



THE COMMUNICATIVE VALUE OF VERBAL HUMOUR

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Abstract

The present paper explores the communicative value of verbal humour in its two major constituents: conversational humour and jokes. In our analysis of the interplay between the serious mode and the humorous one, we have tried to highlight the variety of functions that humour assumes in a serious communicative process by focusing on three basic functions: the lubricant, the abrasive and the coping function in occupational and educational contexts. In our analysis of jokes as the second constituent of verbal humour, we have tried to explore the information-conveying aspect of jokes, the type of jokes which are loaded with a certain piece of implicit or explicit information which renders their interpretative task problematic in case the hearer does not manage to identify this piece of information, hence the failure of the interpretative process. Our work has relevant implications for the general theory of humour and communication as well as applications to inspire professionals in occupational and educational settings.

Key Words: Verbal humour, conversational humour, jokes, communicative value, informativeness, interpretation problems.

1– Introduction

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, given the inevitable interactive coexistence between the serious mode and the humorous mode of communication, we will try to display the variety of functions that humour assumes in a serious communicative process by analyzing three basic functions: the lubricant function, the abrasive function, and the coping function in conversational, occupational and educational contexts. Second, basing our analysis on a content-based approach to humour, namely the information-conveying aspect of jokes, we will try to explore how jokes, apart from their entertaining function, can have an informative function as when they are loaded with a piece of information, whether personal, socio-cultural, political or historical about people, their social reality, their beliefs, interests, attitudes and perceptions. However, the interpretative process of these jokes can be problematic and lead to communicative

breakdown when this conveyed piece of information, be it implicit or explicit, is not identified by the hearer who fails to understand and appreciate the joke because he lacks the type of required background knowledge. The implications of the communicative value of humour are relevant to the continuous efforts being made to the development of a general theory of humour and a fully-fledged theory of communication. Our analysis of the various types of humour in interactional contexts provides an interesting source of inspiration for practitioners in the educational and occupational settings. It should be noted that our study focuses on jokes and conversational humour as being the two major components of verbal humour following the dichotomization of Dynel (2009).

2- Humour and Human Communication

Human capacity for humour seems to be genuinely universal. No culture has been reported to lack this capacity. This is aptly expressed by Apte (1983: 7) when he says:

“Not only does humour occur in all human cultures, it also pervades all aspects of human behaviour, thinking, and socio-cultural reality, it occurs in an infinite variety of forms and uses varied modalities”.

It has, however, been reported that the means of expressing humour, the kind of stimuli which are potentially humorous, and the significance attached to the possession of “a sense of humour” all vary from one culture to another. In some societies, like the British one, for example, *“There are strong cultural sanctions for those lacking a demonstrable capacity for humour, and humour itself is valued as a medium of communication and a lubricant for social interaction” (Husband 1988: 149)*

For British people, then, part of one’s communicative competence is one’s capacity to use humour either as an end in itself or as an activator of social interaction. The implications of this for cross-cultural communication are evident. A foreigner who lacks the skill of humour as a communicative tool is likely to cause communicative problems and to be negatively evaluated once involved in a conversational encounter with British people.

Because it pervades the social fabric of most societies, humour takes different forms and functions, hence its complexity. This complexity of humour has challenged the multidisciplinary efforts of many scholars who have tried to account for its nature and function in human life and communication. According to Martineau (1972: 124),

“As a basic medium of communication, humour assumes many forms and its social functions become complex under the influence of other social processes and existing social structures”

The communicative function of humour, then, derives from the variety of functions it plays in society. These functions of humour are so integrated in the socio-cultural reality of people that any attempt at their delineation is forced to involve an understanding of the social structural characteristics of the community in general and the features of the actual situation in particular.

3- Functions of humour in serious communication

Humour has a double though quite paradoxical function in a communicative process. It may serve as a “lubricant” or as an “abrasive”, to use Martineau’s comprehensive terms (Janes & Olson, 2015)

3.1- *The lubricant function of humour:*

According to Martineau (1972: 103),

“Humour is intended to initiate social interaction and to keep the machinery of interaction operating freely and smoothly”,

Hence, the lubricant function of humour.

First, humour helps in initiating communicative contact especially in those awkward situations where strangers happen to meet but are not sure of how to break the unbearable moments of silence in order to establish a communicative link with each other. In this respect, Martineau (1972: 116) states that *“The “little jokes” and humorous banter so often observed in everyday interactions and when first acquaintances are made are ways of revealing friendship, approval and sharing sentiment and relieving a somewhat awkward situation”*.

In the case of the interactions involving first acquaintances, humour may be said to have a phatic function, a label borrowed from Malinowski’s (1930) term “phatic communion” which is the kind of speech that people get involved in not because they want to communicate ideas, but just because they need to establish and maintain communicative contact.

This phatic function of humour is highlighted by Pabel & Pearce (2015) in their study of the case of tourists in Australia who have recourse to joking behaviour in “breaking the ice with strangers” as a communicative tool to initiate social interaction.

Second, humour can be used not only to initiate communicative encounters, but also to facilitate their continuation as when it helps in overcoming certain interactional difficulties and achieving some release from the restrictions of serious discourse (Mulkey 1988: 26). In a conversational encounter, for example, we often use a joke-spontaneous or standard- to help in maintaining the communicative process in the most suitable and satisfactory conditions. Even in the most formal contexts where serious discourse is the prevailing norm, such as in classrooms, parliament meetings, political negotiations, it happens that participants may have recourse to a joke, a humorous remark or a word play as a way of calming down the tenseness of the atmosphere. A teacher may use humour as a technique to ensure his students’ relaxation and allow them a momentary mental break, which is necessary for achieving effective learning. More than this, as teachers we do our best not to lose the line of communication with our students, especially in those “moments of crisis” where we are trying to make a point, but the message happens not to get through. The use of humour may be a helpful adaptive way to overcome such embarrassing situations.

