A RELEVANCE-THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF ASPECTS OF *MCHONGOANO*

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This article investigates *mchongoano*, a Kenyan speech event very similar to what Americans call "playing the dozens". Much as sociologists, folklorists, and anthropologists have studied playing the dozens fewer studies have been done on *mchongoano* from a pragmatic perspective. That is why this paper discusses a pragmatic interpretation of *mchongoano* using Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995/2004). It will argue that the humorous effect of *mchongoano* is achieved after the hearer has recognised the intended insult of the joke that is created through the incongruity of events and situations. On the face of it, the incongruity of events and situations violates the principle of relevance, which stipulates that all communication has its own presumption of relevance. The paper will also demonstrate how three of Yus' four types of jokes are found in the interpretation of *mchongoano* (2008: 142).

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a lot of interest among sociolinguists, folklorists, and anthropologists in the US (cf. Labov, 1972; Abrahams, 1964 and 1989; Kochman, 1973; Smitherman, 1977; Mitchell-Kernan, 1972; Levine, 1978, etc.) on a speech event very popular among African American adolescents and which goes by very many names: sounding, the dozens, snapping, capping, jonning, playing the dozens, signifying and busting (see Morgan, 2002; Labov, 1972; Mitchell-Kernan, 1972; Percelay, et al. 1994; Smitherman, 1994; Montgomery, 1995, etc.). This speech event/genre is about playful ritual insults directed at an opponent or his/her family members e.g. mother, sister, father, friends, and other participants in the conversation (Morgan, 2002 and Labov, 1972).

The insults are intended to be funny, and are often played to an audience (Schwegler, 2007). The dozens are an extended form of *signifying*, or using "verbal hyperbole, irony, indirection, metaphor, and the semantically unexpected" (Smitherman, 1995 p. 70).

The dozens have equivalents in other cultures. Chimezie (1976) cited in Githinji (2007: 91) gives *Ikocha Nkocha* as an equivalent in the language and culture of the Igbo of Nigeria. *Vociferación* is the equivalent among the Palenque and *vacilada* is the equivalent among the Chota both peoples from the Americas. The Bakongo from central Africa have *Biensa* and *Nsonsani* (Schwegler 2007). In Kenya, the Kikuyu have *Hūhi* [hohi] as the equivalent, the Luhya have *Okhuchayana* while the Luo have *Nyungrwok*.[1] And still in Kenya, there is of course the very term *mchongoano* itself. Githinji (2007, p. 89) defines *Mchongoano* as "a ritualized genre of verbal duel popular with the Kenyan youth where one antagonist insults another or members of [their] family".

Mchongoano is a type of verbal duelling similar to the African-American variety. In this article we refer to it interchangeably as a speech event or genre. The term *mchongoano* seems to have been derived from a Kiswahili verb "*chongoa*" which means, "to sharpen the edges of something" (Tuki, 2004). But the noun *Mchongoano* may be said to belong more to Sheng [2] than to Kiswahili. It is important to note here that Sheng is the language of communication in *mchongoano*. It has the characteristic of mixing its vocabulary with words from a variety of languages (e.g. Kiswahili and other African languages like Dholuo, Kikamba, Gikuyu, English, Hindu, etc.) While we cannot at this time be quite sure that the term *mchongoano* itself is a Sheng or a Kiswahili word, we can say without doubt that as an application of verbal art *mchongoano* uses Sheng.

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[1] We got the information about the Luo example from Millicent Ochola (personal communication, 10 Aug. 2011) and that about the Luhya example from Mukoya Mwairumba (personal communication, 10 Aug. 2011). According to M. Ochola (p.c., 21 Dec. 2011), the Luhya term above has *Okhuyikhya* as a regional variant of it.

[2] Sheng is an urban youth language variety in Kenya whose linguistic structure, especially grammatical, is based on Kiswahili (see more about it e.g. in Githiora 2002, Githinji 2006 & 2007 and Ogechi, 2005).

In this paper we will look at *mchongoano*[3] from a linguistic pragmatic angle. Specifically, we want to show that the humorous effect of *Mchongoano* is realised as a violation of the "communicative principle of Relevance" laid down in Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995/2004). The paper is organised in the following way: the next section explains the basic tenets of Relevance Theory applied in this paper; the third chapter looks at relationship between this theory and humour; the fourth section shows how the inferential recovery of violation of the principle of relevance created through incongruity achieves the humorous effect in the jokes of *mchongoano*; the fifth section is the conclusion.

