

Black humour processing in the light of the conceptual integration theory and the benign violation theory

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to reveal that humour processing is an exertion which requires both, mental and emotional capacities. To prove the point, two theories for humour processing were employed: the conceptual integration theory and the benign violation theory. The paper shows that theories, though different, possess certain common elements and represent useful tools in humour processing. The conceptual integration theory, with its input spaces, blending processes and generic space, together with the benign violation theory and its detection of humorous elements within tragic situations, could be valuable assets in understanding how people find humour in intimidating and life-threatening situations. The paper also sheds some light on how different age groups perceive black humour showing that age and life experience facilitate understanding of black humour.

Key words: black humour; cartoon; the conceptual integration theory; the benign violation theory.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the use of black humour in cartoons and memes on the Internet. In the due course of investigation, a cognitive linguistic theory, namely the conceptual integration theory along with the benign violation theory will be used to assess the ways in which jokes about tragedies and mishaps become humorous. Since humour processing represents “a complex information processing task that is dependent on cognitive and emotional aspects” (Willinger et al., 2017: 159) the above mentioned theories may be helpful in understanding how people find humour in intimidating and life threatening situations.

1.1. *Why do we laugh?*

A sense of humour is something that people start developing at a very early stage of life when, as little babies, they begin to laugh in response to external stimuli (Michel, 2017: 23). It is a universal trait across the world. According to McGraw et al. (2012: 1) humour can be defined as “the psychological state characterized by the appraisal that something is funny, the positive emotion of amusement, and tendency to laugh”. The definition is based on writings of Gervais & Wilson (2005), Martin (2007), and Veatch (1998) who have treated the topic of humour in regard to its biological functions, theoretical and psychological foundations. McGraw et al. (2012: 1) argue that different studies in the field by Keltner & Bonanno (1997) and Martin (2007) confirm the positive aspects of humour suggesting that humour is beneficial for human well-being, it helps in overcoming hardships, improves social relationships and helps in establishing comfort zones.

1.2. *Laughing at tragedies and mishaps*

Investigations in the field have found that humour “can help facilitate recovery from stressful situations, even prolonging people’s tolerance to physical pain” (Michel, 2017: 25). In regard to social development of an individual, studies have shown that a sense of humour enables people to learn to defend vulnerable and sensitive areas when they feel insecure (Blevins, 2010: 13). Researchers like Harm et al. (2014: 10), relying on previous studies conducted by Apter & Smith (1977), Caron (2002), and Dixon (1980), conclude that humour could be a method of reassessing negative events in comical, constructive and more affirmative ways. Humorous jokes that appear in such situations are identified as black humour. Willinger et al. (2017) in their definition of black humour rely on findings by Mindess et al. (1985) and Baldick (2001) and propose that black humour is “a kind of humour that treats sinister subjects like death, disease, deformity, handicap or warfare with bitter amusement and presents such tragic, distressing or morbid topics in humorous terms” (Willinger et al., 2017: 160). Understanding pain and transforming it into a source of pleasure is a process of tremendous importance for our mental wellbeing. Lazarus & Folkman (1984: 181) argue that “mental and physical health are tied up with the ways people evaluate and cope with the stresses of living” while Gross (2008: 499) emphasizes the idea that “the emotional responses generated by appraisals are thought to involve changes in experiential, behavioural and physiological response systems.” Black humour jokes are usually hard to understand since they include exaggeration, satire and irony and being as such, require increased cognitive and intellectual effort so as to be understood (Willinger et al., 2017: 160). On the other hand, McGraw & Warren (2010: 1142) propose that “hu-

mour is aroused by displays of aggression, hostility, and disparagement" in accordance with empirical data provided by McCauley, Woods, Coolidge & Kulick (1983) who found a strong correlation between humour and aggressive content in cartoons. Having this in mind, we believe that the conceptual integration theory, with its different input spaces, blending processes and generic space, together with the benign violation theory and its detection of humorous elements within tragic situations, could be valuable in understanding how people find humour in intimidating and life threatening situations.

1.3. Aim of the paper and hypothesis

The intention of this paper is to examine humour provoked by tragedy since humour plays an important role in managing unpleasant situations. Having in mind that understanding of humour requires both, cognitive and affective domains, the aim of the research is to investigate the ways in which cognition and emotions shape our understanding of other people's misfortune and bad luck. In the first part of the analysis, three random memes taken from the Internet will be examined through the prism of the conceptual integration theory and the benign violation theory. In the second part results of a survey will be assessed. There were 90 participants who took part in the survey (57 high school students and 33 university graduates). The aim of the survey was to investigate whether the memes under investigation were funny or not and to consider cognitive and affective aspects of participants' understanding of the memes since they were asked to write the reasons behind their logic.

The working hypothesis of the paper is:

- Black humour can be well-understood only by application of both cognitive and affective reasoning.

The paper will also try to provide answers to the following questions:

- What is the role of affection and background knowledge in understanding of black humour?
- Do high school students and university graduates perceive black humour in different ways?
- To what extent intertextuality contributes to understanding of black humour?

