

Ambiguity-generating devices in linguistic verbal jokes¹

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Abstract

Linguistic ambiguity forms a crucial element of a substantial proportion of jokes. Removing it will remove the humorous effect. To be ambiguous, a fragment of text must be capable of yielding two possible semantic interpretations. In a typical context-heavy environment achieving ambiguity is not a simple task. To aid in generating ambiguity, special devices are present in jokes that help activate the two interpretations, which I term ambiguitors. Ambiguitors may take several forms, but they have a unique function: to enable ambiguity. They range from a special narrative passage highlighting the alternative reading to proper name creation. A productive ambiguitor is the juxtaposition of dissimilar linguistic systems. These may be altogether different languages, or varieties of one language (dialects, styles, registers, developmental stages, professional jargons etc.), thus expediting the generation of two semantic interpretations: one within each linguistic system. Certain character pairs featuring in jokes, such as children vs. adults, can be viewed as vehicles of such dissimilar linguistic systems and may thus function as ambiguitors. Such an analysis, if correct, would reduce the appeal of aggressiveness-based explanations.

Ambiguity in jokes

Ambiguity has been the subject of a substantial number of linguistically oriented, as well as other, studies (such as Empson 1966; Shultz and Pilon 1973; Stageberg 1979; Kess and Hoppe 1981; Ruch and Hehl 1983; Hirsh-Pasek et al. 1986; Oaks 1990; Oaks 1994; Sánchez Roura 1995 — to name just a small selection). As such, ambiguity has of course been defined in a number of different ways, all of which may have their own validity and usefulness within the frameworks in which they are employed. For the purposes of the present paper I define ambiguity as follows:

(1) Linguistic ambiguity is that property of a fragment of text which allows for two or more significantly different semantic interpretations to be arrived at by a substantial proportion of typical text recipients.

Although ambiguity, as seen here, is essentially a property of the text itself, I have deemed it desirable to refer to the statistically average human recipient (i.e., reader or hearer, depending on the mode of presentation of the joke) of the text as the ultimate judge of what is and what is not ambiguous. The reason for this seeming contradiction is the incompleteness of any so far proposed theoretical descriptions of the semantic system of natural language. Given a comprehensive formalized theory of semantics, a theory that would not only derive correct semantic interpretations from a syntactic representation by querying the lexicon, but one that would also be capable of handling all the contextual, pragmatic and world-knowledge-related factors, no references to actual users of language would probably have been necessary, as the full knowledge of language users would be readily available in the form of a formalized theory.

Unfortunately, a vast amount of progress is needed in order to even begin to hope for such an advanced stage of development of semantics (or whatever name one would choose to give it) as a science. At our present state of knowledge, I think it is expedient and sensible to rely on human judgement. The alternative would be to formulate the criteria in terms of some properties of the text itself, which would yield a superficially appealing, but nevertheless essentially vacuous and unverifiable formulation —

precisely for reasons of inadequacy of existing semantic models of natural language. In a similar manner, and for the same reasons, I make no attempt at suggesting any rigorous quantitative measure for determining when two semantic interpretations are "significantly different".

