

Beyond a Joke: Types of Conversational Humour

Marta Dynel*
University of Łódź

Abstract

The main objective of this article is to list and briefly characterise several semantic and pragmatic types of *verbal humour*, primarily those which cannot be reduced to (canned) jokes. First of all, a distinction is drawn between jokes and *conversational humour*, an umbrella term covering a variety of semantic and pragmatic types of humour, which recur in interpersonal communication, whether real-life (everyday conversations or TV programmes) or fictional (film and book dialogues). On a different axis representing formal structure, stylistic figures are distinguished, such as irony, puns and allusions.

1 Introduction

Humour is the focus of scholarly studies conducted from philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological and linguistic perspectives. While researchers working within the first four fields may regard humour as one (albeit multifarious) phenomenon, linguists analysing its semantic, cognitive, sociolinguistic or pragmatic mechanisms must necessarily narrow down the scope of their investigation to its particular manifestations, which are many.

Verbal humour which is of interest to linguists and is thus addressed here stands vis-à-vis non-verbal humour emerging from, for instance, pictures or body language (cf. Norrick 2004a). Verbal humour is understood as that produced by means of language or text (cf. Raskin 1985; Attardo and Raskin 1991; Chiaro 1992; Attardo 1994;¹ Alexander 1997; Norrick 1986, 2004a).

The underlying aim of the article is to help the readers appreciate the multifarious characteristics of conversational humour and familiarise themselves with a number of categories recurring in linguistic literature on the topic. This article presents a list of verbal humour types/categories known in linguistics rather than their clear-cut taxonomy. The latter would be a quixotic attempt on two grounds. First, the categories tend to, at least in a few cases, overlap and merge, which is why particular instances of humour can be subsumed under more than one label, depending on what criteria are taken into account. Secondly, the list proposed is, theoretically, subject to expansion, given that second-order sub-types of humour abound, while researchers never cease to propose new terms for the phenomena they observe.

2 Jokes

The *(canned)² joke* is commonly considered the prototypical form of verbal humour, produced orally in conversations³ or published in collections. Even if the concept is by no means unfamiliar to lay language users, who intuitively grasp its meaning, it does pose definitional problems. Most frequently, this humour category is defined in terms of its

constituent parts. According to the widely acknowledged definition, a joke comprises a *build-up* and a *punch* (Hockett 1972/1977). Similarly, Sherzer (1985:216) defines a joke as ‘a discourse unit consisting of two parts, the set up and the punch line’. The set-up is normally built of a narrative or/and a dialogue (Attardo and Chabanne 1992), while the punchline (see, e.g. Attardo 1994, 2001) is the final portion of the text, which engenders *surprise* and leads to *incongruity* with the set-up (Suls 1972). There are a number of ways in which this incongruity emerges and is resolved (cf. Ritchie 2004;⁴ Dynel 2009). In the example below, the punchline reveals information that sheds new light on the situation presented in the set-up.

- (1) A man is eating a stew at a restaurant. Suddenly he feels something sharp in his mouth. The object turns out to be an earring. The man instantly starts rebuking the waiter, who says, ‘I’m terribly sorry but you can’t imagine how happy the chef will be to get it back. It’s over three weeks since she lost it’.⁵

There are also a few subtypes of jokes different from the canonical canned joke that are often treated as distinct categories, i.e. *shaggy-dog stories* (lengthy stories without punchlines) (Chiaro 1992), *riddles* (questions followed by unpredictable and silly answers) (Chiaro 1992; Dienhart 1999) or *one-liners* (one-line jokes with punchlines reduced to a few words) (Chiaro 1992; Norrick 1993).

- (2) Ghandi walked barefoot everywhere, to the point that his feet became quite thick and hard. Even when he wasn’t on a hunger strike, he did not eat much and became quite thin and frail. He also was quite a spiritual person. Furthermore, due to his diet, he ended up with very bad breath. He became known as a super-calloused fragile mystic plagued with halitosis. (http://www.heggen.net/entertainment/shaggy_dogs/Gandhi.htm)
(a shaggy-dog story)
- (3) A. What do you do to catch a squirrel?
(B. No idea...)
A: Jump up a tree and act like a nut. (<http://www.jokes.com>)
(a riddle)
- (4) I don’t approve of political jokes ... I’ve seen too many of them get elected.
(<http://www.getamused.com/joke>)
(a one-liner)

One-liners, although generally considered to be canned jokes, are also conceived as being very similar to *witticisms* (described later in this article), because they may be contextually prompted and normally do not interfere with the development of the conversational interchange as do full-fledged jokes.

