

A CLOSE LOOK AT JOKES IN PRAGMATIC ASPECT

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at studying various features of pragmatics in every day jokes to understand why they are so funny, unpredictable and unexpected as well as what provides them with these characteristics.

Key words: Pragmatics, joke, utterance, referent, presupposition, maxim, deixis, politeness, face, speech act, cooperation.

I am sure that when we read or listen to a funny story, we do laugh a lot or a little. Thus, what makes us laugh? It is, of course, the content of that story is amusing. But why is it amusing? How can people make it so humorous? I think it is thanks to the art of using pragmatics in these kinds of story. In this article, some English and Vietnamese funny stories, mainly funny conversations will be examined in order to figure out what components of pragmatics are employed to turn an ordinary story into a hilarious one.

The reason why pragmatics is chosen to study in this article is that it is the prospective candidate for answering the mentioned questions. According to Yule (1998), pragmatics helps deal more with what people mean by their utterances than with what the words or phrases might mean by themselves. It also helps interpret what people mean in a particular context and how the context influences what is said.

First, let's examine this funny story by Lilkayz (a) (2008):

Một người đàn ông lái xe trên đường. Một người phụ nữ cũng lái xe trên đường đó nhưng theo chiều ngược lại. Khi họ vượt qua nhau, người đàn ông mở cửa sổ ô tô và hét lên – “Con lợn!”. Người phụ nữ cũng lập tức mở cửa kính ô tô và hét – “Đồ đười đơi!”. Họ tiếp tục con đường của mình. Khi người phụ nữ đi qua đoạn

rẽ kế tiếp, chị ta đâm phải một con lợn to ở ngay giữa đường và bay thẳng xuống ao.

In this story, the author skillfully makes use of names and referents in pragmatics to create a humor for it. As Yule (1998) mentioned, “there is a convention that certain referring expressions will be used to identify certain entities on a regular basis. It is our daily experience of the successful operation of this convention that may cause us to assume that referring expressions can only designate very specific entities” (p. 19). In this situation, the noun “con lợn” [pig] is just a name. The man uses it to refer to a “real” pig. There is no other meaning in the man’s utterance. However, the woman mistakenly thinks that the man wants to refer to her as that “pig”, which causes the accident.

But what makes the woman think the man is humiliating her? If the “name-referents” is the direct cause, the physical environment or “context” is the number one accomplice because it has “a powerful impact on how referring expressions are to be interpreted” (Yule, 1998, p. 21). In this story, the context (the man and the woman are driving oppositely; the man does nothing but pops his head out of the window and shouts “pig”) is the indirect cause which creates a wrong interpretation for the woman.

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This is another funny conversation that took place between (Y) and a marketing guy(X).

X: Which shaving cream do you use?

Y: Baba's

X: Which aftershave do you use?

Y: Baba's

X: Which deodorant do you use?

Y: Baba's

X: Which toothpaste do you use?

Y: Baba's

X: Which shampoo do you use?

Y: Baba's

X: Which socks do you use?

Y: Baba's

X (Frustrated): Okay, tell me, what is this Baba? Is it an international company???

....

....

Y: No, He is my roommate

("Nice Funny Conversation", 2008)

In this conversation, the author competently exploits one of the presupposition types – the existential presupposition in order to bring humor to the story. As stated by Yule (1998), "the possessive construction in English is associated with a presupposition of existence" (p. 27). By using this kind of construction, the speaker is assumed to be committed to the existence of the entities named. Specifically, since the character (Y) in this conversation uses the possessive construction (Baba's), the marketing guy (X) presupposes that (Y) uses the products of Baba. Besides, it is the influence of the context in this situation – marketing products that makes the marketing guy (X) immediately jumps to the presupposition that the name "Baba" character (Y) talking about is of a certain international company. Nevertheless, it is just the name of character (Y)'s roommate. Thus, the content of any story can be embedded with kinds of presupposition to convert it into a joke.

Next, let's look at another humorous story named "This Could Happen to You" (n.d.) so as to discover what aspects of pragmatics are employed to make it funny.

I was barely sitting down on the toilet when I heard a voice from the other stall saying:

"Hi, how are you?"

I'm not the type to start a conversation in the restroom. I don't know what got into me, but I answered, somewhat embarrassed,

"Doin' just fine!"

