

Humorous Garden-Paths

Humorous Garden-Paths:
A Pragmatic-Cognitive Study

By

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

The book aims to investigate the workings of the *garden-path* (GP) mechanism underlying verbal humour, whose scope, for heuristic purposes, is restricted to *witticisms* and *one-liners*, referred to as *garden-paths* (GPs). In essence, these are short humorous texts couched in *covert ambiguity* (of various types) emergent only at the final stage of *on-line* processing, when the initially overt and obvious (*default/salient*) interpretation needs to be cancelled and superseded by an alternative meaning, so far covert.

Don't drink and drive. You might hit a bump and spill your drink.
It's not that I always see a glass half empty. I always see a glass half full of poison.
He told me I was in shape. It was nice with the exception that round is a shape as well.
She has her looks from her father. He's a plastic surgeon.

The primary analytic perspective adopted here conforms to the widely acknowledged *incongruity-resolution* framework (Suls 1972, 1983), which gives insight into on-line interpretation of humorous texts. However, all their forms cannot be fully explained by one principle. A precise description of humour processes entails an anti-essentialist approach, i.e. a detailed multi-faceted analysis of distinct language phenomena within clearly delineated borders. The goal is thus to shed light on the GP mechanism manifesting itself in particular humorous forms and boasting a variety of realisations. The multifarious methodological apparatus employed to account for the humorous verbalisations in focus is derived from semantics, cognitivism and pragmatics. The discussions will aim to verify whether and how the humorous forms can be described with recourse to postulates originating from the field of humour research and from general studies on language production and comprehension.

The first chapter serves as an introduction to the work, presenting a number of methodological assumptions and familiarising the reader with fundamental concepts. Most importantly, the GP phenomenon is introduced in view of earlier theories rooted in literature on humour and grammar. GP humour is conceptualised vis-à-vis two other mechanisms

underpinning short humorous texts. Finally, various forms of humour (*jokes vs. forms of conversational humour*) are discussed and the scope of research is narrowed down to GPs, understood as one-liners and witticisms contingent on the mechanism in question.

The second and third chapters provide a background to humour studies and survey the prevailing humour theories which tackle the issue of on-line processing of humorous texts, verifying their aptness in the description of the chosen range of humorous phenomena. At the outset, the major theories (supposedly germane to all forms of humour) are revised. The primary focus is the incongruity-resolution approach (Suls 1972, 1983), the prevailing model in contemporary humour literature, which is also given support here, albeit with a few reservations. Those are made after several vexing issues pertinent to the framework have been raised.

In chapter 3, the discussion is averted to a number of proposals widely acknowledged in linguistics, which describe the mechanisms of on-line interpretation of humorous texts, i.e. jokes, together with one-liners. The models are revisited and scrutinised for their applicability to all the three joke categories distinguished in chapter 1. It emerges that a few authors present the interpretation process as if all humorous texts centred on factors inherent to the GP mechanism.

Further, in chapter 4, major subtypes of GPs are differentiated, in the light of *semantic ambiguity* types on which they capitalise, i.e. *pragmatic* and *linguistic* (primarily *lexical*, rarely together with *syntactic*), the latter coinciding with *puns*. Also, several subrealisations of GPs within both of the major ambiguity types are distinguished, with a view to gravitating towards a most adequate description of GP phenomena. To meet this goal, the notion of ambiguity, its categorisations and semantic manifestations are first expounded on.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer two discrete explanatory approaches to the GP mechanism, undertaking to explain the two fundamental features of GPs in the light of broader pragmatic and cognitive proposals concerning the phenomena inherent to human communication. One of the characteristics is the *defaultness* or *salience* of the first interpretation, which, in the case of GPs, prevents an alternative meaning from arising until the final stage of the verbalisation's processing. The other pivotal feature is the *cancellability* or *defeasibility* of this default meaning, given the *co-text* (verbal context) developing contrary to the meaning inferred.

Chapter 5 analyses GPs within the Gricean framework (e.g. Grice 1975/1989b, 1978/1989b, 1981/1989b), verifying *generalised conversational implicatures* as regards their explanatory potential for GPs. These implicatures are made by default across contexts and are subject to

cancellation, which appears to suit the description of the first inference in GP processing. Nevertheless, the Gricean philosophy of language is complex and problematic, rendering the discussion challenging. Before this implicature type is addressed, the thorny issue of the relation between the Gricean model and humour must be elaborated. The objective is primarily to provide argumentation against the well-entrenched contention that humor (not only of the GP type) constitutes the *non-bona-fide mode* of communication with its own humour principle standing vis-à-vis Grice's (Raskin 1985, Raskin and Attardo 1994) and even violates the Gricean Cooperative Principle and its subordinate maxims (Attardo 1990, 1993, 1994, 1996a, 2006). Therefore, the goal is to testify that the Gricean model is germane to the analysis of humour, with special attention paid to the type resting on the GP mechanism.