The embarrassment may also take place on the students’ side, pushing them in their turn to opt for a humorous trigger as a remedial tool to overcome such situations.

Chang et.al (2014) analysed the use of humour in early adolescents to surmount various embarrassing situations. They found that the most used humorous techniques were “irony, imitation and metaphor to cope with embarrassing interpersonal conditions”. This shows how humour is a shared human tool between the teacher and the learner. If exploited adequately can enhance the communicative process and solve interactional problems between them. The appropriateness of humour use in the classroom is stressed by Torock et.al (2014) when he says:

“Humour appropriately used has the potential to humanize, illustrate, defuse, encourage, reduce anxiety, and keep people thinking” (Torock 2014: 19).

To facilitate communicative smoothness, humour may also be used as a transitional device to introduce awkward and embarrassing topics. Mulkay (1988: 80) reports how humour assumes this function in communicative encounters among medical staff members and between these and patients in hospital settings. Once some sensitive issues and taboo topics such as “matters related to death, staff competence and indignities to patients” are to be raised, joking provides a useful channel for their covert communication. The humorous mode allows patients “to communicate about forbidden topics in a way which is effective, yet which does not count as genuine contravention of rules” (Mulkay 1988: 80). The patient finds a psychological relief in asking about “the forbidden” without being perceived as a norm-breaker. Note that any overt communication of the “unmentionable” is likely to lead to communicative problems and subsequent negative stereotyping, a situation which may be avoided by the adoption of the humorous mode as a protective device.

Still within the medical context, Heath and Blonder (2003) examined interactive humour generated by Stroke Survivors, their spouses and an interviewer. The data elucidated the subtlety and pervasiveness of humour in the conversation of stroke survivors as a way to talk about disabilities. Moreover, humour was used among the participants as a way of “*re-assuring autonomy and self-esteem and maneuvering social distance by pointing to boundaries and creating, confirming or denying allegiance*” (Heath and Blonder 2003: 104). Humour seems to be very useful for this category of patients because it helps them tolerate the extended recovery period.

In their analysis of the interrelationship of humour and conflict in conversation, Norrick and Spitz (2010) show how humour can provide “a constructive means of attenuating conflict and ending disagreements in conversation” (Norrick and Spitz 2010: 109). Through humour, conflicts can be mitigated and conflict talk can become funny.

The legal context did not escape from humour researchers in their search for the communicative value of humour. Hobbs (2007) for instance demonstrates how humour can be “a potent weapon” in the attorney’s hands in the American legal system and how it is highly appreciated as an effective tool in the lawyer’s persuasive communicative performance whether inside or outside the court. According to Hobbs’ data “*the attorneys use humour aggressively to ridicule the plaintiffs’ claims, depicting them as laughable and unworthy of serious consideration, while placing themselves at the center of a comic performance which allows them to display their linguistic skills*” (Hobbs 2007: 154).

In the same vein as humour helps in initiating a conversational encounter and participates in promoting its continuation, it does also serve to close it. One may use a “little joke” as a way of signalling that the communicative encounter has come to an end. In a classroom situation, a

teacher – for example – may switch from serious discourse (explanation of the lecture) to humorous discourse as a way of marking the end of the lecture. A humorous remark at the end of the lecture is a brief entertainment for the students before leaving the class and a nice way of keeping a good image and impression about the teacher.

3.2- The abrasive function of humour:

Instead of serving as a lubricant, humour can be on the contrary abrasive to a communicative process. Rather than promoting the ongoing of social interaction, humour may impair it as when a joke is misplaced or when it is not interpreted as such. Communication may also break down when a humorous remark or a joke crops up in the conversational flow and is perceived as face-threatening by the recipient, especially if the participants are not well acquainted with each other. Abrasive humour, then, does not preserve the fluidity of social interaction. Instead, it often results in “an interpersonal friction and a juncture in the communication process which may modify the character of the interaction” (Martineau 1972: 103).

In the workplace, Plester and Sayers (2007) analysed the phenomenon of banter and its facilitation of the process of socialization of work group members in IT industry organization. They have found that though banter was welcome among in-group members who were enough socialized, it was “often experienced as painful, exclusionary and even insulting” for members who were not socialized yet. The more the in-group members are socialized and integrated, the more they will be ready to produce and accept banter claims targeting personal characteristics and traits, such as ethnicity, gender, age, height or dress style. Once banter claims are not appreciated, the consequences are undoubtedly negative on the communicative and social interaction among in-group members.

3.3- Humour as a coping mechanism:

In unequal encounters where hierarchy structure is the determinant factor which regulates communication, humour may help in overcoming the incongruities and contradictions caused by inequality in power and which constitute potential sources for communication failure. By doing so, humour helps in maintaining, developing and consolidating the existing social relationships among the different sides of the social hierarchy.

Therefore, in unequal encounters, hierarchy structure can be preserved through humour which may be used by participants as a “coping mechanism” to overcome the contradictions, inconsistencies and ambiguities of the existing social structure. Accordingly, the “unprivileged” manage to “mildly accept” the state of affairs the way it is. The “privileged”, however, find in the use of humour a way of supporting and maintaining the existing social structure, the preservation of which equates the protection and continuation of their interests as power and authority holders. Humour, then, provides an effective means of preserving hierarchy structure without causing any offence. By using humour, the less powerful tends to “accept” what comes from the more powerful, who – in his turn – goes about his duties without raising any tension or causing a confrontation with the less powerful. In this respect, as it is stated by Mulkay (1988: 169) states that

“In situations where there is a formal hierarchy and where proceedings are guided by participants occupying positions of authority, it seems likely that humour will be

employed routinely to support the authority structure, in a way which maintains the dominant social pattern ...”