In serious informative texts, ambiguity seems to be an undesirable hindrance to communication, and thus tends to be eliminated (cf. Grice's Maxims of Conversation - Grice 1975), or at least minimized to the extent that other important factors are not excessively compromised. One such prominent factor is brevity (Grice's Maxims again). Brevity seems to be in direct conflict with the need for non-ambiguity, in the sense that there tends to be a trade-off relationship between the two. For example, "the prime minister signed the agreement" has — at least in some contexts — a greater potential for ambiguity than the more elaborate "the prime minister of Poland signed the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs." The presence of ambiguity does not, of its very nature, positively affect the information-conveying efficacy of a linguistic transaction. However, Raskin (1985) observes that within the humorous or "non-bona-fide" mode of communication ambiguity is a desirable ingredient. What I intend to show here is that in linguistic verbal jokes ambiguity is not only desirable, but special elements are present in the text of a joke that enhance, or indeed enable, its ambiguity. I believe that these elements are often purposely inserted in the joke-to-be during the process of joke creation. Not only do linguistic jokes often exhibit linguistic ambiguity, but it is important that the clue enabling the recognition of ambiguity should coincide with the final part of a verbal joke, recognized as the punch of a joke (the term "punch line" is more commonly heard in everyday language, but, following Hockett (1973), I prefer to use the less specific "punch", so as not to suggest that the point in a joke text at which the ambiguity becomes apparent is coextensive with a "line", whatever the latter is taken to signify). Giving the ambiguity prematurely away is often tantamount to "killing" the joke, that is turning it into a non-joke. While, for a well-built joke, the recognition of ambiguity should coincide with the punch of the joke, the ambiguous string itself need not be so placed, and in most cases it appears at an earlier point in the joke text. Attardo et al. (1994) report that roughly 80 percent of the jokes investigated in their study exhibit such a pattern.

Presence vs. absence of ambiguity

Let us now examine in what way linguistic ambiguity contributes to the funniness of a simple yet typical linguistic joke exemplified by (2) below:

(2) The following conversation took place between two teachers:

"Do you allow your boys to smoke?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Can they drink?"

"No, by all means, no!"

"What about dates?"

"Oh, that's quite all right, as long as they don't eat too many." (Miształ 1990: 148)²

In joke (2) we are presented with an exchange between two teachers, active (speaking) characters of the joke. Teacher 1 asks teacher 2 about what types of behaviour the latter allows his pupils to engage in. There are three queries.³ The first one refers to smoking cigarettes, the second to drinking alcohol, and the third would normally be interpreted as referring to dating girls. However, the final turn by teacher 2 introduces another interpretation which is enabled by the punch of the joke, roughly coextensive with eat too many. At the moment of reading or hearing the punch, the recipient of the joke backtracks and locates dates as the ambiguous string with the alternative interpretation of 'kind of fruit'. This new interpretation is invoked because the punch introduces the concept of eating, which cannot be easily reconciled with the original reading of dates (date in the sense of 'social meeting with person of opposite sex' cannot be eaten). The two interpretations are compatible with the content of what teacher 1 and teacher 2 said, respectively. However, the recipient of the joke, once the punch has been processed, has open access to both interpretations: this constitutes the joke's ambiguity. As I hope to demonstrate below by altering (2) to produce modified versions marked (3) and (5), the presence of two interpretations makes it possible for

the joke to produce a humorous effect, arguably the most essential property of a joke. If the ambiguity is removed from the text of the joke by artificial manipulation, the humour is lost, as in (3) below, an altered version of (2):

(3)The following conversation took place between two teachers:

"Do you allow your boys to smoke?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Can they drink?"

"No, by all means, no!"

"What about dates?"

"Oh, that's quite all right, as long as they don't go out too often."

In (3) there is no ambiguity, as only one interpretation of the word dates is possible. By removing the reference to eating and replacing it with a reference to meeting girls socially, a reference that is semantically consistent with the original reading of dates, we have effectively removed the ambiguity.

Whether such modified versions of jokes as the above are still jokes is largely an essentialist question. They still possess many of the textual characteristics of a joke as defined in Attardo and Chabanne (1992). However, they are not funny, and humour is a very crucial (to put it mildly) property of a joke. Non-jokes reminiscent of the modified version of the dates joke are, however, occasionally told, and they are capable of eliciting, if not a peal of laughter, then at least a mild chuckle. An example of this would be joke (4) below:

(4)Why did the chicken cross the road?

To get to the other side.

