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What Makes a Joke Bad: Enthymemes and the Pragmatics of Humor

Abstract: Bad jokes are not simply non-humorous texts. They are texts that are humorous for someone—their author at least—but not for their audience. Bad jokes thus involve a contextual—pragmatic—dimension that is neglected in the semantic theories of humor. In this paper, we propose an approach to humor based on the Aristotelian notion of surprising enthymemes. Jokes are analyzed as kinds of arguments, whose tacit dimension can be retrieved and justified by considering the “logic” on which it is based. However, jokes are based on specific pragmatic conditions: they are regarded as arguments grounded on a generalization that is at the same time uncommon, retrievable, and acceptable or plausible for the audience. This perspective integrates the “local logic” of jokes within a broader rhetorical theory that ultimately rests on the communicative notion of common ground.

Keywords: humor, jokes, joke failure, enthymeme, jokes

1 Introduction

Jokes are typically funny, little micro-stories. With few words, a joke can cause an audience member to laugh heartily and patently enjoy the experience. But jokes can also fail in a number of ways. What makes for a bad joke? What are the conditions under which a joke will fail to have an audience member find it funny? Are there conditions under which jokes will not work, and how is it possible to explain them? More

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importantly, is it possible to account for bad jokes starting from the general mechanisms underlying humor? Thankfully we are done with the rhetorical questions for a bit.

The leading “essentialist” theories of humor (Attardo 2010, 49; Larkin-Galinanes 2017), namely the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) (Raskin 1985) and the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) (Attardo and Raskin 1991), underscored how logical mechanisms play a fundamental role in humor. In the SSTH, a text can be considered as carrying a joke when it is at the same time a) compatible with two different scripts, which b) are partially overlapping and opposite (Raskin 1985, 99). Raskin identified three main types of oppositions between the situations evoked by the jokes: 1) actual vs. non-existing situations, 2) normal vs. non-expected states of affairs; and 3) possible/plausible situations vs. (fully or partially) impossible or (more or less) implausible situations (Raskin 1985, 111). The detection of an incongruity between two distinct plausible generalizations (scripts) (Schank and Abelson 1977), one of which presumptively applicable to the text, leads to the humorous effect. The “logic” of jokes, presupposed by the notion of opposition, was developed in detail in the GTVH. Attardo and Raskin classified the logical mechanisms—which are regarded as essential for humor and underlying any jokes (Davies 2004)—in the two categories of syntagmatic and inferential. These mechanisms are used for (partially) resolving or justifying the incongruity (Attardo and Raskin 1991, 307; Hempelmann and Attardo 2011; Attardo 2010, 97), and include analogical comparisons through juxtapositions, inferring consequences, and “faulty reasoning” (Attardo, Hempelmann, and Maio 2002).

These works present a detailed look at the logic of humor, but the logical invariants, abstract categories for analyzing jokes are limited in some important ways. First, they are bottom-up categories, drawn from the complex reality of jokes, but heterogeneous (mappings and juxtapositions together with faulty reasoning) and

incomplete (Oring 2019). Second, while these logical mechanisms can account for non-humorous texts (Hempelmann and Attardo 2011, 142), they do not seem to be able to explain phenomena such as bad jokes, or the relationship between cultural background and humor (Davies 2004; Brône and Feyaerts 2004; Yus 2012). In particular, bad jokes are paradoxical for a purely semantic theory of humor: they are humorous texts for the author, but they are not humorous for the audience (or a specific audience).³ In addition, if the jokes fit into the abstract categories, it would seem that they are thus good jokes – but as anyone who has ever experienced a bad joke can relate, they can fail. They can be recognized as a joke, but not a particularly good one. This situation seems to suggest the need for a pragmatic dimension that is not accounted for in the two leading “essentialist” theories in order to fully explain the humor or failure thereof.

