A pragmatic Study of Arabic One-Liner Jokes

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Abstract

Kirkmann (2008: 1) defines jokes as "short, necessarily punchlined humorous (tacitly contemporary) items in the form of narrative, riddle, advertisement, pun or other formula, etc". With the intent of being humorous, a joke can be seen as a short story or ironic depiction of a situation. In order to have a humorous sense, jokes will normally have a punchline which leaves them with that humorous taste. jokes can be a statement or a single phrase, that employs sarcasm (Ibid: 3). This study deals with the pragmatic aspect of Arabic jokes. In other word, we are trying to find out the pragmatic structure of Arabic jokes. For the purpose of our study we have selected three Arabic jokes to be the case of our analysis. In order to achieve our goal, we have taken Grice's maxims, Speech acts theory and kinds of implicature as a model of analysis of the selected data. Therefore, by applying our modal, we can deduce whether Grice's maxims, speech acts theory and kinds of implicature can be utilized in a similar or different way in the act of joking.

Keywords: Arabic jokes, humour, pragmatic, one-liner jokes, speech act theory

1- Introduction

دراسة براغماتية للنكات العربية المختصرة

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ملخص

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يُعرّف كيركمان (2008: 1) النكات بأنها "مواد فكاهية قصيرة، ذات نكتة (معاصرة ضمنيًا)، تتخذ شكل سرد، أو لغز، أو إعلان، أو تورية، أو صيغة أخرى، إلخ". ولإضفاء طابع فكاهي، يمكن اعتبار النكتة قصة قصيرة أو وصفًا ساخرًا لموقف ما. ولكي تكتسب النكات طابعًا فكاهيًا، عادةً ما تتضمن خاتمة تُضفي عليها طابعًا فكاهيًا. يمكن أن تكون النكات عبارة أو عبارة واحدة، تستخدم السخرية (المرجع نفسه: 3). تتناول هذه الدراسة الجانب البراغماتي للنكات العربية. بمعنى آخر، نحاول استكشاف البنية البراغماتية للنكات العربية. ولغرض دراستنا، اخترنا ثلاث نكات عربية لتكون نموذجًا لتحليلنا. لتحقيق هدفنا، اعتمدنا مبادئ غرايس، ونظرية أفعال الكلام، وأنواع التضمين كنموذج لتحليل البيانات المختارة. لذلك، بتطبيق نموذجنا، يمكننا استنتاج ما إذا كان من الممكن استخدام مبادئ غرايس، ونظرية أفعال الكلام، وأنواع التضمين بطريقة مماثلة أو مختلفة في فعل المزاح.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نكات عربية، فكاهة، براغماتية، نكات قصيرة، نظرية أفعال الكلام

By looking into its manifestation, the concept of humour appears as one of the most defining aspects of humanity. As a concept of human behavior, its use is complex and intriguing. It is a special characteristic of humanity (Nash, 1985:1). From what was stated by Nash, it can be said that the humour is present throughout social conventions as well as in cultural artifacts. Therefore, the use of humour is highly valued in people's interactions.

Strictly to say, humour is not a recent notion. In its modern meaning, humour was first attested in England in 1962. Whereas before that it is used to signify mental temperament or disposition. The originality of this concept comes from the Latin word liquid, fluid or moisture. In his study, Smith (1912: 113) points out that within the ancient Greek theory, every human body comprises four liquids or humours. They are: blood, phlegm, choler and melancholy bile. In an attempt to explain how someone can be controlled by humour, Smith (ibid) explains that any excess to one of these four might lead to disease or to make someone odd and hence a person's temerament has been thought to be controlled by these humours..

د. احمد كريم سالم

According to Concise Oxford Dictionary, humour can be described as "facetiousness, comicality and considers it less intellectual and more sympathetic than wit" (1995: 327).

