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978-1-107-00463-4 — Meaning and Humour
Andrew Goatly
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1 Introduction

1.1. ABOUT THIS BOOK

1.1.1. Why write this book?

Anyone interested in semantics and pragmatics, the way meanings are coded in language and produced or interpreted in context, notices that jokes exemplify various kinds of ambiguity or risk to meaning. Of particular interest, as an object of study, is the question of what knowledge is necessary in order to understand a joke. This might be knowledge of the language code (a matter mostly of semantics) or background knowledge for making the inferences necessary for getting the joke (a matter of pragmatics). Teaching semantics and pragmatics over the years, I realised that jokes can be analysed by using semantic and pragmatic theory, an attempt which prompts one to question and develop theory when the joke is difficult to explain. But the converse is also true: jokes might be a useful way into teaching semantics and pragmatics.

At the most banal level the present book uses jokes as a peg on which to hang theoretical concepts, but it aims to achieve more than that. At least jokes might function as a mnemonic – helping students remember the theoretical concepts through remembering and enjoying the joke. Moreover, for students for whom English is not a first language, humour might be a useful pedagogic tool in developing competence (O'Mara, Waller and Todman 2002). "The use of humour in the classroom has been shown (e.g. Ziv 1979) to increase ease of learning and to be a good pedagogical resource overall (Gentilhomme 1992)" (Attardo 1994: 211). But most crucially, distinct from other books in the series *Key Topics in Semantics and Pragmatics*, it explores the interface between humour theory and linguistic theories of various kinds, especially the pragmatic Relevance Theory, and the psychologically tinged corpus/text-linguistic theory known as priming theory. It does, however, exploit other

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linguistic approaches quite eclectically, touching on systemic functional linguistics, speech act theory, conversational analysis and genre theory. I hope that, above all in Chapter 11, it might contribute to linguistic theory in its own right.

One of the advantages of using jokes as an introduction to the study of meaning is that jokes are authentic texts, whereas many semantics and pragmatics textbooks use made-up examples. There has been a minor revolution in linguistics since computers facilitated the storage of large text corpora, and the interrogation of these corpora with concordancing software for collocational data. Originally the scientific study of meaning was undertaken in the tradition associated with the twentieth century's most famous linguist, Noam Chomsky, where data consisted of the intuitions of an ideal native speaker. However, this tradition has been challenged, since the 1980s, with an approach which takes real recorded textual evidence more seriously. Jokes and humorous narratives belong in the category of authentic texts. Nevertheless, many are as short as the traditional made-up examples in semantic textbooks (none quoted in this book is more than one page long).

In step with these developments in linguistic theory, this book, though beginning by introducing basic traditional categories in semantics and pragmatics, extends to recent text-oriented theories. In particular, it progresses towards a discussion of the work of the late John Sinclair on collocation and the theory of lexical priming that Michael Hoey (2005) has recently built upon it. The semantic notion of ambiguity comes under scrutiny, along with an exploration of the extent to which ambiguity is present in most authentic texts, and whether it is rather artificial in humour. Moreover, by the use of judicious discussion topics, the book persists in challenging traditional semantic and pragmatic approaches, and, further, ends with a critique of Hoey's text-based theory itself.

This book is designed for advanced undergraduates or students on taught post-graduate courses in English language, (applied) linguistics or the philosophy of language. It attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of theories of different kinds of meaning and how they are encoded or implied in texts. It could therefore be a core textbook for courses in semantics and pragmatics. However, the jokes and activities, in particular, provide a resource to be used selectively in other linguistics courses, such as discourse analysis, morphology or even phonology. It should also be of use to students of humour studies, and less specifically of cultural studies, communication studies, and stylistics.

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1.1.2. What's in this book?

The book consists of eleven chapters. After this introduction, Chapter 2 locates the study of meaning within the language system at a level above phonology. Looking downwards it illustrates the contribution of phonology to meaning through malapropisms, dyslexic jokes, etc. At the lowest meaningful level it considers the inflectional and derivational morphology of words. And looking up a level beyond the word it considers multiple-word lexical items – semi-fixed expressions, compounds of various classes, and idioms. From a humour standpoint it explores how jokes blur and problematise the boundaries of linguistic units operating at different levels, for instance by re-analysis.