2. Theories of humour

Humour has been the subject matter of investigation for many researchers coming from different research areas. It has been studied by philosophers

such as Plato, Hobbes and Kant, who have treated the topic naively within a discussion of other topics (Morreall, 2016). In the light of the profound philosophical contemplation three significant theories emerged. The first one, whose contemporary proponent is Roger Scruton, is known as the Superiority theory which postulates that humour emanates from feelings of triumph over other people or our past experiences (Morreall, 2016). However, it is important to point out that “disparagement is funny when it victimizes someone else or a past self, but not one’s current self” (McGraw et al., 2012: 2). The Superiority theory was replaced by two new theories that emerged in the 18th century called the Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory. The former was outlined in Lord Shaftesbury’s 1709 essay “An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor”, and it sees laughter as “the release of nervous energy” (Morreall, 2016). The latter, on the other hand, explains laughter as “the perception of something incongruous – something that violates our mental patterns and expectations” (Morreall, 2016). Morreall (2016) has stated that this approach to understanding of humour, which became the dominant theory of humour in philosophy and psychology, was acknowledged by James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, and many others. However, many of these theories, which belong to either the category of domain-specific theories such as jokes or irony (Raskin, 1985; Giora, 1995) or general humour theories like incongruity (Suls, 1972), superiority (Gruner, 1997), or tension release (Freud, 1928), generally fail to explain “humour across domains” (McGraw & Warren, 2010: 1141). Building on these foundations, modern theories of humour suggest that humour represents a reaction to an apparent violation, or something that violates the way we believe the world ought to be. The notion of violation, as a source of humour, has been advanced further and turned into theory by McGraw & Warren (2010) who claim that benign violations might elicit humour.

2.1. The role of intertextuality

The intertextuality in jokes is considered to be important since it “involves references to other texts” (Attardo, 2010: 87). Its role is vivid nowadays in particular due to adoption of humorous text in “contemporary globalizing cultural communication” (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017: 26). In terms of the internet memes, the intertextuality does not only provide connection of one text to the other, it further provides an elaboration of “a memetic tapestry” (Milner, 2013: 4).

3. Conceptual integration theory

According to Fauconnier & Turner (1998: 134) the conceptual integration theory represents a fundamental intellectual process that functions unvaryingly “at different levels of abstraction and under superficially divergent contextual circumstances.” The process involves the production of different cognitive representations and the formation of mappings between their constituents (Coulson & van Petten, 2002: 959). Dynel (2011: 59) states that the conceptual integration theory was originally proposed by Fauconnier and Turner and has been further refined in numerous articles (Fauconnier, 1994, 2001, 2004; Fauconnier & Turner, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2003; Turner & Fauconnier, 1995, 1999, 2000). The authors of the theory argue that the function of “cross-space mapping” schemes is not to provide an explanation of the relevant data, but to involve data into “conceptual integration and multiple projections in ways that have typically gone unnoticed” (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998: 135).

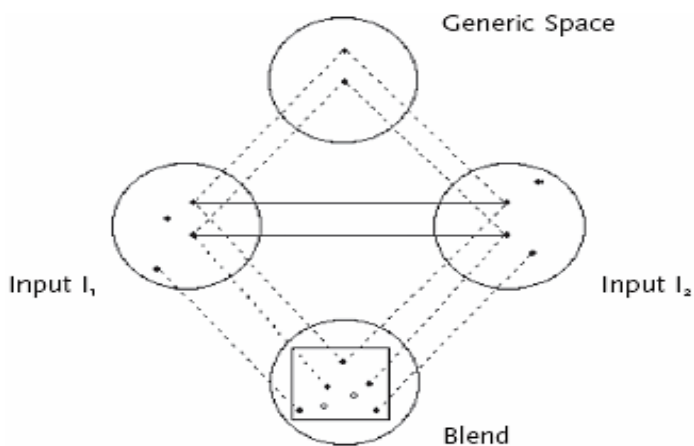


Figure 1. The basic diagram of the conceptual integration network (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002: 46).

In its essence, the theory involves the incorporation of data from separate domains or mental spaces. Mental spaces represent “small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purpose of local understanding and action” (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998: 137). Mental spaces are organized into frames that are derived from “contextual information and background knowledge” and include a cross-space mapping between “the input spaces and the selective projection of the emergent structure from the inputs to the blend” (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002: 102). The blend receives fractional structure from the input spaces, and develops its own emergent structure (Fau-

connier & Turner, 1996: 1) which is organized through three operations, i.e. composition, completion and elaboration. When these three operations are completed, the structure of the blend is formed (Dynel, 2011: 60). The circles in the basic diagram in Figure 1 represent mental spaces, the solid lines specify the matching and cross-space mapping between the inputs, the dotted lines specify connections between inputs and blended or generic spaces, and the solid square in the blended space stands for emergent structure (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 45). Even though the diagram itself seems static, it is not since it represents an imaginative and complicated process which allows substitution of previous connections, thus allowing rearrangement of input spaces and other actions (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 46). In fact, the process is very dynamic.

