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A Manifestation of Stereotypes in Jokes: Relevance Theory

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Abstract:

Human beings are endowed with language which is a unique faculty that functions as a tool for communication. Language enables the creation and expression of jokes. This study holds that jokes are never meant merely for amusement but are purposed to implicitly perform communicative functions not attained by explicit expressions, such as, amusing, entertaining, relieving tension, ridiculing, criticizing and exposing evil. Jokes can also be used to warn the adulterous, the greedy, gluttons, the stingy and those who commit incest. In this study, the manifestation of stereotypes in jokes was the main focus. The study looked at jokes in form of anecdotes. Jokes rely on stereotypes in order to attain punchline. This is because generalizations are linked to familiar expected behaviours. Stereotypes are racially, culturally and ethnically based. A number of studies have been carried out on jokes but so far, no linguistic study in Kenya exists on the manifestation of stereotypes in jokes. This study takes a pragmatic approach in linguistics which deals with the interpretation of utterances. Qualitative descriptive research design was employed in the study. The main objective of this study was to find out the role played by stereotypes in jokes. Relevance Theory propagated by Daniel Sperber and Deidre Wilson was used to analyse and interpret the data. It is hoped that the results of this study will make a contribution semantics and pragmatics, and add knowledge to the language family.

Keywords: Jokes, stereotypes, relevance theory, punchline, implicit, explicit, anecdotes, incest and pragmatics

1. Introduction

This study sets out to explore jokes that are manifested with stereotypes. In today's world, there is increasing interest in problems of cross-cultural communication. In this regard, researchers are beginning to pay attention to components with cultural perspective such as stereotypes and jokes in a linguistic perspective. Stereotypes and jokes are utterances that are given a pragmatic analysis. Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that deals with language in use and the contexts in which it is used, such as, taking of turns in conversation and how utterances are interpreted.

Most jokes in form of anecdotes reflect stereotypes and attitudes within groups of people. Individuals from different ethnic communities in Kenya and beyond have in mind stereotypes of how cultural practices of other groups of people look like. Within a cultural group of people or society, there are stereotypes of their own (in group). At the same time a community (in group) formulates stereotypes about other groups (out group) Brewer, (2001).

Since humour is an inevitable part of human life, it is a fundamental aspect of language. According to Chiaro (1992), humour stands out as one of the few attributes that widely apply to all people and all languages globally. Jokes consist of playing or manipulation of language. The adequate interpretation of humour in many cases depends on decoding the real meaning hiding behind contextual actualization of words or phrases that sound the same but have different meanings. Humour means understanding, not only the language and words but their use, meaning, subtle nuances, the underlying culture, implications and unwritten messages.

Language is a very common tool used to create humorous situations. Humour is a perception that enables individuals to experience joy even in times of sadness. Humour elicited from jokes is associated more with people, even though the more intelligent animals with basic ability respond to humour (Yus, F., 2008). A joke is an organized group of utterances that work in harmony having a humorous climax. The listener is amused by the speaker, marking the climax of the joke. Jokes are spoken or written with an intention of eliciting humour.

Jokes come in different forms such as single word, question and answer, sarcasm, irony and word play. Jokes are used for entertaining friends and on lookers. According to Ritchie (2004), a joke is a short text for a certain group with the aim of producing reactions that amuse. Deaux, (1996) posits that, a joke is a linguistic text that communicates or expresses semantic meaning in spoken or written form. Jokes are not only comical in nature but also deal with serious matters such as sex, politics and death (Norrick, 2001).

1.1. Jokes, Stereotypes and Anecdotes

Jokes play a very important role in creating stereotypes. Stereotypes are generalizations that people make about a group of people with regard to observations of a few members belonging to the group (Samover, 2010). They are cognitive structures with the knowledge of the perceiver, expectancies and beliefs about groups of people. Stereotypes are based on culture, race and ethnicity and very often, they are incorrect. For instance if we say, 'All Kikuyus are thieves,' this is a

stereotype (generalization) of Kikuyus. It is not the racial, social or ethnic group label which is the stereotype but the qualities we presume that every individual of the group displays.

