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A RELEVANCE-THEORETIC CLASSIFICATION OF JOKES

Abstract

Relevance Theory pictures communication as an inferential activity that adjusts, in parallel, the explicit content of utterances, the implicated premises and conclusions that can be derived, and the right amount of contextual information needed to obtain them. When applied to jokes, a relevance-theoretic classification may be proposed depending on whether the humorist plays with the audience's inferential activity aimed at an explicit interpretation, with the audience's inference devoted to deriving implications or with their access to the right amount and quality of contextual information needed to obtain relevant interpretations. In this paper three types of jokes are proposed which focus on these aspects. A fourth type is also added, but this time referred to broad contextual assumptions on social or cultural values of society that are targeted by humorists.

Keywords

Relevance Theory, humorous effects, jokes, inference, incongruity, humor.

1. Relevance Theory

Relevance theory (henceforth RT) is a cognitive-pragmatic approach to communication proposed by D. Sperber and D. Wilson (henceforth S&W) in the mid-1980s (see Sperber & Wilson 1986/95 and Yus 1998, 2006, forthcoming, for general comments on this theory). In a nutshell, RT¹ relies on a basic claim of

¹ An extensive online bibliography on relevance theory applied to humor can be found in *Relevance Theory Online Bibliographic Service*, section 11, available at [www.ua.es/personal/francisco.yus/rt.html].

cognition: we are biologically geared, as evolved humans, to paying attention and processing the information that is potentially relevant to us. At the same time, we are constantly filtering and dismissing information that is potentially not worth processing. This is covered by the so-called *cognitive principle of relevance*:

Cognitive Principle of Relevance:

Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance.

This is a biologically rooted principle that is applied to all kinds of processing, including linguistic processing, the central interest of this theory, which is reflected upon the general objective of RT: “to identify underlying mechanisms, rooted in human psychology, which explain how humans communicate with one another” (S&W 1986/95: 32). Hence, RT specifically concentrates on the linguistic side of this biological endowment. In this case, we are dealing with a highly sophisticated tool–language–which helps us transfer thoughts to one another and an evolved principle that triggers interpretations: whenever someone talks to us, we engage in a relevance-seeking inferential procedure which relies on the so-called *communicative principle of relevance*:

Communicative Principle of Relevance:

Every act of overt communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

When devising an utterance (by the speaker) and selecting an interpretation (by the hearer), both interlocutors follow a cognitive principle that leads to selecting, among the choice of possibilities, to design the utterance (for speakers) and the choice of interpretations of the same utterance in the current context (for hearers), the one that satisfies these two conditions:

- Condition (a): An assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the positive cognitive effects² achieved when it is optimally processed are large.
- Condition (b): An assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the effort required to achieve these positive cognitive effects is small.

Normally, the *first* interpretation that satisfies these conditions is the one that the hearer is bound to choose, ignoring any other possible interpretations of the utterance (this is crucial for humor, as will be described below). For instance, in

² Initially, S&W called them “contextual effects”; later they labeled them “cognitive effects,” and in recent publications a differentiation has been made between those effects which are beneficial (positive cognitive effects) and those which are not. Needless to say, relevance is aimed at obtaining as many *positive* cognitive effects as possible.

the dialogue (1a) the interpretation that most clearly satisfies these conditions is (1b), a much more accessible interpretation than (1c) or (1d) and this prediction is humorously exploited in the scene from the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell 1994) quoted in (2):

- (1) a. A: How is your girlfriend?
B: She's no longer my girlfriend.
b. [They have split up].
c. [They are now married].
d. [His girlfriend has died].
- (2) A. So, John, how's that, how's that gorgeous girlfriend of yours?
B. She's no longer my girlfriend.
A. Oh dear. Still, I wouldn't get too gloomy about it. Rumour has it she never stopped bonking old Toby de Lisle just in case you didn't work out.
B. She's now my wife!
A. Excellent! Excellent! Congratulations!

In (2) the responsibility for the misunderstanding is B's for having selected the wrong utterance to communicate his thoughts and not A's in selecting the most appropriate interpretation, something that A would do almost unconsciously, according to RT. Communication, then, is a game in which speakers aim at relevance when designing their utterances and hearers aim at relevance when selecting an interpretation. An example of the former is found in Yus (forthcoming):

- (2) Ann: Does Susan eat meat?
Tom: (a) She is a vegan.
(b) No. She doesn't eat meat.

In theory, reply (a) does not provide a direct answer to Ann's question, and produces a higher processing effort for (a) than does a more straightforward answer like (b). The explanation for the choice of a more costly answer such as (a) is that it provides additional interest (cognitive effects) that could not be obtained from (b) (in this case the reason for her refusal to eat meat), and this interest makes up for the increased effort.

As will be shown below, humor involves an intentional play with what interpretations are more or less accessible and/or likely (from the humorist's point of view) and also an alteration of the expectations of relevance (from the

audience's point of view). The classification of jokes³ proposed in this article requires a preliminary account of the steps involved in comprehension, all of which may be exploited for humorous purposes. These will be outlined in the next heading.

2. Comprehension according to RT

It is interesting to describe in some detail how RT pictures comprehension, since the classification of jokes that will be proposed in the next headings relies on this cognitive picture. Essentially, RT comprehension is a complex cognitive procedure involving a *mutual parallel adjustment* of three sources of information: (a) the explicit interpretation of the speaker's utterance (which has to be enriched in order to obtain a fully contextualized proposition); (b) the speaker's implicated interpretation–implicature–(if intended); and (c) the right amount of contextual information needed to obtain (a) and (b). Therefore, S&W predict a dynamic and flexible human cognition capable of accessing context, enriching the utterance at the explicit level and deriving implicated conclusions in parallel, constrained by our inherent search for relevance. The parallel sub-tasks for interpretation are summarized in (4):

- (4) a. Construct appropriate hypotheses about explicit content (*explicatures*) via disambiguation, reference assignment and other pragmatic enrichment processes.
- b. Construct appropriate hypotheses about the intended contextual assumptions (*implicated premises*).
- c. Construct appropriate hypotheses about the intended contextual implications (*implicated conclusions*).