Researches on humours present a complex topics nowadays. According to what was stated by Attardo (1995: 28), the complexity of such researches arises from three basic reasons: 1- generally, there is no total agreement on how to define 'humor', 2- humour's researches have a long tradition and 3- a number of disciplines have been attracted by humour such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and anthropology. A set of objectives and methodologies have been applied by each of these disciplines. In addition, the term 'humour' has undergone semantic change, narrowing and shifting. In terms of semantic change, there seems to be a progress from an initial physical sense denoting moisture or fluid towards describing a mental disposition (Ibid).

From another angle, there is another crucial development of humour. Increasingly, humour became associated with enjoyment and pleasure. This, however, led to the modern sense which is described by Lou (1995: 28) as:

> *That quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement, editing, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality and fun. The faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing or of expressing it in speech, writing or other compositions, jocose, imagination or treatment of a subject.* (Ibid)

An important idea to be mentioned here was given by Eco when he states that "it is difficult to find a definition of 'humor' in the most general sense. As a matter of fact, the claim that humor is undefinable has been advanced several times" (1981:

د. احمد كريم سالم

5-7). Such difficulties of defining humour may derive from the fact that the terminology used in describing the concept is implicit. Scholars like Scmidt-Hidding (1963: 15), and Attardo (1994:6-7) have tried to clarify the issue by proposing a semantic map of humour but undoubtedly others, significantly different, cold be formulated. Importantly to

As a speech act and within human discourse, humours perhaps represent the most genuine and universal act (Kruger, 1998:18). Humour has been considered as a part of human experience and a fundamental aspect of the unique capacity of human's language. In fact, it stands as one of the few universal acts that can be applicable to people of all languages all over the world (Trachtenberg, 1979: 132). In our daily life, people often exploit the act in order to exchange humourous stories for information and entertainment, to tease each others, and to trade clever insults for amusement on daily basis. Humour has been categorized by Victor Raskin as universal human trait (1985:2):

> *"Responding to humour is part of human behaviour ability or competence, other parts of which comprise such important social and psychological manifestations as homo sapiens as language, morality, logic, faith, etc. Just as all of those humours may be described as partly natural and acquired."*

When it comes to the purpose of humour, it can be mention that its purpose is to conceptualize and externalize humans' thought. Within the externalization purpose, there exists multiple meanings. Part of them as an outlet to express certain emotions, part as a social device, and other part as an exercise of the intellect. As Raskin points out "It seems to be generally recognized that the scope and degree of

mutual understanding in humour varies directly with the degree to which the participants share their social background" (Ibid: 16).

2- Pragmatic Approach to Jokes

The modern usage of the term pragmatics is attributable to the philosopher Charles Morris. An attempt of shaping a science of signs was made by Morris. The three distinct branches of inquiry within semiotics are: syntactic (or syntax), being the study of "the formal relation of signs to one another", semantics, the study of "the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable", and pragmatics, the study of "the relation of signs to interpreters" (Morris, 1938:6).

Recently, the term 'pragmatics' has come to be applied to the study of language from the users point of view, especially the encounter in using language in social interaction, using the language for the purposes they seek and the effect their use of language has on other participants in an act of communication. A large number of conflicting definitions of pragmatics have been proposed in the course of its history in order to classify the wide range of the subject-matter involved, or to delimit its vast scope. Unfortunately, so far no definition has given us any possibility of delimiting pragmatics clearly and neatly to everybody's satisfaction. This is because some authors, such as Mey, and others either confine themselves to strict linguistic definitions or resort to definitions that incorporate as much societal context as possible, but necessarily remain nearly vague as far as there is a relation between the field of pragmatics and some other areas of language studies is concerned. Some of the definitions of the term pragmatics given by Levinson, (1983: 7,9,12) can be stated to shed light on the term as follow: "pragmatics is the study of all those aspects of meaning not captured in a semantic theory", " pragmatics is the study of language from a functional perspective, that is, that it

attempts to explain facets of linguistic structure by reference to non-linguistic pressures and causes".

