

HUMOUR FROM A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE: THE PROBLEM OF CLASSIFICATION

O HUMOR NA PERSPECTIVA LINGUÍSTICA: O PROBLEMA DA CLASSIFICAÇÃO

EL HUMOR DESDE UNA PERSPECTIVA LINGÜÍSTICA: EL PROBLEMA DE LA CLASIFICACIÓN

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ABSTRACT: Humour represents a central aspect of our everyday conversation. This is why the study of humour has attracted the attention of researchers for centuries. Although research on humour in its numerous genres has been pursued for centuries, only scant attention has been paid to research on theoretical interpretation of the humour theory in compliance with an anthropocentric scientific paradigm based on the modern German language. The present study focuses on humour from a linguistic perspective, trying to describe the types of humour theories. The views of famous researchers on this problem have been analyzed. Before discussing humour theories in detail, it will be helpful to define humour. This study shows which of the theories are the most relevant ones for cognitive-semantic research, as well as what their function is. We can conclude that the classification of humour theories by J. Jablonska-Hood is the most comprehensive.

KEYWORDS: Humour. Humour theory. Classification. Nature of humour. The German language.

RESUMO: *O humor representa um aspecto central da nossa conversa cotidiana. É por isso que o estudo do humor atrai a atenção de pesquisadores há séculos. Embora a pesquisa sobre o humor em seus numerosos gêneros tenha sido realizada há séculos, pouca atenção tem sido dada à pesquisa sobre a interpretação teórica da teoria do humor em conformidade com um paradigma científico antropocêntrico baseado na língua alemã moderna. O presente estudo enfoca o humor a partir de uma perspectiva linguística, procurando descrever os tipos de teorias do humor. As opiniões de pesquisadores famosos sobre este problema foram analisadas. Antes de discutir as teorias do humor em detalhes, será útil definir o humor. Este estudo mostra quais das teorias são as mais relevantes para a pesquisa cognitivo-semântica,*

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bem como qual é a sua função. Podemos concluir que a classificação das teorias do humor de J. Jablonska-Hood é a mais abrangente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Humor. Teoria do humor. Classificação. Natureza do humor. A língua alemã.*

RESUMEN: *El humor representa un aspecto central de nuestra conversación cotidiana. Es por esto que el estudio del humor ha llamado la atención de los investigadores durante siglos. Aunque la investigación sobre el humor en sus numerosos géneros se ha llevado a cabo durante siglos, se ha prestado poca atención a la investigación sobre la interpretación teórica de la teoría del humor de conformidad con un paradigma científico antropocéntrico basado en el idioma alemán moderno. El presente estudio se centra en el humor desde una perspectiva lingüística, tratando de describir los tipos de teorías del humor. Se han analizado las opiniones de investigadores famosos sobre este problema. Antes de discutir las teorías del humor en detalle, será útil definir el humor. Este estudio muestra cuáles de las teorías son las más relevantes para la investigación cognitivo-semántica, así como cuál es su función. Podemos concluir que la clasificación de las teorías del humor de J. Jablonska-Hood es la más complete.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Humor. Teoría del humor. Clasificación. Naturaleza del humor. El idioma alemán.*

Introduction

Problem Statement: A person as an active subject of perception in the process of interpersonal relations is prone to positive emotions. Since speaking about such a form of communication as humour, which is certain phenomenon of social and individual consciousness, one has to admit its humanistic orientation. It is humour that helps to get some stress relief as well as get some complex life situations resolved in the period of globalization. Humour allows us to fight depression, doubt, stress as well as rise spirit.

Relevance of the research is defined, on the one hand, by the general trend of the modern linguistic studies to understand the nature of humour and comic in different languages, on the other hand – by the urgent need to theoretically interpret the humour theory in compliance with anthropocentric scientific paradigm based on the modern German language.

The **purpose** of the research lies in theoretical conceptual justification of linguistic theories of humour that is being formed in the modern socio-cultural communicative space of Germany.

The **object** of the research is humour as a socioethnocultural linguistic phenomenon in the modern German language.

