

# **Relevance at the Centre of Humorous Communication: On Finding the Conceptual Tools Which Carry Explanatory Power in the Model of the Comprehension of Jokes**

## **Introduction**

The present contribution discusses a number of important conceptual tools and strategies which emerge as responsible for the explanation of the humorous material. The paper draws upon the theory of relevance (Sperber and Wilson [1986] 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004) with a special emphasis on epistemic vigilance (Sperber et al. 2010), the guru effect (Sperber [2005] 2010), and three patterns of inference, viz. naïve optimism, cautious optimism, and sophisticated understanding (Sperber 1994, 2000). It is argued that the conflation of several concepts and mechanisms provides a broad panorama of the model of comprehension favoured by the hearer so as to arrive at the humorous effects. Also, the humorist's knowledge of a particular path of comprehension followed by the audience is essential since s/he uses this knowledge to manipulate the hearer into the entertainment of humour.

## **1. Relevance Theory**

The aim of this section is to familiarise the reader with the basic concepts central to the present discussion. The theory of relevance, premised on the Gricean (1975 [1989]) model of verbal communication, offers a recapitulation of two seminal claims: first, when we communicate, either verbally or non-verbally, we produce and ascribe intentions, and second, the utterance itself creates expectations of relevance. Relevance Theory is a wide-ranging framework in which we may find accounts of various phenomena, such as the explicit/implicit dichotomy (Carston 1988, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2009ab), irony (Sperber and Wilson 1981, Wilson and Sperber 1992), metaphors (Carston 1997), etc.

According to Relevance Theory (RT), human communication and cognition are geared to the maximization of relevance. The central concept of 'relevance' is defined as a property of inputs, be it utterances, thoughts, or conclusions of inferences. An input to one's cognitive system is relevant when it ties up with background information and when its processing leads to the emergence of positive cognitive effects (modification of assumption, for example, strengthening and abandoning of existing assumptions) for the least mental effort. In general terms, relevance is maximised when the hearer achieves a large amount of positive effects for the least mental effort. In reverse situation, relevance is minimised when greater processing effort is not compensated in terms of effects.

Relevance Theory is dependent upon two core principles labelled the cognitive principle of relevance and the communicative principle of relevance. By the former principle we can explain our general tendency to maximise the relevance of every input directed towards us. This explanation of human cognition is vital given the fact that an individual has access and entertains a number of possible inputs at the same time. The latter principle

assumes that every utterance, which in RT is realised as an ostensive stimulus, conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance. In other words, the utterance is assumed to be relevant given both the hearer's processing effort necessary to comprehend an input and the speaker's preferences and abilities. The concept of the communicative principle together with the presumption of optimal relevance form the bedrock for the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure which is a heuristic that guides the audience into the speaker's intended interpretation:

- (1a) Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguation, reference resolution, implicatures etc.) in order of accessibility.
- (1b) Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied. (Sperber and Wilson 1986 [1995], 2004: 259)

The comprehension procedure is divided into three sub-tasks, which are not performed simultaneously. The hearer is required to formulate hypotheses concerning explicatures and implicatures against the background of his/her expectations of relevance:

- (2a) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content (in relevance-theoretic terms, EXPLICATURES) via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution, and other pragmatic enrichment processes.
- (2b) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual assumptions (in relevance-theoretic terms, IMPLICATED PREMISES).
- (2c) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual implications (in relevance-theoretic terms, IMPLICATED CONCLUSIONS). (Sperber and Wilson 1986 [1995], 2004: 261)

### **1.1. Epistemic Vigilance and the Guru Effect**

The notions of epistemic vigilance and the guru effect are not similar but, when combined, I contend that they can provide a credible explanation of how the intended humorous interpretation is formulated by the hearer. In Section 2, I demonstrate the way in which the two concepts relate to joke interpretation and try to estimate whether they account for humorous effect on their own. The claim behind these concepts is that they can provide a broader picture of humorous communication.