The dominated side, however, finds in the use of joking behaviour a way of coping with the injustice of established patterns of social life. Moreover, humour allows the "unprivileged" to express their dissatisfaction with the existing reality with all its incongruities without overtly committing oneself since this dissatisfaction is only a routine, transient expression, covering a span of time equal to that of the joking act. More interestingly, the critical view of the reality of things conveyed through the humorous mode is a kind of renewal of a "deterministic acceptance" of this frustrating reality, which again allows the continuation of the social rhythm no matter how unjust it is.

Dealing with a more specific situation, that of occupational settings characterized by hierarchy relationships, Mulkay (1988) presents the case of humour among psychiatric staff and its functional value in senior-junior staff communication in professional meetings. Coser (1960), as reported by Mulkay (1988), explains how humour seems to be one of the effective means of overcoming a recurrent paradoxical communicative situation that senior psychiatrists routinely face when they are addressing their speech to their junior colleagues. In professional meetings, the senior staff have to overcome the delicate situation of a "discursive duality "since they have" to convey reprimand and criticism so that the junior staff might learn-along with support and reassurance so that they might not become unduly discouraged" (Mulkay 1988: 166). This discursive duality is solved by the frequent use of humorous remarks which combine "criticism with support, rejection with acceptance" (Coser 1960: 91 in Mulkay 1988: 166).

The use of humour as a communicative tool in such meetings characterized by inequality in power, allows the psychiatric staff, senior and junior, to maintain good relationships, with the senior's avoidance of offending or discouraging the junior and the latter's acceptance of the critical and corrective comments directed to him/ her, without any feeling of embarrassment or resentment.

Though humour seems to contribute to solving the incongruities of senior – junior communication in meetings, its use is not reciprocal and tends to obey the requirements of the authority structure. In Mulkay's terms:

"Whereas senior staff are particularly likely to direct their humour at junior staff, the latter are strongly inclined to focus their humour on themselves" (Mulkay, 1988 : 168), a situation which can be logically generalized to any communicative encounter where the power relations are not the same. Humour is expected to be unilateral and will be directed down the scale of social hierarchy.

It should be noted, however, that in such occupational settings where there is frequent communication between the senior and the junior, humour-no matter how helpful it may be-has to be dealt with in a very delicate and careful way because it should be performed in such a balanced way as to convey reprimand and criticism on the one hand, and to show support, reassurance and encouragement for the junior psychiatrist who is still in the process of learning and building up his career on the other hand. Any manipulation of humorous discourse which fails to maintain this balance will have negative consequences on the psychology and the social and professional status of the junior psychiatrist. The senior psychiatrist also risks to be judged in negative terms by the members of the staff.

Dealing with humour and leadership style management in New Zealand organizations, Holmes and Marra (2006) explore the leaders' tendency to use humour for the construction of an effective leadership style. It seems that humour is highly valued among leaders as an effective tool to cope with subordinates in terms of communicative and social behaviour. By introducing humour in his leadership style, the leader becomes more creative and innovative and consequently more inspirational. The adoption of humour makes his leadership style distinct from the classical, traditional and transactional style which is rather "rule-driven and task-focused", according to Holmes and Marra (2006). Moreover, humour gives more personalization and idiosyncraticization of the leadership style and makes it different from the conventional stereotypical image. Humour, then, helps in bridging the communicative and behavioural gap between the leader and the followers.

In the same respect, Rizzo et.al (2009) analysed the productivity of humour orientation as a managerial trait in work settings and came to the conclusion that "managers who were perceived as higher in humour orientation were viewed as more likeable and more effective in their positions" (Rizzo et.al 2009: 367).

Basing themselves on the importance of humour in leadership, Pundt & Herrman (2015) go even further to the extent of recommending a formal humour training for leaders where affiliative humour based programs can be devised to improve the quality of behavioural and communicative relationships between leaders and followers. This should be accompanied by the avoidance of the abrasive and destructive intrusion of aggressive humour which can deteriorate these relationships.

We would like to suggest that this function of humour may be of some concern to teachers in classroom situations where teaching is based on frequent interaction between the teacher and the student. The discursive duality of humour may be a convenient communicative moderator in teacher-student communication since any critical or corrective message is likely to be welcome by the student the moment he/she feels that the teacher's negative comment is not void of encouragement and support.

However, the choice of using humour as a coping mechanism for classroom communication depends on the extent to which the teacher believes in the functional value of pedagogically-oriented humour in classroom communication and its effectiveness in overcoming certain interactional difficulties we often face as teachers. Unfortunately, it is not only a matter of belief or conviction. More practically, it is also a matter of skill. Not any teacher can overcome these embarrassing situations by exploiting humour as a problem-solving technique since he/she needs to have a sense of humour in the first place. The concept of "sense of humour" is not clear-cut, however, and lends itself to various definitions and interpretations as it is acknowledged by Martin (1996) who considers this concept as meaning "different things to different people in different contexts" (Martin 1996: 251).

4- The information-conveying function of jokes and problems of interpretation

Besides their entertaining function, jokes can also have an informative function when they include a piece of information, whether personal, socio-cultural, political or historical about people, their social reality, their beliefs, interests, attitudes and perceptions. In trying to account

for the information conveying aspect of jokes, Zhao (1988 : 282) advances the following hypothesis :

“If the hearer knows nothing about the content of the joke but understands it and feels amused by it, then the joke can be seen as conveying some information which the hearer has absorbed in the process of uncoding the joke and which has contributed to the humour experience”

The task of appreciating the joke becomes more difficult for the hearer when the piece of information conveyed by the speaker through the joke is rather implied, and the decoding of the message requires a certain amount of background knowledge basis. According to Zhao (1988 : 282),

“a successful grasp of what a joke contains both explicitly and implicitly, literally and metaphorically, is the preliminary condition for laughing at it”.