The theory of conceptual integration is not a significant possibility for linguistic research only. The theory has its applicability in different research areas concerning a wide range of input materials (Dynel, 2011). Fauconnier & Turner (2002: 18) emphasise that conceptual blending is an integral part of everyday interactions and is “crucial to even the simplest kinds of thought”. As such it offers insights not only into cognitive but also pragmatic and social phenomena (Dynel, 2011). According to Coulson (2005: 109) the process of conceptual blending works “through the establishment and exploitation of mappings, and the activation of background knowledge” and this process requires a lot of intellectual imagery and simulation. Dynel (2011) argues that conceptual integration theory is very useful in pragmatic research including analysis of humour and advertising messages since humorous stimuli can be represented through blends. Delibegović Džanić & Berberović (2017) as well as Dynel (2011) further prove the point by highlighting the fact that blending has its roots in Koestler’s (1964) bisociation which was originally suggested for poetry, science, and above all humour. According to Dynel (2011), the notion of opposing spaces proposed by Fauconnier & Turner corresponds to Koestler’s bisociated matrices since blending consists of seemingly contradicting concepts, which eventually produce the emergent blend. Coulson (2005) argues that this emerging blend is often humorous. Delibegović Džanić & Berberović (2017) emphasise that blending theory has been used as a tool for studying diverse forms of humour in a number of papers (Bergen 2004; Berberović & Delibegović Džanić 2009, 2015; Delibegović Džanić 2013; Delibegović Džanić & Omazić 2011). Dynel (2011) argues that the blending theory may be helpful in investigating humorous political cartoons in the context of social, cultural and political practices. Since the conceptual integration theory is applicable in analysing “the construction of meaning of humorous forms” and “contributes to highlighting certain aspects of reality” (Delibegović Džanić & Berberović, 2017: 5) in this paper it will be used as a tool for assessing black humour in order to point out why people laugh to tragedies and mishaps.

4. Benign violation theory

In their theory on humour, McGraw & Warren (2010) hypothesize that the cause of humour rests in benign violations. The theory proposes that three conditions need to be realised in order to prompt humour: a situation must be understood as a violation, it should be evaluated as benign, and both situations must occur simultaneously (McGraw & Warren, 2010). In other words, they believe “that humour arises when something that threatens a person’s well-being, identity, or normative belief structure simultaneously seems okay, safe or acceptable” (McGraw et al., 2014: 567). The proponents of the theory give three situations when violations become benign: when a norm suggests that something is not right but another norm proposes that it is suitable, a person is loosely related to the violated norm, and the violation is emotionally far away (McGraw & Warren, 2010). In their theory, McGraw & Warren (2010) rely on works of Veatch (1998) and argue that violations can take many different forms such as physical threats, threats related to personal dignity, as well as threats related to linguistics, social and moral norms. The benign-violation theory proposes “that anything that is threatening to one’s sense of how the world “ought to be” will be humorous, as long as the threatening situation also seems benign” (McGraw & Warren, 2010: 1142). In this paper, the focus of analysis will be on benign moral violations or behaviours that people consider wrong. Investigations in this filed prove that moral violations mostly provoke negative emotions and aversion (McGraw & Warren, 2010). In the light of the theory, people who perceive a particular behaviour as both a violation and benign will find it humorous while those who do not they will not be amused.

As Figure 2 suggests, since benign violations elicit humorous responses, either part of the extreme ends might obstruct humour (McGraw et al., 2012: 2).

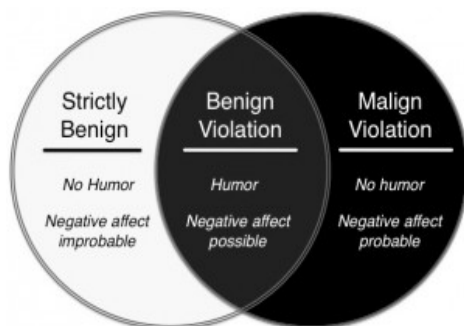


Figure 2. Benign violations as a source of humour

<https://www.petermcgraw.org/why-arent-the-new-yorkers-cartoons-funnier>. Accessed 20. 07. 2018).

5. Analysis

In this part of the paper a cartoon and two memes containing black humour will be analysed. Grounding their findings on works of Lakoff (1987) and Coulson & Kutas (1998), Willinger et al. (2017: 160) argue that understanding of humour requires the use of structures of thought arranged in the form of frames, which are then “semantically reanalysed and reorganized by mapping elements of one frame into a new frame.” Willinger et al. (2017) further claim that understanding of humour involves both cognitive and emotional aspect. Their conclusions are based on investigations conducted by Vrticka et al. (2013) and Wild et al. (2003) which show that humour processing requires cognitive and affective components.

For the sake of understanding the humorous aspects of the cartoon and memes, two theories will be applied, namely the conceptual integration theory and the benign violation theory. The former theory demands great cognitive effort, whereas the latter relies more on emotional aspects of the situation. What they have in common is that both of them require cross-space mapping and conceptual blending.

5.1. Humour processing using the conceptual integration theory

In the upper right corner of the cartoon below we can see a caption “Afghan’s school of terrorism”. Just below the caption there is a sign which reads: “Lecture: a human bomb.” In the picture there are three men standing and listening to a lecture. The fourth man, with a bomb tied to his chest and holding a detonator, is giving an explanation saying: “Listen carefully, I shall show this only once.” In order to assess the meaning of the cartoon through the prism of the cognitive integration theory we need to understand that the analysis involves the use of abstract concepts which are incorporated into different contextual circumstances since mental spaces, which are necessary for understanding, are derived from “contextual information and background knowledge” (Dyner, 2011: 60). The process involves a cross-space mapping between “the input space and the selective projection of the emergent structure from the input to the blend” (Dyner, 2011: 60). A punch line introduces an intertextual reference and “is used to strengthen, embellish, or underline the message” (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017: 28).



