Strategies and Effects in Humorous Discourse: The Case of Jokes

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1. Introduction

According to relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95; see Wilson and Sperber, 2002; Yus, 1997a, 1998, 2006, forthcoming, for general comments on this theory), human beings are cognitively geared to the maximisation of relevance and they look for relevance in all incoming information that their minds process, both utterances that our interlocutors intentionally speak for us to process (the main object of analysis within cognitive pragmatics), and information which is simply exuded from the environment without a prior intentionality. This basic claim is at work in the processing of all types of inputs and humorous discourses are no exception, although attempting to make people laugh involves a prediction and manipulation of inference-centred interpretive strategies, as we will see below. In this paper a relevance-centred account of jokes (mostly Spanish ones) is provided in with the humorist’s prediction of interpretive strategies and inferential steps (as part of the hearer’s overall relevance-seeking activity) plays an important role. The outcome of this analysis is a taxonomy of jokes depending on the interpretive steps and contextual information that the addressee needs to access in order to get the humorous point of the joke. In our opinion, relevance theory is an adequate theoretical framework to explain why jokes are designed in the way they are and why they end up producing humorous effects in the interlocutor (see Yus, 2003, 2004, 2008).

2. Jokes and interlocutors’ tasks

In the famous Wikipedia, jokes are defined as “small stories or a short series of words, both made up, in a spoken or written format, intended to make the hearer or reader laugh. Normally, its main point is to be humorous, but there are also jokes with political connotations, jokes that stress sport rivalry, etc. It is said that there are good jokes and bad jokes, depending on the final effect produced”. This definition exhibits two basic features of jokes: they are intentional and they seek an effect on the hearer. This effect is sustained in a number of interpretive steps and context-seeking inferential activity that can be predicted and manipulated to a certain extent, as was mentioned above. Specifically, the hearer of a joke is supposed to:

(a) Look for a specific interpretation of the joke (which, very often, turns out to be an incorrect one) following the general cognitive tendency to aim at the highest interest (cognitive effects in relevance-theoretic terms) in exchange for the least mental effort required to obtain it. This relevance-seeking inferential activity is one of the varied cognitive operations that human beings ordinarily perform in their daily lives. Indeed, relevance is sought not only in what people

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say to us, but also in the information coming from our environment (most of which has to be filtered out so as not to suffer a barrage of information overload). Even information already stored in the brain is subject to relevance assessment, in the sense that some thought are more likely to be entertained that others in a specific situation. Finally, also part of the (unintentionally) exuded information from people around us may call our attention and be worth processing, even leading to humorous effects, as in (1):

(1) a. A passer-by slips on a banana peel.
   b. A passer-by has water splashed all over him by a passing car.
   c. A passer-by hits his head against a streetlight because he was looking at a girl on the other side of the street.

(b) Access contextual information in order to interpret the joke correctly and obtain relevant conclusions (normally humorous effects). All utterances, jokes included, underdetermine the interpretation that the speaker intends to communicate with them, that is, there is an informational gap between (2a) and (2b) and also between (2b) and (2c), whose relationship is a matter of interpretive resemblance rather than identity, and the task of the hearer is to fill this gap inferentially by accessing the right (i.e., intended) contextual information:

(2) a. What the speaker intends to communicate.
   [only resembles]
   b. What the speaker says.
   [only resembles]
   c. What the hearer interprets.

(c) Accept that, being a humour-intended utterance, the joke will probably be irrelevant in terms of objective information provided, cohesion, coherence, etc, although it may well be worth the processing effort if the joke fulfils its main task of generating humorous effects.

Similarly, the humorist is expected to perform a number of tasks in order to generate a humorous effect:

(a) To choose a linguistic utterance that leads to the intended interpretation and eventual humour.

(b) To predict that, from the whole range of interpretations that the utterance can have in a specific context (all of them plausible, in theory), one of them is very likely to be selected by the hearer (wrongly, as the “multiple graded interpretations strategy” predicts, see below)

(c) To predict that some information from context will be accessible (manifest in relevance theory terms) to the hearer and that he or she will use it as part of the inferential activity leading to a correct interpretation of the joke.

