Relevance Maxim Violation And Conversational Implicature In Online Humorous Discourse

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Abstract:

Humorous discourse is an act of communication with different modes and maxims. In this regard, the study at hand attempts to identify which Grice's maxims violation brings about humorous effect and creates conversational implicatures in Algerian online jokes. To this end, in an experiment, a group of 12 people were asked to read a collection of 16 short Algerian jokes and choose the funniest ones. The 16 jokes are selected from accessible social media sites, classified, and split equally into four groups according to the violation of Grice's maxims. By means of a mixed method and precisely the best worst scaling approach (BWS), it is found that the online jokes that violate the maxim of relevance are the ones the participants find funniest and most humorous, followed by the ones that violate the maxim of quality, quantity and then the maxim of manner. The findings of this study reveal that violating the being relevant maxim is a critical element in the structure of Algerian jokes, creating conversational implicatures related to unsaid stereotypes and cultural norms.

Keywords: Communication, humor, Grice's Maxims, implicature, online jokes.

1. Introduction

Imagine someone has told you a funny joke. Conjuring up a scenario of this funny joke, we need therefore to hear about all of it, its subject, tone, situation; the context used in it and may be the implicatures intended to the mutual knowledge of the teller and the target audience. As Alkaraki et al. (2023) note, the context and mutual knowledge between the joke teller and the audience are crucial in Arabic verbal humor, especially as observed on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. This aligns with the idea that humor is not only about the content but also about the shared understanding and the subtleties of communi[1]cation that make a joke resonate. Keeping in mind that humor is subjective, with several factors contributing to its effectiveness, a humorous communicative act is often used to achieve a desired effect. Al-Sawaeer et al. (2022) further explore this subjectivity in humor through an analysis of the Arabic comedy show N2O, highlighting how different comedic elements are employed to engage the audience and produce the intended humorous effect. Recent studies underscore the complexity of humor and its reliance on a myriad of factors, from cultural context to the nuances of

language and implicature, to convey important signals (Bear & Spektor, 2024) in challenging settings (Huang et al.,2023).

On reflection, is this act as the same as any interaction that requires the involved participants to be cooperative with each other? Referring to Grice (1975) in his Cooperative Principle, four conversational maxims are to be considered for any successful conversation and if, according to him, a violation of any maxim occurs, conversational implicatures are created. Now then, an intriguing question can be: is there any relationship between Grice's maxims violation with this possible humorous scenario? Fawzi (2007) claims that humorous discourse can provide an interesting insight on the nature of cooperative linguistic communication and particularly on the status of the Gricean maxims.

While the exploration of humor in linguistics is still in its initial stages (Attardo, 2014), existing studies on Cooperative Maxims in humor are limited, with minimal analysis of Algerian humorous jokes. Moreover, limited research has specifically delved into the online humorous discourse generated by Algerians on widely accessible social media platforms. Therefore, considering these gaps, this research aims to address the following questions:

1. Which of the four Gricean maxims violation create most a sense of humor in Algerian online jokes?
2. What factors do the conversational implicatures intended from the Algerian most humorous online jokes depend on?

2.   Discourse of humor

In his noteworthy observation, John E. Richardson (2007) highlights the challenge of defining 'discourse' as various authors present diverse, and sometimes radically different, accounts of its meaning and proper usage. Morgan (2010:02) adds a reasonable perspective, noting that "definitions of discourse and discourse analysis can be diverse depending on the epistemological stance of the theorist."

The commonly used term "discourse" often refers to "language structured according to different patterns that people's utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life…" (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002). This implies that discourse can manifest in various types within specific institutional contexts, forming what we can term 'discourse domains.' For instance, 'comedy' may represent the discourse domain for humorous discourse, while religion, psychology, law, media, and others can also be seen as distinct domains. Meriel Bloor and Thomas Bloor (2007) emphasize that discourse often relies on multiple modes of communication, evident in online jokes that incorporate words, photographs, drawings, and more.