3 Conversational Humour

Although many contemporary linguists investigating humour narrow down their scope of studies to the (canned) joke, owing to the methodological feasibility of this form, there are still quite a few who do fill the lacuna in the realm of humour research, focusing on spontaneous or pre-constructed interactional humour, different from jokes. There are numerous works focusing on the chosen aspects of particular humour phenomena in isolation, not placed on any hierarchical tier in humour taxonomy (e.g. Norrick 1984, 1986, 1993; Drew 1987; Hay 2000; Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006; and references in

the sections below). For terminological clarity, the blanket term proposed here is *conversational humour* (cf. Kotthoff 1996, 1999, 2006; Coates 2007; Martin 2007). This term appears to be more advantageous than ‘conversational joking/jokes’,⁶ inasmuch as it easily embraces units such as humorous words or witticisms, which do not resemble jokes formally and often cannot be entirely subsumed under the *humorous mode/frame/key* (e.g. Bateson 1953; Fry 1963; Norrick 1993; Kotthoff 1999, 2007; Coates 2007; Dynel 2009), given that they contribute semantically to the speaker’s message (cf. Norrick 1993).

Units of conversational humour range from single-word lexemes, phrasemes to whole sentences and even multi-turn exchanges interwoven into non-humorous discourse. Conversational humour is here treated as an umbrella term for various verbal chunks created spontaneously or repeated verbatim for the sake of amusing the recipient, either directly contributing to the semantic content of the ongoing conversation or diverting its flow into a humorous mode/frame/key, in which speakers need not genuinely mean what their humorous verbalisations convey.

4 Lexemes and Phrasemes

The shortest humorous chunks are *lexemes* and *phrasemes* (cf. Mel’čuk 1995, 1998), i.e. lexical units used in discourse for a humorous effect, whose semantic import is usually germane to the whole utterance, often non-humorous as such. The humorous potential of lexemes and phrasemes resides in their novelty, unprecedented juxtapositions (incongruity) of their constituents and the new semantic meaning they carry. Even if borrowed from popular media discourse, they are widely repeated in appropriate conversational contexts, they are unlikely to be officially conventionalised and listed in dictionaries as lexical items, and thus always retaining the quality of exceptionality. The two humorous categories, lexemes and phrasemes, deserve meticulous attention, as they do not appear to have been widely discussed in humour literature (but see Chiaro 1992; Alexander 1997; Nilsen and Nilsen 1978).

4.1 LEXEMES

Most humorous lexemes can be conceptualised as *neologisms*. Those are new words indispensable for naming new inventions and discoveries. However, speakers will also incorporate new words in their idiolects, the sole reason being the novelty of expression and humour. Humorous neologisms capitalise on various word-formation processes.

a. coining – creating new morphemes

- (5) pupkus – the moist residue left on a window after a dog presses its nose to it
- (6) a narfistic – an idea or concept that is very difficult to express
 - b. derivation – adding prefixes and suffixes creatively, albeit in conformity to general derivation rules
- (7) reuglification – the process of becoming ugly again, e.g. when washing off make-up
- (8) a kitchennaut – a person working in a kitchen
 - (derivation with the bound meaningful morpheme –naut)
 - c. compounding – combining words
- (9) a Monday-morning idea – a silly idea one has early in the morning, after a weekend spent partying
- (10) a whistle number – an impressive number

- d. blending – combining parts of words
- (11) a sexcapade – sexual escapade
- (12) alcoholiday – holiday with alcohol
- e. acronyms and alphabetisms
- (13) SINK SCUM – single, independent, no kids ... the self-centred urban male (two words with their pejorative meaning treated as alphabetisms)
- (14) SINBAD – single income, no boyfriend, absolutely desperate (a word, the name of a hero known from a story-cycle of ancient Middle Eastern origin, treated as an alphabetism)
- (15) DNA – National Association of Dyslexics (a conventional acronym bearing a new meaning)
- f. decomposition via folk etymology – the attribution of a new meaning to an already existing word, giving rise to the so-called *daffynitions*
- (16) deciduous – able to make up one's mind
- (17) a coffee – a person who is coughed upon
- (18) adultery – the state of being an adult

4.2 PHRASEMES

Semantic phrasemes (Mel'čuk 1995, 1998)⁷ manifesting humorous potential are characterised by novelty and capitalise on the surprising juxtapositions of their subordinate elements.

- (19) a behemoth of a paper – a paper which scares with its quality
- (20) the warmth of a meat locker – emotional coldness

A different category of phraseme, standing vis-à-vis the one exemplified above, comprises already existing units whose conventionalised meanings are substituted with new ones. As rightly observed by an anonymous reviewer, a peculiar subtype of this category will be rhyming slang, e.g. 'the trouble and strife' for 'wife'.