Comprehension involves several steps. Firstly, the hearer identifies the sequence of words uttered by the speaker, the so-called *logical form* or *semantic representation* of the utterance. This is “a well-formed formula, a structured set of constituents, which undergoes formal logical operations determined by its structure” (S&W 1986/95: 74), a context-free schematic interpretation which is useless at this stage and consequently has to be enriched inferentially in order to be communicatively effective. Secondly, this logical form is turned–via inference–into a fully

³ Following Ritchie (2004: 16), a joke will be defined as “a relatively short text which, for a given cultural group, is recognizable as having, as its primary purpose, the production of an amused reaction in its reader/hearer, and which is typically repeatable in a wide range of contexts.”

contextualized proposition that constitutes the explicit content of the utterance or *explicature*.⁴ To turn the logical form into an explicature some inferential operations have to be performed (depending on the specific requirements of the utterance):

Reference assignment and *free enrichment*. Sometimes a reference has to be found for certain words in the utterance. This is typically the case of utterances containing indexicals (i.e. pronouns, adverbs...). For instance, (5) is useless unless the hearer can find the intended referents:

(5) She [*who?*] bought it [*what?*] there [*where?*].

Free enrichment, on the other hand, is the inferential completion of the propositional content of the utterance which, despite being apparently complete, needs extra information in order to make sense, as happens to the bracketed additions in these examples (Carston 2001):

- (6) a. Paracetamol is better. [*than what?*]
b. It's the same. [*as what?*]
c. He is too young. [*for what?*]
d. It's hot enough. [*for what?*]

Disambiguation. When the utterance contains a polysemous or potentially ambiguous word, one of its senses has to be selected according to contextual constraints. In Yus (1999), an example from *Fawlty Towers* ("Communication problems," BBC2, 19 February 1979) was provided which creates humorous effects from an erroneous selection of one of the senses of "paper":

- (7) A. Hallo! girl. There's no paper in my room. Why don't you check these things?
That's what you're being paid for, isn't it?
B. Well, we don't put it in the rooms.
A. What?
B. We keep it in the lounge.
A. In the lounge?!!

⁴ RT's *explicature/implicature* distinction is as follows: An assumption communicated by an utterance U is explicit if and only if it is a development of a logical form encoded by U. On the analogy of *implicature*, S&W (1986/95: 182) call an explicitly communicated assumption an *explicature*. Any assumption communicated, but not explicitly so, is implicitly communicated: it is an *implicature*. Besides explicatures, there are also *higher-level explicatures*, which include the speaker's attitude (*to regret that...*, *to be happy that...*, etc.) or a higher-order speech-act schema (*to be asking that...*, *to be ordering that...*, etc.) involved in the communication of the utterance.

- B. I'll get you some. Do you want plain ones or ones with our address on it?
 A. Address on it?!!
 B. How many sheets? How many are you going to use?
 A. Manager!!
 B. Just enough for one? Tell me.
 A. Manager! Manager!
 C. Yes? (...)
 A. There you are! I've never met such insolence in all my life. I come down here to get some lavatory paper and she starts asking me the most insulting... personal... things I ever heard in my life.
 B. I thought she wanted writing paper!

Conceptual adjustment. This is one of the most interesting lines of research within RT. During interpretation, the default concept coded by a word (e.g. the prototypical concept as found in dictionaries, for example) is adjusted by the hearers so that it meets their expectations of relevance. The outcome is an *ad hoc concept* which is similar, but not identical, to the prototypical concept encoded by the word, retaining only some of the features that constitute this default concept.

In certain contexts, the concept that the speaker intends to communicate is *broader* (i.e., less exact) than the concept that the word he has chosen literally communicates, as in (8a-d):

- (8) a. There is *a rectangle* of lawn in the shed.
 [not an exact rectangle]
 b. Don't worry. I'll be ready *in two minutes*.
 [in a while, surely not exactly two minutes and probably longer than that]
 c. This steak is *raw*.
 [not literally raw, but probably undercooked]
 d. We entered a pub, but we left since it was *empty*.
 [not literally empty: there were people in the pub—e.g. the waiter—but not interesting people]

On other occasions, though, the concept that the speaker intends to communicate is *narrower* (i.e., more exact) than the concept that the word he has chosen literally communicates, as in (9a-d):

- (9) a. I've got *nothing* to wear for the party.
 [specifically nothing appropriate, nothing classy, etc.]
 b. This boy has *a temperature*.
 [specifically a higher temperature than he should have]
 c. It will take *some time* to fix this car.

[specifically longer than you imagine; longer than it would normally take]
d. John *drinks* too much.
[specifically he drinks too much alcohol]

The notion of *ad hoc concept* is particularly interesting for the analysis of metaphors, since they often involve *both* broadening and narrowing of concepts, as in the dialogue (10a) with the intended interpretation (10b), which demands both broadening (10c) and narrowing (10d) (adapted from Wilson and Carston 2006):

- (10) a. Q: Does your daughter help you at home?
A: My daughter is *a princess*.
- b. My daughter, who is not a female royal, is a spoiled, indulged girl, who constantly asks for special treatment, expects her wishes to be granted, refuses to do housework, etc.
- c. The ad hoc concept is *broader* than the encoded concept in some respects since it applies to some people who are not actual princesses.
- d. The ad hoc concept is also *narrower* in some respects since it applies only to people and only to princesses who are spoiled, indulged, etc.

In the aforementioned *mutual parallel adjustment* of enriched explicit content, derived implications and retrieved contextual information, the inferential tasks of reference assignment, disambiguation, etc. are applied, when necessary, to the logical form in order to develop the proposition which is communicated explicitly (*explicature*) but, at the same time, this proposition is combined with the right amount of context to yield (again, if necessary), fully inferential “implicated premises” and “implicated conclusions” (both are called *implicatures* in RT), and all of these inferential tasks are guided by our biologically rooted search for relevance. For instance, in the dialogue (11a), Tom needs to extract from context the implicated premise (11b) in order to obtain the implicature (11c), which is Ann’s intended interpretation:

- (11) a. Tom: Where is John?
Ann: There is a yellow BMW parked outside Sue’s house.
b. *Implicated premise* (implicature): John owns a yellow BMW
c. *Implicated conclusion* (implicature): John is probably at Sue’s house

We can summarize all the steps of comprehension described above with the following exchange (from Yus forthcoming):

- (12) Tom: So... Did you buy that table I told you about?

Ann: It's too wide and uneven.

