoked by the joke set up. S/he, however, finds himself/herself obliged to activate another script when reaching the punch line and discovering that the first activated mental script is not compatible with the meaning of the scripted text s/he has at the end. For the text to be seen as humorous, the second overlapping script must be opposite to the first. Attardo and Raskin (1991) revised the SSTH and widened its scope. Rather than focusing on semantics, the GTVH focuses on all fields of linguistics, especially semantics and pragmatics. This theory is based on six main knowledge resources (KRs) which are thought to be involved in the analysis and processing of humorous texts. These KRs are put in order from the most abstract to the most concrete (Attardo and Raskin, 1991). The KRs are:

(1) Script opposition (SO): It is the major component of the SSTH and maintains that a joke is fully or partially compatible with two opposite scripts.
(2) Logical mechanisms (LM): This KR refers to the joke techniques used to activate the script opposition (like the juxtaposition, parallelism, analogy, and figure-ground reversal).
(3) The situations (S): They refer to the objects, participants, place, and activities involved in a joke.
(4) Targets (TA): They refer to the ''butt'' or victim of the joke and to persons, groups or institutions ridiculed by humor.
(5) Narrative strategies (NS): They refer to the genre or format of the joke (riddle, expository text, dialog).
(6) Language (LA): It refers to the exact wording of the joke.

Research on the communicative and social aspects of humor emphasizes its dualistic nature. Douglas (1975) suggests that all humor is a juxtaposition of two opposite things taking place within a situation. She advances that humor is a way to understand and deal with the complex environment. Incongruity is, thus, a way to interpret ambiguity in the social context. Lynch (2002) argues that humor serves the following dualistic functions of humor: identification and