- (21) donors of organs – people on mopeds on a highway
- (22) a geriatric ward – a group of elderly people sitting together
- (23) a beast of burden – a person or thing causing distress

Lexemes and phrasemes are the shortest possible humorous chunks, which may participate in longer humorous utterances or interchanges described below.

5 Witticisms

A *witticism*, also referred to as a *wisecrack*, a *quip*⁸ or an *epigram*,⁹ is a clever and humorous textual unit interwoven into a conversational exchange, not necessarily of humorous nature (cf. Norrick 1984, 1986, 1993, 2003). Witticisms are context-bound, but occur spontaneously, usually in non-humorous conversational environment, in contrast to canned jokes, which constitute integral parts *per se*, dissociated from the whole discourse (Long and Graesser 1988). Witticisms are thus similar to non-humorous sayings or proverbs in the sense that they are communicative entities comprehensible even in isolation, but they are usually produced relevantly to (recurrent) conversational contexts (e.g. a conversation on a given topic, such as politics; or upon

somebody's coming late). As regards their form, witticisms resemble one-liners. However, in contrast to one-liners which, as are longer jokes, are produced within a humorous frame and rarely communicate meanings outside it (but see Oring 2003), witticisms overtly convey meanings besides facilitating humour. Additionally, witticisms are inherently clever, while one-line jokes need not be so (e.g. bordering on the absurd, rather than witty observations) (see Dynel 2009). Witticisms may assume various communicative forms, such as definitions or comments (Chiaro 1992) and serve communicative purposes besides engendering humour.

- (24) Political skill is the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month and next year, and have the ability afterwards to say why it didn't happen.
- (25) The chance of bread falling with the buttered side down is directly proportional to the cost of the carpet.
- (26) It takes 42 muscles to frown and only 4 to pull the trigger of a decent sniper rifle. (said to somebody frowning)

Witticisms may either be formed on the spur of the moment or, once verbalised, gain a permanent status in an individual speaker's idiolect or in the language of a social group (Norrick 1984, 1993, 1994, 2003), particularly if they are used by respected members of a peer group or appear in media discourse targeted at broad audiences. The allure of such humorous units resides in the fact that speakers may display their wit and cleverness, and thus reap rewards for the creation of witty chunks, despite having obtained them from somebody else's discourse. Witticisms (and other main humour types distinguished here) can also be categorised according to semantic phenomena or stylistic figures on which they operate. The figures are presented in this section insofar as witticisms are structurally and pragmatically less complex than the forms addressed later and the nature of the figures can be understood without additional explanations.

5.1 STYLISTIC FIGURES

- a. simile/comparison – comparing one element with another using words such as 'like' or 'as' (cf. Norrick 1984)
 - (27) She is like a killer who arrives at your doorstep in pigtails holding a bunch of roses.
 - (28) They're kissing as if they were surgically attached.
- b. metaphor – expresses the similarity between the semantic *vehicle* (base or source), i.e. a well-known referent, and the semantic *tenor* (topic or target), which is thus defined (cf. Mio and Graesser 1991; Pollio 1996)
 - (29) You make a plate of cooked spaghetti tense. (i.e. the hearer heightens tension in others)
- c. hyperbole – exaggeration (cf. Norrick 1993, 2004b)
 - (30) Your cardigan is a blemish on the whole male population.
- d. paradox – a statement which shows an internal contradiction (Nilsen and Nilsen 1978)
 - (31) I don't believe in astrology. I'm a Sagittarius and I'm sceptical.
- e. irony
 - (32) It's great that you've started growing hair on your legs.

Irony is frequently addressed in humour literature (e.g. Norrick 1994, 2003; Jorgensen 1996; Giora 1998; Attardo 2000; Attardo et al. 2003; Kotthoff 2003; Partington 2006, 2007). Also, there have been numerous proposals accounting for irony in theoretical terms. It must be remembered, however, that this trope may, but does not have to, overlap with humour. In other words, not all ironic utterances are humorous, which is why only a part of the extensive literature on irony should be subsumed under humour research.

