Agnieszka Piskorska

University of Warsaw

Maria Jodłowiec

Jagiellonian University

Weak Communication, Joke Targets and the Punch-Line Effect: A Relevance-Theoretic Account

Abstract

The paper offers an analysis of the cognitive mechanisms underlying the production and comprehension of verbal jokes in terms of what relevance theorists refer to as weakly communicated import. While pragmatic analyses of humour emphasize the role of the inferential stages that the audience is intended (or even manipulated, Yus 2016) to go through in processing a joke, the weak communication model presented here focuses on the punch-line effect, exploring the nature of the "cognitive climax" that is created. On this account, a vast array of weakly communicated assumptions, resulting in a cognitive overload effect, rather than incongruity resolution on its own, is identified as the laughter-inducing mechanism underlying verbal humour. The central idea is that universal and culture-specific humour-generating elements in jokes have one quality in common, viz. their potential to cause a cognitive overload effect, which may, and often does, result in amusement. On this approach, what is typically recognized as national or ethnic humour is posited to recruit the same humour-invoking pragmatic mechanisms as in other kinds of jokes, the principal difference lying in the choice of the target being mocked, which must be well-known to the audience for the cognitive overload effect to be brought forth.

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia analizę mechanizmów poznawczych stanowiących podłoże humoru w dowcipach słownych, wykorzystującą pojęcie tzw. *słabej komunikacji*, zaproponowane przez teorię relewancji. Podczas gdy większość pragmatycznych modeli humoru podkreśla rolę rozwiązania inkongruencji oraz poszczególnych etapów inferencyjnych, przez które odbiorca jest planowo prowadzony w interpretacji żartów (por. Yus 2016), przedstawiona

tu analiza tłumaczy efekt humorystyczny przez pryzmat swoistego „przeciążenia poznawczego", które towarzyszy przetwarzaniu pointy dowcipu. W tym ujęciu wiele słabo komunikowanych informacji, do których odbiorca nagle uzyskuje dostęp w momencie, gdy dowcip się kończy, tworzy efekt przeciążenia poznawczego dający impuls do reakcji afektywnej. Analiza humoru na gruncie pojęcia słabej komunikacji wskazuje, że wspólnym mianownikiem tekstów uznawanych za śmieszne pod każdą szerokością geograficzną i tzw. humoru etnicznego czy narodowego jest to, że kluczowe pojęcia i postaci w tekście, stanowiące cel satyry, muszą (przynajmniej potencjalnie) dawać dostęp do całego wachlarza informacji, gdyż w innym wypadku efekt słabej komunikacji nie zaistnieje. O śmieszności dowcipu przesądza zatem nie samo zrozumienie jego treści i pointy, ale osiągnięcie specjalnego efektu poznawczego.

Słowa kluczowe
dowcip, teoria relewancji, efekt poznawczy, heurystyka rozumienia wypowiedzi, obiekt humoru

1. Introduction

Humour has attracted considerable attention of researchers from quite disparate fields ranging from philosophy to neuropsychology. Various aspects of humour, such as topics, recurrent schemas, functions, or pragmatic mechanisms involved in their interpretation have been studied by researchers representing different theoretical frameworks. In this paper we adopt a relevance-theoretic perspective on communication to investigate how universal pragmatic mechanisms are combined with culture-specific assumptions to generate an expected response to jokes, arguing for a peculiar weak communication effect that the punch-line sparks off (Jodłowiec and Piskorska 2017).

In particular, verbal jokes have been the subject of investigation of human communication researchers, among them also those working within the relevance-theoretic framework. Most pragmatic analyses so far (e.g. Suls 1972, 1983; Richie 2004; Dynel 2012; Yus 2016), however, have focused on incongruity and its resolution, addressing various possible types of opposition between a joke set-up and its punch-line. Yet, as pointed out by McGraw and Warner (2014), resolving incongruity may not necessarily lead to amusement, which suggests that further questions about the nature of humour should be asked. This paper therefore seeks to push the boundaries of the pragmatics of humour beyond the confines of the incongruity resolution paradigm and to offer an explanation of the humorous effect in terms of weak communication – a phenomenon responsible for many other subtle effects human communication can create.

Combining the weak communication perspective on humour with considerations of motives and themes particularly suitable to be exploited in jokes, we aim to tease out the universal elements from culture-specific ones. We intend to demonstrate that the widely attested phenomenon of joking about a familiar social or ethnic group can be adequately explained in terms of the processing

mechanism we propose for humour and, in particular, the specific cognitive climax that occurs when the punch-line is processed. It needs to be stressed at the outset that this paper is not concerned with a cross-cultural study of jokes and its focal point has to do with the special cognitive effects that accompany the interpretation of the punch-line. The examples of jokes targeting various ethnic or social groups used throughout the text serve illustrative purposes only.

In the next section we shall introduce some basic notions of the relevance-theoretic pragmatics together with the most important accounts of humour proposed in this framework. Then, we will present the notion of weak communication, demonstrating how it can be applied to humour analysis. A number of jokes will be used to illustrate the interaction of the pragmatic mechanism postulated with background assumptions about groups targeted as victims of jokes. Finally, some conclusions will be offered focusing on the explanatory value of the account developed in this paper.

2. Humour and incongruity: relevance-theoretic analyses

Linguistic-pragmatic approaches to humour, to which our study belongs, typically draw on the philosophical notion of incongruity originating from the works of Kant and developed in the 20th century by Suls (1972, 1983), Forabosco (1992), Richie (2004), Dynel (2009, 2012) and many others. Incongruity is often treated as a necessary condition for humour and is further incorporated into a specific linguistic or pragmatic paradigm, such as Grice's theory of implicatures (Attardo 1993), semantic scripts theory (Attardo and Raskin 1991), cognitive linguistics (Turner 2010; Dynel 2011a; Attardo 2015; Chłopicki 2017) or relevance theory. Since the latter is the framework adopted in this analysis, below we shall present its basic tenets, followed by a brief overview of relevance-theoretic contributions devoted to humour.

