

Humorous Communication and Comprehension: Manipulation and Epistemic Vigilance

LI Hai-hui

Jinan University, Guangzhou, China

This paper takes an integrative approach to the communication and comprehension of humor from the perspectives of the humorist's manipulation and the recipient's vigilance informed by relevance theory. It is proposed that, in order to communicate humor, the humorist manipulates the recipient's expectation of relevance in the setup and in the punchline in two different but related ways: misleading and guiding. It is also proposed that, in order to comprehend and appreciate humor, the recipient exercises vigilance against his/her own shallow processing in the setup and exercises vigilance for special cognitive effects in the punchline. On this approach, humorous communication and comprehension is viewed as an interaction between manipulation and epistemic vigilance. Strategies of manipulation and vigilance are described, and some essential issues arising from the relevance-theoretic approach to humor are reconsidered with some implications drawn. This paper contributes to enhancing the explanatory power of relevance theory for the communication and comprehension of humor.

Keywords: manipulation, epistemic vigilance, strategy, special cognitive effect, humor

Introduction

It is generally accepted that humor consists in the clash of two contradictory interpretations, one arising from the processing of the setup and the other arising from that of the punchline. In the comprehension of humor, the humor recipient derives a first, more salient interpretation only to discard it when the punchline emerges and proceeds to derive a second, initially less likely but actually correct, interpretation. This is captured by the notion of incongruity-resolution (Suls, 1983).

The relevance-theoretic approach to humor, as represented by Yus (2003; 2016; 2017), Solska (2012), Padilla Cruz (2015), Oswald and Maillat (2018), and others, places itself under the incongruity-resolution paradigm. While the incongruity-resolution paradigm is more apt at identifying the "content areas" of incongruity, i.e., the cognitive schemas, scripts, or frames where incongruity arises due to an opposition between two schemas, scripts or frames, the relevance-theoretic approach complements it by giving detailed descriptions of how the incongruity arises and how it gets resolved, focusing on the process. Central issues addressed under this approach to humorous communication, arranged from the most general to the more

Acknowledgements: The research was supported by the grant from the Department of Education of Guangdong Province, China ("基于思辨能力培养的商务英语教学模式改革与实践"), the grant from Guangdong Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences ("移情视角下话语缓和的语用研究", GD14XWW09), and the grant from the Department of Education of Guangdong Province, China ("暨南大学—广电商校外实习实践基地").

LI Hai-hui, Ph.D. in Pragmatics, Associate Professor of English Linguistics, College of Foreign Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China.

specific, include the search for relevance as a pivotal constraint on the humorous interpretation (Yus, 2003), the comprehension procedure (Yus, 2016; Solska, 2012), context selection (Oswald & Maillat, 2018), and the source of humorous effects (Jodłowiec, 2008; Piskorska & Jodłowiec, 2018), its main purpose being to generalize the relevance-theoretic account of ordinary communication to humorous communication and the thrust of argument being that the expectation of relevance is the ultimate criterion for judging the acceptability of an interpretation (Yus, 2003; Solska, 2012; Mazzarella, 2013; Piskorska & Jodłowiec, 2018).

Researchers have long recognized the essential role of manipulation in the comprehension of humor (Curcó, 1995; 1996; 1998; 2007; Yus, 2003; 2013a; 2013b; 2016) while epistemic vigilance has received academic attention only in recent years (Padilla Cruz, 2012; 2015; Biegajło, 2013; 2014; Yus, 2016; Piskorska & Jodłowiec, 2018). Manipulation and vigilance are interesting venues of research because, as two sides of the same coin, which provide a unified account of the mechanism triggering the shift from the first interpretation to the second in the comprehension of humor. However, to the best of my knowledge, no attempt has been made to synthesize these two perspectives drawing on the insights provided by one of them for the benefit of the other.

The purpose of this paper is to make a partial response to that gap by trying to establish an integrative approach. In what follows, I will first explore how humorous communication is related to manipulation with reference to its strategies (Section 2), then examine the role played by epistemic vigilance in humorous comprehension in light of the manipulation brought to bear on humorous communication (Section 3), and finally reconsider some of the issues lying at the heart of the relevance-theoretic approach to humor (Section 4). Section 5 concludes the paper with some implications for future studies.