Upon further examination of different claims and assumptions, a disagreement emerges regarding the meanings of discourse and text. Some linguists interchange the terms, while others completely avoid "discourse," preferring "text" for all recorded instances of language. A third perspective, as presented by David Nunan (1993), distinguishes between them, positing that discourse encompasses the entire act of communication, including production and comprehension, whereas text refers to the written or spoken data—the product of discourse. This distinction, discussed further below, essentially centers on the difference between product and process. In contrast to Cook (1989), who interprets discourse as a formal stretch of language without context, Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), among authors concerned with text constitution, propose seven standards of textuality: cohesion, coherence, acceptability, intentionality, informativity, situationality or relevance, and intertextuality.

Building on these discussions, Bahaa-eddin Abulhassan Hassan (2023) analyzes humor used by Egyptian demonstrators in the Occupy Wall Street movement to comprehend the linguistic, psychological, and social aspects of humor, employing incongruity, relief, and superiority theories, which respectively focus on unexpected elements causing amusement, asserting power over others, and relieving suppressed emotions or tensions. Jokes, whether in discourse or text form, occur in diverse contexts with different aspects including: 1) the subject, which can range from everyday situations to political satire, 2) the tone, which can be light-hearted or carry a more serious undertone of critique, 3) the intent, which often involves a play on words or expectations to elicit laughter, and 4. the situation, including the teller and the audience, where the dynamics of the interaction play a crucial role in the humor's reception (Mifdel, 2019; AlZubeiry, 2020; Sawaeer et al. ,2022).

3. Grice's Maxims and Implicature

For a successful conversation, Paul Grice (975: 45) put it simply, that interlocutors unconsciously adhere to four maxims that are subsumed under the cooperative principle. These maxims, as cited in Qiu (2019), are:

1. Maxim of Quantity: to Make your contribution as informative as required.
2. Maxim of Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true. (Do not say what you believe to be wrong and for which you lack adequate evidence)
3. Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.
4. Maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous (Avoid obscurity of expression, ambiguity, be brief and orderly)

Grice (1975) suggests all the maxims are subject to violation, speakers tend to violate the maxims to mislead the hearers, to show politeness, to keep other's self- esteem, or to achieve some other purposes implicated implicitly. Devis (2000:16) defined implicature as "the act of meaning or implying thing by saying something else". Grice (1975) identified two types of implicatures:

- Conventional Implicature is a type of implicature that one can derive from the syntactic and the semantic relationships between words (Davis, 2000).
- Conversational Implicature depends on the conventional meaning of the words used to produce an utterance; it is related to the contextual non-spoken features of a particular situation in which an utterance may occur (Levisnon, 1983).

For further elaboration, in the analysis of verbal humor in the sitcom "Friends," Qiu (2019) finds that the characters frequently violate Grice's maxims, such as providing too much or too little information, making false statements, or being ambiguous, to create humor and misunderstandings. Similarly, as demonstrated by Hassan (2023) in the study of tweets by climate change skeptics, Gricean maxims are frequently violated to generate misleading implicatures that supported their stance of skepticism. In particular, the maxims of Quality and Relation were often flouted or violated to irony and rhetorical questions, casting doubt on the reality of climate change, often manipulating information to deceive their audience. This aligns with theories that view intended maxim violations as deceptive acts aimed at manipulation.

Further research by Rochmawati (2017) about the English-written jokes also rely on the violation of these maxims, with characters providing sarcastic or irrelevant answers, using meandering language, or making irrelevant statements to elicit laughter (Attardo, 2003).

Across these diverse contexts, the strategic breach of at least one of the four maxims serves as a tool for humor (Dolitsky, 1983; Attardo, 1994), persuasion, or deception, highlighting the pragmatic flexibility and rhetorical power of language.

4.   Method

After several readings of the collected accessible social media[2] Algerian online jokes, sixteen jokes were selected based on the criteria identified by Nilsen (1994) and the absence of Grice's maxims. Worthy of notice is that the jokes chosen are not offensive or culturally inappropriate; they are classified into four groups according to the violation of each maxim as shown in the table below:

Jokes violating Gricean Maxims	Quantity	Quality	Relevance	Manner
16 Algerian online jokes	04	04	04	04

Using the best worst scaling approach (BWS), the collected online jokes were in no particular order distributed to 12 people with different characteristics (gender, age…) who were asked for their consent to read the given jokes and select the funniest and most humorous ones. Later, the obtained data was analyzed, starting by the classification of the target jokes into four groups according to the violation of each maxim and then the means were calculated using SPSS to check which Grice's maxim violation brings about humorous effect.