Relevance theory is an ostensive-inferential model of communication, in which the intention to convey certain content is fully overt and the recipient is expected to infer this content on the basis of the input produced by the communicator. Utterance comprehension is postulated to involve the formulation and evaluation of hypotheses about the intended meaning on the basis of the evidence in the form of an utterance provided by the speaker for precisely this purpose (Sperber and Wilson 2002: 7). In the relevance-theoretic framework, the process of comprehension is seen as governed by a single principle, known as the communicative principle of relevance: "Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95: 260).

In practical terms, the principle stipulates that the comprehension process is geared towards optimizing relevance, i.e. obtaining adequate cognitive benefits for a justifiable processing effort expended by the mind. Thus, when Maggie says to Tom

(1) Have you seen my ring?

of all the possible interpretations (e.g. Maggie is asking Tom to help her find a piece of jewellery, she is worried that her piece of jewellery has been stolen, she wants to attract his attention to the fact that she has a new ring on her finger or to the fact that she got engaged, etc.), the one that brings about the optimum balance between the range of cognitive effects and the processing cost will surface as the interpretation manifestly intended by the speaker. This means that in his pursuit for optimal relevance the hearer applies the following comprehension heuristic:

a. Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.
b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (Wilson and Sperber 2004: 613; cf. also Wilson and Sperber 2012: 7).

The heuristic underlies the recovery of both the explicit and implicit content. Assuming, as most pragmaticists do (i.a. Bach 1994, 2010; Hamblin and Gibbs 2003; Levinson 2000; Recanati 2004), that verbal communication involves these two levels of meaning, Sperber and Wilson (1986/95: 182) define explicitly communicated import, or *explicature*, as an inferential development of the logical form encoded by an utterance to full propositionality, adequately embedded under a higher level description of the illocutionary force if necessary (cf. Carston 2002), and *implicature* as any assumptions "communicated, but not explicitly" (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95: 182).

Returning to example (1), the comprehension process stops when Tom arrives at (1a), since this interpretation immediately satisfies his expectations of relevance as it requires the least processing effort if we stipulate that (1b) and (1c) are highly accessible to him.

(1) a. Maggie is looking for her wedding ring.
    b. Maggie puts her wedding ring on when she is going out.
    c. Maggie is going out.

On the explicit side then, the hearer disambiguates the NP "ring" as "a piece of jewellery" rather than some other kind of ring; he also fixes the temporal scope of the Present Perfect to a fairly recent event and modulates the meaning of the verb "see" beyond mere perception to locating the whereabouts of the ring. All this is posited to take place through a series of inferential tasks that

run in parallel and are responsible for identifying the context-intended speaker meaning, conveyed both in the explicit and implicit way.[1]

As emphasized in the relevance-theoretic framework, for an act of communication to be successful, the speaker has to be able to predict, at least to some degree, the inferential path the hearer is most likely to follow. This kind of mind-reading is possible because the speaker shares a part of cognitive environment with the hearer and therefore has good grounds for predicting which contextual assumptions are available to the hearer and will be used in the processing of an utterance.

This observation underlies all the relevance-theoretic models of joke comprehension. In the one put forward by Francisco Yus (2003, 2008, 2013, 2016), it is posited that the set-up of a joke typically prompts the recipient to follow a certain possible line (or several lines) of interpretation, based on the prediction which contextual premises are easily accessible. The punch-line being incongruous with the interpretation(s) cued by the set-up causes a sudden twist in the processing, leading to a surprising interpretation, which Yus (2003) refers to as the *Multiple-Graded-Interpretations/Single-Covert-Interpretation joke schema*. This can be illustrated with the following example, cited in Yus (2008):

> (2) Mr. Isar was attending his friend's wife's funeral. "It must be hard to lose a wife," remarked Mr. Isar. "Almost impossible," remarked his friend. (Yus 2008: 146–47)

Here, the funeral situation will naturally make the interpretation of "hard to lose a wife" as "difficult to face a wife's death" highly accessible to the audience, and it is very likely that this will be the only interpretation that will occur to them at this point. The punch-line "Almost impossible" introduces incongruity and leads to the realization that this is not the interpretation that the receiver of the condolences has found the most salient. Although the second interpretation could have been – in theory – developed by the joke's audience at the set-up stage, this did not happen because of its low accessibility.

This fact, of which the author of the joke is perfectly aware, lies at the core of the humour mechanism: since the expectations of relevance invariably bias the hearer towards the most accessible interpretation, the less accessible one will not be retrieved. Then, a sudden twist from the first hypothesis to the interpretation imposed by the punch-line (here from condolences to the absurd idea of wife as "lost property") evokes a humorous response.

It has to be noted that the potential for the two different interpretations, present in the joke set-up but meant to pass unnoticed, lies in the ambiguity of the words "hard" and "lose" and can therefore be connected with one of the

---

[1] There are different views on the actual types and number of these processes within relevance-theoretic pragmatics (see Carston 2010c; Jodłowiec 2015). Addressing these issues in detail is beyond the scope of this paper.

inferential comprehension processes leading to the recovery of the utterance explicit content, namely disambiguation. Yus (2008, 2016) claims that all inferential processes involved in constructing the explicit and implicit layer of meaning can be likewise capitalized on to generate humour. The case of exploiting implicatures for conveying humour is shown in (3) (adapted from Yus 2008):

(3) Matt's dad asked his son if he got a part in a school play. Matt enthusiastically announced that he'd gotten a part of a man who's been married for twenty years. "That's great, son," replied the father. "Keep up the good work and before you know it they'll be giving you a speaking part."

