

INTRODUCTION:

Aspects of Humour as Positive Socio- Linguistic Correlates

Before We Embark ...

Recently, I saw an utterly compelling photo by Chris Hughes depicting a still Cornwall countryside full of lush shades of green, an aquamarine, almost cloudless sky and a set of white, elegant windmills scattered along the imaginary horizontal line cutting through the central plane of the composition. Most of the wide-angle shot is somewhat blurred. The one strip which is sharp becomes rather disquieting after a moment of observation, as it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain where the line between the sharp and the blurred is. Yet, somehow the three and a half windmills that we can see sharply are an ideal balance; four being too much, three too little. Although such countryside could be seen over most of Europe at the end of summer and although all the windmills are an exact copy of each other, it takes as little as one photographer and three and a half windmills to bring to our attention a memento of perfection we would have missed otherwise.

Metaphorically speaking, it is no different with language, humour and society. What I have in mind specifically concerns the key issues to be discussed in this introduction. One is 'intersubjective validity' (Verdonk, 1995: 3), being, I believe, the aim of any language humour analysis as opposed to 'scientific objectivity' (Verdonk, 1995: 3). This proviso is fulfilled by such an interpretation of humour that is replicable (i.e. in consequence valid on an inter-subjective level). The notion of **intersubjective validity** leads inevitably to the issue of the potential of experience to be expressed and shared, which, for the purposes of this chapter, I loosely label the **express-ability** and **share-ability of experience** (under *Things which enclose me*, p. 9; see also Figure B, p. 13).

The other key issue is that of **originality** in language. As Turner (1991: 19-20) claims ‘...originality is not something autonomous, but is firmly grounded in the unoriginal everyday structures of language that inform it’. This issue brings us to questions such as that of **authenticity**, artistic **value** or **duplicity** and forgery. Discussing these I was inspired mainly by certain ideas of Milan Kundera (under *Style, Timing and (Dis)Content*, p. 65 in chapter Three) and Tomáš Kulka (under *Why Robert Redford could be as beautiful as the Taj Mahal?*, p. 75 in chapter Three). Together with the Lakoff’s (1989) theory of metaphor I discuss Kundera’s and Kulka’s ideas in a separate chapter Three preceding the analytical chapters on Annie Hall and Manhattan Murder Mystery.

Symbolically revolving around these issues is also the subtitle of this introduction – ‘Aspects of Humour as Positive Socio-linguistic Correlates’. The **‘aspects of humour’** I am principally considering here (unlike the specific focus of the analysis proper) are some of the most general and, hopefully, universally discernible aspects. The adjective *‘positive’* in the subtitle suggests I consider the aspects actually existing (not absent) in society and language and obtaining in the socio-linguistic interactions, reflecting a society in a language and vice versa. *‘Positive’* also refers to the process of confirming the nature of a specific language in a specific societal environment. Eventually, the **‘positive correlates’** in the subtitle are meant to represent my conviction that language humour reflects certain universally valid truths about human communities, interaction and expression.

To offer an illustrative example let me mention what David Crystal (1998) claims in his publication on language play. Supposedly, our use of language to play is even more central to our lives than our use of language to communicate information. Elsewhere in his book he says that ‘enjoying others’ language play is a sure sign of a healthy social relationship; and disaffection with someone’s language play is just as sure a sign that a relationship is on the way to breaking down.’(1998: 219) Referring to the title, Crystal’s is a congenial example encompassing at

least one aspect of humour as both positive and negative correlate of society and language; positive in the sense of 'enjoying' and negative in the sense of 'disaffection', the absence or approaching absence of a relationship.

As an attempt to present certain relevant features humans have in common (i.e. relevant for the study of language humour), I also briefly step outside the field of linguistics to borrow a term habitually used in biology: the **supernormal stimulus** - i.e. a stimulus causing a more vigorous reaction than a normal stimulus (under *Mickey Mouse vs. Woody Allen*, p. 14). Thus, I intend to exemplify the inseparability and determinism of human physical and psychic aspects, which can quite easily be found in humour. Nevertheless, it cannot by any means be meant as an attempt at psycholinguistic scrutiny.

I cannot aspire to present any revolutionary findings on the nature of humour as such, since almost all the influential thinkers in history and nowadays have substantially contributed to this field already. Thus, I present a brief mention of the traditional theories in the light of the contemporary view (under *The Three Traditional Theories*, p. 21). However, this chapter's main focus is not to revise or review these theories. I intend to illustrate that despite the different attitudes, all the thinkers tend to display one common premise: **humour** is (for one reason or another) an **inseparable part of our personality and** a part of our mode of **thinking** to such an extent it almost becomes a physical urge if we are deprived of it, as it represents a **relief** (be it positive or negative).

Moreover, I attempt to develop the current discussion by pointing out to new relations between certain ideas and concepts that might not have been considered in this sense so far. By this synthesis I wish to further support my previous conclusions (see the New Conclusion, p. 189) as well as my conviction that artists such as Woody Allen are relevant for cultivating our adequate sense of humanity.