2. THE BASIC TENETS OF THE RELEVANCE THEORY

The Relevance theory (RT) is a theory of communication that has its basis in human cognition (Sperber & Wilson 1986, 1995; and Wilson & Sperber 2004). The theory is cognitive inferential and pragmatic in its nature and works on a cost-benefit basis for comprehension and interpretation. The information is transferred from speaker to hearer channelled through the cognitive principle of Relevance which makes the hearer to single out one possible interpretation as interpretation of communicated utterances, thoughts, gestures, perception, etc. The basic tenets underlying the theory discussed here are: the notion of context, the principle of relevance for communication, (cognitive and communicative principles of relevance). These notions are explained in the first article of this volume under 2.1 and 2.2. The comprehension procedure of Relevance theory another important tenet of the same is discussed below.

The comprehension procedure of RT is based on the balance between effort and relevance. According to Wilson & Sperber (2004, p. 613) a hearer should follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects; test his or her interpretive hypothesis in order of accessibility, and stop when his or

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[3]The data used in this paper was purposively obtained mainly from www.kichizi.com with some of it provided by three young children; two girls aged 14, 11 and one boy aged 9.

her expectations of relevance are satisfied. The following are the specific sub-tasks of the comprehension procedures:

Sub-tasks in the overall comprehension process
(a) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution, and other pragmatic enrichment processes.
(b) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual assumptions.
(c) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual implications. (Wilson & Sperber 2004, p. 615).

The procedure in (a) is an explicature while those in (b) and (c) are implicatures. An explicature is a communicated logical form that has to be enriched through pragmatic means such as disambiguation, reference assignment, saturation, free enrichment and ad hoc constructions, while an implicature is solely derived through inferential processes (Carston, 2002, p. 377). The comprehension process is not demonstrative nor does it occur sequentially; it is an online process where the hypothesis about explicatures and implicatures (implicated premises and conclusions) is developed simultaneously against the cognitive environment and the expectations of the interlocutors. As Yus (2008, p. 142) observed, jokes in generally work on the exploitation of the interplay of explicatures and implicatures. It is with these concepts in mind that we will attempt an analysis of *mchongoano*.

First, we will attempt to briefly situate RT in the analysis of humour including theoretical inclinations that relate to humour analysis.

3. RELEVANCE THEORY AND HUMOUR

RT has been applied to many research areas such as humour, media discourses, literature, politeness, translation, language teaching, etc. In this connection, Yus (2010, p 701) notes that, "… these research areas which take RT as their theoretical framework are evidence of the dynamism and impact of this cognitive pragmatics theory of communication ". There

have been specific studies on humour using RT (see. Yus, 2003 and 2008 and Jodlowiec 1991; Curcó, 1995 and 1996). Yus (2008, p. 142) suggests the following relevance-theoretic four-fold classification of jokes:

> (a) jokes based on the explicit interpretation of the joke or alternative explicit interpretations; (b) jokes which generate humor from a clash between explicit content and implicit information retrieved from context; (c) jokes based on the audience's responsibility to draw implicit information from context in order to derive implicatures; and (d) jokes whose main source of humor lies in the reinforcement or invalidation of commonly assumed stereotypical background information about the society in which the audience lives.

Although Yus discussed the exploitation of implicature and explicature as a basis for generating humorous effects, he did not point out that the humorous effect particularly lies in the recovery of the violation of the presumption of relevance as stated in the Communicative Principle. Note that Curcó (1995) also noted that humorous interpretations depend much on the interaction between the perception of the incongruous [implausible] and the search for relevance, but she applied this analysis to irony not to jokes in general.[4] Humour, according to Yus (2008, p. 148), is an intentional [ostensive] play, where possible or accessible interpretations are aimed at by the speaker and at the same time the speaker aims to alter the expectations of relevance on the hearer's side.

This paper will specifically show how this alteration of the expectations of relevance works. First, the hearer goes through a process where he or she feels that the communicative principle of relevance is violated because what the speaker is saying does not make sense. It communicates events and situations that are incongruous i.e. these events or situations are unsuitable, strange, inconsistent, implausible, or out of place according to the context of the hearer. While the hearer is recovering the relevance of the communication, the humorous effect is achieved.

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[4] Humour cannot be regarded as a context-free property; all humour has a pragmatic component (Attardo, 2003: 1290).

4. THE VIOLATION OF RELEVANCE IN *MCHONGOANO*

In this section we will present a pragmatic analysis of *mchongoano* within the theoretical tenets of RT. We will strive to explain not only the comprehension of the speech event but also what brings about the humorous effect.