Figure 2. Cartoon: Afghan's school of terrorism

The cartoon is a reference to a well-known war against terrorism and suicide bombers in Afghanistan during the American military campaign against terrorism. During the military campaign there were many cases of suicide bombers who aimed at different targets, military and civilian. One of the input spaces is "Afghan's school of terrorism," which represents a military camp where rebels are trained and indoctrinated. It signifies a sort of regrouping of Afghans and an establishment of a resistance movement towards "American occupation."

The instruction delivered by an instructor is similar to a popular catchphrase from a famous British sitcom *'Allo, 'Allo!*, which is about French Resistance during the WWII when France was occupied by Germans. The famous punch line from the sitcom is spoken by Michelle "of the Resistance" Dubois when she says: *"Listen carefully, I shall say this only once."* The humorous meaning of the cartoon can be understood from a six space integration network. Each input space is connected by metaphoric mapping. The first input space represents a suicide bomber who gives instructions to other potential suicide bombers. It has its metaphoric cross-space mapping with the input space three where Michelle "of the Resistance" Dubois is giving classified information to members of French resistance during the Second World War. The second input space represents a terrorist training camp where terrorists learn about suicide bombing procedure. This input space has its metaphoric cross-space mapping with the input space four in which members of French resistance receive instructions from Michelle "of the Resistance" Dubois about the future plans of the resistance movement. The generic space contains connection of elements that seem to be shared by all four inputs. It is a mixture of shared inputs about training camps for potential terrorists in Afghanistan and training of members of the resistance movement in France. The emergent structure is a blend which contains information that is projected to the blend structure from input spaces. The blend contains instructions delivered by "instructors" from input spaces one

and three and creates its own emergent structure. The humorous response is the result of incongruity of the phrase: “Listen carefully, I shell show this only once”. It is evident from the cartoon that if the instructor activates the bomb he will cease to exist, and he will not have a second chance. It will be his first, and at the same time, the last activation of the bomb.

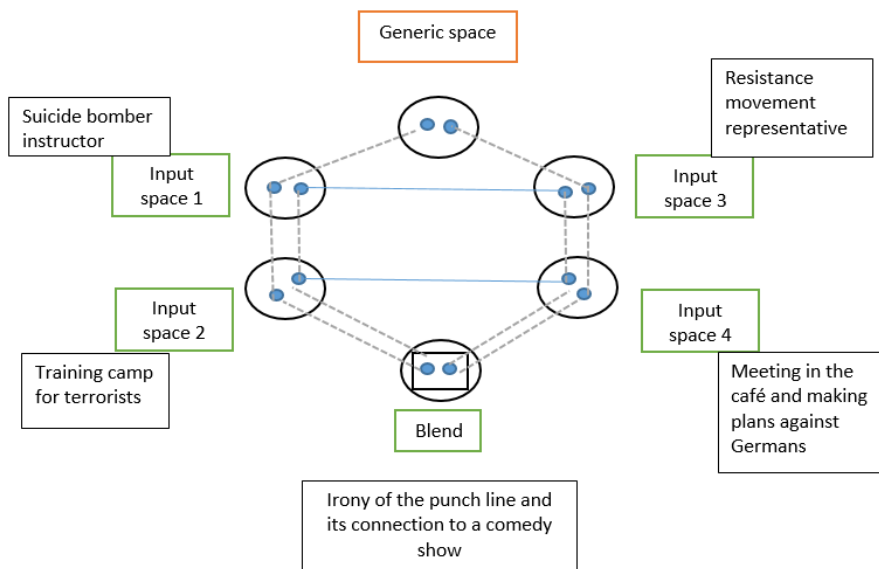


Figure 3. The conceptual integration network for “Afghan’s school of terrorism.”

It could be observed that conceptualization and development of the integration network requires a lot of background knowledge on the issue. However, the characters in the cartoon look funny themselves and there is a strong bond between the drawing and the punch line which could trigger a humorous response, apart from being able to conceptualize the meaning of the cartoon. The results of the survey prove the point since 49% of the high school participants said that the cartoon was funny simply because “they will all die if he activates the bomb”. Other high school participants (51%) said that the cartoon was not funny because it represents killing of people and involves negative emotions. On the other hand, only 27% of university graduates find some humour in the cartoon and those who do in their responses provide certain explanations which resemble cross-space mappings and mental spaces (*he will never teach again; teacher equals terrorist; portrayal of Muslims and identifying them with terrorists; propaganda and stereotyping...*).

5.1.1. *Humour processing using the benign violation theory*

According to the benign violation theory, the source of humour rests in benign violations of norms. In the light of the theory “a violation is considered to be benign if (a) a salient norm suggests that something is wrong but another salient norm suggests that it is acceptable, (b) one is only weakly committed to the violated norm, or (c) the violation is psychologically distant” (McGraw & Warren, 2010: 1142). In the cartoon above referred to as “Afghan’s school of terrorism” it can be observed that it is about tragedy, terrorism and losing one’s life. All of the things mentioned represent serious topics and something that does not trigger any kind of humour. Furthermore, moral violations provoke negative emotions that usually manifest in the form of disgust (McGraw & Warren, 2010), which are rarely humorous, if at all.

