Gulf War jokes: Cohesion and coherence

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Gulf War jokes: Cohesion and coherence*

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Abstract

A great number of war jokes were generated in the Jordanian streets during the Gulf War. The jokes reflect the political and social beliefs and attitudes of the overwhelming majority of the Jordanians toward the different parties involved in the war. A sample of the jokes was selected and analyzed for cohesion and coherence. The analysis addressed four parameters:

1. *the role of world knowledge in creating coherence;*
2. *the role of hierarchic structure of the content of the jokes;*
3. *the role of pragmatic strategies in maintaining communication among the parties involved in the joke; and*
4. *the role of lexical relations and word-play in signalling underlying relations and intentions.*

The argument throughout stresses that war jokes, as a text type in its own right, maintain coherence via adoption of conversational strategies realized in surface structure manifestations, such as brevity of text, ambiguity and indirectness of message, seeming politeness of expression, etc. Coherence in such texts is discernible only by those recipients who are able to reach below the surface and fill in gaps deliberately left unfilled for reasons known to the language users. Cohesive connectives, as the analysis shows, may provide little clue in the process of disclosing the intended message of the joke in question unless the recipient is able to perceive the signifying role such connectives play in establishing relationships between the participants and/or facts referred to in the joke and the intentions underlying the mention of such participants and facts. Thus texture, as argued here, is an output or a higher rank construct brought about by a congruous combining of world knowledge mapped onto the surface expression of the joke under consideration and awareness of the signifying role cohesive connectives play.

Keywords: *Cohesion, coherence, humor, situationality, texture, intertextuality, pragmatics.*

Background

'The Iraqis' technological, economic, and military achievements should be considered a Pan-Arab project that Arab peoples must defend.' This was a comment made by a Jordanian during the Gulf War. It reflects the political beliefs of the overwhelming majority of the Jordanian people. The immediate psychological impact of the Gulf Crisis on Jordanians was the revival of long-cherished aspirations and images of a strong Arab state capable of defending the Arab Nation and deterring foreign powers that try to violate the Arabs' supremacy over their homelands. The Jordanians' deep-rooted Pan-Arabism underlies their deep involvement in the Gulf War psychologically and logistically. Prototypically, Iraq has symbolized Pan-Arabism throughout the contemporary history of the Arab World, and this image has been reinforced by Iraq's voluntary participation in four Arab–Israeli wars, despite the fact that Iraq is not a neighboring country to Israel.

This being the case, one can understand why most of the Jordanians still insist on dismissing the fact, albeit globally admitted, that Iraq was defeated in the War and that the Iraqi leadership should have avoided fighting a losing battle. It is understandable, too, to find Jordanians still talking about an Iraqi victory in the war, thus converting a material defeat into a psychological victory and placing the blame for the destruction of the Iraqi army and the Iraqi technological and economic infrastructure upon the Arab regimes that joined the American-led coalition against Iraq. The uniqueness of the Jordanians' reaction to the War and its material consequences is, perhaps, behind President Bush's accusation of the Jordanians not listening to or reading world news. In fact, Jordanians, as the CNN correspondent in Amman noted, had every access to various international media — those affiliating with the Coalition and those with Iraq.

War, normally, is not the right atmosphere for frivolous behavior; yet jokes were generated in the Jordanian street before and during the Gulf War. Joking was, as it seems, an escape hatch for expressing the unallowable, be it political, religious, or sexual. Joking was in other words a seemingly unserious expression of serious beliefs and attitudes. Above all it was a medium for letting off steam: of frustration and anger.

Theoretically, a number of theories have suggested different types of interpretation of joking behavior. A brief review of some of these theories is provided below.

Relief theory

According to relief theorists, e.g. Kant (1790 [1970]), joking is a passive verbal behavior meant to generate relief and is confined to the joker's self: an 'emotional hoax that barks without biting'.

Incongruity theory

Incongruity theory relates to the effect of humor on thought or perception. According to incongruity theorists, e.g. Willmann (1940) and Suls (1972), humor resides in the combining, in one complex whole, of two or more incongruous parts, circumstances, or concepts. Humor in their view is generated by the sudden awareness of incongruity between an object and the abstract concept underlying it. Suls (1972) writes that humor comes about as a result of experiencing incongruity between facts and objects but that this combination is immediately made congruous. Humor is the outcome of two cognitive processes: perception of incongruity, and the immediacy of discovering an explanation.

Gestalt theories

How elements combine to bring about an overall meaning and the rapid insight by which the meanings of a pattern change seem to be a major concern of gestaltists. In Bateson's (1953) view, a joke manifests the characteristics of a paradox. It can be regarded as having figure–ground elements. The statement constitutes the figure, while its implications represent the ground. Bateson argues that the figure and the ground are usually in conflict, and that this conflict is resolved once the message is got or understood.

Piagetian theories

Some researchers, e.g. McGhee (1971) adopt a piagetian interpretation of humor. According to them, humor indicates a cognitive development: in pretending to treat the unfamiliar as familiar and the incongruent as congruent. To McGhee, amusement is the outcome of fantasy assimilation of incongruous stimulation. This view converges with Piaget's use of 'play' to refer to the assimilation process in which old knowledge (existing mental schemata) is applied to new materials (frivolous and seemingly paradoxical materials) without modifying the characteristic features of the former to the latter. In Piagetian terms, the individual willingly digresses to less restrained childish thought via seeking temporary reprieve from serious and mature thinking.

