

Chapter 9

The Cooperative Nature of Humor

This chapter discusses jokes and humor in the light of Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP). The chapter begins by establishing that jokes present a violation of one of the four maxims composing the CP. The nature of the violation of the CP is addressed, and it is shown that the violation of the CP is real, and not "mentioned" or otherwise metalinguistically salvaged. Having established that jokes are non-cooperative in Grice's sense, their observed communicative effect must be explained, and this is accomplished by postulating a hierarchy of CPs, each of which incorporates the inferential powers of the CPs it overlays. A CP for humor is established in this context. Finally, the chapter considers the importance of the implicit in jokes, which is found to be connected to the peculiar CP of humor. All the necessary terminology is introduced in the first section, but the reader may safely pass over the section on mention theory, which is essentially a methodological discussion.

9.1 Jokes as the Violation of Grice's Maxims

A basic assumption which underlies the following remarks is that a large number of jokes involve violations of one or more of Grice's maxims, as seen in chapters 4 and 5. The claim that jokes could be viewed in terms of violations of maxims dates back to Grice himself, who considers irony as an

example of implicature, as in:

- (96) Miss X produced a series of sounds that correspond closely with the score of "Home sweet home." (Grice 1989: 37)¹

and a (complex) pun based on the name of the Indian province "Sind"

- (97) A British general cabled *Peccavi* to his HQ. (Grice 1989: 36) [*Peccavi* is the Latin translation of the sentence "I have sinned" phonetically similar to "I have Sind."]]

The first direct application of Grice's CP to humor research are those of Violi and Manetti (1979: 132-133), Hancher (1980, 1981, 1982, 1983), Eco (1981), Martinich (1981), Morreall (1983: 79-82), Leech (1983: 98-99) and Hunter (1983).

The following examples will show how particular types of jokes violate Grice's maxims:

- (98) (= 69) Quantity

"Excuse me, do you know what time it is?"

"Yes."

- (99) Relation

"How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

"Fish!"

- (100) (= 19) Manner

"Do you believe in clubs for young people?"

"Only when kindness fails." (Attributed to W.C. Fields)

- (101) Quality

"Why did the Vice President fly to Panama?"

"Because the fighting is over." (Johnny Carson 1-19-90)

Example (98) violates the maxim of quantity by not providing enough information. Violation through providing excess information is also possible and, for instance, was codified in medieval French literature under the form

¹For an implicatural analysis of irony, not based explicitly on Grice's work, but compatible with it, see Booth (1974), see also 13.

of *énumération* (e.g., Garapon 1957: 22-25). Example (99) is an “absurd” joke, with a certain appropriateness from the well-known surrealist taste for bizarre associations. Another example of relevance violation is in section 5.1.3 (70). Example (100) violates the “submaxim” of manner, “avoid ambiguity,” as in general do all forms of verbal humor based on ambiguity, such as puns. Example (101) is a deliberate infraction of the maxim of quality, that is used to insinuate that the then Vice-President was a coward.

What is being claimed is that the above texts do not flout, or exploit, the maxims, but that they violate them, i.e., they fail to conform to their “recommendations.” In Grice’s discussion of the maxims, one of the possible cooperative uses of the maxims is their flouting, i.e., their patent (Grice has “blatant”) violation, which allows the hearer to infer that a given maxim is being violated only insofar as another maxim is being obeyed (Grice 1989: 30). Grice’s example is that of answering the question about how X has been doing on his new job, with “He likes his colleagues and he hasn’t been to prison yet.” On the face of it, the answer violates the maxim of relevance, but if one assumes that the speaker is still committed to the CP, one can infer that the maxim is being flouted in order to imply that X is (potentially) dishonest.

In the case of the jokes above, however, no ulterior interpretation of the text can salvage it from the violation of the maxim. Consider example (98): the first speaker is failing to provide the necessary amount of information (namely the time) because he/she misinterprets the indirect speech act of requesting the time as a literal request of information about his/her capacity of possessing the information. There is no way that the hearer can arrive to the fulfillment of his/her request by assuming that the speaker is following some other maxim. One may imagine somewhat unlikely situations in which the answer would be a normal flouting of the maxim of quantity; for instance, if it were a known fact that the speaker had broken his/her watch, and that it would be repaired at a fixed time in the afternoon, then the answer “yes” could be reinterpreted on the basis of the maxim of relevance as providing the necessary information. The inferential path would look somewhat like: the speaker knows the time, but I know that this is possible only after the moment his/her watch has been repaired, so it must be past that point in time. This example, however contrived, has the merit of emphasizing the

difference between flouting and violating a maxim.²

9.2 Violating the Maxims

The fact that the speaker does not follow the CP in parts of his/her utterances has momentous consequences. Because the CP defines the prerequisites of BF communication—that is the speaker's commitment to truth, relevance, clarity, and to providing the right quantity of information at any given time—when a speaker is being earnest in his/her effort to communicate, he/she will try to follow the CP.

