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The Role of Salience and Common Grounds in Intercultural Communication: A Descriptive Study

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Abstract: *Jokes are specific discourses that contain cultural, historical and region-specific references. In order to understand the salience of these discourses, the common ground of interlocutors is significantly important. The current study explores how non-natives English speakers comprehend English jokes. In addition, it aims to know the difficulties and the lexical issues encountered by Pakhtoon and Sindhi participants in interpreting English jokes. The researchers used a mixed-method approach for this study. The population of this study includes Pakhtoon and Sindhi undergraduate students. A sample of 20 students was selected and two types of tools were used to check the English jokes comprehension skills of participants. The socio-cognitive approach is used as a theoretical framework and the results of quantitative data were presented with the help of pie charts. Results of this study show that ethnic, religious, racial, and jokes having historic references are difficult to understand. Individuals' social knowledge of English culture is important for comprehending English jokes. Knowledge of semantic expressions, ample knowledge and wisdom of culture-specific words and idioms are important for identifying the salience aspects of English jokes.*

Key Words: Jokes, Salience, lexical Issues, Culture, Socio-Cognitive Approach, Interpreting Humour

Introduction

It has been observed that humor is analyzed, contextualized, responded and used differently in interaction and this subject has caught great attention of researchers. It is also noted that the comprehension of humor in communication or conversation is less researched in previous research. On the other hand, psycholinguists have received

great attention in the processing humor in different experimental and theoretical studies ([Vaid et al. 2003](#); [Coulson and Kutas. 2001](#); Derks and Cunningham, 2005; [Coulson et al. 2006](#)). The reason for ignoring this subject is the difficulty in understanding and inference of behavior from an outside controlled setting. Some of the researchers have contributed to cross-culture studies of humor

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which includes [Attardo's \(2001\)](#) and [Kottho's \(2003\)](#) study, who have researched irony and [Carrell \(1997\)](#) on jokes and competence of humor. Furthermore, Hay (2001) has conducted research on humor comprehension by adding sociolinguistics conversation and four implications associated with humor. [Vaid \(2000; Vaid et al. 2003\)](#) changed the dimension of humor research and conducted his research on bilingual native participants. Another study that extended the aspects related to humor comprehension was the Bell study in 2002. His idea focuses on cross-culture interaction. The research of [Carrell \(1997\)](#) is based on Chomsky's idea of an idealized native speaker. He explained in his research the perception of pre-scripted jokes text instead of spontaneous and conversational humor. Further research has covered the aspects found in native and non-native speakers' interaction and identified degrees of difference by putting the participants in different interactive situations. Humor comprehension is mostly studied in cognitive psycholinguistics studies and underlined certain aspects and claim that understanding of jokes does not depend entirely on internal processes.

Pragmatics and Intercultural Pragmatics

Pragmatics deals with language in use. It focuses on how language is articulated and conceived in a social setting. Among the several sub-branches of pragmatics, intercultural pragmatics proposed a solution to bring together two contrast of its research which includes the individual use of language with intention and cognition and social context interaction. Intercultural pragmatics asserts that they are a combination of both individual and social contexts, as is revealed in their communication. Lately, neurological experiments on mirror neurons have been conducted which claim nature and abilities interact among human beings ([Rizzolatti and Craighero, 2004; Arbib et al., 2005](#)).

The Socio-Cultural-Interactional Approach and Cognitive-Philosophical Approach

The socio-Cultural-Interactional Approach deals with the intention that is based on meaning in communication and considers the intention as a post-factum construct, while the cognitive-philosophical approach mainly deals with the intention as the speaker mental state which encompasses communication. In this course, the social-cultural approach plays a prominent role as compared to the cognitive-philosophical approach. Both the approaches vary in their perspectives. So, none of them could be rejected or ignored. In this complex issue, the encoded and co-constructed intention emergent sides are significant in the analysis of communicative processes.