3. A taxonomy of jokes

Jokes can be analysed and divided into a number of cases depending on the aforementioned tasks by the speaker and hearer when producing and interpreting the joke, together with the amount and quality of contextual information used in its interpretation. Figure 1 shows a possible pragmatic taxonomy of jokes, all of them included in the “intentional” side of communication. These will be commented upon in the next headings.
Figure 1. A taxonomy of jokes.
3.1. Intentional versus unintentional

Jokes are inherently intentional, that is, uttered with the specific intention to generate humorous effects. In this sense, although there is no unintentional joke, there can be humorous effects which are produced beyond the sender’s intention. Nowadays, on the Internet a lot of samples can be found of this kind of unintended humour. An example is the parochial announcements listed in (3) below:

(3) a. Rogamos que hasta nuevo aviso se abstengan de traer ropa a la parroquia. Gracias.
   b. El coro de mayores de 60 años se disolverá durante el verano con el agradecimiento de toda la parroquia.
   c. El jueves a las 5 de la tarde habrá una reunión del grupo de mamás. Se ruega a todas las que quieran formar parte de las mamás se dirijan al párroco en su despacho.
   d. Recuerden que el jueves empieza la catequesis para niños y niñas de ambos sexos.

All of these announcements were made without a humorous intention but the reader can extract a non-predicted interpretation mainly due to parallel meanings (the first one is the intended one, while the second is unintended and humorous one): “not bringing clothes vs. arriving with no clothes on” in (3a); “thanking for the performance vs. thanking for leaving” in (3b); “joining a group of mothers vs. becoming a mother” in (3c); and “both boys and girls vs. people with two sexes” in (3d). This latent, unnoticed interpretation can also be found in advertisements, as in the following example in which the reader can find a referent for “it” which is not the intended one and turns the whole advert into a humorous utterance:

(4) Don’t kill yourself in the garden. Let us do it for you.

3.2. Integrated versus non-integrated in the ongoing conversation

Needless to say, neither a pragmatics of humorous discourse in general nor a cognitive pragmatics relevance-theoretic approach to jokes will be interested in these effects that are not sustained in a prior intentionality. Jokes, rather, are utterances with an intended effect and, as such, we can preliminary make a distinction between jokes that are integrated in the ongoing conversation and those “canned” jokes that are framed by specific markers such as “have you heard the one about...?”. As pointed out in Yus (2003: 1299), hearers normally rely on these markers as a reminder that the conversation is entering (or has just entered) a humorous frame. But 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.

However, sometimes cunning humorists can devise their jokes as pieces of discourse which are fully integrated into the conversation and that are only detected at the final stages of their interpretation, surprising the hearer who had not identified any “joke frame” and was processing the utterances in the conversation and accessing contextual information as if they were normal conversational instances, as in (5):

(5) Luis: Estoy preocupado. Me he hecho una revisión rutinaria que incluía un análisis
de sangre y me ha salido que tengo el colesterol altísimo. No lo entiendo, si llevo una vida super-sana.

Juan: A mi me pasó lo mismo hace unos días. Me hice un análisis y me salió el colesterol por las nubes.

Luis: ¡No lo sabía!

Juan: Pues si... Por eso ahora tengo que ir con las piernas muy abiertas, como si me acabara de bajar de un caballo.

Luis: Pero... ¿por qué? ¿Qué tiene que ver...?

Juan: Bueno, es que el médico me ha dicho que los huevos ni tocarlos...

Luis: ¡Muy gracioso! Déjame, ¡que no estoy para chistes!

In the conversation in (5), the first time Juan speaks he already has the joke on the polysemy of “huevos” in Spanish (chicken eggs vs. male testicles) and designs the subsequent turns in such a way that the joke can be smoothly integrated within the conversation. Luis has no idea that a joke is coming and is taken by surprise.

Both canned jokes and jokes integrated in the on-going conversation can based their humorous potential on either the actual interpretation of the joke, normally because the joke demands certain interpretive paths or the accessibility to certain contextual information that can be predicted and manipulated by the speaker, or on certain collective or social information, mainly of a stereotypical quality, that is stored in the hearer’s mind and whose accessibility can be predicted and exploited by the humorist. We will analyse both in the next headings.

3.3. Based on the processing of the joke and its explicit/implicit interpretations

Relevance theory predicts interpretation as an inferential process in which the hearer makes a mutual parallel adjustment of explicitly communicated information, implicated conclusions and contextual information in order to reach a relevant interpretation. Actually, one of the main contributions of relevance theory has been to prove that obtaining an explicit interpretation is as demanding (in terms of contextualisation) as deriving implicated conclusions (see Carston, 2002). In both cases, the inferential steps leading to an explicit and/or implicit interpretation can be predicted and exploited with a humorous intention. Several theories suggest patterns in which this prediction and exploitation of interpretive steps is carried out. Among them we summarise the following:

(a) The **multiple graded interpretation vs. single covert interpretation pattern**. Suggested in Yus (2003) and also proposed, with variations, in Jodłowiec (1991) and in Ritchie’s (2004) *forced reinterpretation model*. In short, the pattern predicts that the initial part of the joke has multiple possible interpretations but graded in terms of accessibility, that is, one interpretation is more likely to be selected as the intended one (following a relevance-seeking inferential procedure based on a balance of cognitive effects and mental effort). This means that the other possible interpretations of this initial part will not be taken into account by the hearer (an unconscious effort-relieving cognitive strategy that plays a part in the generation of humour).