Within the field of linguistics, it becomes a common sense that knowing the general meaning of an utterance will be insufficient, to know the meaning of an utterance we need to make inferences connecting with what is mentioned to context in which it is used or what is mutually assumed by the speaker and the hearer. The following definition given by Levinson, (ibid:21) asserts the idea pragmatics studies "the relations between language and context that are basic to account for language understanding". Making it clear, the study granted a division between knowledge about language and the way in which this language is used, and the principle is to distinguish how knowledge of language interacts with general reasoning in order to understand language and outline the effects that can be achieved through communication.

The study of discourse analysis relies heavily on analyzing the functions of linguistic forms of discourse as stated by speakers or writers in their daily practice of language and what they are doing with their language (what function they want to practice on listeners or readers). The analysis of discourse cannot be restricted to linguistic forms without their purposes (Brown and Yule 1983: 1, 26-27). In this case, discourse cannot be taken as referring to the immediate context which is perceived due to the analysis but rather it has to be understood as a "metapragmatic" condition that covers all the implied conditions governing the use of language (Mey, 1993: 190).

It is essential to recall some philosophical approaches which are given by philosophers of language who interpret language pragmatically. We will consider here the only approaches we need to be stated in this paper. The first approach to be

examined here is the one given by Grice. The cooperative principle theory has to be studied within speech act theory because; within discourse we need to examine the cooperation between the text's producer and the intended audience (Bazzi S, 2009: 93). Here, it is important to take into account the theory of meaning giving by Grice (1975).

For Grice, set of principles and rules which hold the communication among people can be identified. For this reason, Grice's initiates the "cooperative principle". According to him, common goals can be identified by the participants and these participants in turn can cooperate with each other due to the purpose of the conversation as it required. The cooperative principle – "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." – and the four maxims of conversation given by Grice can be summarized as in the following chart below:

Table:1

Conversational Maxims (Adapted from Grice, 1975: 45-7)

No.	*Conversational Maxims*		
a	*Maxims of Quantity*	*1. Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.*	*2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required*
b	*Maxims of Quality*	*Supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.*	
		1. Do not say what you believe to be false.	*2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.*
c	*Maxim of Relation*	*Be relevant.*	

د. احمد كريم سالم

d	**Maxims of Manner**	*Supermaxim: Be perspicuous.*			
		1. Avoid obscurity of expression.	*2. Avoid ambiguity.*	*3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).*	*4. Be orderly.*

The other approach to be studies here is the one given by Searle and his classification of speech acts. Searle studies Austin's taxonomy of illocutionary acts and he arrives at the conclusion that what Austin set was a classification of English verbs rather than a classification of illocutionary acts (1979: ix, 9). Moreover, Searle (ibid: 8-19) argues that the verbs which are listed in Austin's taxonomy are not all illocutionary verbs, such as the verb "intend" and some others are not performative verbs. Mey (2001: 124) comments on this saying that Austin's taxonomy was criticized by Searle for being wide and the category of speech acts overlaps e.g. speech act of "describe" belongs at the same time to verdictives and expositives. Therefore, Searle presents an alternative taxonomy based on the basic categories of illocutionary acts. He (1979: 12- 17) lists five categories of speech acts:

Table2

Taxonomy of speech acts (Adapted from Searle,1979: 12- 17)

Nr.	Categories of Speech Act	The purpose of Speech Act
1	**Assertives**	*the main purpose of this class is to commit the speaker (to something being the case) to the truth of the expressed proposition. These acts express the speaker's belief about the proposition content of the utterance which is true. The direction of fit of this type of acts is word to world, e.g. assert, swear, report, affirm, conclude, believe, etc.*
2	**Directives**	*these acts carry the illocutionary point of being attempts by speakers to get their addressees or hearers to do something. The direction of fit here is world to word and the sincerity conditions is desired, e.g. commands, begs, entreat, request, order, etc.*