If Tom wants to understand Ann correctly (as a relevant answer to his question) he has to make inferences in order to develop the schematic logical form provided by Ann's utterance into a relevant interpretation. In this particular case, Tom has to engage in reference assignment ("it" refers to "the table"), disambiguation (a table can be "uneven" in several ways: because its surface is uneven or because its legs are not properly leveled), and free enrichment (e.g. too wide [for what?]). The outcome could perhaps be the enriched proposition in (13):

- (13) *Explicature*: "The table that you told me about is too wide to go through the bedroom door and its surface is uneven."

This is not the actual answer to Tom's question, so Tom also has to combine (13) with contextual information (*implicated premises*) in order to get the intended interpretation (*implicated conclusion*). In this case *encyclopedic* contextual information will be accessed by Tom about how unlikely it is for a person to buy a table that does not go through the door and whose surface is uneven. This contextual information will help Tom reach, as an implicature, the intended interpretation (14):

- (14) *Implicature*: "I didn't buy the table that you told me about" (*implicated conclusion*).

As will be described below, all of these inferential steps can be manipulated by the humorist to obtain humorous effects, and these steps are also at the heart of the classification of jokes proposed in this paper.

3. Preliminary claims relevant to humor

The following preliminary claims are useful to understand why RT is particularly suited to explain how humorous communication is devised and how hearers extract humorous effects.

1. Wilson (1994: 44) summarizes the basic ideas of RT in four statements: (a) every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded; (b) not all these interpretations occur to the hearer simultaneously; some of them take more effort to think up; (c) hearers are equipped with a single, general criterion for evaluating interpretations; and (d) this criterion is powerful enough to exclude all but one single interpretation, so that having found an interpretation that fits the criterion, the hearer looks no further. These qualities of communication are exploited by humorists who, one way or

another, are more aware of multiple interpretations than their audiences, are able to predict which interpretation is more likely to be picked up as the intended interpretation, and know that their audiences are going to be surprised to discover that this interpretation is eventually questioned or invalidated (see 4 below). Examples would be (15a) and (16a), in which the humorist knows that the hearer is bound to select (15b) as the intended referent for “it” instead of (15c) and—via sexual stereotypes—that (16b) is much more likely than (16c):

- (15) a. A doctor thoroughly examined his patient, and said, “Look, I really can’t find any reason for this mysterious affliction. It’s probably due to drinking.” The patient sighed, and snapped, “In that case, I’ll come back when you’re damn well sober!”
b. [Your affliction] is probably due to drinking.
c. [My inability to tell you which affliction you’ve got] is probably due to drinking.
- (16) a. A wealthy couple had planned to go out for the evening. The woman of the house decided to give their butler, Jeeves, the rest of the night off. She said they would be home very late, and that he should just enjoy his evening. As it turned out, however, the wife wasn’t having a good time at the party, so she came home early, alone. As the woman walked into her house, she saw Jeeves sitting by himself in the dining room. She called for him to follow her, and led him into the master bedroom. She then closed and locked the door. She looked at him and smiled. “Jeeves,” she said. “Take off my dress.” He did this carefully. “Jeeves,” she continued. “Take off my stockings and garter.” He silently obeyed her. “Jeeves,” she then said. “Remove my bra and panties.” As he did this, the tension continued to mount. She looked at him and then said, “Jeeves, if I ever catch you wearing my clothes again, you’re fired!”
b. Jeeves is taking off the clothes that the woman is wearing.
c. Jeeves is taking off the clothes that he is wearing.

2. Closely related to 1., RT predicts that humans are equipped with a mind-reading ability that has played a vital evolutionary part in our survival. S&W (2002: 14-15) acknowledge this ability to predict the mental states and inferential patterns of others as part of the general human tendency to maximize relevance. Specifically, speakers—humorists included—can predict:

- a. which information in the environment is likely to attract B’s attention (i.e. the most relevant stimulus in that environment);
- b. which background information from B’s memory is likely to be retrieved and used during the processing of a stimulus (i.e. the background information most relevant to processing it); and
- c. which inferences B is likely to draw (i.e. those inferences which yield enough

cognitive benefits for B).

In short, it can be stated that humorists design their humorous discourses by resorting to this mind-reading ability and hence predict that certain stimuli will be more relevant than others and that certain assumptions will inevitably be entertained by their audience during comprehension. This is typical of jokes which base the humorous effect not on explicit interpretations but on the audience's extraction of contextual implications (this will be joke type 3; see below) as in the conclusion of "wife's consent" reached in the following joke:

- (17) A husband and wife were having dinner when this young woman comes over to their table, gives the husband a big open-mouthed kiss, then says she'll see him later and walks away. The wife glares at her husband and says, "Who the hell was that?" "Oh," replies the husband, "she's my mistress." "Well, that's the last straw," says the wife. "I've had enough. I want a divorce!" "I can understand that," replies her husband, "but remember, a divorce will mean no more shopping trips to Paris, no more Lexus in the garage and no more yacht club. But the decision is yours." Just then, a mutual friend enters the restaurant with a gorgeous babe on his arm. "Who's that woman with Jim?" asks the wife. "That's his mistress," says her husband. "Ours is prettier," she replies.

3. When processing utterances, hearers use the information already obtained from the processing of the preceding discourse as a preliminary context against which new information is processed. This is essential in jokes such as (18), in which the cognitive biasing of "colors" from the preceding discourse favors the interpretation of red as a color instead of the past participle of "to read":

- (18) Q: What is black and white and red all over?
A: The newspaper.

Ritchie (2004b: 17) correctly points out that many jokes rely on information being revealed in a certain order and that any theory of humor should account for this *sequence of presentation*. RT does cover this fact when asserting that the information from processing an initial portion of a text influences the processing of subsequent stretches of this text.