The concept of stereotype is discussed in linguistics, psychology, ethnography, sociology and cognitive science. Each of the above mentioned areas has their own idea of the stereotype phenomenon. Stereotypes based on how a group of people behave are discussed within a sub-group of social stereotypes. Generalized ideas about the characteristics of a community or ethnic group are done within cultural stereotyping. Jokes (humour) are shaped under the umbrella of stereotypes.

Stereotypes carry a negative tone. A group of people are assigned traits, whether positive or negative (Lizardo, 2006). On listening to a joke, the hearer or receiver immediately thinks of certain characteristics associated with his or her stereotyped images, hence forming expectations. Jokes make use of stereotypes and they are full of humour (Nelson, 2009). Stereotypes can be observed in various types social groups' practices, such as the media and social media such as facebook, twitter etc. Stereotyping practices serve to establish social beliefs about others.

Just like any other humorous texts, anecdotes have mechanisms to elicit humour. Anecdotes are part and parcel of precedent texts familiar to members of a linguistic and cultural group. The use of anecdotes is in relation to the world of knowledge system. According to researchers of the anecdote genre, there are two types of anecdotes basing on the ethnic group: anecdotes that tell about the representatives of an ethnic group and anecdotes that compare representatives of different cultures. In the second category, it is normal to attribute traits that lack a clear evaluative character to individuals who represent other groups (out groups).

Cobos (1997), researched on *The Pragmatics of Humorous Interpretations: A Relevance-Theoretic Approach*. The aim of the research was to provide a pragmatic account of how humorous discourse is interpreted within the cognitive framework of Relevance Theory. The researcher argued that being humorous is not a property of texts, but of the type of mental representations that hearers are led to entertain during their processing, and the specific way in which these representations are manipulated.

One of the objectives was to provide a psychologically plausible explanation of how humorous effects are created and understood in language, and to relate it to philosophical views of humour. This study is significant to this paper in the sense that it deals with the interpretation of humorous texts using relevance theory. It gives an insight in which the interpretation of the humorous texts in this paper is done.

Kabiru (2012) researched on a *Relevance Theoretic Approach to Gikuyu Jokes*. The study investigated the interpretation of Kikuyu jokes under the guidance of Relevance theory and the complimentary theory of Incongruity. The study indicated that, influenced by the cognitive tendency in the first phase of appreciation of Kikuyu jokes, the audience construct an interpretation to the utterance. The punchline makes them choose a new context to construct the proper interpretation. As a result, humour effect is realized. Incongruity is the key point of humour production. The study held that Kikuyu jokes are never produced merely for the sake of amusement but often implicitly perform some communicative functions not achievable by explicit expressions such as criticizing and exposing evil, counter-attacking or self-defending, attacking or ridiculing. From the study the glamour of Kikuyu language will be greatly valued and cherished. Moreover, the study offers some guidance for readers to appreciate Kikuyu jokes. This study is instrumental to this paper in the sense that it provides some arguments on jokes and their interpretations from relevance theory perspective, a theoretical framework employed by the current study.

Situma (2013) researched on *Humorous Texts: Pragmatic Analysis of Lubukusu Jokes*. The study analysed Lubukusu verbal jokes using Relevance Theory. It discussed how Relevance Theory is used to analyse Lubukusu jokes; established the role played by ambiguity in jokes in eliciting humour; and investigated the concept of incongruity in relation to the elucidation of Lubukusu jokes. The study too provides vital arguments on relevance theory and jokes which is beneficial to the current study.

Skyrud (2016) conducted a research on *An Experiment on the Effects of Gender Stereotypes on the Judgment of Leadership Competence*. The aim of the study was to find out if the maritime industry judge leadership competence based on gender stereotypes. The questionnaire was designed based on the Goldberg paradigm where the independent variables were male, female, and gender neutral leaders. 247 people from the maritime industry participated in the research. None of the hypotheses showed any significant results. Meaning that there was no reliable evidence to suggest whether the maritime industry does or does not judge leadership competence based on gender stereotypes. A section of this study also discusses gender stereotypes.

