

Humor in the Foreign Language Classroom and the Evasive Second Script¹

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching encourages the use of authentic materials. However, over the years, many non-native English teachers have shared their concern that their own occasional failure to understand humor in authentic texts will be perceived as a lack of competence by their students. This has caused some of these teachers to avoid humorous material altogether. In this article, I argue that the teacher's occasional incomprehension cannot be considered incompetence and I introduce the General Theory of Verbal Humor, from the field of linguistics, to propose a concrete method to analyze and discuss humorous texts in the language classroom. The theoretical discussion is followed by a demonstration of how the theory can be used as a tool by the teacher and his students in order to boost the students' sociolinguistic competence in the target language.

Resumen

La enseñanza de lenguas basada en el Enfoque por Tareas incentiva el uso de materiales auténticos. Sin embargo, a lo largo de varios años, muchos profesores no-nativos del inglés me han compartido su preocupación de que su incapacidad para poder explicar el humor en textos auténticos, sea interpretado por sus propios estudiantes como una falta de competencia en el idioma. Esto provoca que algunos profesores eviten completamente el uso de material humorístico en sus clases. En este artículo argumento que la incomprensión ocasional no significa una falta de competencia en la lengua y propongo como herramienta concreta la Teoría General del Humor Verbal, del campo de la lingüística, para analizar y discutir textos humorísticos en el aula. Después de la discusión teórica demuestro cómo el profesor y sus estudiantes pueden usar la teoría para promover la competencia sociolingüística en la lengua meta.

Introduction

In recent years, the use of humor in the foreign language classroom has received a lot of attention and various scholars have pointed out its importance for second language development (e.g., Bell, 2005; Ziyaeemehr, Kumar, & Faiz Abdullah, 2011; Shively, 2013; Hodson, 2014). Bell (2009), for example, lists the following reasons for incorporating humor:

- learners request it,
- learners may not have many opportunities to practice humor outside the classroom, and, most importantly,
- studies in second language acquisition have shown that humor may promote second language learning because it helps build sociolinguistic competence.

However, humor is highly complex which may cause non-native English teachers in a foreign language setting in particular to perceive a lack of humor competence that hinders them from being able to explain jokes in authentic materials. My objectives for this article are therefore twofold: (1) to argue that language teachers who fail to understand a joke are not automatically incompetent, and (2) to propose a concrete method language teachers can use in the classroom to analyze and interpret humor in order to boost the sociolinguistic competence of their students.

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The article begins with a brief discussion of the use of humor in the classroom and its effect on language learning. Second, I define humor and introduce the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) as the method I propose to be used by teachers and students to make sense of humor in authentic texts. Third, I discuss humor in relation to competence followed by a brief review of the concepts of cooperation and relevance as they pertain to humor. And finally, I analyze four sample scenes from two US sitcoms, *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre & Prady, 2007) and *Friends* (Crane & Kauffman, 1994) demonstrating how to apply the GTVH to any humorous text.

Theoretical Foundations

Humor in the language classroom

Task-based language teaching, one current approach within the communicative method focuses on achieving meaningful classroom instruction. Genuine materials used in class, defined by Douglas (2010) as texts that have been “produced in an actual communicative situation” (p. 25) rather than with a language learner in mind, provide learners with the real-life task of coming to terms with language that is actually used in the target speech community. One such genuine type of text are sitcoms since they have not been created for language learners but rather for a broad audience of primarily native speakers. Sitcoms that are analyzed in the classroom instead of prefabricated jokes in some textbook are therefore ideal texts which invite students to come to terms with actual instances of the humor present in the target language. However, given that humor is very complex (Dunbar, Launay, & Curry, 2016), “quite often involv[ing] linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural elements that are too subtle or complex for L2 learners to interpret unaided” (Bell, 2005, p. 215), Bell suggests that “the best place to tackle humour” (2005, p. 215) is within the safety of the language classroom. It is exactly the meta-communication between teacher and students about genuine linguistic data, in this case jokes found in sitcoms, which support second language learning (Bell, 2005, p. 215).

