

**A FRAMEWORK FOR THE ANALYSIS OF HUMOROUS
MISCOMMUNICATION LEVELS**

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Abstract

One framework of analysis which seems to be helpful in accounting for the diversity of cross-cultural communicative problems in humour understanding and appreciation is the one suggested by Jordan (1988). This framework reflects the kind of knowledge required in the understanding and appreciation of jokes. Jordan (1988) distinguishes between three types of humour along which we can classify humorous genres, especially jokes, and which provides a logical ground for verifying the potential universality or cultural specificity of the joke. This framework of analysis, then, shows to some extent how some jokes have a high degree of probability of being appreciated and how some others are understood only by a specific group of people hence the potential ground for communication breakdown. This framework involves three categories of humour: language – free humour, language- dependent humour, and culture – bound humour.

Keywords: Humorous miscommunication levels, language free humour, language-dependent humour, culture-dependent humour.

Introduction

One framework of analysis which seems to be helpful in accounting for the diversity of cross-cultural communicative problems in humour understanding and appreciation is the one suggested by Jordan (1988). This framework reflects the kind of knowledge required in the understanding and appreciation of jokes. Jordan (1988) distinguishes between three types of humour along which we can classify humorous genres, especially jokes, and which provides a logical ground for verifying the potential universality or cultural specificity of the joke. This framework of analysis, then, shows to some extent how some jokes have a high degree of probability of being appreciated and how some others are understood only by a specific group of people hence the potential ground for communication breakdown. This framework involves three categories of humour: language – free humour, language- dependent humour, and culture – bound humour.

1- Language – free humour:

According to Jordan (1988: 144), such type of humour depends on "the content of the joke and may readily be translated from one language to another". The following joke is an example of language – free humour.

A.] A man visited a barber to have a haircut and to shave. As he sat in the barber chair, he noticed that the barber’s dog was sitting looking at him especially intently. He remarked on this to the barber, who explained "yesterday I cut off a man’s ear, and he is hoping I will do it again".]

This joke if translated into Moroccan Arabic or French will have the same effect and can be easily understood. It is unlikely to be misunderstood since it does not presuppose any specific linguistic or cultural background knowledge to be shared by the teller of the joke and the listener/reader.

French version :

[Un homme a visité un coiffeur pour se coiffer et se raser. Quand il s’est assis, il aperçut le chien du coiffeur qui le regardait attentivement. L’homme fait une remarque sur ceci au coiffeur qui explique : "Hier j’ai coupé l’oreille à un client, et maintenant il espère que je fasse la même chose].

Moroccan version :

[hada waħəd rražəl mša Çənd lhəžžam baš jħassn rasu w lhjt. mlli glas baš jħassn lkəlb djal lhəžžam mabəaš jhəzz Çinu Çlih ža huwwa jgul ll həžžam "mal had lkəlb mabəaš jhəzz Çinu Çlijja" ža lhəžžam žawbu" lla öi hit lbarh qTTəÇt lwahəd wdnw wdaba rah tajsajn nqTTəÇ lik wdnək"].

In order to test these predictions, this language – free joke A was given to our Moroccan informants in its Arabic version. As table 1 show:

Table 1:

<u>Joke A</u>	<u>Question 1 : Do you find this joke :</u>			
	Not funny at all	Not quite funny	Quite funny	Very funny
Informants	1	4	15	20
Percentage	12,50%		87,50%	

Out of 40 informants, 35 ones (87, 50 %) judged the joke as being either quite funny (15 informants) or very funny (20 informants). While 9 informants did not provide any reason, the remaining 26 informants justified their answers differently. Most of the informants found the

joke funny either because the dog has become used to the barber's cutting of ears which represent a source of food for it, or because the barber is not competent or careless. Other justifications referred to the barber's stupidity to mention something that would make him lose his customers, or to the strange existence of a dog at the barber's.

Out of our 40 informants, 5 (12, 50%) judged the joke as being either not quite funny (4 informants) or not funny at all (1 informant). While 4 informants did not present any justification, 1 informant (28) who judged the joke as being not quite funny gave a "strange" justification, namely "the barber cuts ears for the dog, but the ear does not contain meat".