Humorous Communication and Manipulation

The role of manipulation in the generation of humorous effects has long been recognized, yet the term has been used inconsistently among researchers. Jodłowiec (1991) uses it in the sense of context control or context assistance. Curcó (1995; 1996; 1998; 2007) speaks of hearer manipulation of relevance or of metarepresentation. Yus (2003; 2013a; 2013b; 2016) claims that all the dimensions related to utterance interpretation, including the relevance-orientation of human cognition, the comprehension procedure, the interpretive steps or inferential strategies, the process of mutual parallel adjustment, and the selection of contextual assumptions, are subject to being manipulated (or “exploited”, a term he uses interchangeably with *manipulation*). Heterogeneous meanings could be assigned to the term without an agreed-upon definition. Oswald and Maillat (2018) define manipulation as follows:

Manipulative communication is a binary process by which a restriction of the context selection mechanisms is combined with a target utterance U so as to force the interpretation of the latter in a restricted Context C favorable to the integration of U in the cognitive environment of the hearer and to prevent an extended, unfavorable context C' from being activated. (p. 154)

For the reason that the restriction of context selection is achieved through altering the salience of contextual assumptions and serves the purpose of raising or lowering the relevance of the final interpretation, I abstract away and offer the following redefinition for the concern of the present study:

Manipulation is the humorist's attempt to alter the direction in which for the recipient to seek the optimally relevant interpretation.

This definition draws no distinction between “favorable” and “unfavorable” and is in line with Curcó (1995) and Yus (2013a). As an attempt, manipulation may or may not succeed, which allows for the possibility of humor failure. Under this definition, two broad strategies of manipulations can be distinguished: *misleading* and *guiding*.

In the misleading strategy, the humorist leads the recipient in an unintended direction in which to seek an optimally relevant interpretation. This occurs in the setup and the interpretation derived seems optimally relevant to the recipient but actually is not.

In the guiding strategy, the humorist leads the recipient in the intended direction in which to seek an optimally relevant interpretation. This occurs in the punchline and the interpretation derived is the genuinely optimally relevant one. Consider the following example.

(1)

Worried because they hadn’t heard anything for days from the widow in the neighboring 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.*” (Biegajło, 2014, p. 8)

The humor in this example lies in the clash of two interpretations: (a) Timmy said to Mrs. Kirkland “My mother wants to know how you are”; (b) Timmy said to Mrs. Kirkland “My mother wants to know how old you are”. In the setup (the unitalicized part), the humorist misleads the recipient in the unintended direction (Mrs. Silver sent Timmy over to inquire of Mrs. Kirkland’s well-being) to seek the seemingly optimally relevant interpretation (interpretation a)), but in the punchline he guides the recipient in the intended direction (Timmy misunderstood his mother’s purpose of sending him over to Mrs. Kirkland’s) in which to seek the genuinely optimally relevant interpretation (interpretation (b)).

It is only partly true that, as claimed by relevance theorists in general, humor lies in the clash between the two interpretations resulting from the structural ambiguity of the utterance chunk “how old Mrs. Kirkland is” and that the first interpretation is rendered incongruous by and with the punchline. I suggest that it is the humorist’s guidance that facilitates the recipient’s becoming aware of Timmy’s misunderstanding and that this could be a deeper source of humor.

Manipulation is partly made possible by the relevance-orientation of human cognition and communication (Yus, 2003) and the humorist’s mind-reading ability (Yus, 2013b; 2016). The communicative principle of relevance states that “Every utterance communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Wilson, 2017, p. 85) and the relevance-guided comprehension procedure instructs the hearer to “Follow a path of least effort in constructing an interpretation of the utterance” and to “Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied” (Wilson, 2017, p. 86). The humorist, being able to predict which inferential path and which inferential strategies the recipient will take, will capitalize on it to create humor (Yus, 2016). In Example (1), the humorist knows that the recipient will follow a path of least effort and manipulates him/her into interpretation a) in the setup. In the punchline, the humorist knows that the recipient will only stop processing the utterance when his expectations of relevance are satisfied and manipulate him/her into interpretation (b).