3	Commissives	*the illocutionary point of this class is to commit the speaker to some future course of action. The sincerity condition of this class is intention, and the direction of fit is world to word. Examples of this type, threaten, vow, promise, swear, etc.*
4	Declarations	*in this class, the illocutionary point is to bring into existence the state described in the proposition. Both word to world and world to word can be realized here as direction of fit. The propositional content corresponds to reality, e.g. christening, appointing, naming, declaring, nominating, etc.*
5	Expressives	*These acts express speakers' psychological state about the state of affairs. Different from the other acts, this type has no direction of fit and the truth of the expressed proposition is presupposed, e.g. deplore, condole, thank, congratulate, welcome, apologize etc.*

The third suggested approach is the one stated by Grice (1975: 118), namely that of implicature. According to Gazdar, the term 'implicature' refers to "a proposition that is implied by the utterance of a sentence in a context even though that proposition is not a part of an entailment of what was actually said" (1979: 38). The two distinctions of implicature will be considered here. In Grice's study (1975), he distinguishes between conversational conventional implicatures. In other words, the implicature can be divided into conventional (because it does not occur in conversation, this kind of implicature is not derived from the co-operative principles and its maxims). Leech, perceives conventional implicature as it is associated with specific words and results (1983: 26). When it comes to non-conventional implicatures, Crystal (1977: 191) believes that it refers to what the user of language can implies, suggests, or means something different from what s/he literally means. It refers to what can someone deduced from the form of un utterance.

3- Jokes

Ritchie (2004:15) defines jokes as a short text which is relatively given by a cultural group of people, which can be recognizable as having its purpose such as the production of an amused reaction in its receivers (readers or hearers), and which is typically repeatable in wider range of contexts of humanity. Some scholars treat jokes as a narrative fiction. By giving a more elaborate definition, Attardo and Chabanne (1992:169), present joke as "a very short narrative fiction reduced to the most economical form. The narratives are most generally focused on a short dialogue between rarely more than two characters". Being concise in such a way is intended by the teller because jokes in general are not designed to tell a story but to confuse the teller and give him a sharp surprise in order to provoke his laughter.

Kirkmann (2008: 1) defines jokes as "short, necessarily punchlined humorous (tacitly contemporary) items in the form of narrative, riddle, advertisement, pun or other formula, etc". With the content of being humorous, jokes, according to Kirkman, can be seen as a story (a short story) or it can be found as an ironic depiction of a situation. However, this situation is communicated with the same purpose of being humorous. As he has stated, a joke will normally has a punchline that helps to end a sentence and make it humorous. By employing a sarcasm, A joke can be a single phrase, or statement (Ibid: 3).

According to The New Webster English Dictionary, jokes can be seen as an act or something done to provoke something funny, laugher, at brief verbal narrative with a climatic humorous twist (1961: 1220). By giving this definition, all the conceivable ways can be included in jokes with the intent of amusing others through the language used. "something said or done to provoke laughter, something funny especially, at brief oral narrative with a climatic humorous twist" (ibid). By

د. احمد كريم سالم

reading all the definitions, we can conclude that any joke which does not create laugh is not a joke. In other word, they scholars believe that the term joke is a text written or spoken designed to provoke laughter.

4- One-Liner Jokes

From a compositional perspective jokes fall into five types, one-liners, two-liners, narratives, verses, and riddles. Some of these are sub-classified as is made clear in the following sections:

The one-liner joke fully shows that "brevity is the soul of wit" (Chiaro, 1992: 16). 'One-liner' has been considered as a term which refers to witty or clever intended saying which is characterized by on sentence but not one line (or one speech act). This kind of joke distinguishes by having proverbs (twisted proverbs), definitions (comic definitions), quips and quotes, gag lines and satire and many other kind of sayings. Such jokes are told by one character since s/he assumes that no response will be forthcoming. These types of jokes might have two sentences as long as a single speaker utters them uninterruptedly (Ibid). One-liners are of different kinds:

1-Definition. When a joke consists on an interrogative or affirmative sentence it can be called 'definition'. This kind of jokes gives a cynical explanation or something humorous. This is one kind of one-liner jokes. An alliterative definition refers to that comic definition whose wits are sharpened by it or lie in alliteration (ibid). Both, puns and paradoxical definitions can be exist in this kind of joke. For the latter, it can be clearly seen as it is applicable to clever explanations of words that appear inconsistent or even self-contradictory.