Freudian theories

The displacement of emphasis in jokes from the relevant to the irrelevant; double meaning; multiple use of the same material; and indirect representation are, in Freud's (1905 [1966]) view, the main technique of joking. The enjoyment of humor stems from the appreciation of content describing repressed behavior. In his view, lifting repression releases pleasure, and the main function of joking is, therefore, to temporarily release one's conscious grip over self restraint.

The role jokes play in social and political occasions has also been studied. For instance, Wilson (1979) speaks of two types of ridicule: private ridicule (against self), and shared ridicule (against self, self and others). Both types have a cathartic impact on the individual or community.

1. Introduction

Joking, as a verbal behavior, has been studied for different purposes. Psychologists, e.g. Freud (1905 [1966]), have studied joking for the psychological purposes underlying it; linguistic pragmatists, e.g. Leech (1983), and ethnographers, e.g. Sacks (1974), have explored jokes for social and cultural functions they may assume; discourse analysts, e.g. Sherzer (1985) have studied the form and structure of jokes; and applied linguists, e.g. Alam (1989) and De Bruyn (1989) have looked into jokes for areas relevant to contrastive studies, e.g. translatability of jokes.

However, exploring jokes (as texts representing jocular discourse) in order to identify what it is in the texture of a joke that enables the recipient to grasp the message and react accordingly seems to have remained an area awaiting due attention from researchers. Research seems to be lacking in areas related to what makes a joke cohesive and coherent. Investigating such an area will probably entail identifying the rhetorical techniques a certain language in a certain culture adopts for injecting meaning into the structure of the joke. It will also include screening jokes for surface structural instruments deemed to best serve the purpose of the joker. In order to do so, research needs to approach a joke as a text which has four dimensions: the joker, the audience, the butt, and a complex of situational elements constituting a frame of reference to both the joker and the recipients/audience.

Discourse analysis has expanded to accommodate texts of different genres and extended its scope to cover texts from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (cf. Grimes, 1975; Longacre and Levinsohn, 1978).

Analysts have studied cohesion and coherence in narrative, descriptive, argumentative, analytical, and persuasive texts. The study of cohesion and coherence of discourse has constituted and is still a cornerstone in text linguistics. The ability of this new approach to transcend sentence boundary in search of unifying factors of high orders in discourse has generated continuing interest in textuality, hence in cohesion and coherence. Thus cohesion and coherence have become defining features of text and textuality. Cohesion, on the one hand, resides in the utilization of the linguistic resources that make a text stick together. These resources are usually manifested in physical correlates in the text such as reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunctions, and lexical relations (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Although the physical presence of these linguistic correlates is a dominant feature of textuality, it is not a prerequisite because such correlates could be implicit rather than explicit in discourse. This brings us to the second side of the coin, that is, coherence, which makes communication possible regardless of the presence or absence of the linguistic correlates. Coherence, therefore, is brought to the text by the language user; thus it resides in the user's mind rather than in the text itself (see Carrell, 1982; Van Dijk, 1977, 1981; Hobbs, 1984). The physical correlates of coherence are much less articulate than those of cohesion. Their inarticulateness is basically attributed to their being derivable from the world or encyclopedic knowledge of the language user rather than the linguistic resources in the text.

The relationship between cohesion and coherence has been fuzzy for a while. Halliday and Hasan (1976) think of cohesion as the cause/creator of texture, that is, coherence. It is not hard to discern the weakness of this etiological chain, since coherence can exist independently of cohesion (for elaborate discussion, see Carrell, 1982). Although Halliday and Hasan used the term 'texture' to mean 'coherence' in their seminal work of (1976), this term has been loosely used since then by many authors (for example, see Halliday and Hasan, 1985; Hatim and Mason, 1990). To illustrate, Halliday and Hasan (1985: 71–73) view texture as a matter of meaning relations and cohesion as based on semantic relations. Here, one may legitimately ask about the difference between 'meaning relations' and 'semantic relations' in order to establish grounds on which the two terms, that is, texture and cohesion, could be told apart. Unfortunately, the notion of texture remains vague throughout their (1985) book. Thus, by attempting to remedy their view of (1976), when they equated texture and coherence, they confounded texture with cohesion in their more recent work.

This being the case, it should be decided whether the term 'texture' is a superflous luxury or a label of a more intricate textual parameter. We

take the latter option, considering texture as a catalyst between cohesion and coherence. Thus, texture constitutes a higher order parameter that is created by the interaction between cohesion and coherence. The creation of texture provides the appropriate milieu for textness. Put differently, textness cannot exist independently of texture because it is a direct consequence of it. To illustrate, let us look at the war joke in (1).[1]

(1) *Ṣaddām ʿamar   ʾinnuh Kul   jājih fi-l-ʿirāq   tbīḍ θaman bēḍāt.*
     Saddam ordered that   every hen in-def-Iraq lay eight   eggs
     lākinnu-h fī ʾiḥdā jawlātu-h   it-taftīšiyyih   ʾiktašaf
     but-he   in one   rounds-his def-inspecting discovered + (he)
     ʾinnuh jājih bāḍat bas   beḍtēn   fa-γaḍib   bi-šiddih
     that   hen laid   only two eggs then-got angry + (he) with-strength
     wa-baʿd-it-taḥgīg   ṭilʿat   ʾij-jājih dīč
     and-after-def-investigation came out def-hen rooster

'Saddam ordered that every hen in Iraq lay eight eggs. However, in one of his inspection rounds, he noticed that one hen laid only two eggs, at which he got very furious. After investigating this incident, the hen was found to be a rooster.'