In this section, I have distinguished two strategies for manipulating the expectation of relevance. These strategies are arguably amenable to being subdivided into micro-strategies along the lines of Yus (2016). Before I close this section, I want to claim that the humorist's manipulative attempt is a natural part of his humorous intention which is a combination of his communicative and informative intentions for engaging in humorous communication.

Humorous Comprehension and Epistemic Vigilance

The notion of epistemic vigilance was proposed by Sperber et al. (2010) to address the connection of understanding and believing, a long-standing concern of Gricean and post-Gricean pragmatics. The idea is that a piece of information provided by the speaker is filtered by epistemic vigilance before it is accepted as true. Later the notion was broadened by Mazzarella (2013; 2015; 2016) and Padilla Cruz (2012; 2014; 2015) to account for misunderstanding, pragmatic failure, and humor comprehension, shifting the target of vigilance from the information which the speaker provides to the interpretation which the hearer constructs, centering around the idea that the interpretation constructed by the hearer is subjected to the test of vigilance before it is accepted as intended by the speaker. In connection with the comprehension of humor, epistemic vigilance acts as the mechanism triggering the shift from the first interpretation to the second interpretation (Padilla Cruz, 2015).

Sperber et al. (2010) define epistemic vigilance as alertness against being “accidentally or intentionally misinformed”. They distinguish between vigilance against the content, i.e., the information conveyed by an utterance, and vigilance against the source, the information provider or the utterance maker. In the latter case, they identify two areas of vigilant monitoring: competence (the possession of true information as opposed to false information or no information) and benevolence (intending to share the genuine information as opposed to pretending to share it) (p. 369). An information provider is competent, benevolent, both competent and benevolent or neither competent nor benevolent. In connection with humor, the humorist is “malevolent” and this calls for the recipient's vigilance (Padilla Cruz, 2015), in the sense that, though he does not provide untrue information, he leads the recipient into a wrong interpretation.

Sperber (1994) distinguishes between naïve optimism, cautious optimism, and sophisticated understanding as interpretive strategies related to epistemic vigilance against the speaker. A naïve optimist assumes that the speaker is both competent and benevolent; a cautious optimist assumes that the speaker is benevolent but not necessarily competent; and a sophisticated hearer does not assume either that the speaker is competent or that he is benevolent. Padilla Cruz (2015) and Biegajło (2014) hold that sophisticated understanding is the right strategy for comprehending humor and that naïve optimism is the least valid strategy for that purpose, as the humorist is not assumed to be benevolent in the former but as benevolent in the latter.

For the concern of this paper, I define epistemic vigilance as *alertness against deriving the wrong interpretation and for deriving the right interpretation*. Under this definition, a distinction is drawn between *vigilance against* and *vigilance for*. The difference between the two is that the former is avoidance-oriented whereas the latter is approach-oriented. This definition is partly justified by the fact that humor lies in the incongruity between two clashing interpretations as generally assumed.

Researchers have mentioned several cognitive bases or possibility conditions of epistemic vigilance, such as metarepresentational ability (Sperber, 1994; Padilla Cruz, 2015; Biegajło, 2014) and the “incorrigible human cognitive optimism” (Sperber, Cara, & Girotto, 1995). However, I want to suggest that, in humorous

communication, the humorist's manipulative attempt as described above provides good reasons for the recipient to exercise vigilance. This means not only that a definition of epistemic vigilance might better be given in light of manipulation but also that the first general strategy of vigilance is vigilance against being manipulated.

The humorist could be characterized not only as malevolent, but also as competent. Following Padilla Cruz (2015), I believe that the humorist's competence consists in his linguistic abilities, sense of humor, and joke-telling potential and abilities. Biegajło (2013) thinks that cautious optimism is the one of the tools for explaining humor under the relevance-theoretic framework, but I think this is wrong. On Sperber's (1994) view, a cautious optimist assumes that the speaker is benevolent but not necessarily competent, but the humorist is competent and malevolent. So cautious optimism is rendered irrelevant to the comprehension of humor. Of course, Biegajło (2013) could be right if the author is addressing the judgment of humorous potential in the eye of a cautious optimist, but that is a different matter. Of pertinence to the concern of this paper is that, if the humorist is competent, then the second most general strategy of vigilance is vigilance for the humorist's manipulative competence.