The Algerian online jokes that were selected most are translated into English and described clearly referring to their implicatures as follow in the next section. In an experiment and using a mixed method that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches

Less humourous	16 Algerian Online jokes	Most humourous
⬭		⬭

5.   Data Analysis

This section reports the global findings of the current study using the Statistical Analysis Software SPSS to get a clear illustration concerning the interpretation of the gathered data and the conclusions reached.

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

Most Humourous Algerian Online Jokes according to:

Maxim Violation		Quantity	Quality	Manner	Relevance
N	Valid	12	12	12	12
	Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean		1,25	1,75	,75	3,33
Std. Deviation		,62	,45	,62	,65

The data suggests that the study included 12 valid jokes for each Gricean maxim, with a mean score of 1.25 for the quantity maxim violation, 1.75 for quality, 0.75 for the manner maxim, and 3.33 for relevance. There was some variability in the scores, with the highest variability found in the relevance maxim.

a.   Jokes Violating the Maxim of Relevance: Conversational Implicatures

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[2] Nokat Djazayriya Modhehika 2023, Nokat DZ (2023)

The chosen jokes are transcribed in Arabic phonetic symbols, translated into English language and then followed by a description:

5.2.1. Joke 1

وَاحِد يَشْتَكِي لِصَاحِبُو قَالُوا: مَرْتِي تُضَرْبْني /**wāħid jaʃtaki lisāħibu qālū mɑrti tuðˤrabni**/

One person complained to his friend, he said, "My wife hits me."

قَالُوا وَأَنْتَ تَسْكُتْ لَها   /**qālū waʔanta taskut laha**/

He said to him, "And you stay quiet about it?"

قَالُوا: "لا، هِيَ تُضَرْب وَأَنَا نَعِيطْ"   / **qālū lā hiya tudrab wa ana nˤajtˤ**/

- He said, "No, she hits him and I shout."

This joke shows a stereotype that men are expected to be tough and do not reveal their emotions even if they are physically abused. This joke creates humor though it goes against societal expectations.

5.2.2.   Joke 2:

الأستاذ للتلميذ: "ما هُوَ مُفْرَدُ كَلِمَةِ 'مَصَائِب'؟"

/**alustādh lil-tilmīð: "mā huwa mufrad kalimat 'masāib?"** /

Teacher to student: "What is the singular form of the word 'masa'ib' (meaning 'calamities')?"

التلميذ: "ما عِنْدُهَاش مُفْرَد كَيْ تِجِي تِجِي مَعَ بَعْضْ"

/**altilmīð: "mā ʕandhāʃ mufrad ki d͡ʒi d͡ʒi mʕa baʕdˤ"**/.

Student: "It does not have a singular form because it always comes together."

It is clear that in joke2, the student's answer is irrelevant, representing the violation of the third specific maxim, "be relevant" (Grice, 1974:46) . The target student is not talking about the existence of such singular word in Arabic and thus this joke creates humor and implicitly may communicate that Algerian people suffer from so many social problems.

5.2.3. Joke 3

امرأة كان زوجها لا يحفظ القرآن، قالت له: "كُنْ تَحْفَظَهُ نَخْطُبْ لَكَ وَحْدَ خَراً ."

/**ʔimraʔa kān zawd͡ʒuha la jaħfadˤ alqurān, qālat lahu: "kun taħfadˤ naxṭublk wahda xra"** /.

"A woman whose husband did not memorize the Quran said to him: 'If you memorize it, I'll marry you off to a young virgin.

حَفِظَ القُرآن فِي سِتَّة أَشْهُر وَهِيَ صَامت ثُلَاثَ أَيَّام كَفَّارَةً.

/**ħfadˤ afẓ alqurān fi sitat aʃhur wa hija ṣāmat θalaθat ajām kafāra**/.