The cohesion of (1) above is obvious viz, reference: *saddam...-h...-h*; conjunctions: *lākin...wa-baʿd*; collocations: *tbīḍ bēḍāt, jawlātu-h ʾit-taftīšiyyih*; reiteration: bēḍāt-bēḍtēn, *jājih... ʾij-jājih*; converses: *jājih...dīč*; and much more. Upon encountering this cohesive text, language users check it against their world knowledge, and, by means of this, bring coherence to the text; thus the intricate association between having a rooster lay eggs and Saddam's dictatorship can be established, hence the coherence of the text. However, this intricate association which renders the text coherent is preceded by a host of lower order associations emanating from world knowledge, e.g., the awareness that Saddam is the president of Iraq. Despite the instantaneous accessibility of such information, the text of (1) would be completely incoherent to someone who does not know who Saddam is, let alone the other intricate associations relating to the audience's beliefs and values vis-à-vis Saddam and his policy. As for the texture of (1), it is created by the interaction between cohesion and coherence. For instance, the instantiation of the lexical pair: *jājih... dīč*, directly links up with the dictatorship of Saddam, thus creating texture which qualifies (1) as a text. Imaginably, the failure to instantiate the above lexical pair would have resulted in the thwarting of texture, hence (1) would have been a non-text.

How do language users bring coherence to a text? In general terms, our answer will be, "By using their world knowledge". This answer does not, however, spell out the parameters of world knowledge that are

relevant to textuality. De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) set seven standards of textuality of which cohesion and coherence constitute two. Unfortunately, they confine cohesion to intrasentential relations, i.e., linguistic dependencies, and confuse intersentential cohesion with coherence. The remaining five standards of textuality are user-centered rather than text-centered; these are: intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality. Interestingly, these five standards of textuality can be readily subsumed under coherence, for they interact with one another to bring coherence to the text. More recently, Brown and Yule (1983: 225) compress these parameters of coherence to three aspects that are actively involved in bringing coherence to the text. These are: computing the communicative function (how to take the message), using general sociocultural knowledge (facts about the world), and determining the inferences to be made.

To illustrate the foregoing points, let us consider the war joke in (2).

(2) An Al-Hussein missile met an Al-Abbas missile high up in the sky. The Al-Hussein asked the Al-Abbas whether it had made its ablutions. The Al-Abbas answered, 'Yes!' The Al-Hussein rejoined, 'Then go to Riyadh.'

The process of bringing coherence to (2) above is multi-faceted. First, language recipients must be able to decipher the communicative function, i.e., the intentionality of the text, viz, Saudia Arabia is a fake Muslim state despite the fact that it is often mistakenly considered a genuine one. Most Arab peoples believe that Saudis 'pay only lip service to the teachings of Islam.' They maintain that Saudis, for instance, insist that the five prayers be said in the mosque by Moslems in Saudia Arabia, that one hand of the burglar be cut off, and that the adulterer be stoned in public; yet, they argue, Saudis tend to violate Islamic teachings in many ways such as excessive drinking, womanizing, extravagance, etc. Their joining the Coalition and the 'enemies of the Arab nation' is a further serious violation of the genuine teachings of Islam. Second, recipients must be able to situationalize that text in the light of their world knowledge, that is, Iraq and Saudia Arabia are at war and the missiles mentioned are Iraqi ones attacking Saudia Arabia, etc. Third, the recipient must be able to fill in the withheld information in observance of the informativity parameter, e.g., the inference that Saudia Arabia enforces Islamic legislation such as cutting off the hands of burglars and the stoning of adulterers. Finally, it is taken for granted that language recipients, being members of the Jordanian community whose attitude vis-à-vis the Gulf War is Pro-Iraq, would accept the flouting of the Quality maxim to give rise to conversational implicature (Grice, 1975; Levinson,

1983), thus ensuring the acceptability parameter. (For a pragmatic analysis of Gulf War jokes, see Farghal and Shakir, 1992). Consequently, the coherence of (2) above is fundamentally brought about through the interaction between intentionality, situationality, informativity, and acceptability as inherent parameters of coherence.

2.   The present study

This study addresses the notions of cohesion and coherence in a sample of the large number of jokes generated in Jordanian Arabic in the Jordanian streets during the Gulf War. The jokes reflect the beliefs and political attitudes of the overwhelming majority of Jordanians, who were emotionally and politically pro-Iraq. The jokes will be analyzed for cohesion and coherence, and the analysis will be based on an assumption that jokes represent a discourse genre or a text type that distinguishes itself from most other types by means of rhetorical, registeral, and organizational features rarely available in the routine types of discourse. The way the above features blend into jocular texts features them as a conventionalized folk discourse mirroring thoughts, beliefs, and values of the culture with which they affiliate.