The scientific article is based on the corpus of authentic material represented in the work of H.G. Lechter “Das extra dicke Witze-Buch” which provides data for the analytical part of the given research.

Scientific novelty consists in the attempt to generalize and regulate various views of researchers on the problem of linguistic theories of humour.

Presentation of basic material of the research

A number of Ukrainian and foreign scientists devoted their scientific works to studying the phenomenon of comic, among them Attardo, Freud, Bergson, Escarpit, Raskin, Borev, Virt, Dombrovska, Bassai, Dörner, Kapitska, Kindt, Kotthoff, Müller, Ross, Samohina, Tshynadlovskyi, Kharchenko, and others.

The problems of verbal representation of humour in translation have recently been in the focus of scientific interests of many Ukrainian and foreign scientists, Abrosimova, Boldyreva, Ponomarenko, Pidgrushna, in particular. However, the works listed consider only separate theories of humour without detailed analysis of every approach.

Before we start analyzing the works of prominent scientists that greatly contributed to the understanding of the nature of humour theories, it is necessary to investigate in detail categorization, treatment, and specification of “humour” as a concept in the scientific articles of Ukrainian and foreign scientists. Therefore, how to define the concept of humour itself?

Results and discussion

First and foremost, it is important to state that humour as a multiaspect, interdisciplinary, psychologically and socially relevant cognitive phenomenon that is formed in human phylogeny and is developed in ontogeny under the conditions of dynamic social environment, meeting the innate and acquired needs of the person.

It is commonly known that *(h)ūmor* denoted “liquid”, “moisture”, “juice of the body, organism” in the ancient period. In accordance with humoral theory, being supported by Hippocrates and his followers, the characteristics of temperament are caused by the predominance of certain liquid in the body i.e., anatomical physiological and individual psychological characteristics of person depend on certain blending of four essential life juices, among them: blood, mucus, black and yellow bile that circulate in the human body. Depending on the predominance of this or that liquid in the body, the person had a good

health, that is “good humour.” Bad combination led to diseases, that is, to “bad humor.” These four types of humour defined person’s temperaments, they were: a sanguine person (the predominance of blood makes a person active, cheerful, and positive), a phlegmatic person (the predominance of bile makes a person calm, apathetic, indifferent, and slow), a choleric person (the predominance of yellow bile makes a person irritable, excitable, and reckless), a melancholic person (the predominance of black bile makes a person depressed, oppressed, and pessimistic). In ancient medicine humour was the basis of life, health, and temperament. As it is stated in the etymological dictionary published by Duden (DUDEN, 1997, p. 295), “the development of the current usual positive meaning of the word “humour” (oxytone) which is formally equal to the French word *humeur* took place under the influence of the English language. We find the following definition of this concept in the above-mentioned dictionary: “the talent of a person consists in accepting fallibilities of people and world, everyday difficulties and failures with lightheartedness and calmness.” Academic dictionary of the Ukrainian language (ACADEMIC DICTIONARY OF THE UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE, 1971, p. 194) defines humour as “a kind and sarcastic treatment of something directed to disclosing weaknesses; the ability to represent, show something in a funny and comic way.”

In his work *L'humour* Escarpit (ESCARPIT, 1981, p. 5-7) stated that humour could not be defined. According to V. Raskin, humour is a universal phenomenon, that is, each person is born with a certain form of humour. But humour is not the innate phenomenon by itself (*nature*); character education and life experience also influence humour (*nurture*) (RASKIN, 1985, p. 2). This implies that the sense of humour differs in different people, and not every person is humorous. Although everyone has humoristic competence, sometimes language proficiency of a certain person, his/her skills to choose, use linguistic means competently in speech is insufficient and does not meet expectations (RASKIN, 1985, p. 3), (DÖRNER, 2017, p. 20) adds that “if the person says that he/she has a sense of humour, it usually means, that he/she can laugh at him/herself.” J. Tshynadlovskyi defines humour as a “subjective characteristic of a person to accept some phenomena from reality” (TRZYNADLOWSKI, 1955), by contrast, S. Perlinger explains this notion “as a spontaneous approach to life together with rich imagination (PERLINGER, 2015, p. 44).