Here, incongruity can be spotted between the assumption that the boy was given a major role (implicated by the father's remark "That's great") and the implicature conveyed by the final statement, namely, that the part is a silent one. Again, the initial easily accessible interpretation invited by the set-up requires a reinterpretation when the punch-line is being processed.

As demonstrated by Yus (2013, 2016), to exploit the potential afforded by inferential mechanisms for humorous purposes, humourists often rely on various kinds of knowledge, referred to as make-sense frames and cultural frames. The former is a set of background assumptions which make the joke scenario coherent, whereas the latter refer to the assumptions believed to be shared by members of a culture in which the joke is rooted. For example, the make-sense frame activated in joke (2) is a funeral scenario, in which people conventionally express grief, pay condolences, etc., whereas in joke (3) the scenario is that of a father-son conversation. The cultural frames activated in both jokes involve widespread stereotypical assumptions about the roles of men and women in marriages. Yus (2013, 2016) rightly notes that humour in the majority of jokes arises out of simultaneous exploitation of inferential mechanisms and the above-mentioned two kinds of frames. His Intersecting Circles Model, in which utterance interpretation mechanisms, make-sense frames and cultural frames may – all, or each on their own, or in different configurations – contribute to creating the comic outcome, is by far the most extensive and comprehensive investigation of humour conducted along the relevance-theoretic lines.

Incongruity lies at the core of the account of witticisms and funny aphorisms offered by Curcó (1996). The author focuses mostly on contradictory implicatures supported by various parts of a witty text. This can be illustrated by Oscar Wilde's aphorism:

(4) There is something tragic about the enormous number of young men there are in England at the present moment who start life with perfect profiles, and end by adopting some useful profession.

The speaker may easily predict that the first part of the saying will activate standard cultural assumptions about young people wasting their potential and

not getting respectable professions, whereas the final clause is incongruous with this initial premise and requires its revision. Based on the observation of the speaker's predicting and manipulating the hearer's interpretation path is Curcó's insight that humour production and comprehension require high mind-reading abilities (the point already emphasized above): understanding a joke or a humorous saying may require constructing metarepresentations of the fourth order. This squares well with Padilla Cruz's (2012) claim that humorous communication requires the advanced comprehension strategy known as *sophisticated understanding* (Sperber 1994). As a non-bona fide mode of communication, joke-telling is taken to involve a kind of deception: the hearer is manipulated to recover one interpretation of the text, only to identify another, hidden interpretation when the punch-line is reached. According to Padilla Cruz (2012), the search for the alternative interpretation is activated thanks to the hearer's vigilance mechanisms.

Another aspect of humorous communication was brought to light by Jodłowiec (1991, 2015), who posited that joke comprehension requires activation of a broad array of contextual assumptions. Although none of them may be specifically intended, or none of them taken individually may be amusing, the fact that they are jointly represented in the hearer's mind results in a special cognitive effect, evoking the reaction of mirth in the hearer. In the analyses of humour offered in this paper, we will draw on all the previously mentioned observations, but our main point will be based on the notion of weak import achieved by the punch-line, so we shall present this idea in greater detail, together with the account of weak communication, in the next section.

3. A weak communication account of humour

Since the concept of weak communication (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95; Wilson and Sperber 2004, 2012) underlies the claims advanced in this paper, we present some of its aspects below.

Assuming that by producing an utterance the speaker aims at creating a certain cognitive effect in the audience, Sperber and Wilson argue that the intended cognitive effect may be more or less determinate. In other words, in certain communicative situations the comprehender processing an utterance is intended to arrive at a highly predictable and fairly specific range of assumptions whereas in other situations the communicative goal may be just "to steer the thoughts of the audience in a certain direction" (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95: 60), with the gamut of assumptions generated remaining to a large degree indeterminate. The former is the case of strong communication, while the latter will be placed on the weak end of the communication continuum, with a range of different shades between the two extremes.

The interpretation process for the two ends of the strong-weak continuum can be illustrated by the mini-dialogues in (5) and (6) below:

(5) a. Peter: Do you like my outfit?
     b. Mary: Yes, it looks great.

(6) a. Peter: Do you like my outfit?
     b. Mary (unenthusiastically): Oh my goodness!

Stipulating that Peter's question in (5a) is about the futuristic alien disguise he plans to wear for the fancy dress party that he and his wife are going to, by saying (5b) Mary straightforwardly answers her husband's question and informs him that she thinks his outfit looks great and she likes it. This is where the path of least effort aimed at achieving a satisfying range of cognitive effects takes the comprehender, who, as a result of processing (5b), arrives at precisely this assumption. Technically, it is on this interpretation that (5b) attains optimal relevance. Since there is a fully determinate assumption intended by the speaker in this communicative context, it is a case of strong communication. By contrast, what is communicated by (6b) is not so obvious or determinate. Here what Mary has said and how she has said it discloses surprise and consternation, and certainly cannot be interpreted as an approval of Peter's costume, but it would be difficult to pin down exactly what the speaker has conveyed by producing (6b). There are a number of different assumptions that her interjection makes accessible, for instance, that this is a rather shocking attire and that Peter looks a bit odd in it, that Mary thinks it is weird and eccentric, that she is dismayed by what she is looking at, etc. As can be seen, then, there is no specific assumption or a fixed set of assumptions that the comprehender is intended to generate. Instead, the addressee is encouraged to recover those assumptions that become most accessible to him when (6b) is being processed and to stop as soon as he finds an interpretation that satisfies his expectations of relevance. Under the circumstances, the speaker's intention is not fully transparent and there is a wide spectrum of assumptions that make her utterance relevant in context. In effect, the optimally relevant interpretation that the hearer ends up with is not fully controlled by the communicator. As this example demonstrates, the opacity of the speaker's intention gives rise to, and at the same time endorses, indeterminacy of interpretations typical of weak communication.[2]

---

[2] The idea that the speaker meaning may be indeterminate to various degrees goes back to Grice (1975/89: 39–40), who trying to elucidate the process of implicature generation observed that "[s]ince, to calculate a conversational implicature is to calculate what has to be supposed in order to preserve the supposition that the Cooperative Principle is being observed, and since there may be various possible explanations, a list of which may be open, the conversational implicature in such cases will be an open disjunction of such specific explanations, and if the list of these is open, the implicatum will have just the kind of indeterminacy that many actual implicata do in fact seem to possess."