The humorous response in the cartoon is the result of moral violation, and it is benign since it fulfils the required conditions. According to McGraw & Warren (2010: 1142), the first condition is that “the salient norm suggests that something is wrong but another suggests that it is acceptable.” It is wrong to commit suicide and to take one’s own life, but another norm suggests that it is acceptable for a terrorist to commit suicide, especially if he is killing himself only, or perhaps killing other potential terrorists or suicide bombers at the same time. The second condition manifests in poor commitment to the violated norm. From our perspective people are weakly committed to the violated norm since they approve of killing of terrorists. In general, people disapprove of killing other people, but in this case we are dealing with a potential suicide bomber, so we find it acceptable for him to commit suicide. The third condition is about psychological distance from the violated norm. The setting where the action is taking place is both physically and psychologically distant and it is something that does not concern us directly. People who have not directly experienced bombing and killing of people would find it difficult to identify themselves with horrors that bombing brings, but those who have will find it disgusting and as something that evokes negative emotions. In this case the violation is benign because the one who blows himself up is a terrorist, somewhere in Afghanistan. The act itself does not evoke any empathy with the suicide bomber, which fulfils the condition of psychological distance. Research in the field suggests that psychological distance “increases humorous responses to highly aversive situations” (McGraw et al., 2014: 567).

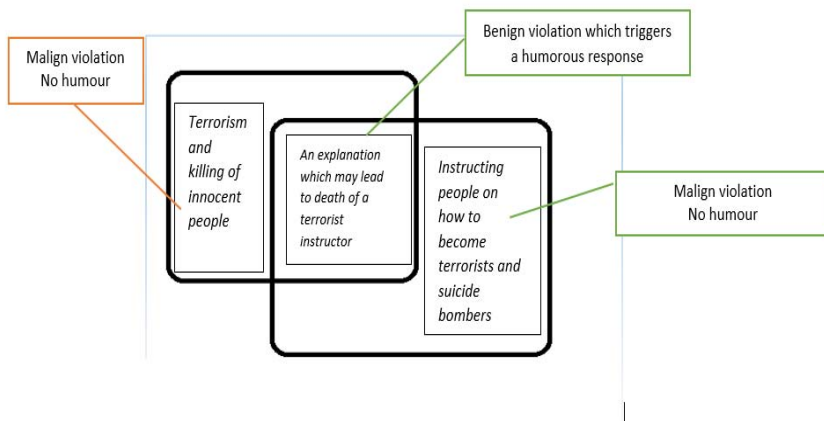


Figure 4. A humorous response prompted by benign violations for “Afghan’s school of terrorism.”

It could be noticed that humorous response is indeed triggered by benign violations. If we approach the cartoon from any of two extreme points, humorous response will not be evoked. There is an idea of terrorism and killing of innocent people at one extreme point, while the other evokes an idea of terrorist camps where they learn about making bombs and where they get instructed on how to become suicide bombers. Neither of these inputs is humorous. The sentence spoken by the instructor in a way merges these two extremes making it more benign and it functions as a trigger to laughter. The two extremes that surround humorous response in the cartoon resemble mental spaces or frames which are derived from context and background knowledge about war against terrorism in Afghanistan, and humorous response emerges in the blend. If understood in this way, the benign violation theory resembles the conceptual integration theory since both of them involve different levels of abstraction, highlight the importance of setting and include cognitive mappings and blending. The survey results prove that apart from conceptualization and development of mental blocks for understanding of the cartoon emotions play an important part in deciding whether something is funny or not since 51% of high school students did not find the cartoon to be funny because it evokes negative emotions and discomfort. Also, 73% of university graduates who participated in the survey said that the cartoon was not funny because it brings up the feelings of discomfort and disgust (*there is nothing funny in the word bomb; the cartoon is about killing, not funny; offends religion; the cartoon is morbid ...*).

5.2. Humour processing using the conceptual integration theory



Figure 5. From a needle to a locomotive.

In the meme there is a man sitting on a chair. The man is skinny and he is wearing a pair of trousers, only. His torso is bare naked. The man is sitting on the chair and it seems that he is looking strait ahead as if he is waiting for something. The chair is positioned on the railway, right in between the two rails. The scene takes place in nature, far from civilization. The punch line reads: "From a needle to a locomotive." In order to grasp the meaning of the meme we need to consider the setting, the context, the abstract concepts and the punch line, which is by the means of intertextuality related to a well-known concept of fulfilment, of having everything in life, or of being fully equipped with all necessary goods. The punch line is written in the Bosnian language (*Od igle do lokomotive*) and its literal translation into English is *From a needle to a locomotive*. However, the English version of the saying would be *From a needle to an anchor* and it stands for "the ultimate compliment to a general store [...] that it could supply the shopper with anything from a needle to an anchor".¹ The understanding of the meme involves a cross-space mapping between "the input space and the selective projection of the emergent structure from the input to the blend" (Dyrel, 2011: 60). The meme makes a reference to misfortune and bad luck of drug users. In the meme,

¹(<https://sailstrait.wordpress.com/2015/01/09/from-a-needle-to-an-anchor/>, accessed 31.12.2019).

four input spaces may be detected. The first mental space represents well-equipped store or a person who has got everything in his life and who needs nothing else. This mental space has its metaphoric cross-space mapping with the input space three, which stands as a reference to misfortunate destiny of drug users. In the first mental space we develop a mental picture of affluence while the third mental space contains a mental picture of drug users who usually spend all their money on drugs. The second input space contains literal references to a needle and a locomotive and is metaphorically cross-space mapped with the input space four with a reference to an injection and death. The generic space contains connection of elements from all input spaces. It gathers elements from all spaces in terms of literal and metaphoric meanings and as a result an emergent structure appears. In the emergent structure there is a combination of all elements which provoke a humorous response triggered by the depiction of a young man in the meme and the punch line.

