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## BREAKDOWN IN HUMOROUS COMMUNICATION

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### Abstract

The present paper deals with breakdown in humorous communication. It is divided into two main sections. The first section will delineate how the principles underlying humorous communication are different from those activating serious communication. The second section will analyse some of the ways in which miscommunication can take place within the humorous mode at the conversational level. We will particularly concentrate on first the kind of miscommunication originating from the switch from serious to humorous mode; second, the individual variation in marking the boundary between the two discursive modes and third, the misinterpretation of banter claims

**Keyword's:** Breakdown in humorous communication, principles of serious Vs humorous communication, switching modes, individual variation, banter.

### Introduction

Before attempting to delineate the different mechanisms underlying humorous communication, an account of the various ways in which serious communication – in contrast with humorous communication – works is in order. Such an account, we hope, will provide a well-grounded frame for the understanding of humorous communication breakdown. Furthermore, it will shed light on how serious and humorous modes do interact in non-serious communication and how quite often such an interaction triggers some trouble.

### 1- Principles of humorous communication versus serious communication

Humorous communication involves the interplay of the serious and non-serious discursive modes. Indeed competent jokesters tend to switch naturally from one mode to the other. Despite their co-presence in communication, the two modes involve different underlying principles and switching from one mode to the other demands varying interpretative efforts on the part of the audience. Accordingly, any improper use of these two modes in communication will certainly lead to communication breakdown. That such a phenomenon (i.e. misuse of modes) is quite widespread in our daily interaction is corroborated by the not-at-all infrequent question addressed to us by people willing to know what mode of discourse is at use : "Are you serious or are you joking ?". Such a question might be thought of as a request for the establishment of what we may call "discourse anchor", that is a common starting point necessary for communication to proceed successfully. In this respect, knowledge of what constitutes the borderline between

serious and humorous modes is highly required. As a matter of fact, once we enter the realm of humorous discourse, the basic principles underlying serious discourse are suspended. In Mulkay's (1988: 26) terms:

"The basic principles and practises of the humorous mode are the reverse of those operative within serious discourse. Whereas ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretative diversity are often treated as problems during serious discourse, and attempts are regularly made to remove them or to reduce their impact, they are necessary features of the humorous mode" (Mulkay 1988: 26).

As the basic principles of humorous discourse differ from those underlying serious discourse, it is almost a necessity on the part of the audience to recognize which mode is at use in order to guarantee a successful interpretation. While serious discourse requires the avoidance of what is ambiguous, inconsistent, and contradictory – in brief incongruous, humorous discourse is a generator of the same elements which feed, create and activate this mode of discourse. Once the recipient recognizes that the speaker has entered the humorous mode, the interpretative process becomes more flexible and the recipient is ready to accept what goes beyond the usual, normal and real.

According to Mulkay (1988:20),

"When speakers move from the serious mode of discourse to the humorous mode, they are allowed much greater freedom in what they can say. In the realm of humour we can tell of men who walk upside-down, of elephants that breed with fish, and other marvels too numerous to list. These impossibilities are possible because humour is marked off from serious discourse, and because the requirements of acceptable discourse vary from one mode to the other"(Mulkay 1988: 20).

Humorous discourse, then allows the participants a high amount of flexibility and freedom in choosing the content of the joke, for example. The speaker is not constrained by the plausibility's of the real world. He has the possibility of envisaging different realities, of creating different worlds that are not necessarily linked to the real world he shares with other people. The high flexibility of interpretation for the recipient and presentation for the speaker is then due to the fact that the world of humour is richer and more varied than the real world, which is rather limited by "the rules of logic, the expectations of common sense, the laws of science and the demands of propriety" (Mulkay 1988 : 37).

Moreover, humorous communication differs largely from serious communication in the extent to which the recipient, willing to interpret the speaker's message can ask for clarification. In serious discourse, asking for clarification in a conversational encounter, for example, is a way of "chasing" threatening phenomena like ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretative duality. However, these threatening phenomena to successful communication unserious encounters are the basic principles that promote successful humorous communication. Thus, because of the functional importance of ambiguity, paradox, contradiction and inconsistency in the accomplishment of humorous discourse, asking for clarification is made useless or at least irrelevant. Markedly, asking for clarification in serious discourse is a normal procedure:

"In the serious mode, allusive remarks can properly lead to requests for clarification. Implicit meanings can often be made more explicit without the discourse breaking down. Participants can in principle say" I'm sorry. I didn't understand. Could you say that again? » This is much more

difficult, however, within the realm of humour... as we all know, when you have to explain what a joke means, it has failed to work as a joke" (Mulkey 1988 : 29).