The goal of this paper is to attempt to explain the phenomenon of bad jokes by proposing an enthymematic approach to humor. In ancient Rhetoric, “enthymeme” referred to the rhetorical syllogism, namely arguments characterized by premises that are not absolutely true (like in deductive reasoning), but only commonly accepted (Walker 1994; Walton 2001), as they concern what usually happens, or how states of affairs are commonly classified or evaluated – in short, they are drawn from the “province of opinion” (McBurney 1936). However, in the Aristotelian perspective, enthymemes are not only regarded from a purely logical point of view. First and foremost, rhetorical syllogisms are used in communication for persuading the interlocutor – and for this reason, their logical aspect is inherently combined with their pragmatic and communicative side (Walton 1990b, 2001; Jackson and Jacobs 1980; Braet 1999). Aristotle underscored the pragmatic nature of enthymemes when he

³ Jokes can fail for semantic reasons as well. The audience may be unfamiliar with the content, hence they won't “get it.” Jokes may also fail because a person isn't in the right mood. We're more worried about joke failures when the audience is semantically suited to get the joke, does in fact do so, but doesn't find it funny.

pointed out that one of their defining features is their incompleteness (*Rhetoric*, 1357a 30–32): if a premise in an argument is commonly shared, there is no need to state it. for this reason, rhetorical syllogisms are grounded on a tacit dimension that make them dependent on the context and, perhaps just as important as the context, the audience’s background knowledge.

According to Aristotle, jokes can be analyzed as surprising enthymemes; however, this perspective was almost neglected in philosophy of humor. Our goal is to develop this Aristotelian approach to humor by interpreting it through the contemporary instruments of argument analysis and pragmatics. This framework will be used to unveil the “logic” of jokes (Macagno and Cundall 2022) and explain—and predict—why and how a joke can go wrong.

2 Jokes and Enthymemes in Aristotle

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle describes the mechanism underlying jokes and the use of words for humorous effects as similar to the one characterizing metaphors, as they both generate surprise, and the acquisition of new ideas by the hearer (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1412a 19–22). The effect of surprise (Ziv 1984, 90) depends on three structural components: shared knowledge, unlikelihood, and simultaneity.

Shared knowledge is the precondition of jokes: jokes can be funny only if the interlocutors accept, or perhaps understand, what the speaker has taken for granted (ὕπολαμβάνω, which Aristotle uses to refer to what the speaker assumes/presumes to be previously held, see Di Piazza 2012). These presumptions are the ground of rational persuasion, as the speakers need to understand what the audience has already accepted in order for their discourse to be persuasive (*Rhetoric*, 1395b 5–11; 1370a 19–27). Humor is based on the same mechanism (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1412a 32–1412b 2).

Unlikelihood is the essential condition of surprise. Enthymemes are grounded on what is *presumed* as typical, namely and thus likely true for a specific audience (Boss 1979; Walker 1994). For Aristotle, jokes are a particular type of enthymeme that are grounded on the conflict between likelihood and acceptability, which generates surprise. These enthymemes rest on a premise that is at the same time unlikely—contrary to what is presumed to be verisimilar—and acceptable (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1400a5–1400a14):

Another refers to things which are supposed to happen and yet seem incredible. We may argue that people could not have believed them, if they had not been true or nearly true. And that they are the more likely to be true because they are incredible; for the things which men believe (ὕπολαμβάνει) are either facts or probabilities: if, therefore, a thing that *is* believed is improbable and incredible, it must be true, since it is certainly not believed because it is at all probable or credible.

Aristotle pointed out how the same mechanism of surprise (the acceptable unlikelihood) that characterizes this special type of enthymeme underlies humor: “the speaker says something unexpected, the soundness of which is thereupon recognized” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1412b 7–8). Jokes and humor are tools for unveiling a truth or an acceptable generalization that is not likely.

The last condition that characterizes the Aristotelian mechanism of humor is *simultaneity*. On Aristotle’s view, the simultaneous satisfaction of the requirements of being a (perceived, acknowledged) truth without being commonplace—indeed in conflict with it—is necessary for humor. A truth that is commonplace is not funny; an unlikely view that is false is simply perceived as false.⁴ Instead, the simultaneity of this twofold nature of the view makes the utterance(s) humorous, such as in “Death is most fit before you do Deeds that would make death fit for you” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1412b 19).

⁴ So why is it that people often will suggest “it’s funny cause it’s true?”

Contemporary essentialist theories of humor have developed in detail the two last conditions of the surprising enthymeme. Script opposition and overlapping can be considered as specific instruments for capturing the notions of unlikelihood and simultaneity. However, for Aristotle enthymemes and jokes are essentially parts of discourse, and thus they are grounded on a pragmatic condition, i.e. the common acceptance (and knowledge) of the propositions “assumed” or rather taken for granted (Stalnaker 2002).

3 Likelihood, suitability, and unlikely possibility

As mentioned above, jokes can be conceived as the discovery of an unlikely generalization, which is not verisimilar (in the given setting and circumstances) but presented as true and acceptable by the audience. This enthymematic approach to jokes can explain some limits of the incongruity theory, which is presently the dominant theory of humor.

