

## Humorous Acts and Foreign Language Proficiency

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### Abstract

The humorous act comprehension, by speakers of other languages, is a field of linguistic research that gives accounts of the extent to which the speakers command a foreign language, inasmuch as being able to comprehend this act implies not only having the necessary proficiency level of the foreign language, but also understanding or knowing cultural features of the target language. Therefore, this work intends to learn if Spanish speakers of an upper-intermediate level of English or higher are able to comprehend humorous acts in the target language. For this, a taxonomy provided by Bergen and Binsted and Zenteno, based on Attardo's proposals was used to develop the instrument of analysis. The results showed that the 67% of the humorous events were understood, being unexpected ending (85%) the act with the highest level of comprehension. Therefore, foreign language proficiency is a key factor to understand the humorous act.

**Key words:** English humorous act, imagery, unexpected ending, general knowledge.

### Resumen

La capacidad de los hablantes de otras lenguas de entender el acto humorístico en una lengua extranjera es un área de la investigación lingüística que da cuenta del nivel de dominio que los hablantes tienen de ésta. Esto debido a que la comprensión de este acto implica no solamente tener un alto nivel de competencia de la lengua extranjera, sino que también conocer los rasgos culturales de la lengua meta. Este estudio busca conocer si hablantes nativos de español con un nivel de dominio de al menos intermedio superior de inglés como lengua extranjera son capaces de comprender los actos humorísticos en este idioma. La taxonomía entregada por Bergen y Binsted, y Zenteno, que a su vez se basa en las propuestas de Attardo, fue usada para desarrollar el instrumento de análisis del estudio. Los resultados mostraron que el 67% de los eventos humorísticos fueron entendidos, destacando aquellos de final inesperado con un 85% de comprensión. Por lo tanto, el nivel del dominio del idioma aparece como un factor clave para la comprensión del acto humorístico.

**Palabras clave:** acto humorístico en inglés, imagería, final inesperado, cultura general

## 1 Introduction

As human beings we laugh about many things. However, not many people really know what they laugh about. Every day, we do face various situations which make us smile or laugh. The social and cultural context play a very important role to consider certain situations as humorous or not, that is why some events are seen as humorous by some people but the same situations are not humorous for others. The aim of this study was to analyse why we laugh at certain jokes or events. For this purpose, this work described the taxonomy of humorous situations presented by Bergen and Binsted (2005) and Zenteno (1988). Based upon this taxonomy, we applied an instrument to assess the comprehension level of humorous events in English as well as investigated if Spanish native speakers can identify the humorous situation of a joke.

## 2 Aims

To investigate the understanding of the humorous events (presented in the form of a cartoon with text) in English by native speakers of Spanish, who work as teachers of English, was the main objective of this work. These native speakers of Spanish have, at least, a post-intermediate level of English (FCE<sup>1</sup> examination) corresponding to ALTE<sup>2</sup> 3. To achieve this objective, an instrument of analysis was developed and applied, and the results were analysed.

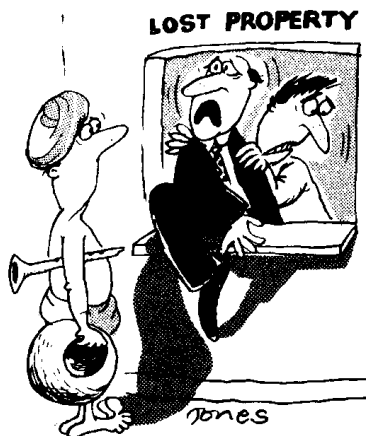
## 3 Theoretical framework

To carry out this research project, it was necessary to consult different authors who have studied the humorous event. However, this study is mainly focused on the taxonomy presented by Bergen and Binsted (2005), and Zenteno(1988), who mention 3 types of humorous events:

- a) The humorous event where the subject imagines the situation “Imagery is vital not just to understanding basic language about action and movement [...] but also seems essential to linguistic humour as well.” Bergen and Binsted (2005) stated. As we can see in the following example taken from Bergen and Binsted (2005)

- (1) A bear and a rabbit are hanging out in the woods. The rabbit tells the bear it has an itch. So the bear scratches the rabbit against a tree.