In non-theoretical terms, the literal import of an ironic utterance is opposite to the implicit meaning intended by the speaker. However, irony may also pivot on a mismatch between the contextual factors and the proposition (Colston and O'Brien 2000), i.e. between the reality and an utterance whose illocutionary force is supported by the speaker, e.g. 'I love children who keep their rooms clean' said by a mother upon seeing her son's untidy room. There is also a general agreement that irony invariably conveys the speaker's evaluation. However, contrary to what some researchers may suggest, this evaluation need not be negative, but may also be positive (Attardo 2000), e.g. a friend saying to another who has just received a very good grade, 'Your result is atrocious!'. Admittedly, negative irony, whereby a negative evaluation is realised via a positive statement, is more frequent than the other type. The negative type of irony is dubbed sarcastic irony (e.g. Jorgensen 1996; Colston 1997). Although the term 'sarcasm' is sometimes used synonymously with irony, especially in American literature, the two should not be equated, as sarcasm does not need to entail irony (Fowler 1926/1965; Partington 2006) and, secondly, irony may also be positive.¹⁰ Each manifestation of sarcasm, by contrast, coincides with 'a sharp, bitter or cutting expression or remark: a bitter gibe or taunt' (Partington 2006:212). The category of sarcasm captures any mordant critical comment not necessarily entailing oppositeness typical of irony, conceived of among others as evaluation reversal (Partington 2006, 2008).

(33) I know you have an open mind. I can feel the draught from where I'm sitting.

Sarcasm is thus a general term referring to an aggressive remark that carries humour (cf. Norrick 1993, 1994, 2003), also sometimes coinciding with a *putdown* (see Section 9) as long as it is directly targeted at a *butt*, i.e. the disparaged party. Needless to say, sarcasm will not have any humorous potential from the perspective of the butt (cf. Culpeper 2005).

5.2 PUNS

Punning is one of the primary concepts examined in humour research. Puns not only are forms of conversational humour (witticisms, one-liners, joke's set-up or punchline) but also coincide with advertising slogans or article headlines and occur in jokes. A pun can be defined as a humorous verbalisation that has (prototypically) two interpretations couched in purposeful ambiguity of a word or a string of words (collocations or idioms), dubbed the *punning element*, manifesting itself in one form (or two very similar ones) but conveying two different meanings.

(34) Take life with a pinch of salt, a slice of lemon and a bottle of tequila.
(idiom 'take something with a pinch of salt' read at the idiomatic level, i.e. 'remain doubtful of something', and literally)

- (35) A woman was created from a man's rib. She has been ribbed ever since.
(homonymy, i.e. two synchronically unrelated senses, of 'rib')
- (36) Better late than pregnant. (said to a late-comer)
(polysemy, i.e. two different but related senses of, 'late')
- (37) You are stuck with your debt if you can't budge it.
(homophony, i.e. phonetic similarity, of 'budge it' and 'budget')

Puns are immensely complex and diversified humorous forms that never cease to garner scholarly interest. (see, e.g. Attardo 1994; Ritchie 2004; Dynel 2009; and further references therein). By way of illustration, example 34 exploits the garden-path mechanism (Dynel 2009), whereby the interpreter first observes the salient idiomatic meaning (i.e. 'don't believe everything that happens in your life') only to have to reject this interpretation in favour of another, the literal one, when the final portion of the text emerges on-line (i.e. 'spend your life drinking tequila with a slice of lemon and a pinch of salt'). On the other hand, in example 35, the interpreter activates consecutively and retains as relevant two meanings of the ambiguous word emerging twice in the surface structure, viz. 'a curved bone around the chest' and 'to poke fun at'.

5.3 ALLUSIONS: DISTORTIONS AND QUOTATIONS

Verbal humour may also rely on already existing material, i.e. on *allusions* (cf. Nash 1985; Norrick 1987, 1993, 1994) incorporating *distortions* and *quotations*. While the former make references to some linguistic units or longer texts, significantly changing the original forms and meanings, the latter operate on direct citations from original texts.

Among the main sources of distortions, there are various pragmatic formulae, e.g. idioms, clichés or proverbs, which give rise to *antiproverbs* (Mieder and Litovkina 1999, 2006). Distortions are based on *deletions*, *substitutions* or *additions*, whereby extra chunks of various lengths (letters/syllables/words) are inserted, in any position, viz. preceding the original text, following it or splitting it (cf. Veisbergs 1997). A distortion not only alludes to the source but also entirely changes the meaning of the original formulation, resulting in a humorous effect.

- (38) To have loafed and lost is better than never to have loafed at all.
(To have loved and lost is better than never to have loved at all – phoneme substitution)
- (39) The pot calling the grass green.
(The pot calling the kettle black – word substitution)
- (40) Life is not all beer and skittles. There are also girls.
(Life is not all beer and skittles – addition)

Quotations are defined as direct citations from any pre-existing texts, predominantly popular culture artefacts (e.g. scripts and film titles, songs, books, advertising slogans, nursery rhymes and the like), which become conversational units available to recipients with sufficient cultural knowledge. (The examples provided should be understood across nations, given the wide availability of the North American cultural artefacts.) Their humorous force stems primarily from the language user's acknowledgement of the pre-existing text and the quote's relevance to the situation.