4. The interpretation of jokes is influenced by the fact that these are often framed by linguistic markers foregrounding a specific intention. As argued in Yus (2003: 1299), humorous utterances (especially the so-called *canned jokes*) may be separated from the topic of conversations by explicit markers (e.g. "have you heard the one...?"). Hearers normally use these markers as a reminder that the conversation is entering (or has just entered) a humor-connoted phase. The same might occur in non-canned jokes (spontaneous or otherwise), but in this case, the hearer has to make *ex post facto* hypotheses based on assumptions about the

intended humorous quality of the utterance. Even so, there may be discriminative cues in context that indicate that what is being said or is about to be said, should not be taken seriously. This is important because in such a humorous frame, hearers will be more willing to devote cognitive resources to obtaining utterly irrelevant interpretations which in normal circumstances would not offset the mental effort that they require. An example is the pun in (19):

- (19) A Chihuahua, a Doberman and a Bulldog are in a doggie bar having a drink when a good-looking female Collie comes up to them and says, "Whoever can say *liver* and *cheese* in a sentence can have me." So the Doberman says, "I love liver and cheese." The Collie says, "That's not good enough." The Bulldog says, "I hate liver and cheese." She says, "That's not creative enough." Finally, the Chihuahua says, "Liver alone... cheese mine."

A hearer who is alert to the humorous quality of the text to be processed (or just processed) will assume that certain interpretive paths are going to be (or have been) favored due to the intention to create humorous effects, without necessarily rejecting the discourse as irrelevant or nonsensical (as (19) actually is if read and not listened to).

5. There is no agreement on why people find certain jokes humorous while they are indifferent to others. In Yus (2003), it is suggested, from an RT approach, that three features of humorous communication may explain why humor arises:

a. The resolution of incongruous on-going interpretations. Often jokes involve the manipulation of alternative interpretations (see heading 4 below) whose availability during processing leads to some form of incongruity. In this sense, hearers are normally (humorously?) relieved when the humorist (or they) solve(s) the incongruity with a punchline and annoyed when there is no resolution and the incongruity remains unresolved. Besides, incongruity-based jokes have to foreground the malicious intention of the humorist or else the incongruity may be simply rejected as irrelevant. Incongruities can lead to puzzlement and negative emotion if the processing effort which they require does not offset the supposed interest of the joke itself.

b. Besides, resolutions of incongruity are not enough to trigger humor. Many incongruities do not generate humor but puzzlement even after resolution. Therefore, the hearer is also expected to join in the game, as it were, to accept that there is some humorous intention underlying the joke. As stated in Yus (2003: 1314), hearers normally accept violations of normal conversational rules, the existence of totally irrelevant answers to otherwise stupid questions and so on for the sake of humor, including incongruities during interpretation. The precondition to this attitude is an acceptance that some humorous game is about to be played (in canned jokes or framed spontaneous jokes) or has just been played (in non-framed

spontaneous jokes).

c. Jokes also have to interact fruitfully with the hearer's beliefs and ideas (a sub-part of the hearer's *cognitive environment*⁵, in RT terms). Jokes have to be accepted by the hearer before they can have any humorous effect. Since jokes provide little, if any, information, humorists have to base their effectiveness on an intended pleasurable effect on the hearer, whose personal beliefs, assumptions, and feelings can only be partly predicted and obviously vary from person to person (Ritchie 2004b: 16). On paper, a joke which targets the hearer's ideas and beliefs, etc. will achieve relevance in three cases (as predicted by RT for any new piece of information which is processed): when it *reinforces* previously held assumptions, when it *contradicts* and *eliminates* previously held assumptions, and when it combines with the hearer's *manifest* information to yield conclusions. In heading 7 below it will be stressed that cognitive environments are highly influenced by constraints from a social context, including stereotypes, from which many encyclopedic assumptions are constantly generated. These may also be targets of humorists when attempting to create humorous effects.

6. Finally, and this is the claim that will be developed in the next headings, a classification of jokes from an RT perspective has to address whether the humorist's intention to create a humorous effect is focused on the audience's enrichment to obtain the explicit content of the joke (*explicature*), on the audience's recovery of contextual assumptions and derivation of contextual implications (*implicature*) or any combination of both. In this sense, four types of jokes have been isolated in this paper: (a) jokes based on the explicit interpretation of the joke or alternative explicit interpretations (heading 4); (b) jokes which generate humor from a clash between explicit content and implicit information retrieved from context (heading 5); (c) jokes based on the audience's responsibility to draw implicit information from context in order to derive implicatures (heading 6); and (d) jokes whose main source of humor lies in the reinforcement or invalidation of commonly assumed stereotypical background information about the society in which the audience lives (heading 7).

⁵ Cognitive environments are related to the RT notion of *manifestness*. What is 'manifest' is what one is capable of inferring or perceiving at a certain stage of interpretation, even if one has not done so yet. The sum of all the manifest assumptions is the person's *cognitive environment*, which varies from one context to another. A set of assumptions manifest to several individuals constitutes their *shared cognitive environment*. This, again, changes according to different contextual parameters. When it is manifest to all the people sharing a cognitive environment that they share it, this is a *mutual cognitive environment*, made up of mutually manifest assumptions. Communication, then, is a matter of making certain assumptions mutually manifest to both speaker and hearer.

4. Joke type 1: Explicit interpretation questioned

Many jokes create humorous effects by manipulating the steps of interpretation (as predicted by RT) taken by the hearer in order to enrich the schematic and context-free logical form into a fully contextualized and relevant explicit proposition. One typical strategy is to favor a very accessible interpretation at an initial stage of the joke and invalidate it afterwards by foregrounding a more unlikely (i.e. less relevant) but still possible interpretation which is compatible with the whole joke (but not with the interpretation initially chosen). This is the pattern that fits Yus's (2003: 1308-1309) *multiple graded interpretations vs. single covert interpretation* schema (MGI/SCI schema for short) defined in (20)⁶:

- (20) The speaker communicates an utterance whose initial part has *multiple interpretations* but *graded* in terms of accessibility (the MGI part of the joke). The hearer will tend to choose a first accessible interpretation in terms of the balance of cognitive effects and (mental) effort. Once the speaker manages to fool the hearer into selecting that accessible interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance, the speaker knows that other possible interpretations will not be taken into account. Then, the speaker creates a cognitive dissonance with the assumptions arising from the processing of the subsequent stretch of discourse (the *SCI part* of the joke), an incongruity that has to be resolved by the surprised addressee. The resolution lies in a *single covert, more unlikely interpretation*, compatible with the whole text (but not with the hearer's chosen interpretation in the initial part of the joke). Since the hearer stops his interpretive process at the first interpretation which offers an optimal balance of cognitive effects and mental effort, this latent interpretation is not taken into consideration until the speaker humorously foregrounds it in the second part of the joke.