The last chapter, based on independent pragmatic and cognitive theories, pursues the strand of the previous chapter and aims to account for the initial default but cancellable text interpretation in GPs. The chapter concentrates principally on the notion of generalised conversational implicatures reconceptualised as *presumptive meanings* (Levinson 2000, cf. 1983, 1998, 1995) and on *salient meanings* (Giora 1997, 1999, 2003), which are argued to correspond to the initial "obvious" interpretations of ambiguity-based chunks conducive to GPs. Albeit divergent, these approaches together help explain the workings of GPs exploiting lexical (punning) or pragmatic forms of covert ambiguity, to the effect that one meaning is effortlessly activated only to have to be legitimately rejected in favour of an initially unavailable interpretation on the strength of the final part of the verbalisation.

CHAPTER ONE

METHODOLOGY AND INTRODUCTION TO GARDEN-PATHS

The present chapter serves as a general introduction to the study on humorous units pivoting on the garden-path mechanism. It opens with a number of observations on the methodology and exemplification used in the monograph. The major part of the chapter is devoted to the conceptualisation of the units of analysis, i.e. witticisms and one-liners, and the humorous mechanism in focus, standing vis-à-vis other mechanisms which can be found in the two humorous forms, as well as jokes.

1. Methodology and exemplification

In literature on humour¹, two main methodological strands can be distinguished, viz. *universalist* and *descriptive* theories (Ritchie 2004). The former embraces general proposals, e.g. from a philosophical standpoint, meant to account for a wide range of humour phenomena, usually failing to produce adequate descriptions of real-life instances. On the other hand, the alternative approach entails conducting detailed analyses of particular humour phenomena. The present work represents the latter perspective, focusing on garden-paths (GPs), i.e. witticisms and one-liners capitalising on the garden-path (GP) mechanism. As Ritchie (2004) rightly observes, a descriptive approach is advantageous in the sense that it holds for the collected exemplification and yields falsifiable hypotheses, as long as the researcher garners extensive data with examples which can be grouped into categories, in order to ascertain that the realisations are not circumstantial.

¹ Contrary to the general tendency in topical literature to use the form “humor”, British English spelling of the term is preferred here, given that the language of whole book conforms to this standard.

Both the *top-down* (theory-driven) and the *bottom-up* (data-driven) procedures of analysis are employed. The two must be combined to provide a detailed picture of one particular humour phenomenon, together with its subtypes. The bottom-up procedure guarantees adequate description of language phenomena, while theoretical grounding and hypotheses (to be proved or disproved) are indispensable as a pre-existing skeleton for the study. This approach facilitates the application of varied theoretical frameworks from the fields of cognitivism and pragmatics, within not only the realm of humour but also general studies on discourse production and comprehension.

Objectivity in the choice of data collection is difficult, and even impossible, to achieve in the study of humour. It should be acknowledged that the majority of contemporary language researchers in humour either conduct meticulous discourse analyses or corroborate their theses by providing exemplification chosen from sources specified. This method is obviously not exclusive to humour research but recurs in analyses of discourse in general. Subjectivity and introspection are then the problems many linguists face, irrespective of their field of interest.

Humour researchers endeavour to circumvent the problem of subjectivisation by dint of the *mutual guarantee technique*, according to which an analyst is entitled to regard a given utterance as an instance of humour if it has already been perceived as such by others (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974). Secondly, empirical evidence legitimising a verbalisation as a humorous item is its occurrence in a collection of jokes or other humorous texts. However, the major flaw of such a criterion is again the subjective perspective of the authors of humour collections. In either case, linguists finally resort to introspection, which may not be a perfectly reliable criterion but apparently the only one available (Attardo 1994).

The book is rich in examples. Discussions of revisited humour proposals are exemplified with instances provided by the original authors, while postulates propounded here are illustrated with GP witticisms and one-liners (and a few longer jokes in this chapter) gathered a priori, primarily by the present author. Nevertheless, for the sake of mitigating complete subjectivisation, some were also submitted by English Philology students, who found examples of GP humour (mostly on the Internet), having been briefly familiarised with this phenomenon. The fact that they were capable of this testifies that language users, guided by intuition, can determine GP examples, even if not being able to conceptualise them theoretically.

The instances derive from real-life oral conversations and electronic exchanges, film dialogues, as well as Internet collections and published

volumes of jokes and quotations (see the end of the reference section). Such diversification of sources may raise serious doubts, which must instantly be dispersed. It is here maintained that regardless of whether its provenance is a real-life conversation (private or media), a fictional dialogue, a scripted interaction in a TV programme or a collection of free-floating humorous texts, each humorous verbalisation is invariably created by one speaker, a public persona, an ordinary language user or a scriptwriter, who attributes it to a fictional character. Once a humorous item is produced first, it will be repeated by language users. It must also be remembered that the success of a film script is determined by whether it reflects the language of the contemporary society, i.e. the target audience. As Wardhaugh rightly observes,

realistic fictional representations of conversations can still offer valid insights into naturally-occurring interactions since they must be based on what people think happens if they are to be effective. (Wardhaugh 1992: 319)

Therefore, it can be extrapolated that contemporary scriptwriters engage in a meta-play with the target audience within an external communicative network, making use of the fictitious characters as their mouthpieces. Furthermore, the caesuras between fictional, media and real-life discourses are blurred, for individual speakers tend to incorporate various humorous chunks from the media discourse into their idiolects. It is also worth noting that numerous examples recurred in various resources. Finally, what is most significant here is the presentation of the mechanism of humorous forms in focus, rather than socio-pragmatic factors of their occurrence.