According to Morreall (1982, 244–45), laughter derives from the order of our world, which gives rise to certain patterns among things, properties and events. When we experience something that violates these expectations of regularity and order, we laugh. This view was further specified by Raskin, who developed the concept of “incongruity” in terms of scripts—stable organizations of events (Schank and Abelson 1975). A joke is regarded as the result of two conditions: 1) the text is compatible (fully or in part) with two different scripts, and 2) such scripts are opposite (Raskin 1985, 99). The opposition (incompatibility) of such scripts can result from different sources (Raskin 1985, 108):

1. Real situation vs. Unreal situation

2. Actual vs non-actual, non-existing situation
3. Normal, expected state of affairs vs the abnormal, unexpected state of affairs
4. Possible, plausible situation vs fully or partially impossible or much less plausible situation

Incongruity theory—regardless of its formulation—is based on an “objective” feature of the text: the states of affairs referred to or described are “(un)real,” “(un)actual,” “(ab)normal” or “(im)possible.” However, a story can be perceived as funny in a given context, by a given audience and if told by a specific speaker, but if these circumstances change, it can be taken as manipulative, offensive, or simply weird (Cundall 2007, 207). For example, a joke about a priest, a monk, and a rabbi may be found humorous when those same individuals are at a bar discussing issues that faith leaders deal with after a long day. Told at a time when those faiths are brought together to deal with some important issues of interfaith interaction, the joke may not go over too well.

In contrast with the “logical mechanisms” developed in recent theories of humor, enthymemes are by definition situationally oriented (Bitzer 1992) – and thus dependent on the context in which they are uttered. Enthymemes are the outcome of strategic invention, not discovery from objective states of affairs: their acceptability, and the possibility of taking some premises for granted, depends on the audience. Enthymemes are relative, and need to be suitable to the context in which they are invented (Untersteiner 1954; Kinneavy 2002). Enthymemes are grounded on what is presumed to usually occur *for someone*, on what is likely to be true *for a specific audience*, and not on what is possible, probable, real or actual (Viano 1955, 280–85). This is consistent with what Cohen (1999) calls the joke hermetic. The cognitive background against which a joke works.

The relative nature of the enthymematic mechanism of jokes can be illustrated by considering two distinct jokes, with different conditions of success. The first is a joke told by Ronald Reagan, who often made fun at his age and reputation for laziness⁵:

Example 1

“I have left orders to be awakened at any time in case of national emergency,” he once quipped, “even if I’m in a Cabinet meeting.”

In this case, Reagan is using an argument from sign: his reported order is intended to be a reason for reaching a positive conclusion on his character, his willingness to forego his own rest for the Country is generally perceived as a sign of strong commitment to the Country. The concessive connector triggers as *a fortiori* argument, placing on the highest level of the scale of “depth of sleep/impossibility of disturbing or intruding into someone’s privacy” the content of the concessive clause (Horn 1969; Ducrot 1972). Thus, the likely conclusion is that Reagan is available even in deeply private moments. However, Reagan himself provides irrefutable testimonial evidence of an unlikely scale of sleep depth (or degrees of privacy): Cabinet meetings are presented as private times, in which he enjoys the deepest rest. This juxtaposition is unlikely to be accepted by the audience. This different vision of the world leads to a judgment on Reagan different from the one that a president or an ordinary politician is likely to desire. One doesn’t sleep in Cabinet meetings (even though everyone in the audience would agree that they soporific)! The now private Cabinet meeting gives the audience reason to conclude that the President does not care much about Cabinet meetings or his political activities in general. The humoristic effect stems from the fact that the unlikelihood cannot be

⁵https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-do-none-of-trumps-jokes-feel-like-jokes/2020/07/03/bdcc053a-bca1-11ea-bdaf-a129f921026f_story.html

ignored or excluded—indeed it needs to be accepted (he states it) but cannot be wholly believed. However, if the joke were told by a different individual, who seems to care very little of his presidential duties, the claim would have been taken as an admission.

Take the following statement offered by former president Trump where he tries to advance a proposal that he would later describe as a joke, but wasn't taken as such⁶:

Example 2

“When you do testing to that extent, you're going to find more people, you're going to find more cases,” Trump said. “So I said to my people, ‘Slow the testing down, please.’”