This paper examines stereotypes manifested in jokes. There have been studies concerning jokes in Kenya but little has been done on humour from a linguistic perspective. This paper focuses on the manifestation of stereotypes from a linguistic point of view. Humour is part and parcel of an individual's life. Jokes are used by people as a way of expressing emotions. Jokes entertain, warn against misdemeanour and spice up communication. The current study aims to analyse jokes from a linguistic perspective by looking at anecdotes and. A punchline is the end product of a joke, thus, without it, a joke will become flat. The study on jokes has not received as much linguistic consideration as they deserve in view of the role they play in human life.

2. Methodology

The data for this study was obtained from the Internet, Facebook, WhatsApp messages, radio stations, namely; 'Mulembe,' 'Kameme,' 'Kass' and West FM. These sources are rich in ethnic jokes. A master list was created from the collected samples of jokes and every collected joke was assigned an entry and eventually the researchers settled on jokes

suitable for the study. The Internet was preferred because it is presumably easily accessible. Moreover, jokes on the Internet can be evaluated and even ranked by the participants.

The researchers used qualitative research techniques in conducting this study because data was in form of numbers and not statistics. The approach taken entailed discussions and analysis due to the fact that the research was not a controlled phenomenon.

3. Theoretical Framework

Joking is a communicative process between conversers – those who address and those that are addressed. Thus, Relevance Theory being a cognitive approach to communication was appropriate for this study. The theory focuses on the significance of intention in every communicative act. According to this Framework, communication is considered as an apparent inferential action which adjusts in parallel, the overt content of expressions, the principles implicated, the conclusion arrived at and the background information necessary for attaining them.

This theory is a cognitive theory of human communication. The supposition of the theory is that humanity is gifted with a naturally entrenched capacity to exploit the relevance of inbound stimuli which include utterances and other communicative behaviour. Wilson (2004) summarises Relevance Theory as follows:

- The decoded meaning of an utterance is compatible with a number of different interpretations in the same context
- The interpretations are graded in terms of accessibility
- Listeners rely on a powerful criterion when selecting the most appropriate interpretation and
- This criterion makes it possible to select one interpretation among the possible interpretations to the extent that when a first interpretation is considered, the hearer will stop at this point

This aids in explaining how punchline is achieved in a joke.

The Relevance Theory has four components:

3.1. Relevance and Cognition

It is assumed that expressions raise expectations of relevance because the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition

3.2. The Cognitive Principle of Relevance

People's cognition tends to be geared towards maximization of relevance

3.3. The Communicative Principle of Relevance

Communicated information guarantees some relevance

3.4. Relevance-guided Comprehension Procedure

In this procedure;

- The hearer should take the decided linguistic meaning
- Follow the path of least effort
- Then enrich it at the explicit level
- And finally complement it at the implicit level until the resulting interpretation meets his/her expectation of relevance

4. Results and Discussion

Jokes in this study were analysed basing on one mapping; anecdotes. Anecdotes are very short stories that are important to the topic at hand. They add personal knowledge or experience to the subject. These are devices which are common and very effective. Anecdotes are stories from personal and individuals experience that people use for entertaining and making a point during conversations (Jones, 2001). According to Wright (1995), anecdotes often elicit happiness, sadness, excitement, embarrassment, amusement and disappointment. They are intuitions into people's frailties and abilities that could not be shown clearly any other way.

In this study, jokes that stereotype were analysed as follows:

4.1. (J 1) A Kikuyu Man in a Hospital Ward

This joke is about a Kikuyu man known as Njoroge. He got involved in a road accident while driving. He was taken to hospital in critical condition. On regaining consciousness, he engaged the nurse in the following conversation:

Nurse: Goodness! You are awake. You were involved in a serious car crash

Njoroge: What! My RANGE ROVER! How is it?

Nurse: Take it easy and calm down because your condition is terrible right now

Njoroge: Is my family aware of what happened to me?

Nurse: Yes, they are even here to see you

Njoroge: Muthoni, are you here?

Muthoni: Yes my husband. I will never abandon you

Njoroge: My son Gitonga, are you also here to see me?

Gitonga: I am here dad and I love you so much

Njoroge: I am finished! If all of you are here, then who is at the hardware shop?