Sophisticated understanding is most interesting as it is taken by Padilla Cruz (2015) and Biegajło (2014) as the right strategy for interpreting humor, but those authors' conception of the term diverges from Sperber's (1994). Sperber (1994) characterizes sophisticated understanding as not assuming the speaker as competent or benevolent, whereas the humorist must be assumed to be competent but not benevolent, a combination possibility overlooked by Sperber (1994). Perhaps Mazarella (2015) is right in suggesting that, with the notion of epistemic vigilance in hand, a distinction between naïve optimism, cautious optimism, and sophisticated understanding is redundant.

Bearing in mind such clarifications and the definition given above, I postulate two more specific strategies of epistemic vigilance in humor comprehension: *vigilance against shallow processing* and *vigilance for special cognitive effects*.

In *vigilance against shallow processing*, the recipient avoids an interpretation on which easy relevance is achieved. An easily achieved optimally relevant interpretation is the result of the humorist's misleading the recipient's expectation of relevance in the wrong direction and vigilance against shallow processing steers the recipient clear of this by eschewing from ordinary expectation of relevance. This occurs in the processing of the setup.

In *vigilance for special cognitive effects*, the recipient strives for an interpretation on which weak implicatures or contrast-engendered absurdity (Piskorska & Jodłowiec, 2018) is evoked. An optimally relevant interpretation oriented to special cognitive effects is the result of the humorist guiding the recipient's expectation of relevance in the right direction and vigilance for special cognitive effects facilitates this by engaging the recipient in sophisticated expectation of relevance. This occurs in the processing of the punchline. Consider Example (2) below.

(2)

The village blacksmith finally found an apprentice willing to work hard at low pay for long hours. The blacksmith immediately began his instructions to the lad, "When I take the shoe out of the fire, I'll lay it on the anvil; and when I nod my head, you hit it with this hammer". The apprentice did just as he told. *Now he's the village blacksmith.* (Yus, 2017, p. 111)

The humor of Example (2) lies in the referential ambiguity of the pronoun *it*, referring to either the shoe or to the old blacksmith's head and giving rise to two clashing interpretations: (a) The apprentice hit the shoe; (b)

the apprentice hit the old blacksmith's head. Again, as suggested above, the incongruity emerging from the punchline (the italicized part) and the contradiction of the two interpretations is not the ultimate source of humor. The ultimate source of humor, I believe, is the apprentice's misunderstanding of the old blacksmith's instructions, which contrasts with and deviates from, in an absurd way, how apprentices normally receive instructions from their masters.

In the processing of the setup, the recipient exercises vigilance against shallow processing and eschews the interpretation which the humorist is trying to manipulate him/her into (interpretation a)) by disengaging from expectation of easy relevance. Failure to appreciate humor may take the forms of puzzlement over the punchline or obliviousness to the humor (Piskorska, 2014). Relevance theory predicts that the hearer will stop the comprehension procedure as soon as his/her expectations of relevance are satisfied. Without exercising vigilance against shallow processing, the recipient would stop at the first interpretation, for it is optimally relevant to him/her on the effort side.

In the processing of the punchline, the recipient exercises vigilance for special cognitive effects and strives for an interpretation optimally relevant on the effect side (interpretation (b)) which the humorist is attempting to manipulate him/her into by engaging in sophisticated expectation of relevance. Relevance theory predicts that, in order to satisfy his/her expectation of relevance, the hearer will invest more efforts into processing the utterance. Success in comprehending and appreciating humor is dependent on the derivation of an interpretation optimally relevant on the effect side.