However, when asked whether they have faced any problem in understanding this language – free joke, all the informants – whether they found the joke funny or not funny – responded with (No). This seems to support our predictions about the interpretation of language – free jokes. Since these jokes are free from any linguistic or cultural specificity that may stand as a block-element in their interpretation, they seem to have the potential to be cross-culturally appreciated and lend themselves easily to cross-linguistic translation.

As we can see, there is no linguistic or cultural block-element that can make the understanding of this joke difficult. A good example of language-free humour are the category of fat-man jokes that Paulos (1980 : 16) refers to as "idiot jokes", and also drunkenness jokes which seem to lend themselves to cross-cultural appreciation.

Consider the following fat-man joke where the butt of the joke is stereotypically famous for his greed and permanent strong appetite, but he is also known for using his mind very little. Here is the joke:

B- [A fat- man sits down to dinner with a whole meat loaf on his plate. His wife asks whether she should cut it into four or eight pieces. He replies, "Oh, four I guess. I'm trying to lose weight"].

There is no linguistic or cultural specificity in this joke. The recipient had just to perceive the incongruity which is based on a violation of a logical mathematical law, namely that "if you cut something into four or eight, the amount is still the same". That is why the joke is easily translated into other languages as the following French and Moroccan versions illustrate.

French version :

[Un gros gourmand est en train de diner. Sa femme lui présente un grand steak et lui demande : "Chéri, est ce que je le coupe en quatre ou bien en huit "Le mari répond, "Oh, juste en quatre. J'essai de perdre un peu de poids"].

Moroccan version :

[hada waħəd rražəl öliD ?u wkkal hTTat lu mratu baš jətÇašša whijja tswllu "waš nqTTəÇ lik had TTöf djal llhəm Çla rbÇa wlla Çla tmənja" ža howwa gallha" llaqTTÇih öi Çla rbÇa rani tandir rrižim baš nnəqS...]

Drunkenness jokes are another example of jokes which lend themselves to cross-linguistic translation and do not seem to show any resistance to cross-cultural appreciation. The following Moroccan joke can be translated into English and French without losing its funniness.

C- [hada waħəd sskajri dajmən tajxrəž mən lbar htta ITTnaš djal llil. fTTriq ta jmši bzzigzag mən TruTwar ITruTwar htta tajwSal lddar mÇa TTnaš wnəSS djal llil. Waħəd nnhar skər htta šbəÇ whuwwa jmši l ddar wmawSəl htta ltlata... žat märtu öəwtat Çlih : "malk žiti had llila mÇəTTl bzzaf" whuwwa jgullha" Çla ? ana lli gultlum jwssÇu TTriq?].

English version:

[A drunkard is used to drinking till midnight. Once he finishes, he goes home walking in a zigzag way between the right pavement and the left pavement. One day, he did the same thing, but he arrived very late home. His wife shouted at him: "Why are you so late tonight ?" and the husband replied ; "Oh, it's not my fault if they have enlarged the main road"].

French version :

[Un ivrogne a l'habitude de rentrer vers minuit à la maison. Après avoir bu, il marchait vers la maison tout en se balançant d'un trottoir à l'autre. Un jour il a fait la même chose, mais il est rentré trop tard à la maison. Irritée, sa femme lui demande : "Pourquoi tu es si tard cette nuit" et le mari répond". Oh, c'est pas de ma faute, c'est eux qui ont élargi la route"]

In the absence of any linguistic or culture-specific block-element, communication problems in understanding and appreciating language-free humour are rendered to a minimum.

2- Language- dependent humour:

A joke of this type of humour, according to Jordan (1988 :114), "makes use of the linguistic resources of the language in which it is told and is very difficult to render into another language".

One category of jokes which falls within language – dependent humour is the category of "poetic jokes" which are defined as those whose humour is "based on grammatical forms and their usage or misusage" (Pepicello and Weisberg 1983: 64-65). A very frequent humour- producing phenomenon is linguistic ambiguity which can be either phonological, syntactic or lexical.

2-1 Phonological ambiguity:

Shultz (1976: 19) defines phonological ambiguity as one which occurs "when a given sound sequence can receive more than one interpretation. This often results from confusion about the boundaries between words". Such type of ambiguity is often exploited to cause some incongruities which, once are resolved, can be a source of humour. The appreciation of jokes which involve phonological ambiguity depends on its resolution. If the ambiguity is not detected and resolved, humorous communication breaks down. Consider the following example:

D-[Professor : Mr Twirp, what do you know about French syntax ?