In serious discourse, if communication breakdown or misunderstanding is detected, it can be remedied since the recipient can always ask for clarification and meaning can be negotiated by the participants in humorous communication, however, asking for clarification and negotiating meaning can simply destroy the humorous act.

If the two modes of discourse seem to be governed by different- if not opposite-principles, it seems logical to see whether the principles that have been proposed for serious conversational interaction may not hold in humorous interaction. Among these principles is Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and his maxims of conversation. According to Grice, people tend to be cooperative in any communicative encounter by adhering to some maxims of conversation: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. To be cooperative is - among other things - to avoid the complication of the addressee's interpretative process by minimizing ambiguity, vagueness, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretative diversity, and maximizing, instead, clarity, consistency and interpretative unity. Since humorous discourse, as we have already noted, exploits the same phenomena that are rejected or avoided in serious discourse, then Grice's Cooperative Principle seems not to apply to non-serious communicative encounters.

In this respect, some researchers have called for the treatment of humorous discourse as a non-bona-fide communication independent of ordinary discourse. Grice's Cooperative Principle needs to be adapted to the principles underlying humorous communication to yield a set of maxims that can characterize successful communication in a non-serious context. Once the participants get involved in non-bona-fide communication, they can be cooperative by adhering to a set of maxims which are different from those that underpin Grice's Cooperative Principle. In joke telling, for instance, the hearer can be cooperative by not expecting the speaker to tell the truth or to provide sufficient and relevant information. This means that more than one Gricean conversational maxim can be uncooperatively violated and yet the communicative act goes successful. According to Yamaguchi (1988:324).

"True, the conversational maxims are at times uncooperatively violated in jokes, but it does not follow that we need another cooperative principle for joke telling".

Yamaguchi suggests, then, that instead of postulating a different cooperative principle, the same one can be kept with the addition of some constraints that can restrict the uncooperative use of language in humorous discourse. In other words, Grice's Cooperative Principle can be extended to account not only for serious communication, but also for non-serious communication. As the participants move from serious to non-serious communication, the four categories of maxims have to be modified in accordance with the principles that underlie non-serious communication. Marino (1988: 43) gives a tentative reformulation of Grice's maxims in the light of what may constitute a successful humorous act. Considering the joke and the pun as non-serious speech acts, he provides the following conversational maxims that underlie humorous interaction:

- Quantity requires necessary information for the joke, and for a successful pun it yields the realization of the two scripts ;
- Quality requires compatibility with the world of the joke, and for a good pun it requires the evocation of two significant scripts.

- Relation requires saying only what is relevant to the joke, and the two scripts must be linked in an interesting way for a good pun.
- Manner requires telling either the joke or a pun efficiently.

By adhering to these conversational maxims, the speaker can realize a successful humorous act.

Joke telling, then, presupposes a set of conventions and involves an interpretative mechanism if judged from the perspective of serious and ordinary discourse will be considered as deviant and incongruous. Yet, jokes do make sense when we find them funny. The funniness of jokes is basically activated by incongruity which is created by the teller of the joke and has to be resolved by the recipient. Once the incongruity is resolved, the humorous effect is achieved, hence the success of the humorous act. In the serious world, we try our best to channel our communicative acts within the limits of one unitary world which we share in our daily life. However,

"In the realm of humour, we strive to create and convey to others, not the one unitary world, but many possible worlds, each characterized by interpretative duality and contradiction" (Mulkay1988: 35)

Since the perception of incongruity in a given humorous situation (a joke) is vital to the understanding of humour – whether verbal or non- verbal – researchers are supposed to give an exhaustive account of its different facets and realizations in communicative situations. If the perceiver is not able to identify the incongruity in its various forms, he/she will not be in a position to use his/her mental capacities to indulge in the process of incongruity resolution. As it is stated by Dickers and But tram (1990: 61) "Humour may fail to occur because either an incongruity was not perceived or it was perceived but not resolved". But, above all, unless the joke recipient is equipped enough with the necessary relevant knowledge which allows the detection of the incongruity and its resolution, the joke will fall afloat.