The discussion on the role of local and universal elements in jokes offered in the next section is based on the claim that the notion of weak communication is of key importance for explaining the humorous effect brought about by the punch-line in verbal jokes. The general idea is that when the punch-line comes, not only does it cause a switch from the initial line of interpretation to the ultimately intended one, as is commonly acknowledged in incongruity-resolution approaches (e.g. Suls 1972, 1983; Raskin 1985; Forabosco 1992; Richie 2004; Dynel 2012; Yus 2003, 2008, 2013, 2016), but it also makes a vast range of weakly communicated assumptions highly manifest to the joke recipient. This result can be described as a *cognitive overload effect*: an array of assumptions suddenly manifests itself to the interpreter, which leads to an affective response, discharged as laughter. Let us explore in some detail the model of joke production and comprehension propounded here by looking at an example.

(7) An American, a Russian, a British and a Pole are going by plane. Suddenly the plane catches fire and it appears that there are only three parachutes available. The Russian grabs the first parachute saying: "As a member of the most intelligent nation I have the right to save myself." The second parachute is grabbed by the American saying: "As a member of the wealthiest nation I have the right to save myself." The British takes the third one and gives it to the Pole saying: "I am a gentleman, you go!"
"It's ok, keep it. We both can jump out because the one of the most intelligent nation took my rucksack."
(adapted from: http://iwillmakeyoulaugh.weebly.com/ multicultural-jokes.html)

On the model of joke-processing presented here, when the punch-line is reached, a large number of weakly communicated assumptions about boastful but often mindlessly acting Russians, their beliefs that they represent the world's leading superpower, their attitudes of superiority that really conceal feelings of inferiority, etc., as well as those about Poles, who are thought to be slow and simple-minded but are often lucky and will (eventually) land on their feet, etc., become salient in the recipient's mind.

This result has to do with the optimally relevant interpretation of the punch-line that the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic yields. In the context of the most accessible assumptions the final utterance in (7) explicitly communicates that both the British and the Pole can jump from the plane, because the Russian made off with the Polish guy's rucksack, implicating that two parachutes are still there to be used.[3] This meaning evidently clashes with

---

[3] To be more exact, the explicature of the punch-line could be spelt out as (6a):

(6) a. THE POLE$_X$ INFORMS THE BRIT$_Y$ THAT BOTH THE POLE$_X$ AND THE BRIT$_Y$ CAN* JUMP OUT* OF THE PLANE$_A$ BECAUSE* THE RUSSIAN$_Z$ TOOK* THE POLE$_X$'S RUCKSACK* BY MISTAKE.

The above is just a schematic representation employed for expository purposes and should not be identified as a language of thought formula actually entertained by the comprehender. Capitalization is used to indicate that the explicature is composed of concepts which the en-

the assumptions communicated by the set-up, in particular those related to the Russian, who was quick to proclaim himself to represent the most intelligent nation, but who, as it turns out, acted stupidly and made a complete fool of himself, plunging to his death. Thus the twist introduced by the punch-line results in the remodelling of the initial assumptions: those compatible with the set-up (i.e. that the Russian survived because of his self-confidence) are proved invalid and are replaced with assumptions reconcilable with meaning of the punch-line, which suddenly become highly accessible to the recipient.[4]

In fact, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to compile a list of the weakly communicated assumptions (potentially) triggered by the punch-line. In the first place, the assumptions brought to bear in the interpretation process tend to be idiosyncratic: they depend to a large extent on the background knowledge stored under the key concepts activated due to linguistic decoding of the text, so they differ across individuals. Also, the nature and the scope of their activation is subject to variation due to the current psychological state of the interpreter: being tired, frustrated or preoccupied with one's own affairs may hamper joke interpretation. By contrast, there may be a true myriad of assumptions manifest when the joke recipient is in a psychological state conducive to mental agility.

There is another important reason for which it would be counterproductive to list the weakly communicated assumptions that contribute to humour. The point is that in the case of weak communication it often happens that apart from one or two assumptions which evidently make the utterance relevant, and therefore are likely to be represented in the comprehender's mind, there will be a number of weakly implicated assumptions that will not be determinate enough to reach a level of actual mental representations during the interpretation process. This is precisely the nature of what we are referring to as the *cognitive overload effect*: a number of assumptions become manifest at the moment when the punch-line is grasped, but most (if not all of them) remain at the "stand-by", without achieving the status of being mentally represented. This explains why people who have just laughed at a joke find it notoriously difficult to explain what the punch-line actually communicates and to

---

coded words provide access to; the asterisks signal that the meanings of these concepts are relevantly adjusted in the context so that the speaker-intended, contextually fine-tuned meaning emerges. This kind of meaning modulation is referred to within the relevance-theoretic framework as *ad hoc concept construction*. For an in-depth discussion on ad hoc concept construction, see Sperber and Wilson (1998, 2008), Carston (2002, 2010a, 2010b, 2012), Wilson and Carston (2007) and Wilson and Sperber (2004).