Student : Gosh, I didn't know they had to pay for their fun."]

Unless one detects the phonetic ambiguity which exists in the word "Syntax"[sintaks] (sin tax), one may not understand the joke, which takes the form of a humorous riddle. According to McGhee et. al (1990 : 122-123), in this joke.

"Resolution is provided by insights into the second meaning which results from the phonetic ambiguity present in the word syntax".

2-2 Syntactic ambiguity:

One type of syntactic ambiguity is surface-structure ambiguity which occurs "when the words of a sentence can be grouped or bracketed (unlabelled) in two different ways with each bracketing expressing a different interpretation" (Shultz 1989 : 13). An example of resolution by surface-structure ambiguity is provided in the following joke where a stranger asks:

E- ["Can you tell me how long cows should be milked" and the farmer answers "they should be milked the same as short ones of course"].

The humour originates from the farmer's incongruous response which can be schematically represented in the form of bracketing as (how) (long cows), where the adjective "long" premodifies the noun "cows". In the stranger's question, however, the bracketing takes a different form (how long) (cows) where the adjective "long" is part of the adverbial. The interpretation of the joke depends on the detection of the surface structure ambiguity whose resolution triggers humorous effect.

2-3 Lexical ambiguity:

Consider the following joke where McFields is asked by someone:

F-["McFields, do you believe in clubs for children"? And he replied "only when kindness fails"] .

The ambiguity in this case resides in the semantic ambiguity of the word "clubs". If the word is defined as "social groups", the interpretation of the joke does not seem to make any sense. But, if the addressee makes use of the second meaning of "clubs" as referring to large sticks, the

incongruity is resolved, hence the appreciation of the joke. Since language-dependent humour is the result of a linguistic manipulation which can only be language-specific, this humour represents potential source of communication breakdown, especially if the listener/ reader is not a native speaker of the language in question. A foreign language learner, for example, may not respond to such type of jokes if he/she does not master the language well enough. As Shultz (1976 :20) explains :

"It has been shown that the appreciation of a large number of verbal jokes and riddles depends on the ability to construct resolutions based on the detection of linguistic ambiguity".

It should be noted, however, that though the ability to respond to incongruous situations which are linguistically manipulated is a rather cognitive process of a universal value, the foreign language learner is faced with some other preliminary problems no matter how competent and reactive are his cognitive capacities. These preliminary problems are basically of a linguistic type so long as the incongruity exploits the linguistic mechanisms of humour such as phonological, lexical and syntactic ambiguity (Shultz 1976). Sometimes, however, the appreciation of the joke becomes more problematic when the language learner is supposed to detect an incongruity whose resolution requires an extra-linguistic knowledge and where the cultural element plays a determinant role.

3- Culture – dependent humour:

The complexity of understanding jokes is also due to the very nature of humour. Verbal humour is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a social one. In Goldstein's (1990 : 39) terms:

"... Humour is a social phenomenon. It typically occurs in a social setting, and typically social factors, such as the culture of the participants are relevant to its explanation".

Therefore, the relevance of contextual and cultural elements for the study of verbal humour should be taken for granted. According to Jordan (1988 : 145), culture-dependent humour includes a set of jokes whose understanding "depends upon sharing the culture, rather than the language of the jokester. It may be language-dependent, but more importantly it is culture-dependent ". These jokes may refer to local events and particular people ("žuha" Jokes in the Arab culture). Jordan (1988:152) provides a good example of an Esperanto joke which definitely falls aflat if the listener to the joke is not really a competent speaker of Esperanto.

G – [Three guys go into a bar, a catholic, a protestant, and a Jew. One is Polish, one is English, and one Chinese. All have mothers-in-law. The Pole, who is also the catholic, says to the bartender "Savu Mlsami : deanjn !Give me a beer !" the English man who is also the protestant, says to the bartender "Ekju bileu !Give me a beer !" The remaining Esperantist (who is the

Chinese Jew), after listening to the other two, looks the bartender in the eyes and says "I'm a Kabe, give me champagne"].