The Socio-Cognitive Approach (SCA)

The socio-cognitive approach (SCA) provides theoretical grounds for intercultural pragmatics/ [Kecskes \(2008; 2010\)](#) and [Kecskes and Zhang \(2009\)](#) proposed the socio-cognitive approach with an intention to combine both the perspectives and their main focus was on priori intention and dialectical relationship. In a nutshell, it basically deals with the individual prior experience and social situational setting.

SCA underlines the production of language and its meaning which involve the knowledge and prior experience of an individual in a social setting and knowledge co-constructed by interlocutors. It stresses that the linguistic expressions have great meaning value and prior social context experience plays a significant role in the composition and comprehension of real social settings. In this process, language works in two ways and in this unique combination, the individual use of language and social context is intertwined. In other words, it can be said that people use the language according to the social context to express themselves. But, in other cases, when people write and speak, they create the content according to their social and cultural frames. As a result, two things occur simultaneously, such as the use of language by an individual in order to fit the context for successful communication (e.g., [Gee 1999](#)).

Statement of the Problem

Jokes are cultural, historical and region-specific discourses that are shared by people for entertainment purposes. In intercultural settings where lingua franca is used to get familiarized with different genres of a global language, jokes remain a difficult genre to comprehend for non-native speakers. The present study addresses the difficulties faced by non-native English speakers and which aspects of the language are most difficult to comprehend.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the English jokes comprehension skills of non-native English speakers.
2. To find out the difficulties encountered by non-native English speakers in comprehending jokes.
3. To look for lexical issues encountered by Pakhtoon and Sindhi participants.

Research Questions

1. How far do non-native English speakers comprehend culture-specific English jokes?
2. What kinds of problems do non-native English speakers encounter while comprehending the English Jokes?
3. What kind of lexical items are difficult to interpret for Sindhi and Pakhtoon participants?

Literature Review

Comprehending Humor

The comprehension of humor has been less prevalent on an interactional basis and most prevalent from a psycholinguistics perspective. [Carrell \(1997\)](#) believes that humor complexity and cognitive processing depend on the linguistic competence of the speaker, Competence of jokes and humor. She views that linguistic competence helps the speaker to understand the text which is constructed with an intention to be used for jokes. She also adds that semantic understanding is very important in decoding jokes. The cognitive processing does not only confine to speaker

competence but also to the hearer who hears and his reaction record the judgment of whether the joke was amusing or not. Though, the processing of hearers works at an unconscious level and sometimes, it is observed that the hearer is uncertain at this stage. In case of the incompetence of the hearer, he asks questions i.e. 'are you joking?' This sentence shows that there is confusion and that the hearer is not competent enough.

On the other hand, Hay (2001) also conducted research on humor-related strategies, which includes the four implications related to humor. The suggested implication includes – recognition, understanding and appreciation. All the stages are connected and come after other to convey the message. The understanding stage involves acknowledgement, whereas the appreciation stage involves both acknowledgment and understanding (2001, p.67). She concludes that the recognition stage corresponds with Carrell's joke competence, whereas both understanding and appreciation correspond with humor competence. She added her fourth implication i.e. agreement. It means humor conveys the message. The reaction of the receiver shows the agreement and acknowledgment of the joke. This signals that message is received for its intended reason. She shares the example of two friends who cracked jokes about Oprah Winfrey and it shows being a 'feminist,' but as far as the interpretation of this term is concerned, it is equated with 'boring.' This idea is also discussed by [Attardo \(2001\)](#). While the analysis of jokes, it is observed that humor and irony are responded to differently. So, it is important to understand the difference between irony and humor in interaction. To understand the difference, it is important to distinguish the difference between humor competence and humor performance. The former means the speaker's ability to process the given text semantically and find the relationship between its parts. Whereas the latter refers to the performance of two speakers when encountered in a humor situation (2001, p. 67).

This idea is related to Chomsky's idea of competence and performance. It is also highlighted in this model that the understanding of speaker and hearer may fail if there are barriers such as noise,

time, multiple jokes at one time, fatigue etc.