[4] It is worth observing that, additionally, there is ironic reference in the punch-line ("the one of the most intelligent nation" is evidently used ironically), which adds a bonus to the humour here. On the relevance-theoretic treatment of irony, see Sperber and Wilson (1998), Wilson (2006, 2009, 2013), Wilson and Sperber (1992, 2012), Piskorska (2016) and Yus (2016).

comment on what makes it funny: punch-line resolution predominantly takes place at the subrepresentational level.

Elucidating the nature of funniness in jokes in terms of weak communication provides considerable insight into the roles that the *set-up* (which Hockett (1977) terms *build-up*) and the punch-line play in creating amusement. As pointed out above, the punch-line is responsible for the reorganisation in the interpretation frame and the sudden cognitive overload effect, whereas the narration that leads to it must ensure that access to certain pieces of background information is facilitated. In the joke under discussion, the chunks of encyclopaedic information stored under such concepts as AMERICANS, RUSSIANS, BRITISH and POLES, to mention just the key lexical items from the opening line, become readily available in the recipient's mind. This is crucial for the humorous climax, since the larger the volume of background assumptions potentially salient in the recipient's mind when the finale comes, the vaster the size and the stronger the impact of weakly communicated import at the end of the joke.

This brings us directly to another important hypothesis about humour that this kind of approach supports. The reason why characters, notions, matters, themes, etc. well familiar to a given audience are the best candidates for humour triggers is not only that recipients will be able to draw some inferences concerning such characters, themes, etc., but that they will be able to draw inferences of the required kind, i.e. ones likely to lead to the cognitive overload effect brought about by the punch-line. The point we are making here does not concern the problem of *understanding* the joke's content, but evoking a humorous reaction in the recipient by the punch-line even when they have comprehended the text. While, as Yus (2016: 241–42) aptly points out, the audience will not grasp the joke in (8) below without access to the background information that the Shadows used to be Cliff Richard's backing band, nevertheless, this may not be enough to achieve the comic outcome.

(8) Doctor, doctor, I keep thinking I'm Cliff Richard.
You're a shadow of your former self.

To be amusing, the comprehension of the punch-line must open access to a range of assumptions and lead to the cognitive overload effect, which occurs when the subject matter is fairly familiar.

Let us consider the two-liner in (9), which in our estimation, makes a rather poor candidate for a joke to be successful with a Polish audience, even though it is presumably heartily laughed at by New Zealanders.

(9) Q: What do you call a sophisticated Australian?
A: A New Zealander.
(https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/120632325/)

The problem is that Polish people are not likely to know enough about how New Zealanders perceive Australians.[5] In fact, it is doubtful that Poles have any stereotype of this nationality, so there are not likely to be line-ups of highly accessible assumptions about Australians or New Zealanders, hypothesized to accompany the punch-line resolution, that might lead to the cognitive over-load effect in the mind of an average Polish recipient. So even though the joke does not seem to pose a challenge on the level of basic comprehension – we can actually learn from the punch-line that New Zealanders consider them-selves superior to Australians, and the inferential path as well as the incongru-ity-resolution pattern (Yus 2016) will be essentially similar for most audiences – the butt of the joke does not open access to the background knowledge re-sources requisite for the weak implicatures to become manifest, which strips the punch-line of the humour-generating potential with the Polish audience. We believe that the same effect can be expected to occur in (10).

(10) Q: What is the difference between yogurt and Australia?
       A: Yogurt has some culture.

However, this joke can be easily tinkered with in order to make it funny for the Polish reader: it is enough for "Australian" to be substituted with "a chav." The Polish version then would be:

(11) *Czym się* różni jogurt od dresiarza?
      Jogurt ma przynajmniej jakąś kulturę.
      'What is the difference between yogurt and a chav?
      Yogurt has some culture.'

These remarks bring into focus some interesting observations about universal and culture specific humour triggers in jokes, which the weak communication approach fully accounts for. Let us turn to these now.

4. Universality vs. locality in jokes

It may have been noticed, especially by a careful Polish reader, that the joke in (10), while not straightforwardly hilarious for Poles, seems better suited to get a little laugh with the Polish audience than the one in (9). Whereas the point of humour in both jokes has to do with access to background assumptions about nations that are remote from Poles, who – as hinted at above – can be assumed to have only rudimentary and superficial knowledge of New Zealanders and

---

[5] As Chiaro (2011: 367) points out, "humorous discourse relies on implicit encyclopaedic knowledge that must be shared between addresser and addressee, between perpetrator and re-cipient."

Australians, the familiar riddle pattern of (10) is likely to make it more amusing for the Polish reader or hearer. So while the alleged contrast between Australians and New Zealanders will not produce an abundant crop in terms of implicit import weakly communicated by the punch-line in (9), a richer cognitive effect is plausible in the case of (10).[6] This joke employs a schema typical of numerous jokes starting with an absurd question about a difference between two notions that are completely dissimilar, hence the joke-mode of processing may be automatically turned on, leading the hearer to exploring various weak assumptions about culture-less groups. Besides, the easily recognisable pun on "culture" (which also works for *kultura* in Polish) introduces the twist in the punch-line, possibly bringing about some reorganisation in the assumption pool, which will give rise to a humorous effect. Even more interestingly, modifying (10) into a joke targeting chavs, a group well-known to Polish audiences, as in (11) above, enhances its humour-inducing potential, because then the punch-line acquires the capacity to unleash a whole range of weakly communicated assumptions concerning the primitiveness, churlishness, impertinence, narrow-mindedness, etc. of the individuals targeted.