As a performed genre, *Mchongoano* has more than one participant. There is general agreement that the jokes against an opponent are just but jokes and should not be taken literally or made personal (Githinji, 2007). We can add that *Mchongoano* works on the mutual understanding that the verbal play is a teasing game where the playful provocation uttered as a fictional proposition is not meant to hurt or criticise. It is not meant to annoy or challenge the interlocutor but just encourages the opponent to engage in a humorous exchange. Because of the mutual understanding between the players, one of the contestants makes his or her intention known by signalling (giving evidence of intention) to the prospective opponent. After the opponent is willing to engage in the game one contestant can spell out the joke.

As stated before, the *mchongoano* jokes exploit the concept of incongruity of events and situations. The incongruity discovered in the *mchongoano* jokes is achieved through the violation of world knowledge of both speaker and hearer as mutual manifested in the context of the mind of the interlocutors. The effect of the violation of world knowledge is brought out through explicatures, the use of stereotypes, metaphors, metonymy, hyperboles, through implicatures and the disambiguation of homonyms as discussed below.

4.1 Incongruity expressed through explicatures

The jokes in examples (1) to (6) provided by our informants solely fall under Yus's (2008, p.142) first category namely that of jokes based on explicatures. The incongruity develops because of immense violation of the

word knowledge manifested in the encyclopaedic cognitive environment of the hearer. The recovery of the expectation of relevance relies on the understanding that the insult is based on the violation of the world knowledge. This category represented the largest category of the jokes discussed here. Look at the following examples.

(1) *Wewe ni mwizi hadi unaiba majani kwa chai.*
'You are such a super thief that you can even steal tea leaves from already made tea.'

(2) *Damu yako ni sweet hadi mosquito zinakuja na cake.*
'Your blood is so sweet that mosquitoes come with cakes.'

(3) *Wewe ni mjinga mpaka ulifail blood test.*
'You are so stupid that you even failed a blood test.'

(4) *Ati nyinyi hupaka Vaseline nyungu mahali imecrack ndiyo iheal.*
'[I hear] that you people apply Vaseline on a broken (earthen) pot for its cracks to heal.'

(5) *Nyinyi ni mafans wa rugby hadi kuku zenu zinacheza rugby na mayai.*
'You [your family] are such rugby fans that even your chickens play rugby with eggs.'

(6) *Nasikia ati gari yenu ni mzee hadi siku ile babako alipeleka trade-in alibadilisha na simu ya 3310.*
'I hear that your [family's] car is so old that when your father took it for a trade-in he got a [Nokia] 3310 phone.'

In all of these jokes the encyclopaedic world knowledge of the hearer is violated. In (1) the sense that freshly made tea leaves are already dissolved and, in the normal world, it would be impossible to steal such tea leaves. The opponent is playfully insulted as being a super thief, because he or she can achieve the impossible and the absurd by stealing dissolved tea leaves. The skill of the thief achieving the impossible strengthens the insult and after the hearer discovers the insult the humorous effects comes about.

While in (2) it is expected and accepted that mosquitoes draw blood from people, but it is against expectations (i.e. world knowledge) that

mosquitoes can eat cakes. The participant who provokes the insult is basically saying that the mosquitoes can have a party with cakes, using the blood of the opponent as the drink.

In (3) the speaker of the *mchongoano* exploits the performers' encyclopaedic knowledge of the meaning of the words *stupid*, *fail*, and *test*. In an educational/academic context "stupid" people do not pass their exams (tests), they "fail" them. So, while to fail a test would thus be an adequate expression in such a context, *to fail a blood test* has nothing to do with the intelligence of person. In this case, the incongruity arises from the violation of the presumption of relevance, specifically the violation lies in the idea that intelligence is required for blood tests.

In (4) we are dealing with a violation of world knowledge that while it is socially normal to apply jelly on a bruise, it would be absurd to do so on a crack on an earthen pot, and somebody who does such a thing can only be regarded as stupid and must feel insulted if said to do so. The crack on the pot is likened to a bruise /cut on which people normally apply jelly to lubricate it for faster healing. Of course the crack on a pot would not mend/seal even if Vaseline was applied and it would be stupid for anyone to imagine that it would. The use of brand names in the *Mchongoano* is also evident in African-American dozens (cf. Labov, 1972; Morgan, 2004).

In (5), there are two aspects to the incongruity: one, chickens are not humans and thus cannot play rugby; two, to play rugby with eggs is ridiculous and absurd, as the eggs are brittle and would break immediately. So through the incongruity of the situation the person's interest for rugby is exposed as being exaggerated.