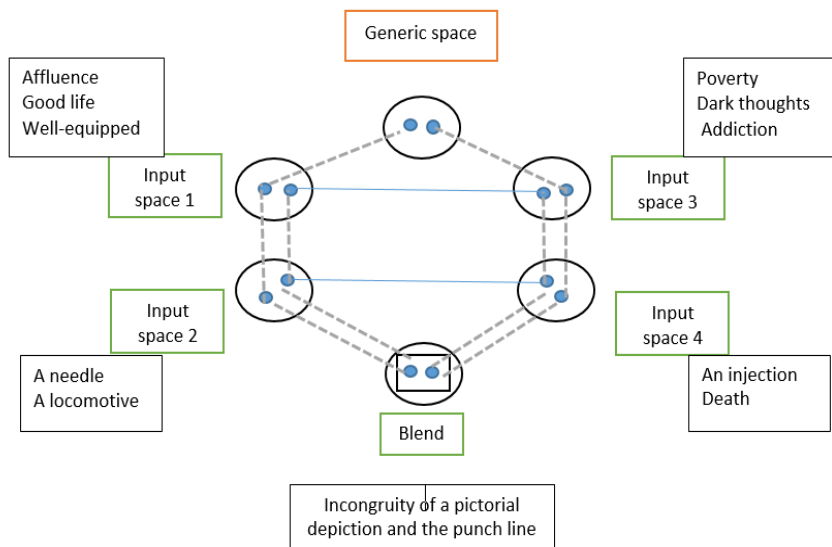


Figure 6. The conceptual integration network for the meme "Od igle do lokomotive."

Understanding of the meme is highly conceptual and requires a lot of mental processing. In the meme the punch line plays an important role since there is an intertextual relation between the line and a well-known saying. The results of the survey show that only 26% of high school students find the meme funny (*the setting; he is bare naked; why would anyone sit on the rail-*

way...), and only a few of them make any sort of conceptual blending at all (the meme is making fun of drug addicts; he has got everything and now he is bored so he wants to try something else; a needle refers to an injection; ...). The rest of 74% of participants think that the meme is not funny. The results of university graduates show that only 15% of participants think the meme is funny. Most of them in the explanation part make some mental conceptualization to prove that the meme is humorous (there is only one life so try everything while you can; he picked the wrong place to sit in; one does not wait for the train on the rails but at the train station; and etc.). The rest of 85% do not find anything humorous in the meme.

5.2.1. Humour processing using the benign violation theory

In the light of the theory, the source of black humour resides in benign violation of norms. The meme “*Od igle do lokomotive*” is about one of the major social problems of today and a lot of people all over the world are coping with it. It could be said that there is nothing funny about it since moral violations usually provoke negative emotions and manifest in the form of aversion (McGraw & Warren, 2010). The same kind of negative emotions evoke upon seeing the meme and one can hardly find any humour in it. However, the theory suggests that humour can be found if certain conditions are met. In this meme, all required conditions could be perceived as being fulfilled. In accordance with the first condition it could be said that it is wrong to commit suicide, but yet a sort of acceptable if committed by someone who is perceived (by some) as a burden to society, someone who is a potential carrier of contagious diseases, and someone who is prone to crime. The second condition is about commitment to the norm and anyone who does not use drugs is far away from any sort of commitment towards drug abuse and similar scenarios. The third condition is related to psychological distance. Those who have not experienced the loss of a loved one, who have not got drug addicts around, would feel psychological distance. All things considered, the violation of the norm in the meme can be perceived as benign if the person in the picture is a stranger, if he is seen as yet another drug abuser in a suicide line, and if we have not recently witnessed similar scenarios.

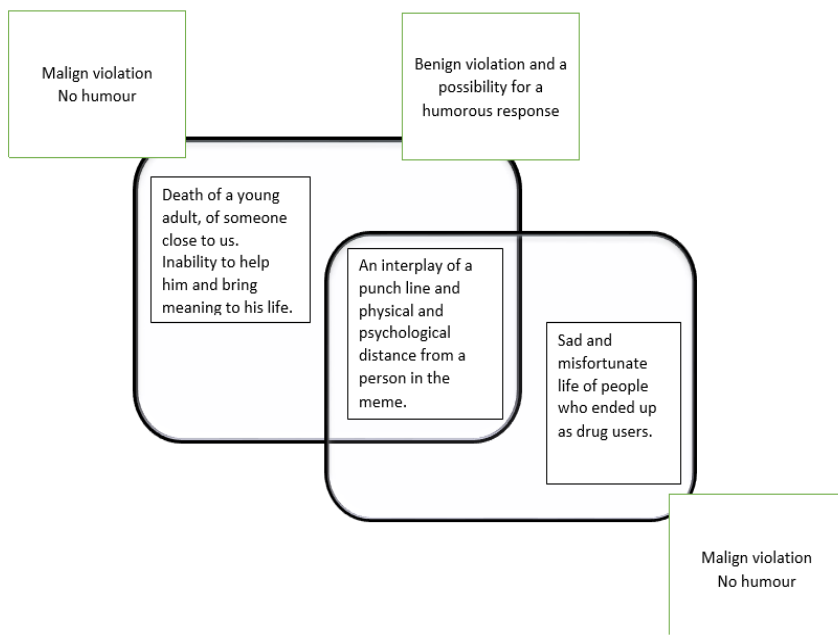


Figure 7. A humorous response prompted by benign violation in the meme “Od igle do lokomotive”.