Robinson (2011) asserts that progressively more complex tasks positively affect the learners’ attention to input which, in turn, provides opportunities for learning to take place. But, in order for any language learning task to support learning, teachers need to have a clear understanding of the tasks they are asking their students to perform. A taxonomy I find very useful because it allows teachers to situate their tasks on a continuum of increasing complexity in terms of the cognitive, interactive, and learner factors involved in the task has been proposed by Robinson and Gilabert (2007). While the interactive and learner factors such as participants, aptitude, and motivation are certainly important to take into consideration when analyzing learner tasks, I will only focus on the cognitive factors since they involve different types of reasoning and background knowledge which are paramount for the comprehension of humor (the interested reader will find the complete taxonomy in Robinson and Gilabert, 2007, on page 164). According to this classification, humor is cognitively highly demanding which means any task that involves humor needs to be carefully sequenced to ensure that it does not overwhelm students.

Another potential problem is that there is to date no clear definition of humor nor a concrete method to help students analyze and interpret genuine humorous texts in the language teaching literature. In the section below, I introduce the definition of humor we use in linguistics and I briefly explain the GTVH which I propose as the tool to be used in

the language classroom to aid the students' comprehension of naturally occurring humor in the target language.

Defining and analyzing humor

To date, there is only one linguistic definition of humor that is generally accepted by humor scholars. Proposed by Raskin (1985), it states that verbal humor, the kind of humor we are concerned with in this article, is any text that meets the following two conditions:

- The text is compatible with two different scripts
- The scripts are fully or partially opposed (Raskin, 1985).

To demonstrate how verbal humor plays with two opposing scripts, let us look at a funny scene from *The Big Bang Theory*:

Leonard: Oh dammit, my glasses. Okay, I'm blind here guys, can you help me find them?
Howard: Sorry. (Crunching sound) Found 'em.
 (The Big Bang Theory)

Howard's response plays with the expectation that not only did he find Leonard's glasses but that these are in their original condition (script one), an expectation raised by the text itself. However, the fact that he steps on them gives rise to the second, and opposed, script in that while Howard did indeed find the glasses, they are not in their original condition (i.e., broken) which makes them unwearable and, as a consequence, useless. As a result, the two scripts (the usefulness vs. uselessness of the glasses) clash with each other creating the humorous effect. Interestingly, though, the text itself does not provide the second script. Rather, the audience will have to observe Howard stepping on the glasses (or hear the crunching sound) for the second script to become available. Just focusing on the text itself is therefore not sufficient to explain the humorous effect in this scene.

The General Theory of Verbal Humor, which consists of six knowledge resources, allows us to analyze the humorous text above in more detail (Attardo, 2008):

- Script Opposition (SO): The two scripts inherent in the text
- Logical Mechanism (LM): The technique or type of reasoning that opposes the two scripts
- Situation (SI): The context
- Target (TA): The entity towards which the humor is directed
- Narrative Strategy (NS): The genre of the text
- Language (LA): The linguistic particularities of the text

Looking back at the scene above, we are now able to provide a more in-depth analysis of how the humorous effect was created (the detailed explanation will be provided below):

SO: NORMAL/ABNORMAL (useful/useless)
 LM: garden-path
 SI: finding someone's glasses by stepping on them
 TA: n/a
 NS: dialogue
 LA: n/a

To begin with, the GTVH distinguishes between two levels of scripts, a basic (or universal) one and a text-specific one. According to Raskin (1985), there are only three basic *script*

oppositions or “binary categories which are essential to human life” (p. 113): NORMAL/ABNORMAL, GOOD/BAD, and REAL/UNREAL, identified with upper-case letters to distinguish them from the text-specific scripts. The text-specific scripts, which will ultimately fall into one of the basic scripts listed above and are written in lower case, are the situation-specific scripts the text plays with. Looking at the scene transcribed above, the text plays with the opposing basic scripts NORMAL vs. ABNORMAL. The NORMAL script refers to what the audience would expect, namely that now that the glasses have been found, they can be used again thus giving rise to the text-specific script ‘useful’. The ABNORMAL script, on the other hand, is evoked by the glasses being stepped on causing the glasses to become ‘useless’, the text-specific script, giving rise to the unexpected, basic script ABNORMAL. Since the second script is opposed to the first one, the text is per definition above funny.