1-1. Double definition. As the name suggests, this kind refers to those definitions in the form of pair. In this kind, the wit is derived from the their

juxtaposition. The relation is antithetical between the definitions (pair definitions). This kind of joke utilizes two sentences to form it.

2. Exhortation. This kind of jokes can be found in a form refers to graffiti or public notices in which the receivers are seen as invited to do or not to do something.

3. Glossed Propositions. This kind of jokes lies in one-liner jokes. In other words, they are kinds of one-liner jokes in which it consists of a proposition (enigmatic proposition) that is followed by an explanatory comment. Importantly to say, the humour of this kind of joke relies on the device of making a semantic transfer from one field of usage to another one.

4. Jonathanisms. The formula of Jonathanism is "X is so Y that Z". This kind can be found in a tall-tales of one sentence only. This sentence deals with the exaggerating actions and appearance of weather phenomena, animals and people.

5. "OK" Jokes. Non-native English speakers can understand some of this kind of jokes i.e. 'OK' jokes. However, the understanding depends on those who have enough background of the given jokes along with elementary competence in English. This is because, some of the jokes are concerned with an academic knowledge and deep cultural environment.

6. Headlines. This kind of jokes is characterized by unintentional content. This characteristics is not confined to some of newspapers which allow and sometimes even encourage writing clever headlines. What is more interesting is that the results of this kind are always produced by the ambiguous brevity of headlines.

7. Quips. The last kind to be suggested here is 'Quips'. This kind of jokes exploits the form of one-liner. The lexical word 'Quip' is loosely applied to any clever saying or any joking witticism.

5- Methodology

Methodology in this paper involves two subdivisions. The first is encompassed the method followed in data analysis and results analysis, and the sample selected. The second comprises the suggested model for the analysis of jokes in the selected data.

A. Method and Sample

The researchers make use of a qualitative procedures in his research to describe and examine the selected data and gain conclusions. The data are assembled from three Arabic jokes.

B. Model of Analysis

The model selected for the pragmatic analysis of jokes is based on a pragmatic aspect based of three levels: 1- Grician's maxims (1975), 2- speech act theory (Searle, 1979) and 3- kinds of implicature (Grice 1975). The steps which are followed in this paper is to find out the observance and non-observance of Grice's maxims, the kind speech act used in the selected jokes and the kind of implicature.

6- Arabic Data Analysis of jokes

Joke: 1.

ركب اثنان في سيارة احدهم ساق والاخر فخذ

(65 :1999, عبد الغفور)

Reading the above given joke for the first time gives us an impression that there are two persons got into a car and one of them is **"ساق" "leg",** and the other one is **"فخذ"** *(thigh)*. The humour arises from the fact that the lexical word (ساق) comprises two meanings in Arabic language. The first meaning is to drive a car and the second one refers to that part of human body namely 'the leg'. Therefore, the humour has been created from the second meaning. In other words, the punchline here shows that the second meaning has been adopted to create the humour.

By applying Grice's maxims we can realize that the speaker violates the maxim of manner (avoid obscurity of expression), and the maxim of quality (Do not say what you believe to be false). In other words, the joker in his way of giving his speech, s/he did not avoid obscurity of expressions i.e. (ساق). Moreover, the meaning of the entire text may carry the possibility of being false.

The above expressed joke consists of the speech act of representative i.e. reporting or telling. Both, the set-up ***"Two men got into a car: one a leg"*** *"ركب اثنان في سيارة* *احدهم ساق* ", and the punchline "***and the another is thigh",*** "*والاخر فخذ*", represent the speech act of representative.

