

PRAGMATICS OF JOKES AND HUMOR

Baxshilloeva Feruza G'afurjonovna

1st year master's student of Bukhara State Pedagogical Institute

Abstract. Humor is an essential aspect of human communication that serves social, psychological, and pragmatic functions. From a pragmatic perspective, jokes and humorous discourse often emerge through the intentional violation of conversational and politeness principles. This article explores the pragmatics of jokes by examining how humor functions as a communicative strategy, particularly through Face-Threatening Acts (FTA) and politeness maxims. The study demonstrates that humor frequently arises when speakers manipulate social norms, expectations, and interpersonal relations in discourse. Understanding the pragmatic mechanisms behind humor contributes to a deeper comprehension of language use in social interaction.

Keywords: humor, pragmatics, discourse, politeness principles, face-threatening act

Humor plays a significant role in everyday communication. Beyond entertainment, it functions as a social tool for reducing tension, expressing criticism indirectly, and strengthening interpersonal relationships. In many communicative contexts, humor allows speakers to convey sensitive ideas in a softer and more acceptable way.

From a linguistic perspective, humor cannot be separated from pragmatics, the branch of linguistics that studies language use in context. While grammar focuses on internal language structure, pragmatics examines how meaning is constructed through interaction between speakers and hearers. Jokes and humorous expressions are particularly interesting for pragmatic study because they often rely on implied meaning, contextual interpretation, and social norms.

Humorous discourse differs from ordinary discourse in that it does not always follow the cooperative and politeness principles typically observed in conversation. Instead, humor frequently emerges from deliberate deviations from these principles.

Pragmatics studies how speakers use language in real communicative situations. It explores how meaning is shaped not only by words and grammar but also by context, shared knowledge, and social relationships. Humor, therefore, can be analyzed as a pragmatic phenomenon because its success depends heavily on contextual understanding.

In normal communication, speakers usually aim to convey information clearly and efficiently. However, in humorous discourse, this goal may be temporarily disrupted. Jokes often create ambiguity, exaggeration, or unexpected responses, leading to laughter. This “disruption” is not accidental; it is strategically used to create comic effect.

Humor can thus be seen as a communicative strategy rather than merely a spontaneous reaction. Its effectiveness depends on timing, appropriateness, and shared background knowledge.

The concept of “face” was introduced by Erving Goffman and later developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson. Face refers to a person’s public self-image or social value. In communication, individuals generally try to maintain both their own face and that of others.

There are two types of face:

Positive face: the desire to be appreciated and approved.

Negative face: the desire to have freedom of action and not be imposed upon.

Many jokes function as Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs). For example, teasing, sarcasm, or ironic remarks may challenge someone’s positive face. However, when used appropriately and within close relationships, such threats can strengthen social bonds instead of damaging them.

Humor often works because the audience recognizes the temporary and playful nature of the threat. In other words, the violation is understood as non-serious. This shared understanding transforms potential offense into amusement.

According to Geoffrey Leech in his book *Principles of Pragmatics*, politeness in communication is guided by several maxims, including:

1. **Tact Maxim** – minimize cost to others, maximize benefit to others
2. **Generosity Maxim** – minimize benefit to self
3. **Approbation Maxim** – minimize criticism of others
4. **Modesty Maxim** – minimize praise of self
5. **Agreement Maxim** – minimize disagreement
6. **Sympathy Maxim** – minimize antipathy and maximize sympathy

In ordinary discourse, speakers try to follow these maxims. However, humor frequently arises from their violation. For example:

- Exaggerating one's abilities may violate the Modesty Maxim.
- Giving an unexpected selfish answer may violate the Tact Maxim.
- Responding without sympathy in a serious situation may violate the Sympathy Maxim.

The humor appears because the response contradicts social expectations. The audience anticipates a polite or conventional answer but receives something surprising instead. This incongruity between expectation and reality produces laughter.

One of the central pragmatic mechanisms in jokes is incongruity. The listener builds an expectation during the conversation, but the punchline introduces an unexpected shift in meaning. This sudden reinterpretation forces the listener to reconsider the previous context, leading to amusement.

For example, when a speaker exaggerates a situation unrealistically, the audience recognizes the impossibility and interprets it as humorous rather than factual. The pragmatic context signals that the utterance is not meant to be taken literally.

Although politeness is a general rule in communication, humor sometimes intentionally uses impoliteness. Teasing between close friends, for instance, may involve mock insults. In such cases, social distance is low, and power relations are balanced. Therefore, the impoliteness is interpreted as playful rather than hostile.

However, if the same joke is told in a formal or hierarchical setting, it may cause misunderstanding or offense. This demonstrates that humor is highly context-dependent. The same utterance can be funny in one situation and inappropriate in another.

Pragmatic interpretation of humor also depends on:

- **Social distance** (how close the participants are),
- **Power relations** (who has higher status),
- **Rank of imposition** (how serious the topic is).

When social distance is small, more face-threatening humor is tolerated. In contrast, in formal relationships, politeness norms are stronger, and humor must be more carefully constructed.

Humor performs several important functions:

1. **Reducing tension** – It helps ease stress in serious situations.
2. **Expressing criticism indirectly** – Sensitive issues can be discussed more safely.
3. **Strengthening solidarity** – Shared laughter builds group identity.
4. **Maintaining interaction** – Humor can revive a dull or rigid conversation.

Thus, humor is not merely entertainment but a pragmatic tool that shapes interpersonal communication

From a pragmatic perspective, jokes and humor are not random linguistic phenomena but structured communicative strategies. Humor frequently emerges from the intentional violation of politeness principles and face considerations. By disrupting conversational expectations, speakers create incongruity, which leads to laughter.

Understanding the pragmatics of jokes requires attention to context, social relationships, and cultural norms. The same humorous utterance may function differently depending on distance,

power, and situation. Therefore, successful humor depends on pragmatic competence—the ability to recognize when and how conversational rules can be safely violated.

In conclusion, humor discourse illustrates the dynamic nature of language use. It demonstrates that effective communication is not limited to following rules but also involves skillful and creative manipulation of them.

The list of used literature:

1. Brown, Penelope, P., & Levinson, Stephen C., S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Finegan, Edward, E. (1992). *Language: Its structure and use*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
3. Goffman, Erving, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face*
4. Leech, Geoffrey N., G. N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. Longman.
5. Nelson, T. G. A., T. G. A. (1990). *Comedy: The theory of comedy in literature, drama, and cinema*. Oxford University Press.
6. Raskin, Victor, V. (1985). *Semantic mechanisms of humor*. D. Reidel Publishing Company.
7. Thomas, Jenny, J. (1995). *Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics*. Longman.
8. Wijana, I Dewa Putu. (1996). *Dasar-dasar pragmatik*. Andi.
9. Wijana, I Dewa Putu. (2004). *Teori kesantunan dan humor*. (Seminar paper).
10. Rustono. (2000). *Implikatur tuturan humor*. CV. Rizky Multindo Perkasa.