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2 “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”.
Next, the speaker utters the second part of the joke which creates a cognitive dissonance with the assumptions arising from the processing of the previous stretch of discourse, an incongruity that has to be resolved by the surprised hearer. The resolution lies in a covert, more unlikely interpretation, compatible with the whole text (but not with the hearer’s chosen interpretation in the initial part of the joke). This latent interpretation is not taken into consideration until the speaker humorously foregrounds it in the second part of the joke, thus making the hearer realise that he or she has been fooled into selecting a wrong interpretation. This realisation, together with the resolution of the incongruity, generates humorous effects. In Yus (2003: 1310) the following joke exemplifies this pattern, where an initial part of the joke suggests that women are less intelligent than men, only to be invalidated by the subsequent part of the joke:

(6) “Things don’t look good. The only chance is a brain transplant. 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, “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”.

(b) The incongruity-resolution pattern. Suggested by Suls (1972), it 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). Here, the hearer encounters an incongruity during the processing of the utterance and tries to find a resolution to it (see Yus, 1997b). Ritchie (2004: 65) summarizes this model as follows:

(7) -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.

The pattern can basically be summarised as a two-stage sequence: (a) In a first stage, there is a violation or invalidation of the cognitive expectations that the hearer has been building during the processing of the joke so far; (b) in a second stage, the text provides the reader with the key to the resolution of the incongruity and the hearer is aware of having been fooled and of the existence of other possible interpretations that he or she had not taken into account. An example is quoted in (8):

(8) Jack was dying. His wife Becky was maintaining a candlelight vigil by his side. She held his fragile hand, tears running down her face. Her praying roused him from his slumber. He looked up and his pale lips began to move slightly. “My daring Becky”, she said, “Rest, Sh! Don’t talk”. He was insistent, “Becky”, he said in his tried voice, “I…I have something I must confess to you”. “There is nothing to confess”, replied the weeping Becky. “Everything’s all right, go to sleep”. “No, no. I must die in peace. Becky. I…I slept with your sister, your best friend, her best friend, and your mother!”
“I know”. Becky whispered softly. “That’s why I poisoned you”.

The initial part of the joke in (8) builds up a scenario in which the loving wife cares for her dying husband but her final utterance creates a sudden cognitive dissonance that contrasts radically with this scenario. Only by resolving the incongruity will the hearer grasp the intended humorous interpretation.

In both patterns, the humorist plays with the relevance-seeking inferential steps that lead to an adequate interpretation. We will explain that this is done basically by manipulating the extraction of explicit interpretations or explicatures (3.3.1), by controlling the derivation of implicated conclusions or implicatures (3.3.2), and by playing with alternative explicit and/or implicit senses that are both possible candidates to match the intended interpretation but are graded in terms of relevance (3.3.3).

### 3.3.1. Extraction of explicit interpretations

In general, the different inferential strategies that have to be used in obtaining the explicit interpretation of the text of the joke involve different possibilities that are graded in terms of relevance (cognitive effects versus processing effort). What the humorist does is to foreground a different possibility that the hearer had not taken into account (or could not have taken into account in some utterly irrelevant jokes). Among the different possible techniques based on the extraction of explicit interpretations of the joke we can list the following:

(a) **Homophony.** Sometimes two words have the same pronunciation but different meanings, thus leading to two different explicatures of the utterance. One is the correct one in terms of relevance but it is eventually invalidated by the hearer. The other is not taken into account by the hearer but it is eventually the correct one. Needless to say, the English language is prone to this kind of word game, whereas it is much more difficult to find in Spanish. A possible example is quoted in (9), in which the humorist plays with the homophony of “baguettes” (a type of bread size) and “vaguetes” (lazy people) in order to characterise civil servants (*funcionarios*) humorously:

(9) Entra un señor a una panadería y dice... –
-¿Me da dos funcionarios?
El dependiente, con cara de perplejidad, le responde:
-Querrá decir “dos baguettes”...

(b) **Phonetic similarity.** Sometimes the humorous game is based on the similarity of the pronunciation of two words. This is the case of “vos / voz” in (10), “veinte / vente” in (11) and “sien / cien” in (12):

(10) Llega un argentino con su esposa y le dice:
-Esta noche voy a hacer el amor afónico.
A lo que la mujer le pregunta:
-¿Afónico?
-Sí... sin vos.