There seems to have two interpretations of the given joke. If we read the first part of the joke i.e. the set-up, we can realize that there are two persons who got into a car and one of them drove the car. But, if we continue reading the punchline, we realize that the first expected meaning **"ساق"** "drove" can be rejected for the fact that the this word has been adopted by the speaker to create something funny. In other words, by using the word **"ساق"** "part of the leg", we can find out that the implicature is non-conventional one.

Joke: 2.

رجل بلع موساً فجرح مشاعره

(سكر, 2009:65)

From the above given words, we can say that the joker uses the lexical verb wound (جرح) in a way to create humour. The entire expression shows that there is a man swallowed (بلع) a razor and he wounded (جرح) his feeling. By giving the set-up, *," A man swallowed a razor " ,"رجل بلع موساً"*, the speaker tries to mislead us and give us the impression there is a man may hurt his throat. The obscurity of the given expression can vanish when we read the punchline because it can explain and clarify the meaning that there is a man who he wounds his feelings and does not hurt his throat. However, by doing so, the speaker violates the maxims of manner and quality. In other words, the use of the specified expression, the joker did not avoid using obscure expressions moreover s/he says what s/he believes to be false.

By applying the given set-up and the punchline to speech act theory, we can infer that both of them represent the speech act of representative i.e. reporting or telling something. In other words, both *"a man swallowed a razor" "رجلٌ بلع موساً",* " and wounded his feelings""," فجرح مشاعره",* are representative speech act.

Obviously, when we read *swallowed" "بلع," a razor"" موساً",* we can get the impression that the one who does that will get hurt. However, this is because the stated set-up contains the words like *" swallowed" "بلع," a razor"" موساً".* Whereas, the punchline gives the readers unexpected explanation. In other words, Swallowing a blade in this context, does not hurt someone's throat but his feelings. Therefore, the unexpected thing makes the joke funny. Hence, the implicature is non-conventional one.

Joke: 3

احدهم شرب القهوة وبلع الكرسي

(90 :1999, عبد الغفور)

The literal meaning of this joke is that there is a man drank the coffee and he swallowed the chair. It may be strange for native speakers to read and understand this expression. However, the speaker makes use and retains the two possible meanings of the word word *(القهوة),* i.e. 'café' or 'a hot or cold dark or brown drink that has a slightly bitter taste'.

Along with the above two jokes, the speaker here violates the maxim of quality and manner. It violates the maxim of quality because the speaker says something out of his belief. In other words, s/he says something which he believes to be false. It violates the maxims of manner for the fact that it the speaker did not avoid the obscurity expressions (قهوة) as we have stated earlier.

The act used in the set-up *"someone drank the coffee" ,"احدهم شرب القهوة"*,is simillar to the speech act of the punchline *"and swallowed the chair" "* وبلع الكرسي",. In other words, in both of them , the speech act is a representative speech act.

The teller of the joke uses the word *(قهوة)* to evoke two different interpretations. The first one is detected from the set-up *احدهم شرب القهوة"* which is an ordinary action, people usually drink coffee to be relaxed. But the other interpretation comes as a shock when the speaker completes the reading of the punchline, *(وبلع كرسي)* which indicates that there is another interpretation for the word *قهوة",* namely, 'café'. the first interpretation is rejected because it is not funny and the second interpretation is adopted because it is impossible, that is what makes the joke funny. The implicature is non-conventional.

7- Conclusion

From what we have studied we can conclude that the same pragmatic structure has been employed by the speakers of the three jokes selected in respect to speech act theory, Grice's maxims and implicature. Our analysis of the selected data shows that jokes use a language which mostly formed by the use of non-observance of Grice's maxims. In all the three jokes, the speaker violates the maxims of quality and manner. Our study shows that the speech act which is exploited in all the jokes is representative one. This explains that the other speech acts such as commissives, expressives, declaratives are not used at least within jokes in Arabic language. As far as we took implicature into account, we can therefore, say that our study states that the non-conventional implicature is used because it relates with the non-observance of the maxims of Grice.

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د. احمد كريم سالم

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د. احمد كريم سالم

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