The appreciation of this joke is possible only if we know what the word "Kabe" means in the history of Esperanto life. According to Jordan (1988 : 151),

"Kabei : Kabe (kazimierz Bein, 1872-1959) was a talented early Esperanto stylist, who became discouraged with the movement for Esperanto and abandoned it. To be a "kabeo" is to be an apostate"].

In this section, we will specifically concentrate on jokes which are culture-dependent because they are activated by some conventional scripts evoked by the words used in the joke. These conventional scripts are very often based on certain common stereotypes that members of the culture have assigned to a specific group or person in the world of jokedom. These stereotypical scripts represent a necessary background information for understanding and appreciating this category of jokes.

3-1 Mother-in-Law jokes: script of enmity

Consider the following English jokes:

H- [Mother-in law to son-in-law: you gave me a really nice book. I nearly died with laughter.

Son-in-law : Pleased to hear so. Why don't you read it again ?]
(Ferro-luzzi 1990 : 151).

I- [When they asked me to donate something for the old-age home, I offered them my mother-in law] (Fechtner 1973 :172-173).

J- [Only Adam had no mother-in-law. That's how we know he lived in paradise]
(Fechtner 1973 : 173).

The funniness of the above jokes is based on a conventional comic script of enmity between the mother-in-law and the son-in law. The jokes illustrate how the mother-in-law is perceived in the British culture – at least in the realm of jokedom. This script is a recurrent one which activates so many other jokes in so many cultures.

However, our Moroccan and French data includes a number of jokes which show that the same script is being used in Moroccan and French mother-in-law jokes. The mother-in-law is always presented as somebody that the son-in-law does his best to get rid of because she is a source of trouble and a threat to his life with his wife. The following Moroccan and French jokes play on the same script:

K-[Sa belle mère vient de mourir et il se présente aux pompes funèbres.

- Alors, dit l'employé, qu'est ce qu'on lui fait ? On l'enterre ? On l'incinère ou l'embaume ? Et le gars répond :

- Faut pas courir de risques... Faites- lui les trois] (Nègre 1973 : 374).

L- [- Et ta belle mère, ça va ?

- Oui, ça va. Je l'emmène partout où je vais, l'empoisonnant, c'est qu'elle retrouve toujours son chemin pour revenir à la maison.]

M-[hada waħəd rražəl kan dajz whuwwa jšuf žmaÇa kbira djal rržal ħda waħəd DDar whuwwa jswwəl waħəd šnu kajn žawbu blli waħəd rražəl matət lih nsibtu ħit ÇaDDha waħəd lkəlb məSÇur Çəndhum wÇawd swwlu waš had rržal žaw jÇəzziw, gallu lla žaw bas jətsllfu lkəlb lməSÇur].

English version:

[A man was walking in a street when he saw a group of men crowding in front of a house. He asked one of them.

- What are these men doing here ?

- A man had just lost his mother-in-law because she was bitten by an enraged dog.

- And these men are here to condole the bereaved ?

- Oh, No! They came to borrow the dog]

N- [hada waħəd rražəl dima mxaSm mÇa nsibtu mlli matət bda dima tajzurha fəqbrha bdaw nnas kajtÇəžžbu waħəd lmərri whuma jmšiw lmaqəbra whuma jəlqawh kajšəžžaÇ ddud baš JJakluha].

English version:

[There was this man who was always cross with his mother-in-law. When she died, he went, often and regularly, to visit her tomb, something which surprised the neighbours. Once, they followed him to his mother- in-law's tomb and found him encouraging the earthworms to eat her body].

It seems, then, that in the British, French and Moroccan culture, the same script activates mother-in-law jokes, namely the conventional script of enmity, hatred and intolerance between the mother-in-law and her son-in-law. This cross-cultural similarity in terms of script activation makes the understanding of these mother-in-law jokes in the three cultures an easy task since they share the same stereotypical view about mother – in law and son-in-law relationship in the world of humour. This cross-cultural similarity in what forms the basis of the joke funniness minimizes the communicative problems that one may face in one's attempt at understanding and appreciating a foreign joke.

