

Perspective-clashing as a Humor Mechanism

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That humor arises in many occasions by the clash, comparison, and contrast of (at least) two incompatible cognitive representations/interpretations of the world is an essential concept of incongruity theories of humor (e.g. Suls, 1972). If these contradicting representations are connected via a (pseudo-)logical mechanism in a more or less sensible way, the resolution of the incongruity occurs. The narratological possibilities to create different perspectives, to switch among them, and to relate them to each other, make perspective-clashing a common strategy of texts on a macro-structure level for the purpose of humorous potential. Misunderstandings (including mistaken identities) are a very prominent example of this sort of humor (see also Brone, 2008) frequently used in ancient Greek comedy, in plays, in movies, and in TV-sitcoms. For example, in the British TV-sitcom 'Peep Show' one of the characters, Jeremy, who is portrayed as stupid, reacts in a very extreme way when his best friend Mark, who is about to become a father, confesses to him: 'I cannot be a good father. I think I am a *pedo-phobe*'. Pragmatic inference and the context offer the most plausible interpretation to the spectator that Jeremy mistakes 'pedo-phobe' with 'pedo-phile'. The spectator builds up three models of the discourse: (i) the 'correct' perspective of the intelligent spectator, (ii) the false belief of Jeremy who thinks that his best friend is a child abuser, and (iii) the false belief of Mark who does not realize that his best friend misunderstood his utterance and suspects him to be a child abuser. The contrast of these representations remains existent for the rest of the dialogue and is responsible for the humorous effect which has its climax when Jeremy answers to Mark: 'Well, I guess I have always wondered. [...] Have you thought about getting help?' The scope of this paper is to describe perspective-clashing from a psycho-linguistic point of view. Based on the text-linguistic analysis of examples from various sources, it will be argued how this mechanism fits into existing theories of semantics. 'Mental-spaces' and 'blending' (Fauconnier, 1994) allow a recipient to parallelly construct several incompatible representations of a discourse and to connect them with each other (e.g. 'the girl with the blue eyes has green eyes in this painting'). Furthermore, the phenomenon will be related to cognitive psychological insights related to 'theory of mind' (Fodor, 1978), or executive functions for the monitoring, shifting, maintaining and updating of representations (Baddeley and Hitch, 2007; Miyake et al., 2000). These concepts help to understand the necessary neuro-cognitive processes underlying perspective-clashing and giving rise to the experience of humor. Empirically testable hypotheses which can be derived from the theoretical postulates will be outlined and discussed.

References:

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