Thus, another dimension to be considered in our discussion on the universal vs. the local is the reference to human traits ridiculed in jokes. Despite the fact that the scope of joke targets popular in different parts of the world and favoured by various communities is both enormous and diverse, as Raskin (1985) observed long ago, there are certain scripts (or cognitive frames or schemas, cf. Yus 2016: 81–84) associated with some nationalities that are known worldwide and universal, that's why they can be tapped into by joke-tellers almost anywhere. So, for instance, the high efficiency of Germans, the preoccupation with sex of the French and Latino people, and Jewish canniness, are prominent candidates for targets found laughable across the globe (cf. also Popescu 2011).

Besides, as noted by Davis (2011: 6–7), "Most jokes are about the undesirable, for people joke not about good things or virtuous people but about failure and wickedness and about matters that they might well find disturbing outside the context of the joke." He goes on to state that "It is difficult to make a joke out of a virtue except when it is cultivated to an absurd and inappropriate extent, by which time most observers will have ceased to regard it as a virtue." Thus, the common denominator for the very different groups ridiculed by joke authors is a conspicuous negative characteristic exposed by the assumptions that the punch-line makes manifest: one way or another, the joke target is always portrayed as epitomising something harmful, adverse, detrimental, unfavourable, etc. In fact, if it is at all possible to identify a universal leitmotif in jokes across geographies, cultures and generations, it will be stupidity.

---

[6] Obviously, as Gillota (2013: 5) emphasizes, "not everybody, even those who share a cultural background, finds the same material funny."

However, to this we would like to add that even if drawing on the same theme (like stupidity), the jokes told in different parts of the globe and designed for different audiences, will inescapably be about "local" targets, because it is only reference to these that will secure a sufficiently rich and abundant weakly communicated import to be generated when the punch-line is reached. So the joke below can be adequately modified depending on who it is supposed to amuse:

(12) Two policemen/Polish/Czech hunters /blondes got themselves set up for a weekend of bird hunting. They gathered their guns, dogs, and ammunition before tromping around for hours with no luck. When they came out of the woods at dusk, they looked around at all the other hunters who were carrying braces of pheasant, quail, duck, and geese.
"Gee," said one to the other companion, "everyone else seems to be doing pretty well for themselves. What d'you think we could be doing wrong?"
"I haven't got a clue," said the other. "Maybe we're not throwing the dogs high enough."

Even if, for some reason, the protagonists were to be Australians, the comprehension path and the incongruity resolution will remain the same for hearers from different national groups exposed to (12). What will change though, is the humour-generating potential of the joke. If (12) is about two foolish Australians, it is likely to be funny for people in New Zealand and probably in the UK, but not necessarily for Poles. This is because, as our weak communication account predicts, it is only when the target is well-known that the cognitive overload effect can arise, eventually leading to amusement. In this way, new light is thrown on eligible joke's butts: only if the butt is familiar to the recipient, it will provide access to a wide range of manifest assumptions and hence will (at least potentially) fuel humour. This means that while fully subscribing to Yus' (2016: 239) view that when translating jokes "faithfulness in reproducing humorous effects is more important than reproducing coded content", we differ in what we consider to be the sine qua non of reproducing the humorous effects. Our conception of the punch-line effect emphasizes its role in triggering the cognitive overload effect, rather than in achieving discourse-based, frame-based or implication-based resolutions (cf. Yus 2016), whose existence we do not intend to contest.

This explains the difficulty with transposing joke (13), in which New Zealanders are made fun of, in the way that would make it funny for the Polish recipient. The problem is that in the Polish context there is no easily accessible stereotype of a stupid nation to serve as a paragon of foolishness, and groups typically targeted for their alleged stupidity, such as blondes or policemen, do not fit the joke scenario, so there is no straightforward substitute for Kiwis as referred to in the punch-line.

(13) Bruce the Aussie builder was going through a house he had just built for the woman who owned it. She was telling him what colour to paint each room. They went into the first room and she said "I want this room to be painted a light blue."

The builder went to the front door and yelled, "GREEN SIDE UP!" When he went back into the house, she told him that the next room was to be bright red. The builder went to the front door and yelled, "GREEN SIDE UP!"

When he came back, the woman said "I keep telling you colours, but you go out the front and yell 'green side up' – what is that for?" The builder said, "Don't worry about that, I've just got a couple of Kiwis laying the turf out front."

(https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/life/88788458/10-australia-day-jokes-to-cele-brate-the-aussie-sense-of-humour)

What's more, the weak communication approach elucidates the function that background knowledge plays in processing jokes: whereas shared subject matter (Cundall 2007) or the mutuality of information (Yus 2016) may be important for understanding what is being communicated, inadequate familiarity with the butt inhibits the weak communication impact and jeopardizes the joke's laughter-provoking potential (cf. also fn. 5 above).

Below is a joke that actually exists in at least two different versions. Its potential for amusing different audiences lies in its reference to stupidity, universally held in contempt as hinted at above, and, even more importantly, in its ability to bring about a vast array of weak assumptions triggered by the activation of a *local* stereotype.

(14) a. A guy walks into a bar and begins to tell a Trump joke.
The bartender stops him and points out the "Make America Great Again" hats everyone else has on. "Still want to tell this joke?"
"Not if I have to keep explaining it."
b. A guy walks into a bar and begins to tell a Polish joke. The bartender stops him and says "I'm Polish. You see the guy over there – he's the owner of this bar and he's Polish. You see these two big guys drinking beer beside you – they're Polish. You still want to tell your joke?" The guy thinks about it and says "No, I don't want to tell it anymore. Nobody will get it."
(https://www.reddit.com/r/Jokes/comments/4zj8rw/a_guy_walks_into_a_bar_and_begins_to_tell_a/)

The motives behind who laughs at whom depend largely on historical, social and economic factors (Davies 2011; Brzozowska 2008; Laineste 2011), the investigation of which lies beyond the scope of the present paper, concerned mostly with the peculiar cognitive climax effect that occurs when the punchline is being processed. Suffice it to say that it is natural to hold a stereotype of a group with whom one interacts or shares some space in the world. In such cases, humour generated by the punch-line, as argued above, necessarily involves a gamut of weakly communicated assumptions originating from a highly accessible stereotype.