3-2 Regional humour:

An analysis of Moroccan regional humour shows that it is mainly based on some recurrent stereotypical notions and characteristics that are assigned to different regional groups in Morocco. We mean by regional humour the reference to a specific regional group as being the butt of the joke where a specific stereotypical characterization is dominant and represents the activating element of the humour. The understanding of such type of humour requires the prerequisite knowledge of certain socio-cultural stereotypical background information which is realized in the form of conventional scripts such of the script of stinginess in relation to Soussi people (people of the western south of Morocco, region of Agadir). These conventional scripts are not our invention, but they are extracted from our data. We will limit our illustration to one example of script which is shared by both the Moroccan and British cultures.

Example: Script of stinginess: Soussi jokes and Scottish jokes.

In the British society, the following jokes express stereotypical information about the way Scotsmen are perceived among British people, at least in the world of humour. (see Asimov 1971 : 287, Mulkay 1988 : 66, Davies 1988).

O- [If you want to get rid of a Scotsman just throw a penny in front of a coming double-decker].

P- [If you want to drive a Scotsman crazy just throw a penny in a rounded room and say that it is in the corner].

Q- [How do you make a Scotsman deaf and mute? By asking him to contribute to a charity].

R- [la femme d'un Ecossai essaie de persuader son mari à acheter des jouets de Noël à son fils.

- Enfin, tout de même, Edward ! il faut faire quelque chose, il faut bien qu'il s'amuse un peu cet enfant...

Alors le bonhomme réfléchit et il dit :

- S'il faut qu'il s'amuse, tu n'as qu'à prendre une paire de ciseaux et lui couper les poches de son pantalon.]

The above jokes are based on one common humorous trigger which is the script of "stinginess" and which represents the piece of information to be communicated through these jokes and to be understood by the audience before they can appreciate its funniness. According to Zhao (1988 : 285).

"The comprehension of the joke such as "the Scots are so stingy that simply asking them to give money to a charity turn them into deaf-mutes" must necessarily precede any possible humour experience".

The communicative value of such jokes resides in their presentation of some popular stereotypes that people from different cultural backgrounds must get acquainted with. Once these stereotypes are internalized, the hearer can respond very easily to any type of joke which involves a Scotsman and which plays on the script of "stinginess" as a humorous trigger. Regardless of the truth value of the stereotype in question, the script of "stinginess" as a stereotypical convention is associated with Scotsmen and needs to be exploited by the hearer if the joke is to be comprehended and appreciated.

Note that the word Scot in Great Britain – the butt of the joke – can be replaced by a Soussi in the Moroccan culture and the joke will work since the same script of stinginess is being exploited.

If the hearer knows about the stereotypical information about Scottish / Soussi people, then he knows that he is dealing with a recurrent type of joke which plays on a conventional script of "Stinginess" associated with a specific community in the Moroccan as well as the British society.

If, however, the hearer does not know anything about the transmitted piece of information, but manages to absorb it while resolving the joke, then the hearer has not only been amused but has also internalized a piece of information, namely a stereotypical convention which reflects the way Soussi / Scottish people are perceived in the Moroccan and British society. This script of "stinginess" in relation to a Soussi or a Scotsman is a necessary condition for the full understanding and appreciation of such type of joke. This supports Zhao's (1988: 282) statement that

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

Conclusion

We would like to suggest that though these jokes are loaded with socio-cultural information which represents a key to their appreciation, they still can be translated from one language into another so long as the activating script exists in the two cultures. This undermines Jordan's (1988) claim that only "content – based humour" (or language –free humour) is translatable since it is free from language- specific and culture- specific elements. The above examples show to some extent how culture –based humour is susceptible to cross- cultural appreciation and cross-linguistic translation so long as there are similarities in some stereotypical conventions across cultures. Both the British and Moroccan cultures share the script of stinginess in relation to a specific community, and this allows the translation of these jokes from English into Moroccan Arabic and vice versa. Now, if we translate the English joke (Q) into Moroccan Arabic and we replace the Scotsman by a Soussi, the joke can be considered as a typically Moroccan Soussi joke:

Q-[How do you make a Scotsman deaf and mute ? By asking him to contribute to a charity.]

Moroccan version:

[?ila böiti trëdd ši susi Sëmm w bkëm šnu ddir, gullu jəÇTi ši Sadaqa.]

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