On the other hand, the study by [Kottho \(2003\)](#) does not show the direct link between the issues of competence and implication, as discussed above. It is viewed that the interactional analysis of response to irony refers to the cognitive understanding. She compared the irony in two different situations. One was between friends and the other was a televised debate. She came up with the finding that the conversation between friends focuses on surface meaning. On the other hand, televised debate addresses the implicature. The analysis of the interaction shows that irony processes and cannot be understood in controlled settings. She emphasized the role of listeners that they cannot be passive and the formulation of their utterance anticipates the reaction for successful interaction.

Humor- Competence as a Social Construct

Competence is considered an important aspect #of understanding the language. Competence is mostly observed as individual knowledge, which is discussed in many kinds of research. It is affirmed that competence is not only considered important in humor-related research but involved in all language-related research. Harris (1981) has presented a model related to humor language analysis and termed it "Telementation." He believes that communication is similar to computer processing and the role of the speaker and listener is important for successful communication. The message is conveyed by the speaker to the listener and the construction of the message and its understanding depends on the intention of the speaker. It shows that competence is socially constructed and it is a widely accepted idea and presented in many pieces of research. The interlocutors are also needed which help in the delivery of the message and are not confined to the participant's head only.

Shea (1994) and [Bremer et al. \(1996\)](#) stress that the situation of interaction, nature of discourse and delivery of an expression and interpretation within micro-context make interaction successful. They have presented a number of examples in second language learning where users are put in a different

context and that makes a great contribution to understanding communicative competence. The research demonstrates the construction of interaction that is less or more symmetrical. This depends on native speakers who have great linguistic input. In some cases, second language practices are excluded because they lack competence. Second language users sometimes feel difficulty in maintaining their positions as they cannot comprehend due to less linguistic input. Bell (2006) shares that idea about second language users in humor situations. The differences between native and non-native speakers are also highlighted in this study which is adjusted by native speakers but not by non-native speakers. It is viewed that the native speakers, if they do not have inter-cultural interaction experiences, may not be able to adjust and they are rated as overestimated, whereas the second language users are sometimes underestimated. The results show that second language users are sometimes marginalized and less than their competence.

Holmes and Hay (1997) link the humor with ethnic boundaries in the speech of Maori and Pakeha (New Zealanders of European background). It is detected that Maori and Pakeha were not able to understand the jokes of each other. It is also noted that the dominant group, Pakeha, didn't adjust to the Maori norms. In this research, the data includes participants of the same ethnic group conversation and exclude the examples of the intercultural differences in Jokes. The focus of this study is based on the ways the interlocutors' position in intercultural interaction. The position of the interlocutor is also observed in the native speaker's language. The data is also comprised of second language users and their relevance to humor comprehension.

Research Methodology

Research Method

The researcher used the descriptive method and the mixed-method approach to carry out this research. Discourse interpretation tasks were given to the participants to get qualitative data, whereas the research tools were used to gather quantitative data.

Population and sample

The population of the research includes Sindhi and Pushto speakers studying at the undergraduate level in Pakistani Universities. The sample comprised 20 students (10 Sindhi +10 Pashto speakers).

Data

- a) Jokes Comprehending Task. It was used to check the English discourse comprehension skills of participants. 20 Jokes were randomly chosen from the book JOKES AND ENGLISH (2015) which had jokes about three major categories a) general b) PAF career and c) Saudia Arabia.
- b) A tool comprises statements in order to know the difficulties faced by non-native English speakers in the interpretation of jokes. Likert scale was used to provide an option to students. Data collected from the tools were used to get results.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analysed by pie charts. Qualitative data was used for thematic analysis.

Theoretical Framework

The Socio-cognitive Approach

The socio-cognitive approach has two claims. The first claim includes the speaker and listener as equal participants in communication. Both the participants are involved in the production and comprehension of language based on their best

knowledge and experience. Consequently, interpretation of the utterance is made from both the perspective of the speaker hearer which can provide an adequate account of language communication. Interlocutors are complete when an individual of different cognitive abilities with common information and situation are involved in communication with a different interpretation. The effect of this communication is on the meaning of the same structures depending on the different perspectives of an individual. The second claim is that it is a dynamic process and individuals who are involved in communication are constrained by social context as they produce and interpret at the same time. Thus, communication is considered as an interplay of two characteristics that cannot be separated, and both are supportive and interactive. It is also a display of intention and attention which is motivated by the social, cultural background of an individual. This approach gives the pragmatics view of cooperation, and a cognitive view of egocentrism is observed. While cooperation is intention-direct practice, egocentrism is attention-oriented practice. Former deals with relevance and later measures by salience. Both Intention and attention are identified as forces that can be measured and have a systematic effect on communication.

