

# EXPLOITATION OF LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITY IN POLISH AND ENGLISH JOKES

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## 1. Introduction

The existence of linguistic humour and linguistic jokes as distinct categories of humour and jokes respectively has been recognized by a number of authors: (Hockett (1972) uses the term "poetic jokes"; Shultz and Horibe (1974); Shultz and Robillard (1980); Frumusani (1986:511); Spector (1990)). Other authors (notably Raskin (1987:11-14)) have called into question the legitimacy of distinguishing linguistic jokes as a special type of jokes. Raskin (1987) claims that all jokes are, in fact, linguistic. While assuming, along with the former authors, that linguistic jokes should be distinguished from non-linguistic ones, in the present paper I pursue three aims. Firstly, I intend to examine and compare some instances of English and Polish jokes based on linguistic ambiguity. Secondly, I attempt to assess the usefulness of the translatability criterion for classifying jokes. Thirdly, I suggest tentatively where the dividing line between linguistic and non-linguistic jokes might be drawn.

Linguistic jokes very often depend for their existence on linguistic ambiguity (Oaks 1994; Lew in preparation), which is only recognized by the recipient of a joke at the moment of hearing or reading the punchline. Such ambiguity can reside in a range of components of the linguistic system, such as the syntax, the lexicon, or the phonology. That the ambiguity of a joke is situated at a certain level of the linguistic system means that the ambiguous string can be represented in at least two distinct ways at this level. One way to determine the level of structure at which the ambiguity is situated is to identify the minimal string containing the part that varies between the two readings. Another is to specify the type and extent of modifications needed for the transition from one reading to the other (Lew in preparation).

Hockett (1972) suggests that joke translatability should be used for distinguishing poetic jokes from prosaic jokes (Hockett's terms for linguistic and non-linguistic jokes, respectively; see also Chiaro (1992:77-99)). Translatability is a cross-

linguistic criterion in that it makes reference to languages other than that in which the joke under consideration is presented. Elaborating somewhat on Hockett's original translatability criterion, a joke would be classified as linguistic if it cannot be readily translated into a number of other languages without losing the humour and without having to resort to lexical equivalents which would not be frequently used for the translation of the source in other, non-humorous contexts.

## 2. Syntactic ambiguity

Let us examine a simple English joke and apply the translatability criterion.

### (1a) English (source joke):

Call me a cab!  
You're a cab!

### (1b) Polish:

Wezwij mi taksówkę!  
[call-imp I-dat taxi-acc]  
Jesteś taksówką!  
[you-are taxi-instr]

Rendering the English source into Polish turns the joke into a non-joke (1b). Because joke (1a) is not translatable into Polish, it will be classified as linguistic on the translatability criterion.

One does not, however, have to appeal to cross-linguistic criteria to determine the mechanics of a joke. It is quite possible, and in many cases preferable, to use intra-linguistic criteria. A linguistic joke will typically exhibit a linguistic ambiguity (Attardo et al. 1994; Lew in preparation), a duality (or, more generally, multiplicity) of semantic interpretations motivated by the structural pattern of the language system. In our specific example, the first utterance of the source joke can be represented syntactically in two ways: as a ditransitive construction with a direct object and an indirect object; and as a complex predicative construction with an object and an object predicative (following the terminology of Huddleston (1984)). From these two syntactic representations follow two radically different semantic interpretations (or readings). Therefore, we are dealing with a joke based on syntactic ambiguity.

To illustrate how the two types of joke classification criteria are linked, let us note that on the second reading the first utterance of (1a) could be translated as:

### (1c) Nazwij mnie taksówką! [call-imp I-acc taxi-instr],

but then the first reading would no longer be possible.

It is interesting to note that producing clauses ambiguous in their syntactic function between ditransitive and complex predicative constructions is easily achieved in English, as there is no overt grammatical marker that would distinguish between the two types of construction. Conversely, in Polish the NPs in both con-

structions will be overtly and unambiguously marked for case. It is the case endings that, in such instances, disambiguate between the two readings. The general untranslatability of English jokes built around this type of ambiguity can thus be seen as a by-product of the properties of the Polish inflectional system, specifically of the relatively high functional load that grammatical inflection carries in Polish.