Inasmuch as GP witticisms and one-liners are easily isolated from discourse, no contextual factors (if present at all, i.e. if the original source is not a collection of humorous texts) have to be elucidated, as is the case of canned jokes. In other words, the present work concentrates on humorous verbalisations which are independent of contextual factors and can be enjoyed by interpreters across situations. This is because these humorous units encapsulate all the information indispensable for understanding (Long and Graesser 1988). What is interesting, the context in which an utterance might have been produced and in which it may be used again can easily be inferred on the basis of the utterance's meaning (Kecskes 2008).

In linguistics, context normally comprises the whole gamut of factors (linguistic, epistemic, physical and social), which affect the interpretation of utterances (and nonverbal communication). From the traditional

external perspective, which is assumed here, context modifies and/or specifies word meanings. This is in contrast to the dynamic model of meaning with its broad conception of context as combining both prior and present experience (of an individual or a social group) with the present context of the outside world (Kecskes 2008). If the word “context” is used in the analyses of GP-related phenomena, it pertains to the text within a GP utterance, preceding or following its ambiguous segment. Given its verbal nature, such context is here also dubbed *co-text* (cf. Halliday and Hasan 1976), which encompasses the text neighbouring the GP pivot, i.e. a covertly ambiguous chunk with one default/salient interpretation. If a broader, not only language-based, context is meant, the epithet “situational” is added, or the term “situational factors” is used instead.

For the sake of terminological simplification, the terms “utterance”, “verbalisation”, or “humorous text” are used interchangeably in reference to GPs regardless of whether they are encountered in spoken or written forms. Also, the term “speaker” will be equated with the term “producer” in reference to the author of a humorous statement (not necessarily the original one), while the terms “hearer”, “recipient”, “addressee”, “interpreter” or “audience” will refer to the person or people analysing a humorous utterance.

1.1. Humorousness and funniness

Naturally, the perception and assessment of humour is idiosyncratic. Humour appreciation, i.e. the perception of its funniness, is an individual matter.

Humour (like beauty) is something that exists only in our minds and not in the real world. Humour is not a characteristic of certain events (such as cartoons, jokes, clowning behaviour, etc.) although certain stimulus events are more likely than others to produce the perception of humour. (McGhee 1979: 6)

This individualisation of humour perception is particularly problematic from the perspective of humour researchers who feel obliged to assert that the examples chosen need not be considered funny and laughable by readers (cf. Raskin 1985; Attardo 1994, 2001). Thus, the reader of any scholarly monograph or paper on humour need not read it with a view to being genuinely amused. A similar precautionary measure is taken here. It must be stated at the outset that the focus of interest is material carrying potential for *humorousness*, but not necessarily *funniness* (Carrell 1997). Humorousness is a binary category representing a stimulus’s theoretical

capacity to induce a humorous response, while funniness is a gradable category indicating the degrees of appreciation of a humorous text, differently perceived by individuals (Carrell 1997). Differentiation is thus made between humour comprehension and appreciation, the latter being affected by motivational, emotional and situational factors (Suls 1972, 1983). The aim will be to discuss the workings and the comprehension process of the humorous GP mechanism, not to account for its appreciation and genuinely amusing value. No attempt will be made to address the question why humour is funny in an individual's perception, or why and how humorous responses come into being, which is the focus of psychological studies on humour (see e.g. Ruch 1998). As Raskin (Aymone 2007) rightly observes, the aim of any linguistic² analysis is to describe humour, rather than explain its funniness.

It must also be highlighted that the interpretation process described is the ideal model realised by the ideal speaker and the ideal interpreter. Hence, the underlying assumption is that each humorous verbalisation is produced and interpreted according to one pattern. No claim is made that this will always be the case in all actual situations in which a particular GP is produced. However, it cannot be denied that, thanks to their skilful structuring and underlying cognitive operations, the humorous texts discussed here should normally be comprehended in the same default manner.³

2. Jokes vs. conversational humour

The aim of this section is to give an overview of verbal humour's pragmatic types so that the taxonomic position and nature of the two forms in focus can be later discussed.

There have been numerous proposals of humour classifications within philosophical and linguistic literature (see Raskin 1985, Attardo 1994). In contemporary linguistic analyses, the scope of humour is frequently

² Throughout this book, the epithet "linguistic" preceding words such as "theory", "research", "proposal", "analysis", "literature", etc. means "related to the study of language, linguistics", while preceding "meaning", "code", "expression", "phenomena", it means "conveyed by means of language". By contrast, collocated with humour-related terms "humour", "ambiguity" or "GP", the epithet carries a narrower sense and means "associated with the very surface structure of an utterance" (cf. chapter 4).

³ This generalisation may not obtain, for example, in the case of people with brain damage.

reduced to the “canned joke”. However, it must be emphasised this is only one form of humour conveyed by means of language.