- (41) Did I do a Rip Van Winkle?
(the eponymous hero from 'Rip Van Winkle' by Washington Irving)
- (42) Be a cool and poised ice-queen!
(from 'Bridget Jones's Diary')
- (43) Shaken but not stirred.
(from the James Bond series)

Additionally, formal phrases repeated verbatim in certain contexts (e.g. in court or army discourses) may be humorously exploited in conversational exchanges.

- (44) I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. (a husband to his wife)
(from court proceedings)
- (45) How do you plead? (a mother to a teenager)
(from court proceedings)
- (46) Sir, yes sir! (said to a co-worker)
(from the army discourse)

Interwoven into everyday discourse, such verbalisations may also be regarded as diversions in register, i.e. register clashes.

5.4 REGISTER CLASH

The two manifestations of *register clash* (Attardo 1994, 2001; Partington 2006, 2008) are *upgrading*, which entails using items from a higher register in informal discourse, and *downgrading*, also referred to as *bathos*, which involves the use of words from a lower register in a formal text. Very often this phenomenon relies not only on the style *per se* but also on the ideas conveyed, which cannot, and should not, be conveyed (in)formally, unless humour is intended.

- (47) The PM cocks his head like a Snow White listening to the animals.
- (48) I'd like to file charges against your improper birthday behaviour.

Needless to say, all the figures and phenomena presented above (Sections 5.1–5.4) are not reserved in their occurrence to witticisms and can be exploited in any of the humour types presented below.

6 Retorts

Another humorous form is the *retort* (Norrick 1984, 1986, 1993). It overlaps with the category of witticism produced in response to a preceding utterance. A retort can be defined as a quick and witty response to a preceding turn with which it forms an *adjacency pair* (Norrick 1993; cf. Schegloff and Sacks 1973; Sacks 1974; Schegloff 1986). With the exception of routines repeated by given interlocutors, retorts are not expected by the producers of the *first pair parts* (while non-humorous adjacency pairs, typically, are predictable). A retort is produced with a view to amusing the hearer, albeit not always the direct addressee but the third party (ex. 50), in which case it is a manifestation of sarcasm or aggressive humour, one of the forms of which is, for instance, *subversive* (Holmes and

Marra 2002a) or *contestive* (Holmes and Marra 2002b) humour that ‘challenges, disagrees with or undermines the propositions or arguments put forward in earlier contributions’ (Holmes and Marra 2002a:1687).

- (49) Daughter: Dylan took a tampon from Gabby’s backpack, stuck it in his mouth and it got real big from his spit.
 Mother: I’ve been seriously underestimating him.
- (50) A: Fashion today goes toward tiny...
 B: So you’ve got the most fashionable brain.

One of the most common mechanisms governing retorts is the humorous interlocutor’s pretended misunderstanding of the preceding turn, which prompts him/her to skew the intended meaning and activate another one (Norrick 1984, 1986). Essentially, the same phenomenon is also discussed as an adversarial game of *trumping*, based on hyper-understanding and analysed as exploiting various cognitive construals (Veale et al. 2006; Brône 2008). A retort may hinge on either punning ambiguity (a poetic retort) or twofold pragmatic (illocutionary) force of the foregoing utterance (prosaic retort)¹¹ (Norrick 1984, 1986). Later, Norrick (1993, 2003) dubbed the former *punning*. This term, however, fails to capture the difference between punning retorts and free-floating puns in the form of witticisms or one-liners, which are contextually/topically adjusted, but do not capitalise directly on the form of the preceding verbalisation. Therefore, a retort exploiting surface-level ambiguity of the preceding utterance should preferably be dubbed differently, e.g. the *interactional pun*. It is an adjacency pair comprising an utterance couched in (initially covert) surface-level ambiguity and a retort which, for humorous purposes, foregrounds the latent meaning of the ambiguous first turn (cf. Norrick 1984, 1986, 1993).

- (51) A: What do you do when a bird dirties your windscreen?
 B: Never ask her out again.
- (52) A: Fax it up!
 B: Yes it does.

The second subtype of retort based on pretended misunderstanding pertains to cases couched in *pragmatic ambiguity* (cf. Ritchie 2004; Dynel 2009), i.e. ambiguity which manifests itself at the level of inferences, i.e. at the illocutionary level, rather than be rooted in the surface structure.

