

Abstract

This thesis approaches the joke, a poorly analyzed discourse phenomenon, though it is a significant part of the comic discourse. We set to build a semiotic of the joke, analyzing it within two totally different cultural areas – Romanian and French. This choice has some advantages. Firstly, it allows an analysis on two linguistic areas that are quite different, though they belong to the same family – that of the Romanic languages. Secondly, the political evolution of the two areas was completely different which should make even more different the way this type of discourse has evolved, especially the one which is strictly connected to the social and political conditionings (namely the political jokes).

There is an almost unanimously opinion that humor and jokes especially are conditioned by the linguistic area of expression and political setting. But, the hypothesis we started from in writing this thesis is opposite. We have assumed that the joke is a cultural invariant which doesn't depend on the geographic or cultural area, and neither on the social practice. This assumption is supported by the existence of some almost identical jokes over long periods of time (over 1000 years) and in completely different cultural areas. We are, as in the case of fairy tales, in the archetype area, which could explain the perpetuation of these almost identical structures on extended areas and over long periods of time. We use the term archetype in its Jungian acceptance according to which these are coherent and unconscious psychic contents. Jung identifies such contents with mythological images that were never objects of consciousness and that come from an unconscious activity.

In order to analyze the joke and to establish the mechanisms that can be found at its origin, we firstly have to define this concept. We are going to say that the joke is a simple narrative sequence whose stated goal is to produce laughter. Through this definition we try to overcome two of the problems that have frequently come up in the analysis of the comic discourse. The first one is the relation between comic and laughter and the second one is the relation between comic and intentionality.

From all the esthetic categories, comic is the only one that has a recognizable psychological effect. This individualization is the first trap of the comic discourse because it places it in an unstable area. When we are talking about comic, do we need to talk about laughter too? Or we should rather talk about laughter, meaning the result and not the cause – the comic?

Constant reference of the comic discourse to its effect leads to questioning the definition of the comic. In the studies referring to comic, there are two main directions regarding its definition. The first one says that we should give up arbitrary differentiations between comic, humor, derision and grotesque. According to this, there is a comic as such and dry humor or verbal fantasies are nothing but secondary variations. This perspective sets forth the autonomy and individuality of the comic discourse, though it cannot completely define it. Another point of view starts from discovering that the laughter criteria comes a posteriori enunciating the discourse and, therefore, we cannot talk about a comic discourse in opposition to the serious one. Better said, the dichotomy comic-serious is, in this case, totally outdated because we cannot talk about only one comic discourse. This hypothesis leads to the conclusion that irony, satire, burlesque are distinct categories that cannot be analyzed using the same tools.

In order to solve this argument, we should first identify the differences between comic and laughter, terms that have been used many times in correspondent meanings (Bergson, Kant). Therefore, we have established that laughter is part of a psychological paradigm, such as crying, screaming, while comic is part of a discursive paradigm. The difference between the two is therefore getting obvious because we cannot in any way associate laughter the discourse meaning, no matter how much we try to reduce or amplify the meaning of this term. Comic and laughter are in an interdependence relationship, but they belong to different paradigms.

Once established this differentiation, we have to identify the way the comic discourse functions. The first approaches of the comic were linked more to the question whether the desirable comic is social and less to identifying the operating mechanisms. Immanuel Kant is among the first people who establishes a mechanism of the comic, this being the effect of the conversion of an expectance into nothing. Arthur Koestler's hypothesis is also similar, according to which comic is an effect of a sudden change of plan or context, which provokes an emotion whose expectance stays suspended. Comic is, in this situation, the expression of a stress relief and an absence. Bergson does not agree with this hypothesis and he has another definition. Comic (laughter as he writes, without the differentiation we mentioned earlier) is "du mecanique plaque sur du vivant", a mechanism applied to clothes, mimics, gestures. But this theory cannot be applied to jokes, discursive structures respectively. Therefore, Daniela Roventă Frumușani turns over the rule when she applies it to jokes. In this case, comic would be "du vivant plaque sur du mecanique" because conventional meanings are replaced by those unexpected. Another

theory that identifies the mechanisms of the comic is that of Louis Cazamian's. The theory, which was later completed by Robert Escarpit, claims that the joke is born by suspending the judgments that govern the social actions; these judgments are comic, affective, moral and philosophical. This theory is applied to relationship humor and suspending the four judgments leads to irony (in the case of suspending comic judgment – which makes an amusing situation to be presented as serious), to dark humor (the absence of affective judgment that acts by voluntarily desensitizing), to the licentious one (produced in the absence of moral judgment) or the carnivalesque humor (the absence of philosophical judgment). Humor offers therefore the possibility to escape from the webbing of some rules whom the need to socially exist compels them. The Cazamian-Escarpit theory was the basis of this thesis and it was replenished with that of Dominique Noguez for whom comic is produced by linking the signifier of a signified to the signified of a signifier.