(11) ¿Qué le dice un dos a un cero?
-Vente conmigo.
(12) Llega un campesino al médico y le dice que le duele mucho “la mil”.
Doctor: ¿Cómo “la mil”? ¿Qué es eso?
Paciente: ¡La mil! Me duele mucho aquí… en la cabeza.
Doctor: ¡¡¡Eso es la sien!!!
Paciente: Ya sabía yo que era un número alto…

(c) Conceptual adjustment. According to relevance theory, the concepts typically encoded by the words contained in an utterance often differ from the concepts that the speaker really wants to communicate with them, and therefore the hearer has to adjust them to meet the expectations of relevance. Basically, this adjustment (that leads to the so-called ad hoc concepts) can be done in two directions: the (ad hoc) concept communicated may be broader (that is, less exact) than the concept encoded by the word uttered, resulting in conceptual broadening, or may be narrower (that is, more exact) than the concept encoded, resulting in conceptual narrowing. Consider the examples in (13):

(13) a. We entered a pub but we left because it was empty.
   [not literally empty; there was a waiter and maybe a few people].
   b. I’ve got a thousand things to do this morning.
   [not literally a thousand things; rather, a lot of things].
   c. Antonio drinks too much.
   [specifically, he drinks too much alcohol].
   d. I’ve got nothing to wear for the party.
   [specifically, nothing classy, nothing elegant].

(13a) and (13b) are examples of conceptual broadening, since the (ad hoc) concepts communicated are less exact than the concepts encoded by “empty” and “a thousand”. Neither the pub was empty nor the number of things to do is literally a thousand. On the other hand, (13c) and (13d) are examples of conceptual narrowing, since the (ad hoc) concepts communicated are more exact than the concepts typically encoded by the words “drink” and “nothing” (“drink alcohol” and “nothing classy or elegant” respectively). Similarly, the humorous effects of a joke may depend mainly on the adjustment of conceptual information attached to the ad hoc concepts communicated and not on the processing of the typical concepts encoded by some word(s) in the utterance. Some examples are listed in (14)-(17):

(14) ¿Qué le dice un café al azúcar?
   -Mi vida sería amarga sin ti.
(15) -¿Qué tal tu hija aprendiendo piano?
   -¡Uy!, tiene los dedos como relámpagos.
   -¿Qué..., ¿muy rápidos?
   -No, que no se sabe dónde van a caer.
(16) Esto era un hombre tan borracho que lo llamaban genio, porque cuando alguien abría una botella él aparecía.
(17) Mi hermano siempre que va a cualquier lugar tiene una acogida muy calurosa.
   - Debe de ser muy popular...
   - No, es bombero.

Adjusting the encoded concept into the ad hoc communicated concept often entails an
assessment of the encyclopedic features attached to this concept and select or refine some of these features while discarding others. In (14), an example that can also be included in the strategy of “implicated as explicit” (see below), the typical assessment of the encyclopedic features of “amarga” (bitter) in order to turn the encoded concept into a metaphoric one is reversed and turned literal. In (15), the question about why the girl’s fingers may be labelled “como relámpagos” (like lightnings), is a question about which features of lightnings can be adjusted and metaphorically applied to a person. In (16) the reader does not know which feature attached to the encoded concept of “genio” (genie) can be applied to a drunkard until the humorist explains it and generates the humorous effect. Finally, in (17) there is another example of “metaphoric turned explicit”, in which the typical assessment and adjustment of the features attached to the concept “calurosa” (warm) in order to refer metaphorically to a welcome is invalidated and the reader is forced to re-interpret the concept as explicit.

(d) Sub-sentential utterances. Speakers can communicate their thoughts in an explicit or implicit (or implicated) way, but they also have to make choices concerning how explicit and/or implicit they want their utterances to be. In general, the more information is coded, the more explicit the utterance is. For instance, all the utterances in (18) communicate the same interpretation, but the utterances become less explicit as we go down in the examples:

(18) a. I’ve put the book by Larsson on the downstairs bedroom table.
    b. I’ve put the book by Larsson on the table.
    c. I’ve put the book on the table.
    d. I’ve put it on the table.
    e. I’ve put it there.

In these examples, the hearer has to infer the information that is left implicit (i.e.non-coded), specifically where the table is (18b), plus who wrote the book (18c), the referent of “it” (18d), and the referent of “there” (18e). Even though we do not expect speakers to be fully explicit when they talk (they would sound awkward), it is undeniable that sub-sentential utterances demand more cognitive resources. Of course, it comes as no surprise that elided information can be exploited with humorous purposes. An example is found in a dialogue from the TV series Frasier (19), in which the sub-sentential utterance “shameless” is open to several interpretations (20a and 20b):

(19) Frasier: I’ve tried dealing with this problem on my own but Bulldog insists on interrupting my show with his foolish pranks.
    Kate: I heard.
    Frasier: Yes, well I did not spend eight gruelling years at Harvard to be mocked by that juvenile jackass!
    Kate: Shameless!
    Frasier: Oh, he's beyond shameless!
    Kate: I’m talking about the way you manage to get Harvard into every conversation.