The CP assumes a commitment to the truthfulness of the speaker's utterance. If the speaker has left the BF mode, the hearer has no warranty that the speaker is not lying about all or some of the aspects of his/her message, or even worse, that the message is not totally irrelevant. In other words, if the speaker is not committed to the CP, then the hearer may only infer from the utterance that the speaker has uttered a sentence of literal meaning M, plus all the usual existential presuppositions (e.g., the speaker exists), minus any inference deriving wholly or in part from M.

Consider the following situation:

(102) A is told by B that “the cat is on the mat” but A does not know if B is CP compliant

Consider “the cat is on the mat” to be “M.” The following violations of PC may have taken place: A knows that B has literally said M, but A does not know whether B was lying and the cat is *not* on the mat (the speaker is violating the maxim of quality); or whether the cat is sitting on the precious

²The claim that jokes do not involve a violation of the PC has been put forth by Jodlowiec (1991: 251) within the framework of Relevance Theory. It is unclear what the status of the claim is particularly because it follows the claim that “no exhaustive generalizations about the mechanisms (...) of all verbal jokes can be put forward” (Ibid.). This latter claim is erroneous and explained by the fact that Jodlowiec relies on a purely pragmatic account of joke processing with insufficient attention to its semantics. It may well be that the claim that jokes do not violate the CP comes from the notion that humor *eventually* makes (some sort of) sense, but that misses the issue entirely. As discussed in some detail in the body of the text, that joke processing involves two moments: the perception of incongruity (CP violation) and its resolution (compliance with CP-for-humor).

antique handpainted silk mat a rich aunt just bequeathed A (quantity); or whether a killer is aiming a gun at A's head (relevance); whether any of A's six cats is sitting on any of A's numerous mats, and A has no way of knowing about which cat and/or mat B is talking about (manner).

But, from the point of view of communication, an even worse situation holds. Assuming that B is lying (violating CP), it does not follow from M that there are either a cat or a mat. Consider:

$$(\text{ON}(\text{cat}, \text{mat})) \supset (\exists \text{cat}) \& (\exists \text{mat})$$

but if the left member of the implication is false, the implication is always true, regardless of the truth of the right member,³ hence we cannot pass any judgement as to whether there exists either a cat or a mat (outside of logic: B could have made this up, since he/she is lying anyway).

If B had not been violating the CP, then clearly all the usual implications would hold. A does not know, however, whether B is following the CP, and so the very ground for inferential work is missing. A could assume that B is following the CP, but by doing so, A would put him/herself at risk of being duped, made fun of, or otherwise deceived.

As a result, in a situation in which the hearer doubts the CP compliance of the speaker, either the hearer assumes CP violation and suspends all inferencing, or the hearer ignores the possibility of violation and takes the speaker's word for what is being said. Naturally, if the hearer has had reason to doubt the speaker's compliance in the CP, the second option is inadequate. The effect of this situation is clearly an invalidation of communication, since the only safe inference from M is that the speaker said M.⁴

How is it possible then that speakers do successfully engage in communicative practices that involve humorous exchanges? By claiming that the speaker in jokes violates Grice's maxims, it is being claimed that these texts constitute examples of non-cooperative behavior; nevertheless, the examples do "somehow" make sense, and are understood and recognized as jokes. The rest of this chapter will present and explain the solution to this apparent puzzle.

An important aspect of the processing of the joke text has been assumed implicitly in the discussion so far. It has been shown, for instance in ch. 3 and

³See for instance Reichenbach (1947: 27).

⁴In fact, the hearer does not reject the message entirely, but tries to extrapolate as much bona-fide information from it as possible, see Raskin (1992).

6, that the processing of a humorous text involves reaching an interpretive dead-end and backtracking in order to find another interpretation to the text. The decision to backtrack can be seen as a first hint at the solution of the problem outlined above: the hearer seems to assume the speaker's cooperative intent even *after* his/her failure to provide a text with a literal BF sense. After presenting the processing of the text again, from the point of view of the application of the CP, the next section will discuss an attempt at "skirting" the issue, and finally discuss the solution of the paradox, namely the hierarchy of CPs, including a CP for humor.

Grice notes that by violating one of the maxims the speaker "will be liable to mislead" (1989: 30); and this is exactly the case in the text of a joke in a literal reading. The processing of a joke can be described (in theory-neutral terms) as the discovery of a second "sense" in a text that had initially seemed to be headed in the direction of a "normal" disambiguation. The Raskin's SSTH (1985) (ch. 6) describes this phenomenon as the imposition of a second "script"; the structuralist-based theories (ch. 2 and 3) as the discovery of a second "isotopy". The speaker producing the text uses the violation of a maxim to mislead the hearer into believing that "normal" reliable information is being provided, while in effect the text, or the utterance, is rigged with the unexpected presence of the second sense (script, isotopy).

