

Non-serious Text Types, Comic Discourse, Humour, Puns, Language Play, Limericks, Punning and Joking

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Text Types, in a broad sense, may be classified, according to the intention of the text-producer, as either serious or not. Another binary distinction is spoken vs. written texts, neutralized in the category discourse. Such classifications may be used in the composition of corpora, where humour is often neglected as a criterion. Basically, word play and joking must be analysed and described from a pragmatic perspective.

Keywords: *discourse, word-play, humour, pun, pragmatics*

1. Text Types and Corpora

1.1 Humour in the ICE, LOB and elsewhere

As described in Greenbaum (1991) the detailed composition of the International Corpus of English (ICE) does not contain the class of humorous texts at all. Fries, in his teaching, called jokes, headlines, captions, texts on greeting cards, prefaces, dedications ‘Minor Text Types’. He would also include limericks in this category (personal communication). Another binary classification possible would be if a text is invited or not. Invited texts are e.g. book reviews or contributions to festschrifts or to collections of articles and special volumes and numbers of journals (including online journals – responding to call for papers). In contrast, as shown in Lipka (1999: 90) the Lancaster-Oslo-Bergen (or LOB) Corpus contains only two instances and samples of humour. This observation demonstrates a clear neglect of such an important aspect of human communication.

However, various books deal with the phenomenon and provide a wealth of illustrations of verbal play, puns and jokes such as Blake (2007), Chiaro (1992), Crystal (1998), Nash (1985) and Redfern (1984).

In my opinion, this seems to be the state of the art in 2008. However, the topic definitely is a never-never-ending story. It all depends on verbal and ever-ever-changing extralinguistic context, knowledge of the world and of persons, historical events, funny incidents etc.. Parody and allusion is based on and defined through intertextuality. One can also parody or imitate specific persons, their behaviour and accent such as Hitler by Charlie Chaplin. Visual humour is present in cartoons, comic strips and graffiti. Non-serious music can parody pompous and famous classical works such as Wagner’s operas and never-ending symphonies, as was done in Gerard Hoffnung’s (a multi-talent) famous concertos in the Royal Albert Hall.

1.2 Word play, puns, jokes, comic discourse, funny (haha)

There are various possible sources of amusement (no serious business!). Speakers or remarks may be funny or witty and the former may perform funny actions when imitating persons, their peculiarities, accents and so on. Redfern (1986: 6) uses *pun* as “a convenient tag for a whole variety of rhetorical devices which play on words” and states “a pun is language on

vacation” and also “the pun is a verbal practical joke” (ibid.: 14). He further draws attention to the fact that “many puns are nonce-words, special usages for special occasions” (ibid.: 18). We look in vain for a definition of joke and the distinction between *joke* and *pun*. Both are normally believed to be comic or funny (haha) but there are also bad puns (calembours), sick jokes and there is black humour (not everybody’s taste). Non-serious texts may involve irony, taboo, euphemism, parody and pastiche. Fake malapropisms, such as *standing ovulations*, may be intentionally funny.

1.3 *The limerick as an English genre*

We’ll begin with a special kind of limerick about the limerick itself, which may therefore be called a *meta-limerick*:

*The limerick’s an art form complex
whose contents run chiefly to sex,
it’s famous for virgins
and masculine urgins
and vulgar erotic effects.*

This is how Baring-Gold (1975) starts his collection and from this it seems to follow that the true limerick is characterised or defined by the feature or criterion of a bawdy text. However, there are also clean examples such as:

*There was a fair maid of Ostend
who thought would hold out to the end
but half she was over
twixt Calais and Dover
she did what she didn’t intend.*

and also, well institutionalised in the British speech community, cited in Baring-Gould (1975), Chiaro (1992) and Blake (2007) and elsewhere – possibly the most famous one:

*There was a young lady of Riga
who went for a ride on a tiger,
they returned from the ride
with the lady inside
and a smile on the face of the tiger.*

There are various theories about the origin of the name *limerick*. Possibly the most convincing one is to link it with a song or funny poem popular in Ireland in the 19th century ending in *come all the way up to Limerick?* There are two instances of limericks in Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Hamlet*. The greatest classic, who contributed a lot to the renown and spread of this type of **nonsense poetry** (also called *Learics*) – another category of text, non-serious of course – was Edmund Lear. He wrote more than two hundred limericks and illustrated them himself. A famous example (autobiographical?) is:

There was an old man with a beard,

*Who said "it is just as I feared.
Two owls and a hen,
Four larks and a wren,
Have all built a nest in my beard!"*

Often, there are various versions, for example – the first one clean:

*There was a young lady of Norway,
Who casually sat in a doorway,
When the door squeezed her flat,
She exclaimed: What of that?
This courageous young lady of Norway.*

The second one begins:

*There was a young lady of Norway,
Who hung by her heels from the doorway.*

Sometimes limericks play on orthography and may also be bilingual, like the following one, coined in 1980 in England, on the way to Aberdeen (Scotland):