One joke fitting this schema is quoted below:

- (21) "Things don't look good. The only chance is a brain transplant. This is an experimental procedure. It might work, but the bad news is that brains are very expensive, and you will have to pay the costs yourselves." "Well, how much does a brain cost?" asked the relatives. "For a male brain, \$500,000. For a female brain, \$200,000." The patient's daughter was unsatisfied and asked,

⁶ Ritchie's (2004) *forced reinterpretation model* is similar: "The set-up has two different interpretations, but one is much more obvious to the audience, who does not become aware of the other meaning. The meaning of the punchline conflicts with this obvious interpretation, but is compatible with, and even evokes, the other, hitherto, hidden, meaning. The meaning of the punchline can be integrated with the hidden meaning to form a consistent interpretation which differs from the first obvious interpretation."

“Why the difference in price between male brains and female brains?” “A standard pricing practice,” said the head of the team. “Women’s brains have to be marked down, because they have actually been used.”

Overt accessible interpretation in the MGI part: Women are less intelligent than men.

Covert unlikely interpretation fitting both MGI/SCI parts: Women are more intelligent than men.

A slightly different pattern is found in the famous *incongruity-resolution model* by Suls (1972), which also predicts incongruity during the processing of the joke but not necessarily involving ambiguities in overt and covert interpretations (of initial and subsequent parts of the joke). Needless to say, the audience will also be willing to solve the incongruity and derive effects from this resolution (see Yus 1997; Ritchie 1999). Ritchie (2004b: 65) summarizes this model as follows:

- (22) -as text is read, make predictions.
 -while no conflict with predictions, keep going.
 -if input conflicts with predictions:
 -if not ending – PUZZLEMENT.
 -if it is the ending, try to resolve:
 no rule found – PUZZLEMENT.
 cognitive rule found – HUMOR.

Notice that, in this sense, Suls’ *incongruity-resolution model* seems to cover more cases than Yus’s (2003) *MGI/SCI model* and Ritchie’s (2004) *forced reinterpretation model* since it covers not only jokes in which incongruity arises from a multiplicity of interpretations of the initial part of the joke, but also jokes in which the incongruity is not based upon this multiplicity.⁷ An example of the latter is provided in (23) and (24) below, where the final part of both jokes is surprising (incongruous with the “loving setup” and “the doctor’s advice,” respectively) but does not involve an ambiguous MGI part of the joke:

- (23) Jake was on his deathbed. His wife Susan was maintaining a vigil by his side. She held his fragile hand, tears ran down her face. Her praying roused him from his slumber. He looked up and his pale lips began to move slightly. “My darling Susan,” he whispered. “Hush, my love,” she said. “Rest. Shhh. Don’t talk.” He was insistent. “Susan,” he said in his tired voice. “I have something I

⁷ It should be added that even though the jokes that fit the *incongruity-resolution model* are typically ascribed to this first joke type, there is no reason why incongruity-resolution should not be centered upon a clash between explicit interpretations and contextual information (type 2) or upon the recovery of implications (type 3). I would like to thank Marta Dynel for pointing this out to me.

must confess to you.” “There’s nothing to confess,” replied the weeping Susan. “Everything’s all right, go to sleep.” “No, no. I must die in peace, Susan. I slept with your sister, your best friend and your mother.” “I know,” she replied. “That’s why I poisoned you.”

- (24) A woman accompanied her husband to the doctor’s office for a checkup. Afterwards, the doctor took the wife aside and said, “Unless you do the following things, your husband will surely die.” The doctor then went on to say, “Here’s what you need to do.” “Every morning make sure you serve him a good healthy breakfast. Meet him at home each day for lunch so you can serve him a well balanced meal. Make sure you feed him a good, hot meal each evening and don’t overburden him with any stressful conversation, nor ask him to perform any household chores. Also, keep the house spotless and clean so he doesn’t get exposed to any threatening germs.” On the way home, the husband asked his wife what the doctor said. She replied, “You’re going to die.”

What is more interesting for an RT approach to jokes is that the manipulation of the audience’s recovery of explicit information may be carried out at all the different stages of comprehension according to RT which were outlined in heading 2, from the very initial context-free identification of the sequence of words (logical form) to its inferential enrichment (reference assignment, disambiguation, etc.) into an explicature and the ascription of underlying attitudes and intentions (higher-level explicatures). These will be exemplified below:

4.1. Logical form

The initial identification of the grammatical sequence of the joke is context-free but meaningful, even if insufficient to be considered a valid interpretation of the joke. Some humorists play with this initial and schematic ascription of meaning, by predicting a more likely identification of sentence constituents (especially “heads” and “modifiers”) which is later invalidated and replaced with a more unlikely (but eventually correct) one, as in (25) and (27) with alterative grammatical arrangements in (26) and (28), respectively:

- (25) Postmaster: Here’s your five-cent stamp.
Shopper: [with arms full of bundles]: Do I have to stick it on myself?
Postmaster: Nope. On the envelope (Clark 1968: 61, quoted in Oaks 1994: 379).
- (26) Likely but incorrect: [stick it on] [myself].
More unlikely but eventually correct: [stick it] [on myself].

- (27) A lady went into a clothing store and asked, “May I try on that dress in the shop window?” “Well,” replied the sales clerk doubtfully, “don’t you think it would be better to use the dressing room?” (Clark 1968: 239, quoted in Oaks 1994: 379).
- (28) Likely but incorrect: [try on] [that dress (which is) in the shop window].
More unlikely but eventually correct: [try on] [that dress] [in the shop window].

4.2. Reference assignment

When interpreting the joke, the hearer often has to find a referent for certain words. As was pointed out above, this inferential task is typically applied to indexicals (it, this, there...) which lack meaning unless they are pragmatically filled with meaning during interpretation. This fact may be exploited by humorists looking for alternative explicit interpretations. Example (15) above involving “it” with alternative referents “your affliction” and “my inability to tell you which affliction you’ve got” would be an example of humor that involves reference assignment. Another similar joke involving a referent for “that” is quoted in (29) and the (real) classified ad quoted in (30) is humorous because of the dual availability of referents for “it”:

- (29) Eleven-year-old Lucy was walking down the village street leading a cow by a rope. She met the vicar who said, “Little girl, what are you doing with that cow?” “Please Sir,” said Lucy, “it is my father’s cow and I am taking her to the bull.” “Disgusting,” said the parson, “can’t your father do that?” “No,” said Lucy, “it has to be the bull.”
- (30) Do not kill yourself in the garden. Let us do it for you.