We can illustrate this by the following joke:

Die Mutter ist entsetzt, hat sie doch von ihrem Sprössling auf der Straße gerade einen besonders unschönen Satz gehört.

»So etwas sagst du nie wieder!«, ermahnt sie ihren Sohn.

»Aber Mami«, rechtfertigt sich der schlaue Knabe.

»Das ist doch ein Zitat von Schiller.«

»Dann wirst du ab sofort mit diesem Schiller nicht mehr spielen«, entscheidet Mami rigoros (LECHTER, 2005, p. 529).

G. Müller rightly mentions “humour can involve any event, phenomenon, subject or object that provokes laughter or seems witty for the purpose of appeasement of interpersonal relations.” (MÜLLER, 1964, p. 8).

In his work “Laughter”, essay about the meaning of humor, published in 1901, the researcher Bergson (1901) supposes that the words “humour” and “comic” are synonymous. Freud (1970, p. 153) follows his idea, stating that both terms have similar psychic localization in preconsciousness.

Considering humoristic dialogic speech “*Wie stirbt bei einer Blondine eine Hirnzelle? – Einsam*” (LECHTER, 2005, p. 88) or “*– Was sagt eine Blondine, wenn man sie nach dem Unterschied zwischen einer weißen und einer braunen Kuh fragt? – Die braune gibt Kakao*” (LECHTER, 2005, p. 96) as an example of linguo-creative stereotypic, comic formation, jokey communication key, we mean that the comic in such jokes is sometimes realized with the help of intention of derision by criticizing existing social stereotypes (such as for instance, intellectual inability of blonde women). This is because “the comic acts among other things as a general term (hyperonym) for fun and various entertainments starting from comic and witty farce and nonsense to satiric or humorous” (WIRTH, 2017, p. 2).

We agree with the opinion of Ruch that humour “should be seen as a multifaceted phenomenon hardly to be accounted for by any single theory or to be examined by a single paradigm” (RUCH, 2001, p. 413).

In the 1970s a number of scientists described more than 100 typical humour models, defining minimal conditions, necessary to cause humour and laughter. Later P. Keith-Spiegel grouped them in eight theories, each of which was characterized by certain reason for humour: biologic, psychoanalytic, superiority, contrary to reality expectation, sudden decision, allegoric nature, relief, configurativeness, to name a few (KEITH-SPIEGEL, 1972). However, Bergler (1956, p. 1-41) suggests 76 laughter and humour theories, not giving their detailed justification.

Over the course of time the number of humour and comic theories has increased. They were analyzed with respect to the subject and object of humour.

The classification of humour theories by Dzemydok (1974, p. 11) is worth noting. The scientist codified six typological models, within which one can single out objectivistic, subjectivistic and relativistic theories:

1. Theory of negative characteristic of the object of derision and theory of superiority of the subject over the comic matter;
2. Theory of degradation;
3. Theory of contrast;
4. Theory of contradiction;
5. Theory of abnormality;
6. Mixed type theories.

B. Dzemydok adds that each of these theories is included in one of these groups, depending on the place of the comic substance in it. The comic substance can be whether in the subject sphere, in the sphere of emotions or in relations between the object of perception and the subject that percepts.

The scientist Attardo (1994, p. 1) distinguishes three types of theories used in humour:

1. Essentialist theories;
2. Teleological theories; and
3. Substantialist theories.

Moreover, he adds that “linguistic theories of humour are either essentialist or teleological” (sociolinguistic approaches) (ATTARDO, 1994, p. 2).

Lyttle offers his classification of humour theories in his scientific work devoted to studying of effectiveness of humour in beliefs. The researcher single outs functional theories, stimuli theories and response theories (LYTTLE, 2001, p. 23). However, in our opinion, this systematization of humour theories is not comprehensive and requires revision.