Consider example (100) again. The polysemous word "club" introduces a first (unnoticed) ambiguity, while "kindness fails" is the part of the sentence which redirects the interpretation of the text onto the second script/isotopy. During the process of disambiguation, the reader selects the "social activities" meaning of the polysemous lexeme "club." Nothing adverse occurs, up to the point when the VP "fails" forces the reader to correct his/her choice. When the word "fails" is reached, however, the disambiguation process is brought to a halt. It is impossible, at that point, to make sense of the sentence. The reader is then faced with an option: either discard the text as ill-formed, and thereby assume that the utterance did not convey any meaning (with the exception of its own ill-formedness and the inferences thereof), or backtrack and check for possible ambiguous or polysemous lexemes, constructions, etc., that might be given another reading. The option of declaring the text ill-formed is undesirable under the principle of cooperation (see below). While backtracking, the reader encounters the lexeme "clubs" once again. The sense "stick" offers itself to the reader, who can then reprocess the second part of the text as a (very) elliptical sentence having roughly the form "[I

would use clubs on young people] only when kindness fails.” A more detailed account of this process can be found in ch. 3.

9.3 The Mention Account

An attempt to resolve the problem of the apparent non-cooperative nature of jokes has been made within the “mention theory.” “Mention theory” comes from an explanation of irony presented by Sperber and Wilson (1981), which assumes that any ironical utterance is, in fact, the mention of another utterance. Mention is intended in the philosophical sense which distinguishes between the use of a word (e.g., “the dog runs”), and its mention (e.g., “the previous example included the word ‘dog’”). Before dealing in some details with the issues, it is interesting to consider the reasons for proposing a mention theory of jokes.

In this writer’s opinion, there are two reasons to propose the mention account of jokes: these are the essentially commonsensical observations that jokes “work” in interactions between people (see above) and that (at least some) jokes convey some information. The observer is faced with two sets of contradictory facts: on the one hand, joking is a successful interpersonal and/or communicative exchange, and, on the other hand, joking violates the principle of cooperation, which accounts precisely for successful interpersonal communication. Since the principle of cooperation regulates both interactions⁵ and transmission of information, it stands to reason that one would want to claim that jokes do not violate the principle. If one acknowledges the presence of a violation of the principle of cooperation, accounting for the communicative aspects of jokes automatically becomes a problem.

The mention theory, by claiming that Grice’s maxims are not really violated, but that their violation is “enacted” by the narrator, explains the apparently paradoxical situation of a cooperative text that violates (at least one of) Grice’s maxims. The mention theory relieves the analyst from the task of having to justify the paradox of a successful interaction which violates the principles on which successful interactions are supposed to be based.

The motivation for the mention theory of jokes comes from a very real

⁵Grice and his followers oscillate between the claim that the CP accounts only for the transmission of information and the much broader claim that it accounts for all interaction. This author will return to these issues in Attardo (in preparation, b)

and important problem. As will be shown below, however, a different account of the communicative aspect of jokes is available and is ultimately to be preferred to the mention account.

Another important issue concerns the actual nature of the “mention” claimed by the theory. A “mention theory” may take different forms. Obviously enough, any version of a mention theory will have to distinguish between two types of utterances: mentioned and non-mentioned ones. Further, it must account for the observable surface differences (if any) between the two types of utterances. Intuitively, this account will refer to the (meta)linguistic devices used for mentioning the utterances.

Sperber and Wilson’s (1981) application to irony explicitly allows for “implicit mention,” i.e., mention of an utterance without any overt trace of the mentioning. This will be referred to as “zero-mention.” Yamaguchi (1988) on the contrary disallows zero-mention and requires that the mentioning be overt.

Thus, there are at least two possible versions of the mention theory. The Sperber and Wilson version is “stronger” in the sense that it allows greater leeway to the mentioning, since in principle any utterance can be seen as the (implicit) mention of another utterance. The Yamaguchi version is “weaker” since it constrains the realm of the admissible mentions to the utterances explicitly mentioned. Needless to say, no evaluative connotation of “strong” and “weak” should be read into the above formulations.

In what follows, the weak version and the strong version of the mention theory will be discussed.

9.3.1 The Weak Version of the Mention Theory

Yamaguchi (1988) sets out to present a “mention” account of the violation of the maxims in jokes, but his position is so well-edged and takes into account so many exceptions that it turns out to be a forceful statement as to the impossibility of a “weak” version of the mention theory.

Yamaguchi begins by showing how jokes violate Grice’s conversational maxims. He then proposes the “Character-Did-It” hypothesis, which follows:

- (I) One of the characters in the joke is free to violate the maxims of conversation in order to produce the essential ambiguity of the joke.

(II) The narrator must avoid violation of the maxims. When for some reason the maxims are to be violated in the narrator's own report of the event, either the narrator needs to pass on the responsibility for the violation to one of the characters, or at least to minimize the narrator's own responsibility for the violation in one way or another. (Yamaguchi 1988: 327)

It should be noted that Yamaguchi's own formulation of the hypothesis already concedes its own refutation: if the narrator needs to *minimize his/her responsibility for the violation*, then this implies that the narrator has violated the maxims! Yet, Yamaguchi's analyses should not be rejected *in toto* because they are a fine argument *against* the weak mention hypothesis. As Yamaguchi perspicuously notes, the violation of the maxims is hidden away in the text in a paradoxical attempt at dissimulation bound to failure, since the joke will inevitably foreground the violation so laboriously dissimulated in the text (on this aspect see Dolitsky (1983, 1992) and Dascal (1985)).