Chapter 3 concerns sense, logical or conceptual meaning, as expressed in grammar. It concentrates on two areas, the meanings of modification of the noun phrase and the meanings of the clause, following, respectively, work by Ferris (1993) and by Halliday (1985/1994). It explains the different kinds of modification, such as ascription, association, and the overlapping categories of classifiers and epithets, as well as considering the ambiguities in the scope of modification. As for the clause, it introduces the various semantic categories of process types and participants, with a power hierarchy of these participants, and gives a brief example of critical linguistic analysis using these. It proceeds to a discussion of nominalisation and passivisation, and their consequences for introducing gaps into meaning. The concentration on the meaning of the clause allows scope for the illustration of syntactic ambiguity as a resource for humour.

Chapter 4 deals with areas traditionally the staple for semantics, the sense, or conceptual meaning, of lexis. It considers the logical basis of conceptual meaning by introducing the basic sense relations of synonymy, entailment, inconsistency, contradiction and tautology. It discusses semantic ambiguity based on homophony, homography and polysemy, and different forms of presupposition. It deals with meaning oppositions – complementarity, multiple-incompatibility, polar oppositions, converses, transitivity and symmetry, and meaning relations such as meronymy and hyponymy. The role of componential analysis and selection restrictions in this logical approach to meaning is demonstrated. However, it questions the psychological validity of this logical approach, and considers vagueness and fuzziness, prototypes, radial categories and family resemblances. Throughout it exemplifies lexical and sense relation ambiguities as used in humour, especially puns.

Chapter 5 introduces other kinds of meaning besides the conceptual: reflected, connotative, affective and social meanings. Particular emphasis

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is given to affective meaning, where we explore emotive lexis, evaluation and appraisal, and amplification through rhythmic repetition and syntactic parallelism; and to social meaning, which includes not only the dialectal, age and status meanings of lexis, but also the interpersonal meaning expressed by grammar through mood and modality. It illustrates humour dependent on stylistic mixing, and stresses humour's interpersonal functions.

Chapter 6 concentrates on the kinds of meaning associated with language use in textual and generic contexts. It covers collocational meaning, thematic meaning – the ordering of information in the clause and the role of intonation in establishing focus and contrast – and the cohesive relations within texts. An introduction to genre and register provides a way of tying together all aspects of meaning and locating them in a social context. A major section surveys the literature on different genres of jokes (humour) and their similarities to narrative, as well as genre-mixing as a humour resource. The chapter ends with a critique of stable de-contextualised notions of meaning, giving evidence for this critique with a brief excursus into varieties of meaning change.

Chapter 7 considers metonymy and, more importantly, metaphor and their role in meaning and humour. This is a pivotal chapter between semantics and pragmatics; conventional metaphors have become de-motivated and incorporated into semantics, whereas original metaphors are more dependent on pragmatic inferencing for their interpretation. First, the chapter explores the role of deletion in metonymy and the consequent ambiguities in genres, such as headlines, with their abbreviated grammar. It then discusses the distinction between original and conventional metaphors. After a sketch of experientialist theories of conceptual metaphor, data from the author's database *Metalude* illustrates conceptual metaphor themes and their role in jokes and humour. Metaphorical elaboration in texts is also explored – literalisation, extension and mixing. The chapter ends with thorough discussion of the commonalities and differences between jokes, irony and metaphor.

Chapter 8 shifts from semantics into pragmatics. It focuses initially on the boundaries of semantics and pragmatics, outlining degrees of motivation in relation to symbols, indexes and icons. In this context it explores the notion that central to humour is a kind of language play which attempts a re-motivation of the linguistic sign. The chapter next delineates the different kinds of reference and the variability of reference according to place, person and time in deixis. The chapter's main focus is speech act theory, the conditions and categories of direct and

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indirect speech acts, and their participation in larger text structures as analysed in conversational analysis. The chapter ends with a critique of the theory and the problems in applying it to discourse. The chapter exemplifies referential and speech act category ambiguities and infelicitous speech acts as a source of humour.

