

Universität des Saarlandes

Wintersemester 1997 / 98

Fachrichtung: 8.3 – Anglistik / Englische Philologie –
Sprachwissenschaft

Hauptseminar: Linguistics of Humor

Dozent: Prof. Dr. Neal Norrick

Hausarbeit: *Computer Humor – A classification*

Referent: Jens Harder

Computer

Humor

-

A classification

Table of contents

1 Introduction	3
2 Norrick's Frame Bisociation Theory	3
3 A definition of "Computer Humor"	4
4 The formal structure of computer jokes	6
4.1 Poetic jokes	7
4.2 Prosaic jokes.....	8
4.4 List jokes	10
4.5 Riddle jokes	12
4.6 Hypothetical situations.....	13
4.7 Cartoons.....	15
5 Conclusion	16

1 Introduction

In this paper I will give an overview of the different kinds of jokes in the field of computer. The theory I rely on most is Norrick's Frame Bisociation Theory (1986) and for this reason the second section is dedicated to a short summary of Norrick's theory. In the third section I will define the term "computer humor" and will briefly deal with the history and development of "computer humor." In the fourth section I will classify the different kinds of computer jokes. To do so, I will use Norrick's (1986) terminology as well as some of Hockett's terms. In the fifth and final section I will present a summary of my paper.

2 Norrick's Frame Bisociation Theory

With his article "A frame-theoretical analysis of verbal humor" (1986) Norrick was the first who developed a theory of humor that combined bisociation and frame theory. The term bisociation was coined by Koestler in his book "The Act of Creation" (1963) and is defined as

the perceiving of a situation or idea (...) in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference (...) The event (...), in which the two intersect, is made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths, as it were. While this unusual situation lasts, [the event] is not merely linked to one associative context, but bisociated with two (Koestler, 1964: 35)

The term "frame" (or script) originated in psychology and was incorporated by Artificial Intelligence. A frame is

an organized chunk of information about something (...). It is a cognitive structure internalized by the speaker with information on how things are done, organized, etc. (Attardo, 1994: 198)

The frame-theory refers to the fact that our knowledge of the world is stored in scripts. For example, whenever we go to a restaurant, we know exactly what we

have to do after we enter the building, because we have internalized the restaurant-script.

Norrick replaces Koestler's idea of "planes" by "schemas." Norrick asserts that "humor is the result of schema conflict" (Norrick, 1986: 243) He goes on to state that the schema conflict alone is not enough; there has to be a higher level fit between the two conflicting schemas. Norrick's final two hypotheses sum up the whole article which is the most fruitful linguistic analysis of humor – both verbal and non-verbal.

The two hypothesis are:

Hypothesis 1. Conflict between the two schemas M_1 and M_2 on some level of analysis L_1 is a necessary condition on the funniness of the structure activating M_1 and M_2 .

Hypothesis 2. The funniness of the structure generating the conflict between M_1 and M_2 on level L_1 is directly proportional to the richness of fit between M_1 and M_2 on some other level L_2 . (Norrick 1986: 243-4)

3 A definition of "Computer Humor"

Before beginning with the structural classification, I will define what I mean when I use the term "computer humor."

"Computer humor" is basically a generic term for jokes and cartoons that have something to do with computers or the Internet. I have collected all my jokes on the Internet and since the amount of data is absolutely overwhelming I have tried to stick to typical examples.

In the last couple of years, computer humor has certainly undergone a big change. About 15-20 years ago when the first home computers began to enter peoples' lives, very little was known about them and very few people had anything to do with them. Hence there were also very few jokes about computers, and those jokes about them often involved a comparison of God and computers. This might be

due to the fact that computers seemed like something supernatural to most people and hence a comparison to God might have seemed appropriate. This can also be observed in the following example in which God is depicted as running life with a computer:

Joke 1

Q: Does God control everything that happens in my life?

A: He could, if he used the debugger, but it's tedious to step through all those variables.