4.3. Disambiguation

One of the tasks involved in enriching the logical form is disambiguation and, predictably, a good source of humorous effects if the (graded) accessibility to the two senses of a word or phrase is manipulated by the humorist. Indeed, the humorist can predict that one of the senses is more likely to be picked up and may then invalidate it in a subsequent part of the joke. This happens in the two senses of *hard* in (31), of *free* in (32), and of *rubber* and *stick* in (33):

- (31) Mr. Isar was attending his friend’s wife’s funeral. “It must be hard to lose a

wife,” remarked Mr. Isar. “Almost impossible,” remarked his friend.

- (32) I stopped at a fast food restaurant recently. I was fascinated by a sign which offered fat free french fries. I decided to give them a try. I was dismayed when the clerk pulled a basket of fries from the fryer which were dripping with fat. He filled a bag with these fries and put them in my order. “Just a minute!” I said. “Those aren’t fat free.” “Yes, they are. We only charge for the potatoes...The fat is free!”
- (33) A man, his wife and their eight children were waiting at a bus stop. Not long afterwards, a blind man joins the group. The bus finally arrives, but the blind man and the husband are forced to walk because there’s just no more room on the bus. As they walk together, the tapping of the blind man’s cane starts to irritate the other man. Finally, the man says, “You know, that’s pretty irritating. Why don’t you put a rubber on the end of that stick?” The blind man replies, “If you’d put a rubber on the end of your stick, we’d both be on that bus.”

Disambiguation also plays an important part in sexually connoted jokes, as in (33) and it is frequently centered on the verb “to come,” as in (34) and (35). Notice, though, that although both jokes have to do with disambiguating that verb, in (35) the hearer has to take responsibility in extracting, as implicit information from context, the intended source of ambiguity, and hence the joke would also belong to joke type 3, whose humor is mainly generated by accessing implicit contextual assumptions and deriving implications and not simply from obtaining explicit interpretations as in this first joke type (see heading 6 below):

- (34) A man is out shopping and discovers a new brand of Olympic condoms. Clearly impressed, he buys a pack. Upon getting home he announces to his wife the purchase he just made. “Olympic condoms?” she asks. “What makes them so special?” “There are three colors,” he replies, “Gold, Silver and Bronze.” “What color are you going to wear tonight?” she asks cheekily. “Gold of course,” says the man proudly. The wife responds, “Really, why don’t you wear Silver, it would be nice if you came second for a change!”
- (35) A chicken and an egg are lying in bed. The chicken is leaning against the headboard smoking a cigarette with a satisfied smile on its face. The egg, looking decidedly unhappy, grabs the sheet and rolls over and says, “Well, I guess we finally know the answer to THAT question!”

The popular puns can also be ascribed to this first joke type. There is a great deal of scholarly research on this humorous technique. In Yus (2003), a broad RT classification of puns was proposed:

(a) The utterance yields two propositions with similar accessibility. The hearer, unable to choose one candidate as consistent with the principle of relevance, entertains both humorously, as in (36):

- (36) Two molecules are walking down the street and they run in to each other. One says to the other, “Are you all right?” “No, I lost an electron!” “Are you sure?” “I’m positive!”

(b) A first accessible interpretation is reached for the whole text; this could have been chosen as the intended interpretation, but the expectation of humorous reward leads the hearer to search for an alternative interpretation instead. This is typical of puns playing with literal vs. metaphorical or literal vs. idiomatic uses of words and phrases, with polysemy, and with homophony. An example would be (37):

- (37) Q: Why don’t Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles get on with each other?
A: Because they can’t see eye to eye.

(c) No interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance is reached (initially) due to absurd and/or nonsensical punning associations. Only the reliance on an intended joking intention keeps the hearer searching for a relevant interpretation. This happens especially in cases such as those in which the speaker manipulates linguistic conventions for the sake of humor. In (38), for example, it is clearly a forced and absurd pun in which the humorist tries to manipulate a famous saying:

- (38) It’s a well-known fact that if you want an improvement in your working conditions, you should always tackle your boss about your issues one at a time. After all, you should never put all your begs in one ask-it.

(d) The first part of the joke contains a potentially ambiguous term whose first accessible interpretation is later invalidated by the punster in exchange for a more unlikely (but still possible) interpretation. This is what occurs with the similar pronunciations of lying/lion in this joke:

- (39) A guy walks into a bar with a giraffe and says, “A beer for me, and one for the giraffe, please.” So they proceed to drink. Then: “...a shot for me and one for the giraffe, too.” And they keep drinking all evening. Finally the giraffe passes out on the floor of the bar. The guy pays the tab and gets up to leave. The bartender shouts out, “Hey! You’re not going to leave that lying on the floor, are you?” The guy replies “That’s not a lion... it’s a giraffe.”

In this sense, puns which play with similar pronunciations of words are normally irrelevant at a first stage, until the audience tracks the intended association of

words, as in (40) and (41) ([Amal / ‘em all] and [clone fall / phone call], respectively):

- (40) A woman has twins, and gives them up for adoption. One of them goes to a family in Egypt and is named “Amal.” The other goes to a family in Spain; they name him “Juan.” Years later, Juan sends a picture of himself to his mom. Upon receiving the picture, she tells her husband that she wishes she also had a picture of Amal. Her husband responds, “But they are twins—if you’ve seen Juan, you’ve seen Amal.”
- (41) I remember the case not too long ago of the scientist that cloned himself. However, his clone was very obnoxious, while the scientist was well received and respected. Finally fed up with his experiment gone wrong, he threw his clone off the roof of the laboratory; killing the clone. He was arrested by the local police for making an obscene clone fall.

4.4. Conceptual adjustment

As described above, hearers normally do not infer the prototypical meaning of words (as coded by the word and stabilized in dictionaries) but adjust it following a relevance-seeking pattern. Sometimes the concept inferred is *broader* than the coded one; on other occasions the concept inferred is *narrower* than the one encoded by the word. Metaphors are also examples typically involving conceptual adjustment. Consider this example (adapted from Ritchie 2004a):

- (42) a. Ann: You seem much happier than the last time I saw you. Now you seem to be happy and at peace with yourself.
Tom: My wife is an anchor.
- b. Ann: You look bored. You used to be so eager for new experiences, but now you no longer do that.
Tom: My wife is an anchor.