Yamaguchi lists three types of mention/dissimulation frames: direct speech, indirect speech, and narrative report.

Direct Speech

When a speaker (A) reports the utterance of another speaker (B), speaker (A) cannot be held responsible for the locutionary, illocutionary, and (perhaps) perlocutionary contents of the other speaker's utterance. Consider the following example: Johnny tells his mother that he did not eat the jam. He is in fact lying, and the punishment for that violation of the corresponding Gricean maxim is a spanking. Suppose now that Mary, Johnny's sister, tells to her father: "Johnny said 'I did not eat the jam'." Clearly she will not get spanked. This author hesitates to claim that repetition of a speaker's utterance is devoid of any indirect endorsement of its perlocutionary effects. If one were to say at the Republican convention "My neighbor, John Smith, thinks Republicans are untrustworthy," that would probably not go without consequences. The matter is complex, but does not pertain much to this discussion.⁶

Based on the fact that a report of someone else's speech act does not imply its endorsement and is not subject to the same rules, Yamaguchi quite

⁶It may be noted in passing that Sperber and Wilson seem to be making a more restricted claim:

correctly claims that when the teller of a joke quotes verbatim a statement uttered by one of the characters of the joke, the speaker is not violating the CP him/herself. It is worth clarifying that Yamaguchi does not claim that no violation has occurred, but only that the joke teller cannot be blamed directly for the violation. In other words, the weak mention hypothesis seems to hold perfectly in the case of explicit direct speech report.

Consider the following example:

- (103) Arthur: "Today on the school bus a little boy fell off his seat and everybody laughed except me."
 Teacher: "Who was the little boy?"
 Arthur: "Me." (Yamaguchi 1988: 326)

(103) is a very weak joke, apparently told by or meant for children. It is particularly adequate here for its simplicity and the clarity of the phenomena involved. In his first utterance, Arthur is violating the maxim of quantity by withholding information (namely, by using the generic "boy" when the much more specific "me" was available). Because of the verbatim nature of the report, emphasized by the quotation marks in the written text, the teller cannot be blamed for the violation of the maxim. As Yamaguchi puts it, "the character did it!" This claim will be discussed further below.

Indirect Speech

The case of indirect speech is somewhat less clear-cut. While the speaker (A) is still reporting some other speaker's (B) words, and so he/she cannot be held responsible for any violation of the CP that occurs in the reported

When an expression mentioned is a complete sentence, it does not have the illocutionary force it would standardly have in the context where it was used.
 Sperber and Wilson (1981: 303)

However, this is only an imprecise formulation (an *ignoratio elenchi*, to be specific). Certainly Sperber and Wilson do not want to claim that the mentioning speaker is committed to the locutionary content of the utterance he/she mentions. Consider the following example:

The linguist said that in 1957 Chomsky believed that 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously' was grammatical.

The linguist doing the mentioning is not committed to the claim that 'Colorless...' is grammatical.

speech act, A is responsible for the actual wording of the indirect speech act. This is the crux of the matter. Consider example (104):

- (104) The boss finally agreed to give Ken the afternoon off because he said his girlfriend was going to have a baby. Next morning, the boss said, “Was it a boy or a girl?”
 “Too soon to tell,” replied Ken. “We won’t know for another nine months.” (Yamaguchi 1988: 329)

The violation of the maxim of quality (at the moment of the utterance Ken does not know with certitude that his girlfriend will have a baby)⁷ and perhaps of quantity (Ken should have added “If we are lucky and she gets pregnant as a result of our sexual intercourse this afternoon”) is “rightly ascribed to the character” (Yamaguchi 1988: 329); however, the fact that the character has violated one or several maxims does not exempt the narrator from the same “fault.” Yamaguchi claims that “the narrator has nothing to do with the violation in indirect speech.” (Yamaguchi 1988: 329). But is it so? Consider again the example. The character’s violation of the maxims is encased in the narrator’s narrative frame “he [Ken] said...” The characters have obviously nothing to do with the narrator’s choice of the narrative frame. The narrator’s apparently innocent statement “he said” is in fact a violation of the maxim of quantity. At that point, the narrator knows that Ken is lying and deliberately withholds this crucial information from the reader. This is done knowingly, because if the narrator were to word cooperatively his narration as “Ken lied to the boss” the joke would lose its characteristics as a joke (and would become a humorous anecdote—see Oring (1989)).

As a result, it is necessary to reach the conclusion that the narrator is an accomplice in the violation of the cooperative principle in (104). By not exposing the character’s violation of the CP, the narrator violates it as well, albeit differently and less directly.