It has to be mentioned, that most researchers distinguish three main humour theories, they are:

1. Superiority theory, its proponents are: Plato, Aristotle, T. Hobbes, H. Bergson;
2. Incongruity theory, its proponents are: I. Kant, E. Oring, A. Schopenhauer, H. Spencer;
3. Relief theory, its proponent is S. Freud.

The proponents of superiority theory see the comic in the sense of superiority and advantage over somebody/something; they consider moral inferiority of humour. Plato thought that “one could not understand serious issues without funny ones; in fact, opposite things are understood with opposites, in case a person wants to be intelligent” (PLATO, 1965,

p. 77), and the essence of humour lies in “combination of satisfaction and grief” (PLATO, 1999, p. 54). It can be explained by the fact that a person who laughs at somebody feels sympathy and sorrow for their mistakes at the same time, and he/she also feels happy that he/she does not have such faults in them. In this situation the person feels two emotions at once, namely: sympathy and satisfaction. The following joke proves these statements. Having read the joke, one feels a mixture of comic and sorrow at the same time:

Ein Biologiestudent bei der mündlichen Prüfung. Am Ende sagt sein Professor:

"Zeichnen Sie mal einen Zug."

Der Student: "Bitte?"

Der Professor wiederholt seine Aufgabe, und der brave Student zeichnet einen Zug. Der Professor: Ein solcher ist gerade für Sie abgefahren! Sie haben die Prüfung nicht bestanden! (LECHTER, 2005, p. 563).

In accordance with Hobbes, “laughter that causes superiority, has two modes: self-elevation (“pleasure from one’s own unexpected action”) and humiliation of the other person (“awareness of some shortcoming or ugliness in the other person”).” (HOBBS, 2011, p. 41), whereas a laughter response, in philosopher’s opinion, is caused by sudden glory.

The representatives of incongruity theory suppose that humour is based on the contradiction, inconsistency, absurdity; and firstly-unrelated elements suddenly form complete picture and cause laughter.

Thus, Oring thinks that humour depends on perception of appropriate incongruity (ORING, 2003, p. 1), that means that humour is the result of understanding the inconsistency between listener’s expectations and events happened. For example:

Was ist der Unterschied zwischen einer Blondine und einer Glühbirne? Die Blondine ist leichter anzumachen (LECHTER, 2005, p. 91).

Arzt zur Patientin: "Ich habe Ihnen da ein Rezept aufgeschrieben, Fräulein Schlecht". Die Patientin entzückt: "Das ist aber nett von Ihnen, Herr Doktor, kochen Sie auch so gern?" (LECHTER, 2005, p. 46).

Wie kann man die Augen einer Blondine aufleuchten lassen? Durch eine Taschenlampe an ihrem Ohr (LECHTER, 2005, p. 90).

Most of modern humour theories admit that humoristic relief and emotional release can be the element of humorous situation, but they question their necessity. As long as laughter is a way to get rid of concerns and emotional and moral pressure.

Let us consider the examples of such a joke:

Drei Blondinen gehen durch den Wald und treffen eine Fee. Die sagt: »Jede von euch hat einen Wunsch frei.«

Die erste wünscht sich auszusehen wie Pamela Anderson - schon ist der Wunsch erfüllt.

Die zweite wünscht sich lange Haare - und schon hat sie Haare bis zum Boden.

Die dritte wünscht sich, noch dümmer zu sein - und sie wird zum Mann (LECHTER, 2005, p. 95).

The next example illustrates consistent joke organization, aimed at creation and framing of a riddle or puzzle, why something happens the fourth time differently than previous times:

Ein Ingenieur, ein Buchhalter, ein Chemiker und ein Beamter sprechen über die Klugheit ihrer Hunde.

Der Ingenieur sagt, sein Hund könne gut zeichnen. Er lässt ihn ein Blatt Papier holen und einen Kreis, ein Rechteck und ein Dreieck zeichnen, was der Hund auch leicht schafft.

Der Buchhalter sagt, sein Hund sei besser. Er befiehlt ihm, ein Dutzend Kekse zu holen und sie in Dreierhäufchen aufzuteilen. Das schafft der Hund locker.