In accounting for the role of vigilance in humorous puns, Padilla Cruz (2015) and Oswald and Maillat (2018) emphasize external triggers of epistemic vigilance such as the communicative context or the communicative medium. In his analysis of the example "There was a sign on the lawn at a drug re-hab centre that says 'Keep off the grass'", Padilla Cruz (2015) says that it is where the sign is put (re-hab center) that prompts the sign reader's vigilance for the ambiguity of the word *grass* (ordinary grass vs. marijuana). This is certainly true, but I think the humorist's manipulative attempt is an additional, perhaps more fundamental trigger of epistemic vigilance. As a piece of evidence for this, note that in Example (2) there is no external trigger of the recipient's vigilance and, what's more, Example (2) need not be humorous because the first interpretation need not be incongruous with the punchline. For example, if the apprentice hit the shoe (rather than the old blacksmith's head) and becomes the village's blacksmith after long years of devoted work, it makes perfect sense. This can be explained by saying that the humorist's manipulative intention activates the recipient's vigilance for special cognitive effects. Thus the manipulation of sophisticated expectation of relevance, especially for the interpretation of the punchline, can be viewed as the internal trigger of epistemic vigilance activating external triggers (where possible) conducive to the derivation of the second interpretation.

In this section, I've postulated two general strategies of epistemic vigilance, i.e., *vigilance against shallow processing* and *vigilance for special cognitive effects*, to be used by the recipient of humor in the processing of the setup and in the processing of the punchline respectively. These strategies are arguably amenable to being subdivided into micro-strategies along the line of Yus (2016). Yus (2016) suggests that all the dimensions related to utterance interpretation, including the relevance-orientation of human cognition, the comprehension procedure, the interpretive steps or inferential strategies, the process of mutual parallel adjustment, and the selection of contextual assumptions, are subject to being manipulated. Following this, I want to suggest that all those dimensions are viable areas of vigilant monitoring.

The Relevance-Theoretic Approach to Humor: Some Essential Issues Reconsidered

The foremost concern of the relevance-theoretic approach to humor is to generalize the theory's account of ordinary communication and comprehension to humorous communication and comprehension. The most explicit proponents for this include, among others, Yus (2003; 2016), Solska (2012), and Piskorska & Jodłowiec (2018). Piskorska & Jodłowiec (2018), for example, claims that the relevance-driven route to ordinary utterance interpretation can be extended naturally to the analysis of weak communication in the punchline. Likewise, Yus (2016) and Biegajło (2014) claim that the relevance-theoretic framework is well-suited for the explanation of humor.

One thing to note about relevance theory-informed researches on humor is that most of them either make no explicit distinction between the setup and the punchline (e.g., Solska, 2012) or pay exclusive attention to the punchline at the expense of the setup (Piskorska, 2014; Piskorska & Jodłowiec, 2018). Not many have given equal attention to both the setup and the punchline and even fewer have taken them as mutual reference points in building a unified account of humor.

The setup and the punchline are different in nature. Oswald and Maillait (2018) characterize the initial part of the communication of puns as “deceptive” or “manipulative” and the final part as “manipulation revealed”. As can be seen from the analysis given above, the humorist's manipulation in the setup is different in nature from that in the punchline: The former is preventive in the sense of leading the recipient up the garden path while the latter is facilitative in the sense of guiding the recipient into the right direction in which to search for genuine optimal relevance. Similarly, the recipient's vigilance in the processing of the setup is different in nature from that in the processing of the punchline: The former is avoidance-oriented, in the sense of eschewing easy relevance despite the humorist's misleading attempt, whereas the latter is approach-oriented, in the sense of striving for genuine optimal relevance under the humorist's facilitative guidance. Therefore, it makes sense to say that the communication and comprehension of humor in the punchline is cooperative at the explicit level but the communication and comprehension of humor in the setup is uncooperative at the explicit level, although it is also cooperative at the implicit level. The relevance-theoretic account of ordinary communication and comprehension extends itself straightforwardly to the punchline but not so unambiguously to the setup. In the setup, there is a level of implicitness running parallel to a level of explicitness, which requires a different treatment from that given to the punchline. Taking an integrative view from the perspectives of manipulation and epistemic vigilance, I consider it worthwhile to highlight the two modalities of optimal relevance in Sperber and Wilson's (1995) conceptualization of the term: effort-oriented optimal relevance and effect-oriented optimal relevance. Thus the explicit communication and comprehension of the setup can be viewed as being governed by the communicative principle of relevance with effort-oriented optimal relevance built in it and the implicit communication and comprehension of the setup can be viewed as being governed by the communicative principle of relevance with effect-oriented optimal relevance built in it. The implicit part of the setup up could be made explicit in the punchline and, if it is, humor succeeds, if it is not, humor fails.