This argument is an instance of the argument from practical reasoning (Walton, Reed, and Macagno 2008, 94–95), in which the speaker argues from a goal and the available means to achieve it in favor of the acceptability of a given course of action (Walton 1990a; Clarke 1979; Hitchcock 2017, chap. 15). In this case, Trump's reasoning can be represented as follows:

PREMISE 1:	Agent <i>A</i> has a goal <i>G</i> .	We need to reduce the number of Covid cases.
PREMISE 2:	Carrying out this action <i>B</i> is the best means to realize <i>G</i> .	As the testing frequency increases the number of cases found, reducing the testing will reduce the cases found.

⁶https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-do-none-of-trumps-jokes-feel-like-jokes/2020/07/03/bdcc053a-bca1-11ea-bdaf-a129f921026f_story.html

CONCLUSION:	Therefore, <i>A</i> should bring about action <i>B</i> .	The best way to reduce the Covid cases is to stop testing.
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This rhetorical argument was claimed by Trump to be a joke but was in fact taken as a serious proposal—indeed not funny at all. However, if we change the setting, the joke can be successful:

2*. “In Dictatorial Country X, we have found a much better solution to Covid. We have stopped counting.”

The problem lies in the balance between what is possible and what is likely—namely presumptively acceptable by the audience. The classification of the decision to stop the testing as a way to stop the Covid is based on a generalization that is not only unlikely (ignoring the problem solves it), but a sheer falsity. However, in 2* it is presented as an unlikely “best” solution (I have chosen not to see it), while Trump presents it as a wrong cause-effect relationship, namely a false and unacceptable generalization. It is maintained as the solution that Trump has endorsed as a president, and considering his approach to the pandemic, it can be reasonably taken as an already made decision.

4 The Pragmatic Dimension of Enthymemes: Presuppositions and Common Ground

As noted above, enthymemes are characterized by an implicit dimension. A premise is taken for granted by the speaker because likely, and thus presumably acceptable. This “taking for granted” of a premise, however, becomes complex in jokes, which are characterized by an implicit premise that is not commonplace, though acceptable. The

Reagan quip shows how the uncommon, though plausibly true, assumption that he sleeps in cabinet meetings is important for the joke to work. There is a problem lurking here. How is it possible to take a premise for granted, when it cannot be presumed to be already known or accepted? To address this question, it is necessary to explore the pragmatic dimension of jokes, and their relationship with what rhetoricians call the common ground.

The tacit, implicit premise of an enthymeme has been analyzed in pragmatics as type of “backgrounded” message (Black 1962, 61), pragmatically presupposed as necessary for connecting the premise to the conclusion (Charnavel 2017; Konig and Siemund 2009; van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1982). In linguistics and philosophy of language, a pragmatic presupposition is defined as a condition that a speaker poses for his utterance to be acceptable; it is what is taken for granted, what is normally expected to hold in the common ground between the participants (Beaver 1997, 2439). Thus, a speaker who sincerely asserts that “Wake me even if I’m in a Cabinet meeting” assumes that it is possible that the speaker is sleeping in Cabinet meetings—or that a person in a Cabinet meeting is expected to sleep (von Fintel 2008, 138). However, what does it mean?

Classically, what the speaker presupposes corresponds to what they believe to be common belief (or ground) (Stalnaker 2002, 707). An alternative view depicts the common ground in terms of assumptions, namely propositions that a speaker supposes that are shared with the hearer (Gauker 1998; von Fintel 2008). However, when a presupposition is not shared, namely when it is not part of the common ground, it does not mean necessarily that the utterance is unacceptable (Gauker 1998). Speakers sometimes presuppose without believing that the presupposition is common ground (Burton-Roberts 1989, 26). Informative presuppositions such as “I am moving with my

fiancé to Seattle” (told by a daughter to her father without having informed him that she got engaged, see Von Fintel 2000; Stalnaker 1974; von Fintel 2008) are based on a divergence between what the speaker displaces as a condition for the acceptability of their utterance and what can be believed/assumed to be already shared.