Chapter 9 continues the introduction to pragmatic theory with a focus on inferential pragmatics. It explains Paul Grice's (1975) co-operative principle, how maxims are observed in standard implicature, or how they are broken through violation, flouting, opting out, suspension and infringement, with jokes providing examples. It discusses and questions the claim that joking violates the co-operative principle. The end of the chapter stresses the need for interpersonal pragmatics and politeness theory, introducing the politeness principle and theories of face, and discussing humour in the context of modesty and banter.

Chapter 10 is based on an extension to Gricean theory – Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). Topics include vagueness and the explication of propositions, propositional attitude, contextual effects and processing effort, the role of different kinds of knowledge in deriving implicatures, and the storage of knowledge in schemas. This provides an opportunity to explore script/schema opposition theories of humour. Another aspect of Relevance Theory delineated here is the theory of echoic utterances, including the reporting of speech, the use of proverbs, allusions and other kinds of intertextuality. The echoic theory of irony is discussed and extended.

Chapter 11 summarises theories of text-linguistics including the role and importance of collocation, and the relationship between meaning, information and predictability. It focuses on Hoey's priming theory and its hypotheses, especially the idea that different, potentially ambiguous meanings of the same word-form have different collocational, thematic and semantic profiles, with the result that in their context and co-text these word forms are often not ambiguous. Hoey (2005) hypothesises that humour is often achieved by these profiles or "primings" being over-ridden to create an unlikely meaning. The last chapter tests this hypothesis by examining examples of jokes dependent on the different kinds of ambiguity covered throughout the book, and investigating whether concordance data indicate that the least predictable un-primed meaning is essential to the ambiguity. Such exemplification constitutes a sort of summary of the areas of semantics and pragmatics covered in previous chapters. The chapter continues with a critique of Hoey's

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new theory, both in its own right, and in its ability to account for and extend the script-opposition theories of humour.

Besides summarising different kinds of linguistic humour, the last chapter also represents the climax of the book in terms of an exploration into linguistic theories of humour. While numerous references are made to the particular insights of linguistically based humour theory throughout the first ten chapters, the last chapter makes space for a more coherent discussion of theories of humour as incongruity, liberation and control, and hints at how they might be integrated into semantic and pragmatic theory.

1.2. SEMANTIC TYPOGRAPHY

Before beginning a book to do with meaning, it is important to establish typographical conventions in order to avoid the kind of ambiguity exploited in the following joke:

> Beware of tennis players – love means nothing to them. (Tibballs 2006: 540)

This could be paraphrased either as

> Tennis players are short on emotional commitment to sexual relationships.

or

> Tennis players use the word *love* to mean 'zero'.

The ambiguity depends upon the fact that language can either be used to make a statement about the world beyond language or be mentioned in order to make a statement about language itself. This is known as **the use–mention distinction**. So in "love means nothing to them", "love" is either involved in describing the sexual mores of tennis players, a **use**, or has its own meaning described, i.e. 'nothing', a **mention**. In this latter case the language employed to describe the meaning is called **metalanguage**, and the bit of language described is known as **object language**.[1]

In order to distinguish between uses and mentions this book employs typographical conventions. The "use" meaning of the joke will not need to employ any special typography, just as it is presented above. But according to the typography adopted here, the "mention" meaning of the joke would appear as

> Beware of tennis players – *love* means 'nothing' to them. (Tibballs 2006: 540)

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Single inverted commas are used for the meaning, and italics are used for the word-form as **type**, which constitutes some kind of generalisation about the many individual uses or **tokens** of the word-form.[2] To understand this **type–token distinction**, look at the coins in your pocket. If you have three 2p pieces, four 5p pieces and one 10p piece, how many coins do you have? You have three coin types and eight coin tokens. Or refer back to the first sentence of Section 1.1.1, where there are twenty-seven word forms as types and thirty-one as tokens.

