

## THE SUBTLETY OF COMIC REGISTER IN PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** *Humour is a discursive strategy with huge persuasive potential, which values the interlocutor. The use of comic register is not only proof of the communicator's intelligence, but also a form of interlocutor consideration, who is credited from the beginning with a sense of humour. Using comicality in persuasive communication is an option as tempting as it is risky, because not everyone tastes the same kind of humour. In this article we shall try to reveal the specifics of the comic register in discursive strategies and propose a humour typology, based on five relevant criteria: thematic, attitudinal, intentional, axiological and narrative, starting from the attributes that accompany the noun "humour" in various communication situations.*

**Keywords:** *Persuasive Communication; Comic Register.*

### The comic register

The **comic register** is a human-specific way of communication. Animals play, but do not amuse themselves. Humour means secondary decoding of meaning, beyond denotation, it means reasoning and understanding, beyond concrete meaning. Amusement is associated with optimism and increased receptivity. Let us start with a finding: when we are happy, we notice more of what is going on around us, we are more permissive and more tolerant, we are willing to accept new ideas, suggestions and proposals from others. When we are happy, we are more willing to shop around, change our mind and behaviour. Relaxed and cheerful people are kinder and more open to noticing their own needs and those of others. Studies have shown that there is a relationship between good mood and empathy. Therefore, anyone who wants to achieve their goal of communication, to influence their interlocutor to follow suggestions, will take advantage of the others' good mood or will try to induce the state of permissiveness generated by optimism.

We could claim that there are, in general, three major registers of discourse, depending on the relation to reality: *sober*, *idyllic* and *comic*. The **sober register** seeks to reproduce reality as it can be observed, so the discourse will focus on the informational aspect and will rely on the observance of current logic. The **idyllic register** seeks to express a desirable universe, derived from observable reality, a universe from which all areas of shadows and tensions are deliberately omitted. In this sense, the idyllic register applies a "pink" filter to reality, altering immutable characteristics of reality, such as: objectivity, dynamics, conflict, etc., which explains the seduction potential of this register. On the contrary, the **comic register** defies reality, criticizes it, and makes fun of its imperfections and malfunctions. With indulgence or malice, the comic register applies an X-ray filter to reality. Just as radiography goes beyond surface, the comic register captures, beyond appearances, the "crooked" ("sick") aspects of reality, which it socially sanctions by laughter (and not through criticism, vehemence, incrimination or negativity). Both the idyllic and the comic registers oppose the

objective way of rendering reality, but each uses its own means of altering observable reality, depending on the purpose of communication.

**Humour** is a form of communication (Räwel 2005) that produces laughter by presenting reality "against the grain", with associations of unique ideas and twists of the situation, appealing to lateral thinking (De Bono 2011), different from the current logic of daily routine. (Etymology is bizarre: The term comes from the Latin *humor* = *moisture*, *humidity* (Umor, (umor.ro) n.d.). Usually, humour refers to contexts in which the interlocutors are not involved situationally and emotionally, but there is also the situation when we make fun of trouble and we laugh at ourselves. The way humour is perceived depends on the social role of the recipient, the era and society to which it belongs, the traditions, culture and history of a people. "Humour is considered a spiritual solution to a reality without a practical solution." (Morar 2008)

### Stylistic variations of humour

In what follows, we shall propose a typology, starting from the adjectives that collocate with "*humour*" in common communication situations. In compiling the model, we have formulated relevant criteria that generate series of mutually exclusive terms or represent gradations of the same aspect, showing that humour can be simultaneously described using all the stated aspects. Several distinctions have been made in the literature; there are types of comicality: *situational* comic, *language* and *character* comic, and there are intricacies of humour that we can grasp.

Humour can come in different forms. Its classification should start from terms encountered in everyday language that collocate with "*humor*", i.e. *black*, *dark*, *crazy*, *bitter*, *failed*, *sick*, *macabre*, *quirky*, *surreal*, *wacky*, *zany*, *bawdy*, *gentle*, *subtle*, *dry*, *ironic*, *sacastic*, *self-deprecating*, *unintentional*, *good*, *great*, *refined*, etc.