Narrative Reports

Yamaguchi begins his discussion of this third class of contexts of violation by acknowledging that “violations of Grice’s maxims in narrative reports,

⁷Not a violation of the maxim of relation as Yamaguchi (1988: 329) claims.

though rarely found, should be ascribed to the narrator” (1988: 329), which amounts to an explicit admission of the inadequacy of the weak mention hypothesis. He also notes that, although the narrator violates the maxims, he/she tries to hide the violation, either by taking the viewpoint of one of the characters in the narration (and so claiming a partial unaccountability), by skillfully avoiding the mention of crucial information, or by backgrounding it. Yamaguchi’s highlighting of this fact and the typology of the strategies employed by the speakers are a fine piece of scholarship, but they fall outside the scope of the present discussion; therefore, these issues will not be pursued further.

9.3.2 Evaluation of the Weak Mention Hypothesis

As discussed in the previous sections, the weak mention hypothesis is found to be inadequate in two out of three cases. This section will attempt to deal the weak mention hypothesis the final blow. If it can be shown that an hypothesis which does not rely on mention (“non-mention”) can account for the remaining case, as well as for those that the weak mention hypothesis could not account for, the weak mention hypothesis will have to be abandoned in favor of the new hypothesis because the latter is descriptively adequate, whereas the former is not.

The non-mention hypothesis would ascribe the violation of at least one maxim to the narrator. It has been shown above that in the case of maxim violations that occur in direct speech reports, no accountability can be claimed for the narrator, but, as seen in the indirect speech reports, the narrator is responsible for the narrative frame in which the reports are made. Precisely as the narrator is guilty in the indirect speech report of failing to mention the fact that the utterer of the reported speech act was violating the CP, the invisible narrator of a direct speech act report is guilty of not making him/herself present in the story to expose the violation of which he/she was aware at the time of the narration (since obviously the narrator has heard the joke before, or has thought of it). It turns out that even in the “best case” scenario for the weak mention theory, things do not work out the way the theory predicts.

A conclusion can be reached: the narrator is always guilty of violation of the CP: either because he/she directly violates one of the maxims or because he/she indirectly does so by not exposing the violation of which he/she is

aware.⁸

9.3.3 A “Strong Mention” Account of Jokes

In Sperber and Wilson’s (1981) view, an ironic utterance would involve a speaker “mentioning” an utterance, rather than uttering it and thereby endorsing its veracity. Accepting their thesis⁹ for the sake of argument, it could be similarly argued that jokes are not maxim-violating texts and that the violation of the maxim(s) is only “represented” (i.e., mentioned) and does not actually take place.

An adherent to this position would describe jokes as texts in which the speaker represents (mentions) one or several violations of Grice’s maxims, while maintaining him/herself in the safety of a metalinguistic status. In other words, a mention theory of jokes would claim that the violation does not take place at the same level at which the speaker places him/herself, as in the case of metalinguistic sentences containing semantically anomalous or ungrammatical sentences (e.g. “‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’ is not a sentence of English”). A normally unacceptable sentence becomes “acceptable” when put inside a metalinguistic statement about that sentence.

The theoretical advantage of this position is obvious: it allows the theorist to limit the scope of the violations of the maxims (i.e., non-cooperative behavior) to fictional accounts. This in turn, takes care of the paradox of jokes outlined above, because the acceptability of ungrammatical sentences within metalinguistic utterances does not threaten to destroy the grammar, and at the same level, the acceptability of maxim violations within mentioned sentences would not threaten the universal status of the inferential strategies in Grice.

Unfortunately, the position is problematic. Consider an example such as:

(105) How can you fit 4 elephants in a car? Two on the front seat, and two on the back seat.

⁸As any Catholic priest will tell you, sins of omission are as bad as the others, although they may be less entertaining.

⁹Irony remains outside of the scope of this book; however, the mention theory has been successfully applied to sarcasm (Haiman 1990), as well as other areas. It seems logical that a strong mention attempt at explaining away the paradox of jokes seen above could be pursued.

Taken literally, the text violates the maxim of quality since the answer to the riddle suggests the absurd idea of fitting the elephants in the car following a human pattern. The mention theory may still be salvaged by the claim that the text of the riddle is not used as a full-fledged utterance by the speaker, but that he/she is only mentioning it; however, this defense is awkward: there is no trace in the text of any “detachment” between the speaker and his/her utterance. Thus, the claim that the speaker is mentioning the utterance has to be introduced for the sole purpose of salvaging the theory.

Moreover, if the mention theory admits zero-mention (that is, mention without any surface trace of the operation), there is an immediate danger of an infinite regression: consider the sentence

(106) Honey, can you pass the salt?

Denoting by “S” sentence (106) and by “M” the “mention operator” the following example would be denoted by “M(S)”¹⁰

(107) “John said: ‘Honey, can you pass the salt?’ ”

Quite obviously if sentences can be zero-mentioned, any mentioned sentence can be zero-mentioned, including any zero-mentioned sentence, thus producing

$$(M_n(\dots(M_3(M_2(M_1(S))))))\dots) \text{ where } n = \infty$$

Infinite regression is not a problem *per se*, although it may lead to questionable interpretations, as see above. Even if the mention theory could resolve the problem of zero-mention and infinite regression, it can still be shown to be ultimately untenable.