(20) a. Bulldog’s behaviour is shameless.
    b. Boasting about having studied in Harvard is shameless.

And everyday jokes also exploit the need to infer elided propositional information in sub-sentential utterances, as in the utterances “¿y tú?” (and you?) in (21), with the two interpretations
(22a) and (22b); and “de 2 a 3 años” (between 2 and 3 years) in (23), with the two interpretations (24a) and (24b):

(21) Entre dos amigos:
- Oye… yo no me acostaste con mi mujer antes de casarme? ¿y tú?
- Yo sí, pero no sabía que se iba a casar contigo...

(22) a. And you… slept with your wife before getting married?
   b. And you… slept with my wife before getting married?

(23) Manolito le dice a Juan: “He acabado un puzzle en un tiempo record, más rápido de lo que decía en la caja”.
- ¿De cuántas piezas era?
- De 22.
- ¿Cuánto tardaste?
- 11 meses.
- ¿Tanto en acabar un puzzle de 22 piezas?
- ¡Oye!, ¡que en la caja ponía “de 2 a 3 años”!

(24) a. This puzzle can be used by children aged between 2 and 3.
   b. This puzzle may take between 2 and 3 years to complete.

(e) Syntactic organisation. Sometimes the same string of words uttered encodes two different sentences that lead to two different logical forms and hence to two different explicit interpretations. This is a humorous strategy that can be found frequently in English jokes, a type of humour that is very prone to playing with word senses and sentential organisation, as in (25), with the two possible logical forms quoted in (26), one very likely but eventually incorrect, and one very unlikely but actually intended by the humorist:

(25) 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?”.

(26) a. More likely interpretation but eventually incorrect:
   [May I] [try on] [that dress (which is) in the shop window?].
   b. More unlikely interpretation but eventually correct:
   [May I] [try on] [that dress] [in the shop window?].

In Spanish, the typical strategy concerning logical forms and sentential organisation is to pronounce words in sequence which can also be interpreted as a single word. This is the case, for instance, of “gelatina” vs. “g latina” in (27), “no espera” vs. “no es pera” in (28), and “condón” vs. “con don” in (29):

(27) -¿Cual es la letra que se come?
   -La g latina.

(28) ¿En qué se diferencia una pera de un tren?
-En que la pera es pera y el tren no espera.

(29) Hola, ¿me da un preservativo?
-Perdone, pero aquí decimos condón.
-De acuerdo, pues déme un “don preservativo”.

(f) Polysemy. In both Spanish and English, polysemy provides a good source of humorous effects. In this case the humorist ends up foregrounding one of the senses of a word as the intended one. This sense is less relevant than the one that the hearers have chosen in their relevance-seeking inferential activity and, consequently, they had not even noticed that a possible second sense existed until the humorist makes them discard the relevant sense and opt for the unlikely one. Consider the following jokes:

(30) ¿Qué le dijo una impresora a otra impresora?
-¿Esa hoja es tuya o es impresión mía?

(31) -¡Doctor! ¿Cómo ha ido el parto?
-Bien, pero hemos tenido que ponerle oxígeno.
-¡Oh! ¡Qué pena! ¡Con lo me hubiera gustado ponerle Mariano!

(32) Tarzán y Fidel Castro se encuentran en la selva, y Tarzán dice:
“Yo Tarzán”.
Y Fidel: “Yo Castro”.
Y Tarzán salió corriendo.

(33) Dos tipos suben a un ascensor y uno le dice al otro:
-¿Qué piso?
-Mi PIE idiota.

In (30), the whole sentence containing “impresión” makes the sense “impression” the most likely one, but the context of printing also foregrounds “printout” as a possible sense. The hearer is forced to entertain both senses of “impresión” simultaneously. In (31), the most effort-relieving interpretation of “ponerle oxígeno” is “to put oxygen into a patient”. The hearer will not consider the possibility that the phrase can also mean “to name a person oxygen”, a possible sense but very unlikely in terms of relevance. In (32) the reader is forced to reject the very accessible and easy-to-process meaning of Castro as a proper noun, and replace it with the first person of the verb “castrar” (castrate). Finally, in (33) there is a sub-sentential utterance, “¿qué piso?” which, in the context of being inside a lift, immediately leads to the interpretation “¿a qué piso va?” (which floor are you going to?), but again the humorist forces the hearer to discard this relevant sense and opt for a more unlikely but still possible interpretation: “¿qué estoy pisando?” (what am I treading on?).