A possible explanation of any humorous potential of such "non-joke jokes" might be that the whole text has two text-type interpretations: one that it isn't a joke (it's not funny), the other that it is a joke (length, narrative/dialogic structure, prefacing devices — on which see Cashion et al. 1986). Such texts might thus possibly be said to exhibit text-

type ambiguity. This, however, goes beyond the scope of the present paper, and beyond the meaning of ambiguity adopted here.

Another way of altering the original joke (2) which would result in a non-ambiguous text is replacing the word dates with another, not so polysemous⁴ item, such as hamburgers:

(5)The following conversation took place between two teachers:

"Do you allow your boys to smoke?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Can they drink?"

"No, by all means, no!"

"What about hamburgers?"

"Oh, that's quite all right, as long as they don't eat too many."

Again, as in the previous altered version (3), no ambiguity is present in (5), since hamburgers cannot typically refer to anything else than a specific type of food. Altered text (5), with the ambiguity that was present in the original joke (2) artificially removed, exhibits no humorous quality. This is true of both altered versions, (3) and (5), and demonstrates that the removal of ambiguity causes the humour of a linguistic joke to be lost. Of course, this could conceivably be an incidental property of just joke (2). That this is not so and that the same effect is observed for other jokes is demonstrated in Lew (1996b). There, and in Lew (1996a), the reader will also find arguments for distinguishing linguistic jokes from non-linguistic jokes plus the basis on which this distinction is based.

Thus, in the original joke (2), we are presented with two interpretations of the lexical item date. The original interpretation arises naturally from the preceding context and may be termed the unmarked interpretation. The alternative interpretation becomes accessible only after the punch of the joke has been processed. It is typically somewhat unexpected in the light of the preceding material and may thus be called the marked interpretation. In order to have ambiguity and the humorous effect that follows therefrom, both interpretations have to be recognized by the recipient of a joke. This is made more likely thanks to a variety of devices embedded in jokes that can collectively

be referred to as ambiguators.

An ambigator then, as understood in the present approach, is a purposeful device aimed at enhancing the probability of the alternative (marked) reading relative to the original (unmarked) reading. The marked reading may be suitably highlighted and/or the unmarked reading may be suppressed.

While the role of ambiguators is fairly uniform, that is to enable an ambiguity which potentially resides in some fragment of a joke's text, their form can vary significantly, and choosing it skillfully (in the process of joke creation, or re-creation, if the joke is only partially retained in the memory of the teller) may go a long way towards the success or failure of a joke (see Hockett's (1973:171) way IV of blowing a joke).

Ambiguators, as seen here, should be distinguished from Dallin Oaks's (Oaks 1990, 1994) enablers (of grammatical ambiguity). The latter concept refers to the specific, mostly systematic but not exclusively, syntactic and lexico-syntactic properties of the English language with grammatical ambiguity-generating potential. Thus, while Oaks's enablers identify the kinds of phrasal and quasi-phrasal strings potentially capable of carrying two meanings through syntactically divergent representations, the role of ambiguators is to make sure that the two potential readings (not necessarily corresponding to two syntactic representations) are in fact brought to the mind of the recipient. The two directions of study stand in complementary rather than mutually exclusive relation.

Examples of ambiguators

Narrative ambiguators

Let us now take a closer look at some instances of ambiguators in jokes. First, consider joke (6) below:

(6) They had just turned the corner from one of the most beautiful of steep valleys.

She exclaimed: "What a beautiful gorge that was!"

"Yes, it wasn't bad," he replied, his mind flashing back, unromantically, to the restaurant in the valley, "but I could have done with a bit more apple pie." (Misztal 1990: 595)

The reader will, I hope, agree that (6) is hardly a side-splitting joke. The reason why I think it is a rather mediocre joke is that it has a very obvious ambigator⁵, which fact, however, makes it a suitable candidate for illustrative purposes. The original (unmarked) reading of the ambiguous word gorge is 'ravine'. The alternative (marked) reading is 'copious meal'. The latter interpretation is somewhat unexpected in the context, definitely less so than the former, so the creator (or creators) of the joke chose to insert a narrative passage his mind flashing back, unromantically, to the restaurant in the valley, to increase the chances that the alternative reading would be activated. This is a clear instance of an ambigator. Through a reference to a restaurant, the audience is informed that the characters took a meal on the way. The audience can then tie the last line of the male character with the reference to a restaurant and more readily reinterpret gorge along the lines of the marked reading. An ambigator such as that of (6) above may be termed a narrative ambigator.