The humorous situation consists of imagining the bear performing the action described. Imagery also operates when we need to reconstruct the previous context to understand, through the pragmatics of a situation, the humorous event. Let us consider the following example:



*“Yes, as a matter of fact we have.”*

**Figure 1.** Taken from Swan (1988)

<sup>1</sup> First Certificate in English, (a Cambridge Esol examination)

<sup>2</sup> The Association of Language Testers in Europe.

The subject must visualise the snake charmer asking the people in charge of lost property for the snake in order to understand their reaction.

- b) The humorous event in which the ending is unexpected. According to Zenteno (1998), Attardo(2001), Suls (1972) and Tsakona (2009) the clash between the beginning, which presents the context, and the ending, which is expected by the reader or hearer, produces the comical event as illustrated in (3):

(2) When I asked the bartender for something cold and full of rum, he recommended his... wife.

Bergen and Bisnted (2005) refer to this situation quoting Coulson(2000), and Coulson and Kutas (2001), who state that individuals have knowledge-based frames. These frames are activated when we hear the beginning of an utterance:

(3) She read so much about the bad effects of smoking...

In this case the person who hears or reads the utterance will activate a frame which is related to the harmful effects of smoking and they would expect to hear an ending against smoking; however, this situation gets comical when it changes:

(4) She read so much about the bad effects of smoking that she decided she'd have to give up reading.

- c) The comical event in which it is necessary some general knowledge. This type of knowledge varies from person to person.

(5)



*"My third husband was delicious."*

Figure 2

(6)



Figure 3

The examples (5) and (6) (Swan, 1988) illustrate this type of comical events. In (6), the person needs to know the behaviour of this type of spider (the black widow), which eats the male spider after being inseminated. In (7), the subject must know the Human Development Index (HDI) and relate that to the stereotype presented in the caricature. Besides, it is necessary to associate the light with God's presence.

The understanding of a comical event is not restricted to literal comprehension of the message; therefore, a person must meet certain requirements to interpret a comical event successfully. One of these requirements is related to having an advanced command of a language in which the humorous event is presented. However, the command of the language does not guarantee understanding a humorous event. The hearer or reader must know some cultural aspects about the place where the comic event takes place or the place the humorous event refers to. If we have a look at (2) and (7), we will see that the characters' clothes are necessary to understand the comic events.

#### 4 Research question

Considering that learning a language involves not only having a good command of the language that allows us to convey meaning and communicate information, but also understanding social and cultural aspects of a certain culture, we rise the following research question: are subjects with, at least, an upper-intermediate level of English able to understand the humorous event which is read?

## 5 Subjects

The subjects were 10 native speakers of Spanish who had an upper intermediate command of English. They were also teachers of English who work as such at different language institutes as well as colleges. Gender and age were not considered for the purpose of this work.

## 6 Instrument of analysis

The instrument of analysis was made taking into account the taxonomy proposed by Bergen and Binsted (2005). Six caricatures were selected; they represent the 3 types of comical events described by Bergen and Binsted (2005). Caricatures 1 and 6 are humorous events in which the ending is unexpected; caricatures 2 and 5 are comical acts in which the reader or hearer must have some general knowledge to interpret them; and to understand the caricatures 3 and 4, the person must use imagery.

### 6.1 Unexpected ending caricatures

#### Caricature 1

It shows a woman reading the headline of a newspaper which informs the kidnapping of a child. With this piece of information the subject activates a framework concerning a tragic event. However, the ending of the headline clashes the beginning when stating that the parents want the kidnappers to keep the child.



Figure 4. Caricature 1



"We have high quality and low prices.  
Which do you want?"

Figure 5. Caricature 6

#### Caricature 6

In a shop, a woman seems to be asking about a product. The shop assistant offers the woman "high quality and low prices." The clash occurs when the shop assistant asks her to choose between them.

### 6.2 General knowledge caricatures

#### Caricature 2

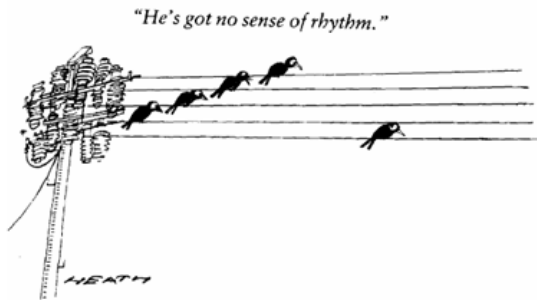


Figure 6. Caricature 2

In this caricature, wiring looks like a stave since it has 5 lines and 5 birds take the position of the notes on it. Four of the birds are arranged like a scale, while the fifth is standing not following the visual pattern. One of the birds states that the fifth one "...has got no sense of rhythm." For this joke to be understood, the subject must know what a stave is.