Der Chemiker meint, das sei noch gar nichts, und befiehlt seinem Hund, einen Liter Milch zu holen und davon ein Drittel in ein Halblitergefäß zu gießen. Der Hund schafft das leicht.

Grinsend wenden sich die drei an den Beamten und fragen, was sein Hund könne. Der schnippt mit dem Finger, und sein Hund frisst die Kekse, trinkt die Milch, macht ein Häufchen auf das Papier, vergnügt sich mit den anderen drei Hunden, behauptet, sich dabei eine Beinverletzung zugezogen zu haben, reicht eine Beschwerde wegen gefährlicher Arbeitsbedingungen ein, verlangt Verdienstausschlag, lässt sich krankschreiben und läuft heim (LECHTER, 2005, p. 68).

The illustrated joke shows the consistency of three parallel events. The fourth event brakes parallelism, that according to Sacks, is “a minimal but sufficient condition for solving the puzzle like that” (SACKS, 1978, p. 224).

It is to be noted that unexpectedness acts as a main factor of the comic effect. For example:

Drei kleine Jungen streiten sich darum, wessen Vater am schnellsten ist.

Meint der erste: »Mein Vater fährt einen Porsche!«

Sagt der zweite: »Das ist noch gar nichts. Mein Vater ist Pilot bei der Lufthansa und fliegt einen Airbus!«

Und schließlich der dritte: »Damit wollt ihr mich beeindrucken? Mein Vater ist Beamter. Um fünf Uhr hat er Dienstschluss, und um halb vier ist er schon zu Hause! (LECHTER, 2005, p. 79).

Eine Schwarzhaarige, eine Brünette und eine Blondine beim Quiz. Fragt der Quizmaster:

»Wie viele «D» sind in «Bonanza»?

Die Schwarzhaarige und die Brünette wie aus der Pistole geschossen: »Keines«.

Nach langem Überlegen sagt die Blondine: »22«

Der Quizmaster verdutzt: »Wieso 22?«

Antwort: »DamdadadamdadadamdadadamBonanzaaahdamdadadamdadadamdadadamdamdam ... (LECHTER, 2005, p. 89).

The problem of innocence as a subtype of the comic was mentioned by S. Freud in his work «Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum unbewussten» (FREUD, 1970, p. 118), he claims that “it is a characteristic feature that naive conversations, like casual talks of children can also be called “naive jokes”. The comic here is connected with the idea that we do not expect from speakers to think about the joke content in advance and to have the intention to tell the joke since they naively believe in the truth of the mentioned statement; and we take the place of them, digging into that situation. For example:

Weißt du eigentlich, warum die Fische stumm sind?, fragt Tina ihren Bruder.

Blöde Frage! Kannst du etwa mit dem Kopf unter Wasser reden? (LECHTER, 2005, p. 350).

The classification of humour theories by Jablonska-Hood is, in our opinion, the most comprehensive. She divided the system of humour theories into two types: “Physiological humour theories” and “Linguistic humour theories.” Incongruity, superstition and relief theories the researcher referred to physiological humour theories. The semantic-script theory of humour (SSTH), the general theory of verbal humour (GTVH), Richi offers and pragmatic approaches to humour the researcher referred to linguistic humour theories (JABŁOŃSKA-HOOD, 2015, p. 109-154).

The illustration of the ways of representation of the comic category as well as the attempt to classify humour theories will allow to generalize theoretic knowledge of studying humour as a multiaspect interdisciplinary cognitive phenomenon as well as offer new ways of its solving.

Conclusions

Considering the role of the phenomenon of the comic in human activity, the question of studying the main means of creation of comic effect in jokes based on the material of the German language, appears especially relevant today. Therefore, studies in this direction are fully justified. The chosen problematic issues reveal not only relevance and meaningfulness but also their potential for further theoretic and practical investigations. The study of the stated theoretical postulates will open the opportunity to thoroughly analyse the frequency of the usage of linguistic means that are involved in the representation of comic discourse in anecdotes on the lexico-semantic level of the modern German language.

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