

Getting beyond a joke: Accommodation and mismatches in humour

Christine Howes Vladislav Maraev Ellen Brietholtz
University of Gothenburg

1 Introduction

To interpret utterances in interaction, we use common-sense inferences linking background knowledge, beliefs and context to the ongoing dialogue. How a particular utterance should be interpreted relies on certain underpinning assumptions warranting these inferences. These principles of reasoning are called *topoi* (following Aristotle, ca. 340 B.C.E./2007; Ducrot, 1988). Topoi are cultural affordances accessible to members of a particular community which licence certain inferences. Accessing or accommodating an appropriate topos to interpret an utterance is therefore crucial for successful dialogue (Breitholtz, 2020). In most (arguably all) cases there is more than one potentially applicable topos and this can lead to a mismatch between interlocutors' interpretations of an utterance (Breitholtz et al., 2017). It has been proposed that this potential for mismatch is exploited in the case of humour (Attardo and Raskin, 1991). Maraev et al. (2021b) argue that the humorous effect of jokes, for example, is created by the juxtaposition of at least two different topoi which are both potentially applicable to the situation.

A common technique for creating a humorous effect is importing a topos from a different domain or type of situation to the context of the joke. This involves accommodation (Lewis, 1979; Beaver and Zeevat, 2007), the integration of new information which is in some way conveyed or hinted at in an utterance but not explicitly stated. Accommodation is frequent in dialogue and often happens seamlessly as the things we accommodate tend to be uncontroversial (Larsson, 2002; Breitholtz, 2020). One way jokes may exploit this is to set up the narrative so that one of the available topoi appears more salient than another, which then turns out to be erroneously accommodated creating a sense of surprise. This “setting up of the situation” can be seen as manipulating the priors for accommodating one topos rather than another. This can be done for example by withholding certain information, or adding misleading information that radically changes the listener's perception of the situation described in the joke scenario.

In this paper we present a pilot experiment in which we modify jokes to alter participants' access to the hidden meanings on which the humorous effect relies. We explore how participants react to modifications and what happens in the interaction if the joke is misunderstood. We will present some qualitative results and suggest how our data can be explained using notions of topoi and accommodation.

2 Method

21 participants were divided into groups of three. Each participant received two jokes to be told to the other participants in their group using video chat, and two jokes to be presented using a text-based interface. In each triad, half the jokes were presented as they appear in a joke book, whilst the other half were modified. As this is a preliminary study, we do not have sufficient data for statistical comparisons, but report instead on

some observations from the data. We also restrict the following discussion to a subset of the jokes. The modifications can be grouped into the following types:

- (1) Changing the temporal order of information crucial to the joke:
 - (a) Three vampires walk into a bar. The bartender asks the first vampire what he wants to drink. He replies, “Warm blood.” The bartender pulls a live rat out from under the bar, chops its head off, and drains the blood into a glass. He asks the second vampire what he wants to drink, and he replies “Cold blood.” The bartender pulls out another rat, chops off its head, and throws several ice cubes into the glass with the blood. The bartender asks the third vampire what he wants to drink, and the vampire says “Hot water.” The bartender is puzzled. “Don’t you want blood?” he asks. The vampire pulls a used tampon out of his jacket and says, “Oh, no, I’m making tea”.
 - (a’) [...] The bartender asks the third vampire what he wants to drink, and the vampire pulls a used tampon out of his jacket and says “Hot water.” The bartender is puzzled. “Don’t you want blood?” he asks. “Oh, no,” says the vampire, “I’m making tea”.
- (2) Making information explicit which prevents the accommodation of a salient topos thus avoiding humorous juxtaposition:
 - (b) A boy is walking down the road one day when a car pulls over. “If you get in the car”, the driver says, “I’ll give you a 10 pound note and a packet of sweets”. The boy refuses and keeps on walking. A little further up the road the man pulls over again. “Okay”, he says. “How about a 20 pound note and two packets of sweets?” The boy tells the man to piss off and carries on walking. Still further up the road the man again pulls over, “Right,” he says. “This is my final offer, I’ll give you fifty pounds and all the sweets you can eat.” The little boy stops walking, goes toward the car and leans in. “Look,” he hisses. “You bought the fucking Skoda, Dad, and you have to live with it.”
 - (b’) A boy is walking down the road one day when a car pulls over. “If you get in the car”, his dad, the driver says, “I’ll give you a 10 pound note and a packet of sweets”. [...]
- (3) Removing ambiguity which would licence the accommodation of multiple topoi:
 - (c) A man telephoned the airline office and asked, “How long does it take to fly to Boston?” The clerk said: “Just a minute...” “Thank you,” the man said and hung up.
 - (c’) A man telephoned the airline office and asked, “How long does it take to fly to Boston?” The clerk said: “Wait a minute...” “Thank you,” the man said and hung up.