5. Conclusions

Looking at the joke's punch-line effect through the weak communication lens, while fully compatible with the incongruity theories of humour and in total harmony with the comprehensive Intersecting Circles Model of humorous communication, appears to reveal an interesting dimension of joke comprehension. The inferential pattern that the audience is manoeuvred to follow and the surprising finale they discover are hypothesized to climax in an array of weakly communicated assumptions when the punch-line is reached. So whereas the above-mentioned models of humour provide the basis for thought-provoking classifications of different kind (as in Yus 2016), the weak communication account exposes the common denominator behind various types of jokes and affords some insights into the link between the cognitive and the affective spheres combined in humour. The cognitive overload effect, posited to be generated at the subpersonal level and involving mental processes going on in the language of thought, may impact the affective domain, which might elucidate how the laughter response comes about.

This account also offers some clarifications with respect to certain characteristics of humour often left unexplored or simply taken for granted. While it is commonly observed that a necessary quality for an issue or a group to be chosen as a joke target is its saliency for the recipient, the explanations of why this is so draw mainly on historical, political and social arguments, which pragmaticists supplement by arguing that without access to relevant background knowledge, the text will not make much sense to the interpreter. The analysis of joke processing suggested here adds another dimension to these justifications. The weak communication impact of the punch-line, it has been argued, contributes substantially to the humour-inducing potential of the joke. As illustrated by examples discussed in this paper, although culturally distant jokes (as is the case with those originally produced for New Zealanders when transferred to the Polish context) may not be perceived as completely vexing, they fail to evoke amusement due to their lack of potential to activate a wide array of weakly communicated assumptions. Therefore, jokes about culturally distant referents are not amusing, not because they create comprehension problems, but because they fail to yield a cognitive overload effect. As is claimed here, for a joke to evoke mirth, it is not enough to be just understood: it has to be interpreted in a way that leads to the vast array of weakly communicated assumptions manifest in the mind of the recipient when the punch-line is being processed.

It is also worth mentioning that of vital importance in this process is a familiar joke-telling pattern, such as that of a question-answer or a riddle, and a specific make-sense frame employed in a joke (Yus 2013, 2016). These elements may incite the comprehender to search for relevance of a joke via the

weak communication path in which a large number of assumptions, typically negative, become accessible to the hearer.

The reason why New Zealanders laugh at Australians (and vice versa) and Poles might more readily laugh at Russians or Germans is that the presence of a stereotype of an ethnic or other group is a rich source of assumptions which may be activated by a joke set-up and exploited in various ways by the punch-line. As this analysis of humour predicts, concepts which afford access to a large number of assumptions of the right kind are likely to sow the seeds of humour. In the light of the considerations presented above, the national character of some humorous manifestations seems to be confined to the element of a trigger – most often a familiar stereotype that sets off the inferential interpretation processes on the weak communication path.

References

ATTARDO Salvatore (1993). Violation of conversational maxims and cooperation: The case of jokes. *Journal of Pragmatics* 19, 537–558.

ATTARDO Salvatore (2015). Humorous metaphors. In *Cognitive Linguistics and Humor Research*, Geert BRÔNE, Kurt FEYAERTS, Tony VEALE (eds.), 91–110. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.

ATTARDO Salvatore, RASKIN Victor (1991). Script theory revis(it)ed: Joke similarity and joke representation model. *Humor* 4, 293–348.

BACH Kent (1994). Semantic slack: What is said and more. In *Foundations of Speech Act Theory: Philosophical and Linguistic Perspectives*, Savas TSOHATZIDIS (ed.), 267–291. London: Routledge.

BACH Kent (2010). Impliciture vs. explicature: What's the difference? In ROMERO, SORIA (eds.), 126–137.

BRZOZOWSKA Dorota (2008). *Polski dowcip etniczny. Stereotyp a tożsamość*. Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego.

CARSTON Robyn (2002). *Thoughts and Utterances. The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

CARSTON Robyn (2010a). Lexical pragmatics, ad hoc concepts and metaphor: From a relevance theory perspective. *Italian Journal of Linguistics* 22(1), 153–180.

CARSTON Robyn (2010b). Metaphor, ad hoc concepts, literal meaning and mental images. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 110(3), 295–321.

CARSTON Robyn (2010c). Explicit communication and 'free' pragmatic enrichment. In ROMERO, SORIA (eds.), 217–285.

CARSTON Robyn (2012). Word meaning and concept expressed. *The Linguistic Review* 29(4), 607–623.

CHIARO Delia (2011). Comic takeover or comic makeover?: Notes on humour translating, translation and (un)translatability. In DYNEL (ed.), 365–378.

CHŁOPICKI Władysław (2017). Metonymy in humour. In *Humorous Discourse*, Władysław CHŁOPICKI, Dorota BRZOZOWSKA (eds.), 23–52, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Cundall Michael (2007). Humour and the limits of incongruity. *Creativity Research Journal* 19, 203–211.

Curcó Carmen (1996). The implicit expression of attitudes, mutual manifestness and verbal humour. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* 8, 89–99.

Davies Christie (2011). *Jokes and targets*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Dynel Marta (2009). *Humorous Garden Paths: A Pragmatic-Cognitive Study*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Dynel Marta (2011a). Blending the incongruity-resolution model and the conceptual integration theory: The case of blends in pictorial advertising. *International Review of Pragmatics* 3, 59–83.

Dynel Marta (ed.) (2011b). *The Pragmatics of Humor across Discourse Domains*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Dynel Marta (2012). Garden paths, red lights and crossroads: On finding our way to understanding the cognitive mechanisms underlying jokes. *Israeli Journal of Humor Research* 1(1), 6–28.

