

PRAGMATICS... IN A FUNNY WAY!

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What is humour?

- Difficult to define.
- Complex phenomenon (semantics and pragmatics)
- Umbrella term (*humor, irony, sarcasm, etc.*)

What is humour?

- Humor consists of two facets, a semantic and a pragmatic one.
- Semantically: **antonymic opposition between two scripts/frames** that are compatible entirely or in part with the text
- Pragmatically, a **violation of Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP)**.

What is irony?

- A type of humorous phenomenon.
- Purely pragmatic, without semantic counterpart.
- Thin border between humour and irony.

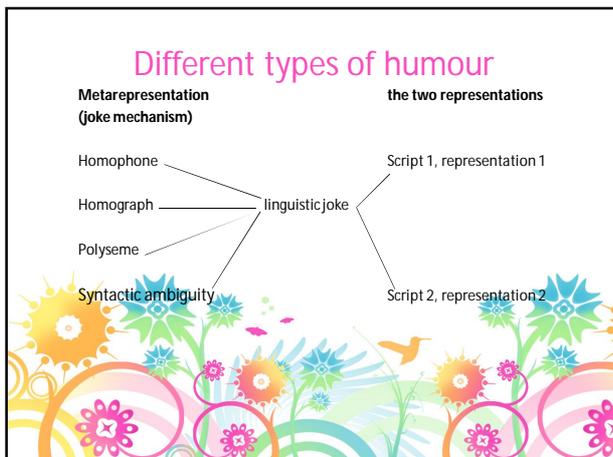
Context-bound and context-free humour

- Jokes – context-free
- Irony – context-bound
- Saying things funny → being witty is context-bound
- Saying funny things → jokes are context-free

Different types of humour

More “neutral” forms of humour:

- Jokes:
 - In the Frank and Ernest comic strip, Frank says to a real estate agent, “**Sure, we'd like to see a model home. What time does she get off work?**” (Nilsen & Nilsen 2000: 26)



Different types of humour

- More “aggressive” forms of humour (social criticism):
- Irony
 - “A friend paying a visit to a man one evening was astonished to find him playing chess against his dog. **“What a wonderful animal you have there”,** he said. “What’s so wonderful about him?”, the man replied. “I win two games out of every three we play”.

Register humour and irony

Register humour: humour produced by the clash between the register used and the register that would be appropriate or expected in that situation.

linguistic factors + connotations (formal vs. informal)
+ situational context

Register humour and irony

Thank you. First of all, I'd like to thank all of you who've flown in from the States. As for the rest of you, I'd have thought that lots of frightful Americans flying in was an excuse for staying away. So I thank you, too. If my darling dad had been here today, he would have been speaking now, and I know what he would have said: '**Great dress, babe,** but why *in the hell* are you marrying **the stiff in the skirt?**'

Four Weddings and a Funeral, Carrie's thank you speech

Register humour and irony

The border between them is indeed very thin: research shows that basic mechanisms are shared by irony and those forms of humour that cannot rely on clear unique *disjunctors* and that therefore depend significantly on **encyclopaedic knowledge** and **pragmatic processes**.

Important concepts

- Semantic vs. pragmatic meaning
- Context
- Scripts and representations
- Register, connotations, situational context
- Propositional meaning
- Encyclopaedic knowledge
- Inferential/pragmatic processes
- Intentions and attitudes
- Implicit meaning
- Inferences, implicatures, cognitive effort

Important concepts

All these problems are dealt with by the two linguistic disciplines dealing with meaning:

SEMANTICS and PRAGMATICS (is there even a distinction anymore? We will see.)



The irony of this course...

...is that you might think it deals with irony and humour, but instead it deals with the boring principles that explain how we deal with humorous phenomena and with communication in general.



Semantics vs. Pragmatics

Semantics: the study of meaning.

Pragmatics: the study of meaning in context.

But is there a real difference?



Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis

Both deal with the way in which meaning is created in **the interactional context**.

They look at **larger portions of text**.

They are both concerned with **function**.



Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis

They differ in that DA studies **structure**, how large chunks of language beyond the sentence level are organised, how the social transaction imposes a framework on discourse.

Pragmatics focuses on the **social principles** of discourse.