Joke (2) is based on another type of syntactic ambiguity.

### (2) A pretty girl walked into a little dress shop and said to the manager: "May I try on that two-piece suit in the window?" "Go right ahead," said the manager. "It might help business." (Hoke 1965:69)

On one reading, the PP *in the window* is a constituent of the NP *that two-piece suit in the window*; on another, it is an immediate constituent of the S headed by *try on*, functioning as modifier. We have a clear case of syntactic ambiguity here. And yet, as can be easily verified in practice, the joke is perfectly translatable into Polish with the retention of analogous ambiguity (and the humour) (cf. "Czy mogę przymierzyć ten kostium na wystawie?"). This is because the Polish language happens to allow this type of ambiguity, along with English. This fact is a result of the specific structural patterns of Polish and English, and it does not necessarily happen for an arbitrary pair of languages.

## 3. Lexical ambiguity

Moving on to lexical ambiguity, let us consider the following joke:

### (3) Father to son, on Coronation Day: "Jimmy, where's Mummy?" Jimmy: "She's upstairs waving her hair." Father: "Goodness me, can't we afford a flag?"

Joke (3) exhibits lexical ambiguity. The minimal string which has, in the context, two semantic interpretations is the verb *wave* (1. curl; 2. display). (3) is not directly translatable into Polish, because the Polish translation equivalents for *wave* will be different for each of the readings. This does not mean, however, that Polish lacks jokes based on lexical ambiguity. An example follows:

### (4a) Wychodzi baba od lekarza. – Na śmierć zapomniałam, jak lekarz nazwał moją chorobę. Zawraca. – Panie doktorze. Pan tak dziwnie nazwał moją chorobę... Jak to było? Żaba? Ryba? – Nie, proszę pani, to rak. (Blicharska 1991:24)

### (4b) A woman leaves the doctor's. "I just can't recall what disease the doctor said I have." She goes back.

"Doctor, what did you say the name of my disease was?  
Was it frog? Fish?"  
"No, it was {1. crayfish/2. cancer}."

In Polish, the word *rak* can denote both the crustacean and the disease. The word *rak* in (4a) is ambiguous between the two semantic interpretations because both interpretations are supported by the context. This particular ambiguity is not possible in English, which is why the joke will not work in English (4b). Untranslatability, rather than translatability, is to be expected for lexical ambiguity, since the mapping of semantic values onto lexical units is highly language-specific. Sometimes, however, a match does exist:

(5a) - Jasiu, wzięłeś prysznic?  
- Nie, mam, a co, zginął?

Joke (5a) is based on lexical ambiguity. The ambiguous lexical item here is the verb *brać* (perfective *wziąć*), which may mean "use" or "appropriate".

Joke (5a) can be readily translated into English as (5b).

(5b) "Johnnie, have you taken a shower?"  
"No, mum, why? Is it missing?" (compare also Freud 1960)

However, the translatability of (5a) is largely the result of an accident, and probably also of the unusual status of the verb *take*, which seems to have special grammatical uses. In general, it cannot be expected that languages will exhibit similar patterns of synonymy and polysemy.

#### 4. Phonological ambiguity

Phonological ambiguity is illustrated in (6).

(6) "If a new Dodge Viper costs 15,000 bucks, what does a vindshield cost?"

It is worth noting that phonological ambiguity as seen here is not mutually exclusive from lexical ambiguity. Indeed, joke (6) involves the selection of two distinct lexical items. What makes this case different from non-phonological ambiguity jokes is that phonological ambiguity crucially depends on the recognition of a phonological rule, which may be specific to a joke character or may be part of a joking stereotype of a given group featured in the joke. In (6), we are dealing with a speaker who has a phonetic segment [v] where most speakers would have used [w], and this rule triggers the ambiguity. In simple terms, it is the modification of a sound, a unit smaller than the word, that makes the difference between the two readings. Phonological jokes are not usually translatable for reasons similar to those given above for lexical ambiguity jokes. This does not mean, though, that phonological jokes are not to be found in Polish. An example follows in (7a).