Moreover, understanding in humorous communication is much more complicated than in serious discourse. While in serious communication "either the speaker is able to avoid ambiguity or the listener can select the correct and intended script by examining the context", (Davies 1987: 451) in humorous communication, the task of understanding is much more complicated since "clues for searching are frequently withheld or distorted by the speaker, this creating a puzzle for the hearer to resolve..." (Goldstein 1990: 37 – 38). This means that the mental mechanisms which activate the process of interpretation involve more efforts since the difficulty of understanding is consciously manipulated by the initiator of the joke. If we compare an ordinary question to a riddle, the process of responding to each of them is not the same since the humorous riddle would require more mental work before the recipient manages to resolve it.

The task of joke understanding becomes more complicated in cross-cultural communication. According to Hall (1959: 136), since jokes are created out of incongruities, the recipient "has to be almost a native speaker in order to appreciate the full implications of a joke. If he is unable to assess the degree of incongruity, he can't appreciate the joke" (Hall 1959: 136).

## ***2- Miscommunication within the humorous mode: Conversational level.***

A fully-fledged theory of human communication is one that accounts for the mechanisms and principles that govern the communicative process both in serious and non-serious discourse. Though the non- serious side has not been granted its "right" concern on the part of communication researchers, its study can quite ironically shed some light on the mechanisms of

serious interaction, the main focus of these researchers. Pretorius (1990: 273) states that the humorous effects which result from the violation of the conventions and norms of serious discourse may have significant implication for what goes wrong in serious exchanges.

"The line between levity and seriousness is a fine one and examining the humorous effects for contraventions of discourse norms and deviant conversation exchange may help us understand why more serious exchanges so often go awry" (Pretorius 1990 : 273 ).

This statement again underlines the assumption that humour occurrence can be achieved, either intentionally or accidentally, through the violation or deviation from the ordinary discourse norms that characterize serious communication. Pretorius seems to be alluding to the accidental humorous effects that may occur in a communicative situation. However, in our case, we are more concerned with humorous communication where the speaker has the intention to joke and expects the addressee to enter the humorous realm. Our next step is to analyse how communication can fail in humorous interaction, especially in conversational encounters.

### **2-1 Switch from serious to humorous mode.**

The first type of misunderstanding that may take place is when the recipient is unaware of the speaker's passage from the serious mode to the humorous mode. According to Malay (1988: 46),

"Since the principles and practises of humorous and serious discourse are radically different, failure by participants to realize that their partners have switched from one mode to the other is likely to generate misunderstanding, confusion and inappropriate responses".

Therefore, one of the main requirements for communicating effectively in a social encounter is the participants' need to know which discursive mode they are involved in. If the speaker decides to switch from the serious mode to the humorous one, he/she is required to inform the addressee by using a cue that signals this switch.

### **2-2 Individual variation in marking the boundary between serious and humorous discourse.**

A related type of misunderstanding may be due to an individual variation at where to draw a common line between serious and humorous discourse (Mulkay 1988: 71). The boundary between serious discourse and humorous discourse is not a single and fixed one, since in any interaction participants can assume different lines that separate the two discursive modes. The point is well expressed by Mulkay (1988: 71):

"It seems that different participants can draw that line quite differently. What one participant claims to be merely playful embellishment or "exaggeration for comic effect", another may take it to be thinly disguised reality work".

It should be noted, however, that when humour is exploited to transmit serious intents, the line of demarcation between serious discourse and humorous discourse is agreed upon so long as the addressee does not show any sign of rejection of the disguised serious intent. Once the addressee is aware that the humorous act is loaded with a serious message and to which he shows disapproval or dissatisfaction, the speaker has always the possibility of denying the serious intent and sticking to the mere intention of joking. This is reachable thanks to the elusive nature of humour. Now, even if we assume that the participants seem to agree more or less on the

boundary between what is serious and what is humorous, miscommunications may, nevertheless, occur at other stages or levels According to Mulkay (1988: 216).

"The characteristic features of humorous language tend to create conflict and misunderstanding when encountered unexpectedly in the course of serious interaction".

Therefore, what are the participants required to do when they decide to enter the humorous mode? How can they ensure the success of the communicative process even if they are changing discursive modes?