Proper name ambigators

What appears to be a rather frequently employed type of ambigator is an ad hoc coinage of a proper name. This is a very convenient, if perhaps unoriginal, method of generating ambiguity. Most lexical items in English are polysemous: they have a number of distinct senses. These senses, however, do not freely occur in any contextual environment. In an actual text, whether spoken or written, the exact meaning of lexical items is negotiated via an intricate (and still largely mysterious to linguists) network of grammatical and semantic links and correspondences with the co-occurring lexical items, as well as with the whole baggage of non-linguistic context. Because of this, it is not generally usual to have more than one such "dictionary sense" carried by a single occurrence of a lexical item within a typical, well-structured text (and, one would like to add, it's a good thing it is so, for otherwise the communicative purpose of

language would be ill-served). However, a relatively easy way of endowing a lexical item with additional referential meaning is to force its use as a proper name for something or somebody. In this fashion, ambiguity can be generated as in joke (7) below:

(7) A religious and charitable woman noticed a very down-and-out sort of man standing at the corner of the street near her residence.

One morning she took compassion to him, pressed a dollar into his hand and whispered: "Never despair."

Next time she saw him he stopped her and handed her nine dollars.

"What does this mean?" she asked.

"It means, ma'am," said the man, "that Never Despair won at 8 to 1.

(Misztal 1990: 611)

The Noun Phrase never despair in (7) above is given an extra semantic interpretation by assigning to it a proper name value. It is thanks to this mechanism that the phrase becomes ambiguous.

It is worth pointing to another difference between the proper name coinage ambigator as exemplified in (7) and the purely narrative ambigator illustrated in (6) above. In the latter case the formal linguistic requirements for the existence of two meanings are present outside the context of the joke: there is knowledge in the minds of most native speakers of English of the two meanings of gorge. This is more than can be said of Never despair in (7), which is presented with special proper name meaning in an arbitrary fashion just for the occasion.

Existing and well-known proper names can also be tapped for ambiguity, if they can be given non-proper-name interpretation as well, as exemplified by (8) below:

(8) Artillery Commander: "Fire at will!"

Recruit: "Where is Will?" (Misztal 1990: 155)

The arbitrariness, and thus ambigator status, of such devices will be typically less

striking than that of ad-hoc proper name coinage, but it will be the more apparent the more unusual (infrequent) the proper name is. Joke (9) below will provide an illustration:

(9)Thor, the God of thunder, boasted an unusaly high sex drive. On one occasion, after an encounter with a particularly challenging partner, he felt compelled to disclose his identity:

"I am Thor."

"Tho am I," said the girl.

On the other hand, proper name coinage is more open-ended and thus potentially more productive as an ambiguity-creating device than the use of already existing names, although resorting to phonetic nonidentity, as in (9) above, may give a boost to productivity. This last strategy is taken to its extreme in knock-knock jokes, whose highly conventionalized structure enables ambiguity to be perceived with even high degrees of phonetic divergence. Recipients' ambiguity-discovering efficiency is particularly high then, since those recipients who are familiar with knock-knocks will have a priori knowledge of the precise location of the ambiguous string.

Different languages

A potentially very productive ambiguator consists in the introduction into the joke of characters differing in their linguistic systems. This strategy has clear benefits from the point of view of ambiguity-generating potential: a fragment of text can be given two distinct semantic interpretations, the ambiguity resulting rather naturally from the different processing within the two linguistic systems. The most conspicuous difference of this type results from the juxtaposition of two different languages, as in (10) below:

(10)During the Second World War, a German spy in London goes into a pub for a drink. Using his immaculate British accent, he addresses the bartender: "Two Martinis, please."