*There were four professors of English,
Who travelled together, not singlish,
When they came to Riveaulx,
They all said hello,
And decided they wouldn't be pinglish.*

2. Types and Genres of Jokes and Word Play

2.1 Puns and Jokes and their Structures

Crystal (1998:17) cites an "old saying" which is in rhyming form and defines or characterises the pun as the lowest type of humour or word play based on homophony i.e. only in the spoken medium:

*A pun's the lowest form of wit
it does not tax the brain a bit,
one merely takes a word that's plain
and picks one out that sounds the same.*

He continues that "jokes are often formulaic" with various types of target such as doctor, elephant, and Irish jokes and the technique is simple, often relying on "a simple transposition of initial sounds". The joke is then based on two forms (often similar) and two meanings. According to Blake (2007: 80) puns may "involve one particular form with more than one meaning," i.e., polysemy. Jokes can be based on a narrative structure with three parallel stories, in which the third one contains the (unexpected) punchline. Blake (2007: VI)

distinguishes the following kinds of word play according to their form: puns, jokes, wit, errors (including malapropisms) and rhymes. Chiaro (1992: 14ff) according to the target of jokes and the intention talks about degradation or derogatory jokes about a “minority ethnic groups”, lavatorial jokes and, in general, “prosaic and poetic jokes” (ibid.). *Jewish* texts, or better (referring to the European language of Jews) *Jiddish* – according to Google loaned into English as *Yiddish* and then back into German as *Jiddish* at the beginning of the 20th century – include a very special kind of text type because they may often be self-referential, often self-ironic, self-critical or self-aggressive. Jewish humour is also typically used in stressful and tragic situations. It may also contain rather complex logical reasoning and involved, tricky arguments. Interesting descriptions of the language and of jokes were published by Salcia Landmann. One of these is quoted in Landmann (1962: 253):

*Moses, was lachst Du so?
Ej, gar nichts. Ich hab mir erzählt einen Witz.*

Nash (1985:Vff) distinguishes witty compression and comic expansion, oral and textual humour, the joke as recital, allusion and parody, puns based on homophones, homonyms, formulaic jokes, rhyme and rhythm, and further topicalizes “the performance element.” His main focus (ibid.: 34ff) is the sequence of prelocation (with signal, orientation, context) and the *locus*, which clinches or discharges the joke, i.e., the punchline. The classic two-line form consists of question and answer (ibid.: 49ff) and the joke as recital, routine or anecdote.

3. Pragmatic Approaches: Punning and joking as speech acts or who jokes to whom about what in what medium

3.1 The comic quadrangle

In 1923 Ogden and Richards developed a model of the linguistic sign which came to be called the *semiotic triangle*. It links a symbol (word) to an extralinguistic referent (thing) via a thought but still excludes the speaker and the hearer. In 1934 Karl Bühler developed a model of the process of communication, following Plato, in which language is considered as a tool (= *organon*) by means of which a sender communicates a message to an addressee about objects and relations. This so-called *Organon Model* links the three components with a sign (language) in the middle and also includes various language functions. See Lipka (2002a: 57f). The triadic structure of both models must be supplemented by a fourth component, the Medium, if we want to capture humorous discourse adequately. Humour exists both in spoken and written language, but can also be visual (as in cartoons) and even musical. Thus the triangle becomes a quadrangle.

3.2 The Maxim of Joking

In the second stage of the development of linguistic pragmatics Grice’s *Cooperative Principle* was introduced which is based on four maxims of conversation: QUANTITY, QUALITY, RELATION and MANNER (cf Lipka (2002a:XII)). He states explicitly, that these may well be violated, especially blatantly, ie flouted, which gives rise to implicatures, especially to an “ironic tone”. This is the case with the maxim of Quality, which requires the speaker to say

something which is true. If this is not the case, because something is obviously untrue, irony or parody arises. Another maxim requires: Avoid ambiguity.

With humorous discourse this is definitely not the case, because humour is often based on the ambiguity of words (polysemy, homonymy) and we could therefore postulate a new maxim which states:

Exploit ambiguity!

This might be paraphrased or supplemented by

Produce amusement, enjoyment, a pleasant atmosphere, laughter!

This is the prime function of humour which may be achieved by various means or techniques including non-verbal ones.

3.3 *The sender, joker, punner, punster*

Crystal (1998) distinguishes three groups of people who play with language, especially words, viz. the amateurs (ibid.: 9ff), the enthusiasts (ibid.: 54ff) and the professionals (ibid.: 93ff). The amateurs “receive no payment” for their activity and also “some people are cleverer at language play” (ibid.: 9). Comedy may arise out of the non-verbal situation and a mime artist can create humour and others may attempt an imitation of a person’s behaviour, gestures, class or regional dialect. Some can earn a living by language play such as standup-comedians.