Jokes are often divided into *conversational* or *canned* types (e.g. Fry 1963; Attardo 1994, 2001), the main criterion being that while the latter are repeated verbatim, the former are improvised and anchored in the situational context of a particular conversation conducted by minimally two interlocutors (Brzozowska 2000). Attardo (1994), following Mulkay (1988), perceives conversational jokes as spontaneous, for they are improvised on the spur of the moment, and as situational, given that they are indigenous to a particular situational context and emerge as virtually incomprehensible to an outsider. Attardo (1994, 2001) also perceives a number of dissimilarities between the two types. Whereas canned jokes are normally repeated, recounted by a narrator and decontextualised, conversational jokes are original, non-narrative and contextually linked. Nonetheless, as Attardo (1994) also observes, this dichotomy is not a rigid one. For example, once constructed, a short conversational joke may develop into a text repeated verbatim, rather than be spontaneously produced. Additionally, as noted by Zajdman (1991), canned jokes may be adopted for the purposes of the joke-telling situation. Notwithstanding these observations, it could be argued that the former is still a conversational form, while the latter is still a canned joke.

Also, the term “conversational joking” has broader applicability (see the next section), which is why it is here protested that, for the sake of clarity, the vague category “conversational joke/joking” should be avoided and substituted with second-order types, all of which represent *conversational humour* (cf. Coates 2007). On the other hand, in accord with the general tendency (see Attardo 1994, cf. Raskin 1985, Attardo and Chabanne 1992, Hockett 1972/1977, Ritchie 2002), the term “joke” is used in the sense of a “canned joke”, a fully-fledged humorous text. Thanks to this, the epithet “canned” is elided as redundant. In addition, the *one-liner*, normally conceived as a one-line canned joke, is distinguished as a discrete type of humorous text.

2.1. (Canned) jokes

Even if the concept of a joke is by no means unfamiliar to lay language users, who intuitively grasp its meaning, it does pose definitional problems. Most frequently, a joke is defined in terms of its constituent parts.

Attardo and Chabanne (1992) understand a joke as a text type, a narrative which is recounted by the speaker and which is composed of the following elements:

1. Introduction – the information aimed to provide contextual factors (status of the characters, time, place), which sets “the background against which and in reason of which the punch line⁴ appears incongruous” (Attardo and Chabanne 1992: 109)
2. Dialogue – usually two, three or four characters are quoted
3. Punchline – the last sentence closes the narration, rendering the earlier part of the joke sensible and triggering the hearer’s laughter.

It should be observed that the definition is not flawless, since dialogues and narratives are non-obligatory elements and only either element may suffice to form a joke, while the punchline can be reduced to a phrase or a single word. Hence, it appears feasible to champion the broadest possible structure of a joke and a necessity for dividing jokes into subtypes. Such an approach, much older than the one cited above, is credited to Hockett (1972/1977), according to whom, a joke comprises a *build-up* and a *punch*. This definition is often repeated in literature, albeit with different terminology. For instance, Sherzer defines a joke as “a discourse unit consisting of two parts, the set up and the punch line” (Sherzer 1985: 216). Hockett also (1972/1977) proposes an organised categorisation of jokes, juxtaposing them with sentences. He thus distinguishes between *finite jokes* commencing with narration and ending in a punchline and *infinite* ones, which are devoid of either or even both the elements. The former are further divided into: *simple* ones, i.e. one narrative part followed by one punchline, *complex* ones with many punchlines, and *joke-within-joke* structures. Nota bene, it could be hypothesised that there can only be one genuine punchline introducing the main incongruity (see chapter 2), while the preceding ones only contribute to the ultimate humorous effect. Among infinite jokes, Hockett (1972/1977) enumerates *shaggy-dog stories* and humorous dialogues, i.e. *riddles*.

To summarise, it is the safest to posit that, in terms of structuring, a canonical joke usually consists of a variously formulated set-up (a story and/or a dialogue) and a punchline. The set-up can be differently structured, thereby yielding various joke forms. The most crucial is the distinction between the main body of a joke and its punchline.

There is an easy procedure for locating the boundary between build-up and punch. Starting at the end, one finds the shortest terminal sequence, the

⁴ Unless quoted from literature, the term is written here as one word.

replacement of which by suitably chosen other words will transform the joke into a nonjoke. (Hockett 1977: 259)

Ritchie (2004) criticises this definition, pointing out that elements of the punchline can actually be altered, deleted or added with no loss of the joke. It is, however, undeniable that the punchline is an indispensable trigger of each joke, whose mechanisms are a few (see section 7). All in all, one might conclude that a joke is a humorous short text repeated (almost) verbatim whose content is usually irrelevant to, and dissociated from, the conversation and is geared towards amusement. Nonetheless, it cannot be ruled out that jokes can carry relevant propositional content (see Oring 2003).

A few different forms can also be categorised as special types of jokes. One of the most prominent of such forms is a humour-oriented *riddle* realised by one speaker, who both asks the hearer an “unanswerable” question and provides the answer to it, which can be conceived of as a punchline. Another type of joke is a *shaggy-dog story*, i.e. a long joke whose quasi-punchline is formed by a nonsensical ending. The most significant type of joke in the present analysis is the *one-liner*, which will be discussed below. Because of its importance in the present work, this category is treated independently from that of a joke. The term “joke” used throughout the book refers to a fully-fledged joke (longer than one line/sentence) comprising a set-up and a punchline (but this may not always be thus if the term appears in quotations cited verbatim from works by other authors).