The model suggests that humour emerges only in the case of benign norm violation which is positioned in between two extremes. The extreme poles do not trigger any humour because both extreme ends represent extremely tragic situations void of any humour. The survey results confirm the claim that malignant violation of the norm does not trigger any humour. Of all high school participants that took part in the survey, 74% of them think that the meme is not funny because it evokes emotions of sadness and misfortune (*doing drugs is not funny; there is no connection between the punch line and the meme; it is about doing drugs; it's about suicide-not funny; and etc.*). The university graduates, 85% of them believe that the meme is not funny because it depicts suicide and end-results of drug abuse.

5.3. Humour processing using the conceptual integration theory



Figure 8. Don't mind me just hanging around for the upvotes.

In the meme there is a man smoking a cigarette. He is holding the cigarette in between his point finger and middle finger in front of his mouth. He is wearing a military uniform. The man has got black hair and a thick black moustache. He looks like the late president of Iraq, Saddam Husain, but also resembles Fidel Castro in some of his pictures with a cigarette in his mouth. There is a caption on the meme which reads *"Don't mind me, just hanging around for the upvotes."* In order to investigate the meaning of the meme we need to take into consideration several things. We need to understand who the person in the meme is, what happened to him, what is the significance of a punch line in the meme, and the wider context of the meme. The meme shows the late president of Iraq, Saddam Husain. He was accused for production of the weapons for mass destruction. Eventually, the accusation led to the military intervention of the U.S.A. and the allied forces in Iraq, which resulted in capturing the president of Iraq and his execution by hanging to death. Later on, the execution was broadcast on television and people could see him hanging. Prior to the military invasion of Iraq there was a strong media campaign in the major media agencies for the purposes of gaining general approval from public for the military invasion of Iraq. The president of Iraq was portrayed in the major media as a dictator who brings harm to his people and poses a threat for the rest of the world. Considering all the points above, it could be stated that understanding of the meme demands a lot of background knowledge and a lot of conceptualization, which is a feature of the conceptual integration theory. There are a few input spaces that should be taken into consideration. The first input space contains information about military invasion of Iraq and metaphorically cross-space corre-

sponds to the matching input space containing information about the war for the liberation of Iraq. The second input space refers to media campaign with the intention of gaining approval for the military invasion and this mental space corresponds to the approval on social networks in terms of getting upvotes. The third input space contains a phrasal verb “hang around” and the corresponding mental space refers to a gibbet. Thus, to grasp the meaning of the meme all six input spaces need to be brought together, filled with “information from background knowledge” and then elaborated by means of “imaginative mental simulation and inference making” (Dyner, 2011: 60). The humorous response is triggered by the incongruity of the punch line and the person in the meme, provided that one has the background knowledge of the whole scenario.

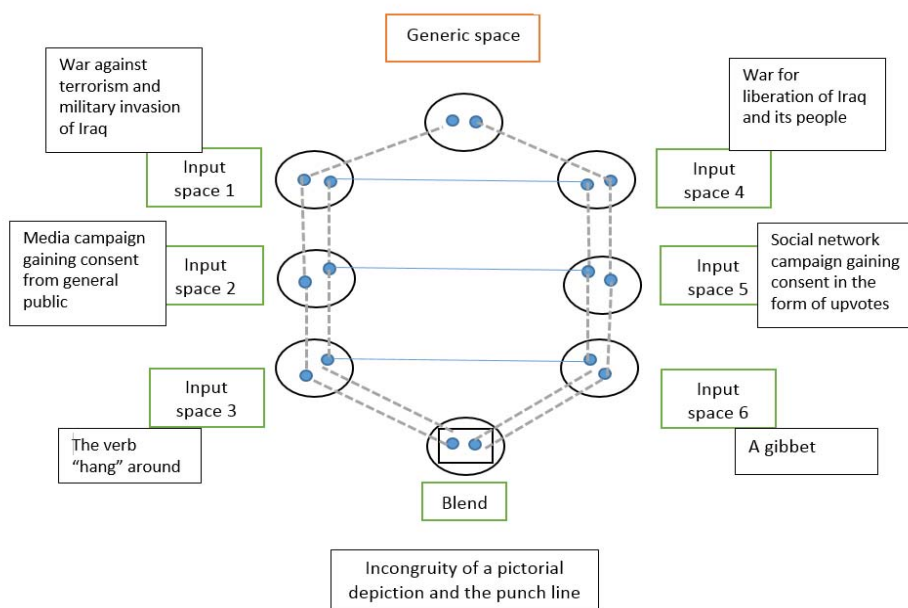


Figure 9. The conceptual integration network for the meme “Don’t mind me, just hanging around for the upvotes.”

The analysis of the meme proved to be very challenging in terms of conceptualization and blending. The survey shows that only 9% of high school students thought the meme was funny, which supports the claim that background knowledge plays an integral and essential part in the process of conceptualization. In the explanation part of the survey, only one participant made a relationship between “hanging” and “upvotes” commenting “good

old black humour." Other participants, 91% of them, found nothing funny about the meme with comments like: *not funny because it is real; I do not understand; I do not know who the person is; not my type of humour; and etc.* The picture is slightly different with university graduates. Among them, 21% think the meme is funny with comments like: *because it is ironic; he is sending funny signals; camera likes him, and etc.* The rest of 79% said the meme was not funny. The interesting thing to point out here is that most of participants, in their explanations, have used some sort of mental conceptualization to elaborate their points (*voting makes no sense with dictators; there is a killer behind his cold face; he looks dangerous; mocking the death of a famous politician; and etc.*).