After having the mechanism of producing the comic which jokes use, the next step in establishing a semiotic of the joke is assigning joke the status of a sign. This means on one hand to prove that the joke has a substitute role and on the other hand that this substitution is made through a culturally recognized and systematically coded association.

Proving the first condition is done by analyzing the way the terms that designate this reality in French (*blague*) and Romanian (*banc*) evolve. The word *blague* comes up for the first time in 1721 in a Chemistry dictionary and then it was taken from Dutch (*balg*) which means paunch. It designates then a little leather bag where smokers kept their tobacco. Afterwards, the meaning changed, designating a lie told in order to deceive someone. This change was induced by the smokers' habit to keep their bags bloated so they looked full, even if they were empty. In Romanian the word *banc* comes up at the end of the 19th century from the German word *bank* that was a card game where people often cheated. This is how the semantic translation is done so the word will designate a scam, hoax or joke.

In both linguistic and cultural areas the terms *blague* and *banc* similarly evolve – they start by designating an extra linguistic reality, a certain type of fabricating the reality so this mechanism is afterwards absorbed and it linguistically designates a type of story which is based on deforming the relationship between signifier and signified. This entails the control of the second condition also, according to which the substitute the sign expects needs to be culturally recognized.

Being identified as a sign, the joke is placed at the boundary between sociolects and idiolects, which leads to the need of identifying its functions. These are both communicational (the phatic function) and social (cohesion and moral) or even political (manipulation, protest, outpouring).

The existence of a semiotic of the joke means building its semantics, syntax and pragmatics. Establishing a semantic of the joke means studying the way the meaning of the words is used in triggering the comic mechanism that the joke basis on. Starting from the fact that the linguistic reality does not perfectly lap over the material reality it wants to designate, it is obvious that the incompatibility between the two universes leads many times to different tensions – some apparently insignificant, others spectacular. These tensions are at the origin of the comic of jokes. Therefore, analyzing the semantic of the joke implies identifying the means of producing comic. These means are either semantic (through which the signifier of a signified is associated to the signified of other signifier) and we are talking about figures of speech (rhyme, repetition, inversion and zeugma) and semantic relations (homonymy, clinch and paronymy), or paradigmatic alteration, that will also be classified in semantic means of paradigmatic alteration (metonymy, synecdoche, antonomasia and anacoluthon) and in means of altering the paradigmatic relation (the relation hyponym – hyperon, qui-pro-quo and parallelisms).

Analyzing the syntax involves establishing the rules of combining constituent elements of the joke. Going back to structuring the semiotic of the joke, it is required to identify its constituent elements. Using the Greimas model, developed by Nicole Everaert-Desmedt we define the joke as a narrative structure through which an event is represented. Practically, through the joke one gets from an initial state S1 to a final state S2 through an event which is represented. This definition leads us to the next step which is classifying the jokes considering this mechanism. Hence, jokes are classified in jokes with an **actantial** model and jokes without an actantial model. If in the first case things are obvious, having a short tale where the initial and final states are obvious, in the case of jokes without actantial model the transformation takes place in what concerns the relation between the transmitter and the receiver of the communication act that the joke involves.

Approaching the joke from the pragmatics` point of view is needed, considering the fact that the joke exceeds strictly the informative content it has. Attaining the comic effect that assumes reaching its goal is done through the linguistic mechanisms described earlier, but without being exhaustive. Part of the comic discourse, the joke obviously cannot be judged by true or false, but more by successful – unsuccessful. Therefore, the joke aligns in the series of performative acts of language. On the other hand, it is mainly part of the fictional area which includes discursive acts that are not considered in relation to the rule of honesty. This assertion does not apply though, only to the actantial jokes. The jokes without an **actantial** model cannot be considered fictions so they don`t follow Searle`s rules.

Therefore, we will analyze jokes as performative acts on two levels:

- In the case of actantial jokes within the communicational act (between characters, only for actantial jokes)
- Outside the communicational act (between the transmitter and receiver) for all jokes.

Also, the joke as a communicational phenomenon is strongly linked to **deixis**. More than a few times, when a joke is told in a certain group, people add up some stereotype expressions such as “present company excluded”. It is practically a way to avoid personal or social coordinates that can disturb the joke or can embarrass a participant.

Moreover, analyzing the rules of the discourse, associated to Grice`s conversational sayings, it can be seen that the violation of each one (we refer here to the informativity law, exhaustive law and the litotes law) leads to comic.

All of this outlines the picture of the joke as a complex and complete semiotic phenomenon whose evolution is not conditioned by the structure of the language where it evolves and it belongs, such as fairy tales, to the archetypal fund of humanity.

Finally, we could add that many times jokes are self-referential and we have heard many jokes about jokes. And, the ability of a system to produce a meta discourse, namely a discourse about a discourse, shows once more that this is an independent semiotic system.