This brings us to the second issue which is concerned with the status of optimal relevance. The relevance-theoretic communicative principle of relevance is built on the pillar of expectation of relevance and, if relevance theory is to retain its explanatory power, the status of relevance must be kept intact. However, Padilla Cruz (2015) thinks otherwise. In opposition to Mazzarella (2013) and many others who defend optimal relevance as the ultimate criterion for judging the acceptability of an interpretation of utterance, he proposes

that epistemic vigilance in general, and what he terms as “hermeneutical vigilance” in particular, can serve as an alternative to the expectation of optimal relevance, placing the two on equal footing. If this is the case, it could pose serious threat to the relevance-theoretic edifice, for it will shake the foundations of the communicative principle or relevance. However, epistemic vigilance largely diverges from the expectation of optimal relevance and cannot replace it. For one thing, while the expectation of optimal relevance is a universal tendency of human communication, epistemic vigilance is a strategy of epistemic and/or cognitive caution subject to individual differences, cross-situational variations, and temporal instabilities. For another, epistemic vigilance is only secondary to the expectation of optimal relevance, modifying and adjusting it according to the actual needs of the communicative situation. As argued above, the expectation of optimal relevance in the form of special cognitive effects prompts the humor recipient to switch from the first interpretation to the second interpretation and, in this switch, epistemic vigilance only plays a facilitative, rather than a decisive, role. If epistemic vigilance could replace the expectation of optimal relevance as the ultimate criterion for judging the acceptability of an interpretation of utterance, then the naïve optimist, who exercises the lowest degree of vigilance, would not be able to communicate or would run into serious trouble in ordinary communication. But the fact is that in ordinary communication, naïve optimism is sufficient and the level of vigilance is raised only when there is much at stake (Sperber, 1994). Indeed, naively optimistic comprehension, e.g., when communicating with intimates or trusted friends, is the “idealized” situation which relevance theory initially set out to capture (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), barring the cases of misunderstanding, lying, and humor. In a nutshell, relevance is a property of an interpretation of utterance which can be possessed in varying degrees but vigilance is not, so while optimal relevance can be a criterion for making assessments of acceptability, I do not think vigilance could be such a criterion on its own.

Perhaps what Padilla Cruz (2015) has in mind when making that proposal is the first interpretation arising in the comprehension of humor. Some authors have characterized the first interpretation as “not relevant enough” (Solska, 2012) or “sub-optimal” (Olswald & Maillat, 2018). Indeed, if the first interpretation is sub-optimal, then optimal relevance could not be the criterion by which to judge whether an utterance interpretation is acceptable or not because the first interpretation is not relevant enough but it is accepted by the humor recipient. However, I do not think this is right. First, on the relevance-theoretic account, the hearer accepts an interpretation and stops processing the utterance as soon as his expectations of relevance are satisfied. This means that, if the hearer has accepted an interpretation, it must be because he perceives the interpretation as optimally relevant. In this sense, it is self-contradictory to say that the hearer accepts an utterance interpretation even though it is not relevant enough to him. Second, in the light of the two modalities of optimal relevance proposed above, an interpretation could be optimally relevant either in terms of effort-saving or in terms of cognitive effects. For the non-vigilant recipient, the first interpretation is optimally relevant in an effort-dominated way though he is blinded to the second interpretation. For the vigilant recipient, the first interpretation is optimally relevant in terms of easy processing but not optimally relevant in terms of cognitive effects, so he derives the first interpretation, discards it, and strives for the second. In all these cases, the recipient accepts an interpretation only because it is optimally relevant (to himself rather than to the analyst) in one or the other sense of the term, and the recipient rejects an interpretation only because it is not optimally relevant (to himself rather than to the analyst) in either one or the other sense of the term. Vigilance contributes to the establishment of the optimality of an interpretation but it does not bear directly on its acceptability.