Meaning in Context

Focus on the meaning of words in interaction and how interactors communicate *more information than the words they use*.

Speaker's meaning: dependent on shared assumptions of knowledge.



AF (2) So you went to Arran. A bit of a come-down isn't it! ((laughing))
DM It was nice actually. Have you been to Arran?
AF No I've not. (1) Like to go.
DM Did a lot of climbing.
AF // (heh)
DM // I went with Francesca (0.5) and David.
AF Uhuh?
DM Francesca's room-mate. (2) And Alice's — a friend of Alice's from London (1). There were six of us. Yeah we did a lot of hill walking. (0.5) We got back (1) er (2) Michelle and I got home she looked at her knees. (0.5) They were like this. Swollen up like this. Cos we did this enormous eight hour stretch.
AF Uhm.

There are three sorts of context to observe here:

- the **situational context**, what speakers know about what they can see around them
- the **background knowledge context**, what they know about each other and the world
- the **co-textual context**, what they know about what they have been saying

Meaning in Context

Lecturer Forty-nine? Why do you say forty-nine?
Pupil Cos there's another one here.
Lecturer Right, we've got forty-nine there, haven't we? But here there's two, okay? Now, what is it that we've got two of? Well, let me give you a clue. Erm, this here is forty, that's four tens, four tens are forty.

Meaning in Context

*Next day, now look, the picture shows
 How lank and lean Augustus grows!
 Yet, though he feels so weak and ill,
 The naughty fellow cries out still –
 'Not any soup for me, I say:
 O take the nasty soup away!
 I won't have any soup today.'*

Situational Context

The immediate physical co-presence, the situation where the interaction is taking place at the moment of speaking.

Meaning in Context

My formative months of Italian language education were spent in the company of lots of construction workers.

[...] my husband, who, though undoubtedly Italian (who else would pack olive oil for vacation) is not what you'd call a flashy dresser.

Meaning in Context

Her How are you?

Him OK.

Her Did you have friends in and get a video last night?

Him Oh, I had friends in, but we just watched a little TV.

Her Ah right.

Him That was great. How do you feel?

Her OK.

Background Knowledge Context

This can be either:

- **cultural general knowledge** that most people carry with them in their minds, about areas of life
- **interpersonal knowledge**, specific and possibly private knowledge about the history of the speakers themselves.

Cultural General Knowledge

It belongs to **discourse communities** and varies in **size**. Often assumes **shared attitudes** towards a state of affairs.

If interlocutors establish that they are part of the same group, they can assume mutual knowledge of everything normally known by group members.

Interpersonal Knowledge

Knowledge acquired through previous verbal interactions or joint activities and experiences, and it includes privileged personal knowledge about the interlocutor(s).

The larger the interpersonal knowledge, the vaguer, more implicit and minima the reference to any part of it can be.

Linguistic ways to refer to the context

The act of using language to refer to entities in the context is known as **reference**. The speaker uses linguistic forms, known as **referring expressions**, to enable the hearer to identify the entity being referred to, which is in turn known as the **referent**.

Linguistic ways to refer to the context

Exophoric reference: the first mention of the referent in the exchange. Exophora is dependent on the context outside the text.

Endophoric reference: reference to a known entity in the text.

Linguistic ways to refer to the context

- DM** // I went with **Francesca** (0.5) and **David**.
AF Uhuh?
DM Francesca's room-mate. (2) And Alice's – a friend of Alice's from London (1). There were six of **us**. Yeah **we** did a lot of hill walking.



Deixis

If the referring expression points to the referent in the context (whether interlocutors can see it or not), it is known as **deixis**.

There are **3 types of deixis**:

- **person**,
- **place**,
- **time**.



Deixis

- **We** are not amused
- So **you** went to Arran.
- **We** got back (1) er (2) Michelle and I got home **she** looked at her knees. (0.5)
- **They** were like this.
- Yet, though **he** feels so weak and ill.



Deixis

- They were like **this**.
- **That** was great.
- Cos there's another one **here**.
- Right, we've got forty-nine **there**, haven't we?



Deixis

- Next day**,
- now look,
- yesterday
- then



Deixis

- Next day**,
- now look,
- yesterday
- then