"Dry?"

"Nein! Zwei, bitte!"

In (10), the phonetic sequence corresponding to English dry is similar to that representing German drei. The bartender's intention is to produce an English word, but the spy apparently switches his decoding apparatus into German, perhaps because he fails to make sense of the string within English, or else because this isn't the first pub he went to that night (the interesting point is that jokes, unlike some longer humorous pieces of literature, can thrive without any such deep justification).

Different dialects of one language

In a less manifest case of a bringing together of two distinct linguistic systems, speakers of two dialects of the same language may be involved:

(11) A visitor from England startled at dead of night by a terrifying hoot asked his American host:

"What can that terrifying sound mean?"

"It's an owl," the host explained.

"Right, but 'oo's 'owling?" (Pocheptsov 1974: 283)

The dialects contrasted in (11) are British and American English, with h-dropping being attributed to British English, a feature stereotypically perceived by Americans as typical of British speakers, which stereotype has some factual grounding (Wells 1982).

Within Britain, h-dropping is popularly associated with the Cockney accent, hence jokes like (12) below:

(12) Doctor, to Cockney patient: "Now, my man, what about this ear?"

Patient: "This 'ere wot?" (Pocheptsov 1974: 242)

The next example is based on dialectal variation within the US:

(13)Agent: "Now, there is a house without a flaw!"

Harvard Man: "My, what do you walk on?" (Misztal 1990: 498)

Joke (13) explores the stereotypical (and once factual) feature of a cultivated New England accent, namely non-rhoticity (r-lessness).

Different developmental stages of a language

Linguistic variation is not, however, limited to the geographical dimension. For example, there are significant, consistent differences between the linguistic competence of an adult and that of a child. This is simply a result of the regular ontogenetic development of language. The language of a child, especially of a young one, represents a given non-final developmental stage. Thus, the presence of adult-child pairs in jokes may be seen as an ambigator, a purposeful device allowing two distinct linguistic systems to go to work on a single fragment of text, yielding ambiguity. Here are some examples:

(14)A lady sent her little girl to see the doctor. When she returned, the fond mother said:

"Mary, did the doctor treat you?"

"No, he charged me two dollars." (Misztal 1990: 832)

(15)Next-door neighbour, to small boy: "Come again, Johnny. We'd like to see more of you."

Johnny: "But there isn't any more of me!" (Hoke 1965: 92)

(16)Big sister's date was trying to make friends with the young son of the house as he waited for her to finish dressing.

"I think I have met all of your family except your Uncle Joe," he said.

"Which side of the house does he look like?"

The small boy hesitated. "The side with the bay window," he said finally.

(Hoke 1965: 92)

(17)The youngsters at Sunday-school were told to draw their conceptions of the Flight into Egypt. One little girl turned in a picture of an airplane with three people in the back, all with haloes, and a fourth up in front without one. Perplexed about the fourth person, the teacher asked the girl who it was.

"Oh," replied the youngster, "that's Pontius, the pilot." (Miszta 1990: 988)

Jokes (14), (15), (16) and (17) above explore the differences between the adult's and the child's lexicon, but any other difference can become the basis for ambiguity — like the difference in syntactic parsing in (18) below:

(18)Mother: "Mary, will you run across the street and see how old Mrs. Smith is today?"

After a few minutes, Mary: "Mother! Mrs. Smith says it's none of your business how old she is today!"