The third issue concerns what happens to the first interpretation after the second one has been retrieved and accepted as truly intended by the humorist. Dynel (2010) thinks that it is retained in double-retention puns but not in single-retention puns. Jodłowiec (2008) thinks it is juxtaposed with the second interpretation in the processing of the punchline. Solska (2012), Yus (2016), Piskorska (2014) and Piskorska & Jodłowiec (2018) claim that the first interpretation is entertained simultaneously with the second. I agree with these views, but I want to take one step further and suggest that the first interpretation is not only juxtaposed and simultaneously entertained with the second, but also serves as a point of reference whereby a contrast is evoked. The idea is that the second interpretation, when placed in contrast to the first, displays an element of absurdity, novelty, or breakaway from the norm which contributes to the humorous incongruity. Consider Example (3).

(3)

There once was a man who owned a sausage factory, and he was showing his arrogant son around his factory. Try as he might to impress his snobbish son, the lad seemed to sneer at everything. They approached the heart of the factory, where the father thought “This should impress him!” He showed his son the machine and said “Son, this is the heart of the factory. This machine here we can put in a pig, and outcome sausages.” The son, unimpressed, said “Yes, but do you have a machine where you can put in a sausage and out comes a pig?” The father, furious, said “Yes son, we call it your mother.” (Yus, 2016, p. 136)

The humor of Example (3) does not only lie in the clash between the first interpretation “The mother is a machine that produces pigs” and the second interpretation “The son is an idiot”, but also in the following contrasts: machine/mother; pig/son; sausage/penis.

While enjoying the humor, it is likely that the recipient entertains the father’s comparison of his wife to a machine, his son to a pig, and his sex organ to a sausage which gives rise to some sort of absurdity. Indeed, it is possible that the sharper the contrast and the absurdity, the more the recipient will understand the father’s frustration and the more he will enjoy the humor. If this analysis is on the right track, i.e., if the first and second interpretations are simultaneously entertained and placed in contrast to engender absurdity, it will probably cast some doubt on Dynel’s (2010) distinction between double-retention puns and single-retention puns. It will also call into question Yus’s (2003, 2016) distinction between MGI and SCI.

What roles manipulation and epistemic vigilance play in this enhancement of humor is still unclear. One possibility is that manipulation and epistemic vigilance lead the recipient, to varying degrees of success perhaps, in the direction of absurd schematic opposition in which to search for special cognitive effects or what Piskorska & Jodłowiec (2018) call “cognitive overload effect”. But that remains to be verified, of course.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have attempted to outline an integrative account of humorous communication and comprehension by taking into consideration the humorist’s manipulation and the recipient’s epistemic vigilance, and have described two broad strategies of manipulation and two of epistemic vigilance. I have also challenged some authors’ views expressed in the literature, with proper caution exercised and remaining all the while well aware of and appreciative of their contributions. It emerges from the present study that the role played by manipulation and epistemic vigilance in searching for contrast-engendered absurdity or novelty as special cognitive effects is an especially interesting area of research. Future studies could follow the lines of Yus (2017) in complementing the relevance-theoretic orientation to process and the content-area-orientation of the incongruity-resolution paradigm in order to render the two mutually informed and mutually reinforced.

