



A Relevance-theoretic Analysis of Persian Verbal Humor and Online Joking

Farnoush Ghodsi *

Department of English, Shahreza Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran.

Mohammad Ali Heidari-Shahreza

Department of English, Shahreza Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran.

Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating Persian verbal humor from the perspective of Relevance Theory (RT). Based on the cognitive and communicative principles of this theory, a corpus of online Persian jokes was analyzed. Following Yus (2008) and partly through inductive analysis, four different categories of jokes were identified: (a) Joke type one in which the explicit interpretation was questioned, (b) Joke type two in which the explicit interpretation clashed with contextual assumptions, (c) Joke type three in which implicated premises and conclusions contributed to humor and (d) Joke type four in which background encyclopedic assumptions were at work. Further probe into Persian online jokes also revealed that Joke type one was by far the most frequent category of Persian verbal humor in the corpus. In addition, we considered the senders of the analyzed jokes to discern how gender could contribute to diversity and distribution of the joke types. In the present research, these four types of Persian jokes are exemplified and discussed in light of RT. Moreover, possible implications and suggestions for further research are highlighted.

Keywords: Persian humor, Relevance Theory, Online jokes, Gender, Verbal humor.

INTRODUCTION

Humor is by definition the tendency of special cognitive experiences to motivate laughter and provide enjoyment and amusement. The term derives from the humoral medicine of the ancient Greeks, who believed that the balance of fluids in the human body, known as 'humours', controlled human health and emotions (Attardo, 2001). Most people are able to experience humor and hence are considered to have a sense of humor. There are many theories of humor which seek to explain what humor is, what social functions it serves, and what would be considered humorous (Attardo, 2001; Kuipers, 2008). Nevertheless there are relatively few linguistic studies on humor (See for example, Raskin, 1985, 2008); there are many psychological theories, the immense majority of which consider humor to be an incomprehensible mystery, very much like a mystical experience. Among current theories of humor, three theories appear

repeatedly: relief theory, superiority, and incongruity theory Attardo, 2001; Raskin, 2008). Also, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore script based semantic theory of humor (henceforth SSTH), General Theory of Verbal humor (henceforth GTVH), and Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) (see also Attardo & Raskin, 1991).

Relief theory maintains that laughter is a homeostatic mechanism by which psychological tension is reduced. According to relief theory laughter and mirth, result from the release of nervous energy. The superiority theory of humor traces back to Plato and Aristotle. (Raskin, 2008)The general idea is that a person laughs at misfortunes of others, because these misfortunes assert the person's superiority on the background of shortcomings of others. The incongruity theory states that humor is perceived at the moment of realization of incongruity between a concept involved in a certain situation and the real objects thought to be in some relation to the concept. The Script - based Semantic Theory of humor (SSTH) was introduced by Victor Raskin (1985). The theory assumes that a joke is always related with two different scripts that are opposed to each other in a special way. The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) is a theory developed by Attardo (1994, 2001). Besides script opposition, the scope of the GTVH consists of five other parameters, called Knowledge Resources (KRs): Language (LA), Narrative strategy (NS), Target (TA), Situation (SI), Logical mechanism (LM), Script opposition (SO).

- "LA" which is responsible for the exact wording of the humorous text and organization of the humorous text.
- "TA" involving the persons, groups, or institution ridiculed by humor.
- "SI", including the objects, participants' activities, places, etc. presented in the humorous text.
- "LM", presenting the distorted and playful logic that causes the script opposition.
- "SO", which is the necessary requirement for humor: a humorous text is fully or partially compatible with two different and opposed scripts.

RELEVANCE THEORY

The focus of this study is on Relevance theory. The Relevance theory (RT) is a cognitive-pragmatic approach to communication proposed by D. Sperber and D. Wilson (1995, 2002) in mid -1980s. RT is built upon a basic claim of cognition: we are biologically altered as developed humans, to pay attention and process the data that is potentially relevant to us (Yus, 2003). Simultaneously, we are continually filtering and disregarding information that is potentially not worth processing. This is covered by so-called *cognitive principle of relevance* (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Furthermore, we are dealing with an extremely complicated tool - language - which helps us convey ideas to one another and a progressed principle that triggers interpretations: we take part in relevance - searching inferential process which depends on the so-called *communicative principle of relevance*, whenever someone talks to us (Sperber & Wilson, 2002). Based on Communicative Principle of Relevance, every incidence of explicit communication transfers a presupposition of its own optimum relevance (Yus, 2008).

