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JOKES AND METAREPRESENTATIONS: DEFINITION JOKES AND METALINGUISTIC JOKES

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Abstract: This paper clarifies how our metarepresentational abilities involving the comprehension of definition and metalinguistic jokes emerge in communication within Relevance Theory. In order to address this issue, I adopt the incongruity and dissolution analysis. Metarepresentation is defined as a higher-order representation with a lower-order representation embedded inside it. Humorous cognitive effects come from the discrepancy between metarepresentational and non-metarepresentational interpretation. Metalinguistic jokes are related to our metarepresentational ability, which is the key to our verbal communication. A joke question can be interpreted as a real world, but the answer goes into a metalinguistic world, so humorous cognitive effects come from the two different interpretations by the hearer. As for metalinguistic jokes, the hearer has to process more than one meaning in the question, and this generally involves additional processing effort.

Keywords: Jokes, Relevance Theory, definition jokes, metalinguistic jokes

Languages: English, Japanese

THE PRESENT STUDY¹ argues that Relevance Theory can explain our metarepresentational abilities involving joke comprehension and give more explicit and exhaustive explanation of Definition Jokes and Metalinguistic Jokes. As shown in Wilson (2000), we can use metarepresentations in various ways. Metarepresentation is defined as a higher-order representation with a lower-order representation embedded inside it. Joke interpretation comes from the discrepancy between the two forms, or two meanings, or two interpretations. Definition jokes can be captured by the discrepancy between non-definitional and definitional interpretations of a given sentence or a word. Metalinguistic jokes are on the language form and not the meaning. A metalinguistic joke question can be interpreted as a real world situation, but the answer goes into a metalinguistic world (spelling), so humorous cognitive effects come from the discrepancy between a real world interpretation and a metalinguistic world interpretation.

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1. SOME BASIC TERMS OF RELEVANCE THEORY. Relevance is a property of inputs to cognitive processes. Cognitive effects (or contextual effects) include the strengthening of existing assumptions of the system by providing further evidence for them, the elimination of assumptions that appear to be false in the light of the new evidence, and the derivation of new assumptions through the interaction of the new information with existing assumptions. A basic principle of the framework is the Cognitive Principle of Relevance, according to which the human cognitive system as a whole is oriented towards the maximization of relevance (see Sperber & Wilson 1995: 261–66). There are other important terms:

1. **Communicative Principle of Relevance:** Every utterance creates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.
2. **Presumption of optimal relevance:** The utterance will be (a) at least sufficiently relevant to be worth the hearer's processing effort, and (b) the most relevant one compatible with the speaker's abilities and preferences.
3. **Explicature** has two essential properties: it is an assumption communicated by an utterance and it has a propositional form pragmatically developed out of a logical form of the utterance. The job of the pragmatic inferential system is to deliver the communicated assumptions (explicatures and implicatures); the information available to it includes, crucially, the logical form of the linguistic expression employed. For the role of incomplete logical forms, see Sperber and Wilson (1995:285).
In relevance theory, explicature is defined as the development of a linguistic expression encoded by Utterance (i.e., explicature = so-called literal meaning + reference assignment + word sense disambiguation + specification of vague terms + supplying empty categories with content + relations between events and states + other pragmatic enrichment).
4. **Assumptions** are intended to reflect the hearer's background knowledge.
5. **Implicature** is derived from the deduction of the utterance (= explicature) and assumptions. See Sperber and Wilson (1995:110–17) for the deductive device in the framework of Relevance Theory.

2. DEFINITION JOKES. As defined by Kobayashi and Cheetham (2005:94–96), a definition joke is a joke where a well known word or phrase is defined, or re-defined, with an ironic or humorous twist, and the humor comes from the definition being correct, but correct only from a particular (and often peculiar) point of view.

2.1. DEFINITION JOKES IN RELEVANCE THEORY. I argue that Relevance Theory can provide a good tool for explaining why definition jokes in question-answer pairs can produce some of the cognitive effects of humor that hold between the non-definitional and definitional interpretations of a given sentence or a word.

I provide below explanations of why a number of definition jokes are funny, using the framework of Relevance Theory.

- (1) a. What's the definition of *repetition*?

b. Can you say that again, please?

There are two explications for (1)b:

- **Explicature 1:** a metarepresentational interpretation (= an example of repetition)
- **Explicature 2:** a non-metarepresentational interpretation (= literal meaning)

The humorous cognitive effects in (1)b come from the discrepancy between the metarepresentational interpretation and the non-metarepresentational interpretation. In short, (1)b implicitly gives an example of *repetition*. So word plays like this make good use of the gap between definitional and non-definitional uses of the utterance. Processing jokes is less economical than processing plain, explicit messages. Certain effort-demanding interpretive paths of jokes are favored in exchange for an increase in humorous effects.