To address this imperfect correspondence between presupposition and common ground, the notion of accommodation was introduced (Lewis 1979). Accommodation is a process in which the hearer charitably adjusts his common ground to include a proposition p , taken for granted by the speaker but not shared by the hearer. In this sense, the presupposition is added to the common ground prior to the acceptance of the utterance (von Fintel 2008, 143). However, there are limits to these adjustments. The speaker may presuppose a specific content; however, it does not mean that the hearer will accommodate it. The first and most basic condition of acceptability consists in the possibility of accessing (identifying) the presupposed information. For example, an utterance like

- a. “John lived in New York too” (in a context in which the other places in which John lived were not mentioned before)

triggers a presupposition that does not allow any kind of accommodation (Asher and Lascarides 1998, 247; von Fintel 2008, 154). The hearer needs to be able to draw the presuppositional inference so they can connect it with their knowledge or the context (Asher and Lascarides 1998, 277). The possibility of accommodation needs to be distinguished from the acceptance of the presupposition, which depends on two conditions (von Fintel 2008, 145):

- (i) the listeners may be genuinely agnostic as to the truth of the relevant proposition, assume that the speaker knows about its truth, and trust the speaker not to speak inappropriately or falsely;
- (ii) the listeners may not want to challenge the speaker about the presupposed proposition, because it is irrelevant to their concerns and because the smoothness of the conversation is important enough to them to warrant a little leeway.

A joke by the late comedian Mitch Hedburg relies on the same sort of structure. “I used to drink. I still do, but I used to too.” The context here is that one typically doesn’t mention that one doesn’t drink unless one’s quit. The listener has to accommodate and realize that the “I used to drink” is now not being used to explain that the person still no longer drinks.

The two conditions can easily explain the accommodation of presuppositions triggered by Example 1: the hearers do not know what the president is doing during the Cabinet meetings, assume that he has no reasons for conveying false and not too much honorable information about his behavior, and for this reason they do not want to challenge it. For this reason, the presupposition can be accommodated—namely taken (provisionally) as common ground, even if it is surprising. This type of accommodation can be compared to the one underlying Example 2. In this case, the hearers do not know what the president has done to curb the Covid, they have no reasons against accepting that for Trump slowing the testing is a way to curb the Covid pandemic, and thus they accommodate the common ground. This type of accommodation is different from Example 1. Here, the President cannot presume that the audience knows or accepts that he sleeps during the meetings (or that cabinet meetings are commonly known as a place

where people commonly sleep), even though hearers may hold privately the view that such meetings are sleep-inducing (Yus 2002). However, the audience needs to take this information (and the generalization about the common behavior of politicians during cabinet meetings) as an improbable truth (it is a testimony of the president himself, even though it is unlikely). In contrast, in Example 2 Trump could not presume that the audience accepted as commonly shared the causal relation taken for granted—but the audience did accept it as a sign of his likely way of thinking.

Thus, the relationship between presupposition (*pp*) and common ground leads to different scenarios (Macagno 2018):

- i) The hearer draws a presuppositional inference, but s/he cannot evaluate it (cannot determine whether *pp* is acceptable or not) (case a);
- ii) *pp* can be accepted by the hearers as a background assumption (ex: “*I am moving with my fiancé to Seattle*”) because it is not conflicting with their commitments;
- iii) *pp* can be accepted by the hearers as a background assumption *provisionally* (waiting for further information), even though they cannot be presumed to accept *pp* – or accept that *pp* is commonly accepted within a certain community (Yus 2002) (Example 1);
- iv) *pp* cannot be accepted by the hearer as it conflicts with other commitments (ex: “*The king of France is bald*” said nowadays);
- v) *pp* cannot be accepted by the hearer as the hearer cannot be presumed to accept *pp* (Example 3—considering that the causal generalization “slowing the testing leads to curbing the Covid pandemic” is placed in the common ground).

In this framework, the surprising effect of enthymemes needs to be analyzed in pragmatic terms as a kind of accommodation of the common ground. This perspective can be useful for analyzing the cases of unsuccessful jokes.

5 Unsurprising Enthymemes and the Conditions of Success

Jokes are forms of enthymemes and like enthymemes, jokes can fail. The surprising enthymeme clearly has a counterpart—the enthymeme that wants to be surprising, but without success. This type of failed joke occurs when the audience and the joke-teller both recognize that the joke was/is a joke, but where the audience member simply does not find it funny (Cohen 1999). In Gimbel's terms, the joke is presented and recognized as "...an intentional, conspicuous act of playful cleverness" (Gimbel 2017, 37), but fails to cause mirth for the audience.

Normally, when a joke fails, the failure is typically attributed to a lack of proper understanding of what Cohen (1999) calls the joke hermetic. Since the audience does not hold sufficient background knowledge, they cannot possibly be expected to see the humor. The assumption is that were the person to have the correct background knowledge, then they would likely find it funny. If one were to tell a joke about horse-riding Kazakhstanis to an audience of US citizens, they may not, or likely will not, get it—they understand that it is a joke because it is offered as such, but it is not successful. In this perspective, Cundall (2012) explains that a joke about Etruscans might leave most audiences scratching their heads.

