

A FORMALISM FOR MISANTONYMS:
A CONTRIBUTION TO VERBAL HUMOUR
MODELLING,
AT THE MEET OF WORD-FORMATION
AND PRAGMATICS

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Abstract

Bearing witness to the current strength of computational linguistics research, five years ago the twelfth Twente Workshop on Language Technology was devoted to modelling verbal humour. My own paper in the resulting volume was rather at the narrative side of the spectrum of objects of inquiry, focusing as it did on what makes some accusation-and-pretext narratives processed by ALIBI sound humorous (it's when the accusation is so damning, that ALIBI's strives for exoneration trying too hard, by adopting an atomistic approach to alternative planning by the way of explanation); the same Twente paper also shortly introduced the rudiments of the COLUMBUS model (now presented in detail elsewhere), which adopts a goal-and-plan network as one component in a representation whose purpose is to capture the gist of the humour in the opening page of Gershon Rosenzweig's classic of Hebrew humour from the 19th/20th turn of century, Tractate America (supposedly, America wasn't named after Columbus because his foresight had him rather not to: "predictably", I published that in a forum on computational anticipatory systems); other research of mine on narrative has nothing to do with humour, yet has to do with startling elements in a narrative, which is the case, indeed, of the JAMA project in AI & Law, on which I recently published three papers. A startling element is, anyway, arguably underlying a large subset of humour, if not all of it (if we relax 'startling' to just a Riffaterrian discrepancy from an expected standard).

Still, my Twente paper of 1996 also touched upon word-formation. In fact, several of the papers in the proceedings were concerned with modelling the mechanism which make puns humorous. That I should now turn to word-formation for good, while within the same line of research, will

come as no surprise to whomever is acquainted with my earlier research in computational linguistics: my own doctoral project (which yielded the ONOMATURGE expert system for Hebrew nonconcatenative derivation and coinage psychosemantic evaluation, as well as three volumes of dissertation) was supervised, indeed, by the jubilaris whom this conference honours, Prof. Yaakov Choueka.

In this paper I show how extensive is the encroachment of pragmatic, "extralinguistic", encyclopedic or even contingent factors on word-formation within a category of devices which I show to be, well, a class of devices for good. The formation of "misantonyms", of which I traced dozens of examples across languages, on occasion yields a term that is not humorous; yet, this is arguably so because the term is entrenched in the lexicon (or the toponomasticon) of the given language, or then because the components did not originally qualify as a pair of crisply contrary lexical morphemes whose application to form the coinage (qua signifier) responding to an extant term would not be strictly justified by the denotatum of the coinage. Such a consideration in turn has us turn to linguistic prototype theory, a subject to which I devoted a long essay elsewhere.

To conclude this short abstract, I'll confine myself to just mentioning a few examples of misantonymy, with no further elaboration in the present compass: no humour is involved in the formation of Turkish Akdeniz (literally, 'white sea') versus Karadeniz for the Black Sea. Humorous headlining was, in contrast, the criterion for Newsweek to print "Clockwork Kumquat" on top of a disappointed review of a new book by Anthony Burgess, the author of the well-known *A Clockwork Orange*. Finally, the discrepancy between the linguistic competence which is standard for adult speakers of English, and the imperfect lexical and derivation-morphology knowledge of toddlers, is the key to pinpointing where the humour stems from, in the reception of an utterance reported by a magazine: "My three-year-old daughter was outraged at being unfairly blamed for her brother's noisy games. 'It's not me being boisterous', she complained furiously, 'I'm girlsterous!' "