#### Caricature 5

A man is describing himself to a woman in terms of percentages stating that he is 10% lover, 8% poet, and 2% head librarian. What about the remaining 80%? He says "it's just water." The only way to understand the humorous act, i.e. to laugh at this joke, is to know the human beings are made of, actually, 80% of water.



"I'm ten per cent lover, eight per cent poet and two per cent head librarian. The rest, I'm afraid, is water."

Figure 7. Caricature 5

### 6.3 Imagery caricatures



"Don't lie to me - you've been to the pub again."

Figure 8. Caricature 3

#### Caricature 3

A man who is coming home apparently late is listening to his wife who asks him not to lie again about the place he has been to. The man has a dart on his nose and he has probably been denying his attendance to the pub. Imagery activates when the reader has to picture the man excusing himself for being late.

Caricature 4

In this caricature imagery works at the level of the social context because the reader should be able to notice that the people in the car are from a foreign country and that they do not speak the local language. The situation gets funny when the man in the car, noticeably nervous for the local person approaching to him, asks his travelling companion, maybe his wife, for the phrase-book, which might help him to solve the impasse.

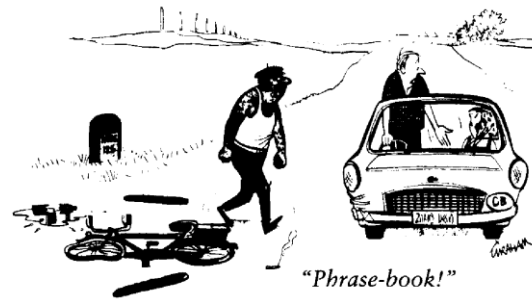


Figure 9. Caricature 4

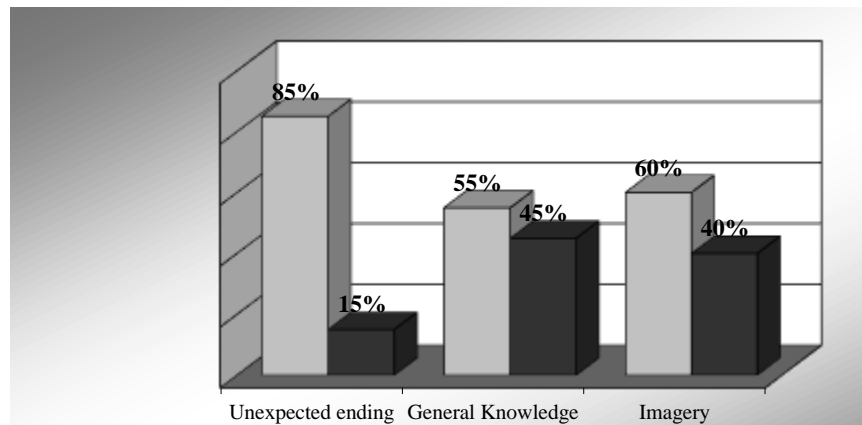
7 Instrument application and data collection

The instrument was applied to 10 subjects. These subjects were asked to read the caricature and to answer the question next to it in Spanish. Nothing was explained or mentioned about the caricatures of the questionnaire. The answers provided with the necessary information to notice the mechanism the subjects used to understand the situation.

8 Results

After applying the instrument the data were tabulated and the results were as follows. Gender was not taken as an aspect to be analysed in this study, that is why the results obtained from men and from women were not contrasted.

If we observe graph 1, we can realize the large difference which was obtained from the ‘unexpected ending’ caricature in relation to its understanding, the other caricatures showed similar results (55%-45% and 60%-40%). This proves that readers, according to Zenteno (1998), were really involved in a certain context (helped by the drawing and the text) where they expected a “typical” or “normal” ending, which was determined by the activated frames. Besides, it is possible to infer that the general knowledge comical event was the least understood (caricatures no. 2 and no. 5)



**Graph 1:** Relationship between Understood-Non-understood and the 3 types of caricatures.

Regarding the 60% of understanding of the imagery caricatures we can conclude that No. 4 was the least understood and this decreased the percentage of that type of comical event.

In summary, 67% of the caricatures were explained according to the taxonomy used by the individuals who participated in this study and only 33% did not do it successfully. Considering the results discussed, the conclusion is presented in the next section of the study.