In (42a), Ann is expected to adjust the encoded concept *anchor* and select only those attributes of anchors (stored in Ann’s mind as encyclopedic features connected to “anchors”) that are relevant in the current context, for example those referring to stability, reliance, etc. In (42b), on the contrary, Ann is expected to select different encyclopedic features of anchors which are more relevant in this context, for instance those having to do with preventing movement, impossibility of moving forward, etc. Similarly, jokes which contain metaphors normally demand some kind of conceptual adjustment based on the audience’s search for relevance in the joke. Example (43), for instance, plays with literal and metaphoric

meanings of *sausage* and *pig*:

- (43) There once was a man who owned a sausage factory, and he was showing his arrogant son around his factory. Try as he might to impress his snobbish son, his son would just sneer. They approached the heart of the factory, where the father thought “This should impress him!” He showed his son the machine and said, “Son, this is the heart of the factory. This machine here we can put in a pig, and out come sausages.” The son, unimpressed, said “Yes, but do you have a machine where you can put in a sausage and out comes a pig?” The father, furious, said, “Yes son, we call it your mother.”

Jokes which play with social stereotypes are also typically metaphoric and, again, demand some conceptual adjustment in order to relate people to other entities, as in these “lawyer jokes,” in which the hearer has to adjust *shark* and *suck blood* to make them applicable to the legal profession and hence meet the audience’s expectations of relevance:

- (44) Q: Why won’t sharks attack lawyers?
A: They don’t attack animals of their own species.
- (45) Q: What’s the difference between a lawyer and a vampire?
A: A vampire only sucks blood at night.

4.5. Higher-level explicatures

Besides enriching the schematic logical form into a fully contextualized proposition, the hearer is expected to embed this explicit proposition in a higher-order schema, called *higher-level explicature* which contains the attitude or underlying intention (as speech act) of the speaker when saying the utterance. For example, in (46) Tom will be interested in assessing the *higher-level explicature* (46b-d among other possibilities) that corresponds to Ann’s intention when saying (46a):

- (46) a. Ann [to Tom]: You’re going.
b. Ann *is asking* whether Tom is going.
c. Ann *regrets that* Tom is going.
d. Ann *is ordering* Tom to go.

Similarly, some jokes base their humorous effect on the incorrect identification of the higher-level explicature of some characters inside the joke. In (47), from Ritchie (2004b: 42), the humor lies in an erroneous identification of the higher-level explicature: “I am glad that...” (less likely but correct) instead of “I am

complaining that..." (more likely but incorrect):

- (47) Diner: Waiter! There's a fly in my soup!
Waiter: Please, don't shout so loudly. Everyone will want one.

5. Joke type 2: Explicit interpretation clashing with contextual assumptions

Comprehension according to RT is a *mutual parallel adjustment* of explicit content (inferentially developed from the schematic logical form, as described above), the necessary amount of contextual assumptions and the derivation of implicated conclusions (implicatures) from the combination of explicit information and context. It is logical to assume that some jokes will generate humorous effects by producing a clash between explicit information and information that the audience has to extract from context. This is one of Curcó's (1995, 1996, 1997, among other publications) main lines of research. Essentially, in this case the hearer finds that he has taken on board an assumption that is either incorrect or whose value is questioned by the humorist. It is important to stress the subset of the hearer's beliefs that are retrieved from memory or constructed on the spot in interpreting an utterance, which normally clashes with explicitly communicated information. In this sense, the hearer is led to entertain two contradictory pieces of information: one is strongly derived from the explicit interpretation of the joke (which Curcó labels *key assumption*) which clashes with an accessible (though so far unaccessed) assumption in the context of interpretation (which Curcó labels *target assumption*). Jokes like (48) and (49) would be analyzable in these terms (in the latter the humorist provides the resolution of the clash at the end of the joke):

- (48) I am so unlucky... Imagine! The other day I entered a haystack and I pricked one of my feet with a needle.

-*Target assumption*: It is almost impossible to find a needle in a haystack (from the hearer's encyclopedic knowledge, and aided by the accessibility to the popular saying "X is more difficult than looking for a needle in a haystack").

-*Key assumption*: It is possible to find a needle in a haystack (inferred from (48)).

- (49) A woman walked up to a little old man rocking in a chair on his porch. "I couldn't help noticing how happy you look," she said. "What's your secret for a long happy life?" "I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day," he said. "I also drink a case of whiskey a week, eat fatty foods, and never exercise!" "That's

amazing,” the woman said. “How old are you?” He thought for a moment, and replied, “Twenty-six.”

-*Target assumption*: It is impossible to live very long with such bad habits (from the hearer’s encyclopedic knowledge).

-*Key assumption*: It is possible to live very long with such bad habits (inferred from the initial part of (49)).⁸

6. Joke type 3: Implicated premises and implicated conclusions at work

A third type of joke centers all the humorous power on forcing the audience to draw implicatures and, consequently, on making them take responsibility for deriving these effects. From an RT point of view, there are two types of implicatures: on the one hand, *implicated premises* are assumptions drawn from context and their combination with the explicit information provided by the utterance makes it possible to derive the other type of implicature: *implicated conclusions* (the former are also called *pragmatic presupposition* in many non-RT-based studies). (50) exemplifies this typology:

- (50) a. Ann: Nice cat! Is it male or female?
Tom: It’s three-colored.
b. *Implicated premise* (implicature): All three-colored cats are female.
c. *Implicated conclusion* (implicature): The cat is female.

Similarly, many jokes demand from the audience the extraction of implicatures beyond the explicit interpretation of the joke in order to grasp the full extent of the intended humorous effects. For instance this happens in (51) and (52):

- (51) a. Matt’s dad picked him up from school to take him to a dental appointment. Knowing the parts for the school play were supposed to be posted today, he asked his son if he got a part. Matt enthusiastically announced that he’d gotten a part. “I play a man who’s been married for twenty years.” “That’s great, son.

⁸ Marta Dynel has correctly suggested that (49) also fits joke type 1. In my opinion, there is an initial part of the joke in which there is a covert but highly unlikely interpretation (“young but old-looking”) instead of the more likely “old and hence old-looking.” This part fits joke type 1. In the subsequent stretch of the joke, the man’s explanation clashes with the audience’s encyclopedic information on healthy habits (context), and hence it fits joke type 2. Finally, the last part of the joke clarifies both the initial part (old vs. old-looking) and the clash with context (these habits cannot help a person reach old age) relieving the audience and producing humorous effects.