- (53) A: Why are you drinking alcohol?
 B: What else do you want me to do with it?
- (54) A: Wow! You’ve got a tattoo on your shoulder!
 B: Oh my Gosh! How did it appear there? I never noticed it!

The *rhetorical question* is another common, albeit rarely investigated, technique of performing a humorous retort (Schaffer 2005). A rhetorical question is a challenging statement conveying the obviousness of the speaker’s answer or, on the contrary, the speaker’s inability to respond (Schaffer 2005).

- (55) A: Do I look good in this dress?
 B: Is Batman a transvestite?

- (56) A: Do you mind if I smoke?
 B: Do you mind if I throw up on your trousers?

Some retorts can also be perceived as one-turn teases, especially those which are transparently enclosed within a humorous frame (e.g. those based on pretended misunderstanding). Essentially, the category of retort is used by authors focusing on formal or stylistic structuring of humorous exchanges, while the concept of teasing is employed by researchers discussing its pragmatics, notably its (non-)aggressive capacity.

7 Teasing

Teasing (Drew 1987; Norrick 1993; Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997; Partington 2006; Martin 2007; Dynel 2008a) can be conceptualised as a higher-order concept embracing jocular utterances performing a variety of pragmatic functions (such as mock challenges, threats or imitation) the meaning of which is not to be treated as truth-oriented and which invariably carries humorous force to be appreciated by both interlocutors. Contrary to the tenet propounded by many authors, i.e. that teasing is inherently playful but aggressive (e.g. Drew 1987; Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997), it may be argued that the degree of aggression in teasing is gradable and can even be non-existent. In addition, such aggression, if present, is only ostensible. In other words, producing a tease, the speaker does not mean to be genuinely offensive towards the hearer, challenging the latter jocularly, i.e. speaking within a humorous frame, even if simultaneously implicitly conveying pertinent meanings outside it. Supposing the speaker intends to be hurtful, a *putdown* (see Section 9), rather than a tease, comes into being.

- (57) Female: You manifest the Peter Pan syndrome.
 Male: And you have the Captain Hook syndrome. (teasing)
 Female: There's no such syndrome.
 Male: Obviously there is. You have it! (teasing)
- (58) Female: You're a thief and a liar.
 Male: I only lied about being a thief, I don't do that anymore. (teasing)
 Female: Steal?
 Male: Lie. (teasing)

8 Banter

If both parties are willing to engage in a humorous frame, a one-turn tease can develop into a longer exchange of repartees, which is dubbed *banter*. As Norrick (1993:29) puts it, banter is a 'rapid exchange of humorous lines oriented toward a common theme, though aimed primarily at mutual entertainment rather than topical talk'. A crucial quality of banter is that consecutive retorts are added very rapidly, which leads to what can be compared with a match of verbal ping-pong (Chiaro 1992) played by the two (or more) interlocutors, which is why it is primarily spoken, but can also be produced via instant messaging programmes (e.g. Skype). Such a coherent sequence of contributions is phased out from the ongoing conversational situation when one of the interlocutors has run out of ideas to outdo the other party.

Leech (1983) provides a slightly different definition of banter in the context of the Banter Principle, a second order principle allowing the speaker to be polite via pretended

impoliteness. In this view, banter is a method of building solidarity with the hearer by saying something 'obviously untrue' and 'obviously impolite'. So conceptualised, banter is a manifestation of *mock impoliteness* (cf. Culpeper 1996, 2005). However, this definition narrows down the scope of banter to its ostensibly aggressive/contestive form, while it may be also supportive, and maximally or minimally collaborative (Holmes 2006;¹² cf. Edelsky 1981; Coates 1989, 1996), which yields a number of banter types (Dynel 2008a). A most conspicuous category is that of *joint fantasising* or *humorous 'fantasy' sequence*, i.e. a fantasy/imaginary scenario created by interlocutors (Hay 1995; Kotthoff 2007).

- (59) Female (age 25): Drink up your beer!
 Male (age 45): Yes, mummy!
 Female: And make sure you change your nappy when it's wet!
 Male: I will! And when I do, I will go straight to bed to meet my teddy bear!
 Female: But only after you both brush your teeth.
 (supportive, maximally collaborative, i.e. joint fantasising)

9 Putdowns

Remarks which are truly abusive and disparaging, usually carrying no humour to be appreciated by the by the *butt*, should be regarded as *putdowns*, i.e. *putdown humour* (Zillmann and Stocking 1976), based on *ridicule* (Billig 2005), *mocking* (Ziv 1984; Norrick 1993, 1994; Everts 2003) or *sarcasm* (e.g. Norrick 1993; Partington 2006). The butt may coincide with the direct addressee, or another party, whether or not able to overhear the conversation.