Today on the other hand, computers have entered our lives. Millions of people work with computers and even the Internet is becoming more and more popular. Therefore as the whole subject has become more familiar, the jokes have changed, too. But the fact that so many people work or play with computers, which are still quite complicated, has also led to the increasing frustration with computers. This development has had an important impact on computer jokes. As will be seen in some of the examples discussed later on (Jokes 6 and 9), many people use jokes to vent their anger at computers or – and that is very typical – computer companies. Bill Gates and Microsoft are the main target of jokes about computer companies, presumably because their programs often cause so much trouble. There are even whole anti-Microsoft and anti-Bill Gates pages on the Internet, which shows how seriously some people seem to take the matter. Here one of the earliest theories of humor – the hostility theory – fits very neatly. The theory which states that there has to be an aggressive side of humor and a “butt of the joke,” someone to laugh about in every joke, goes back to Plato and Aristotle. This hostility theory can be neatly applied to a lot of computer jokes - especially to those about Bill Gates and Microsoft – because they are the target and hence the cause for laughter in many jokes. An extreme example for this is the following riddle joke:

Joke 2

Q: How did Bill Gates cross the road?

A: He didn't, he got hit by a semi-truck.

Another interesting feature of computer humor that will also be dealt with in section 4.4 is the fact that very often the subject of computers is used as a vehicle to make fun of other topics, such as gender or nationality. An example would be:

Joke 3

Q: Why don't the British build computers?

A: Because they can't figure out how to make them leak oil!

Here the computer topic is only used to make fun of the British and their inability to produce reliable cars.

The reason for the use of this humor strategy probably lies in the fact that it presents a possibility to avoid the 'real' topic. Especially when it comes to sex (joke 8), many people are still embarrassed and do not like to talk about this taboo topic. For these people the use of the computer subject as a vehicle makes it easier to tell jokes that involve sex, like in the following example, where the Internet is used as a vehicle to joke about sex.

Joke 4

Why the Internet is like a penis

1. It can be up or down. It's more fun when it's up, but it makes it hard to get any real work done.
2. In the long-distant past, its only purpose was to transmit information considered vital to the survival of the species. Some people still think that's the only thing it should be used for, but most folks today use it for fun most of the time
3. It provides a way to interact with other people. Some people take this interaction very seriously, others treat it as a lark. Sometimes it's hard to tell what kind of person you're dealing with until it's too late.
4. If you don't apply the appropriate protective measures, it can spread viruses.

4 The formal structure of computer jokes

In this section I will provide a structural classification of computer jokes using mainly Koestler's (1963) and Norrick's (1986) terminology. Due to the sheer amount of data,

this classification is bound to be incomplete, but I nevertheless believe that it represents a fairly general overview of the different types.

4.1 Poetic jokes

The term "poetic joke," coined by Hockett (1977), refers to jokes that "turn on accidental resemblances between words in sound and in meaning." (Hockett, 1977: 262) A word or a phrase can have more than one meaning, causing a schema conflict that very often suffices to make a joke. Poetic jokes stem from slips of the tongue and are generally not translatable, since it is highly unlikely that the word or phrase having more than one meaning also has the same multiple meanings in other languages. The most common form of the poetic joke is the pun. Hockett distinguishes between perfect puns and imperfect puns: perfect puns are identical in sound and imperfect puns just have a close resemblance.

Norrick points out that there is "relatively low degree of humor traditionally associated with puns" (Norrick 1986: 233) because the only higher level fit in puns is the phonetical identity of semantically distinct elements.

An example would be:

Joke 5
I haven't lost my mind – it's backed up on tape somewhere.

Here the pun - and thus the schema conflict – turns on the expression "to lose one's mind". The first part of the joke evokes the schema of somebody explaining that he has not gone crazy, that he hasn't "lost his mind" in the idiomatic sense. But in the second part the expression "lose your mind" is not understood idiomatically. Instead the term "lose" is taken literally with reference computer users making backup copies in order not to lose any data. This evokes the

second schema. The two schemas "to go crazy" and "not lose data" are of course incompatible and thus there is a schema clash.