Similar effects can be seen in examples (2)–(4):

- (2) a. What's the definition of *shy*?
b. Are you looking at me? Don't look at me!
- (3) a. What's the definition of *angry*?
b. What do you think I am? A dictionary? Check for yourself!
- (4) Teacher: What's the difference between *ignorance* and *indifference*?
Student: I don't know and I don't care.

2.2. ABNORMAL DEFINITION JOKES. (5) and (6) demonstrate that the discrepancy between normal and abnormal definitions makes these examples humorous.

- (5) What's a *kidnap*?
A baby that's having a sleep!

Kidnap is normally defined as "illegally taking a person away by force."

- (6) a. What do the letters *NASA* stand for?
b. Need Another Seven Astronauts.

Example (6) was jokingly said just after the space shuttle disaster. *NASA* is normally the acronym for the *National Aeronautics and Space Administration*.

Similar abnormal definition jokes can be observed in (7) through (10).

- (7) Airport: A place where people hurry up and wait.
- (8) Insurance: Gambling that you will be lucky enough to have a terrible accident and receive a lot of money.
- (9) Insurance is just like marriage. You pay, pay, pay, and pay and you get little back.
- (10) Television is the third parent.

3. METALINGUISTIC JOKES. Metalinguistic jokes are based on the form and not the meaning of the text. In order to understand metalinguistic jokes, we have to be able to understand about language and its mechanics.

It is often said that children's jokes are very creative. According to Schumann (2009), a child's cognitive development of metalinguistic jokes is as follows: (a) a joke on the phoneme is appropriate for ages 6–8 years, (b) a joke on the word is most appropriate for ages 8–10, and (c) a joke on sentence structure is appropriate for ages 10–14.

Let us first look at example (11).

- (11) What two letters of the alphabet contain nothing?
MT. (Spector 1992:21)

A joke question can be interpreted as a real world situation, but the answer goes into a metalinguistic world (spelling), so humorous cognitive effects come from the discrepancy between a real world interpretation and a metalinguistic world interpretation. In order to understand *MT* appropriately, we have to know the phonetic similarity between *MT* and *empty* and the semantic relation between 'nothing' and 'empty'. As with metalinguistic jokes, the hearer has to process more than one interpretation and meaning in the joke question, and this generally involves additional processing effort. Jokes are favored in exchange for an increase in humorous effects.

As clearly demonstrated in Wilson (2000), we have to consider how metarepresentational abilities fit together, both with each other and with the architecture of the mind. It is worth attempting to integrate them with an empirically plausible pragmatic theory. Metalinguistic jokes are related to our metarepresentational ability, which is the key to verbal communication. So in this section, we examine various kinds of metalinguistic jokes from phoneme to sentence.

3.1. METALINGUISTIC JOKES: A PSEUDOMORPHOLOGY CASE.

- (12) Teacher: What kind of *key* opens a banana?
Pupil: That's a trick question. You don't need a key to open a banana.
Teacher: Wrong. The answer is a *monkey*. (Howell 2003:32)

Schumann (2009:1) explains that here "[a]n independent word is confused with a larger word but the sequence is not really a morpheme of the larger word." In (12), the pupil looks for the key in the actual world, not metalinguistic world, but the correct answer goes to the metalinguistic world, not the actual world. *Monkey* is a word containing the syllable *key* in its written form. So the humor comes from the discrepancy between the actual world and the metalinguistic world.

Similar examples of pseudomorphology cases can be seen in (13)–(19).

- (13) Which *city* gives you lots of shocks? *Electricity*. (*TRIFIC jokes* 2002:31)

- (14) What *pet* makes the loudest noise? A *trumpet*. (Archibold, Brown & Hurt-Newton 1999:125)
- (15) What's the difference between *here* and *there*? The letter *T!* (Yoe 2001:28)
- (16) In many marriages there are three *rings*: an *engagement* ring, a *wedding* ring and *suffering*. (Maruyama 2002:133)
- (17) What's in the middle of *Alberta*? The letter *E*. (Hershkowitz 2004:57)
- (18) Rearrange the letters of *new door* to make one word. *One word*. (Kim 2002:35)
- (19) What *five-letter word* is always spelled wrong? *Wrong*. (Kim 2002:46)

3.2. METALINGUISTIC JOKES: IRREGULAR MORPHOLOGY OR SPELLING DISCREPANCIES. Some metalinguistic jokes are based on morphological skills and joke interpretation comes from the discrepancy between the normal spelling and an abnormal spelling, as shown below. Abnormal spellings are related to the exploration of new word meanings or semantics.