Jokes tend to employ rhetorical techniques which determine the selection and arrangement (at both the macro and micro levels) of phonological, syntactic, semantic, and lexical features. The type of selection and arrangement combine the constituents of a joke, whether those said or those unsaid, in a finished product capable of effectively accomplishing the goals of the joker and the satisfaction of the audience. Such goals would not be achievable by means of other types of texts. By virtue of this characteristic type of organization, jokes can, more effectively than other text types, cut across the social and political boundaries of the society and can trespass political barriers they operate within. These characteristics can be classified into two groups: those relating to surface structural features (the said), and those relating to underlying features (the unsaid).

Surface features

Jokes tend to achieve 'impact' on and 'appeal' (Nida, 1990) to the intended audience by means of, generally, a highly condensed content assumed to best convey its communicative, socio-cultural, and psychological presupposed meanings and a certain degree of ambiguity as to what

is unsaid. At the micro level, jokes manifest registeral features particular to them. They purposefully employ ironical expressions, word-play, and prosodic features more extensively than other text types. These features, in addition to ellipsis, add to the condensedness of the joke structure and raise the degree of ambiguity of interpretation which is usually solved only by shared reference to schematic knowledge of both conventionalized format and contextual dimensions of the joke.

At the macro level, content organization lends itself to a narrative mode of exposition. Participants, referential points of time, events, and relevant places need to be incorporated, and the order in which they are arranged in the body of the joke is constrained by the audience's expectations (see below). Adopting a narrative mode has, perhaps, its psychological motivation. As most jokes, especially political and ethnic ones, are meant to ridicule and indirectly offend the butt, adopting a narrative style may, therefore, enhance the seemingly neutral, uninvolved, and merely observational stand of the joker in his/her attempt to avert blame (for further information on the 'role of the composer', see Longacre, 1983).

Underlying features

a. Realism.   Although, on the face of it, a joke may look paradoxical with regard to the component elements of its content, its lexical uniqueness, the intimate link between the joker and his/her audience, the appeal it achieves to the status of the butt as pictured in the joke, the congruity the audience discover between seemingly incongruous facts or concepts — all these contribute to creating realism in the joke.

b. Clarity.   Unlike most routine discourses, jokes tend to violate the principles of clarity of content and intent. Meanings and intentions in a joke are notoriously and purposefully obscure. However, this obscurity is resolvable by the audience who, the joker assumes, shares the values, or is aware of the values, motivating the joker's utterance. This state of unclarity is, perhaps, what gives jokes their associative nature and renders them interesting or exciting.

c. Varying degrees of statedness.   Jokes in general are characterized as being understated. Much is left to the audience to infer and appreciate. An uniformed audience may, therefore, fail to bridge gaps, and jokes may subsequently be stripped of their humorous and ridiculing power once they figure as opaque verbal structures.

d. Indirectness.   One technique jokers often opt for is to state the seemingly innocent, neutral, uninvolved, or irrelevant. Yet, as in other

types of gnomic discourse, they intend to communicate an entirely different message whose content derives from knowledge and values shares with the audience (for elaboration on this point, see below).

As a verbal behavior, motivated and oriented by factors deriving from current political, social, and cultural milieus, jokes represent a type of discourse sensitive to the above factors and spontaneously responsive to events that leave hallmarks in the history of a nation. This being so, jokes take on pragmatic roles configured in discoursal forms whose surface expression is set at the service of the intentions that shape the content in a form commensurate with an audience's anticipations.

This study will, therefore, focus upon pragmatic coherence, and will attempt to explore the strategies the language users — producers and recipients alike — adopt in order to maintain mutual understanding and sustain communication. The approach will thus be based on the assumption that both the surface expression and the underlying intention are to be viewed as inseparable correlates, and that in order for the surface expression to be meaningful, the underlying intentions have to be accessible. Subsequent to these assumptions, a third one follows: the employment of explicit textual instruments, e.g., cohesive connectives, will most probably be of little significance in rendering a processable text unless the textual world underlying the joke in question is envisionable by the intended recipients. This being the case, the jokes will be analyzed for cohesion and coherence with reference to four parameters:

1. The role of world knowledge as a catalytic factor in the process of exploring the worlds called up (by the speaker) through textual configurations meaningful only when taken as signifiers (Widdowson, 1987) of intentions or plans inherent in the situation that motivated the generating of the joke/text.

2. The role of the hierarchic structure (conventionalized as it is) of the jokes in arousing anticipations on the part of the recipients of how the joke/text will unfold, thus enhancing the process of communication between the speaker and the audience. In such a hierarchic structure, elements (sentences and/or clauses) take on pragmatic function where one element assumes a dominant or superordinate position to which the rest serve as subordinates.

3. The role of pragmatics as represented by the complex network of implicatures built into the jokes alongside the key role played by the politeness principle.

4. The role of lexical relations and word-play as surface structure instruments employed to serve the speaker's maneuvers for sustaining ambiguity and indeterminacy.

The role of world knowledge

Jokes are basically founded on mutually-shared background knowledge to ensure comprehension and, perhaps, minimal laughter on the part of the recipients, and on the recipients' values to elicit optimal appreciation and involvement. Knowledge of the world, which interacts with values, takes on a comprehensive function which exploits a number of contextual dimensions activated simultaneously as the language user embarks on processing the in-coming message. These contextual dimensions are intentionality, situationality, acceptability, informativity, and intertextuality (see example 1 above). Perceiving the intricate linkage of these dimensions in the process of negotiating the structure and content of the text in hand is, in other words, perception of the texture of the text, that is, its being coherent and communicatively acceptable. To illustrate, see the intricate texture of the joke in (3):

(3)   A British pilot sighted two Iraqi tanks of which he killed one immediately. However, when he returned to kill the other, he saw four Iraqi soldiers carrying it away, which caused him to go crazy.