4.2 Prosaic jokes

The term "prosaic joke" was also introduced by Hockett (1977). It refers to funny narratives that may function on the semantic or pragmatic level, stem from pratfalls and are generally translatable. Like all other jokes, prosaic jokes consist of a build up and at least one punch-line. Most prosaic computer jokes I have found are not really computer jokes at all. They are widespread jokes in which the protagonists are substituted by common figures from the computer world like for example Bill Gates. These jokes do not depend on their computer protagonists but are funny with any number of people that share certain character traits such as greed, arrogance etc. I will therefore not deal with them but rather focus on those that are funny only or at least mostly within the field of computer humor. Such an example would be:

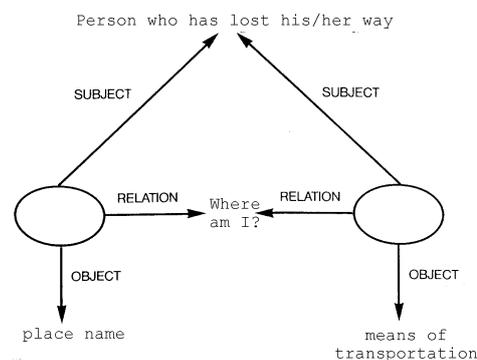
Joke 6

There was a pilot flying a small single engine charter plane, with a couple of very important executives on board. He was coming into Seattle airport through thick fog with less than 10m visibility when his instruments went out. So he began circling around looking for landmark. After an hour or so, he starts running pretty low on fuel and the passengers are getting very nervous. Finally, a small opening in the fog appears and he sees a tall building with one guy working alone on the fifth floor. The pilot banks the plane around, rolls down the window and shouts to the guy "Hey, where am I? To this, the solitary office worker replies "You're in a plane." The pilot rolls up the window, executes a 275 degree turn and proceeds to execute a perfect blind landing on the runway of the airport 5 miles away. Just as the plane stops, so does the engine as the fuel has run out.

The passengers are amazed and one asks how he did it. "Simple" replies the pilot, "I asked the guy in that building a simple question. The answer he gave me was 100 percent correct but absolutely useless, therefore that must be Microsoft's support office and from there the airport is just a while away."

This is a good example of a joke that has multiple punch lines. The first one is located in the build up. When the office worker replies "You're in a plane" he creates a schema conflict. The question "Where am I?" uttered by someone who has lost his way evokes a schema involving place names or something similar. This schema is shattered when the office worker takes the question too literally and introduces a new schema of means of transportation. The figure below represents the schema conflict (adapted form Norrick 1986)

The higher level fit in his statement is that his answer is absolutely correct if the question is taken literally.



The second punch is about the pilot's perfect landing. There is also a schema conflict involved because the schema of a perfect landing in thick fog demands much more information than the single sentence uttered by the office worker, even after the pilot explained why he could tell by the answer where he was. Knowing where one is still does not suffice for such a complicated action as a landing in fog and that creates schemas clash.

The third and final punch is the pilot's conclusion from the answer given to him by the office worker. The sentence "The answer he gave me was 100 percent correct but absolutely useless, therefore that must be Microsoft's support office" is an

example of the real life inability of Microsoft support staff. This inability is a very frequent topic in computer jokes.

4.3 One-liners

Norrick defines one-liners as "the minimal form narrative humor may take" (Norrick, 1986: 237). A good one-liner is supposed to evoke a certain schema and then distort it within a single word or clause. The following example is taken from a web page titled "Classic Computer One-liners":

Joke 7
How do I set my laser printer on stun?

The first chunk evokes a schema of asking how to handle a laser printer, namely how to set it on print; the second skews it with one that refers to the Star Trek series where lasers and phasers can be set on "kill" or "stun". The schema conflict is created by the word "stun" because it appears instead of the expected word "print." Thus – in Koestler's terminology - the joke could also be called a "garden path" joke because it misleads the hearer and faces him with a sudden twist. This joke is not very funny, but it is typical of computer humor in the sense that it makes fun of Star Trek. For some reasons unknown to me the combination of Star Trek and computers can be found quite often in computer humor.

4.4 List jokes

I am using the term "list joke" to describe a certain kind of humor that has become more and more popular, especially on late night shows and in the field of computer humor. Most list jokes have headings like "The top 10 ..." or "You know you've ... when"

An example for such a list joke would be:

Joke 8

Top 10 reasons computers are male

10. They have a lot of data but are still clueless.
9. A better model is always just around the corner.
8. They look nice and shiny until you bring them home.
7. It is always necessary to have a backup.
6. They'll do whatever you say if you push the right buttons.
5. The best part of having either one is the games you can play.
4. In order to get their attention, you have to turn them on.
3. The lights are on but nobody's home.
2. Big power surges knock them out for the night.
1. Size does matter

At first sight there is of course once more bisociation. The two schemas "being a man" and "being a computer" are incompatible and there seems to be no legitimacy to compare the two. So Norrick's first hypothesis - the conflict of the two schemas on the level of comparison – is absolutely fulfilled.