2.2. Conversational humour: any verbal humour but jokes

Many contemporary humour linguists narrow down the scope of humour under investigation to jokes, due to their heuristic advantages over other humour forms (cf. Attardo and Raskin 1991, Attardo 1994). Nevertheless, there are a few authors (e.g. Long and Graesser 1988; Norrick 1993, 2003; Kotthoff 1996, 1999, 2006, 2007; Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997; Brzozowska 2000; Veale et al. 2006) who do fill the lacuna in the realm of humour research, examining forms used in interactions. Usually, articles focus on particular humour phenomena in isolation, distinguished as pragmatic categories or formal realisations, which need not be placed on any hierarchical tier in humour taxonomy, e.g. *stock conversational witticisms*, i.e. *retorts* (*punning* and *non-punning*) and *quips* (Norrick 1984, 1986); *teasing*, i.e. benevolent jibes carrying no genuinely aggressive potential (cf. e.g. Norrick 1993, Drew 1987, Hay 2000, Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006, Dynel 2008); *banter*, i.e. longer

teasing exchanges (cf. Norrick 1993, Dynel 2008); *joint fantasising*, i.e. fantasy/imaginary scenarios created by both interlocutors (Kotthoff 2007); *irony* (e.g. Attardo 2000, 2001, Partington 2007); or *adversarial humour* achieved via *trumping* i.e. humorous verbalisations subverting the communicative import of the preceding turns (Veale et al. 2006, Brône forth.). The few authors who assume a bird's eye view of the field of humour beyond the joke are hardly unanimous regarding the terminology and the conceptualisation of the phenomena discussed.

For example, Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997), introduce the term *conversational joking*, equating it with *situational humour*, which may be deemed as causing epistemological convolution, since the denotation of the term “humour” embraces (is superordinate to) “joking”, as will be explained below. More importantly, not all conversational joking must be immanently associated with particular contextual factors, the lack of which deprives the text of its humorous force. Additionally, Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) propose a tripartite function-based division of conversational joking into teasing, understood as poking fun at the interlocutor, joking about absent others and self-denigration. Obviously, conversational joking so understood does not exhaust the list of potential realisations of conversational humour.

Long and Graesser (1988) explore conversational humour which they dub “wit” manifesting itself in: irony, satire, sarcasm, overstatement and understatement, self-deprecation, teasing, replies to rhetorical questions, clever replies to serious statements, double entendres (puns), transformations of frozen expressions and puns. It is self-evident that these eleven categories operate on various classificatory criteria, thus representing rhetorical figures or pragmatic types, which could easily overlap.

Norrick (1987, 1993, 2003) also holds a broad view of humour realisations trespassing jokes, distinguishing *conversational joking*, a blanket term for a multitude of “verbal playing” types. From this vantagepoint, conversational joking encompasses primarily wordplay, punning, teasing, sarcasm, mockery, anecdotes and joint narratives (Norrick 1993). Similarly to Long and Graesser's (1988) list, this one is not entirely satisfactory either, for the types are not distinguished according to one criterion (e.g. formal structuring or pragmatic function). Also, they are by no means mutually exclusive, e.g. teasing may entail punning, while mockery may involve sarcasm.

For the sake of terminological clarity, the blanket category advocated here is *conversational humour* (cf. Coates 2007). While Norrick (2003) uses this term in reference to all forms of humour in conversations, including jokes, for heuristic purposes, it is here assumed that conversational

humour is any type of humour except for jokes. The term “humour” appears to be more advantageous than “joking/jokes”, inasmuch as it covers units such as neologisms (e.g. “pupkus”, i.e. a mark of a dog’s nose on a window pane) or witticisms, which are humorous but cannot be labelled as joking, owing to their “non-joke” form. Units of conversational humour range from single lexemes to whole utterances and even exchanges interwoven into otherwise non-humorous discourse.

In essence, conversational humour is here treated as an umbrella term for various intentionally formed verbal chunks, both *linguistic* (i.e. hinged on wordplay) and *non-linguistic* (see chapter 4), uttered for the sake of amusing the recipient, either directly contributing to the semantic content of the ongoing conversation or diverting the flow of the conversation into the humorous mode, in which the speaker need not support the propositional content of the jocular chunk (see section 4).

Even if some may argue that conversational humour is necessarily a locally structured social phenomenon (Kotthoff 2007), it can be either spontaneously formed or standardised (Norrick 1993). There may exist (exchanges of) spontaneous humorous verbalisations inextricably connected with a given situation, which are unlikely to be remembered and reused. However, a humorous unit may come into being in the course of a particular interaction, whether private or media, only to gain a permanent position within the idiolects of conversationalists, who repeat it verbatim in appropriate conversational situations. Obviously, such humorous chunks are unlikely to be lexicalised, thus always retaining their exceptionality and the quality of novelty (but for humorous conversational routines, e.g. “Look what the cat has dragged in” said upon someone entering). It is noteworthy that if the hearer knows a certain humorous item, he/she will normally not consider it as funny as it will have been upon first encounter, even if it is still humorous. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that repeatedly heard jokes may retain their funniness (see section 7, chapter 2).