Forabosco Giovannantonio (1992). Cognitive aspects of the humor process: The concept of incongruity. *Humor* 5(1/2), 45–68.

Gillota David (2013). *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Grice H. Paul (1975/89). Logic and conversation. In *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*, Peter Cole, Jerry Morgan (eds.), 41–58. New York: Academic Press; reprinted in *Studies in the Way of Words*, H. Paul Grice, 1989, 22–40. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hamblin Jennifer, Gibbs Raymond W. (2003). Processing the meanings of what speakers say and implicate. *Discourse Processes 35(1), 59–80.*

Hockett Charles (1977). Jokes. In *The View from Language: Selected Essays*, *1948–1974,* Charles Hockett (ed.), 257–289. Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press.

Jodłowiec Maria (1991). *The Role of Relevance in the Interpretation of Verbal Jokes: A Pragmatic Analysis*. Kraków: Jagiellonian University Ph.D. thesis.

Jodłowiec Maria (2015). *The Challenges of Explicit and Implicit Communication. A Relevance-Theoretic Approach*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Jodłowiec Maria, Piskorska Agnieszka (2017). The dynamism of context: A relevance-theoretic approach. Paper delivered at the 18th Szklarska Poręba Workshop on the Roots of Pragmasemantics "The Role of Context and Reasoning in Communication", Szklarska Poręba 3–6 March, 2017.

Laineste Liisi (2011). Politics of taste in a post-Socialist state: A case study. In *Studies in Political Humour*, Villy Tsakona, Diana E. Popa (eds.), 217–241. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Levinson Stephen (2000). *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.*

McGraw Peter, Warner Joel (2014). *The Humor Code*: *A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Padilla Cruz Manuel (2012). Epistemic vigilance, cautious optimism and sophisticated understanding. *Research in Language* 10(4), 365–386.

Piskorska Agnieszka (2016). Echo and inadequacy in ironic utterances. *Journal of Pragmatics* 101, 54–65.

Popescu Carmen (2011). Understanding ethnic humour in Romanian jokes. In Dynel (ed.), 173–190.

Raskin Victor (1985). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor.* Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

Recenati Françoise (2004). Literal Meaning. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richie Graeme (2004). *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes.* London: Routledge.

Romero Esther, Soria Belén (eds.) (2010). *Explicit Communication: Robyn Carston's Pragmatics.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sperber Dan (1994). Understanding verbal understanding. In *What is Intelligence?* Jean Khalfa (ed.), 179–198. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sperber Dan, Wilson Deirdre (1986/95). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Sperber Dan, Wilson Deirdre (1998). Irony and relevance. A reply to Seto, Hamamoto and Yamanashi. In *Relevance Theory: Applications and Implications*, Robyn Carston, Seiji Uchida (eds.), 283–293. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Sperber Dan, Wilson Deirdre (2002). Pragmatics, modularity and mind-reading. *Mind & Language* 17(1–2), 3–23.

Sperber Dan, Wilson Deirdre (2008). A deflationary account of metaphors. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, Raymond Gibbs (ed.), 84–105. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Suls Jerry M. (1972). A two-stage model for the appreciation of jokes and cartoons. In *The Psychology of Humour. Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues.* Jeffrey H. Goldstein, Paul E. McGhee (eds.), 81–100. New York: Academic Press.

Suls Jerry M. (1983). Cognitive processes in humor appreciation. In *Handbook of Humor Research*, Vol. 1, Paul E. McGhee, Jeffrey H. Goldstein (eds.), 39–57. New York: Springer Verlag.

Turner Mark (2010). Blending box experiments, Build 1.0, Working Paper website http://markturner.org/blending.html, access 10.11.2015.

Wilson Deirdre (2006). The pragmatics of verbal irony: echo or pretence? *Lingua* 116, 1722–1743.

Wilson Deirdre (2009). Irony and metarepresentation. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* 21, 183–226.

Wilson Deirdre (2013). Irony comprehension: a developmental perspective. *Journal of Pragmatics* 59, 40–56.

Wilson Deirdre, Carston Robyn (2007). A unitary approach to lexical pragmatics: Relevance, inference and ad hoc concepts. In *Pragmatics*, Noel Burton-Roberts (ed.), 230–259. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wilson Deirdre, Sperber Dan (1992). On verbal irony. *Lingua* 87, 53–76.

Wilson Deirdre, Sperber Dan (2004). Relevance theory. In *The Handbook of Pragmatics,* Laurence Horn and Gregory Ward (eds.), 607–632. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wilson Deirdre, Sperber Dan (2012). Explaining irony. In Wilson, Sperber (eds.), 123–145.

Wilson Deirdre, Sperber Dan (eds.) (2012). *Meaning and Relevance*. Cambridge University Press.

Yus Francisco (2003). Humor and the search for relevance. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35(9), 1295–1331.

Yus Francisco (2008). A relevance-theoretic classification of jokes. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 4, 131–157.

Yus Francisco (2013). An inference-centered analysis of jokes: The Intersecting Circles Model of humorous communication. In *Irony and Humor: From Pragmatics to Discourse*, Leonor Ruiz Gurillo, Maria Belén Alvarado (eds.), 59–82. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Yus Francisco (2016). *Humour and Relevance*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Agnieszka Piskorska
Instytut Anglistyki
Uniwersytet Warszawski
ul. Hoża 69
00-681 Warszawa
[a.piskorska(at)uw.edu.pl]

Maria Jodłowiec
Instytut Filologii Angielskiej
Uniwersytet Jagielloński
Al. Mickiewicza 9A
31-120 Kraków
[maria.jodlowiec(at)uj.edu.pl]