This type of failure is clearly distinct from simple lack of understanding, namely when the joke does not work because of lack of proper background knowledge—the endoxical premise cannot be even acknowledged as part of the common ground. If one

does not understand the complexities of Canadian Parliament, then any joke to me on that subject matter is likely to fail. To recognize the joke as a joke requires, to a degree, some background knowledge that would allow the joke to be recognized as such. Speakers can disambiguate their meaning, signal that they are intending to joke in saying things like “did you hear the one about...?” as a way to clearly, if crudely, indicate they are getting ready to tell a joke. Other ways to do this is to use a well-known joke lead like “Knock knock.” But in any case, subtle joke, or one advertised as such, positing something as an enthymematic tacit premise requires that at least it can be accessible—in pragmatic terms, taking something for granted requires at least that the interlocutor can reconstruct (or accommodate) (Stalnaker 2002; Thomason 1990) the tacit content (Asher and Lascarides 1998, 247; von Stechow 2008, 154). This pragmatic mechanism underlies the lack of success of certain absurdist jokes, which, due to their excessive absurdity, lead to confusion rather than mirth. The following is an absurdist joke that fails to cause any mirth for the authors, and for many not just because the joke is a bit on the older side.

Example 3: Failed joke—No retrievable link

“Why is a mouse when it spins? The higher the fewer.”

This nonsensical joke is just that: nonsense. Some people are amused by it, but they tend to be a group that is familiar with the saying. Its British provenance may be enough to get the interested person to laugh, but more often than not, the joke, if it is one, elicits confusion. The joke’s incongruity is too out of bounds. The initial statement is a question is itself nonsensical. The response, completely irrelevant to the why and when interrogatives, is also way out of bounds. It is indeed a stretch to imagine

“accommodating” this joke in any way. There’s nothing for the mind to grab hold of and make some sort of conceptual relation with. Most jokes have some sort of conceptual relationship that unites two concepts in ways described above. But the concepts in the spinning mouse joke are simply too disparate, there’s not even a gossamer thread by which to unite the various elements of the joke. As absurdist humor, the point is to make a joke, or perhaps a joke-form, and then simply deny anything to have the conceptual relations needed for most forms of humor. This is crucial. The joke runs on the frustration of any sort of conceptual relationship, it is simply and unapologetically, absurd. Generally, humor has some level of conceptual relation, some common ground, or some resolution that allows it to resolve, but here we have none of it. It could be thought of as the ultimate anti-joke.

The best framework to talk about failed jokes—not failed humor—is comedy, and more specifically comedians and comedy writers, whose livelihoods depend on writing successful jokes. They likely have a cornucopia of failed jokes. So it would make sense to go find a comedian and get them to lay out some failed jokes. As we will see, most comics are hesitant to share them because to do so would be to show their failings as comedians. Not a good look for any comedian whose life blood is getting those laughs. The authors would like to thank the comedians that graciously offered up these failed jokes for some armchair dissection.⁷

⁷ A cautionary note about the analysis to come. Analyzing humor, jokes, and the like tends to bleed away the humor from jokes. While it is unfortunate, it is necessary. The hope is, in doing such work, that perhaps a newer appreciation of the richness of humor will make up for the dimming of the mirth one gets from jokes in the more traditional way.

Example 4a: Failed joke —(too) common ground

There is a gum, Bazooka Joe, where the packaging of the gum comes with a joke on it. The joke in one of them went like this. “Why did Bazooka Joe throw the clock out the window? He wanted to see time fly.”

This joke is generally thought to be a bad joke. It is obvious, simplistic, and not good comedy. While it is an attempt at being clever and playful, it is not a good one. A better version comes from famous comedian Groucho Marx.

Example 4b: Successful joke

“Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.”

This joke may not get deep belly laughs, but it is generally considered a good joke written by a master of comedy. Why is the Bazooka Joe joke bad, and the other good? To begin our comparison of these two jokes the obvious needs to be stated. Both jokes are easily recognized as jokes. Both are recognized as jokes only after the “play” on the words comes. You may know to expect a jocular bit of humor given context (a space where humor is typically found—the comics) but you do not get the joke until after all the items are in place so as to allow for the humorous interpretation.