Result and Discussion

Description 1

The majority of students responded that they could interpret L2 jokes easily. 35 % of participants remained neutral in response to the statement.

I can interpret English Jokes easily.

20 responses

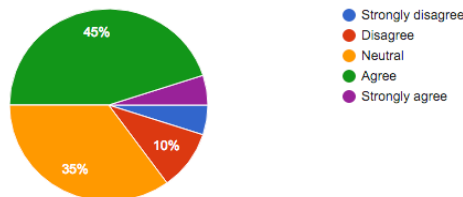


Figure 1

Description 2

The majority of the participants (50%) were neutral in response to statement number 2. 30 percent of

students disagreed with the statement. The number of positive responses is less as compared to neutral and disagreeing percentage.

English Jokes are easy to understand.

20 responses

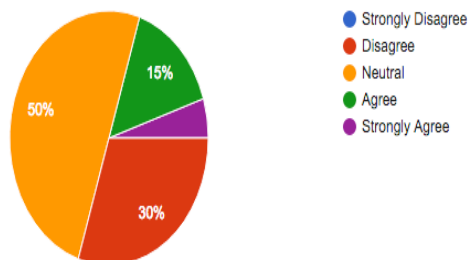


Figure 2

Description 3

The majority of the respondents remained neutral in response to statement 3. 40 percent of participants

believe that jokes with explicit meanings are easy to interpret. The percentage of students who agreed to the statement is only 20 percent.

Jokes with explicit meaning are difficult to interpret.

20 responses

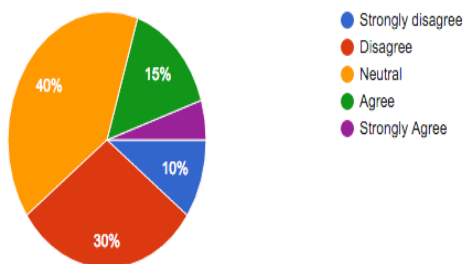


Figure 3

Description 4

33 percent of students remained neutral in response to the statement that figurative language acts as a

hurdle in interpreting English jokes. 45 percent i.e. majority of students, agree with the statement, whereas 22 percent of students agree with the statement.

Figurative use of language acts as a barrier in understanding the English Jokes.

20 responses

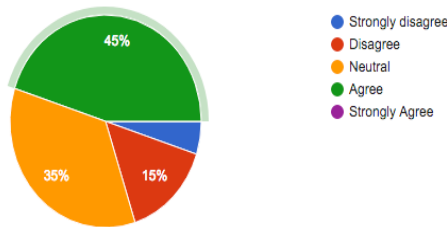


Figure 4

Description 5

50 percent of students agree that religion-specific

jokes are most difficult to interpret. Only 15 students remained neutral. The majority of the students agree with the statement.

Religion-specific jokes are most difficult to interpret.

20 responses

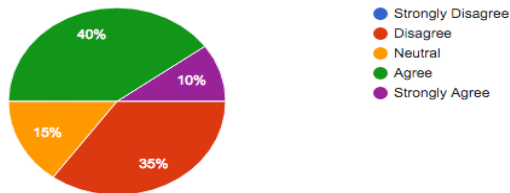


Figure 5

Description 6

30 percent agreed with the statement, 35 remained

neutral and 35 percent disagreed. Participants had mixed responses to the statement and the percentages of each category were the same.

Idiomatic expression in jokes are easily understandable.