- (60) You must be an experiment in Artificial Stupidity.
 (61) Your talent is like the Loch Ness monster. Nobody has seen it yet.
 (62) She's so deaf that she wouldn't hear a dustcart going through a nitro-glycerine factory.

If a pejorative (ridiculing, disparaging or sarcastic) remark is genuinely levelled against the addressee or a third party present, the latter faces a dire social threat (Zajdman 1995). The aim of the speaker in such a case is to denigrate and foster conflict with the butt and simultaneously to amuse another listening party or metarecipients, e.g. TV audiences, in the case of media discourse. The denigration of hearers via mocking is a very common humorous technique in television shows, in which the host's aim is to induce amusement in the target audience, and in films, as scriptwriters aim to entertain the general public at the cost of fictional characters. In real-life discourse, putdowns will more likely refer to people oblivious of such utterances being produced. Putdowns may also be presented as if they were aggressive teasing, which is when the speaker assures the hearer that the depreciatory remark is not meant to be truly offensive (even though it is). In contrast, what some authors (e.g. Terrion and Ashforth 2002) view as (ritual) putdowns are actually instances of teasing aimed to foster solidarity between interlocutors. Consequently, it may be concluded that the difference between aggressive teasing and putdowns can be drawn only in light of the speaker's real intention and the addressee's corresponding perception of it. In the case of teasing, even if ostensibly aggressive, the speaker's attitude towards the butt must be benevolent, subscribing to a humorous frame or mock impoliteness (Culpeper 1996, 2005; Bousfield 2008), which the hearer must also appreciate. In

contrast, in the case of putdowns, the speaker's genuine intention is indeed to denigrate the butt.

10 *Self-denigrating humour*

A most peculiar pragmatic type of humour comes into being when the speaker directs a brickbat at him/herself, which is known in literature as *self-disparaging*, *self-denigrating* or *self-deprecating* humour, as well as *self-mockery* or *self-directed joking* (cf. Norrick 1993; Crawford 1995; Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997; Kotthoff 2000; Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006; Dynel 2008a).

(63) My brain must be on the standby mode.

(64) In today's performance, the role of the idiot will be played by myself.

This form of humour is an indication of pre-conceived self-presentation politics and self-assuredness underlying a self-deprecating act. It is more self-teasing (cf. Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006) than a self-putdown, inasmuch as the speaker does not genuinely aim to disparage him/herself. Even if a verbalisation conveys a genuine self-putdown, it must be the result of preconceived self-presentation politics. The humorousness of a genuine auto-critical comment on the speaker's part, e.g. admitting to a mistake/failure (which transpires/may transpire), will have a cushioning effect. Self-deprecation produced in an awkward situation is a manifestation of the speaker's intelligence and composure, as he/she seems not to have lost his/her bearings. Therefore, applying the technique of self-deprecation, the speaker displays his/her positive self-image and, in particular, one of the virtues in contemporary societies, i.e. the ability to laugh at one's inabilities or problems (cf. Norrick 1993).

11 *Anecdotes*

Yet another humorous form is the *anecdote*. This is a humorous narrative by means of which the speaker regales the hearer with a story deriving from his/her personal experience or other people's lives (Norrick 1993, 1994, 2003). Frequently, the speaker presents an event from someone else's life as if it were autobiographical. Apart from narratives presenting (ostensibly) personal episodes, prevalent are those about the famous, which are published in collections and passed on orally. Anecdotes are delivered in a colourful style abounding in witty lexemes and phrasemes, coupled with rich non-verbal expression (the tone of voice, facial expression and gestures), which contribute to the humorous effect. It is not uncommon for such stories to refer to events which were hardly humorous and even dramatic, but are, however, recounted jovially to elicit a humorous response in the addressee.

(65) My flight back home was full of surprises. At the airport in Paris, customs officers wouldn't let me keep the wine I had bought at the Portuguese airport. It goes to your head ... and knees very easily. For over 20 minutes we conducted a rhetorically rich dialogue 'You can't carry any liquid onto the plane'. 'I think I can. I was informed I would be allowed to'. 'No, you can't'. I was just about to empty the two bottles, but I asked for the reasons. What I heard was, 'You can only have liquids bought at European airports in your hand baggage'. The French are so lovely and knowledgeable, aren't they? I felt like a primary-school teacher, explaining to them the difference between Lisbon and Lebanon.