## 9 Conclusion

After tabulating the results, we conclude subjects with an upper-intermediate level of English are able to understand the background of a comic event. However, some interesting points should be added to consider. First, a comical event cannot be restricted to one classification or another, since some comical acts can have many features of different possible classifications, i.e. an event can be classified as an unexpected ending situation but we can still use imagery to understand it. Combinations are countless and this is not surprising, since it is language under research. Second, considering the cognitive features of the humorous act and language, it is concluded that the taxonomy used in this study can be applied in any language under research. Thirdly, the study methodology seems useful to measure this aspect of language; nevertheless, it should be improved or adapted if necessary.

Finally, since doing research on humour does involve many different factors, some aspects need to be analysed in further research: these aspects may be gender in relation to humorous event understanding; comical/non-comical effect associated with understood/non-understood variables; social stratification regarding humorous event understanding; age associated with understood/non-understood and Comical/non-comical variables; and, to include humorous events which present figurative language such as metaphor, irony, metonymy and the like.

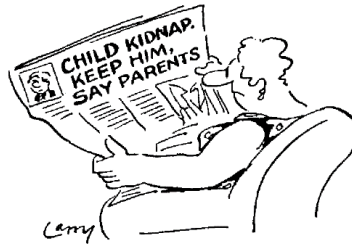
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**Appendix:**

Lee, observa y contesta las preguntas junto al dibujo.



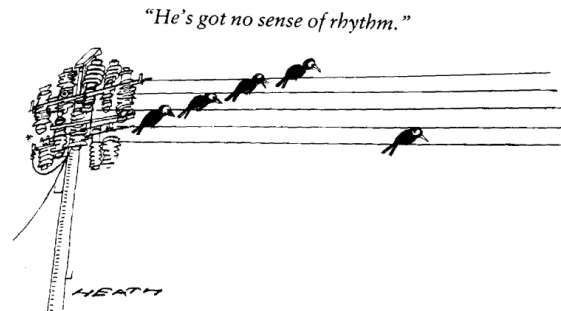
¿Es cómico?      Sí \_\_\_\_\_      No \_\_\_\_\_

¿Por qué?

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¿Es cómico?      Sí \_\_\_\_\_      No \_\_\_\_\_

¿Por qué?

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*"Don't lie to me – you've been to the pub again."*

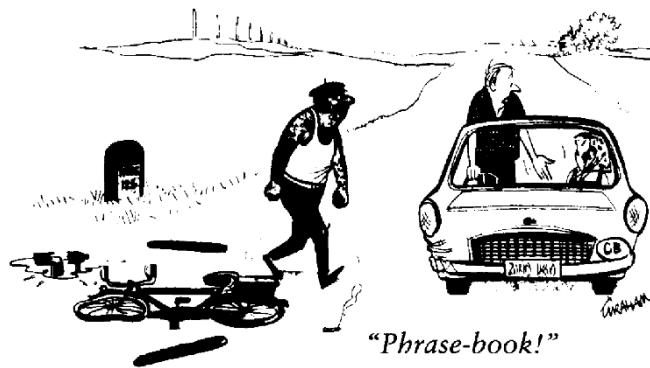
¿Es cómico?      Sí \_\_\_\_\_      No \_\_\_\_\_

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*"Phrase-book!"*

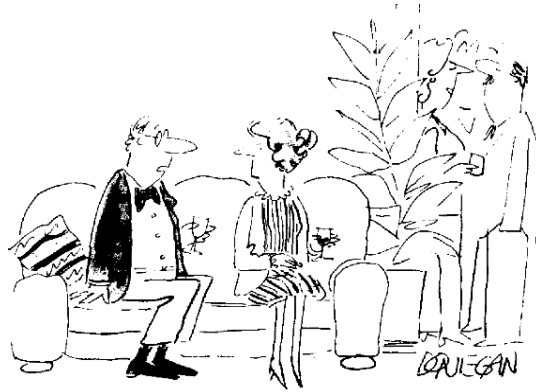
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¿Es cómico?            Sí \_\_\_\_\_            No \_\_\_\_\_

¿Por qué?

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*"We have high quality and low prices. Which do you want?"*

¿Es cómico?            Sí \_\_\_\_\_            No \_\_\_\_\_

¿Por qué?

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**Gracias por tu colaboración**