Keep up the good work and before you know it they'll be giving you a speaking part."

b. *Implicated premise*: Men are not allowed to talk when they are married for very long.

c. *Implicated conclusion*: Men are dominated by women when they are married for very long.

- (52) a. A dietician was once addressing a large audience in Chicago. "The material we put into our stomachs is enough to have killed most of us sitting here, years ago. Red meat is awful. Vegetables can be disastrous, and none of us realizes the germs in our drinking water. But there is one thing that is the most dangerous of all and all of us eat it. Can anyone here tell me what lethal product I'm referring to?. You, sir, in the first row, please give us your idea." The man lowered his head and said, "Wedding cake?"
- b. *Implicated premise*: One eats wedding cake if one has just got married.
- c. *Implicated conclusion*: Getting married is very bad for your health.

This type of joke is very effective because the audience does not simply realize that the interpretation selected has been invalidated, or that there is some kind of ambiguity, but takes a higher degree of responsibility in finding the right implicit information and in deriving the correct implications that make the joke effective. Being able to find the eventual congruence between the processing of the joke at the explicit level and obtaining the implicated information is bound to be pleasurable for the audience.

7. Joke type 4: Targeting background encyclopedic assumptions

Instead of playing with explicit and implicit interpretations of jokes and with possible clashes between these interpretations and contextual information, a fourth variety of joke only plays with broad encyclopedic information, of stereotypical quality, that is stored in the audience's mind as cultural schemas on society and human roles or activities. In general, jokes that play with this broad encyclopedic information either intend to *reinforce* it, *contradict* and *eliminate* it, or simply remind the audience of the collective quality of this information.

In Yus (2002, 2004, 2005), this variety of humor was studied in the specific context of stand-up performances. In this specific context, the audience arrives at the venue with a particular store of mental representations, and one of the main sources of humor in stand-up comedy monologues is either the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes or the audience's realization that many thought-to-be privately stored representations about the world are actually collective cultural representations shared by a number of people in the audience. Laughter is, perhaps,

the most evident signal of mutual cultural awareness in stand-up comedy, providing a direct insight on the cultural quality of their representations. In Yus (2002), (53) is quoted as an example of how a private experience may be stressed as collective by the comedian:

- (53) Have you ever sat in a bar, at a table, two or three chairs around it? Somebody is bound to come and say: “Are... are you... *sitting* in that chair?” “No, I’m sitting in this one.” “What I mean... is *anybody* sitting in that chair?” “Yes, there are eight people having a gang-bang!” [*audience laughs*] (...) Have you ever sat, say, in a park... on a newspaper? sit on a bench...? it’s wet... put a newspaper there... sit there...? I guarantee you... I guarantee you... after five minutes... in *two* minutes a guy will come and say: “Are... are you... are you *reading* that?” [*audience laughs*]. “Yes, I have an eye in my anus!!” [*audience laughs*] (by comedian Dave Allen).

However, sometimes the comedian also attempts to contradict or challenge social and cultural stereotypes. Since human beings are unwilling to erase information from their storage of encyclopedic information, assumptions challenging this knowledge are often rejected if their strength does not lead to the erasure of this information. Even so, the challenge of cultural and social stereotypes tends to attract the audience’s attention, producing an immediate cognitive assessment of the audience’s encyclopedic storage. For instance, the audience is bound to find this excerpt of a monologue relevant since it challenges commonly accepted ideas on being fat and healthy:

- (54) [*A very fat comedian is on the stage*] Nowadays everybody aims at a perfect body. And as you can see, I’ve succeeded. Someone may say: “But he’s fat!” Well, yes of course. But for me this is a perfect body. People are so obsessed with losing weight that they don’t realize that being fat has a lot of advantages. Slim people have to eat revolting things in order to keep their figure, while the things that us fat people have to eat to keep ours are all delicious (from “Advantages of being fat” by *El Club de la Comedia*).

Normally, short jokes which deal with cultural stereotypes do not exhibit a private/collective duality or attempt to challenge stereotypes, but tend to stress the commonly assumed ideas on sex roles, nationalities or ethnic attributes, among other sources of humor. Humorists expect most people to be aware of these stereotypes (even if they do not individually support these collective beliefs) and find pleasure in being reminded of them. Examples would be (55) on sex roles, (56) on national attributes, and (57) on one profession:

- (55) Recently scientists revealed that beer contains small traces of female hormones. To prove their theory, the scientists fed 100 men 12 pints of beer

and observed that 100% of them gained weight, talked excessively without making sense, became emotional, couldn't drive, and refused to apologize when wrong. No further testing is planned.

- (56) A Brit, a Frenchman and a Russian are viewing a painting of Adam and Eve frolicking in the Garden of Eden. "Look at their reserve, their calm," muses the Brit. "They must be British." "Nonsense," the Frenchman disagrees. "They're naked, and so beautiful. Clearly, they are French." "No clothes, no shelter," the Russian points out, "they have only an apple to eat, and they're being told this is paradise. Clearly, they are Russian."
- (57) Q: What do you have when a lawyer is buried up to his neck in sand?
A: Not enough sand.

8. Concluding remarks

RT pictures communication as a highly inferential activity of human beings, who have to develop the schematic string of words that arrives at their mind into fully contextualized and relevant information. This development is applied to the enrichment of explicit content, to the derivation of implicatures and to the extraction of the necessary amount of contextual information. Crucially for humor, these inferential tasks can be predicted to a greater or lesser extent and hence manipulated to obtain humorous effects.

In this paper, these general RT ideas have been applied to a broad proposal of classification of jokes: (a) jokes which are based on some invalidation of inferred explicit content; (b) jokes which are based on a clash between inferred explicit information and some implicit information accessible to the audience; (c) jokes which are based on the audience's recovery of implicatures (either implicit premises or implicated conclusions); and (d) jokes which move beyond the specific processing of the joke into more broad collective information which normally generate humorous effects through a reinforcement of previously held stereotypes on issues such as sex roles, nationalities, ethnic differences or professions (or an attempt to contradict and eliminate them).

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