References

- Biegajło, M. (2013). Relevance at the center of humorous communication. In U. Warszawski & W. Neofilologii (Eds.), *Acta philologica* (pp. 31-42). Wydawca: Wydawca Neofilologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Biegajło, M. (2014). "From which position should I get this joke?!" A relevance-driven interpretation: Naïve optimism, cautions optimism, sophisticated understanding? *International Studies in Humour*, 3(1), 2-14.
- Curcó, C. (1995). Some observations in the pragmatics of humorous interpretations: A relevance-theoretic approach. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 7, 27-47.
- Curcó, C. (1996). The implicit expression of attitudes, mutual manifestness, and verbal humour. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 8, 1-12.
- Curcó, C. (1997). Relevance and the manipulation of the incongruous: Some explorations of verbal humour. In M. Groefsema (Ed.), *Proceedings of the University of Hertfordshire relevance workshop* (pp. 68-72). Chelmsford: Peter Thomas and Associates.
- Curcó, C. (1998). Indirect echoes and verbal humor. In A. Rouchota & A. Jucker (Eds.), *Current issues in relevance theory* (pp. 305-326). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Curcó, C. (2007). Irony: Negation, echo and metarepresentation. In R. Gibbs & H. Colston (Eds.), *Irony in language and thought* (pp. 269-293). New York/London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Dynel, M. (2010). How puns bear relevance. In M. Kisiielewska-Krysiuk, A. Piskorska, & E. Wałaszewska (Eds.), *Relevant studies in Poland: Exploring translation and communication problems* (pp. 1-12). Warsaw: Warsaw University Press.
- Jodłowiec, M. (1991). What makes a joke tick. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 3, 241-253.
- Jodłowiec, M. (2008). What's in the punchline? In E. Wałaszewska, M. Kisiielewska-Krysiuk, A. Korzeniowska, & M. Grzegorzewska (Eds.), *Relevant worlds: Current perspectives on language, translation and relevance theory* (pp. 67-86). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Mazzarella, D. (2013). "Optimal Relevance" as a pragmatic criterion: The role of epistemic vigilance. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 25, 20-45.
- Mazzarella, D. (2015). Pragmatics and epistemic vigilance: The deployment of sophisticated interpretive strategies. *Croatian Journal of Philosophy*, 15(44), 183-199.
- Mazzarella, D. (2016). Pragmatics, modularity and epistemic vigilance. *Argumenta*, 1(2), 181-193.
- Oswald, S., & Maillat, D. (2018). Deceptive puns: The pragmatics of humour in puns. In C. Padilla (Ed.), *Perspectivas sobre el significado: Desde lo biológico a lo social* (pp. 145-171). La Serena: Editorial Universidad de la Serena.
- Padilla Cruz, M. (2012). Epistemic vigilance, cautious optimism and sophisticated understanding. *Research in Language*, 10(4), 365-386.
- Padilla Cruz, M. (2014). Pragmatic failure, epistemic injustice and epistemic vigilance. *Language & Communication*, 39, 34-50.
- Padilla Cruz, M. (2015). On the role of vigilance in the interpretation of puns. *Humor*, 28(3), 469-490.
- Piskorska, A. (2014). A relevance-theoretic perspective on humorous irony and its failure. *Humor*, 27(4), 661-685.
- Piskorska, A., & Jodłowiec, M. (2018). Weak communication, joke targets, and the punch-line effect: A relevance-theoretic account. *Studies in Polish Linguistics*, 13(1), 25-44.
- Sperber, D. (1994). Understanding verbal understanding. In J. Khalfa (Ed.), *What is intelligence?* (pp. 179-198). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sperber, D., Clément, F., Heintz, C., Mascaro, O., Mercier, H., Origgi, G., & Wilson, D. (2010). Epistemic vigilance. *Mind & Language*, 25(4), 359-393.
- Sperber, D., Cara, F., & Girotto, V. (1995). Relevance theory explains the selection task. *Cognition*, 57, 31-95.
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Solska, A. (2012). Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure and the processing of multiple meanings in paradigmatic puns. In E. Wałaszewska & A. Piskorska (Eds.), *Relevance theory: More than understanding* (pp. 167-182). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Suls, J. (1983). Cognitive processes in humour appreciation. In P. McGhee & J. Goldstein (Eds.), *Handbook of humor research: Basic issues* (pp. 39-57). New York: Springer.
- Wilson, D. (2017). Relevance theory. In Y. Huang (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of pragmatics* (pp. 79-100). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Yus, F. (2003). Humor and the search for relevance. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35, 1295-1331.

- Yus, F. (2013a). Analyzing jokes with the *Intersecting Circles Model* of humorous communication. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, 9(1), 3-24.
- Yus, F. (2013b). An inference-centered analysis of jokes: The intersecting circles model of humorous communication. In L. Ruiz Gurillo & M. Alvarado Ortega (Eds.), *Irony and humor: From pragmatics to discourse* (pp. 59-82). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Yus, F. (2016). *Humour and relevance*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Yus, F. (2017). Incongruity-resolution cases in jokes. *Lingua*, 197, 103-122.