If we may consider a joke as a speech act, then this joke can have a "locutionary" function (to use Austin's (1962) terminology) which corresponds to its natural function, namely the entertainment and amusement of people. A category of jokes which exemplifies this locutionary function is often referred to in the literature as "innocent" or "non-substantial" jokes (Zhao 1988 : 220). These are jokes meant basically to entertain and not to convey any specific information either implicitly or explicitly about real life situations.

However, there is another category of jokes whose function goes beyond amusement and entertainment to inform the hearer with a specific message which can take a descriptive form, an expressive form, or an evaluative or critical form. When we hear a joke, sometimes we already know the implied or explicit piece of information and we just appreciate in the joke its entertaining side. In other situations, we hear a joke, but we are not familiar with the piece of information being conveyed through the joke and which contributes to its funniness. If we manage to detect the implied message which activates the humorous effect, then this joke has fulfilled a double function. One is its "locutionary" function which is to make people laugh. The second function is rather "illocutionary" since we learn from the joke a piece of information-implicit or explicit-which contributes to the enrichment of our world knowledge. This type of jokes falls within the category of "substantial" or "tendentious" jokes which are loaded with social, cultural, political, economic and historical information about specific situations, events, communities or individuals. Exploiting Lyons's (1977: 50) terminology, we may say that substantial jokes which have both a locutionary and an illocutionary load can express- in the same way as language does-descriptive information, social information and expressive information besides their primary entertaining function.

In this paper, we are more concerned with the category of “substantial” jokes because their interpretation, understanding and appreciation cross-culturally is more difficult and this is largely due to the dependence of the funniness of the joke on the conveyed piece of information especially if it is implied and has to be worked out by the addressee. How can it be worked out?

This depends on how rich one's world knowledge is and how largely one is acquainted with cross-cultural characteristics involving socio-cultural norms, political and historical events, socio-economic information. In brief, one's positive response to information-conveying jokes depends on how rich is one's encyclopaedic knowledge.

It should be noted with care, however, that the distinction between the category of "innocent" jokes and "substantial" ones is not definitely a clear-cut one mainly in functional terms. Though innocent jokes may not have any informative-illocutionary-function in terms of their semantic content, they may have a social function once we take into consideration the context of their use. Even if they do not include any piece of information to be conveyed to the addressee, they may play a social function in their context of use. One of these social functions that an "innocent" joke can play in a communicative situation is the "phatic" function which is based on Malinowski's (1930) term "phatic communion". The same function is acknowledged by Asimov (1971 : 2) :

"A joke is a social phenomenon... it breaks down reserve, eases tension, establishes contact".

An "innocent" joke can serve to establish social and communicative relations between people who happen, for example, to share companionship in a trip without previous knowledge of each other. In such a context, an innocent joke, being free of any informative implication can contribute to the establishment and maintenance of communicative contact. Besides conventional greetings and ritualized gambits (eg. what a nice weather we are having today !) that we use to initiate a conversation, a straight forward innocent joke empty of interpretative complication (in our case informative implication) can sometimes serve the same purpose.

By drawing this distinction between "Substantial" and "innocent" jokes, we do not hold the claim that people have well established functional as well as contextual criteria for choosing one category rather than the other in a given context. The choice of a joke in a given context whether for a purely entertaining function or for other social, descriptive and expressive ends is a decision taken by the speaker. Since the use of humour in a communicative context is rather a skilful activity, the choice of the "right" joke in the right context depends on how skilful the person in question is. There remains also the task of the receiver whose understanding and appreciation of the joke depends on the extent to which he can detect the implied message or piece of information. The interpretative task becomes more difficult if this implied message is the key element which gives access to the intended interpretation of the joke and subsequently to the enjoyment of its funniness.

The context of the joke is not the only trouble source in the process of its understanding. There are other external factors, a set of contextual rules that contribute to the success or failure of the joking act. According to Fine (1983 :166), joking is not a random activity. Since it is subject to contextual rules, it is rather a strategic activity, that is

"not everyone can joke about all topics in all situations. Joking must be understood in light of the presentation of self that one is displaying in the joke and in light of the expectations of one's audience". (Fine 1983: 166)

One aspect of these contextual conventions of joking is the teller's perception of the joke itself, as a kind of manifestation of the self, a subjective constraint which makes us normally think twice before we joke in a social encounter. The other side of the issue is that your choice of a joke or your choice to joke is also dependent on the expectations of your audience of the kind of joke that may originate from you. This partially explains the intricate relationship between joking and one's individual and social personality. In a joking encounter, communicative problems may

arise from trespassing the expectations that others may have concerning the kind of person you are and the kind of joke predicted from you on the basis of your personality.

Our expectations and perceptions change depending on socio-cultural variables and dimensions. What we normally expect from males would be different from what we expect from females for example in a given communicative context. In brief, the expectation and perception variation is influenced by factors such as age, sex, education, occupation, social class and regional and ethnic identity. As human beings we do not joke randomly. We joke the way we are expected to do and our joking behaviour is as much important as our serious behaviour since our image, whether personal, social, ethnic or cultural, is at play in both cases and sometimes a misuse of humour can be socially and relationally costly.