- (20) What do you call a polar bear with no socks on? Bear-foot. (Hershkowitz 2004:30)

The normal spelling is 'barefoot'. But there is homophony between *bear-foot* and *barefoot* and a semantic relation between 'with no socks on' and 'bare'.

- (21) Where do farmers in the north keep their hogs? In *pigloos!* (Hershkowitz 2004:2)

The normal word is *igloos*, not *pigloos*. There is a rhyme between *igloos* and *pigloos* and also a semantic relation between hogs and pigs.

3.3. METALINGUISTIC JOKES: SPOONERISMS. In (22) and (23), the humor resides in spoonerisms. (22) has a spoonerism of syllable onsets and (23) has a spoonerism of everything but the syllable codas.

- (22) What's the difference between Shrek and a bowl of carrots?
One is a *funny beast* and the other is a *bunny feast*. (Dunn 2007:94)
- (23) What's the difference between a *night watchman* and a *butcher*?
I don't know. What is the difference between a night watchman and a butcher?
One *stays awake* and the other *weighs a steak*.

3.4. METALINGUISTIC JOKES: SPELLING AND KNOWLEDGE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE. The joke in (24) is a little more complicated.

- (24) Why do you need glasses when spelling *Mississippi*? You need *four I's*. (Yoe 2001:147)

In (24) the joke question can be interpreted as a real world situation, but the answer goes into :

1. a metalinguistic world, and
2. *four I's* should be interpreted as *four eyes*,
3. which can be enriched by ad hoc concept construction (Wilson 2004) at the explicature level to refer to a person who wears glasses.

So the answer *You need four I's* implicitly suggests *You should wear glasses*.

Humorous cognitive effects come from these three different processings by the hearer. As for metalinguistic jokes, the hearer has to process more than one meaning in the joke question, and this generally involves additional processing effort. Jokes favor increased processing effort in exchange for an increase in humorous effects.

3.5. METALINGUISTIC JOKES: SPELLING AND WORLD KNOWLEDGE. Examples (25)-(29) show jokes of this sort.

(25) Why is the letter *I* like Rome? Because both are capitals. (Kim 2002:50)

In order to understand (25), we need to know what *capital I* means and that Rome is the capital of Italy.

(26) Why is the letter *A* like a flower? Because a *B* comes after it! (Yoe 2001:141)

In (26), we need to know that *B* is homophonous with *bee* and bees like flowers.

(27) Kid: I had trouble with *diarrhea* at school today.
 Mother: That's terrible! I didn't know you were ill.
 Kid: I wasn't, I just couldn't spell it. (Howell 2003:10)

When the kid says *diarrhea* in (27), it can be interpreted as the actual illness called diarrhea. But the punchline makes it clear that the problem is just how to spell *diarrhea*.

(28) Where does Friday come before Thursday? In the dictionary. (Kim 2002:31)

In (28), the hearer considers the question in the actual world. But in order to find the answer, it is necessary to look in a metalinguistic world, such as a word list. The same is true of (29).

(29) What two things can you not eat for breakfast? Lunch and dinner! (Yoe 2001:54)

3.6. METALINGUISTIC JOKES: ABNORMAL IDIOM INTERPRETATION. (30) involves an abnormal interpretation of the well-known English idiom *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*.

- (30) Teacher: What do we know about *a bird in the hand*, class?
 Pupil: That *it's worth two in the bush*?
 Teacher: Well, I'd say *it makes it hard to blow your nose*. (Howell 2003:33)

In (30) there is a discrepancy between the normal idiomatic interpretation, which the student provides, and an abnormal, or literal and non-idiomatic interpretation, which is provided by the teacher.

3.7. METALINGUISTIC JOKES: A RESEMBLANCE-BASED QUOTATION. There is a famous Shakespearean quotation "To be or not to be, that is the question." In (31), the joke comes from the discrepancy between the real Shakespearean quotation and the similar expression used here.

- (31) Ring, ring! It's Toby!
 Toby who?
 Toby or not Toby that is the question! (*TRIFIC Jokes* 2002:22)

4. THE TWO RONNIES (CORBETT AND BARKER) AND JOKES. Of all the sketches performed by The Two Ronnies, I have chosen the sketch "The Hardware Shop," commonly called "Four Candles," for analysis from the metalinguistic point of view. I begin with a summary of the sketch. The actual script follows in (32).