And the other person says:

"So what are you up to?"

What kind of question is that? At that point, I'm thinking this is too bizarre so I say:

"Uhhh, I'm like you, just sitting here."

At this point I am just trying to get out as fast as I can when I hear another question:

"Can I come over?"

Ok, this question is just too weird for me. I figured I could politely end the conversation. I say:

"No.....I'm a little busy right now!!!"

Then I hear the person say, nervously:

"Listen, I'll have to call you back. There's an idiot in the other stall who keeps answering all my questions!!"

According to Yule (1998), people involved in a conversation will cooperate with each other. In most circumstances, the assumption of cooperation is so pervasive that it can be stated as a cooperative principle of conversation and elaborated in four sub-principles, called maxims. They are (1) quantity maxim – making your contribution as informative as is required; (2) quality maxim – making your contribution one that is true; (3) relation maxim – being relevant; and (4) manner maxim – being perspicuous (Yule, 1998).

The person asking questions in this funny conversation does not violate any maxims. He/She provides an appropriate amount of information; tells the truth; is relevant; and tries to be as clear as he/she can, but this makes us laugh. The point is that the person answering questions does not see the person raising questions as he is in another stall. Thus, he/she does not know the other is on the phone. Hence, what draws him/her in responding to the questions?

First, it is owing to the use of the pronoun “you” called person deixis – one of the deictic aspects in pragmatics. Coincidentally, this pronoun is true for both speakers in this conversation. The person on the phone uses it to greet his/her friend at the other side of the phone, while the person trying to respond the questions thinks the person from the other stall is asking him/her.

In addition, one more reason to explain why the person from other stall answers the questions is that he/she is affected by the polite social behavior called “politeness”, particularly “face”. According to Yule (1998), politeness in an interaction can be defined as “the means employed to show awareness of another person’s face” which means “the public self-image of a person” (p. 60). It is this feature that makes the person trying to answer the questions give out his/her utterances in order to save the other person’s face in another stall.

Here is another funny story by Lilkayz (b) (2008):

Chàng và nàng ngồi trong công viên tại Hà Nội.

Chàng rất thẹn thùng còn cô gái muốn được chàng hôn bèn nói: “Ôi! má em đau quá!” Chàng trai bèn hôn vào má cô gái. - Em thấy thế nào? Còn đau không? - Úi, hết đau rồi.

Ít phút sau... - Ôi! Cổ em lại đau!

Chàng lại hôn vào cổ nàng. - Còn đau không em? Cô gái bèn lên: Hết... rồi...

Cụ già ngồi gần đó cúi tiết liền hỏi: - Hỡi chàng trai có đôi môi thần kì, cháu có thể chữa được bệnh trĩ không?

In this story, the young lady makes no request from the man but receives his very considerate actions. Why does it happen? And what makes the story so hilarious after the old woman gives out her utterance?

The young lady in this story cleverly makes use of what is called “speech acts” in pragmatics. They are “actions performed via utterances” (Yule, 1998, p. 47). This type of action consists of three related acts. First, when the young lady forms the sounds and words to create a meaningful utterance, for example (a) “Ôi! Má em đau quá!” [Ouch! My cheeks hurt], she is making what is called “locutionary act”. She, yet, does not just produce a well-formed utterance with no purpose. She forms it with some kinds of function in her mind, which is called “illocutionary act”. In this situation, the young lady utters, for example (a), to make one kind of speech acts – the directives (suggestions, requests). And of course, she does not simply create an utterance with a directive function without intending it to have an effect. This is the third dimension, the “perlocutionary act”. Depending on this circumstance, the young lady utter, for example (a) on the assumption that the hearer (the man) will recognize the effect she intended. That is to get the man to kiss her.

Luckily, the man (the hearer) recognizes the young lady’s communicative intention and her implied request is satisfied. Nevertheless, an old lady nearby also recognizes this circumstance surrounding the utterances called the “speech event”, and she cunningly challenges the man with her awkward utterance, which creates a humor for the story.

To sum up, funny stories in both English and Vietnamese do take most advantage of pragmatic features. With only an ordinary content in common contexts, they are skillfully embedded with all kinds of elements in pragmatics – from reference to presupposition, to cooperation, to deixis, to politeness, and to speech acts. All of them are cleverly combined to turn stories into jokes with the magic of pragmatics' components.

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