It is interesting to note the relationships that hold among the participants (Grimes 1975), both animate and inanimate, in the above text. A network of cohesive connectives give the different joints:

Reference connectives:
A British pilot...he...he...he...him
two Iraqi tanks...one...the other...it
Collocations: British pilot...tank...kill...soldiers

Yet the occurence of the above connectives will by no means be sufficient clues to processing the intended message if the language recipient is not aware of other more crucial elements, perceived but not seen, that feature context. The speaker assumes that both the audience and the butt share with him the following types of knowledge:

–that Iraq and Britain are at war
–that a tank is normally too heavy } situationality
  for four soldiers to carry away
–that Iraqis were well-known during
  the war for their skillful decoy tactics
–that international mass media spotlighted } inter-textuality
  these decoy tactics

–that, therefore, 'the destroyed tank'
  as well as the 'other tank' were decoys
–that the saving of the Iraqi decoy tank
  and the fact that the British pilot went   } acceptability
  crazy would please the intended audience,
  which was pro-Iraq

Of key importance for the recipient is to be aware of the fact that Iraqis are skillful in decoy tactics. This is, in fact, the major clue to deciphering the intended message: Coalition Forces had been frustrated by the careful maneuvers of the Iraqi Forces. Only when this point is taken can the joke be meaningful and the anticipated reaction, i.e., humor, elicited. The other types of knowledge seem to subsume roles subordinate to the key element, viz. decoy tactics, and the totality of these types constitutes the contextual framework (Brown and Yule, 1983) within which the verbal behavior can be endorsed as valid, communicative, meaningful, and subsequently coherent. The speaker would have been a violator of the 'communication contract' (Smith, 1982) had he or she not made sure that the above types of knowledge were part of what the audience knew, without which the surface structure connectives, viz. cohesive connectives, would not have provided helpful clues.

The effect of world knowledge is extendable to accommodate a type of culture-specific knowledge, viz. stereotypes. Stereotypical content would be impenetrable to an audience unfamiliar with the implicatures blended into the stereotype expression incorporated into the body of the texts/jokes, thus leading to a coherence breakdown. To illustrate, observe how coherence is constructed in example (4):

(4)   A Tafili (a person from Tafila, a town in the southern part of Jordan) in the Iraqi Missile Force received orders to economize on the use of missiles against Israel because of their high cost. However, one night he was ordered to launch ten missiles on Tel Aviv; but, using his discretion, he launched them on Tafila (his home town)!

In order for recipients to appreciate the intended humor in this joke, they need to know that Tafilis (the population of Tafila) are stereotyped as being naive and stupid, and, hence, have long been a target for Jordanian jokes. Thus, being so naive, the Tafili thought he would do his town a big favor by launching the expensive missiles on it.

The role of hierarchic structure of jokes

The structure of a joke tends to meet normative expectations — expectations of members of the community in which a certain joke is generated

with respect to the unfolding of information in it. This being so, the structure of a joke forms part of conventionalized knowledge of which speakers and hearers alike are (or are at least assumed to be) well aware. Three major components are identifiable in the structure of a joke (see Farghal and Shakir 1992 for a fuller description of the structure of Gulf War jokes):

a.   The scene setter
b.   The climax unfolder
c.   Some elements which come in between.

We shall call the last elements 'response stimulators'.

A close look at this sequence reveals a plan of goals, where each element (sentence or clause) in the structure of the joke performs a micro-goal subordinate to a macro-goal (Ferrara 1985) implemented in the climax unfolder. Though the content of each goal-implementing element varies in its opacity for the audience, the elements tend to be arrayed from the least opaque (and thus the least suspending) to the most opaque (i.e., the climax unfolder) where the humor intended builds up to be revealed in this final element. Thus, the underlying goals can be viewed as constituting a hierarchy, at the top position of which lies the final elements, i.e. the climax unfolder or 'punch line', in Sherzer's (1985) terms. To illustrate, note the structure of the joke in (5)

(5)   Saddam (Iraqi President) came into his bedroom (1) where he found his wife watching a TV program featuring King Fahd (of Saudi Arabia) (2). He got furious (3) and asked her if she loved Fahad (4). She screamed (5): *baḥibbōš* (6).

/baḥibbōš/ is colloquial Jordanian and ambiguous between two readings: 'I do not love him' and 'I love Bush' (American President). It should be noted that the joker's employment of this colloquialism is responsible for creating this joke. Had the joker opted for the standard expressions, that is, /lā 'uḥibbuh/ or /mā baḥibbuh/ 'I don't love him', the joke would not have come into existence. As for the structure of the above joke it can be divided into three major elements (sentences/clauses are numbered for convenience of reference):

1.   scene setter: elements 1 and 2
2.   response stimulator: elements 3 and 4
3.   climax unfolder: elements 5 and 6

Since the essence of the joke is abuse, criticism, or ridicule enveloped in humor and intended to be elicited in the audience, the climax unfolder will naturally occupy the top position of the hierarchy, as it is in this

element that the expectations of the speaker and the audience intersect; otherwise, the point of the whole joke will be missed. The climax, thus appreciated on the basis of mutual knowledge, is prepared for by the response stimulator, where we often have the audience's comments: 'Ah, I knew this was coming.' However, this comment is motivated by the information provided in the scene setter — the context setter.