The particular *logical mechanism* uniting the two opposed scripts is called garden-path, a very common technique which leads the listener to believe something only to find the opposite to be true (for a discussion of different logical mechanisms, see Attardo, Hempelmann, & Di Maio, 2002). The co-text (Howard’s response *Found ‘em*) sets us up into believing that he found the glasses and we expect that he will consequently return them to Leonard when, simultaneously, we observe him stepping on them which makes him unable to return the glasses in their original condition. We are therefore first made to believe that the glasses are useful only to realize next that they are not useful anymore since they are now broken.

The *situation* helps us identify any potential contextual clues that might aid us in the comprehension of the humor contained in the text. In the scene we are analyzing, the situation is important because the second, opposed script is actually evoked by the non-verbal action of stepping on the glasses rather than the verbal act of ‘Found ‘em’. The linguistic features of the utterance ‘Found ‘em’, in turn, are unmarked or not especially interesting, rendering the knowledge resource *language* irrelevant here because there are no special linguistic features that would provide an additional clue to the listener that the utterance may have been intended as humorous (see the discussion on cooperation below). Finally, the knowledge resource *target*, which refers to the butt of the joke, is irrelevant here as well since none of the participants are being attacked.

As I will demonstrate below, the same knowledge resources can be used by the language teacher to help students make sense of jokes that at first sight might be incomprehensible. The knowledge resource *language*, in particular, focuses the learners’ attention on form while grappling with the meaning giving even highly proficient learners an opportunity to map known or unknown structures to new meanings allowing them to further develop their sociolinguistic competence. But, before we get to the analysis of more examples, let us have a closer look at the relationship between humor and competence and how that might affect the non-native language teacher (and student).

Humor: A question of competence

Sitcoms make for perfect authentic material because the studio laughter helps identify the humorous acts (although laughter is not a necessary condition for humor) which are based on typical events and characters that especially young adult learners can easily identify with while being exposed to the target language and culture. However, the non-native teacher often feels anxious about using sitcoms in the classroom because he is concerned

that his potential inability to understand the jokes will cause his learners to believe him incompetent in general. I argue, however, that a teacher who fails to explain a joke is not automatically incompetent.

Let us first consider linguistic competence. Even though linguistic competence includes all areas of grammar, it is usually not the reason for an advanced non-native or near-native language teacher's failure to understand the joke. As I explain elsewhere (Banitz, 2009), it is indeed possible for a listener to miss a joke even though all the linguistic information is available. Therefore, a lack of linguistic competence is not the culprit.

Another possibility is that the teacher lacks humor competence, defined by Raskin (1985) as the capacity to deem a joke-carrying text funny. According to Attardo (1994), however, we possess an innate capacity to detect the semantic mechanisms underlying the joke-carrying text, i.e., the *script oppositions* discussed above, and are therefore able to judge any given text as funny if it meets the minimum conditions of the text playing with two (partially) opposed scripts. Hence, a teacher who fails to grasp a joke does not suffer from humor *incompetence* either.

The third alternative is that the teacher lacks communicative competence. Yet a closer look at the different types of humor reveals that this is not the case. Schmitz (2002, p. 89) classifies humor as follows:

- universal or reality-based humor
- culture-based humor
- linguistic or word-based humor

Universal humor plays with scripts that are familiar to speakers from all over the world and that would be considered as either normal/abnormal, good/bad, or real/unreal by any listener independent of their cultural background (these are the basic binary categories proposed by Raskin, 1985, discussed above). Reality-based humor, on the other hand, is non-verbal and depends on particular observable events happening at the moment. The scene analyzed at the beginning of this article, for example, is an instance of reality-based humor because the audience watches as Howard steps on the glasses. If the joke is based on any one of the basic binary categories mentioned above or involves reality-based humor, the teacher (and students) should have no problem in detecting the two opposing scripts.