“Language play enthusiasts are distantly related to language enthusiasts in general” (ibid.: 54). Advertisers and headline writers are professionals. Also people who write funny captions for photos in newspapers and people who invent and produce greeting cards of any sort.

3.4 *The addressee (recipient)*

The recipient of a joke, pun or any other type of word play is forewarned and forearmed by verbal means signalling the intention of the sender to produce, or recite, a non-serious text, e.g., a limerick. Besides the beginning *there was a young lady/a fair maid of...* the metre and rhyme clearly signals this. There are also other signals of imminent word play, punning or joking which cannot be overlooked or overheard such as intonation, mimic and body language. Openings like *Do you know the one about...?* and riddles like *What’s the difference between...? Why is...?* or utterances like *Doctor, doctor..., Knock, knock...*

The opposite may also be the case when the speaker will signal or emphasize that he is telling the truth and is being serious or not by adding to a statement the phrase: *-no kidding, serious!* or *I was only kidding*. The reaction of the recipient may be a smile or outright laughter or either *Oh, not again!* and often the misfired joke attempt may result in moaning and groaning.

3.5 *The complex situation of joking and punning and the medium*

Producing and receiving comic discourse, requires, besides the sender and recipient, a specific medium, a context or situation and a theme or target in derogatory or aggressive jokes about e.g., the Irish, Poles, blondes or certain politicians.

The sender has the intention to amuse or make the recipient laugh and also – in a specific situation – to show his superiority in a game called *ping-pong punning* by Crystal (1998: 2f, 139, 169) or competitive *joke-capping sessions* by Chiaro (1992: 113f). In this situation the punner or joker is inviting others to follow suit with a recital or their own jokes trying to score over the previous speaker.

3.6 *The function of jokes, puns and humour*

The functions of jokes, humorous discourse and language play are manifold. In the act of humour the sender, according to Nash (1985: 9) plays “with various dualities” i.e., ambiguities and homonymy (two meanings). Chiaro (1992: 122) claims that “ambiguity can be exploited to create verbal duplicity”. This is a “frame for sexual innuendo, to bring out the *double entendre*” (ibid.: 116). The limerick is the classic case in point, but even more so dirty jokes.

In drama or in a serious story there may be a situation which makes you relax a little because it is funny which is called *comic relief*. Thus the funny scenes in Shakespeare provide a light relief. Incidentally, a British charity organization started by professional comedians is called *Comic Relief*.

With professionals, i.e., the writers of headlines, captions, texts on greeting cards, language play is a very popular method of catching the possible reader’s attention and curiosity, i.e., it has the function of an attention-seeking device (ASD).

3.7 *Punning as kind of phatic communion*

In 1923, in an appendix to Ogden/Richards’ *The Meaning of Meaning* Bronislaw Malinowski, who had investigated the language and culture of Melanesian tribes on the Trobriand Islands – using the method of *Participant Observation* – postulated a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words and called it *phatic communion*. In this form of communication no factual or new information is conveyed, as in the prototypical weather-talk of informal British conversation. The meaning of individual words is irrelevant, as in phrases of politeness and the utterance fulfils the function of togetherness, or getting people together in a friendly atmosphere and is interaction-centred. This is a central function of humour, telling jokes and funny stories. A joke may be used for the opening of an academic lecture, to create interest and a positive atmosphere.

4. **Non-serious texts in the history of English**

Naturally, the type of non-serious or humorous text is not restricted to modern or present-day English or other languages. I will here focus on two eminent figures of literary history.

4.1. Chaucer

In the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales several persons are characterized and some of them in a funny way. The Prioress, Madame Eglentyne, who during a meal *leet no morsel from hir lippes falle* is said to speak French in a non-native way:

*And Frensh she spake ful fair and fetisli after the scole
of Stratford atte Bowe, for Frensh of Paris was to hir unknowe.*

4.2. Shakespeare

Shakespeare is well known for using plentiful puns, many of them bawdy and often untranslatable, because the homonyms on which he plays do not exist in other languages. Therefore he might be called disrespectfully *The King of Pun*.

But not only in his dramas does he use non-serious language, but also in his poetry. In his *Ode to his mistress* he parodies the style of Petrarca (in Sonnet 130):

*My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,
coral is far more red ...
if snow be white, why then her breasts are dun
if hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.*

5. Conclusions

Humour and word play is neglected in corpora and text typologies. There are, however, several books on the subject, whose definitions and arguments are described and analysed in the article. The limerick, as a typically English genre, is explained and illustrated with a considerable number of examples. In a pragmatic approach, punning and joking are treated as speech acts, where sender, recipient and situation must be considered. Maxims of joking are postulated, such as EXPLOIT AMBIGUITY! and PRODUCE AMUSEMENT! Punning can be seen as a kind of phatic communion. Examples of non-serious text are given from Chaucer and Shakespeare.

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