In the next sections, we will provide some examples of substantial jokes and their information-conveying aspect. By analysing these jokes we will try to show how the interpretative process of jokes can be either successful or unsuccessful and to illustrate how communication breakdown occurs in joke-telling and the kind of requirements needed for understanding and appreciating a substantial joke. The analysis of these jokes will also help us in understanding why we so often hold certain stereotypical judgements about the humour of other people as being, for example, dull, banal, stupid and not funny. Such judgements, which may be due to one's unawareness of the cultural specificity of humour, partially explain why we often make the swift conclusion that our humour is the "best".

4.1- Descriptive information

4.1.1 - Socio-economic information

Dolitsky (1982:45) provides the following example –joke:

Joke 1 - [A man goes into a butcher shop and asks if they have any meat that day, the butcher replies "yes sir"]

The appreciation of this joke depends definitely on a pre-requisite knowledge of where such a story takes place. If the listener/reader does not know in advance that this story takes place in Poland which is known for shortage in meat, then he/she will not see any humour in the joke. This is simply because we do not normally ask whether there is meat or not once in a butcher's. The humour arises in this narrative joke from the presentation of a schema or script (a butcher with the possibility of not having meat) which contradicts and goes against our expectations which represent a schema/ script of a different type (namely, whenever there is a butcher's shop open, there is meat). The "where" of the narrative joke represents an essential background information since without it the reader/ listener cannot envisage a schema-conflict (Norrick 1984, 1986) which is in this case a juxtaposition of two frames of reference or schemas or scripts: one which we know and are familiar with, so we take it for granted. The second script/schema is presented by the joke, but it is unusual and unexpected since it represents an exception to what we are used to. The juxtaposition of the opposed scripts is what creates an incongruity whose resolution on the part of the hearer makes him enjoy the funniness of the joke. The socio-economic information about Poland which is implied here is the shortage in meat and it stands as a "block element" in the interpretation of the joke. If one is familiar with the socio-economic situation of Poland and knows that the joke concerns the Polish society, one will certainly appreciate the joke.

For Moroccans, as an instance, this joke is not considered as such because its content states the obvious and does not present any juxtaposition of scripts that can cause an incongruity whose resolution may result in laughter. Going to the butcher, asking for meat and receiving a positive answer, does not seem to evoke any opposition based on a socio-economic background knowledge of Moroccans. For Moroccans, to ask for meat once at the butcher's seems to be a redundant question because normally if the butcher's is open, there is meat; otherwise, it would be closed.

It seems, then, that if one is not equipped with the background knowledge necessary for the full understanding and appreciation of a joke, the joke may fall aflat or be misinterpreted since it is the outproduct of its socio-cultural, economic and political milieu.

Joke 2 - [Ah ! Moscou ! dit miss France qui revient de Russie. Quelle ville étonnante !je marchais dans la rue, toute nue, avec seulement mes chaussures. Et tout le monde me regardait les pieds!]

The funniness of the joke is based on an implicit socio-economic piece of information which alludes to an economic strategy adopted for a long time by the Russian communist government. This economic strategy protects and encourages local products by forbidding the import of foreign products, especially those of the capitalistic western countries. The joke pictures in a very vivid way Russians' frustration and their desire and astonishment for foreign products, a desire that overrides the sexual one. Without being aware and acquainted with this socio-economic piece of information, the interpretation of the joke and the perception of its funniness is almost impossible.

4.1.2 - Socio-cultural information: cultural stereotypes and social diseases

Jokes may convey some social information about a person, a group of people, a community, a historical period or a social phenomenon. This piece of information is either presented to us explicitly or may be implied. One way in which jokes can convey social information is when they stipulate some cultural stereotypes which are held among people either intra-culturally or cross-culturally. Let us consider the following joke (Zhao 1988: 285) which illustrates the socio-cultural informative function of humour.

Joke 3 - [A patient in the hospital is offered a choice of two kinds of brain transplant. "We have Jewish brains "he was told" at \$ 5,000 and polish brains at \$10,000".

"How come the Polish brains are twice as much as the Jewish brains?" he asks in amazement.

"well, Sir the Polish brains are brand-new. They have never been used"]

The funniness of this joke is based on the opposition of two explicit and common standard scripts in the European community in general and the British society in particular, namely the script of dumbness in contrast with the script of smartness. These two scripts are the key to the understanding and appreciation of this joke and they represent the socio-cultural type of information which is conveyed in this joke. In order to perceive the funniness of this joke, the

addressee is required to process the information in a sequence that is schematically represented by Zhao (1988 : 285) as follows :

Jewish brain, cheap, much used → smart.

Polish brain, expensive, never used → dumb.

In other words, because the Jewish brain is smart, it is much used and since it is much used, it is cheap and can be sold as a second hand product. Since the Polish brain is dumb, it is never used, it still keeps its newness, hence its expensive value. The schematic representation summarizes the informative aspect of the joke, namely how the Jews and the Poles are generally perceived stereotypically in the world of humour. According to Zhao (1988: 285),

“Until one’s mind has processed these pieces of information in the joke and grasped the implied messages pointed to by the two arrows one may not be able to find it funny”.

The above joke reveals stereotypical information about the Jews and the Poles which is implicitly conveyed. If the hearer of the joke does not recognize the implied informative message, the interpretation of the joke may not be possible.

Jokes do also represent an effective means of presenting a social problem that people suffer from. Consider the following Moroccan joke:

Joke 4 - [hada waħad l?almani Ćandu ši maraD xaTir fdmaõu. gallu TTbib lħall lwaħid baš tabra huwwa nbddlu lak dmaõk bdmaõ ši waħad jkun Ćad mat. Bdaw tajsajnu whuwwa jmut waħad lmaõribi qbTu lmaõribi ħjjdu lu dmaõu wdaruh ll?almani. Öir hadak lĆalmani faq mal lbanž whuwwa jnoD tajõwwat waš wSal paspur lĆamala wllalla.]