In (32), the hardware shopkeeper (Corbett) is confronted by a customer (Barker), who is holding a shopping list. The customer requests what sounds like "four candles". The shopkeeper then takes out four candles, but the customer merely repeats his request and the shopkeeper is confused. The customer rephrases his request to reveal he in fact wanted "andles for forks." This joke is based on resemblance in sound, that is, "four candles" and "fork handles" are quite similar in sound.

- (32) CORBETT: (*muttering*) There you are. Mind how you go.
 (*Ronnie Barker enters the shop, wearing a scruffy tank-top and beanie.*)
 BARKER: Four Candles!
 CORBETT: Four Candles?
 BARKER: Four Candles.
 (*Ronnie Corbett makes for a box, and gets out four candles. He places them on the counter*)
 BARKER: No, four candles!
 CORBETT: (*confused*) Well there you are, four candles!

(32) BARKER: No, fork 'andles! 'Andles for forks!

(Ronnie Corbett puts the candles away, and goes to get a fork handle. He places it on the counter.)

CORBETT (muttering): Fork handles. Thought you said 'four candles!'

In (33), Barker asks for plugs. Trying to avoid a similar mistake the shopkeeper asks what kind and is told "a rubber one, bathroom". Believing that he is asking for bath plugs the shopkeeper gets out a box of them and asks for the size. The customer's answer is "thirteen amp" revealing he in fact wants an insulated electric plugs. In this example, the word sense for "plug" is disambiguated and so it refers to "an electric plug" rather than "a bath plug" in order to develop the linguistic expression encoded by the utterance.

(33) BARKER: Got any plugs?

CORBETT: Plugs. What kind of plugs?

BARKER: A rubber one, bathroom.

(Ronnie Corbett gets out a box of bath plugs, and places it on the counter)

CORBETT: *(pulling out two different sized plugs)* What size?

BARKER: Thirteen amp!

CORBETT: *(muttering)* It's electric bathroom plugs, we call them, in the trade.
Electric bathroom plugs!

(He puts the box away, gets out another box, and places on the counter an electric plug, then puts the box away)

In (34), Barker asks for "o's". This item causes the most frustration for the shopkeeper. He brings a hoe, hose, and pantyhose to the counter before working out that what Barker wants is the letter O—"oes as in 'Mon Repose'". The box of garden gate letters is noticeably difficult to get to and put back, requiring a ladder. In this example, "o's" is finally understood to refer to "the garden gate letter 'O,'" that is, a kind of metalinguistic interpretation.

(34) BARKER: 'O's!

CORBETT: 'O's?

BARKER: 'O's.

(He goes to get a hoe, and places it on the counter)

BARKER: No, 'O's!

CORBETT: 'O's! I thought you said 'O! *(he takes the hose back, and gets a hose, whilst muttering)* When you said 'O's, I thought you said 'O! 'O's!
(He places the hose onto the counter)

BARKER: No, 'O's!

CORBETT: (*confused for a moment*) O's? Oh, you mean panty 'o's, panty 'o's! (he picks up a pair of tights from beside him)

BARKER: No, no, 'O's! 'O's for the gate. Mon repose! 'O's! Letter O's!

CORBETT: (*finally realising*) Letter O's! (muttering) You had me going there!

(*He climbs up a stepladder, gets a box down, puts the ladder away, and takes the box to the counter, and searches through it for letter O's*)

CORBETT: How many d'you want?

BARKER: Two.

(*Ronnie Corbett leaves two letter O's on the counter, then takes the box back, gets the ladder out again, puts the box away, climbs down the ladder, and puts the ladder away, then returns to the counter.*)

In (35), when he asks for "peas" the shopkeeper, believing him to be asking for the letter P for a garden gate, is understandably annoyed as they are in the box he has just put back. The customer waits for him to get the box down before better explaining what he wants - tins of peas. At this point the shopkeeper first suspects it may be a joke. In this example, he first interprets "P's" as the "O's" in (34), that is, "letter P's", but Barker's request was for "tins of peas".

(35) BARKER: Got any P's?

CORBETT: (*fed up*) For Gawd' sake, why didn' you bleedin' tell me that while I was up there then? I'm up and down the shop already, it's up and down the bleedin' shop all the time. (*He gets the ladder out, climbs up and gets the box of letters down, then puts the ladder away*) Honestly, I've got all this shop, I ain't got any help, it's worth it we plan things. (*He puts the box on the counter, and gets out some letter P's.*) How many d'you want?