Thus, interaction between the speaker and the hearer has been made possible via a plan implemented through a series of elements constituting the text/joke in question — each element being underlain by a certain goal. It is the deciphering of these goals and the mapping of them onto the surface structure manifestations that bring about coherence in the above joke.

The role of pragmatics

As a genre of conversational behavior, jokes are assumed to be governed by the Cooperative Principle and its submaxims of Quality, Quantity, Manner and Relation (Grice, 1975). The observation of these maxims brings about Standard Conversational Implicatures (Levinson, 1983). These standard implicatures are arrived at via working out inferences deriving from the encoding of mutual linguistic and world knowledge, thus complying with the aforementioned maxims. Further, we have the Politeness Principle which can be argued to cut across the Gricean maxims. To uphold the Politeness Principle, the speaker sometimes flouts one or more of the maxims of conversation, thus giving birth to Particularized Conversational Implicatures or Exploitations (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983) arrived at by the assumption that the Cooperative Principle is always at work in natural human conversation.

The notion of implicature plays a key role in both the process of constructing a joke and the process of comprehending it. As a matter of fact, a joke would rarely, if ever, qualify for a text if we overlooked the network of implicatures usually built into it. The complexity of the 'implicatures' network is, in most cases, of intriguing appeal. To appreciate this, consider the example in (6):

(6)   After death, Al-Asad (president of Syria), Fahd (King of Saudia Arabia), and Mubarak (President of Egypt) earnestly asked God to give them another chance by bringing them back to life, to which God agreed. He returned Al-Asad in the form of a lion, Fahd in the form of a leopard and finally Mubarak in the form of a donkey. At this, Mubarak frowned, saying: 'Not again!'

First, the joke in (6) utilizes a popular conventional implicature (Grice,

1975), viz. the word 'donkey' conventionally implies stupidity. Second, having adopted this conventional implicature, the joke standardly implicates that Mubarak is very stupid and will stay stupid because stupidity is incurable. As can be observed, the direct linkage between conventional implicature and standard conversational implicature in (6) is the key factor in generating laughter, viz. in Mubarak becoming the butt of the joke. It should be noted that Mubarak is the most suitable candidate for butt of the joke among the three Arab leaders, because he is generally stereotyped as stupid in Jordan and elsewhere in the Arab world; in fact, he has long been stereotypically known to the Jordanians as the 'laughing cow'. Thus the joker has relied on the socio-political milieu in Jordan in particular and the Arab world at large for the effect of this joke.

Finally and equally importantly, however, the joke flouts the maxim of Quality by having Al-Asad and Fahd brought back to life as a lion and a leopard, respectively, despite their 'cowardly' and/or 'treacherous' role in the Gulf War from the Jordanians' point of view. The joker has opted for this in order to achieve 'word-play', that is, Al-Asad and Fahd are both proper names and names of animals, namely, the lion and the leopard, respectively, but since the two animals conventionally imply bravery rather than cowardice, the ironic interpretation is achieved. Clearly, the joker builds into this joke a second-order butt, that is Al-Asad and Fahd by, once again, the direct linkage between conventional implicature and particularized conversational implicature, thus achieving humor at two intertwined levels.

Despite the fact that the above joke is meant to serve a social function, e.g. to make fun of the butts, to criticize them, to offend them, etc., the joker has opted for an indirect, understated, and a seemingly polite manner to convey the message, thus employing the Politeness Principle throughout the joke. These tactics would not have worked (and thus humor would not have been generated) had the audience not been cooperative, i.e., not able and willing to fill in empty slots in the body of the joke. Communication has been sustained by the audience's appreciation of the humor residing in the information being withheld. Withholding information in such a context is tolerated by the audience (and this is how cooperation is maintained) for reasons well-known to all parties involved in the joke. Suppressing key information, though a breach of the Quantity maxim, is approved by the audience for the purposes of securing polite expression: the speaker opts for providing less information in order not to appear less polite. This trade-off may not be possible if the audience is not willing to employ inferencing strategies to fill gaps in the information provided. Thus, the objective of the joke is met, covertly, by means of implicature.

By way of illustration, observe how the Politeness Principle operates in example (7):

(7)   During a military inspection round of one of the rulers of the Gulf States, one of his commanders shouted, saying, 'The camel ($ba^c\bar{\imath}r$) and the barley ($\check{s}a^c\bar{\imath}r$) are ready for inspection, Sir!'

The humor of the joke in (7) above does not reside mainly in the rhyming couplet /ba^{c}īr/ and /ša^{c}īr/; rather, it resides in revealing the information withheld from the audience, but still accessible through implicature, i.e., that most of the Gulf Sheiks and/or people are too naive to cope with what modern and professional armies require. This message, albeit harsh and insulting once disclosed, is successfully clad in a seemingly polite manner, utilizing the emblem of the desert, viz. the camel, in such a way that an acute contrast is established between two worlds, that is, the primitive world of the Gulf Sheiks and the highly technological world of modern nations.

Though, on the face of it, one or more of the conversational maxims are flouted in the above joke, communication is not impaired, as the recipients are able to provide the missing information and, consequently, to interact accordingly. Transcending the alleged polite expression and probing the text for covert intentions represent the point where the joker's intention and the recipients' reaction intersect. Given this mutual understanding, the joke coheres, not only through its surface structure manifestations, but mainly by virtue of this process of discovering.