Use of joking stereotypes

It is a little-contended fact within humour scholarship that verbal jokes tend to cluster in cycles (Dundes 1987), which display a similarity of theme, setting, or character(s) featured in the jokes. As joke recipients become familiar with a given cycle of jokes, they build a mental set which evokes a network of associations attached to this cycle or any of its constituent elements. This appears to be serving a concrete purpose in joke lore, as the mere inclusion of an element indicative of an established cycle evokes in a very economical, "shorthand" way a set of assumptions about some specific entity which remain active during the interpretation of jokes. These sets of assumptions will be here called joking stereotypes. It is worth pointing out that, to be part of a joking stereotype, a given feature need not be objectively present; nor need it be identical to a true (or bona-fide, to extend Raskin's (1985) usage of the term) stereotype, in that it need not reflect the true beliefs (correct or otherwise) of the holder(s) of the stereotype

(see Davies 1990 and Davies 1991 with his comic stereotypes, also Raskin 1985: 177-179 and Attardo and Raskin 1991: 301-302 for a similar view). This point is perhaps most saliently demonstrated with a non-human example of rabbits, as reflected in joke (19) below:

(19) A man opens a refrigerator and sees a rabbit sitting on the top shelf munching on a carrot. "What on earth are you doing in there?" the man asks.
"Well, it said Westinghouse, so I'm westing," answers the rabbit.

It is part of a widespread joking stereotype of rabbits that they pronounce the English /r/ sound as [w] (a labial-velar approximant). This feature of the rabbits' joking stereotype enables the ambiguity 'Westinghouse (= popular brand of refrigerators)' vs. 'resting house'. It would be perverse to claim that most recipients of (19) seriously believe that rabbits possess this particular feature of speech, or that the animals are capable of any speech in the first place. Even so, such recipients are not prevented from getting the joke. Apparently then, a stereotypical set of features of rabbits is invoked that is known to be factually untrue, yet is assumed to be locally true, within the realm of the joke. Of course, some features explored in jokes may well correspond to reality, such as the systematic differences between the linguistic systems of children and adults discussed above; but the important point is that they don't necessarily have to be objectively real. Joking stereotypes frequently concern groups of people, and thus the inclusion of stereotype-carrying characters is widespread in jokes. For example, one could name ethnic groups (eg. Poles, the Irish, Russians, Greeks), geographical (different parts of the country), rural vs. urban characters, occupational (university professors, lawyers, nuns, policemen), age groups (children, the elderly). Some of the above are stereotypically characterized by specific habits of speech which may generate ambiguity. In terms of contributing to linguistic ambiguity, "dumb" and "smart" character stereotypes may be particularly useful, by capitalizing on the implicature linking general low cognitive ability with impaired linguistic competence. Dumb stereotypes (Davies 1990) are often represented as ethnic groups (Polish-Americans or Italian-Americans in

the US, the Irish in England and Scotland, etc.), inhabitants of fooltowns (eg. Wąchock in Poland, County Kerry in Ireland), and rural folk in general. As an illustration, consider an example of this last group. A set feature of a dumb character in general, and of a rural one in particular, is poor vocabulary range. This is in evidence in joke (20) below:

(20) An angler was stopping at an inn, and, desirous of getting some bait, he said to the servant-girl:
"Can I get horse-flies round here?"
The girl looked wooden. "Have you never seen a horse-fly in these parts?" he asked.
"No, sir," said the girl, "but I once saw a cow jump over a gate." (Miształ 1990: 709)

The girl, unfamiliar with the term horse-fly, is baffled by the first query of the traveller. Once the query is rephrased in a form allowing an interpretation that does not involve this lexical item, she interprets the string in a way different than intended by the angler.

Infrequent lexical items and constructions

Esoteric words and expressions in jokes may help achieve ambiguity, as in (21):

(21) One Irishman phoned another and said, "Come on over, we're having a wake."
His friend said, "I dunno, we've got a bad case of incipient laryngitis in the house." "What the hell," said the other Irishman, "this lot here will drink anything; just bring it." (Cagney 1979: 41)

The rationale for the use of rare words and expressions is that it makes sense for a joke character to experience difficulties with understanding them correctly, that is in the established meaning. A private meaning is then introduced as the alternative interpretation which, as in (21) above, arises from contextual support, but phonetic

similarity may also play a role, as in (22) below:

(22)After several years of married life without child, the husband sends the wife to a doctor. The doctor soon discovers that the reason is lack of sexual intercourse.