(g) Reference assignment. Part of the inferential steps that turn the sentence (processed initially as a logical form) into a fully contextualised proposition is reference assignment, a typical feature of indexicals such as pronouns, which are devoid of meaning unless context aids in the identification of the intended referent. Jokes can also exploit the need to find a referent to certain words, and the strategy by the humorist is the same: to invalidate a referent which is very relevant in the current context of interpretation and replace it with a more unlikely referent that is, in theory, possible but that the hearer could not have detected in his/her search for relevance. This is the case of competing referents for “¿cómo…” (how…) in (34). But, alternatively, the humour may lie simply in the actual identification of the referent, without competing referents. This is what happens with “la tuya” (yours) in joke (35) and “eso” (that) in (36):
-¿Cómo ha encontrado el señor el bistec?
-¡De milagro!, oiga, ¡de milagro!

Dos amigos charlando.
-¿Sabes? Me gustan todas las mujeres menos la mía.
-A mi me pasa lo mismo: Me gustan todas las mujeres menos la tuya.

A la mañana siguiente de la noche de bodas:
-Juan... ¿Por qué no haces café? ¿O eso tampoco lo sabes hacer?

3.3.2. Derivación de implicadas conclusiones o implicaturas

A veces el punto principal de un chiste no está en alguna manipulación de interpretaciones explícitas sino, en vez de ello, en la cantidad de asunciones contextuales que debe retomar el oyente en el contexto para entender el chiste. Algunas de estas asunciones son fuertes, en el sentido de que son esperadas, respaldadas por el hablante y absolutamente necesarias para obtener la interpretación implicada correcta, mientras que en otras ocasiones estas asunciones son débiles, responsabilidad del oyente y, en mayor o menor grado, impredecibles.

Por ejemplo, el chiste en (37) es humorístico solo si el oyente puede retomar del contexto varias asunciones y concluir implicaturas como las listadas en (38):

(38) A mujer en la cama con un hombre. La mujer recibe el teléfono.
-Yes darling... No problem... OK... I'll see you later.
-The man asks: “Who was that?”
-It was my husband. He’s going to come home very late tonight because he is in an important meeting with you.

(39) a. The man and the woman that are in bed are lovers.
b. The woman’s husband has a lover.
c. She knows that her husband has a lover.
d. Her lover and her husband know each other.
e. Her husband does not know that this man is his wife’s lover.

3.3.3. Jugar con interpretaciones explícitas e implicadas de la misma broma

Un enunciado puede tener tanto una interpretación explícita como una interpretación implicada, accedidas por el oyente mediante un ajuste paralelo mutuo con la información contextual. Un ejemplo es la respuesta en (40) con la interpretación explícita (41) y la interpretación implicada (implicatura) en (43) obtenida con el apoyo de la información contextual (42):

(40) A: Where is Peter?
B: There is a yellow BMW parked outside Sue’s.
(41) Explicit: “There is a car of the BMW brand parked outside Sue’s house”.
(42) Context: Peter owns a yellow BMW.
(43) Implicated: Peter is probably at Sue’s.

Jodłowiec (2008) subraya la importancia de implicaturas en la interpretación de chistes, especialmente las débiles, parcialmente impredecibles. Propone el término cognitive overload para el vasto array de asunciones débilmente comunicadas por un chiste, algunas (pero no todas) de las cuales llegan al estatus de asunciones enteramente entretenidas.

4 Jodłowiec (2008) underlines the importance of implicatures in the interpretation of jokes, especially weak, partly unpredictable implications. She proposes the term cognitive overload for the vast array of weakly communicated assumptions by a joke, some (but not all) of which reach a status of fully-fledged entertained assumptions.
Very often, though, the joke only has one interpretation, either an explicit or an implicit one, and one of them is more likely to be picked up as consistent with the principle of relevance\(^5\) (highest cognitive effects in exchange for the least mental effort). Predictably, the humorist forces a reinterpretation of the accessible explicit interpretation as implicated or vice versa. An example of the former is quoted in (44) below:

(44) Este es un hombre que entra a una tienda de deportes y le pregunta al dependiente:
-Perdone, pero ¿usted tiene pelotas para jugar al tenis?
-¡Sí, claro.
-¡Pues entonces mañana a las 10.

In this joke, the information already stored in the hearer’s short memory from the preceding text (the sports shop, the shop-keeper…) makes the explicit interpretation of the phrase “tener pelotas” (to have balls) the most accessible and relevant. However, in the last utterance the humorist forces a re-interpretation of the phrase as idiomatic (to have the guts to do something) and implicated and forces its selection by the hearer, who will be willing to do so under the expectation of being amused.