3 Results and discussion

The participants view the task as a particular type of activity – joke-telling (Allwood, 2000). We conclude this as they use discourse elements that set the expectations of the others (e.g., “my joke, let’s hope it’s better”), specifically indicating that the frame is set to be joke-telling. For instance, (1) was introduced (in zoom) by:

- (4) **A:** oh it's okay because I have one last joke for you
A: it's a little more in the halloween mood but it will do
A: three vampires go into a bar

In joke-telling, there is an expectation for the joke to be perceived as funny or at least recognised as humorous (for the distinction, see Ritchie, 2018, Ch. 3). Given this, if the segment is not recognised as humorous it can trigger a clarification sequence, and such requests do indeed occur in the data (see e.g. example (5), taken from the same dialogue as (4)). Additionally, joke-tellers themselves often explain the joke by highlighting the topoi, as in (6). Interestingly this suggests that telling a joke which relies on (sometimes very) specific topoi can work as a community defining device, in that laughing suggests that you got the joke and thereby are familiar with the topoi that are common to the group (common ground in a particular community). Similarly these kind of jokes have the power to reveal who is an “outsider”. In a way this is similar to dogwhistle communication (Breitholtz and Cooper, 2021), as both processes can be seen as relying on the potential of accommodating more than one topoi, but one of them – which turns out to be the one that yields the humorous effect or dogwhistle message respectively – is “hidden”.

- (5) **C:** what
C: what? [okay]
A: [well] he was making tea
B: yeah of course because the blood that [*gestures dunking a teabag in a cup*]
- (6) **B:** apparently there's something wrong with skodas
B: there's something wrong with the fact that you own a skoda

A failure to “get” the joke also causes participants to make a potential topoi explicit. We hypothesise that jokes which are more likely to be misunderstood can be used as devices to elicit topoi and explanations, in a similar way to ‘why’ questions (Maraev et al., 2021a; Breitholtz, 2020). Example (2), especially its “broken” version is a case in point (see example (7)). This joke relies on two topoi: i) a child being abducted by a stranger (hinted at in the setup of the joke) and ii) Skoda being a car brand producing cars of substandard quality (a culturally specific topoi in Britain in the 90s). Since the first topoi is not entertained in the modified version of the joke, only the humour that comes from the second topoi remains to be understood.

- (7) **A:** [...] And the boy stops walking and says: “look dad, you bought the fucking Skoda, you have to live with it” (What is the joke? I am feeling stupid 😊)
B: Hahaha (me too 😂)
B: I didn't get it
C: I'm not so into cars but I guess the fact that the dad bought a skoda instead of another brand? 🤔
A: So does he want his son to get in the car instead of him so he doesn't have to be seen in it?
A: Or does he want the son to drive the car and break it so he can get another one?

This pilot study identifies a method that can be used for a fine-grained analysis of mechanisms involved in joke comprehension in interaction. A natural progression of this work is to conduct an experiment on a larger scale with more targeted and controlled joke modifications. The current data suggests the importance of looking beyond the punchline of the joke towards more general dialogical mechanisms which are involved in incremental process of joke telling.

Acknowledgements

References

- Allwood, J. (2000). An activity-based approach to pragmatics. In Black, W. and Bunt, H., editors, *Abduction, belief and context in dialogue*, pages 47–80. John Benjamins.
- Aristotle (2007). *On Rhetoric, a theory of civic discourse* (translated by George A. Kennedy). Oxford University Press, Oxford. (original work published ca. 340 B.C.E.).
- Attardo, S. and Raskin, V. (1991). Script theory revis (it) ed: Joke similarity and joke representation model. *Humor-International Journal of Humor Research*, 4(3-4):293–348.
- Beaver, D. and Zeevat, H. (2007). Accommodation. *The Oxford handbook of linguistic interfaces*, pages 503–536.
- Breitholtz, E. (2020). *Enthymemes and Topoi in Dialogue: The Use of Common Sense Reasoning in Conversation*. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands.
- Breitholtz, E. and Cooper, R. (2021). Dogwhistles as inferences in interaction. In *Proceedings of the Reasoning and Interaction Conference (ReInAct 2021)*, pages 40–46.
- Breitholtz, E., Howes, C., and Cooper, R. (2017). Incrementality all the way up. In *Computing Natural Language Inference Workshop at the International Conference on Computational Semantics (IWCS)*.
- Ducrot, O. (1988). Topoi et formes topique. *Bulletin d'études de la linguistique française*, 22:1–14.
- Larsson, S. (2002). *Issue-based dialogue management*. Department of Linguistics, Göteborg University.
- Lewis, D. (1979). Scorekeeping in a Language Game. *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 8:339–359.
- Maraev, V., Breitholtz, E., Howes, C., and Bernardy, J.-P. (2021a). Why should I turn left? towards active explainability for spoken dialogue systems. In *Proceedings of the Reasoning and Interaction Conference (ReInAct 2021)*, pages 58–64, Gothenburg, Sweden. Association for Computational Linguistics.
- Maraev, V., Breitholtz, E., Howes, C., Larsson, S., and Cooper, R. (2021b). Something old, something new, something borrowed, something taboo: Interaction and creativity in humour. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12:1443.
- Ritchie, G. (2018). *The Comprehension of Jokes: A Cognitive Science Framework*. Routledge.