"There is nothing physically wrong with you, my lady, but you have a deficiency of passion, and if you ever give birth to anything, it will be a miracle."

"Well, what did the doctor tell you?" asks the husband upon the wife's return.

"He said I got a fish in my passage, and if I ever give birth to anything, it will be a mackerel."

There is, however, a delicate balance to be struck here. The word or expression must not be too obscure, or there will be a risk of the recipients missing the original interpretation themselves. Again, this is where the introduction of a dumb (and thus linguistically nonproficient) character becomes a useful accompanying ambigator, so the dumb interpretation can be used against the normal or smart one. Once a dumb stereotype with which the audience is familiar features in the joke, it is easier for the audience to accept that this particular character may fail to understand a word or phrase in the way it would be understood by most.

Implications for aggressiveness-based frameworks of joke analysis

Proponents of the broadly conceived aggressiveness-based approach to humour (also known variously as the superiority or disparagement approach; see Keith-Spiegel 1972, Gruner 1978, and Raskin 1985 for an extensive list of references) argue, in the most general of terms, that enjoyment of humour arises from the feeling of superiority from winning over an opponent defeated, or put down, in an act of humour. In its strong version, an aggressiveness-based approach claims that all humour works like this (e.g. Gruner 1994, 1995, 1996⁶) and can be sufficiently and satisfactorily explained in this

way. This position is aptly captured by Gruner (1996):

For forty years hence, I have been able to explain to myself and others in "superiority theory" language each and every instance of humor I have encountered.

But many humor "experts" and researchers, while admitting that "superiority" explains much humor, resist the notion that it can explain all humor. (all emphasis by Gruner)

As far as jokes go, a type of example favoured by the champions of aggressiveness-based approaches involves jokes featuring stereotyped groups of humans such as I have enumerated above. While I do not wish to contend the claim that some jokes may at times convey aggressive intent, it is worth remembering that so does non-humorous language on some occasions — and yet few linguists would want to claim that the primary function of language is aggression. Likewise, I do not believe that the primary function of jokes is to attack or put down; rather, the primary function of jokes is to amuse. Aggressiveness may well be an incidental property of a section of jokes, but hardly a constitutive one. It seems to me that the emphasis on the aggressive aspect of humour typical of superiority theories is unwarranted. Some theories (such as Bradshaw 1977) have a special parameter of 'butt' or 'target' of a joke, implying that every joke must have a butt or target. Aggressiveness-based approaches would tend to explain the presence of characters from certain groups as chiefly serving to put down or disparage (members of) these particular groups. An alternative, or at least complementary, line of explanation that emerges from the preceding discussion is that the presence of characters belonging to different groups may be a convenient device that allows the introduction of two differing linguistic systems: an ambigator. When the two systems are applied to a certain fragment of the joke's text, the difference may result in two distinct readings. In other words, the difference between two linguistic systems directly, and the presence of characters possessing such divergent systems indirectly, generates the ambiguity of the joke necessary for the humour. I am far from suggesting that the aggressiveness-based approach to humour should be scrapped completely. It

may be useful, but should not be indiscriminately applied to all types of jokes (such as linguistic jokes), not even those involving distinct groups of characters.

As an extended example of excessive, in my view, attention to the aggressive aspect of jokes consider joke (23), given in Norrick (1993: 107-108):

(23) Red Adair is coming back from Indonesia. He's been over there a while putting out fires, and he stops off in Las Vegas. On his way back to Houston, he sits down at the bar next to a guy and he starts up a conversation, and the guy starts talking about what a terrific town Las Vegas is. He says, "Not only is there gambling and good golf and all this stuff, but the entertainment here is just spectacular. Two nights ago I saw the greatest song-and-dance man ever: Lenny Davis Jr., and the guy was terrific. He's very old at this point, but, boy, he can still hoof."