English version:

4’ - [A German had a fatal disease in his brain. After trying all the possibilities of getting rid of this disease, the doctor confessed that the only remaining chance was to do a brain transplant of somebody who has just died. It happened accidentally that a Moroccan died and his brain was used by the doctor in the brain transplant. The operation was very successful, but as soon as the German regained consciousness, he shouted: "Is my passport ready or not yet ?"].

This joke effectively and adequately conveys- though with critical intentions – a "descriptive" information (to use Lyons’s term (1977 :50)) about the Moroccan society, namely how difficult it is or it was to get a passport, a frustrating situation which may even be a fatal cause of death. Assuming the "logic" of humorous discourse, even if the person in question is given another chance to live again, the first thing he asks about is whether his passport is ready or not. This person represents a multitude of other people who suffer from the same problem since their whole life is based on that passport. To get a passport in a given time in Morocco was a real key to getting a job abroad, especially in European countries and in particular France. Note that a foreigner who is not acquainted with the socio-economic situation in Morocco and the significance attached to the notion of "passport" may not be able to understand the humour

involved in it. The German is reborn again with a Moroccan brain which still instores the social problems of a Moroccan life and which may be totally alien to the Germans. Unless one is equipped with a descriptive social information of what a passport means in the Moroccan context and with what it is associated, one may not be entitled to appreciate the joke and enjoy its funniness. Note that the joke could be well-updated by changing “passport” with “visa” since currently it is easy to get a passport but a visa is difficult to obtain for a great majority of people.

Jokes which deal with social problems that people suffer from have a positive function in society since they reveal negative phenomena and social diseases which –once are put to the surface and are circulated – need to be cured as Zhao (1988 : 287) explains :

"These jokes work for the benefit of society by exposing and poking fun at some ugly evil social phenomena detrimental to its health".

4.1.3- Socio-political information

Consider the following joke:

Joke 5 - [Consulted secretly by an Italian peddler who has been having too many children, a doctor recommends the use of condoms, to be put directly on the organ. A long interval passes. Finally, the doctor sees Ginyseppe on the street one day.

"How are things?" He asks significantly.

"Not- a so good" is the answer. "My woman is big again"

"Did you do what I told you with the condom?"

"Yes-a and no. Sure I used it. But I didn't have an organ. So I put it on the piano. But it did not Work"] (Bier 1988: 137).

Apparently, the funniness of the joke originates from the Italian Peddler's interpretation of the Word "organ" as a musical instrument while what the doctor meant was the male sexual organ. The lexical ambiguity of the word "organ" lies at the heart of the joke's funniness.

However, this joke had more significance for the Americans between 1915 and 1925 if we consider its socio-political circumstances. Bier (1988: 127) explains that the joke communicates the Americans' feeling of dissatisfaction with the threatening rising numbers of Italian immigrants, hence their creation of jokes to put them down. The rapid outgrowth of Italian Americans between 1915-1925 was a threatening phenomenon to Americans because this – it was thought – "would transform numbers into significant political as well as economic power in fewer than two generations" (Bier 1988: 137). The Americans were very cautious because the same process of demographic growth of Irish immigrants resulted in the "economic and presidential vindication of the Kennedys" (Bier 1988: 137).

As we read the joke now, we may laugh because of the unexpected misinterpretation of the ambiguous word "organ". Because humour in this joke is linguistically manipulated, the joke is no longer an offspring of its socio-political and historical context.

However, once the joke is put in its socio-political and historical context, it does not only serve as an entertaining entity but does also communicate serious intents and crucial concerns.

The joke falls within the series of put-down jokes which were meant to disparage the Italian Immigrants and to criticize their tendency to have a lot of children.

If we compare this joke (5) with the following one :

Joke 6 - [Five citizens of the Reich sit in a railway room. One sighs, another clasps his head in his hands, a third groans, and a fourth sits with tears streaming down his face. Says the fifth "Be careful gentlemen. It's not wise to discuss politics in public"] . (Benton 1988: 41).

Unlike the previous joke (5), this one obviously does not make use of any linguistic trigger. There is no lexical or syntactic or phonetic ambiguity which activates the funniness of the joke. The contextual background of the joke, however, makes use of a historical information about the political situation during the Nazi reign. This joke is representative of a series of anti-Hitler jokes which are expressive of the miserable conditions of life that people suffered from under Hitler's dictatorship. The joke also reflects how people were "stifled" by the strong censorship on discussing political matters. The oppression of the Nazi system reached a level where even the label "political joke" was changed into a "whisper joke" (Benton 1988: 35).

4.2- Expressive information: communicating the taboo

The expressive function of humour tends to be a manipulation of the individual since the intended message of the joke co-varies with his personal characteristics, aims, motivations, wishes and beliefs. The expressive function of humour, then, provides an outlet for the individual to convey his personal tendencies which may contradict the existing social norms and, therefore, allow him a momentary escape from the force of social constraints. In this section, we will briefly concentrate on the use of humour in communicating the taboo; in particular, we will deal with sexual humour, political humour and religious humour. Before this, we need just to define the phenomenon of taboo. Trudgill (1974: 29) defines taboo as follows :

"Taboo can be characterized as being concerned with behaviour which is believed to be supernaturally forbidden, or regarded as immoral or improper; it deals with behaviour which is prohibited or inhibited in an apparently irrational manner".