The guru effect is the concept underlying the role of authority and argumentation in the sense that the speaker can become our authority/intellectual guru whom we strongly believe in what is said. It means that the utterance is relevant and worth mental effort, even when the communicator conveys expressions which are obscure. Authority is understood as a social relationship involving at least two people and authority works in parallel with reputation which is established via repeated communicative acts. If in the hearer's cognitive environment there is an authority figure who is competent and reliable, s/he wants to believe in the validity and relevance of an argument, which in turn is not subject to rigorous examination. An additional effect upon accepting an argument on the authority's sole responsibility is that the hearer has a proof of her/his own intelligence and by extension s/he becomes a part of authority. As a matter of fact, an authoritative source may fail to

convey an utterance which is accepted immediately. In other words, the audience does not have an external reason to hold a belief as true and in this situation, a guru has to adduce evidence for an internal reason to accept an utterance, for example an honest guru has to convince the hearer that the conclusion of argument should be accepted as true.

Epistemic vigilance is a crucial cognitive tool which is employed by the hearer in order to avoid possible misinterpretations, i.e. the risk of being purposefully or accidentally misinformed. An epistemically vigilant hearer may be reluctant to accept the communicated content of an utterance immediately since the speaker's overall trustworthiness is questioned. Epistemic vigilance may be targeted at the source of a piece of communicated information or at the content. It is claimed that when vigilance is directed towards the source, an informant must be both competent and benevolent. In addition, informants are like gurus so that we have external and/or internal reasons to regard an assertion as true.

At first glance, it may be noted that these two concepts can be put on the opposite sides of an axis since the guru effect is concentrated on a blind believing that what the authority says is true, whereas epistemic vigilance is one's cognitive attentiveness to the reliability of an act of communication. In the present contribution, it is shown that their application to the comprehension of jokes is not mutually exclusive.

## 1.2. Naive/Cautious Optimism and Sophisticated Understanding

Sperber (1994) compiles a list of three strategies of utterance interpretation, ranging from naive (unsophisticated) to more complex. These strategies are connected to the attribution of intentions which call for metarepresentational abilities (cf. Sperber 2000) held by the hearer at the moment of the comprehension process. I use the example Sperber (1994) quotes to show how the three strategies are applied:

(3) Carol to John at a party: *It's late.* (Sperber 1994: 187)

In very general terms, a first-order meta-representation is connected to a simple informative intention; a second-order is when the hearer knows that the speaker has an informative intention; a third-order meta-representation is when the speaker has a communicative intention so that s/he intends his/her audience to know about an informative intention, and finally, a fourth-order meta-representation is connected to the hearer's attribution of a communicative intention to the speaker.

In the naive optimism strategy, the hearer assumes that the speaker is a benevolent and competent communicator and stops his/her comprehension at the first interpretation that comes to his/her mind, and it is presumed that it is the one intended by the speaker. Consequently, John understands Carol's statement literally and accesses the interpretation: *It's late now.*

According to cautious optimism, the speaker is assumed to be benevolent but not necessarily competent and the hearer does not stop his/her comprehension process and the first interpretation that comes to his/her mind but the first interpretation that the communicator might have thought would be relevant to him/her. Hence, John derives another interpretation: *It's time to go home.*

In the sophisticated understanding strategy, the communicator is assumed to be neither benevolent nor competent, but s/he intends to seem benevolent and competent. The hearer does not stop his/her comprehension at either the first interpretation that comes to his/her mind or the interpretation that the communicator might have thought would be relevant, but the first interpretation that the speaker might have thought would seem relevant enough to him/her. As a result, John may access a number of alternative interpretations: *Carol is tired so it's time to go home* or *Carol wants me to take her home*.

## 2. RT and Joke Comprehension

There are many postulates concerning the analysis of humorous discourse, be it jokes, conversational humour, stand-up performances, in the framework of Relevance Theory (see Yus 2003, 2008, 2012; Curcó 1995, 1996, and references therein). However, the study of jokes in accordance with three strategies of utterance interpretation has been marginalised so far in topical literature (cf. Cruz 2012).