3. Witticisms and one-liners

The present conceptualisation of *witticisms* (*wisecracks*, *quips*⁵ or *epigrams*⁶) is rooted in Norrick’s (1984, 1993, 1994, 2003) notion of *stock*

⁵ According to Norrick (1984, 1986), a quip is a subtype of witticism produced in response to non-verbal behaviour of the other interactionist.

⁶ Esar (1952) differentiates between epigrams and wisecracks, both clever remarks, depending on whether they refer to a general group of people/things or a particular person or thing, respectively.

conversational witticisms, i.e. witty and humorous units of text entwined in conversational exchanges, not necessarily of humorous nature. They are context-bound but mode spontaneous in contrast to jokes, which constitute integral parts per se, dissociated from the whole discourse (Long and Graesser 1988). However, witticisms can easily be isolated from conversations and still be perfectly comprehensible. Additionally, they may either be formed on the spur of the moment or, once verbalised, gain a permanent status in an individual speaker's idiolect or in the language of a social group (Norrick 1993, 1994, 2003), particularly if they are used by respected members of a peer group or appear in popular media discourse targeted at broad audiences. In other words, a witticism comes into being as a novel verbalisation produced by a fellow conversationalist, a fictional character or a media persona. Having heard it, speakers may quote it verbatim in relevant situational contexts, either acknowledging its origin or pretending to be producing it spontaneously (except for allusive quotations, e.g. "Shaken but not stirred" known from the Bond series). The allure of witticisms resides in the fact that speakers may boast their wit and reap rewards for the creation of witty chunks, having obtained them from media discourse or exchanges with other interlocutors (Norrick 1993).

Witticisms can be categorised according to semantic phenomena or rhetorical figures on which they operate (e.g. metaphor or irony). Additionally, they may assume various communicative forms such as definitions or comments (cf. Chiaro 1992), thanks to which they serve communicative purposes.

My motto is: I'm a light eater. I start eating as soon as it's light.
[a GP definition]

When you meet Mr Right, you don't know his first name is Always.
[a GP comment]

Witticisms can also be categorised regarding pragmatically oriented humour types they represent, such as teasing (jocular mocking, whose aggressive import need not be treated seriously), putdown humour (a genuinely offensive comment) or self-deprecating humour (a jocular comment directed at oneself) (cf. Dynel 2008).

Yes, darling, I know you have an open mind. I can feel the draught from where I'm sitting.
[a GP in the form of teasing between spouses]

Could you pass me the recipe for your ratatouille? So I can tear it up.
 [a GP in the form of putdown humour between two female antagonists]
 How I managed? Well, there are remarkable people in this world, but I'm
 not one of them.
 [a GP in the form of self-deprecating humour]

The *one-liner*, the shortest form of a joke, is regarded as a slippery category (Chiaro 1992), lingering on the border between prototypical jokes and conversational humour. One-liners, although predominantly considered to be canned jokes such as those produced by stand-up comedians (Norrick 1986), are here claimed to be very similar to witticisms, because they may occur in a conversation, being contextually prompted and not always interfering with its development, as opposed to jokes, which are, more often than not, disruptive. In essence, one-liners may coincide in function (and hence in form) with witticisms, or may act as short jokes for a moment diverting the flow of the interaction to the amusement of the hearer but conveying little or no informational content. This is because they often display absurdity.

A woman came to ask the doctor if a woman should have children after 35.
 I said 35 children is enough for any woman.
 [a GP one-liner]

I'm addicted to chocolate. I snort cocoa.
 [a GP one-liner, first part of the verbalisation outside the humorous frame,
 i.e. the speaker does love chocolate]

It is not a book to be tossed lightly aside. It should be thrown with great
 force.
 [a GP witticism]

The division between the two types of GPs, i.e. witticisms and one-liners, appears not to be a clear one, as the two categories often merge in their pragmatic function. Both carry humorous potential and may be relevantly applied in conversations as responses to the preceding turns or comments on the situation and the interactant's non-verbal behaviour. What may be the distinguishing parameter is whether the speaker supports the import of the humorous utterance or whether the latter is produced within a *humorous frame* (see section 4). In the case of a witticism, the speaker not only amuses the hearer but also conveys pertinent propositional meaning, while a one-liner serves humorous purposes, not necessarily communicating any propositional force. Nonetheless, even in the latter situation, some meanings may be conveyed outside the humorous

frame, e.g. that the speaker wants to relieve tension or mitigate the force of a threatening act.

4. Humorous keying

Jokes and a number of manifestations of conversational humour need to be perceived as utterances produced within a humorous *frame* (Bateson 1953, Gumperz 1982, Goffman 1974, Coates 2007), as a special form of *keying* (Goffman 1974; Kotthoff 1999, 2007) or *footing* (Goffman 1981). Hearing humour, the recipient recognises that “this is play” (Bateson 1953) and that the interlocutor does not seriously mean what he/she is uttering. The appreciation of humour entails mode adoption, i.e. plunging into the world defined by the speaker (Mulkay 1988, Attardo 2001).