Though taboo involves what is forbidden, people still make use of it in their communication. There are even situations where we intend to communicate the "unmentionable": an idea, a feeling or an opinion; yet, we face the problem of how to channel it. Humour seems to be one of the most effective ways of communicating expressive messages which are socially embarrassing, culturally improper, religiously forbidden or politically dangerous. What is taboo tends to be less offensive when it is introduced in a jocular form. Moreover, through humour "human contacts, always problematical, become less fragile" (Martineau 1972: 113). In describing humorous interaction among American Indians, Levine (1969 : 10) Shows how the clown takes the freedom to violate all the social taboos without any feeling of reproach or guilt :

"During certain festivals, the clown violates with impunity nearly every sexual and aggressive taboo, including incest. Participants share this licence with the clown, and free of social constraints in a context of humour and fun, they regress to the most primitive and infantile levels of conduct without anxiety of guilt" (Levine 1969: 10)

In this culture, the taboo can be overtly expressed in humorous interaction. Bateson (1969 : 166) specifies, however, that in most cultures taboo tends to be implied even in humorous communication. According to him, though taboo is universal,

“in all cultures of the world that type of material is likely to be sidetracked into the implicit and to be unnoticed until a joke is completed” (Bateson 1969 : 166).

We will analyse, now, three instances of humour through which taboo is expressed, namely sexual humour, political humour and religious humour. In analysing the communicative function of these types of humour, we will try to demonstrate how humour can be used as a protective communicative device to overcome certain embarrassing situations that we often face in life, and which may be difficult to overcome by the use of the commodities of serious discourse.

4.2.1- Sexual humour

Sexual jokes represent a very good example of taboo material, the circulation of which is restricted to certain situations and contexts of use. According to Zhao (1988: 284),

“It is probably true of most people that it is not appropriate behaviour to tell sexual jokes freely and thoughtlessly in the company of the opposite sex, or of people to whom one is not very close”

However, sexual jokes can sometimes be used as an effective means by men to reach a more personal and intimate relationship with the opposite sex. According to Fine (1983: 167).

“... Shift from an impersonal to a personal relationship can be facilitated through humour. By communicating through sexual humour the man can gauge the woman’s willingness for additional contact without having a direct invitation rejected”.

Sexual humour allows men and women to express their propositions to each other in an indirect and subtle way without facing the embarrassment of a direct and overt statement. If the proposition is rejected, no offense is felt because the part looking for a more personal relationship can always pretend to be only joking, a possibility guaranteed by the elusive and ambiguous nature of humor. Through humor, we can always express a serious intent, but once this serious intent is rejected by the addressee, we still have the possibility of easing the tension by saying "oh, I was just joking. Don't take it seriously". Humour, then, allows the expression of some embarrassing messages in a subtle way that minimizes communicative trouble and subsequent negative effects on the partners' future relationship. Any direct and explicit shift from an impersonal to a more personal relationship may be awkward and blatant enough to impair the communicative process and to make the addressee (male or female) perceive the speaker in a negative way. In such situations, an effective use of humour represents a face-protective device for the speaker from any direct and open rejection on the part of the addressee. From the addressee's perspective, the use of humour leaves enough "margin" to choose either to accept the speaker's proposition and to reject it without being offensive or feeling offended. Joking, then, provides a suitable ground on which embarrassing proposition can be negotiated with a minimum of mutual negative perceptions. This is well summarized in Mulkay's (1988: 82) words:

“Adoption of the humorous mode gives participants a degree of protection against the negative consequences of their potentially deviant actions, and gives recipients a

chance to indicate how far they are willing to cooperate before either party has become seriously involved”.

4.2.2- Political humour

Political jokes are often regarded as an effective means of expressing one’s dissatisfaction-sometimes even rebellion-against the existing ruling system. Through these jokes, people can reveal their positions and opinions about political authorities and criticize their unsatisfactory leadership when other channels are censored. According to Zhao (1988 : 292),

"Jokes are seen to be capable of revealing those personal feelings or sentiments of their tellers in form of expressive information... furthermore, individual’s discontent, anger and wish for changes are announced and hence recorded in form of "social information in jokes.""

One way in which political jokes can be expressive is when they convey one’s rejection of repressive tyrannical systems and reflect how oppression works in totalitarian regimes. During the reign of Nazi Germany, for example, Galnoor (1990 : 227) notes in a book review that political jokes "provided a much needed-outlet for people forced to be silent". Many jokes treated Hitler as an arrogant, cruel and unjust leader. The following joke is an expression of the extent to which German people hated Hitler:

Joke 7 - [Hitler accorde une audience à un ouvrier à Berlin

- Mein Führer, lui dit celui-ci je suis venu solliciter de vous l’autorisation de changer de nom
- Et comment t’appelles-tu ? demande Hitler.
- Je m’appelle Adolf Merde.
- Oh ! Je comprend que ce soit difficile à porter !Et comment voudrais-tu t’appeler.
- Hans Merde...] (Nègre 1973 : 335).

This worker would rather keep the name "Merde" (Shit) than keep the name of the great tyrant and what it stands for.

The general Amine Dada, another well-known tyrant, is the butt of many jokes where his people express their criticism and feeling of resentment towards him and his totalitarian regime. Here is one example :

Joke 8 - [Le général Amine Dada se rend incognito dans un cinéma de Kapuala. Il s’assied au milieu de la foule et dans l’obscurité, personne ne le reconnaît. Sur l’écran passent les actualités, et tout d’un coup, il se voit apparaître, lui-même, dans le film, au balcon de sa résidence entrain de haranguer le peuple. Aussitôt, la salle entière se lève et applaudit. Seul le dictateur reste assis, savourant sa puissance. Alors son voisin se penche vers lui et lui glisse à l’oreille :

- Lève-toi, imbécile la salle est pleine de flics. Tu ne vas pas risquer de te faire fusiller pour ce gros porc !] (Nègre 1973 : 337)

By telling and exchanging these jokes, people find an outlet and a way of communicating their real feelings, positions and opinions. The expressive-including the descriptive – value of political humour is psychologically and socially comforting since it allows people to express something that would otherwise be difficult, perhaps dangerous or even impossible to convey openly in serious communication.

