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Humour as a Metacommunicative Process

In this article, metacommunication is initially defined as explicit or implicit communication about aspects of the ongoing communication. One of these aspects can be previous metacommunication, so that in some cases metacommunication is communication about metacommunication. The result, then, is a hierarchy of metacommunicative acts. Metacommunication always involves changing one's communicative position from a participant's to an observer's. While it is a common phenomenon of all kinds of communication, metacommunication plays a specific role in humorous discourse. This is due to the fact that humour usually involves incongruities, i. e. ill-fitting communicative elements that destroy an expectation introduced before. Incongruities necessarily trigger a metacommunicative reflection of the communicative process leading up to it. The incongruous element is therefore one of the most important (implicit) metacommunicative cues in the humorous discourse. Humour is thus understood as a production/reception process with a necessary metacommunicative component. This can be minimal, but often is a complex web of metacommunicative cues. Methodologically, humour is seen as evidence of metacommunication, as there can be no humour without a minimum of metacommunication.

In section 2, the circumstances of metacommunication in humour are discussed: The producer of humour metacommunicates by explicitly announcing a joke and giving explicit information on some aspects of the ongoing discourse or by implicitly constructing the communication in such a way that the audience's attention is necessarily drawn to some aspect of the communicative process, without which the humour would not deliver. The recipient either follows the producer's explicit metacommunicative cue or is drawn to consider specific aspects of the communicative process itself, even in absence of explicit clues. Meta-humour, as in the parody of a humour pattern, is usually based on implicit metacommunication, as an explicit cue would destroy its subtlety. A prominent position in the hierarchy of metacommunicative cues is taken up by the one that indicates the comedian's/ joker's humorous intent, because it primes the recipient for the humorous event and activates all the respective expectations and communicative patterns. This *humour cue* establishes the humorous mode of communication, and a *humour maxim* along with it, which forms the pragmatic basis for the interpretation within the humorous

mode of communication. The humour cue and the incongruity together form the central metacommunicative elements in the humour process.

In this article, the view is taken that humorous incongruities can attack at any point in the discourse. Hence, the recipient's metacommunicative attention can be directed at any aspect of the communicative process. Examples of this are given from phonology, the lexicon (e. g. a spoof education programme claims that the terms *Ginny*, *Ninny* and *Peter's Peg* are commonly used for the chemical element calcium), knowledge frames, and genre patterns. In some cases, the incongruities are quite blatant, whereas in others, the metacommunicative message is subtle and requires an attentive audience, when, for instance, the word *mafipulate* is used in a context of chemistry, and the audience is left unsure whether the word exists or not.

In section 4, some basic constellations of metacommunication in humour are presented.

1. *The humour cue with delayed fulfilment*: Here, a metacommunicative humour cue is given. However, a humorous incongruity is then not delivered for a relatively long time, so that when it finally arrives, the previous delay adds considerably to the communicative effect. In this context, the *principle of delayable fulfilment of maxims* – here the humour maxim – is discussed.

2. *No humour cue, sudden humour*: Typical realisations of this pattern are the spontaneous joke in a conversation and involuntary humour. Here, the fact that the humour is unannounced may heighten its effects. At the same time, however, this constellation involves the risk of the audience missing the humour.

3. *Humour cue follows after the punch-line*: A common realisation of this constellation is the studio audience laughter in TV sitcoms that draws the TV audience's attention to the humorous potential of the lines and actions presented immediately before.

4. *Humour cue, but no delivery*: This constellation may produce meta-humour, when, for instance, comedians parody a worn humour pattern and deliberately produce a predictable, poor punch-line, or none at all. The realisation of a meta-humorous intention is guided by the humour maxim, which – like other Gricean-type maxims – may trigger an implicature: If humour was expected, but not delivered, then the real humorous incongruity may lie in the absence of the expected incongruity.

The article closes with the observation that subtlety and suspense in humour may to some degree be brought about by the clever manipulation or suppression of metacommunicative cues. The question of whether the omnipresence of metacommunication in humour and the necessary connection between incongruity and metacommunication suggest a *metacommunication theory of humour* is answered in the negative: The *presence* of a certain phenomenon in humour does not automatically prove that it is also the *cause* of humour. But metacommunication may well be behind the phenomenon that some humour theorists call the *resolution* of an incongruity.

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