The role of lexical relations and word-play

Since the process of discoursing is, by its nature, a deliberate action motivated by factors external to the discourse itself, the choice and employment of lexical items come about as an expression of the decisions taken by the discourse producer in light of factors appreciable by the intended recipients. In such a view, some lexical items in a given discourse figure as signals of intentions enveloped in expressions penetrable only to recipients having access to the implicatures underlying such expressions. Once the implicatures of such lexical items are disalienated, communication takes place.

In our sample of the Gulf War jokes, lexical relations, e.g. homophony, polysemy, and word-play, like puns and prosody, play a key role in activating worlds relevant to those intended by the discourse producer. To illustrate, note the role of the homophonous item in (8):

(8)   Iraq counted on the Arab Nation, but it turned out to be /bōš/!

In order for recipients to grasp the humor in the above joke, they need to have access to two textual worlds signalled by the colloquial item /bōš/ which means 'useless', and at the same time coincides with the name of President Bush. The employment of this double-faced item is certainly intentional and is meant to summarize the political climate, then prevalent in Jordan in one lexical item representing emotions, beliefs, and attitudes of the recipients.

The first world activated by the word /bōš/ represents the speaker's, as well as the recipient's, frustration at the neutralized stand of most of the Arab states during the war; hence the meaning 'useless' is brought to the fore. The second world is that of a speaker sharing ideologies and feelings with the audience as regards the stance of some Arab states 'which mortgaged themselves to the Americans', hence the second meaning of /bōš/ — two worlds inaccessible to an audience lacking knowledge of the double meaning of the homophonous item /bōš/.

To further explore the role of lexical relations and word play, let us observe the instantiation of the joke in (9) through polysemy in Arabic:

(9) Saddam's secretary applied for a four-day leave to get married. Saddam granted her only a four-hour leave. When she complained about this, Saddam responded, 'I conquered (*fataḥt*) Kuwait in four hours, can't he (the groom) deflower (*yaftaḥ*) you in four hours?!'

The humor in this joke resides in the polysemous Arabic word *yaftaḥ* which can mean both 'to conquer' and 'to deflower'. The analogy between the occupation of Kuwait and the deflowering of a bride in terms of ease constitutes the climax of this joke. Ideologically, however, the joke goes well beyond this to imply that Kuwait does not deserve to be a country because of its being so small and fragile. Moreover, this joke can be interpreted as having a second-order standard implicature commending the efficiency of the Iraqis who stormed Kuwait in only four hours. This unwritten contract of mutual understanding between the joker and the recipients is what legitimizes the employment of polysemy in the above joke and endorses the whole discourse as pragmatically coherent.

3. Conclusion

The argument maintained throughout this study has attempted to bring into prominence the pragmatic and communicative dimensions of coherence as a composite construct substantial for promoting textness of the jokes concerned. The analysis has shown that in order for recipients to make sense of a joke, they need more than knowledge of breaking the

joke into its surface elements or pursuing the relations that hold among such elements. Rather, they need to bring to the text world knowledge that enables them to penetrate the worlds underlying the surface structure of the text.

Brevity of the joke, its understatedness, its seeming politeness, and apparent ambiguity — as characterizing features — have proved to be tactical features taken by the recipients as maneuvers for achieving a goal plan, viz. generating humor or ridicule. In such a view, it has been shown, informativity is a quality conferred upon the text by the recipient who, drawing upon world knowledge, can bridge gaps deliberately left unfilled. Events, situations, participants (in the sense of Grimes, 1975), and the intentions involved gain sense not through surface manifestations only, but mainly via mutual knowledge that furnishes the grounds for understanding on the part of the language users.

According to our argument, cohesive connectives can be functional only when taken as signals for information suppressed (for the sake of informativity) in the text in which they occur. This role can be indiscernible if the text recipient is unable to reach below the surface structure of the joke. Texture, according to this view, comes about as a corollary to the informed awareness of what cohesive connectives signal and signify in the joke and link that with familiarity with the worlds called up in the joke itself. Cohesive connectives alone cannot create texture, as this is ranked as a higher order of textual qualities amalgamated from both cohesion and coherence.

Appendix

The complete transcribed Arabic versions of the jokes as they appear in the paper.

(1) *Ṣaddām 'amar   'innuh Kul   jājih fi-l-'irāq   tbīḏ θaman bēḏāt.*
     Saddam ordered that   every hen in-def-Iraq lay eight   eggs
     lākinnu-h fī 'iḥdā jawlātu-h   it-taftīšiyyih   'iktašaf
     but-he   in one   rounds-his def-inspecting discovered + (he)
     'innuh jājih bāḏat bas beḏtēn   fa-γaḏib   bi-šiddih
     that   hen laid   only two eggs then-got angry + (he) with-strength
     wa-ba'd-it-taḥgīg   ṭil'at   'ij-jājih dīč
     and-after-def-investigation came out def-hen rooster

(2) *ṣārūx-il-ḥusēn*   *'iltagā bi-ṣārūx-il-'abbās*   *'ali bi-ǰ-ǰaw*
missile-def-Hussein met   with-missile-def-Abbas high in-def-space
'il-ḥusēn   sa'al 'il-'abbās 'iðā kān mitwaḏḏī
def-Hussein asked def-Abbas if   was have ablutions
fa-gāl   na'am fa-galu-h   'il-ḥusēn   'iðan   rūḥ 'alā
then-said + (he) yes   then-said-him def-Hussein therefore go on
'ir-riyāḏ
def-Riyadh