This inventory is not intended to be exhaustive, but we can see several oxymoronic combinations which tell us how humour is in most cases. We can also notice that the occurrence of positive qualifiers is obviously lower. It is logical, after all, to talk about what deviates from normalcy, because what falls within the established limits is commonplace. Considering this inventory we can notice that several criteria come into question when categorizing humour.

Therefore, a systematization of humour should draw on its nature, on thematic, cognitive, ethical, educational, aspects and, last but not least, on aesthetic.

#### 1. The thematic criterion

The thematic criterion refers to funny topics – which obviously have social and cultural validity, determined by epoch, geographical area, language, region, religion, beliefs and current practices, but arouse attention, especially when the topic touches on the sphere of social taboos such as sexuality, racism, violence, morbidity, religion or ideology. Thus, in any society, there are favourite subjects, as publicly accepted humour, which opposes subversive humour. Without exception, in any community we will find a level of acceptance for humour that is considered *harmless* and a complicit repulsion for *offensive* humor. However, light humour and innocent amusement seem less tempting than violating social norms or trivializing others.

#### 2. The attitude criterion

The attitudinal criterion derives from the thematic one and refers to the way we relate to reality, because it is one thing to have fun with others and it is quite another to laugh at them. It is one thing to have fun, for the sake of joy and good mood, and it is quite another to

make fun of someone's flaws: ugliness, clumsiness, stupidity, vices, just to feel superior to them. Let us not forget that irony hurts and bitter humour damages social relationships. Humour is often moralizing; a joke draws attention to shortcomings or inappropriate behaviour, in order to correct things in a playful, non-offensive way. Depending on attitude, there is gentle, forgiving, benevolent humour or, on the contrary, aggressive, acid or malicious. Besides the permissive and the aggressive attitudes, we can also have mockery in difficult situations, when we do not foresee a concrete solution (in real life). The playful attitude towards life is linked to the Freudian approach which explains humour as a way of releasing tensions (or impulses, in psychoanalytic terms).

### 3. *The criterion of intentionality*

The criterion of intentionality refers to humour in terms of communication sciences. Humour is achieved only if the receiver understands the playful intention and laughs. So, we have a process of coding and decoding information that is formulated in a playful manner, a process whose success is confirmed through convincing feedback. The discussion about humorous intent makes sense, especially when the mechanism of communication does not work.

Humour mechanisms involve unique associations of ideas, and amusement arises when the receiver is surprised. At first, he is amazed at the unusual combination, and then he enjoys himself when understanding the purpose of the association. Surprise gives the impression of spontaneity, although in the practice of humorous creation, the joke is not usually spontaneous, but on the contrary, carefully premeditated and sometimes elaborated. Inspiration of the moment is the happy exception (often accidental, casual and rationally inexplicable). Premeditated humour belongs to the realm of the show, whether it takes place in everyday situations or on stage and, in this situation, someone is consciously and deliberately generating reasons for others to laugh.

**Involuntary humour** occurs when the sender is serious in communication, but poor knowledge of language, an inappropriate situational context, or a mere unfortunate match makes the receiver misinterpret the message, differently from the speaker's purpose and thus information is trivialised.

**Failed humour** is, from a communicational perspective, the reverse of involuntary humour, because the sender has humorous intentions, but there is no effect for the receiver.

The comic impact is increased if the discourse is adequate in a certain situation (as argued by theorists of language pragmatics).

Contextual adequacy of humour involves formulating the message in accordance with the receiver's interests, vision, values, knowledge and competences, but also adjusting the message to circumstances. There are cultural and social specifics of humour. Obviously, not all of us find the same things amusing. We, Romanians, for example, do not find German or British humour particularly funny – and maybe the opposite is true. Additionally, the humorous intention can fail depending on the interlocutor's relation to the topic of the jokes. For instance, a teacher and a student may not laugh at the same insight joke, since they are in complementary positions. Actually, no interlocutor will find amusing the type of humour that puts him in an inferior position.