In his paper, Cruz (2012) argues that epistemic vigilance acts as a “surveillance mechanism” and the employment of either cautious optimism or sophisticated understanding is a direct consequence of epistemic vigilance. As regards the sophisticated understanding strategy, the hearer may “discard interpretations which speakers attempt to present as optimally relevant and believable, but are not actually the real, believable interpretations or those necessary to achieve effects like humour” (Cruz 2012: 383–384).

### 2.1. The Core Tools

As mentioned above, the guru effect, epistemic vigilance, and three strategies constitute the bedrock for a relevance-based interpretation of jokes. This is not to say, however, that only these concepts may account for a cognitive apparatus in which various mechanisms are at work in the emergence of humorous effects.

As it has been noted in Section 1.1, the concepts of epistemic vigilance and the guru effect, which stem from the theory of relevance, may direct the study of human communication which ends up with humorous resolution in opposite directions. In other words, epistemic vigilance epitomises our own process of selection of an appropriate interpretation which should be on a par with the speaker's intended meaning, while the guru effect concerns the humorist's cognitive abilities to make the humorous interpretation more relevant than others.

#### 2.1.1. The Naive Optimism Strategy

On the basis of the following example,<sup>1</sup> it is demonstrated how epistemic vigilance and the guru effect are applied to joke comprehension:

- (4) Two husbands were talking about their married lives. Although happily married, both confessed to the occasional argument.  
Then Joel said, “I've made one great discovery. I now know how to always have the last word.”

<sup>1</sup> In this paper the author uses her own examples of jokes which come from various collections of jokes, such as Rovin (1987).

“Really!” said Henry, “How did you manage that?”

“It’s simple,” replied Joel, “My last word is always ‘Yes, Dear’”

- (4a) The man has a recipe for having the last word during the quarrel with his wife.  
 (4b) Actually, the man does not have the last word.

The joke belongs to the group of simple-structured jokes<sup>2</sup> in which the non-humorous explicit interpretation (4a) derived from the set-up part of a joke suffices for the whole text. It means that the hearer cannot derive any humorous effects, but s/he derives cognitive effects. That is to say, a naive audience derives the first non-humorous interpretation and even when the processing of the discourse proceeds the hearer does not access the second interpretation.

The hearer accepts the communicator’s benevolence and competence so that the asserted proposition is true. When the naive audience analyses the text of a joke s/he formulates the first accessible interpretation (4a), and it may be stated that it is the only linguistic sense derived from the form “to have the last word.” In other words, the man in the joke, boasts about having the last word during a quarrel with his wife, implying that he wears the trousers in this marriage, and the hearer expects an expression which really can be regarded as something decisive. Consequently, the informative intention has not been discovered since the joke was supposed to trigger a humorous response on the part of the hearer. As for the communicative intention, it has been fulfilled on the assumption that the audience spent mental effort to properly comprehend a piece of information and extracted cognitive effects accordingly.

What about the guru effect? The answer is two-fold. The first possibility is that the humorist is an intellectual guru and the hearer has an external reason (the source of the belief) to spend the processing effort because s/he takes for granted communicator’s authority and reliability. The second possible way of approaching the interdependence between the guru effect and joke comprehension is that the humorist is not an authoritative source and the audience has to have an internal reason, which, in the case of jokes, is made post factum. The internal reason is the one which deals with the content of the belief, for example the hearer acknowledges the text as a humorous one, appreciates it, and spends mental effort to process it. However, for the naive optimism path, the second option is less probable since the hearer is required to derive humorous effects. In addition, it is maintained that the application of the guru effect in naive optimism is not sufficient. The audience’s knowledge that an authority figure has uttered the text which should be regarded as a joke is not helpful since the naive optimism inference does not allow the hearer to arrive at this type of conclusion. The guru effect contributes to the broad panorama of the state of affairs in jokes only at the level of cautious optimism and sophisticated understanding.