(7a) Hrabia: Janie, zasłałem sobie łózko!

Jan: Niepotrzebnie się Jaśnie Pan fatygował.  
Hrabia: Dobła, dobła!

(7b) Count: John, I have {1. made/2. shat in} my bed!  
Servant: You shouldn't have taken the trouble, sir.  
Count: O.K., O.K.!

In (7a) the Count has a defective /r/, which he realizes phonetically as [w]. The recipient of the joke will not be aware of this fact of Count's speech prior to processing the punchline, so until that time only one reading is present ('made [my bed]'). In the punchline, the word *dobra* is easily decoded despite the unconventional pronunciation, because it is the only plausible candidate in the context. This, in turn, allows the identification of the phonological rule responsible for the phonetic form, and activates the alternative reading of *zasłałem* through reversing the operation of the identified phonological rule and obtaining *zasrałem* 'shat on'. The mechanism of (7a) is analogical to the English example (6). Both languages employ phonological ambiguity, yet the jokes cannot be translated from one language to the other.

#### 5. Pragmatic ambiguity

Another type of ambiguity explored in jokes has its roots in the pragmatic rules that govern discourse (Grice 1975). In this type of ambiguity, the minimal ambiguous string is longer than in any of the above types of linguistic ambiguity. The two readings result from non- or misapplication of Grice's cooperative principle of conversation or any of the Gricean maxims (Grice 1975; Pepicello 1987; Yamaguchi 1988; Attardo 1990). As an illustration, consider joke (8).

(8) Two farmers had known each other all their lives, but their conversations were usually restricted to "Good morning" or "Nice day." One afternoon, however, the first farmer asked:  
"Hi, Pete, what did you give your horse when he had the colic?"  
"Turpentine," said Pete.  
"Thanks," said his friend.  
Two weeks later they met again.  
"Didn't you tell me, Pete, that you gave your horse turpentine when he had the colic?"  
"Yes," said Pete.  
"Well, I gave mine turpentine and he died."  
"So did mine," said Pete. (Misztal 1991:506)

The ambiguity of (8) is in the first farmer's query. It can be interpreted semantically in accordance with the pragmatic implications of the context to mean approximately "What do you cure a horse's colic with?" (the first farmer wants to find out how to treat a horse's colic) or it can be interpreted in violation of the context as a direct query about the kind of medication that Pete gave to his horse. Pete violates the "be as informative as required" rule of conversation, or

else he fails to recognize the pragmatic implication of the first farmer's original question.

Joke (8) is readily translatable into Polish, and the translation retains all of the humorous value of the original. The same seems to be the case for most other jokes based on this type of ambiguity.

### 6. Conclusion

Whether jokes based on pragmatic ambiguity should be treated on a par with syntactic, lexical and phonological ambiguity is debatable. If translatability is to be taken as a valid test for linguistic jokes, then jokes exploring pragmatic ambiguity should be excluded. On the other hand, there are many instances of jokes based on syntactic ambiguity which are translatable, though certainly not as universally as pragmatic jokes. If the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic jokes is to be upheld, it is best kept so as to exclude pragmatic jokes.

While apparently helpful for *general classification* purposes, translatability is not a reliable criterion for deciding whether *individual* jokes belong to the linguistic category. It is problematic in two ways. Firstly, as demonstrated above, some linguistic jokes are translatable; secondly, some clearly non-linguistic jokes are untranslatable for reasons other than the differences between the languages, such as different customs, religion, etiquette, etc. In individual cases, it seems preferable to evoke language-internal criteria rather than translatability, as I have done above.

Differences in the translatability of various kinds of jokes seem to point to the conclusion that there is more uniformity across languages in the pragmatics than there is in the hard-core linguistic components. This is understandable, since people around the globe have a need for essentially the same range of communicative functions, which are realized by means of rather more diverse inventories of elementary building blocks.

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