Culture-based humor, on the other hand, requires specific cultural knowledge. Often, to understand these jokes, the listener has to be familiar with a specific speech community's attitude towards the target of the joke, which can be challenging for the non-native teacher because of a lack of exposure to this particular kind of information. But, since nothing hinders him to detect the missing script and to make sense of the joke when provided with the missing information, a teacher who fails to understand a highly allusive joke about something he has had no previous experience with cannot be said to lack communicative competence.

Finally, linguistic or word-based humor plays with a marked use of language. This is the case, for example, with puns or the juxtaposition of literal versus non-literal meaning. The teacher who does not know that the first script has another meaning will not be able to detect the second script. Nevertheless, I insist, rather than labeling the teacher as incompetent, this situation provides an authentic learning opportunity for both the teacher

and the students because it is one rare case in which the teacher actually may not have the answer. If he then invites his students to solve the problem by looking for the second script, he simultaneously creates a meaningful task for the students that, as I argue above, fosters language learning. For the students, the search for the evasive second script will come naturally. This point I discuss in more detail below.

Cooperation and the search for the missing script

According to Grice (see Grundy, 2008), any normal conversation is considered to be *bona-fide* (literally, in good faith) in that the interlocutors cooperate with one another following a number of rules or maxims which ensure mutual understanding. But there are situations in which speakers opt to violate one or more of these maxims rendering the conversation *non-bona-fide*. Lying is one case in which the speaker deviates from the *bona-fide* mode of communication in that he is not telling the truth. More importantly, though, he also expects the listener to remain in the *bona-fide* mode and to assume that the speaker is telling the truth. In this case, speaker and listener are in different modes of communication (otherwise the listener would catch the lie!) making the conversation non-cooperative.

Humor is another deviation from the *bona-fide* mode of communication but, contrary to lying, relies heavily on the cooperation between the speaker and the listener. Mutual understanding using humor only happens if the listener is ready to be 'humored', i.e., he is in the same *non-bona fide*, humor mode (Raskin, 1985) as the speaker. Once the listener has recognized that the speaker is in the humor mode, he will expect a message that is not literal and therefore not obvious right away. In addition, according to Wilson and Sperber (2006), the listener will automatically assume that the message is relevant to him and, as a consequence, he feels inclined to cooperate and willingly invests more effort while searching for the second script in order to make sense of the message. The reason for the listener's cooperation is based on the principle of relevance, explained in Wilson and Sperber's (2006) Relevance Theory.

Wilson and Sperber (2006) postulate that relevance is based on two principles – a cognitive one and a communicative one. From a cognitive perspective, Wilson and Sperber (2006) argue that the goal of human cognition is to obtain relevant information and that a listener will therefore expect a speaker to provide information relevant to him because he recognizes the speaker's intention to inform. This is also known as ostensive behavior. From a communicative perspective, the listener will automatically infer that what the speaker tells him is relevant to him and if it is not obviously so, he, the listener, will look for the context in which the speaker's utterance will become relevant. Always assuming cooperation between listener and speaker, these principles are so strong that rather than accepting an utterance as irrelevant *per se*, the listener will continue to try to make sense of the utterance until his expectations of relevance are met (for a summary of Relevance Theory, also see Grundy, 2008, chapter 6). Applying Relevance Theory to humor, we can say that once a second script has been found that matches the context established by the joke text, the joke will fire resulting in the desired cognitive effect of enjoyment.

Since a sitcom is by definition funny, ingenious scriptwriters exploit the audience's expectation of humor and willingness to cooperate by obscuring the second script. That way, the audience stays hooked and is forced to hunt for the evasive opposed script. This effect can be exploited by the language teacher because, even if the risk of not getting the joke is higher with materials from sitcoms, the students willingly search for the second

script once the studio laughter signals that humor has taken place. This cognitively complex task will appear natural to the students because their failure to understand the joke made them aware of an obvious gap in knowledge they are eager to fill in order to obtain the desired cognitive effect of having the joke fire. As an added plus, the new information required to detect the second script automatically becomes relevant to the students turning the new input into uptake which results in learning.