The following humorous sentence from a newspaper uses the typographical convention for mentioning tokens, i.e. double inverted commas:

> Miss Charlene Mason sang "I will not pass this way again," giving obvious pleasure to the congregation. (Tibballs 2006: 495)

The ambiguity here is quite subtle. Firstly, if you quote what is said, or in this case sung, it counts as a mention, because the statement made cannot be attributed to you, only to the person making the statement. However, the added subtlety in this case is that, when Miss Mason performs, what she sings is in fact also a mention by her: she is not actually stating that she herself will not pass this way again. However, the joke depends upon pretending that she is stating this, that her utterance is a use, the implication being that she sang so badly the congregation is mightily pleased she will never return.[3]

A further convention concerning word-forms is useful when distinguishing the phonetic form from the written or graphic form.

> Waiter, waiter, why is my steak so small?
> Well, sir, that's what we call a minute steak.

The ambiguity here cannot be represented in print by spelling: we need a phonetic representation of the different sounds of the word-form as type, distinguished typographically by slants, e.g. /mɪnɪt/ meaning 'a period of 60 seconds'; /mɑɪnjuːt/ meaning 'very small'.

So far we have been dealing with words or word-forms. But, in the study of meaning it is often useful to think of a category even more abstract than the word as type, which lies behind various word-forms. This is the **lexeme** or **lexical item**. The following joke depends upon not only a use–mention distinction, but also the fact that the mention may be of the lexeme rather than just the word-type.

> A blonde went to the library and chose a book called HOW TO HUG.
> It turned out to be volume seven of the Oxford English Dictionary.
> (after Tibballs 2006: 533)

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The blonde mistakes a dictionary – which is metalanguage and object language throughout – for a manual on embracing. HOW and HUG in small caps in fact represent lexemes listed in the dictionary. Under the headword or lexeme HUG, one can find various types of word-forms, *hug*, *hugs*, *hugging*, *hugged*, all instances of the same lexeme, and examples of tokens of their uses. For instance, in the Oxford English Dictionary we have

> **1661** *LOVELL Hist. Anim*. Introd., The love of apes is such towards their young, that they often kill them by hugging them. ***c*1705** *POPE Jan. & May* 1813 He hugg'd her close, and kiss'd her o'er and o'er. **1841** *DICKENS Barn. Rudge* xli, Dolly . . . threw her arms round her old father's neck and hugged him tight.

When searching for all the inflected forms of the same lexeme in a corpus one often uses the uninflected form or the initial part of the word, which is called the **lemma**. This is represented by its italicised type followed by an asterisk, e.g. *hug**.

There is one more notation we will use.

> On the whole men are more violent than animals. But women aren't.

This joke, if you can call it that, depends upon an ambiguity in the meaning of the word *man*. We might think "men" in the first sentence refers to humans in general. But the second sentence indicates that it only refers to the male members of humankind. The meaning of *man* has one more component of meaning than we at first thought, which we call a componential feature. So at first we think of the meaning of *man* as [+HUMAN], but reading on we add another feature [+HUMAN, +MALE].

To sum up, the typographical conventions employed in this book to distinguish object language, language as mention, and to describe it metalinguistically are:

italics for word-form as type
//slants for phonological form as type
'single inverted commas' for meaning
"double inverted commas" for word-form as token
SMALL CAPS for lexemes
*asterisk** after the initial uninflected part of a word form type for lemma
[+CAPS IN SQUARE BRACKETS] for componential features of meaning

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Activity 1.1

Analyse the following four jokes in terms of the confusion between language use and language mention, employing the concepts of 'metalanguage' and 'object language'. Write your answers using the typographical conventions introduced above (if handwritten you may want to use underlining instead of *italics*).

a. To some – marriage is a word . . . to others – a sentence. (Ng 2005: 13)
b. What's orange and sounds like a parrot? A carrot.
c. He walked with a pronounced limp. Pronounced L-I-M-P. (Alexander 1997: 53)
d. That girl speaks 18 languages and can't say no in any of them. (Tibballs 2006: 658)