The pair of jokes above are not precisely the same in linguistic form, but they are similar in important ways. This is one of the reasons that this example is used to begin our analysis. Both use the “time flies” phrase to help drive the humor, but the humor for each turns on different uses. In our bad joke example, the humor surrounds Bazooka Joe’s misunderstanding that the saying “time flies” is not metaphorical. He assumes that a clock flying through the air qualifies as time flying. The joke is based on

the reinterpretation of the phrase “time flies” from figural to literal. It is a rather simple reinterpretation that is made clearer by the imagery that comes in the comic—namely a clock flying through the air after Joe threw it. Though one can readily see the attempt at humor, cleverness, in a telling of the joke sans the comic assist. The speaker thus takes for granted a generalization (*Throwing a clock is a way to see the time fly*) that is commonplace (the metaphor is based on a common way to look at the time) and thus not surprising.

In addition to using a reinterpretation of the “time flies” phrase, the Marx joke involves a further play on the term ‘like.’ The humorous shift occurs from the reinterpreting that term from the adjectival form to the verbal form. In the Bazooka Joe joke there is only one main reinterpretation, while the Marx joke involves two. Thus, the jokes at least differ in their level of complexity. For lack of a better term, the Bazooka Joe joke is rather simplistic. It just plays on the misunderstanding of the metaphor. The Marx joke brings the affective use of ‘like’ where X likes Y, and then changes meaning of the term ‘like’ from the affective to comparative (X is like Y). There is also double meaning of flies (verb) and flies (noun) that furthers the cleverness and the mental work needed by the audience to understand the joke. Both jokes rely upon a linguistic incongruity to work. The simpler joke from Bazooka Joe has a single word that is reinterpreted to resolve the incongruity. Marx’s joke is more complex in that there are two linguistic ambiguities to resolve. But in both cases, the requisite incongruity, an incongruity that is quite similar across both joke examples, is present.

The Bazooka Joe joke differs from the Marx joke in its reasoning structure. Example 4b is grounded on an enthymematic mechanism different from Example 4a. The speaker constructs an analogy, and the audience is first led to regard the common feature between the two events (Macagno 2017) as the “*perception of the rapid passage*

of X,” but then discovers—surprisingly—that the common feature is instead “*what X bugs like.*” The interpretative discovery—based on an unusual, but acceptable premise—leads to the comic effect.

We can tentatively assert that jokes need to be sufficiently surprising, and thus require a certain amount of cognitive work by the audience, in order to work. Too little and the joke, recognized as a joke, will elicit a groan rather than a guffaw. This is also why people tire of ‘knock-knock’ jokes as they get older. These simple linguistic plays are not sufficiently complex enough to engage the audience. This also would explain why jokes will fail to produce as much mirth as it did at first when there are repeated exposures to the same type of token of the joke. One might reasonably extend this idea and think that the more incongruous a change is, the more humor—in other words, the more uncommon the tacit premise is, the more surprise. However, this “uncommon” nature of the tacit premise needs to be combined with its retrievability—as shown in Example 4 above, if the audience does not manage to retrieve the presupposed content, the result will be confusion.

The three poles of humor can be thus identified in the retrievability of (and thus possibility of reconstructing) the tacit premise, the uncommon nature thereof, and its acceptability. The balance between these poles results in an enthymeme that is at the same time surprising and accessible. For example, take the following two jokes from comedian and speaker Jeremy Rochford.⁸

Example 5: Failed joke—Complex accommodation

“How did the Pirate fix the alphabet? With his I patch.”

⁸ Many thanks to Jeremy for his kindness in giving these jokes for analysis. Like any performer, failed bits care not great for booking the next gig. To advertise the failures takes a level of bravery and that he shared them with the authors is something the authors are grateful for.

This joke is one that fakes/tricks the listener. Anyone familiar with the classic representation of the “Arrrghh” vocalization of pirates is immediately attempting to find a way to use that and the letter R into some comedic answer. The comic knows this and goes a different direction with “eye/I” patch. It’s a sort of comic prestidigitation. Mr. Rochford says this joke rarely works because the audience has to first go against the assumed joke direction, but then reframe everything around the “eye/I” patch. Here, the enthymematic generalization (*I-patches can fix the alphabet*) depends on too many presuppositions (*pirates normally have eye patches; eye is pronounced like I; a patch can cover holes; an eye-patch is a physical patch; the alphabet is broken; a broken alphabet has holes ...*), which in turn can be retrieved only through a complex backward reconstruction of what is left unsaid. The tacit premise can be reconstructed, but its understanding—namely its full accommodation within the audience’s common ground—depends on too many premises and too many inferences. As a result, Mr. Rochford has retired this joke from his sets.