Interlocutors can change frames many times in one speech encounter. Tannen and Wallat (1993) deem frames as interactive structures of interpretation sustained and modified by interacting participants. Regardless of their perspectives and goals, participants must cooperate to negotiate a frame, which is, as a result, their joint creation (Tannen and Wallat 1993). In humour, this entails not necessarily equal verbal contributions produced by both the interlocutors but the hearer’s humorous reaction to the utterance made (exclusively) by the speaker.

This should not be mistaken for Goffman’s (1974) *frame fabrication*, i.e. the speaker’s intentional effort to produce an utterance which will mislead the conversationalist, causing the latter to have a partial or simply false notion of the ongoing interchange. This will, however, be the case of a backhanded compliment, whose genuine import is unavailable to the addressee (e.g. “You’ve got peach skin.” meant as “Your skin is fluffy.”). A question may arise if frame fabrication is actually a case of GP humour. The answer is negative, because in the latter case, even if the interpreter is initially deceived on purpose, he/she ultimately appreciates the alternative interpretation, which is the source of the humorous surprise experienced.

Humour often appears within *contextualisation cues* (Gumperz 1982), e.g. gestures, peculiar prosody, facial expressions, code switching, social stylistics, interjections and laughter, which create humorous keying associated with contextual presuppositions indispensable for conversational inferencing (Kotthoff 2007). Very often, the speaker signals his/her intention by using adequate non-verbal cues (body language, facial expressions, intonation, etc.) before, while or after producing a humorous unit, or by uttering introductory utterances, such as “Have you heard the one?”, whereby he/she enters a humorous frame and signals that the hearer should follow suit (e.g. Mulkay 1988, Carrell 1997,

Chiaro 1992, Norrick 1993, Kotthoff 2007, Coates 2007). By contrast, introductory verbal cues do not invariably accompany units of conversational humour, which are produced more spontaneously, not always in the sense of being spontaneously created, though. However, non-verbal cues can accompany conversational humour, emphasising the speaker's jocular intention.

Although the dichotomy between serious and humorous modes appears to be clear in theory, there do exist units of conversational humour which cannot be classified as belonging solely to either. For example, witticisms are only tinted with humour and do convey meanings relevant to the ongoing discourse. This is why such forms of humour cannot be unanimously subsumed under the humorous frame, lying on the border between humorous keying and serious mode of communication. The speaker may hence convey vital information, i.e. intentionally support the message conveyed, and simultaneously amuse the interlocutor. Admittedly, one may venture a claim that almost any form of humour can carry significant information, even jokes (Oring 2003). Humour may convey potentially offensive information which the speaker refrains from communicating in a serious mode and uses humour as a mitigator or as a vehicle for retracting the message under the "only-joking" pretence (e.g. Norrick 1993).

5. On-line processing of language

Crucial to the present analysis is the assumption that language production and reception are necessarily linear processes, whether language is used in a spoken or written form. Thus, meanings conveyed and received by language users rely on time dimension. It is widely acknowledged that language creation and interpretation processes take place *on-line* (e.g. Carston 2002), i.e. *incrementally* (e.g. Levinson 2000, Kamp 1981, Kamp and Reyle 1993) or *linearly* (Attardo 1997a). This means that in human language, words are strung out in time, even if it should be a matter of milliseconds. Consequently, the comprehension process occurs on-line, with meanings being constructed on the spur of the moment, immediately upon the recipient's encounter of the elements evoking them, and not at the end of the utterance perception process (e.g. Hockett 1961, Van Dijk and Kintsch 1983, Just and Carpenter 1980). Also, the linear organisation of the text presupposes temporal ordering of the chunks and the affect of the preceding elements on the consecutive ones. All the processed elements form the preceding verbal context against which the consecutive material is processed, but contextually inadequate

meanings can be activated due to their salience, only to be instantly suppressed (see chapter 6). With the constituent members of a linearly organised text being analysed consecutively, the global meaning is constantly revised as more elements are added. Meanings are constructed and revised in the light of incoming information and background knowledge. On-line construction of meaning entails

an active process in which the speaker integrates ongoing aspects of perceptual and conceptual information with more abstract information available from long-term memory. (Coulson 2001: 29)

On-line meaning construction is a natural process which precludes delays in interpretation and often relies on cognitive shortcuts in the process of ambiguity resolution. Interpreters resolve ambiguities, not even being aware of alternative meanings. This is because the first interpretation is rapidly chosen by default and appears to be correct, as no contextual factors point to the contrary. All the same, hearers run the risk of misinterpretation. Processing traps are conducive to mistakes triggered by the processes which facilitate regular text interpretation. Such traps are conceived of as GP constructions, which entail compensatory strategies of rejecting prior readings and activating readings so far unobserved.

6. Garden-path sentences vs. garden-path humour

The term “garden-path” derives from the idiom “to lead somebody up the garden path” (in American English, “lead somebody down the garden path”) meaning “to cause someone to believe something that is not true; to deceive someone”. This idiom offers a basis for a grammatical problem as well as for the humorous mechanism proposed here.