(3) *ṭayār biriṭānī šāf dabbābtēn 'irāgiyyāt fa-dammar*
pilot British saw two tanks Iraqi   then-destroyed + he
waḥadih ra'san.   lākinnu-h lammā riǰi'   li-tadmīr
one   immediately but-he   when   returned to-destroy
'iθ-θānyih šāf   'arba' ǰunūd   'irāgiyyīn šāylīn-ha
def-second saw + (he) four soldiers Iraqi   carrying-it
w-ḥārbīn   bī-ha fa-nǰan
and-running away with-it then-go crazy + (he)

(4) *tafīlī bi-l-guwwah 'iṣ-ṣārūxiyyih li'rāgiyyih 'iǰāh   'awāmir*
Tafili in-def-force def-missile   Iraqi   received orders
bi-l-'igtiṣād   fī 'isti'māl 'iṣ-ṣawārīx ḏid   'isrā'īl
to-def-economy in using   def-missiles against Israel
li-'an-ha   γālyih   lākinnu-h fī lēlih 'umir
because-that-they expensive but-he   in night was ordered
bi-'iṭlāg 'ašar ṣawārīx 'alā talabīb fa-'aṭlag-ha   ba'd
to-launch ten   missiles on Tel Aviv then-launched-them after
tafkīr   'alā 'iṭ-ṭafīlih
thinking on   def-Tafilih

(5) *Ṣaddām daxal   'alā γurfit nōmu-h fa-lagā   maratu-h*
Saddam entered on   room sleep-his then-found + (he) wife-his
btiṭṭalla' 'alā barnāmij tilvizyōn fī-h fahid fa-γaḏib
watching on   program television in-it Fahd then-got angry + (he)
bi-šiddih   wa-sa'al-ha   'iðā kānat bi-tḥib fahid
with-strength and-asked-her if   was   to-love Fahd
fa-ṣāḥat   'baḥibbōš'
then-screamed + (she) 'I don't love him'
                    or 'I love Bush'.

(6) *ba'd 'il-mōt   traǰǰā   'il-'asad w-fahid   w-mbārak*
after def-death begged def-Asad and-Fahd and-Mubarak

rab-hum   ʿašān yirjīʿ-hum   li-l-ḥayāh marah θānyih
God-their to   return-them to-def-life once   second
fa-wāfag   ʾirjaʿ   ʾil-ʾasad ʿalā šakil ʾasad
then-agreed + (He) returned + (He) def-Asad on   form lion
w-fahid   ʿalā šakil fahid   wi-mbārak   ʿalā šakil ḥmār
and-Fahd on   form leopard and-Mubarak on form donkey
fa-ɣaḍib   mbārak   qāʾilan tānī
then-got angry Mubarak saying again

(7) fī jawlih ʿaskariyyih li-t-taftīš   li-wāḥad min   ḥukkām
in round military   for-def-inspection of-one   from rulers
ʾil-xalīj   ṣāh   wāḥad min   guwwādu-h   ʾil-baʿīr
def-Gulf shouted one   from commanders-his def-camel
wi-š-šʿīr   jāhzīn li-t-taftīš   sayyidī
and-def-barley ready for-def-inspection Sir

(8) li-ʿrāg   rāhan   ʾa-l-ʾummah   ʾil-ʿarabiyyih fa-ṭilʿat
def-Iraq counted on-def-nation def-Arab   but-came out + it
bōš
$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Bush} \\ \text{useless} \end{array} \right\}$

(9) ṭalbat   sikritērit ṣaddām ʾarbaʿ ʾayyām ʾijāzih ḥatā tijjawwaz
applied secretary Saddam four   day   leave to   marry
fa-ʾaʿṭāhā   ṣaddām ʾarbaʿ sāʿāt bas w-lammā ʾiḥtajjat
then-gave-her Saddam four   hours only and-when complained
ʿalā ðālik rad   ʿalī-ha qāʾilan fataḥt   li-kwēt   b-ʾarbaʿ
on this   replied on-her saying conquered def-Kuwait in-four
sāʿāt mā-byigdar   yiftaḥič   b-ʾarbaʿ sāʿāt
hours not-can + (he) deflower + (you) in-four hours

Notes

* The authors strictly dissociate themselves from the political attitudes and the cultural and/or social stereotypes expounded by the war jokes reported in this paper. The paper only monitors a linguistic phenomenon.

1. For ease of exposition, we use English versions in the text; they have been translated from Jordanian Colloquial Arabic. The complete transcribed Arabic versions of the jokes are given in the appendix, numbered as in the text. The following reading conventions are used in the transcription of data from Arabic:

ʾo glottal stop
ṭ voiceless, dento-alveolar, emphatic plosive

ḏ voiced, dento-alveolar, emphatic fricative
θ voiceless, interdental fricative
š voiceless, palato-alveolar fricative
ʿ voiced, pharyngeal fricative
ḥ voiceless, pharyngeal fricative
ǰ voiced, palato-alveolar affricate
č voiceless, palato-alveolar affricate
y palatal glide
w bilabial glide
v̄ long vowel

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