12 Conclusion

In this article, verbal humour was dichotomised into jokes and conversational humour, which embraces an array of semantic-pragmatic categories, such as lexemes, phrasemes, witticisms, retorts, teasing, banter, putdowns, self-denigrating humour and anecdotes. It was also shown that the categories are not mutually exclusive and thus certain overlaps between them can be observed and the categories can be combined in particular instances of humour. Additionally, with the witticism as an example, several linguistic formulations were presented, among which the most prominent are puns, irony and allusions.

All the types and forms of humour offer copious research material, which can be approached from a variety of linguistic vantage points, i.e. cognitivism, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics or translation (see Attardo 2008; Dynel 2008b). The number of potential research topics is infinite, with the discourse of popular culture continually yielding new data for multifarious analyses.

Short Biography

Marta Dynel, PhD, is an Assistant Professor (adiunkt) in the Department of Pragmatics in the Institute of English at the University of Łódź, where she teaches courses in practical English, pragmatics and verbal humour. It is also there that she completed her MA thesis (2004) on the pragmatics of compliments and her doctoral thesis (2006) devoted to the pragmatics of conversational humour. She also graduated (2005) from the Institute of Applied Social Sciences (ISNS) within Interdepartmental Individual Humanities (MISH) at the University of Warsaw. She has published internationally in linguistic journals (e.g. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*) and volumes (e.g. for Peter Lang and Cambridge Scholars Press). Her research interests are focused primarily on pragmatic, cognitive and sociolinguistic mechanisms of humour, as well as on the processes of social influence and the rhetoric of advertising. Her book, *Humorous Garden-Paths: A Pragmatic-Cognitive Study* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2009), is devoted to the workings of one cognitive mechanism underlying witticisms and one-liners, such as 'Life is not all beer and skittles, there are also girls', 'Smoking calms me down, at least I know what I will die of', 'I miss my wife, but my aim is improving'.

Notes

* Correspondence address: dr Marta Dynel, Department of Pragmatics, University of Łódź, Institute of English, Al. Kościuszki 65, 90-514 Łódź, Poland. E-mail: marta.dynel@yahoo.com.

¹ Irrespective of postulating the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo and Raskin 1991; Attardo 1994) applicable to various forms of humour conveyed by means of language/text, Attardo (1994, 2001) discusses *verbal jokes*, which are those operating on *wordplay* (humorous exploitation of the surface structure, such as puns and rhyming). For terminological clarity, forms of humour based on wordplay may be categorised as *linguistic humour* vis-à-vis *non-linguistic* humour (Raskin 1987; Alexander 1997).

² The epithet is usually elided in literature, the presumption being that jokes are repeated texts. Nota bene, even though jokes should be reproduced verbatim, in practice, they will undergo (minor) alterations. Individual speakers make changes, whether or not intentionally, which should not affect the workings of the basic humorous mechanisms.

³ Obviously, canned jokes can also be produced in conversations (not only circulated in volumes). However, for the sake of terminological clarity, the term 'conversational humour' is viewed as capturing categories of humour other than canned jokes.

⁴ See also Ritchie's relevant articles available at <http://www.csd.abdn.ac.uk/~gritchie/papers/index.html>

⁵ Unless the Internet sources are provided, the examples derive from the author's corpus of humorous texts generated on the basis of private conversations and media discourse.

⁶ Speakers often use words 'joking' and 'joke' informally (as in 'I'm only joking' or 'That was a joke') to convey the idea that they do not genuinely mean something, even if the humorous forms produced cannot be classified as canned jokes.

⁷ Mel'čuk (1995, 1998) distinguishes between semantic phrasemes and pragmatic phrasemes, neither of which must be humorous, yet those in the focus of attention here do have humorous capacity. Mel'čuk dichotomises phrasemes into *pragmatic phrasemes* comprising *sayings, proverbs and clichés*, and *semantic phrasemes*, i.e. *idioms, conventional (dead) metaphors* and *(set) collocations*. These three can be conceived of as multi-word lexemes.

⁸ According to Norrick (1984, 1986), quips are witticisms produced in response to non-verbal behaviour of the other interactionist.

⁹ Esar (1952) differentiates between epigrams and wisecracks, both clever remarks, depending on whether they refer to a general group of people/things or to a particular person or thing respectively.

¹⁰ Also, 'irony' is used in reference to other phenomena, e.g. irony of fate or ironic markers such as 'isn't it ironic?' (see, e.g. Kreuz and Roberts 1993; Partington 2006).

¹¹ The poetic vs. prosaic dichotomy was proposed by Hockett (1972/1977).

¹² Holmes discusses what she calls *conjoint humour*, not banter *per se*.

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