To conclude, it seems that in undemocratic systems where human rights are not respected and censorship is tightly exercised on people's freedom of expression,

"the politically powerless use it [the political joke] as a tribunal through which to pass judgements on society where other ways of doing so are closed to them" (Benton 1988 : 33).

4.2.3- Religious humour

Religious taboo is another element that is often expressed through humour since, as Asimov (1971 : 311) notes :

"In the world of jokes, nothing is sacred – disease, death misfortune, tragedy, disappointment, frustration, grief- least of all, heaven or hell".

Taboo religious jokes may reflect one's weak conviction of certain prevailing religious beliefs and the existence of certain notions such as God, prophets, doomsday, heaven and hell. Since some societies place high restrictions on the contravention of religious norms, humour is often exploited as a protective device "to mock at", "belittle" or "victimize" the sacred such as mocking at God as a weak creature, presenting religious saints involved in some mean abnormal sexual tendencies or reversing the roles of heaven and hell prescribed in the holy books.

5- Conclusion

In trying to explore the communicative value of humour, we have focused on the two major constituents of verbal humour, namely conversational humour and jokes. In the first part of this paper, we have tried to stipulate the variety of roles that humour can assume in its fatal interplay with serious communication by distinguishing between the lubricant, the abrasive, and the copying function. Because of its universality and pervasiveness, humour has proved to have a multitude of communicative functions in conversational encounters in various contexts. Our analysis of some cases basically of occupational and educational settings shows to some extent the value of humour in allowing people in various interactional contexts to cope with the hardness and harshness of certain communicative processes due to certain embarrassing interpersonal, social, cultural, or ethnic conditions and contexts where there is unbalanced distribution of power and authority.

Secondly, we have also tried to explore, through a content – based analysis, the information – conveying aspect of humour, specifically jokes which carry on implicit or explicit piece of personal, social, cultural, political, historical, attitudinal, moral or perceptual information. Thus, these jokes have an informative function added to their entertaining one. However, the informational load of these jokes may represent a problem in their interpretative process once it is not detected or identified by the hearer who fails to understand and appreciate them because he lacks the specific type of required background knowledge.

It is who worth meeting that the present work has both theoretical and practical implications.

First, by showing some of the ways in which humour has a value and a function in interactional contexts, we have made a humble contribution to the development of the theory of humour as it is called for by Norrick (2010) when he says:

“Any complete theory of humour must include its exploitation in and effects on interaction, taking into account such matters as gender, power, solidarity, politeness and identity” (Norrick 2010: 261).

Second, the present work may also have implications for how a general theory of communication should be conceived. Since human daily communication involves an interaction between the serious and humorous modes, a realistic conception of a prospective general theory of communication should take into consideration not only the principles underlying serious communication, but also those which form the basis for humorous communication. Any adequate and comprehensive theory of communication is supposed to account for the various ways people interact with each other through serious or humorous discourse.

Such a view may provide more new insights into certain already defined theoretical notions, such as the notion of “communicative competence”, (Hymes, 1971) which has often been discussed in relation to serious discourse. Given the importance of humorous discourse, its frequency, and the multitude of functions it fulfils in human life and communication, this notion of communicative competence has to be reconstructed to account for the humorous side of communication. Therefore, since the principles underlying these two types of discursive modes have proved to be different, sometimes even opposite, then the notion of communicative competence is expected to be comprehensive enough to include human communicative processes, whether they are serious or humorous. For example, Wolfson’s (1983) notion of “rules of speaking” seems to be a possible suitable frame where some aspects of humorous verbal behaviour can be placed. In the same way as a non-native speaker needs to know “how such speech acts as greetings, compliments, apologies, invitations and complaints are to be given, interpreted and responded to” (Wolfson 1983 : 60), he/she also needs to know how humorous acts (e.g telling jokes) are to be realized, interpreted and responded to. For non-native speakers, the understanding and knowledge of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour- whether in the serious or the humorous mode or in their interaction - is essential if they are to communicate effectively with native speakers of the target-language.

Our analysis of the functional value of humour in serious interactional contexts provides interesting practical insights which can be exploited in occupational and educational contexts. The review of the cases we have displayed may be sources of inspiration for managers and educators to use humour in coping with some of the difficult interactive situations. Embarrassing situations are human and therefore transverse. They occur unavoidably in managerial as well as educational contexts and have to be sorted out with a minimum of professional and relational casualties. In educational settings, humour can help in improving the quality of the communicative environment by reducing anxiety, optimising students’ attention and motivating their ease of participation in classrooms. In medical settings, Humour may be an effective tool to tackle sensitive issues and taboo topics and to create an atmosphere of well-being. In managerial settings, professionals can learn to use humour as a way of overcoming the incongruities, inconsistencies and contradictions of the existing social structure caused by the inequality in power and authority.

The communicative value of humour seems to be so advocated that more and more researchers called for the formalization of humour training and coaching programs for leaders, teachers and doctors who are in search of the improvement of the quality of behavioural and communicative relationships between themselves and respectively their followers, students and patients.

However, whether we are leaders looking for improving our leadership style or we are teachers trying to create a motivating learning environment for our students, the choice of using humour as a coping tool depends largely not only on the leaders' and teachers' belief in the value of humour in the pedagogical management of classroom communication, but also on their capacity and skill in humour performance.

It remains to say finally that though the communicative value of humour seems to be unquestionable, it may still become a double-edged sword in case it is not manipulated

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adequately or not dealt with in a delicate, cautious and careful way.

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