THE LOGIC OF THE LUDICROUS IN THE PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF HUMOR

Rayhona Narzikulova
Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages

Abstract. This article examines the mechanisms of verbal humor from a pragmatic and cognitive perspective. Drawing on Madeleine Ferrar's research , the study argues that humor emerges not from linguistic structure alone but through the interaction of context, speaker intention, and listener interpretation. Key theoretical frameworks—including Grice's cooperative principle, Raskin's script-based semantic theory, and Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory—are analyzed to demonstrate how the human mind processes incongruity and derives cognitive reward from reinterpretation.

Key words: *pragmatics, verbal humor, incongruity, script theory, relevance theory, cognition, communicative intention, interpretation, context, cognitive processing.*

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqola verbal yumorning mexanizmlarini pragmatik va kognitiv nuqtai nazardan tahlil qiladi. M. Ferrarning tadqiqotiga tayangan holda, maqolada yumor faqat lingvistik tuzilma bilan emas, balki kontekst, nutq egasining niyati va tinglovchining talqini o'zaro ta'siri natijasida yuzaga kelishi asoslangan. Asosiy nazariy yondashuvlar, jumladan, Graysning kooperatsiya prinsipi, Raskinning skriptlarga asoslangan semantik nazariyasi hamda Sperber va Uilsonning relevantiya nazariyasi, inson tafakkuri inkongruentlikni qanday qayta ishlashi va qayta talqin jarayonidan kognitiv qoniqish hosil qilishi nuqtai nazaridan tahlil qilinadi.

Kalit so'zlar: *pragmatika, yumor, inkongruentlik, skript, relevantlik, kognitivlik, kommunikatsiya, talqin.*

Аннотация. В данной статье рассматриваются механизмы вербального юмора с прагматической и когнитивной точек зрения. Опираясь на исследование М. Феррар, работа утверждает, что юмор возникает не только из языковой структуры, но и в результате взаимодействия контекста, интенции говорящего и интерпретации слушателя. Ключевые теоретические подходы, включая кооперативный принцип Грайса, семантическую теорию скриптов Раскина и теорию релевантности Спербера и Уилсона, анализируются с целью показать, как человеческое мышление обрабатывает инконгруэнтность и получает когнитивное удовлетворение от процесса переинтерпретации.

Ключевые слова: *прагматика, юмор, инконгруэнтность, скрипт, релевантность, когниция, коммуникация, интерпретация.*

Why do we laugh? For centuries, this question has engaged philosophers, from Plato's superiority theory to Kant's incongruity theory. In linguistic inquiry, however, humor is best understood not as a property of isolated sentences but as a function of language in use. Its effect emerges only within a specific communicative situation shaped by intention, context, and interpretation. This perspective situates humor within pragmatics, the field concerned with how meaning is constructed in interaction. Following Madeleine Ferrar's concept of the "logic of the ludicrous," humor can be viewed as a structured manipulation of expectations that transforms apparent inconsistency into meaningful interpretation [4].

A foundational account of this process is provided by Herbert Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle, which posits that communication relies on shared expectations of truthfulness, relevance,

clarity, and appropriate informativeness [1]. Humor exploits these expectations by deliberately violating them in a recognizable way. For instance, irony emerges through a controlled breach of the maxim of quality: when someone remarks, "I just love this weather" during a storm, the listener interprets the contradiction as intentional rather than deceptive.

However, deviation alone does not produce humor. If such violations are not perceived as purposeful, they lead to communicative breakdown rather than amusement. What distinguishes humor is the presence of an additional interpretive layer that invites the listener to reconstruct meaning beyond the literal level [4].

This interpretive shift is central to Victor Raskin's script-based semantic theory of humor. Raskin introduces the notion of scripts as cognitive frameworks representing familiar situations [2]. Humor arises when a text simultaneously activates two incompatible scripts, prompting a transition from an initial interpretation to an alternative one.

This mechanism is illustrated in the following exchange:

"Is the manager available?" the visitor asked quietly.

"No," the employee replied just as quietly, "but you can leave a complaint." The initial script of a cooperative service interaction is disrupted by a response that is formally appropriate yet pragmatically ineffective. The resulting incongruity compels the listener to reassess the communicative situation, producing the comic effect.

A related strategy appears in "garden-path" jokes, where the listener is guided toward a plausible interpretation that is subsequently invalidated. The humor emerges not from the ambiguity itself but from the cognitive effort required to revise the initial understanding. While Raskin's model effectively captures this structural dynamic, it remains limited in its focus on textual properties and does not fully account for contextual and social variables [2].

A broader explanation is offered by Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory, which conceptualizes communication as an inferential process aimed at maximizing cognitive effect while minimizing effort [3]. Humor deliberately disrupts this efficiency. The listener is led toward an apparently optimal interpretation, which is then overturned by the punchline, forcing a reinterpretation of the entire utterance.

For example, the statement "*I love work. I could watch it for hours*" initially suggests enthusiasm but ultimately reveals an ironic stance. The resolution of this discrepancy generates cognitive satisfaction, often described as a form of reward for successful inference. Unlike ordinary communication, humor intentionally increases processing effort, yet this effort is perceived positively when it leads to a coherent reinterpretation [4].

Ferrar further emphasizes that humor is inherently unstable, as it depends on the alignment between speaker intention and listener interpretation. A communicative act may succeed, fail, or produce unintended humor depending on contextual factors. For instance, the remark *"This is a boutique, not an elephant house"* may function as exaggeration in one setting but as offense in another. Such variability reflects the role of what Austin termed "felicity conditions," which determine the appropriateness and effectiveness of speech acts.

The importance of shared background knowledge is evident in jokes that rely on implicit cultural assumptions. Consider the statement: "*Two taxis collided, and thirty Scotsmen were taken to hospital."* Its comic effect depends on the listener's ability to infer a stereotype without explicit explanation. When this inference is made explicit, the humor disappears, demonstrating that the comic effect relies on active cognitive participation rather than direct statement.

Humor, therefore, operates as a form of guided inference. The speaker constructs a communicative scenario that initially misleads the listener and then prompts reinterpretation. The resulting shift in understanding is experienced as both surprising and satisfying.

In conclusion, humor is best understood as a pragmatic and cognitive phenomenon arising from the interaction of linguistic form, contextual assumptions, and inferential processing. Rather than representing a deviation from communicative norms, it exemplifies the flexibility and sophistication of human cognition. The ability to recognize and resolve incongruity reflects advanced communicative competence, as it requires sensitivity not only to language but also to the dynamic interplay of meaning, intention, and context.

References:

1. Grice, H. P. Logic and Conversation.
2. Raskin, V. Semantic Mechanisms of Humor.
3. Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. Relevance: Communication and Cognition.
4. Ferrar, M. The Logic of the Ludicrous: A Pragmatic Study of Humour (PhD thesis, UCL).