As for epistemic vigilance, it may be directed at the source of a communicated proposition or at the content. At this point, the application of epistemic vigilance is similar to

2 The concept of a ‘simple-structured joke’ is coined by the author of the paper to mean a two-fold structured text of a joke in which the hearer’s lack of recovery of the second interpretation does not disturb the process of interpretation given the extraction of cognitive effects. This concept is essential to explain the role of the naive optimism strategy to the study of jokes.

the guru effect in which the hearer has external and/or internal reasons to hold a belief as true. Even though epistemic vigilance should be activated when there is a real possibility of being misinformed, and as such it is an indispensable feature of a fail-safe process of communication (in the case of jokes, the addressee has to know that a different set of rules are to be followed on the basis of the fact that an ordinary text and a joke differ in formal properties), the hearer analysing a simple-structure joke does not arrive at the humorous resolution.

The point I would like to make is that the naive optimism pattern of inference does not enable the hearer to derive humorous effects besides those which can be formulated on the basis of a communicated proposition realised in terms of usual utterance, with no additional meaning. As for the guru effect, it even strengthens the assumption that cognitive comic effects would not arise because the hearer cannot undermine an assertion communicated by an authoritative source. Consequently, the addressee accepts an utterance and is oblivious to the communicator's intention to amuse his/her audience. As for epistemic vigilance, when it is directed at the source of the text the case is similar to the above mentioned problem with an authority figure. If we take joke (4) above, the hearer uncritically processes the text, and as soon as s/he arrives at the first explicit interpretation (4a), s/he does not delve into the analysis in which comic effects are meant.

### 2.1.2. The Cautious Optimism Strategy

Cautious optimism is a more sophisticated pattern of inference in which the hearer arrives at the first interpretation that comes to his/her mind and then revises it with respect to what s/he knows about his/her communicator. If the communicator is known as a splendid humorist in his/her social and cultural milieu, the hearer may suspect that the speaker would say something hilarious. The expectation of an incoming joke would be best explained in terms of the guru effect and the hearer's alertness to expect a humorous turn would be characterised by the notion of epistemic vigilance. The following joke exemplifies the point in question:

- (5) Little Ashley and his friend Beaufort went to the movies and, before the show, headed to the bathroom to relieve themselves. Ashley urinated, then washed his hands; much to his surprise, Beaufort did just the opposite.  
 "Hey," said Ashley, "smart boys wash after their pee."  
 Holding his head back proudly, young Beaufort corrected, "Smart boys learn not to pee on their hands."  
 (5a) It is a usual situation to wash one's hands after urinating.  
 (5b) The reason why a boy did not wash his hands is that he did not urinate onto his hands.

Joke (5) is not a simple-structured joke because the first relevant interpretation (5a) does not suffice for establishing overall relevance. The formulation of the first meaning for the whole utterance endangers the text of a joke in which the hearer would be compelled to discard the text as irrelevant and not worth of spending one's processing effort. Following the cautious optimism pattern the hearer extracts the explicit interpretation (5a) and then when the discourse proceeds, s/he may easily arrive at the second humorous

interpretation (5b). The only possibility for a joke to misfire is when in this pattern of comprehension the hearer does not want to formulate another interpretation (5b) when s/he has already spent mental effort to extract the first interpretation. This is true when we take into analysis this strategy with no aid from other cognitive tools conceptualised in RT.

The role of the guru effect in cautious optimism is prominent given the fact that humorous communication cannot be at stake. There are two possible situations that may take place. The first instance is that the hearer is well aware of the communicator's intention to convey a humorous discourse. The speaker is the addressee's intellectual guru, therefore s/he has an external reason to spend mental effort. In other words, her/his guru is reliable and trustworthy. In the second situation, the hearer fails to discover a humorous intention at the outset of the comprehension process. As soon as the punchline is conveyed, the hearer entertains humorous effects since s/he formulates the second interpretation (5b). From this, it follows that the audience possesses an internal belief to accept a communicated proposition, but it is activated after the joke telling. I argue that the hearer adjusts his/her expectations of relevance so that when s/he has failed to notice the relevance of the text, s/he may employ either internal or external reasons. It may also be stated that at the beginning the hearer spends processing effort because of an external reason in which the communicator is a guru, and then s/he switches to an internal reason because s/he derives humorous effects.