The opposite strategy, to turn a typically implicated interpretation into an explicit one is much more frequent and normally based on very accessible metaphoric or idiomatic meanings of phrases that are re-interpreted as literal. Alternatively, the humorist may force the hearer to entertain both interpretations, explicit and implicated, simultaneously as a form of humour-generating incongruity. Consider these examples:

(45) ¿Por qué las gallinas quieren tanto a sus pollitos?
-¡Porque les costó un huevo tenerlos.
(46) ¿Qué dice un kamikaze?
-¡Yo sí que me mato trabajando.
(47) Dos amigos en la ópera:
-¡Este sí es un cantante de primera fila!
-¡Estoy de acuerdo! ¡En la segunda fila no se le oye!
(48) La profesora a Jaime: ¿Profesión de tus padres?
-Mi padre es cura y mi madre es monja.
-¡Ah! ¿colgaron los hábitos?
-No, sólo se los remangaron un poquito.

In (45) the humorist makes the hearer entertain both interpretations of “costar un huevo”. The implicated interpretation of the phrase as an idiom is the most likely one (to cost a lot) but the explicit one (to cost one egg) is also made accessible by the connoted linguistic context of the joke (hens, eggs). In (46), the sentence “me mato trabajando” has a typical idiomatic interpretation (I work a lot) but in the context of kamikazes, who literally killed themselves for

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\(^5\) Specifically, the communicative principle of relevance: “Every act of overt communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance. When this principle is satisfied (normally, any time anybody speaks to us), addressees undertake an interpretive task which aims at selecting the most appropriate interpretation from the range of interpretations that the utterance (or text) has in the current context. A stimulus has optimal relevance when two conditions are fulfilled. (a) it is relevant enough to be worth the audience’s processing effort; and (b) it is the most relevant one compatible with a communicator’s abilities and preferences.”
the sake of war, an explicit interpretation is also possible and entertained simultaneously. The same applies to “de primera fila” in (47), which in the context of singing typically leads to an idiomatic interpretation (a highly talented singer) but the last sentence forces a literal interpretation of this phrase (of the first row), implicating that the singer is so bad that he cannot be heard beyond the first row of seats. Finally, in (48) the idiom “colgar los hábitos” (to renounce one’s vows) is the only possible (and accessible) explanation of the boy having a priest and a nun as parents, but the last part of the joke forces a possible but highly unlikely explicit interpretation of the idiom as “to roll up one’s clothes in order to have sex”.

3.4. Based on social and cultural assumptions stored in the hearer’s encyclopedic information

In the previous headings the intended humorous effects are based on the inferential steps that the hearer has to make in order to turn the words of the joke (its logical form) into a valid interpretation. This is, no doubt, one of the most common forms of joke design. There is, however, an alternative route to generating humour, this time beyond the actual interpretation of the joke and into a more culture- or society-centred approach. In short, the humorist can play with the hearer’s background knowledge on stereotypical information concerning cultural or social qualities such as features of their community, sex roles, racial relationships, etc. Very often, this strategy entails a strengthening of social stereotypes, even if the hearer does not individually support this stereotypical information.

An example is stand-up comedy performances based on monologues by a person on a stage (cf. Yus, 2002, 2004, 2005). They are not inherently humorous, but the way that the comedian manages to stir the audience with a reinforcement or challenge of stereotypes generates humour in the venue. Indeed, the comedian’s monologues address a number of social issues as stereotypical, but they can also aim at unfolding cultural aspects which were unknown, not fully understood or previously undetected by the audience. The eventual improvement in the audience’s representation of the world makes the comedian’s words highly relevant. For instance, a very relevant aim of human cognition is to erase inconsistencies in their understanding of the surrounding world, and the comedian’s wit and observation of the world provides a source for an adequate erasure of these inconsistencies, as in the following part of a monologue from the TV program El Club de la Comedia (cf. Yus, 2004):

(49) Tú estás por la noche en la cama y oyes un ruido extraño, ¿y qué haces? ¡Te tapas con la sábana! ¡Muy bien! ¿Qué pasa, que la sábana es antibalas? ¿Que si viene un malo con un cuchillo no va a poder atravesarla, se le va a doblar la hoja? ¡Hombre, por favor! [...] ¿Y qué pasa si vas por la calle y de pronto ves a alguien y piensas que te va a atracar? Pues te cambias de acera. Seguro que si es un atracador, pensará: “Vaya, otro que se me ha cruzado de acera, ¡qué nochecita llevo!” (from “Reacciones estúpidas ante el miedo”).