Comment

a. (i) To some *marriage* is a word . . .
(ii) To some [marriage] is a sentence.
In the first clause "marriage" is object language, a mention, and "is a word" is metalanguage describing it. The second clause has to be a use: some people feel imprisoned or punished by marriage. The joke depends upon the ambiguity of *sentence*, which represents two lexemes: SENTENCE$_1$, 'punishment handed down by a court' or SENTENCE$_2$, 'a linguistic unit comprising one or more clauses'. Since *sentence* in this second meaning is a metalingual term, and "sentence" occurs after "word", which can only have a metalingual meaning, we first access the metalingual SENTENCE$_2$ and are then forced to reject it.

b. This example, too, plays on the use–mention distinction. As a mention focussing on form *a carrot* /ə kærət/ sounds like *a parrot* /ə pærət/. As a use a carrot is orange.

c. (i) pronounced limp
(ii) pronounced /l/ /ɪ/ /m/ /p/
The first occurrence of "pronounced limp" is a use, with "pronounced" representing the meaning 'very noticeable'. The second puns on the meaning of a different lexeme, 'uttered' or 'said'.

d. This joke is slightly more complicated. "Say no" as a use means 'refuse'. But "say no" as a mention cannot really be represented as "say *no*", since the form of the object language will only be *no* in English not the girl's other seventeen or eighteen languages. It must mean, therefore, 'say the word with the equivalent meaning to the English word-form *no*'. With this focus on meaning rather than form, perhaps the best notation is:

That girl speaks 18 languages and can't say 'no' in any of them (Tibballs 2006: 658).

The theme of use-versus-mention will be revisited in Chapter 10 where we discuss echoic utterances in relation to the pragmatic Relevance

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Theory. But the metalingual function is often important in jokes. And it is worth locating jokes in relation to this and other language functions. To do this we can make use of Jakobson's model of communication.

1.3. JAKOBSON'S MODEL OF COMMUNICATION AND THE METALINGUAL FUNCTION

Jakobson, a linguist of the Prague school who later lectured at MIT, advanced a model in which an act of communication involves six elements: addresser, addressee, context (topic and setting), message, contact (medium and channel) and code (see Figure 1.1) (1960: 353).[4] Briefly, an **addresser** (for example, a speaker), who has some **channel** for physical sense contact (air through which sound waves can travel) linking her/him with the **addressee** (the hearer), and a productive **medium** for creating a physical sign (the speech apparatus of mouth, lips, tongue, vocal cords etc.), selects items from the **code** (the language as system), and combines them into a **message** concerning a particular topic in a particular social and physical setting – the **context**. The addressee, who has a receptive medium (the auditory apparatus), and a knowledge of the code, receives the message and decodes it.

The power of Jakobson's model lies in its incorporation of different functions of language (given in italics in Figure 1.1). Although, he claims, all these six elements are necessary for communication, different communicative functions place emphasis on different elements: on the addresser for the **expressive** function; on the addressee for the **conative** function – an attempt to affect the actions of the addressee; on context for the **referential** function, where what is at stake is the description of the world; on contact for the **phatic** function – which is

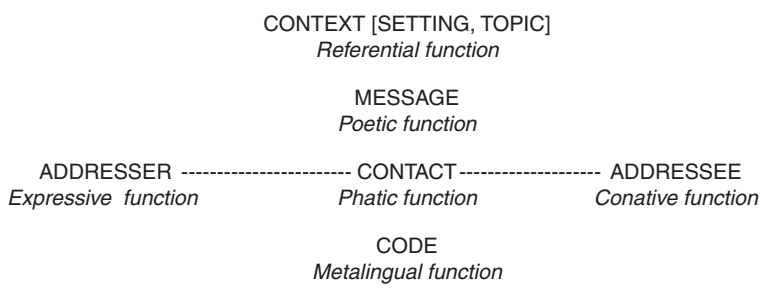

Figure 1.1. Jakobson's model of communication

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