RT visualizes communication as an extremely inferential activity by humankind, who has evolved to grasp the schematic chain of terms that occurs into the mind through contextualized data (Yus, 2003). This progress is utilized for the development of explicit context, to the extraction of implicatures and to the derivation of the essential sum of contextual information. Significantly for humor, these inferential tasks can be anticipated to a greater and lesser amount and therefore manipulated to attain humorous outcomes. Following Yus (2008), RT can be used to identify four different types of jokes, which are the basis of this study:

Joke type 1: Explicit interpretation questioned

Such jokes are based on some invalidation of inferred explicit. Identifying the grammatical arrangement of the joke is context-free but meaningful. Jokes should have reference assignment, because the hearers often follow a referent for certain words. They also should be unambiguous. Disambiguation plays an important part. A joke which has the intended source of ambiguity would belong to Joke type 3. In this type the hearer expects the *higher-level explicature* which contains the attitude or underlying intention (Yus, 2008).

Joke type 2: Explicit interpretation clashing with contextual assumptions

Jokes which are based on a clash between inferred explicit information and parts of implicit information available to the audience. The audience is led to think about two contradictory parts of data: One is originated from the explicit interpretation of the jokes which Curcó (1997) labels *key assumption*, clashing with an accessible assumption in the context of interpretation, *target assumption* (Curcó, 1995, 1996; Yus, 2008).

Joke type 3: Implicated premises and implicated conclusions at work

Jokes which are based on the audience's recovery of implicitness. There are two types of implicatures from an RT point of view. On one hand, implicated conclusion – also called *pragmatic presupposition* – and on the other hand, implicated premises.

Joke type 4: Targeting background encyclopedic assumptions

Jokes which proceed beyond the specialized developing of the joke into more comprehensive collective data which normally induce humorous effects through a reinforcement of antecedently held stereotypes on issues such as nationalities, ethnic attributes, and sex roles.

In the following, a corpus of online Persian jokes is analyzed based on the aforementioned joke types.

METHOD

Initially a corpus of Persian verbal humor was formed. We decided to focus on Persian online jokes because they were much more feasible and probably more diverse than any other types of Persian humor. To do so, a number of online mobile applications and social networks were probed to collect Persian jokes.

CORPUS ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A corpus of 354 jokes were collected and analyzed to discern different types of jokes in RT terms. In the following, the results of the corpus analysis are presented:

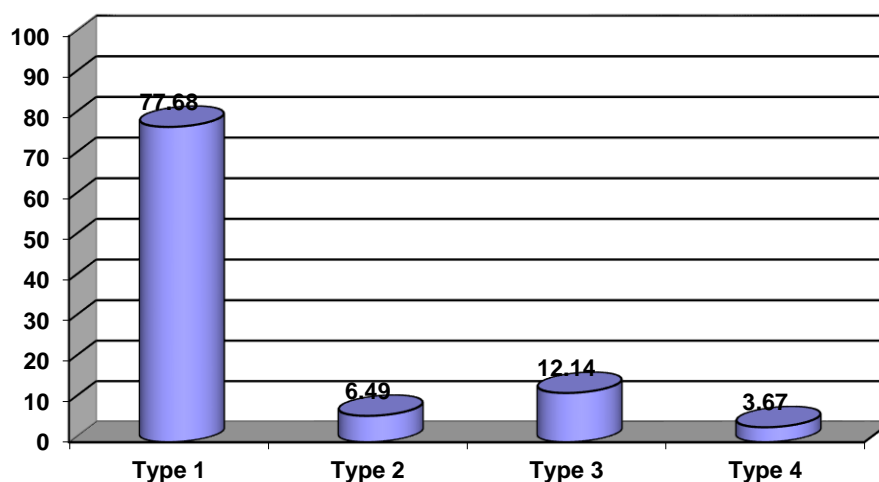


Figure 1. Four types of jokes based on Relevance Theory

As shown in Fig. 1, the percentages of all types of jokes were accounted. . Jokes type 1 show 77.68% of frequency, and then jokes type 3 with the frequency of 12.14%, afterwards jokes type 2 which reached 6.49%, and jokes type 4 show only 3.67%. In other words, the first type of jokes has the highest frequency among all types of jokes and the fourth type has the lowest one. Here are examples of these types of jokes:

Jokes Type 1: Explicit interpretation questioned

Example:

دختره تو فیسبوک استاتوس گذاشته: «جدیداً خیلی لاغر شدم چی کار کنم؟!» منم زیرش کامت گذاشتم: «برو برعکس رو تردمیل بدو خوب میشی» چرا بلاکم کرد؟! خدا میدونه.