Consider the example of puns. E.g.:

(108) (=54)

Why did the cookie cry?

Because his mother had been away for so long.

¹⁰We ignore the fact that the mentioning is done by John in (107). Since mention theory admits zero mention, it doesn’t matter if a sentence is mentioned openly as in (107) or covertly, i.e., when there is no surface trace of the fact that the sentence is mentioned. In other words, sentence (106) could be zero-mentioned.

When a speaker makes a pun, he/she pretends to behave as if two unrelated senses of a word (or of a paronym) are equivalent and interchangeable. This is a clear violation of the submaxim of manner "Avoid ambiguity." Guiraud (1976) introduced the notion of "defunctionalization" of the utterance to describe the kind of linguistic behavior involved in punning (see ch. 3), and in verbal humor in general. If the speaker is diverting the linguistic system from its normal function, he/she can hardly be believed to be "mentioning" utterances. The "metalinguistic" option could still be available for cases of "a-contextual" puns like the one mentioned above, since it could be claimed that they are narratives, and as such are "repeated." Conversational witticisms are much harder to take as "mentions" of utterances, from this point of view.

The decisive argument against the mention account of the violation of the maxims comes from another direction: second degree humor.

Eco (1979) analyzes a short story by the great French humorist Alphonse Allais entitled *Un Drame Bien Parisien*. The author constructs the story in a way that brings the reader to the conclusion that two masked characters are the two main characters of the story, only to be told in the end that the two masked individuals are not the two main characters, and moreover have nothing to do with the story. This text, which can only be described as a "practical joke" on the reader, is far from being atypical. So-called "second-degree" humor (see Attardo (1988), Lefort (1992)) consists of humorous texts which "fail to deliver" the expected punch line and become funny precisely because of the failure to do so. A famous example is

(109) "Have you heard the latest?"
 "No? Well, neither have I."

It is clear that in these texts the speaker can hardly be said to be "mentioning" the utterances, if he/she intends to "fool" his/her reader into believing that a "normal" BF text will follow, only to deceive his/her audience and deliver instead the unexpected punch line.

It follows that violations of Grice's maxims are responsible for at least some types of humorous texts, and even a strong mention account of jokes does not account for some of the data. On the basis of Occam's razor, the mention theory will therefore have to be rejected: both the mention theory and the non-mention theory can account naturally for a large part of

the data, but the mention theory has both theory internal problems (infinite regression) and descriptive weaknesses (second-degree humor). Since a satisfactory account of the phenomena at hand can be achieved without the mention theory, there is no need to postulate a mention theory of jokes.

It remains to be seen how speakers handle non-cooperative texts, such as jokes. Some issues raised by this apparently non-cooperative behavior are: 1) the nature of the communicative status of humorous texts, 2) the implicit/explicit balance, 3) the relative status of the maxims. These issues will be studied in the following sections.

9.4 The Communicative Status of Humorous Texts

The first step towards solving of the apparent puzzle of the processing of non-cooperative texts such as jokes will be to look at an alternative set of maxims proposed to account for the “non-cooperative” behavior of jokes. Next, attention will be given to socially-accepted activities performed “using” jokes. Finally, we will consider the status of the communicative mode of jokes.

9.4.1 A Hierarchy of CPs

If humorous texts violate the maxims, one would expect them to become non-cooperative and/or to lose meaningfulness; nevertheless, jokes are (usually) “understood” and are not perceived as lies (lying is non-cooperative) or as ill-formed or cryptic texts. To account for this fact, Raskin (1985) suggested that joking involves a different kind of communication mode, governed by a different set of maxims (see ch. 6). The apparent paradox is solved: after realizing he/she has been misled, the hearer will backtrack and will reinterpret the information provided in the text on the basis of the “humor” maxims, switch to the NBF mode of humor, and react accordingly (i.e., laughing, smiling, etc.).

This claim, of remarkable theoretical importance, opened the way to the study of NBF modes of communication (see Raskin (1992)). In practice, it establishes a hierarchy of CPs. The lowest common denominator is the original CP, but then a humor-CP is introduced which can accommodate the original CP, but can also allow violations of the CP as long as they are

eventually redeemed by an ulterior humorous intent. Other CPs seem to exist, as well as a “meta-CP” which regulates violations to the CP. Further discussion of these issues will be pursued elsewhere (Attardo forthcoming, b). It should be emphasized that this claim is different from Grice’s “flouting” of the maxims: one flouts a maxim when one follows another maxim; here one violates a maxim because one follows a different CP.

It is necessary, then, to distinguish between a first reading of the joke, in which the reader notices the violation of Grice’s maxims, and a second reading in which the reader, having switched to the NBF mode of humor, reinterprets the text as a joke, and so accepts strange and unrealistic events (“suspension of disbelief”), activates particular stereotypes, and in general “tunes in” to the idiosyncrasies of the NBF mode of humor.

