

Hyper- and misunderstanding in interactional humor

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Received 8 September 2005; received in revised form 11 September 2007; accepted 21 April 2008

Abstract

This paper explores the semantic–pragmatic intricacies of two related types of interactional humor. The two phenomena under scrutiny, *hyper-understanding* (Veale et al., 2006) and *misunderstanding*, are categorized as responsive conversational turns as they connect to a previously made utterance. In the first part of the paper, an analytical model is developed that provides a unified account of both phenomena, using insights from Clark's notion of layering and Fauconnier's mental spaces theory. Hyper-understanding revolves around a speaker's ability to exploit potential weak spots in a previous speaker's utterance by playfully echoing that utterance while simultaneously reversing the initially intended interpretation. Misunderstanding, on the other hand, involves a genuine misinterpretation of a previous utterance by a character in the fictional world. Both cases, however, hinge on the differentiation of viewpoints, yielding a layered discourse representation. The second part of the papers present a corpus-based study of hyper- and misunderstanding in the staged interactions of the British television series *Blackadder*. The corpus analysis reveals the spectrum of different pivot elements that can serve as a trigger for hyper- and misunderstanding. Common to all instances, it is argued, is a mechanism of *figure–ground reversal*.

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Keywords: Interactional humor; Hyper-understanding; Misunderstanding; Layering; Mental spaces; Figure–ground reversal

1. Introduction

Recent studies in pragmatics (see e.g., Attardo, 2003) have shown a renewed interest in humor as a valuable topic of interdisciplinary research. More specifically, these studies have extended the traditional focus of humor research on jokes to include longer narrative texts (Attardo, 2001a; Chlopicki, 1997, 2000; Triezenberg, 2004) and conversational data (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Hay, 2001; Kotthoff, 2003; Norrick, 2003; Antonopoulou and Sifianou, 2003; Archakis

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and Tsakona, 2005). New data from conversation analysis, text linguistics and discourse psychology present significant challenges to linguistic humor theories like the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo, 1994, 2001a), and call for (sometimes major) revisions.

Conversational humor, for example, has specific characteristics that have traditionally been ignored because of the focus in former research on jokes detached from the context in which they are performed. Among these features are the signaling of the non-serious nature of a conversational turn in comparison to the rest of the discourse (Kotthoff, 1998), the differentiation of different viewpoints (Ritchie, 2006), the interpersonal function of multi-agent humor (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Holmes and Marra, 2002) and timing (Norrick, 2001).

The present paper is intended as a contribution to this recent development in humor studies. More specifically, two subtypes of conversational humor are discussed with respect to their semantic–pragmatic structure as well as their empirical range. The first phenomenon, labeled *hyper-understanding* in Veale et al. (2006), revolves around a speaker's ability to exploit potential weak spots (ambiguity) in a previous speaker's utterance by echoing the latter's words with a fundamentally different reading. This type of playful verbal echoing serves as a background for the analysis of a second subphenomenon (not treated in Veale et al., 2006), in which the *misinterpretation* is not pretended. In these cases, a character in the fictional world is genuinely misguided by the potential (but mostly contextually suppressed) ambivalence of a previous speaker's utterance.

First, I briefly review some of the past research on interactional humor, with a special focus on those cases in which the responsive nature of the humorous turn is crucial (section 2.1). On the basis of this selective overview, I present an argument in favor of a layered approach to the focus phenomena hyper- and misunderstanding (section 2.2). It is argued that the analysis of hyper-understanding developed in Veale et al. (2006) needs to be complemented with a model that accounts for the differentiation of interconnected viewpoints in these examples. A mental space approach to both hyper-understanding (section 2.2.1) and misunderstanding (section 2.2.2), respectively, reveals that both essentially involve a clash of different viewpoints. As a second step, I present a quantitative analysis based on a corpus of 2100 conversational turns in the British TV series *Blackadder* (section 3). These data provide an overview of the different pivot elements that can trigger hyper- and misunderstanding. On the basis of the first and second step, some general conclusions are presented, together with feedback to linguistic humor theories (section 3.4).

2. Interactional aspects of hyper- and misunderstanding

In this section, a selective overview is presented of research on the reactive nature of interactional humor (section 2.1). On the basis of this overview, the phenomena that are the focus of the present paper, hyper-understanding (section 2.2.1) and misunderstanding (section 2.2.2), are introduced and an analytical model is developed, based on insights from cognitive linguistics and discourse psychology. For both phenomena, a layered approach in terms of viewpoint mental spaces is advocated.

2.1. The linguistics of interactional humor

The multitude of humor theories developed in more than two millennia of philosophical considerations on laughter and humor can generally be divided into three major families: the cognitive theories that give a central role to *incongruity* and its resolution (e.g., Kant, Schopenhauer, Koestler, Suls); social theories that highlight the importance of aggression,

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