The balance between the three dimensions of jokes can be upset also by a tacit premise that is not accommodable in the sense that there is no reason for the audience to accept it. An example is the following joke, again, compliments of Mr. Rochford.

Example 6: Failed joke—Unacceptable premise

“I saw a sign at Dairy Queen the other day that said "As Always, Served Upside Down!!!"....you know, in a world so focused on COVID, it's good to know that Dairy Queen is on the forefront of early Vampire detection.”

The point of this joke was that since vampires can shapeshift into bats, and bats hang upside down to sleep, and Dairy Queen serves their Blizzards upside down, ostensibly

to show how thick and good they are, a vampire might be enamored. This is admittedly both a very “long walk” to get to the punchline and a rather complex joke. The Venn diagram of the folks who might “get” this joke could be rather sparsely populated. The connecting thread between the Blizzard and the vampire is being upside down. But this is not really terribly surprising. There is no relationship between the two parts, vampires and Blizzards, beyond this upside-down quality. More distressing for the comedian, the vampire sleeps upside down and the Blizzard is shown upside down for a moment. There is such a wispy, thin relationship between the two that there is no resolution of the incongruity. It is just a strange relationship between two very different things. The comedian took for granted that “what is upside down detects vampires,” which is easy to access in the joke, but not acceptable, as conflicting with common knowledge (upside-down or misplaced objects do not attract vampires in any story). Absent some other conceptual relationship of vampires to Blizzards, the joke just will not work.

What we have now are three jokes where the conceptual relationships between the ideas is just too strained. In the first the case, the absurdity, while the point, is going to make most audiences confused. It’s too much a joke in a sense. The second and third examples are good for the thesis urged here because the conceptual relationships in both are strained. The pirate joke is a deliberate fake. It expects the audience to go to the “Arrrggh/R” idea, but then frustrates it. It is like the absurdist joke because they both are playing with the audience in knowing that they are aware of how jokes work and are ultimately using that to make the new joke. It’s meta in a way, but not a cool or funny way. It’s more like the haughty millennial downplaying something as cool because they’d known of it years before and everyone else is late to the game. The third joke has two problems. The first is that the joke is a “long walk.” There are a lot of steps to go through to make any of the connections. The other is that the connection resting on the

upside down, is quite weak. There's no way to realize the connection. There's no fullness to it. As such, the joke fails.

6. Conclusion

The mechanisms of humor have been explained in the literature considering what is needed to make a joke successful, and focusing on the relationship between the suggested and actual scripts or generalizations involved therein (Raskin 1985; Attardo 2010; Attardo and Raskin 1991). However, jokes are first and foremost communicative events (Brône and Feyaerts 2004, 364)—utterances or sequences thereof between interlocutors with a specific purpose. In this sense, they have a pragmatic dimension, which has been explored in terms of a balance between efforts and reward, and can account for what makes a joke bad in cognitive terms (Yus 2003; Piskorska 2014). While the semantic account sets out the conditions that make a story a joke, the cognitive one provides a hypothesis of what happens when a joke is told, and how we interpret it. Both theories show essential dimensions of jokes, but they hardly explain why a joke is bad, and more importantly how to determine and predict when a joke cannot be successful. To address this problem, a different perspective needs to be used—combining the semantic normativity with the pragmatic nature of jokes.

Aristotle's account of jokes as surprising enthymemes provides the theoretical framework for tackling this challenge. Enthymemes are not only logical constructs. They are dialogical events (Walton 1996; Walton and Macagno 2009), carrying specific effects on the audience and defined by an implicit dimension that is commonly analyzed in pragmatics in terms of presupposition (Black 1962; Levinson 1983; van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1982, 1984). The enthymematic perspective can account for the communicative dimension of humor without discarding the logical mechanism

underlying any joke (Davies 2004). In an argumentative perspective, the logic (in the traditional meaning of the term) and the pragmatics of jokes are not only compatible, but mirror images. The logic of jokes is necessary for explaining what is taken for granted (Macagno 2018), and the tacit, presumably accepted premise is necessary for a conclusion to follow, or a joke to be explained or justified.

In this paper, we have tried to show this twofold nature of jokes. Jokes are analyzed as arguments grounded on a generalization that is at the same time uncommon—not commonplace—retrievable, and acceptable—namely accommodable by the audience. These latter three pragmatic conditions can capture when a story can produce a humorous reaction, and when it is doomed to fail.

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