Raskin hypothesized an “extended form of bona fide communication” incorporating humor (and governed by both Grice’s maxims and the “humor maxims”). It has been noted (Raskin 1985) that after a hearer experiences an apparent failure to reconcile utterances with his/her own belief system, he/she engages the default communicative mode of “joking.” If the speaker is faced with an utterance whose contents he/she cannot reconcile with his/her knowledge of the world, the speaker will try to assimilate it, either by including the new information in his/her world representation or by refusing the conflicting information status of “reliable” knowledge. The joking mode (“Are you kidding?”) seems to be the first option, which reflects the premise that joking is more socially acceptable than lying or not making sense (see Raskin 1985:104). From the foregoing discussion, it should be clear that 1) speakers use humorous texts cooperatively (thus corroborating Raskin’s thesis), but also 2) they rely on the “subversion” of the maxims to achieve socially desirable effects. Consider, for instance, the possibility of “backing out” of an utterance, by claiming that one “did not really mean it” (i.e., that one was infringing the quality maxim).

It seems also that a radical dichotomy between “serious” BF use of language and “humorous” NBF cannot be maintained in reality. Grice’s hypothesized speaker, totally committed to the truth and relevance of his/her utterances, is a useful abstraction, but should be considered only as such. In reality, speakers engaged in everyday communication use humorous remarks that the hearers decode, interpret as such, and use along with other information to build their vision of the communicative context.

The consequences of this recognition—that communication which vio-

lates the maxims can still be “cooperative”—are far ranging. Any attempt to characterize linguistic interaction will have to incorporate rules and inferential mechanisms to handle humorous violations of the CP.

9.4.2 Jokes Convey Information

What is then the communicative status of jokes? As has been shown, jokes involve the violation of one (or more) maxims in the first reading. Jokes have, however, been shown to perform various communicative functions; for example, Drew (1987) analyzed reactions to humorous teasing and found that many speakers take teasing seriously, at face value, clearly showing that they assume that the utterer of the tease is communicating effectively (a more detailed discussion will be found in 10.4.1). Mulkay (1988) discusses several “uses” of joking (including sociological accounts of the use of humor among the members of a staff hospital and in a restaurant as a method of “picking up” members of the opposite sex); he concludes that by using humorous utterances, the speakers can avoid committing themselves too strongly to what they say. Jefferson (1984) analyzes narratives relating problematic situations and finds that speakers intersperse humorous remarks in their narratives to show that “they can take it.” These issues will be discussed more at length in ch. 10.

Zhao (1988) has shown that jokes can convey relevant “BF” information as, for example, in the case of jokes about an unfamiliar situation/culture. They do so not by virtue of what they state, but by virtue of their presuppositional basis. Consider the following non-humorous example:

(110) Kennedy’s killer was not part of a CIA plot.

Assume for the sake of the argument that (110) is literally false—that is, Oswald did not act alone and was part of a CIA plot. Even if false, and thus violating the maxim of quality, (110) conveys information beyond the existential presupposition of all participants, namely that a) Kennedy died, b) his death was not accidental, c) his death was materially caused by (at least) one person, d) that someone has made or might make the claim that he was part of a CIA plot, e) that the CIA may “plot” under certain circumstances. On the basis of this fact, it is easy to see how a joke such as (111) could inform the readers about the actual situation in the Soviet Union while still violating the principle of cooperation:

- (111) “Excuse me! Where did you get the toilet tissue?” “Oh, this is used, my own —I’m simply taking it home from the cleaners.” (Raskin 1985: 243)

The behavior of the second speaker is absurd, as it is impossible to have one’s toilet tissue cleaned. Yet, the text presupposes that toilet tissue was scarce in the USSR, and the reader who was not aware of this fact can add it to his/her knowledge base.

Now that the communicative status of jokes and other humorous types of texts has been assessed, it is possible to consider the “implicit” dimension of jokes in more detail.

9.5 The Importance of the Implicit in Jokes

It has been frequently noted that some part of the information in jokes must be left implicit. Explication of the mechanisms involved in the humorous effect of the text results in the destruction of the humorous effect: i.e., a joke loses its humor when the joke teller explains the punch line. After claiming that all jokes involve, among other mechanisms, the violation of a “rule,” (see ch. 5), Eco (1981) notes that the rule must be left implicit. Mizzau (1982; see 5.1.3, Dolitsky (1983, 1992) and Jablonski (1991) mention that the way in which the information in a joke is organized is relevant to the “structure” of the joke—that is, not every formulation of the information contained in the joke text (and inferrable from it) will be considered a successful joke. It is precisely because part of the information is present only in the implicit part of the text that the joke acquires one of its characteristics. In other words, for the joke to “function” as such, some information must be left unsaid: i.e., Grice’s maxim of quantity must be violated.

The modality of this delicate explicit/implicit equilibrium has yet to be explored fully. A few preliminary remarks will serve the purpose of delimiting the range of the problems involved.

It has been noted that the resolution of incongruity in humor involves mental expenditure (see, for instance, Freud (1905)), so it is clear that the hearer of a joke must infer some implicit information, or perform some cognitive task.