Epistemic vigilance also comes in handy when cautious optimism is followed. In my earlier piece of research, it has been maintained that accepting the cautious path of comprehension results in humorous communication, but it is not a fail-safe process. Here, I have adopted the guru effect and epistemic vigilance to prove my postulate that a cautious hearer always accesses humorous effects. On hearing joke (5), the audience finds the first non-humorous interpretation "It is a usual situation to wash one's hands after urinating." When the discourse proceeds, the hearer employs epistemic vigilance, and this interpretation cannot be accepted for the whole text. Epistemic vigilance plays an important role in cautious optimism because the humorist's competence is limited.

### 2.1.3. The Sophisticated Understanding Strategy

On the sophisticated pattern of inference, similar postulates can be put forth. Humorous communication is not jeopardized since the speaker successfully attributes her/his informative and communicative intentions to his/her audience. The following example illustrates the comprehension process taken by a sophisticated understander:

- (6) Worried because they hadn't heard anything for days from the widow in the neighbouring apartment, Mrs. Silver said to her son, "Timmy, would you go next door, and see how old Mrs. Kirkland is?"

A few minutes later, Timmy returned.

"Well," asked Mrs. Silver, "is she all right?"

"She's fine, except that she's pissed at you."

"At me?" the woman exclaimed. "Whatever for?"

"She said it's none of your business how old she is."

(6a) “to see how old Mrs. Kirkland is” = to find out her age

(6b) “to see how old Mrs. Kirkland is” = to find out if she feels well

The figure below depicts the way in which the hearer’s fourth-order metarepresentational abilities are employed when the sophisticated understanding pattern of inference is applied:

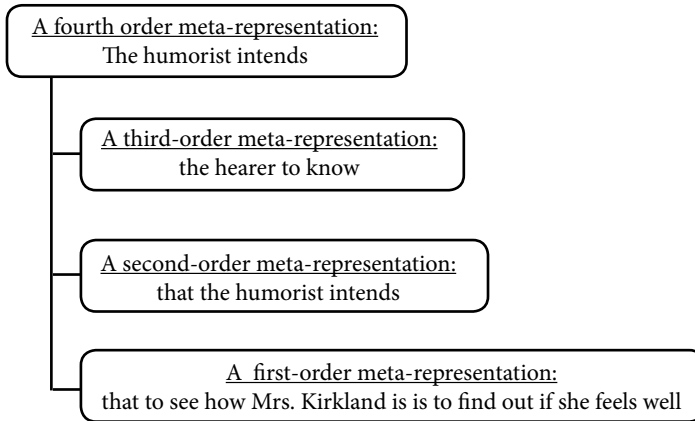


Fig. 1. Analysis of the joke (6) with respect to fourth-order metarepresentation.

It is maintained here that the combination of epistemic vigilance and a sophisticated strategy with the guru effect is not crucial for the emergence of humorous effects. To a certain extent, the strategy of a sophisticated understander and epistemic vigilance work in parallel since these two are involved in the fully-fledged process of utterance interpretation in which humorous cognitive effects are extracted. On the other hand, the role of the guru effect is limited. If we assume that it is an authority figure that makes a decision what is relevant to us, this postulate will be true when the hearer is eager to derive only humorous effects.

A sophisticated understander also derives additional cognitive effects. That is to say, the hearer may wonder why the communicator conveys a humorous text. In other words, s/he wants to know a proper intention behind the utterance. We may picture the following situation: the humorist notices that the hearer feels a bit under the weather and as a result s/he wants to cheer him up. When a sophisticated hearer becomes conscious of the fact that the speaker is eager to lift the hearer’s spirit, this knowledge becomes the part of additional cognitive effects. These additional effects, besides regular humorous ones that s/he arrives at the humorous resolution of the text of a joke, include the knowledge about the speaker’s intention to improve his/her well-being.