This joke stereotypes men from the Kikuyu community as being money minded such that even when hospitalized, Njoroge thinks about his hardware shop. The inference in this joke is that Njoroge is a wealthy man. This is shown by the world of knowledge about him owing a hardware shop and a Range Rover. He is only but worried about his hardware shop and the losses he is making because of the shop staying closed. Instead of Njoroge worrying about his health, he worries about his vehicle which can be replaced but his limbs cannot be replaced. The implicated conclusion about this stereotype joke is that Kikuyu men like money more than anything else including their lives.

4.2. (J 2)

The following joke is about the Luhya people who are assumed to have difficulties in the pronunciation Kiswahili words. A Luhya parent gave his class 4 child a spelling exercise and marked the following words correct:

- Ukali
- Jai
- Gugu
- Gegi
- Mjusi
- Jabati

The humour derived in the joke is realized through the problem of pronunciation of Kiswahili words among the Luhya people. The inference drawn from this joke that some members of the Luhya community have problems in articulating a number of sounds in Kiswahili words;

GLOSS	KISWAHILI	WRONG PRONUNCIATION
Ugali	Ugali	Ukali
Tea	Chai	Jai
Chicken	Kuku	Gugu
Chapati	Chapati	Jabati
Soup	Mchuzi	Mjusi
Cake	Keki	Gegi

Table 1

In joke 2, the Luhya people use voiceless velar plosive [k] instead of voiced velar plosive [g] when articulating the word ugali. The wrong pronunciation of [g] for [k] further brings about the issue of minimal pairs. When the Luhya people use phoneme [g] and [k] interchangeably, the meaning of the word ugali, changes from food to *ukali*(harshness). In the word *jai* instead of chai (tea), sound [j], a voiced palatal approximant is used instead of the affricate [tʃ]. The humour in this stereotype joke comes about when a person who is proficient in Kiswahili reads the mispronounced words.

4.3. (J 3) Nyeri Woman

A driver of a public service vehicle is overheard saying this to his conductor:

'Conductor, be faster. My wife is from Nyeri.'

Nyeri which is in Central Kenya has Kikuyu people living there. In this joke, Njeri represents all Kikuyu women from Nyeri who are known to be harsh and batter their husbands. This joke is a metonymy. The inference drawn in this joke is that Nyeri women are no nonsense and beat up their husbands, thus when the driver asks the conductor not to waste time because he knows that any provocation towards these women will be met with 'beatings.' In conclusion, the man does not want to arrive home late in order to avoid being beaten. Nyeri women are stereotyped as harsh. This stereotype serves as a warning, because marrying a Kikuyu man from Nyeri means one is in trouble as long as the marriage lasts.

4.4.(J 4) 85 Year Old Man

An 85 year old man marries a 20 year old and a couple of weeks after, she becomes pregnant. The man visits a doctor to seek for explanation how this could have happened. The doctor then told him a story about an 85 year old man he knew. 'This man went hunting every hunting season and never missed an event. One time, he got ready to go hunting and grabbed an umbrella instead of his rifle. He got to the bush and saw an antelope. He pulled up the umbrella and said, 'pow', 'pow' and the antelope fell dead.' The doctor asked the 85 year old man what he thought happened to the antelope. The old man said, 'I think someone else shot the antelope.'

While it is in the world of knowledge that men sire children, the inference in joke 4 is that it is almost impossible for an 85 year old man to make a woman pregnant. The old man is compared to the umbrella in the joke which cannot be used to shoot and kill the antelope. The implicature in this joke is that a gun – a man, much younger than the 85 year old made the 20 year old pregnant. This joke stereotypes very old men as those who cannot sexually satisfy women besides being unable to make them pregnant.

4.5. (J 5) Pathologist Kenya

Two dead bodies turn up at the mortuary with big smiles on their faces. After autopsies, the pathologist calls the police boss.

Pathologist: 'The first body is for a Kamba man, who died while having sex. The second body is for a Luhya man who died from constipation after a very heavy meal of ugali and chicken.'

This joke stereotypes Luhya men as those who consume large amounts of food, especially ugali served with chicken. On the other hand, it also stereotypes Kamba men as those who like sexual escapades. The incongruity of this joke lies in the violation of the world of knowledge that food kills instead of providing energy for good health and sex is supposed to give pleasure but not to kill. The implicature in this joke is that the Luhya and Kamba gluttons and like sex, is entertained. The humorous effect is achieved through strengthening of the stereotype that Luyas are gluttons and Kamba people like sex a lot.