The phenomenon of *garden-path sentence* operates on the deception of the hearer thanks to syntactic ambiguity. In more scholarly terms, the phenomenon of a garden-path sentence is anchored in syntactic ambiguity resulting from misparsing consequent upon the decisions taken in on-line processing, which is conducive to a grammatical mistake (Pritchett 1992). The linear string of words is consistent with more than one syntactic structure, and hence sentence meaning, but only one is perceived upon the first reading/hearing. The addressee first makes an interpretation that turns out to be wrong, clashing with the next part of the text, which prompts him/her to reanalyse the sentence from the beginning and find the second (correct) interpretation. The classic example of a garden-path sentence which keeps reappearing in topical literature is credited to Bever (1970: 316), i.e. “The horse raced past the barn fell.” First, the interpreter

analyses the sentence according to the pattern, where “raced” is the main verb used in past simple, but the final element of the sentence (“fell”), which does not fit the structure, causes him/her to retrace the whole sentence anew to find another interpretation congruent with the final element as well, viz. where “raced” is treated as a passive participle.

Pritchett (1992) posits that garden-path sentences are pivoted on local ambiguity, which leads to ungrammaticality but not global ambiguity. Specifically, a garden-path sentence is defined as

a grammatical but unprocessable sentence which results from the combination of (a) a local parsing decision which ultimately proves not to be consonant with a global grammatical representation, and (b) the parser’s inability to perform the reanalysis necessary to obtain a grammatical representation. (Pritchett 1992: 7)

The initial ungrammaticality and resistance to processing can, however, be redeemed thanks to higher non-automatic cognitive processes. The parser needs to backtrack and reinterpret the sentence so as to change an incorrectly chosen local hypothesis that has produced the garden-path effect. Appreciating the fact of having wrongly analysed a portion of the sentence, the interpreter must go back and reanalyse, or at least correct this misanalysis (Milne 1982). Several structures giving rise to garden-path sentences can be distinguished in English.

- a. Main Clause – Relative NP Ambiguity
The horse raced past the barn fell.
- b. Complement Clause – Relative Clause Ambiguity
The doctor told the patient he was having trouble with to leave.
- c. Object-Subject Ambiguity
After Susan drank the water evaporated.
- d. Double Object Ambiguity
Todd gave the boy the dog bit a bandage.
- e. Lexical Ambiguity
The old train the children. (Pritchett 1992: 12)

It is interesting to observe that Pritchett (1992) categorises lexical ambiguity, represented by homonymy (e.g. “train”: “to coach”/“a means of transport”), as subordinate to the syntactic type. However, this approach is not supported here (see chapter 4), given that, most often, lexical ambiguity will not inherently entail categorical contrast, being thus independent from syntactic ambiguity. The two types of ambiguity may mesh, but it is here argued that the lexical one can be accompanied by syntactic ambiguity, not vice versa.

The garden-path effect is discussed as a syntactic problem in psycholinguistics and artificial intelligence research (e.g. Frazier 1987, Frazier and Rayner 1982, Fodor et al. 1994). There are also other perspectives, e.g. literary garden-paths with their authorial intent functionality (Fish 1989), as well as more complex GP narratives, such as short stories and novels (Mey 1991).

The idea of leading the interpreter up the garden path appears to be mentioned in passing in a number of humour studies (Paulos 1980, Dolitsky 1992, Giora 2003, Coulson et al. 2006). Nevertheless, in none of these works is this statement sufficiently explained. Nor is such humour compared with the concept of a garden-path sentence. In contemporary studies on humour within linguistics, the garden-path phenomenon is also known as one of the *logical mechanisms* within the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (Attardo and Raskin 1991, Attardo 1994, Attardo 2001, Attardo et al. 2002 inter alia, see section 3, chapter 3). It is there defined as a mechanism obtaining when the audience of a joke is led to entertain one interpretation or assumption only to have to backtrack the text and appreciate the second reading (Attardo and Raskin 1991). Postulating this logical mechanism, Attardo and Raskin present two jokes leading the interpreter up the garden path, for instance by “manipulating the acceptable level of the obvious” (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 306).

George Bush has a short one. Gorbachev has a longer one. The Pope has it but does not use it, Madonna does not have it. What is it? A last name. (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 305)

Should a person stir his coffee with his right hand or his left hand? Neither. He should use a spoon. (Attardo 1991: 306, quoted from Esar 1952: 21)

Unfortunately, the authors equate the mechanism of garden-path with that of *false priming*, as in the sentence, “The astronomer married a star”, in which the name of the profession primes the inappropriate, i.e. celestial meaning of the term “star”, whereby comprehension is hampered (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 306). Certainly, the two phenomena cannot be equated. *Priming* (e.g. Leeper 1935, Lackner and Garrett 1972, Meyer and Schvaneveldt 1971, see section 4.3, chapter 6) is a phenomenon potentially affecting the interpretation of incoming stimuli and prompting the interpreter to opt for one interpretation. Indeed, Attardo and Raskin’s (1991) example about the astronomer exploits this phenomenon but cannot be deemed as garden-path humour, which is characterised by an effortless interpretation of the set-up (covertly ambiguous), usually without the support of any prior contextual effects. The first meaning is later cancelled