A girl reported on Facebook: “I have lost weight recently, what should I do?”

“Run contrariwise on treadmill”, I commented. “Only God knows why she blocked me!”

This joke is type 1, because of explicit content, which is to say that punch line is explicit interpretation. Using Treadmill – walking or running – in order to become slim is obvious for everyone. Now, think about walking or running contrariwise on treadmill to become overweight! It’s ridiculous! The gender variable is shown in Fig. 2. After

unspecified senders who have the highest rank, the male senders are more than female senders.

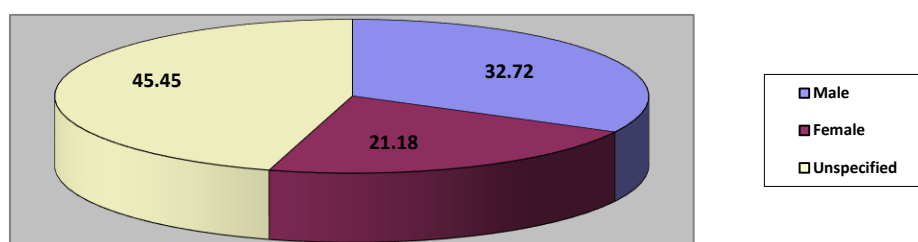


Figure 2. Joke type 1 and the contribution of Persian male and female senders

Joke type 2: Explicit interpretation clashing with contextual assumption.

داشتم به غروب جمعه 31 شهریور فکر می‌کردم که ناخودآگاه اشک از چشمم سرازیر شد....!
چراغ‌ها خاموش کنین، مدرسه‌ای‌ها میخوان سینه بزنن!

I was thinking of Shahrivar, thirty-first (September twenty-first) – a day before the first day of school – I burst to cry...! Turn off the lights.... Students want to mourn!

This one is type 2, although it has explicit context, the punch line refers to contextual assumptions which is "mourning" or in Persian "*azaadaari*". In Islam religion, we have some historical events in which Imams sacrificed themselves for justice. In their anniversary Muslim mourn for them. In this ceremony all lights are turned off and people whimper and slap on their chest. This joke analogized the first day of school to mourning. 23 out of 354 jokes were type 2. As for the gender variable, the highest rate of frequency belongs to the unspecified part. Male senders and female senders have equal rank in this type of jokes.

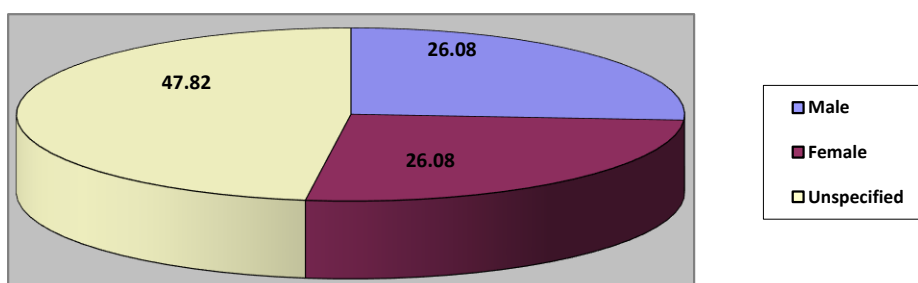


Figure 3. Joke type 2 and the contribution of Persian male and female senders

Joke type 3: Implicated premises and implicated conclusions at work.

بهترین راه خودکشی ... بری وسط کویر ساقه طلایی بخوری ... آقا بد میگم؟؟ با چای میخوری باز تشنت میشه. معلوم نیست از چی ساختن ... فک کنم یزید قاطیشه.

The best way for suicide is eating 'Saghe Talaei' in desert....isn't it? Eating with a cup of tea makes you thirsty..... What is it made of? I think it has 'Yazid'!