If you look at the second hypothesis – the need for a certain richness of fit between the two schemas – you will not be disappointed, either. Every item from the list can be applied to both schemas – at least if one believes in female prejudices towards men. If you do not happen to own one of the few supercomputers, you will find that there is always a better model around (especially taking the rapid pace of development into consideration.) And in joking or in consolation many women also claim that there is always a better man just around the corner. Due to the instability of many operating systems, it is always advisable to have backup of your data, and some women might also think that one man is not enough.

All ten points can be interpreted in a similar way, so that the incompatibility of the two schemas at first sight resolves into a higher level fit and an amazing compatibility.

Another interesting point about this joke is the fact that it does not really make fun of computers. As already mentioned in section 3, the topic of computers is only used as a vehicle to make fun of something else, in this case men. The reason for this might be that the computer topic serves as a shield, as a sort of disguise to make the joke seem less harmful. And the fact that the world of computers is still dominated by men which might make it yet more challenging for women to use such a "masculine" vehicle to make their jokes.

4.5 Riddle jokes

As Hockett (1977) points out, jokes must have a bipartite structure; they must consist of a build-up and a punch-line.

[In a riddle joke] the build-up is the question and the punch-line is in the answer, but the person to whom the riddle is posed cannot usually guess the answer and is not really supposed to try. (Hockett, 1977: 271)

The bisociation theory also explains riddle jokes very well. The question evokes a certain schema and the answer then causes a schema clash and hence laughter. Most riddle jokes are topic oriented. There are elephant jokes and – especially in the field of computer humor – very often light bulb jokes, for example:

Joke 9

Q: How many Microsoft support staff does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Four. One to ask "What is the registration number of the light bulb?", one to ask "Have you tried rebooting it?", another to ask "Have you tried reinstalling it?" and the last one to say "It must be your hardware because the light bulb in our office works fine..."

The question already creates a schema conflict by mentioning Microsoft support staff in the context of changing a light bulb where computer experts do not

fit. The answer then causes the second schema clash. Computer typical questions like "Have you tried rebooting it?" have very little to do with changing a light bulb and thus the schema conflict evolves.

But nevertheless there is a higher level fit for those who have ever called a Microsoft support hotline, because the answer given to the light bulb question is more or less exactly the stereotypical answer you get from Microsoft support staff.

4.6 Hypothetical situations

Hypothetical situations are a mixture of riddle jokes and list jokes. As opposed to riddle jokes, the question is not explicitly posed, but hidden in the headline and the answers follow in a list. An example would be the headline: "If computers were toasters" followed by various comparisons of operating systems with toasters.

Joke 10

If computer were toasters

If IBM made toasters ... They would want one big toaster where people bring bread to be submitted for overnight toasting. IBM would claim a worldwide market for five, maybe six toasters.

If Microsoft made toasters ... Everytime you bought a loaf of bread, you would have to buy a toaster. You wouldn't have to take the toaster, but you'd have to pay for it anyway. Toaster'95 would weigh 15,000 pounds (hence requiring a reinforced steel countertop), draw enough electricity to power a small city, take up 95% of the space in your kitchen, would claim to be the first toaster that lets you control how light or dark you wanted your toast to be, and would secretly interrogate your other appliances to find out who made them. Everyone would hate Microsoft toasters, but nonetheless would buy them since most of the good bread only works with their toasters.

If Apple made toasters... It would do everything Microsoft toaster does, but 5 years earlier.

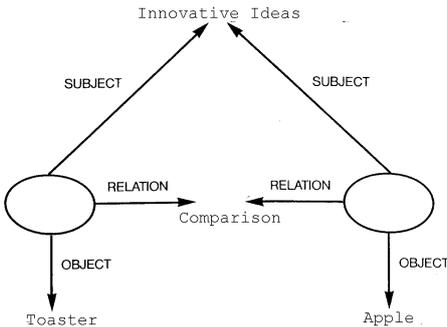
All this could be reformulated as a riddle: "What would happen if IBM / Microsoft / Apple was a toaster" and then we would again have the build up in the question and the punch in the answer.