Another well-known requirement of the punch line of a joke is that it should come “unexpectedly” (this is commonly referred to as the “surprise”

theory of humor). Once one takes into consideration such notions as surprise or expectedness, it becomes necessary to refer to the linear aspect of the text of the joke (see ch. 2). Since the decoding of the text of the joke is a temporally structured activity in which the various elements are necessarily introduced in a linear order, it is necessary to avoid the introduction of the “second script” in a text engaged in actualizing the first one and give away the punch line early, thus violating the need for surprise. This fact seems to account for the often noted but scarcely explored fact that the punch line of the joke comes towards the end of the text.¹¹

The requirement that the presence of the second sense not be introduced early in the text applies not only to explicit mentions of elements of the second script, but also to any related element which could enable the hearer’s actualization of the script via inferential channels. This is clearly connected to the concept of “manifestness” introduced by Sperber and Wilson (1986) for all the contextual information which can be brought into the focus of the speaker’s attention. In this terminology, the text of the joke must render non-manifest the presence (or the future presence) of an alternative script.

Consider the following example:

(112) A young lady was talking to the doctor who had operated her. “Do you think the scar will show?” she asked. “That will be entirely up to you,” he said.

The joke depends on the passage from the MEDICAL script to the NUDITY script. The allusion to nudity cannot be topicalized before the end of the text; otherwise, the joke would lose its effectiveness. If the first sentence were substituted by “A young nudist lady...” the punch line would not only lose its suddenness, but would probably lose its evocative side (nudity implies sex).

The quantity maxim for jokes (see ch. 6): “Give as much information as is necessary for the joke” can now be viewed as an informal algorithm for the computation of the quantity of information to be left implicit.

¹¹The reader will recall the demonstration, in ch. 2, that the punch line must occur finally in the text, and that the exceptions can be predicted fairly accurately.

9.6 Relative Position of the Maxims

In this section, evidence for a hierarchical organization of the maxims will be presented, first from an empirical analysis, and then on theoretical grounds.

In an analysis of some 243 jokes extracted from a corpus of 6500, Van Raemdonck (1986, 1991) found that all the jokes violated the maxim of relevance while only some violated another maxim as well (Van Raemdonck 1986: 62-63); furthermore, the violations were interdependent. Although the figures are not claimed to be statistically reliable, they still retain interest as a well-grounded example.

These results seem to suggest that when any of the other three maxims is violated in a joke, the maxim of relevance is necessarily violated as well. If the speaker does not believe in the truth of what he/she is saying, the content of the utterance can hardly be expected to be relevant (though the speaker could be lying, thus producing a relevant but non-cooperative utterance; but, then, this would not qualify as a joke). If the speaker does not provide enough information (or provides too much information), what he/she says will not be relevant, either because his/her information will fail to cover some of the relevant issues or because the information will cover issues which are not relevant. If the speaker is obscure or ambiguous, his/her contribution will not be relevant since the hearer will not be able to evaluate whether the information provided is "to the point." Thus, it seems that the maxim of relevance subsumes the other three; in order to be relevant, one must first be sincere, orderly, and exhaustive.

It should be recalled now that the "obligatory violation of the maxim of quantity" was shown to be the underlying motivation for the presence of implicit information in the text of a joke. If all jokes must abide by the NBF quantity maxim (i.e., must violate Grice's maxim of quantity by not giving enough information), there seems to be evidence for a maxim of quantity at the same level of the super-maxim of relevance. The speaker is required, per Grice's maxims, to provide "enough" information for the text to be processed without problematic falls into ambiguity (cf. (100)). Similarly, the speaker is supposed to provide collateral information that would prevent the sudden introduction of an unexpected second sense or, in other words, to set communication on a "safe" base of information which will clearly delimit the "topic" of the interaction and thus prevent a premature switch in the topic of a text like (101) where the topic switches from politics to a "Dan

Quayle" slur.

We are thus faced with two claims for "underlying" maxims: relevance and quantity. It is interesting to note that both positions have been claimed by independent research. Sperber and Wilson (1986) propose an underlying super-maxim of relevance, while Horn (1984) proposes two "principles" "Q" and "R" to "evoke," *à la* Chomsky, Grice's maxims of quantity and relevance. This is not the place to go into the details of an evaluation of both proposals, but it may be noted that since both quantity and relevance have been noted to be necessarily infringed upon in a joke, Horn's dualism seems to be better supported by the facts about joke-texts.

This discussion suggests that the violation of maxims in jokes provides an independently-motivated external element of confirmation to the so-called "relevance" theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986) and to the "revised" maxims proposed by Horn (1984), both of which grant to the maxim of relevance (and of quantity) a higher status than the original Gricean text.¹²

9.7 Summary

The cooperative aspects of humor as a NBF mode of communication have been explored, as well as the need for a revision and extension of the idealized "BF" mode of communication. It has also been shown that jokes and other kinds of humorous texts can yield information both on the principles of construction of texts which violate the maxims to exploit the deception of the hearer's expectations, and on the hierarchical organization of the maxims.

¹²This should not be construed as acceptance *in toto* of the relevance theory, or of Horn's claims. See Attardo (forthcoming b) for further discussion.