## Conclusions

The present contribution aimed to conflate various relevance-driven tools, i.e. naive optimism, cautious optimism, sophisticated understanding, epistemic vigilance, the guru effect, in order to present a model of utterance interpretation. Jokes are treated as regular texts

which do not require any special mechanisms, which shows that Sperber and Wilson's theory of relevance accounts for joke comprehension. The three patterns of inference serve as a basis for further analysis in which the role of the guru effect and epistemic vigilance is distinguished and estimated. Nevertheless, there are still many possible ways to advance the scrutiny of the interdependence between strategies of utterance interpretation and other conceptual tools.

As for the naive optimism strategy, the hearer cannot entertain a humorous text because s/he merely derives cognitive effects, but only in simple-structured jokes in which the interpretation from the setting suffices for the comprehension of the whole text, and the second interpretation remains undiscovered. It may be stated that the text of a joke is treated as a regular text in which the humorous stimulus is not present. Since the comprehension process is smooth in which the first interpretation sticks to the scenario present in the whole joke, the hearer is not compelled to look for another (humorous) interpretation. As I have tried to show, if we take any strategy of intention attribution, there are at least two possible ways in which we apply the guru effect. First, it can be directed at the source of a belief, and hence, the audience has an external reason to believe in the validity and relevance of arguments. I have argued that this state of affairs is more plausible because a naive hearer is not able to assess the importance of a stimulus on his/her own and takes for granted the utterance without detailed examination. Second, the guru effect can be directed at the content, which has no role in naive optimism because the hearer is not capable of any kind of evaluation that a joke has been said. Since different hearers are driven by different reasons to process any utterance, the explanation of humorous discourse employing the guru effect is the least convincing. Also, it is claimed that epistemic vigilance is not essential when the naive optimism strategy is applied because it is not activated in the process of interpretation. In other words, epistemic vigilance is one's alertness to the relevance of an utterance and a naive hearer heavily relies on the communicator's authority and does not even suspect that humour is intended.

As regards cautious optimism, the hearer acknowledges the text as a joke and consequently s/he is able to derive humorous cognitive effects. In some, more extreme, cases the audience may not be eager to spend more mental effort as soon as s/he accesses the first non-humorous meaning. His/her readiness to look for another interpretation is essential to understand non-simple-structured jokes. The presence of the guru effect and epistemic vigilance strengthens the assumption that humorous communication is a successful enterprise during interpersonal exchanges in the way that the hearer has either external or internal reason to accept the validity of an argument – this is the part of the guru effect. As regards epistemic vigilance, when the hearer is not eager to process the punchline of a joke, his/her epistemic vigilance comes into play so that s/he recognises the communicator's intention to convey a humorous stimulus. In my opinion, the cognitive mechanism 'epistemic vigilance' is an indispensable feature of any model of joke comprehension since a vigilant hearer does not believe in the communicator's competence and is able to adjust the meaning on the basis of evidence provided.

Last but not least, the sophisticated understanding strategy allows the hearer to entertain humorous effects since s/he possesses a fully-fledged communicative competence. Also, it can be concluded that a sophisticated understander is a vigilant understander since

their common denominator is dependent upon suspension of a belief in the communicator's benevolence and competence. The guru effect may still operate in the analysis of jokes since the hearer has an internal reason to accept a piece of evidence. In doing this, the audience knows that a joke has been told and has to spend mental effort to arrive at humour. The main difference between cautious optimism and sophisticated understanding is that the latter enables the hearer to formulate extra cognitive effects, for instance the hearer's knowledge that the humorist has noticed his/her poor well-being and wants to cheer her/him up saying a humorous text.

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## Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie studium nad humorem w świetle Teorii Relewancji zapoczątkowanej przez Dana Sperbera i Deirdrę Wilson. Punkt wyjścia do analizy dowcipów stanowią trzy strategie rozumienia wypowiedzi, od prostych po bardziej złożone, które w połączeniu z efektem guru i pojęciem epistemicznej czujności mogą posłużyć do zbudowania modelu rozumienia dowcipów.