Not only monologues address social issues, but also short jokes that play with highly stereotypical information. Examples of this information include the following topics:

(a) Sex roles. They are acquired through different stereotyping contexts: one of them is the authority underlying parents’ language. This important source is later complemented with the values acquired at school and through different mass media discourses (literature, film, television, magazines, advertising...) emphasising both the traditional roles of men and women in society,
and over-stressing the importance of physical appearance over personality in women’s lives. The jokes that address sex roles typically derogate women if they are uttered by men and vice versa. Jokes (50)-(51) are examples of derogation of women, while (52) and (53) derogate men:

(50) ¿En qué se diferencia “disolución” de “solución”? “Disolución” es meter a una mujer en una bañera de ácido sulfúrico y “solución” es meterlas a todas.

(51) ¿Por qué las mujeres tienen los pies más cortos que los hombres? Para llegar mejor al fregadero.

(52) ¿Por qué las mujeres son tontas? La respuesta es evidente: Porque Dios las creó a imagen y semejanza del hombre.

(53) ¿Cómo llamarías a un hombre que sólo tiene medio cerebro? “Bien dotado”.

(b) Race relations. Racial stereotypes are also a fertile source of jokes, especially in countries in which there is a lot of racial minorities and the “dominant” race rejects them. Jokes concerning race relations are often crude and highly derogatory, as the examples listed below show:

(54) Va un tío en un Porche a 200 y de pronto se le cruza un negro en la carretera, el tío va y lo atropella. El negro sale volando y aterriza en el suelo. El del coche frena como puede y sale a ver que le ha pasado al negro.

Negro: ¿Estás ciego o qué?
Conductor: ¿Ciego? ¡Que va! ¡Si te he dado de lleno!

(55) Si tiran a una mujer blanca y a una negra desde un edificio: ¿Quién tarda más en caer?
La negra porque va limpiando los cristales...

(56) Dígame, oficial: ¿Usted no estaba cuando el acusado le pegaba a este pobre hombre?
-Sí que estaba, señor Juez.
-¿Y por qué no intervino?
-¿Y por qué no intervino?
-¿Y por qué no intervino?

(c) Jobs and professions. These are also filled with stereotypes that humorists can exploit in their jokes. Some jobs are more prone to obtaining humorous connotations, especially if society as a whole does not like those who hold this profession. This is the case of lawyers:

(57) ¿Qué es lo que no tienes cuando ves a un abogado cubierto de arena hasta el cuello?
-Suficiente arena.

(58) ¿Cómo se sabe que un abogado está mintiendo?
-¿Y por qué no intervino?
-¿Y por qué no intervino?

In Spanish, a particularly frequent source of job-connotated jokes is the convention “¿Cuál es el colmo de…?” (what is the last straw of…?), which stresses some stereotypical feature of a particular job, often with hardly any logical relationship to it, as in (59)-(61):

(59) ¿Cuál es el colmo de un jardinero?
Que su novia se llame Rosa y lo deje plantado.

(60) ¿Cuál es el colmo de un bombero?
Tener una esposa ardiente.

(61) ¿Cuál es el colmo de un electricista?
Que su esposa se llame Luz y sus hijos le sigan la corriente.

(d) Connoted country or place. Finally, another source of stereotype-based jokes is to exploit some archetypal quality of certain connoted places, regions or countries (normally labelling people from these places as ignorant). Some examples include the joke (62) on Lepe, (63) on Ethiopia, (64) on people form the island of Gomera, and (65) on Catalan people:

(62) ¿Por qué los de Lepe ponen las patatas en la ventana?
    Porque hace un frío que pela...
(63) ¿Qué diferencia hay entre un ascensor de Etiopía y un ascensor normal?
    En que en el normal pone “4 PERSONAS, 300 KILOS” y en el de Etiopía pone “300 PERSONAS, 4 KILOS”.
(64) ¿Por qué los gomeros, cuando entran en el Corte Inglés, lo hacen de puntillas?
    Porque en la entrada hay un cartel que dice: “No se admiten talones”.
(65) Entre dos catalanes:
    -¿Sabes por qué la serpiente le dio la manzana a Eva?
    -Porque no pudo vendérsela.

3.5. Concluding remarks

Sperber and Wilson (2002: 14-15) claim that human beings are equipped with a biology rooted cognitive 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).

As the taxonomy of jokes presented in this article shows, it can be stated that humorists design their humorous discourses by resorting to this mind-reading ability and hence predict that certain interpretations of parts of the jokes will be more relevant than others and that certain assumptions will inevitably be entertained by the hearer during comprehension. The prediction and manipulation of inferential steps, as predicted by relevance theory, secures the desired humorous outcome.

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