He memorized the Quran in six months, and she fasted three days as atonement."

Infringing the maxim of relation in joke 3 produces humors effect. The wife promises her husband that she would allow him to marry another woman as a reward or an incentive if he memorizes the Qur'an. After six months, the husband tells his wife that he memorized the Qur'an. The wife informs her husband that she fasted three days a s reparation for the sin of lying on him. The wife's information has nothing to do with what her husband tells her. It is irrelevant. The wife's answer implicitly means that the wife deceived her husband.

5.2.3. Joke 4

"عَجُوْزَةٌ رَاحَتْ لِلطَّبِيبِ دَارَتْ فَحْصًا. دَا عَلَيْهَا 150 أَلْفَا وَقَالَ لَهَا: "مَا عِنْدَكِ وَالُو؟" كِي خَرَجَتْ، سَقَسَتْهَا بِنْتُهَا، وَاشْ لَقَا عِنْدَكِ؟ قَالَ لَهَا: "لَقَا 150 أَلْفَا دَاهَا".

/ʕad͡ʒūza rāḥet l-ṭabīb dāret faḥṣ. dā ʕalayhā 150 al-af wa qālluhā maʕandk walū. kī kharajt " saqset-hā bint-hā wāʃ lqa ʕndk. qātl-hā: lqa 150 al-af dāhā.

An old woman went to the doctor seeking for medical treatment and paid him 150.000 (currency) as a charge for his services, and when she left, her daughter asks her: What did he find? She replies: He found 150 thousand, he took it

In joke 4, humor is created by violating the maxim of relevance. In this joke the daughter asks a clear and direct question about her mother's health condition by saying "what did he found with you?". The mother's answer is not relevant to her daughter's question. This joke implicates that some doctors in Algeria do not do their job; instead, they examine people just for money.

6.   Synthesis of the Findings

This paper attempts to examine Algerian humorous discourse and Gricean Maxims' violation. Keeping in mind that humor is subjective, what one may find funny, another may not; this study provides evidence that Algerian jokes are more likely to be amusing when they violate the maxim of relevance, which subsumes the other three maxims: quality, quantity, and manner. In other words, Algerian online jokes that are not directly related to the situation or topic at hand are more likely to be the funniest for Algerian audiences.

It is important to mention that the violation of the Gricean maxim of relevance is a critical element in the structure of effective Algerian jokes, used not solely for entertainment but often to highlight stereotypes and cultural norms. Consistently, it can be said that the cultural background of the audience is significant when creating or analyzing humorous discourse, and in this light, the violation of the maxim of relevance in Algerian online jokes can create conversational implicatures related to the unsaid cultural norms and stereotypes.

On the personal appreciation of humor based on implicit—unsaid—information, Dolitsky (1983: 41) writes: "When humor relies on the 'unsaid,' individuals engaging with a story will only find it amusing if they can recognize what was not explicitly stated but served as a crucial underlying element, or what was stated but should have remained unsaid... Humorists leverage their audience's unarticulated expectations." While the Algerian humorous discourse study emphasizes the violation of the maxim of relevance, its findings are consistent with existing research (Al-Zubeiry, 2020). However, this needs further exploration, to align with other studies proposing that humor can also arise from cognitive processes (Yus, 2003), social interactions (Huang et al.,2023), and the navigation of sensitive topics (Buchwald et al., 2023). The use of humor in these studies, whether it aligns with or deviates from

Grice's maxims, serves various functions such as mitigating discomfort, enhancing social bonds, or challenging social norms.

Conclusion and Implications for further Research

Overall, the study highlights the importance of understanding cultural nuances and context when analyzing humor. The obtained findings can help develop culturally appropriate humorous discourse and avoid misunderstanding of offence to the audience. Therefore, it is important to consider the cultural background of the audience when creating or analyzing humorous discourse.

The current study paves the way for comparative studies across multiple cultures, potentially contributing to a global framework for comprehending and crafting humor while considering significant factors. Future research then may delve into the convergence of humor and technology, exploring the role of artificial intelligence in predicting joke success across diverse cultures, examining the emotional intelligence of humor creators as another promising avenue for study.

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