By paying attention to the contextual cues provided in the scene and using the GTVH to analyze the text when searching for the missing second script, the teacher fosters active student participation while confronting the learners with authentic language- and/or culture-based problems. Since the students share a natural interest in finding a feasible solution, they engage with the authentic material, learn more about the target language, and continue to develop their sociolinguistic competence in the process.

Next, I analyze four humorous scenes from popular US sitcoms to exemplify how teachers can employ the GTVH to work with authentic sitcom materials.

Sample Analysis and Discussion

We begin with a scene in which the joke-carrying text provides both scripts. In this scene from *Friends*, Phoebe is teaching Joey how to play the guitar by showing him different finger positions which she has named in rather odd ways:

Joey: Hey, Pheebs! Check this out. (Holds up his hand in one of Phoebe's chords.)

Phoebe: Ooh, you nailed the Old Lady!

(Friends)

SO: NORMAL/ABNORMAL (no sex/sex)

LM: juxtaposition (literal vs. idiomatic expression)

SI: Joey tries to mimic the chords

TA: n/a

NS: dialogue

LA: idiomatic expression (category: linguistic humor)

The co-text leading to the pun activates the second script, sex, an expectation raised as soon as Phoebe labels one of the chords *Old Lady*. The second, opposed script is therefore made explicit to the audience as long as the viewers understand the meaning of the idiomatic expression *to nail the Old Lady*. Learners at the intermediate or even advanced level might not have been exposed to this idiom and the teacher can invite them to look up its meaning thus becoming aware of the second script.

The second example is from a scene in which the opposed script has been provided in a previous scene which the audience needs to reactivate in order to understand the joke. Or, if the audience was not watching, searching for the second script and encountering the most relevant solution will result in the viewers' learning something previously unknown about one of the characters. The excerpt is from *The Big Bang Theory* in which Leonard, entering the apartment, walks in on Penny and Sheldon immersed in a computer game making the following remark to Penny:

Leonard: [...] you know there are groceries outside of your apartment?

Penny: Yeah yeah yeah, shhh!

Leonard: I only bring it up because your ice cream is melting and it's starting to attract wildlife.

(The Big Bang Theory)

SO: NORMAL/ABNORMAL (domestic animal/wild animal)
 LM: exaggeration (calling a cat a wild animal)
 SI: talking about the cat that got into the grocery bags
 TA: Penny
 NS: dialogue
 LA: wildlife (marked choice of words; category: linguistic humor)

In this scene, the audience must either know that the term *wildlife* refers to a cat that was shown in a previous scene, or, if the viewer missed this information, he will have to deduce that Penny might have a cat (or a dog) which would be the most likely or relevant explanation given the situation. If the first scenario is the case, the audience will find it funny simply because of the absurdity of calling a cat a wild animal. If the second case is true, the audience will have to supply the second script to render the text funny. As I argue above, if the latter is the case, the viewer will be readily looking for a plausible second script simply because the text is supposed to be funny. It is also a good example of how the audience has no problem in detecting the humor once the new information has been accommodated.

An interesting way to use this scene in class is to first ask students to create a mind map of *wildlife* and then to have them watch the scene, omitting the part where the cat is shown. Afterwards, the teacher asks the learners what animal Leonard is most likely referring to discussing exaggeration as a linguistic strategy to create a humorous effect. At the end, students watch the complete scene to corroborate their hypotheses.

The third example involves a more complex opposed script as it plays with linguistic and cultural knowledge simultaneously. The scene is from *Friends* and the audience has to provide the second script because it is not explicit in the context or the co-text. The co-text, however, provides clues that allude to the second script which guide the search for the missing script, although these hints might be lost on a language teacher or learner who is not familiar with the specific cultural reference. In this situation, Joey has met a young woman from the Netherlands whom he is trying to impress when Chandler walks in on them.