20 responses

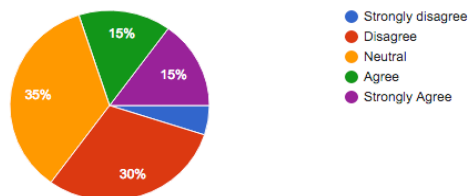


Figure 6

Description 7

35 percent of students agree that lexical items have

an important role to play in semantic expressions. 40 percent of students did not show any tilt towards agreement or disagreement.

Vocabulary of language creates a hurdle to understand English Jokes.

20 responses

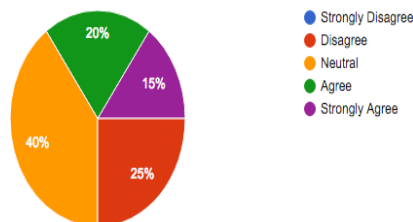


Figure 7

Description 8

The percentage of agreeing and disagreeing

students is equal. 40 percent of students showed a neutral response

Jokes with implicit meaning are difficult to understand.

20 responses

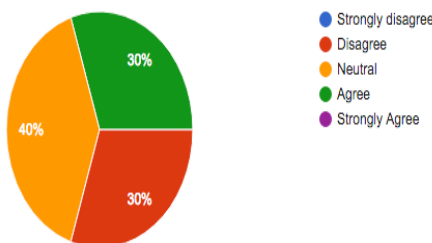


Figure 8

Discussion (statement 1-8)

The overall responses of the quantitative tool show that English as L2 is not difficult to interpret for Pakhtoon and Sindhi speakers having different L1s. The interpretation of jokes is difficult only when the lexical items have different implicit ideologies which could be gender-related, religion-specific or historically embedded expressions. Figurative use of language makes interpretation of jokes easier as compared to jokes having simple and explicit expressions. For every statement, the percentage of neutral responses is high. The neutral responses

could possibly be a reason that interpreters/participants are not sure whether it is the language which creates difficulty or their own skills to interpret. Another possible reason for high neutral percentages could be the lack of attention paid by individual respondents.

Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

The sample qualitative tool had a mixture of plain jokes having no gender/ethnicity/religion and historical statements and jokes having

discriminatory gender/ethnicity/race/religion-related content.

Prior-Knowledge

The participants easily understood the jokes, having shared common ground and shared salience jokes about Pakistani and Indian contexts. E.g. a joke about Air Force was interpreted rightly by the majority of students. In the recent past, PAF targeted hit Indian Air Force planes and this created hype on social and electronic media. Almost all students had the knowledge about the incidents and shared common ground and shared salience helped the students to interpret the jokes easily.

Ethnicity-Specific Jokes

Jokes about Sikhs and Indians were interpreted rightly by the majority of students but they had difficulty in understanding and describing the jokes related to western culture e.g. Australians. According to the Socio-cognitive approach and Dynamic Model of Meaning presented by Keszkes (2008), the meanings are derived from the prior experience and relating it with the current context or emerging context. Since Eastern societies have cultural-specific meanings, which are interpretable by all individuals living in the Eastern World, that's why Pakistani students can easily interpret the jokes having Eastern-specific expressions. Lack of familiarity and understanding with the Australian Culture creates a hurdle for interpreting English

Jokes.

Intention and Attention

It is very difficult to understand the intention of interlocutors in written discourses, especially in intercultural communication. While interpreting the jokes, the interpreters look and the lexical items which are explicit and fail to underpin the underlying intention of the discourses. The participants of this research were paying the least attention to making inferences about the intention of the joke writers and they were relying only on the written discourses to interpret the jokes to face the same difficulty.

Conclusion

Jokes are one of the important genres of communication. Interpreting English jokes becomes difficult when jokes have ethnic/religion/race and history-related implicit ideologies. In order to understand the communication strategies used in-jokes, individual and societal knowledge plays a pivotal role. Shared prior knowledge, shared salience and prior/emerging context have an important roles to play in comprehending jokes. Having knowledge of semantic expressions is one of the aspects of comprehending text. Ample shared knowledge and the shared wisdom of culture-specific words and idioms are also important in completely comprehending jokes.

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