5.4. Humour processing using the benign violation theory

According to the benign violation theory three conditions need to be fulfilled in order for a joke to be considered humorous (McGraw & Warren, 2010). The meme itself does not contain any visible humorous elements. The only way for the meme to be perceived as humorous is to consider the story behind the meme which requires a lot of background knowledge and conceptualization. The story behind the meme was given previously and as such it fulfils the requirements for a humorous response. In the light of the first condition, the norm suggests that something is wrong but acceptable. It was wrong to gibbet a person, but the person killed was perceived as a dictator by most of the world and as such it is perceived as something acceptable. There is a weak commitment to the norm present, since most people disapprove of terrorism and dictatorship. And, the violation is psychologically distant. The case happened a long time ago and does not affect the readers of the meme in a direct and an affectionate way.

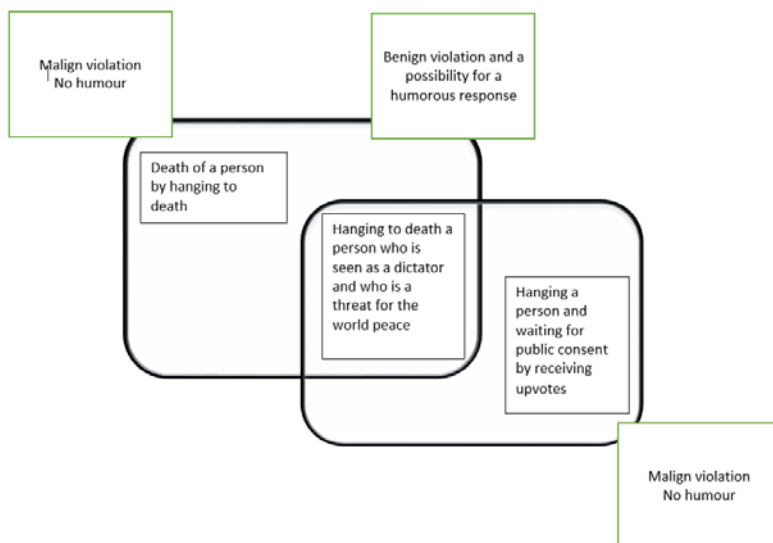


Figure 10. A humorous response prompted by benign violations in the meme “Don’t mind me, just hanging around for the upvotes”.

The model shows that the meme would not trigger any humour if only the literal meaning of the punch line was taken into consideration. At the two extreme points, there is an indication to the death of a person which evokes negative emotions that do not trigger any humorous responses. They only arouse the feelings of disgust and sorrow. Hence, when the background knowledge is taken into consideration and if the concept is well-understood there is a possibility for humour. The background knowledge and the punch line, which “plays” with the verb hang, provide the opportunity for black humour. The survey results show that high school participants did not find the meme to be funny at all, 91% of them. The explanations in the survey show that they failed to find any connection between the punch line and the meme because they did not have enough information about the person in the meme. The university graduates also did not find humour in the meme, 79% of them. The rest thought it was funny, but made no reference to emotions and feeling what so ever.

6. Conclusion

In the light of the data presented, it can be confirmed that humour processing involves both, cognitive as well as emotional aspects (Willinger et al., 2017). It could be observed that understanding of humour through the

prism of the blending theory demands high cognitive exertion and background knowledge in order to identify input spaces as well as to properly arrange structures of thought. Founding their ideas on previous studies, Willinger et al. (2017) claim that understanding of humour requires the use of structures of thought arranged in the forms of frames. These structures are then “semantically reanalysed and reorganized by mapping elements of one frame into a new frame” (Willinger et al., 2017: 160). Eventually, the blend emerges which represents a humorous situation composed of elements coming from different cognitive domains. The analysis in the paper indicates that the age plays an important role in the process of conceptualizing and sense making. Older and more experienced individuals are more successful in complex meaning making processes which involve different levels of abstraction compared to younger ones. They also make more use of intertextuality in their understanding of the memes considering the fact that they, being older, possess more background knowledge on the issue and as such are capable of making different inferences. With the benign violation theory, humour emerges as a reaction to “hypothetical threats, remote concerns, minor setbacks, social faux pas, cultural misunderstandings, and other benign violations people encounter on a regular basis” (McGraw & Warren, 2010: 1148). It is an emotional reaction to something that occurred, and a humorous response is a sort of defensive mechanism which assists in undermining the gravity of the situation. It resembles the conceptual integration theory in a way that it involves cognitive conceptualization, and in both theories a humorous response emerges in the blend. The survey results support the idea that emotions play an important part in deciding whether something is funny or not. However, background knowledge on the matter is crucial since not knowing the person or unfamiliarity with the setting may result in not prompting any affective response. Such situations would make a reader or listener confused, and thus the response would be irresolute. In a nutshell, humour processing is a complex task that demands cognitive and emotional aspects which, in one way or another, influence cognitive operations that underlie understanding of humour (Willinger et al., 2017).

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