Humour also depends on what you need to know in order to decode the playful intent: an audience can enjoy a certain type of humour that is opaque to others, *i.e.* professional humour or "inside jokes". Thus, we may all laugh at jokes about engineers, but only the initiated ones laugh at jokes told among engineers. In organizations, employees have their own topics for laughter, which leads to group cohesion and differentiates them from other people. Furthermore, a joke in a foreign language is tasted only if we understand it linguistically and culturally. Lack of reaction or perplexity show that the humorous effect did

not occur. Impediments to perceiving comic intent include psychological, linguistic, cultural and social communication barriers.

**Forced humour** is a variation of failed humour. Some creators in the field want to be funny and, often rely on exaggeration, painting reality in thick strokes in the hope that the absurd will arouse laughter. This is what humour professionals also do: screenwriters, comedians, copywriters, etc. But many times, the public proves to be smarter than these supposed comedians imagine. Numerous jokes from public speeches and advertising can easily be considered childish, simplistic, silly or, in other words, "recycled clichés". A joke is funny when we first hear it. No matter how good a joke may be, the comic effect diminishes when we hear it again. And humorous little clichés in advertising often annoy us.

#### *4. The value criterion*

The value criterion refers to the degree of comicality. To assess the quality of humour we rely on axiological standards. Humour is considered great or derisory, depending on the intelligence of the actors involved (creators and consumers), on their cognitive and intellectual levels.

The quality of humour depends on several factors: the subtlety of the joke, as a humorous stimulus; -the intellectual effort of reception; the sphere of addressability and, last but not least, the performing (acting, narration).

Thus, we can have obvious humour, which we notice immediately and more subtle humour, which requires higher intellectual effort for decoding. We may instantaneously enjoy, for example, the hilarious resemblance between a dog and its owner, but it takes us longer to "catch" a covert allusion or clever pun. We know from experience that some people enjoy humour more than others, that some have a great sense of humour, while others definitely lack it. On a conceptual level, however, we can distinguish between two types of humour: the one that is revealed immediately, visually accessible, and the "encrypted" humour, hidden from the profane and unadvised recipient. This latter type of humour is predominantly narrative, relying on wordplay and double meaning.

Obviously, not everyone is able to grasp humour as quickly or enjoy it in all its shades and depths. Many people have only a superficial level of humorous understanding, without even being aware of their cognitive boundaries and without being bothered by this in any way. That is why the bulk of humour in any society is made up of irreverent, slapstick, gross jokes -unrefined as humour, but sometimes quite elaborate. These jokes are easily and quickly perceived and have nothing hidden beneath their observable surface. In this sense, we can talk about simple humour, accessible to anyone, which is opposed to deeper, more subtle humour, created with care and attention to details.

Quality humour usually involves simultaneous interpretation on several levels, from the observable (superficial) to the conceptual (deep) one. The level of humour refinement discriminates between categories of audience. Light humour is the main source of entertainment for the consumer of "mass culture" (to speak in the terms of Frankfurt School), while subtle humour delights intellectuals. It is interesting to observe how these two sides make fun of each other's tastes and consumption habits, calling one another either "rednecks" or "arrogant".

It seems that good humour depends on how much prior knowledge we need to activate in the reception process and on how many cognitive operations we need to make to understand the joke.

#### *5. The criterion of humour integration in the narrative*

This criterion refers to the extent to which the comic affects the creative narration of reality. In this sense, comicality – as an artistic process of altering the representation of reality, can have a functional role or a purely decorative one in the construction of the fictional text.

Functional humour is part of the narrative structure, an inherent part of the text, and its absence would not only change the course of action, but would cancel the story. Decorative humor, on the other hand, does not affect the sequence of events, but only gives "colour" to details and provides the receiver with a moment of amusement.

### Conclusion

Humour stems from the tension among the elements exposed in a message. Thus, we are forced to temporarily associate two or more things that already exist in our mind, but which are normally incompatible or, which are not, in normal contexts, in a cause-and-effect relationship.

In the literature there is a theory that perception of humour is achieved through the same mechanism as problem solving (Weems 2014). Understanding a joke involves quickly (and often unconsciously) going through three stages. 1. First we "build" (that is, we turn to personal knowledge, experiences and expectations, gathering information that we consider relevant). Then (after filtering our information, eliminating the mistakes and dropping some erroneous expectations), 2. we anticipate a certain result and, finally, 3. we reach a conclusion, a decision (a satisfactory, but often unexpected solution to the problem).

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