4.6. (J 6)

A patient was hospitalised suffering from brain damage. His family gathered to hear what the doctor had to say. The doctor told them that the patient was in critical condition and required urgent brain transplant. He went on further to inform them that it was to be an experimental procedure which could work, although brains are very expensive and they will have to pay the cost themselves. 'Well, how much does a brain cost?' the relatives asked. 'Male brain costs shs. 600,000 and the female brain costs shs. 300,000.' The patient's daughter was not satisfied and asked, 'why the difference in price between the male brains and female brains?' 'This is a standard practice,' said the doctor. 'Women's brains have to be marked down, because they have actually been used.'

This joke is based on folk presupposition, namely the gendered stereotype frequently deployed in jokes, that women's brains are smaller or less efficient compared to the men's brains. The pragmatic ambiguity in this joke inheres in the doctor's statement on the prices of brains. The punchline sheds light on why women's brains are cheaper.

4.7. (J 7) Bukusu Men

Everyone has heard about Bukusu men. They are intimidated by the modern woman and prefer marrying girls from the village who are happy to stay at home. If one gets married to the man, she should be ready to take care of his children from his teenage times. Unlike many men, you can readily tell if a Bukusu man is unfaithful. If he has not brought a child from an illicit affair in five years, then relax, the man is an angel. And if one does not want to have a live-in mother-in-law, then should learn to cook ugali and mrenda before marrying this man. If you cook for him rice for supper, he will be waiting for dinner.

In joke 7, Bukusu men are portrayed as those without ambitions. They are known to be contented with the little they have and that is why they are never interested in modern women, preferring the local ones back in the village. They are specific with matters concerning diet. The implicated conclusion is that men from this sub-tribe of Luhya community are rigid to change. Their ideal diet is ugali and *mrenda*, and not ready to embrace delicacies such as rice and '*githeri*' for supper. That, they still believe in giving birth to many children. According to them, children belong to the father. Therefore a Bukusu man will go after and bring back all the children he gets out of wedlock.

4.8. (J 8) Otieno and Njuguna

- When Njuguna buys a plot and wants to construct, Otieno is the architect
- When Njuguna constructs rental houses, Otieno is the tenant
- When Njuguna is sick, Otieno is the doctor
- When Kamau owns a public service vehicle, Otieno is the mechanic
- When Otieno uproots the railway line, Njuguna is a scrap metal dealer

And life is like that, whereby these two cannot do without each other. Both of them prepare tea using Uhuru's milk and cook using Raila's gas. 'Embrace peace, we need each other.'

Although on a light note, this joke looks at the general relationship between the larger Kikuyu and Luo communities. The inference in this joke is that members of these two communities cannot do without each other despite the political conflicts witnessed since independence. The Kikuyus are stereotyped as business oriented and economic investors. On the other hand, Luos are portrayed as intellectuals who are utilized by the Kikuyus to realise their real estate ambitions, check on their health and maintenance of their motor vehicles. The last part of this joke brings in the aspect of incongruity in the sense that Luos are stereotyped as violent with regard to politics. It is alleged that when they are annoyed by election results, they resort to violence by even uprooting the railway line. As they vandalise the railway line, the Kikuyus take advantage by buying and selling of scrap metal. This is further strengthened by the fact that, their leaders, Uhuru and Raila, own businesses that benefit one another. They Uhuru and Raila supply milk and cooking gas respectively to Kenyans. The lesson that Kikuyus, Luos and Kenyans by large, we cannot do without friends and neighbours, and that we should learn from this joke that peace is important and it should be embraced.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study proved that stereotypes are manifested in jokes. According to the study, jokes in Kenya are tailored towards targeting some linguistic groups and representing them in portraying them in either good or bad light. Jokes are produced using specific aspects on linguistic groups such as economic status, cultural beliefs and

practices, and religious believes as a source of their punchlines. In this study, it has come out vividly that language plays a major role in the construction of jokes and how they are interpreted. The manipulation of language in terms of anecdotes adds flavour to jokes. Lastly, stereotypes and jokes have moral lessons besides provoking laughter and amusement.

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