This instance of Persian humor is type 3, because it has implicit information that audience does not simply realize; *Implicated premise: First & second line; Implicated conclusion: last line (punch line).*

"Saaghe Talaei" is a kind of biscuits in Iran, when you eat it you feel thirsty. Now think about eating "Saaghe Talaei" in desert! This is the first part of joke which was called *Implicated Premises*. The last part - Implicated Conclusion - refers to historical event. One of our Imam's enemies was 'Yazid' who prohibited water for Imam Hussein, their family, and their companions. Thus, this joke connects the historical event to the biscuit, i.e. one of the ingredients of the biscuit is 'Yazid' that make you feel thirsty!

Fig 4 shows the gender variable: The first rank is related to unspecified senders. Female senders are less than male senders in Implicated premises and implicated conclusions at work.

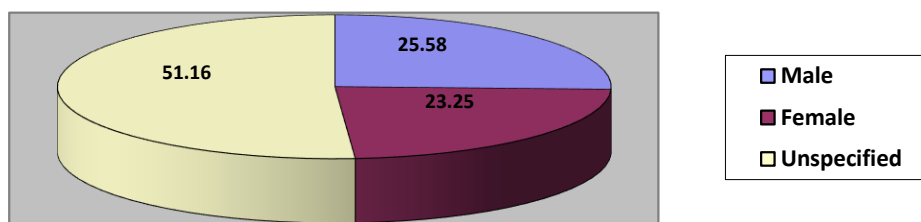


Figure 4. Joke type 3 and the contribution of Persian male and female senders

Joke type 4: Targeting background encyclopedic assumptions

خانوم شما چقدر زشتی = خفشو کتافتنتنت
 خانوم شما چقدر خوشگلی = خفشو آشغال کتافت
 من تو خلقت این موجود موندم اصن!!!

You are too ugly, madam! = shut up jerk!

You are so beautiful, madam! = zip it up jerk!

I am amazed, how are these creatures!!!!

13 out of 354 jokes were type 4 and this is one of the examples of jokes type 4, due to the information which is stored in the audience's mind as cultural background on society and human roles. This joke referred to sex roles as targeting background.

Women in this joke are as the target. In complaining and praising situation, woman used vulgar words that cause audience feel bewildered. The variable of gender is presented in Fig. 5 below: The peak rate is unspecified senders, but the other two groups of senders have the same percentage.

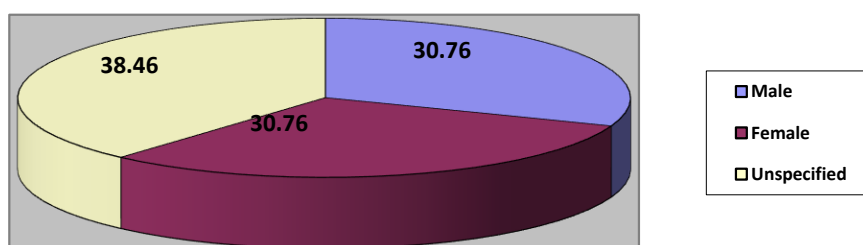


Figure 5. Joke type 4 and the contribution of Persian male and female senders

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present research investigated Persian online jokes, as the most prevalent genre of Persian verbal humor. Based on the communicative and cognitive principles of Relevance Theory, 354 Persian jokes were analyzed and four distinct types of jokes were identified. Gender was also examined as a contributing factor. The highest percentage belonged to the first type of jokes with 77.68%. The second was related to joke type 3 which had a significant difference with the first type (12.14%). The third was joke type 2 which reached 23 out of 354 or 6.49%. The last one, the fourth type of jokes, had the lowest proportion of the frequency of types of jokes with only 3.67 percent.

The findings indicated that joke type 1 was the most frequent category of Persian verbal humor. In other words, a significant number of online jokes created humor based on their explicit interpretation. At the second place were jokes type 3, that is the jokes which made humor based on implicit premises and conclusions. Jokes type 2 and 4 relatively formed an insignificant proportion of the total percentage. They both accounted for almost 10 percent of the total. This, in turn, may imply that the RT mechanism at work to create humor in such jokes is less favored by Persian speakers. Alternatively, humor might be better realized and interpreted on the premises of explicit and implicit interpretation as employed in jokes type 1 and 3. Likewise, it might be the case that Iranian may be more eager to use explicit phrases. Additionally, the comprehension of explicit jokes might be more straightforward for Iranian Persian speakers.