In order to switch from serious discourse to non-serious discourse, the speaker's signalling of this passage is essential for avoiding misunderstandings. If one of the participants does not properly communicate this entry into the humorous mode, "the ensuing interaction is put in Jeopardy and recipients are likely to be bewildered to respond with irritation" (Mulkay 1988: 217). Languages provide a variety of cues to signal the entry to the humorous mode. In English, for example, there are some expressions used as verbal cues to preface a joke – generally a standardized joke – in a communicative situation. Here are some examples: "Let me tell you a story", "Did you hear this one?" "I heard a good one last week" (Mulkay 1988), "wait till I tell you this wee joke, "here listen to this one", "Hey, here's a great joke for you" (Wilson 1987 : 349), "there's this fellow" (Nash 1985 : 34). In Moroccan Arabic the following expressions are used as an example of verbal cues to introduce a joke: "bħal hada wħad rražəl" (It's like this man...) and "fkkərtini f waħəd nnukta" you reminded me of a joke). These linguistic cues used to enter the humorous mode vary from one culture to another. This variation may perhaps explain partially some cases of misunderstanding which are due to differences in signalling the passage from the serious mode to the humorous one in cross – cultural encounters. However, these humorous cues do not guarantee the recipient's appreciation of the humorous act as it is intended by the speaker. Their function is limited to indicate to the recipient that

"the dominant commitment to maintaining the appearance of a single reality can – at least momentarily – be relaxed, and that it is socially acceptable to enter the domain of meaning where the so-called certainties of the mundane world no longer hold and where the point of talking and listening and being alive is to enjoy the possibilities of uncertainty, ambiguity and interpretative multiplicity» (Mulkay 1988: 56)

The humorous signals we have provided as examples represent just the common explicit way of signalling the passage to humorous communication. There are some other less direct ways of achieving the same effect and which may even be created through the realities and events peculiar to any particular exchange. We will not deal with this since it is not our main concern.

No matter how responsible the speaker may be in making clear the passage from serious discourse to humorous discourse, the success of humorous discourse remains a shared activity between the teller of the joke or the speaker who is entering the humorous mode and the recipient. If the recipient does not – whether consciously or unconsciously – base his interpretative work on the principles of humorous discourse, humorous communication breaks down no matter how skilful the speaker might have been. The speaker's caution to signal directly or indirectly his switch from serious to humorous discourse and the recipient's caution agreement to get involved and be prepared to "obey" the principles of humorous discourse are two faces or the same coin. If one side fails to adhere to these requirements, misunderstanding would automatically result.

Failure of the speaker to signal the passage from serious to humorous discourse leads the recipient to take seriously what the speaker intends non-seriously. Reciprocally, failure of the recipient to adopt the humorous wave-length initiated by the speaker causes the intended humorous act to fall afloat. In such case, the speaker either would have the feeling that he was somehow offensive or that his sense of humour is not that convincing. He may as well blame the recipient for his being dull or perhaps consciously uncooperative.

### **2-3 Misinterpretation of banter claims:**

As we have seen in the previous section, entering the humorous mode is a shared activity which requires the cooperative work of both the teller and the recipient. A good example in this respect is the type of misunderstandings which occur due to misinterpretation of banter which is defined by Wilson (1987: 356) as:

"The use of an explicitly face-threatening form whose prosodic marking indicates that it is intended non-seriously"

A serious interpretation of what is intended as banter can only result in a communicative breakdown. For Wilson (1987: 357) such a breakdown may happen for two reasons:

"firstly, because of an inadequate prosodic working of the form intended as banter, and secondly banter may fail because (H) [hearer] is not willing to accept (despite correct marking) the claims of the banter" (Wilson 1987: 357).

Banter, then provides a good example of how the cause of the breakdown in communication can be either the speaker or the recipient.

In the Moroccan context, banter which is a so frequent humorous game is named "ttaq šab". Since this form of humour represents a non-serious face-threatening act, its realization tends to be logically governed by some sociolinguistic factors, such as sex, age, status which regulate communicative behaviour in serious discourse. The initiation of banter claims is not a random matter, but it seems to be regulated by the participants' sex, age and social status.