Chandler: And the other, ah, Dutch people, they come from somewhere near the Netherlands, right?

Joey: Nice try, (to Margha) see the Netherlands is this make-believe place where Peter Pan and Tinker Bell come from.

(Friends)

SO: NORMAL/ABNORMAL (neutral/ridiculous)
 LM: juxtaposition (Netherlands vs. Neverland)
 SI: Joey and Chandler are trying to impress Margha and both are failing miserably
 TA: (indirectly both Joey and Chandler)
 NS: dialogue
 LA: Netherlands (phonetic similarity; category: linguistic humor)

Chandler's utterance is funny by itself but let us only focus on Joey's reply because, in and of itself, it is not funny yet it provides sufficient clues for the audience to encounter the missing script. When Joey mentions *Peter Pan* and *Tinker Bell*, to the listener familiar with both characters, the cultural script *Neverland* is activated, a cultural reference. What further guides the viewer into this direction is the phonetic similarity of *Neverland* to *Netherlands*, which makes this joke a linguistic one according to Schmitz' classification

discussed above. Still, the audience has to provide the second script which then is juxtaposed with the first one rendering Joey's correction of Chandler even more ridiculous than Chandler's utterance.

The viewer, learner, or teacher who lacks the cultural referent will miss the point of the joke. This can be remedied by conducting a simple search on the Internet. But even learners who are familiar with the characters might not have the term *Neverland* readily available. In that case, the teacher can prompt it with images or a video clip thus encouraging the students to find the missing script. Students at a higher proficiency level might only need the teacher's hint regarding the phonetic similarity of both words. In either case, this scene can also be used as a novel introduction to US popular culture and the role of Disney movies.

And finally, the fourth example, again from *The Big Bang Theory*, is a case which lacks the second script completely. It is precisely this absence that causes the text to be funny. In this scene, Penny observes Sheldon who in a previous scene has been involved in a computer game and typed *AFK* before leaving the game for a moment:

Penny: What's AFK?

Sheldon: AFK. Away from keyboard.

Penny: Oh, I see.

Sheldon: What does that stand for?

Penny: Oh, I see?

Sheldon: Yes, but what does it stand for?

(The Big Bang Theory)

SO: NORMAL/ABNORMAL (phrase/acronym)

LM: garden-path (without resolution)

SI: using acronyms to communicate messages during a computer game

TA: n/a

NS: dialogue

LA: Oh, I see (as opposed to OIC; category: linguistic humor)

The resulting puzzlement and apparent inability by both characters to solve the problem is in itself funny but more intriguing is the fact that the garden-path technique of script opposition leads the viewer, and Sheldon, into thinking that the expression *Oh I see* is an acronym that stands for something else when, in fact, it does not. This is a situation in which the potential second script, *OIC*, actually does not exist and the viewer's search for it leads him nowhere which renders the text, and the situation, absurd. The audience's failure in making sense of the text, mimicking the characters' puzzlement, makes the text funny. This is also a good example of why the teacher who is not able to pinpoint the second script is not automatically incompetent; maybe there just is no real second script. This scene also provides an opportunity for the teacher to discuss word formation processes in English focusing especially on the appropriate use of acronyms in different registers.

Conclusions

As I have argued in this article, the use of sitcom humor in the foreign language classroom provides genuine linguistic data that facilitates language learning and a lack of comprehension of a given joke on the part of the teacher cannot be considered incompetence. Rather, the very nature of humor promises complex authentic tasks to be

resolved by the teacher and his students in the safety of the classroom. Potential failure to understand leads to an explicit focus on form (i.e., noticing) which, in turn, provides a wonderful learning opportunity. The analysis and discussion of funny scenes from different sitcoms exemplified the use of the GTVH to explore a plethora of authentic funny material with students without fear of negative consequences, which are a real possibility outside the classroom.

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