BARKER: No! Tins of peas. Three tins of peas!

CORBETT: You're 'avin' me on, ain't ya, yer 'avin' me on?

BARKER: I'm not!

(*Ronnie Corbett dumps the box under the counter, and gets three tins of peas.*)

In (36), when he asks for "pumps," the shopkeeper asks him to elaborate. The customer complies by asking for "foot pumps". The shopkeeper brings a pneumatic pump to the counter. The customer then reveals he wants "brown pumps size nine". At this point the shopkeeper becomes convinced that the customer is playing a practical joke on him.

(36) BARKER: Got any pumps?

CORBETT: (*getting really fed up*) 'And pumps, foot pumps? Come on!

BARKER: (*surprised he has to ask*) Foot pumps!

- (36) CORBETT: (*muttering, as he goes down the shop*) Foot pumps. See a foot pump?
 (*He sees one, and picks it up*) Tidy up in 'ere.
 (*He puts the pump down on the counter*)
 BARKER: No, pumps fer ya feet! Brown pumps, size nine!
 CORBETT: (*almost at breaking point*) You are 'avin' me on, you are definitely 'avin' me on!
 BARKER: (*not taking much notice of Corbett's mood*) I'm not!
 CORBETT: You are 'avin' me on! (*He takes back the pump, and gets a pair of brown foot pumps out of a drawer, and places them on the counter*)

In (37), after the customer asks for washers, the shopkeeper, out of desperation and annoyance, recites a long list as to what this could mean. The customer then explains he wants tap washers, one of the types of washer that the shopkeeper had failed to mention.

At this point the shopkeeper, having had enough, snatches the shopping list the customer has been holding to complete the order without any confusion. However, he then seems to take offence at something written on the list. He decides he cannot tolerate the customer any longer and calls his assistant from the back to complete the order. The assistant reveals that the request was for *billbooks*. The audience later infers that the shopkeeper misread it as *Pillocks*, which refers to "very stupid persons" in British English.

- (37) BARKER: Washers!
 CORBETT: (*really close to breaking point*) What, dishwashers, floor washers, car washers, windscreen washers, back scrubbers, lavatory cleaners? Floor washers?
 BARKER: 'Alf inch washers!
 CORBETT: Oh, tap washers, tap washers? (*He finally breaks, and makes to confiscate the list*) Look, I've had just about enough of this, give us that list. (*He mutters*) I'll get it all myself! (*Reading through the list*) What's this? What's that? Oh that does it! That just about does it! I have just about had it! (*calling through to the back*) Mr. Jones! You come out and serve this customer please, I have just about had enough of 'im. (*Mr. Jones comes out, and Ronnie Corbett shows him the list*) Look what 'e's got on there! Look what 'e's got on there!
 JONES: (*who goes to a drawer with a towel hanging out of it, and opens it*) Right! How many would ya like? One or two?
 (*He removes the towel to reveal the label on the drawer - 'Bill books'!*)

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS. Now I would like to summarize the main points of my paper. I have shown that certain types of jokes (e.g., definition jokes and metalinguistic jokes) can be captured by a kind of discrepancy between two interpretations in the framework of Relevance Theory. Definition jokes come from the discrepancy between non-definitional and definitional interpretations of a given sentence or word. Metalinguistic jokes are based

on the language form and not the meaning. In order to understand metalinguistic jokes, we have to be able to understand about language and its mechanics. The humor comes from the discrepancy between the actual world and the metalinguistic world, between the abnormal spelling and the normal spelling, and so on.

Finally, I would like to assert that metalinguistic jokes are universal, and give you two Japanese metalinguistic jokes, which are called *Senryu* in Japanese..

- (38) 続柄あわてて「妻」を「毒」と書き
 ‘He was so confused that he filled in 毒 not 妻 as a relationship to her.’

Here 毒 is a Chinese character meaning ‘poison’ and 妻 is a Chinese character meaning ‘wife’.

In example (39) the metalinguistic world (that is, Chinese characters) is used to make a short poem humorous in Japanese:

- (39) 食べすぎに待っているのは体重刑
 ‘You will be sentenced to overweight when you eat too much.’ (*Mainichi Newspaper*, June 19, 2005)

Here 体重刑 are the Chinese characters meaning ‘weight punishment’ and 体重計 mean ‘bath scale’ (*health meter* in Japlish). In (39) the normal Chinese characters are 体重計, and the abnormal Chinese characters are 体重刑, which is homophonous with 体重計, but there is a semantic connection between “overweight punishment” and 体重計.

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