Focusing on the instance of sex-role initiation of sexual and aggressive humour, McGhee (1979: 203) notes:

"It is commonly assumed (perhaps only by men) that humour that is sexual or aggressive is more popular among men than women". (McGhee 1979: 203)

Because of "the close association of humour with aggressive and dominating forms of behaviour it has generally been assumed and expected (at least from a male point of view) that the initiation of humour is more appropriate for males than females" (McGhee 1979: 202). This, of course, puts males in a more likely position to initiate humour than females in mixed-sex social interaction. Such sex-role distribution of humorous communication establishes a pattern of social interaction among males and females which tends to be preserved and controlled whenever humour is initiated in a mixed-sex social interaction. This partially explains why joke-tellers are usually expected to be males and not females in social encounters where the two sexes happen to meet. Therefore, humour initiation in general, and banter initiation in particular seems to be a male activity in a mixed-sex social interaction. Where a female decides to adopt the role of an initiator of humour

"She must violate the cultural expectation that females should not aggressively dominate mixed-sex social interaction" (McGhee 1979: 202).

Given the nature of the relationship between males and females in humorous interaction, it is expected that a female who trespasses her role as a recipient in a mixed- sex humorous interaction will violate the communicative norms that regulate sexual and aggressive humour communication. Such initiation may not only cause a communicative breakdown where the female would be negatively perceived, but will also threaten a taken- for granted pattern of social interaction where the weight of dominance is in favour of the male and not the female and aggression is a characteristic of men and not women. Since banter claims are expected to take a male-female direction and not the other way around, this non-serious act represents a case of unequal communicative encounter where the male has the privilege to indulge in and direct banter claims to the female while she is supposed to accept them. Any deviation on the part of the unprivileged (female) from this communicative pattern where the roles are culturally distributed will undoubtedly cause communicative problems, if not social problems too.

Like the dimension of sex, the dimension of status represents another factor which causes the distribution of humour among high-status people and low-status people in occupational settings. Since humour initiation is associated with power and dominance,

"Individuals in positions of higher status initiate more jokes and other witty remarks than do people in low-status positions" (Mc Ghee 1979: 202).

This hierarchical structure characterizing the relationship between the employee and the employer "allows" the latter not only to initiate humour, but also to direct banter claims to the low-status employee. In other words, the boss is in a favourable position to make his employee the butt of the joke. The high-status employee can also non-seriously down-grade the face of the lower-status employee as McGhee (1979: 202) says:

"Not only do employees in more authoritative positions initiate more jokes, but their humour is more likely to be at the expense of others" (McGhee 1979: 202).

The inequality of status explains why the more powerful can direct banter claims to the less powerful while the latter has only the possibility of down-grading himself in the presence of his superiors. To put down the superior, even if it is intended non-seriously, may break down the communicative process and shake the existing hierarchical structure which is created by society and tends to be preserved and respected by people. Humorous communication, whether in the format of joking or banter, tends to be successful if it is initiated by a higher- status person and directed towards a lower-status person. If the direction is reversed, the chances for communicative success are rather low. As McGhee (1979: 202) notes:

"Everyone puts down someone in their humour, but only low status persons put down themselves" (McGhee 1979: 202).

In teacher-student communication, the teacher may non-seriously make fun of the student who will generally speaking accept the humorous act, whether sincerely or out of pretence. However, if banter takes the opposite direction, it is unlikely to be accepted by the teacher who will consider the student as impolite, disrespectful and perhaps worthy of punishment... Similarly, an old person (e.g. Father) is likely to direct banter claims to a younger person (e.g. Son) who is supposed to "welcome" them, sometimes as a way of showing respect to the older person.

It seems that any communicative situation which involves privileged (employer, teacher, father) and non-privileged (respectively, employee student, son) participants in one way or another, the privileged is on more solid grounds to direct banter claims to the unprivileged who may accept them wholeheartedly or as a mere pretence due to his disfavourable position in the encounter.

Any rejection of the banter claims on the part of the disadvantaged is likely to result in a misunderstanding which may lead him to be badly perceived. Moreover, if banter claims go from the unprivileged to the privileged, the down- grading of face, even if it is marked adequately as intended non-seriously may lead to a breakdown in communication. This is because the chances for a boss, a teacher or a male to accept the claims of the banter initiated respectively by an employee, a student or a female are likely to be low.

However, a tendency to reject the claims of the banter is likely to emerge in cases of equal encounters where there is no relationship of power or dominance in any sense that can favour one side over the other. Acceptance or rejection of banter claims becomes a matter of choice.

It seems, then, that even when participants get involved in humorous communication, the nature of the relationship that holds them in the serious world is still operating in the distribution of who can direct banter claims to whom. People seem to bring with them to the humorous communication certain assumptions (e.g. about their status, sex, age) to be respected. This may explain why a high- status person is unlikely to accept the claims of the banter even if they involve a face-threatening act not intended seriously.

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