In addition, the percentage and distribution of gender (i.e., male, female, and unspecified joke senders) might be insightful. The results showed that there was a marked rise in unspecified group than male and female groups. Male and female groups

were equal in joke type 2 and 4. Also, there were not any significant differences in jokes type 1 and 3; the male group was a little higher in percentage than the female group. However, we suppose that the unspecified senders are male-dominated, because generally males use humor more than females (Kotthoff, 2000, 2006). For instance, although the percentages of male and female senders in joke type 4 were the same, males might be considered more in number than females because they may be more enthusiastic to use humor. In real life, males usually use humor in general and jokes in particular -implicit or explicit- considerably more than females (see also Heidari-Shahreza, Vahid-Dastjerdi, & Marvi, 2011; Heidari-Shahreza, 2014b for related studies within Iranian culture).

The current study had several limitations: The study was limited to one genre of humor. Other types of humor, comedy, cartoon, metaphors, irony, and the others, may be investigated in follow-up studies. Additionally, the study was limited to only Persian *online* jokes. That is, among all kinds of jokes which are common in various social contexts, this study only examined online jokes. The study was also limited to investigate Persian verbal humor based on RT theory. Future studies may investigate the other types of humor with respect to other theoretical frameworks. Interested researchers may also examine gender in more detail. Finally, the pedagogical potential of using humor to raise cultural awareness particularly in EFL/ESL contexts should not be ignored (Heidari-Shahreza, 2014a; Heidari-Shahreza, Moinzadeh & Barati, 2014). Therefore, another area of research would be educational humor. In particular, further research may focus on the application of various genres of humor such as jokes, comedies and cartoons to teach L2 vocabulary to EFL/ESL learners.

REFERENCES

- Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic theories of humor*. Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Attardo, S. (2001). *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Attardo, S. (2008). Semantic and Pragmatics of Humor, *Language and Linguistic Compass*, 2(6), 1203-1215
- Attardo, S. & Raskin, V. (1991). Script theory revis(it)ed: Joke similarity and joke representation model. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 4(3-4).293 –347.
- Curcó, C. (1995). Some observations on the pragmatics of humorous interpretations. A relevance-theoretic approach. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 7, 27-47.
- Curcó, C. (1996). The implicit expression of attitudes, mutual manifestness and verbal humour. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* 8, 89-99.
- Curcó, C. (1997). *Relevance and the manipulation of the incongruous: some explorations of verbal humour*. In Proceedings of the University of Hertfordshire Relevance Theory Workshop, edited by Marjolein Groefsema, 68-72. Chelmsford: Peter Thomas and Associates, 1997.

- Heidari-Shahreza, M. A. (2014a). Raising Cultural Awareness through Implicit Exposure to Culturally-loaded Vocabulary. *International Journal of Culture and History*, 1 (2), 1-14.
- Heidari-Shahreza, M. A. (2014b). A sociolinguistic and cross-cultural investigation into the speech act of suggestion. *International Journal of Culture and History*, 1 (1), 1-18.
- Heidari-Shahreza, M. A., Vahid-Dastjerdi, H. & Marvi, S. (2011). Discoursal variation and gender: The case of compliment responses among male and female speakers. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 2 (3), 159-168.
- Heidari-Shahreza, M. A., Moinzadeh & A., Barati, H. (2014). A comparative investigation into effects of L1 lexicalization and cultural loadedness on incidental vocabulary acquisition and retention. *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning*, 3 (5), 83-96.
- Kotthoff, H. (2000). Gender and joking: On the complexities of women's image politics in humorous narratives. *Journal of Pragmatics* 32, 55-80.
- Kotthoff, H. (2006). Gender and humor: the state of the art. *Journal of Pragmatics* 38, 4-25. doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2005.06.003.
- Kuipers, G. (2008). The sociology of humor. In V. Raskin (Ed.), *The primer of humor research* (pp. 361-398). Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic mechanisms of humor*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: D. Reidel.
- Raskin, V. (2008). *The Primer of Humor Research*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Sperber, D., Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sperber, D., Wilson, D. (2002). Pragmatics, modularity and mind-reading. *Mind and Language*, 17(1-2), 3-23.
- Yus R. F. (2003). Humor and the search for relevance. *Journal of Pragmatics. Special issue on The Pragmatics of humor*, 35(9), 1295-331.
- Yus, F. (2008). A Relevance-Theoretic Classification of Jokes. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics, Special Issue on Humour*, 4(1), 131-157.