And Red Adair looks at the guy and says, "Lenny Davis Jr.? You mean Sammy Davis Jr.?"

"Sammy, Lenny, I don't know. But the guy was great. I tell you the entertainment here is terrific." And he says, "And last night. You know who I went to see? I saw the best country and western singer I've seen in my life. This gal was just terrific. Sings like an angel. Molly Parton."

And Red Adair looks at the guy. "Molly Parton? Everybody knows that it's Dolly Parton. How can you call Dolly Parton Molly Parton?"

So their talk goes a little further and the guy says, "By the way, you look familiar to me. Who are you?"

And he says, "Oh, I'm Red Adair."

And he says, "Oh, are you still sleeping around with Ginger Rogers?"

It must be observed that Norrick (1993) himself in several places moderates other authors' claims about the apparent importance of aggressiveness in jokes. It is all the more surprising to find him suggesting that the above joke poses an act of aggression against the person who "pathologically confuses names" (Norrick 1993: 132), and that

the expression of aggression through jokes and joking lets us present a particular personality with our own attitudes and feelings. It lets us probe for similar attitudes and feelings in our listeners. And it may help us let off steam and relieve tension which might find less salubrious expression otherwise. (Norrick 1993: 133)

To me, it does not seem very likely that probing the feelings of the recipient of the joke would loom anywhere prominent in the intentions of a teller of a joke like (23) above. How much interest would anyone normally have in someone else's attitudes towards people who habitually distort other people's names? Rather, it seems much more likely to me that confusing names is a deliberate ambiguity-generating device — an ambiguator. In this particular case, the ambiguity is built around an interesting linguistic abnormality of the joke's character. It appears that in the lexical representations of people's first names, certain phonological contrasts are lost, or weakened, for that speaker. Mainly consonants seem to be affected, because the vowels are left more or less intact. I will not go into any speculations as to the detailed nature of these processes, but it is clear that in the final analysis they lead to the creation of ambiguity, in the sense that what for other people is two different names may turn out to be one and the same name for our character. In the punch this factor culminates in a failure to make a crucial distinction: between the other character of the joke, Red Adair, and another even better-known person — Fred Astaire. Simultaneously, it is revealed that the neutralization processes also apply to family names.

Finally, it is interesting to consider the reason for which the name of Ginger Rogers was the only one that was left untouched. It is the context of Ginger Rogers that allows the recipient of the joke to recognize the ambiguity between Red Adair and Fred Astaire because of a strong association between Fred and Ginger (ambiguator!). Should the name of Ginger Rogers be distorted, it might go unrecognized, and so might the Fred Astaire vs. Red Adair ambiguity. And, as I have shown in (2) — (5) above, the loss of ambiguity renders a joke unfunny.

Notes

1. Portions of earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 13th International Humor Conference of the International Society for Humor Studies, July 31 — August 4, 1995, at the University of Aston, Birmingham, England, and at the 29th International Conference on Cross-Language Studies and Contrastive Linguistics, November 30 — December 2, 1995, in Świeradów, Poland.
2. Throughout this paper, the numbers following a colon in references to Misztal (1990) refer to joke numbers as given in that source, rather than to page numbers.
3. The tripartite structure that this joke exhibits is a frequent characteristic of jokes in general, but will not be discussed here.
4. Whether we are dealing with polysemy or homophony is debatable, of course, but this issue is only tangential to the argument. At best, it may play a role in deciding as to what type of ambiguity is involved, but not as to whether there is ambiguity at all.
5. The relationship between ambiguators and funniness of jokes will not be explored here, but the interested reader will find the relevant discussion in chapter 11 of Lew (1996b).
6. I would like to thank Chuck Gruner for making this work of his available to me.

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