The schema clash in these kinds of jokes is obvious. The two schemas computer companies and toasters seem absolutely incompatible and, indeed, the

answers fit in neither schema. Neither can we imagine a toaster weighing 15,000 pounds nor can we see any reason why the software giant Microsoft should build toasters. But despite all this there is a higher level fit. The whole Microsoft – toaster comparison, for example, is based on typical real life features of Microsoft products. This can be observed in the following table:

Microsoft Toaster	Microsoft Products
Every time you buy a loaf of bread you have to buy a toaster	Almost every time you buy a new computer you will need a new operating system (most often Windows 3.1/95/98/NT)
You don't have to take the toaster but you have to pay for it anyway.	You don't have to take the OS but you have to pay for it anyway.
Toaster 95 weighs 15,000 pounds, requires a reinforced steel countertop, draws enough electricity to power a small city and takes up 95% of the space in your kitchen.	Windows 95 takes up a lot of room on the hard drive and hence requires large hard drives, fast computers and a lot of memory.
Toaster 95 claims to be the first toaster that lets you control how light or dark you wanted your toast to be.	Windows 95 claimed to have been innovative in many ways (but wasn't)
Toaster 95 secretly interrogates your other appliances to find out who made them	Windows 95 tends to leave its fingerprints in the source code of almost every other program.
Everyone would hate Microsoft toasters, but nonetheless would buy them since most of the good bread only works with their toasters	Many people do not like Microsoft programs, but most good software only runs under MS operating systems.

The same higher level fit is also valid for the Apple – toaster comparison,

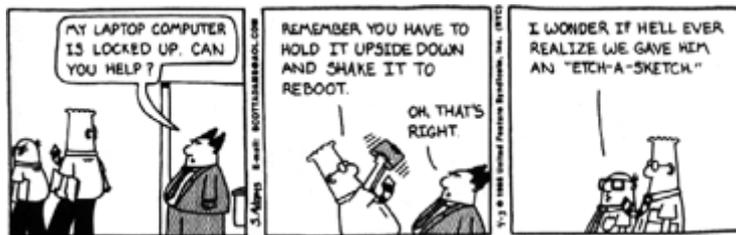


because it is a widely known fact that Apple had windows based operating systems long before Microsoft came up with Windows 3.11. This can be illustrated by the following figure:

4.7 Cartoons

Cartoons are humorous drawings that have an additional visual component to them. In fact, most cartoons create a schema conflict because of the way they depict certain situations. Sometimes those situations are exaggerated as in the following example. When Dilbert holds up the computer and shakes it in order to make it reboot the picture alone is funny. But it also causes a schema conflict, because the schema of “rebooting a computer” does not involve any of these actions. The resolution to this schema conflict becomes obvious after the third picture, when the reader learns that it the laptop computer really is an Etch-a-Sketch, and these toys have to be shaken to start all over again.

Joke 11



But this cartoon does not only function on the visual level because you also need the words to resolve the conflicts, which becomes obvious in the third picture. This picture also involves a schema conflict, because the “employer-employee” schema does not lead us to expect that Dilbert could have given his boss a child’s toy instead of a computer. The higher level of the conflict can be found in the statement of the boss in the second picture. When he stands there and looking at Dilbert who shakes what he thinks is a computer and saying “Oh, that’s right”, he behaves like a naïve child who believes everything. And since an Etch-a-Sketch is a toy, and

everyone could easily imagine telling a small child that it is a computer, the schema conflict is resolved.

5 Conclusion

I'd like to conclude by pointing out I have to point out once more that the classification I have presented above is far from complete. I am convinced that it will be very difficult if not impossible to get a complete classification of computer humor. The whole subject of computer humor covers too many different aspects and there are simply too many jokes available on the Internet and through other sources to allow a complete classification. Furthermore does the field of computer humor develop with almost the same pace as the development in the field of computer, which is as we all know rapid.

Attached to this paper you will find a short corpus of computer jokes and cartoons as well as a list of links, where further jokes can be found. The fact that these jokes also fit in my categories is a further proof of their validity.