The joke in (6) is also based on the recovery of an explicature, using the adjustment process of lexical broadening in form of categorial extension. One finds categorial extension of the Nokia 3310 mobile telephone as the epitome of a cheap cell phone. This is due to the popularity of this brand of telephone at the advent of mobile telephony in Kenya. This type of cell phone later became a symbol of jokes due to its size, limited features, lack of sophistication, all of which make it cheap. The joke is based on the idea that a car (which is supposed to be more valuable) is exchanged for such a

cheap phone. The comparison to the cheap sell of the Nokia cell phone brings about the insult and it also insults a person as being poor.

In all of the above jokes, the incongruity of the situation first violates the presumption of relevance in the hearer's mind. The hearer basically thinks how impossible and implausible the situation is and so the joke does not produce any relevant assumption for him/her. While trying to make sense out of the situation, the hearer recovers that the insult is produced through the implausibility of the situation and the humorous effect and optimal relevance is achieved. All the above jokes are explicatures, as they need no extra inferential processes in the recovering of optimal relevance.

The following joke exploits the process of disambiguation of a homonym found in the recovery of explicatures:

(7) *We ni fala, leo asubuhi nilikupata umeweka mkate katikati ya barabara, kukuliza ni nini mbaya, ulinishow ati unangojea jam.*
'You are such a fool; this morning I found you having placed a loaf of bread in the middle of the road and when I asked; you told me that you were waiting for jam.'

In example (7), the back and forth play between the two senses of the word "jam" namely "traffic jam" and "the spread on bread" are both exploited in the joke. Once "jam" means "traffic jam" and the other time "spread for bread". However, the background knowledge for each of the two senses is reversed: on the one hand the bread is linked to the road, and on the other hand, it is linked to the spread. The implausibility that the *spread* cannot be found on the road and the *traffic jam* cannot be eaten creates the incongruity and is a severe violation of the communicative principle of relevance and the world knowledge of the hearer. When the insult in the joke is recognised optimal relevance is recovered.[5]

The following joke creates incongruity through expressing an illegitimate relationship between the adjective 'hard' and the computer word 'hardware':

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[5] That ambiguity is essential in jokes was also pointed out by Zijderveld (1983) cited in Dascal (2003, p. 368).

(8) *Ati wewe ni mkono ngumu hadi ukishika computer inajiandika "New hardware found".*
'[It is said] that] you have such a hard hand that when you touch a computer it shows this message: "New hardware found".'

The word 'hardware' is a compound noun that was most likely created in the past through compounding 'hard' and 'ware', but has extended its meaning twice first to construction material, so the sense of 'hard' in the cognitive environment of the hearer was lost. In a second process 'hardware' has now become a term in the computer language. The original relationship to 'hard' is completely forgotten and a violation of understanding in the mind of the hearer takes place. The hearer has to disambiguate the relationship between the adjective 'hard' and the compound noun 'hardware' in order to understand the joke and achieve relevance from it.

It is also funny that a gadget like a computer is able to realise how hard a person's hand is and interpret it to be part of the hardware though we know that it is not because of being hard that something becomes part of the computer hardware.

4.2 Incongruity expressed through implicatures

The following joke demonstrates that the insult and humorous effect can only be recovered through implicatures, representing the third category of Yus's (2008) categorisation (p. 242).

(9) *Ati nyumba yenu imejengwa na matope, wezi wakikuja wanasema, "fungueni ama tukonjolee ukuta".*
'It is said that your (family's) house is built with mud (walls) and when robbers come they say, "Open or we urinate on the wall".'

The joke is derived through the implicature that people who build mud houses are poor. The exposure of the poverty and the fact that urine brings down the walls is the insult of the joke. The assumption is that walls offer protection but this is not the case, as the robbers do not need much effort

to gain access into the house. The joke also lies in the irony that the robbers want to steal from the poor; what is there for them to steal anyway?

Some of the jokes are based on incongruity and the interplay of literal versus metaphorical meaning, which also represent the third category of Yus's (ibid.) classification, where the expectation of relevance is recovered through implicatures:

(10) *We ni mgreedy hadi ukimaliza kuvuta fegi unalamba vidole.*
    'You are so greedy that you lick [your] fingers after you finish smoking a cigarette.'

If the receiver of this *mchongoano* wants to understand the challenger's (speaker's) joke correctly, he or she has to use his or her inferential ability and play around with the literal and metaphorical meaning. The literal meaning of the joke does not make any sense, as licking fingers and smoking a cigarette do not create any positive cognitive effects i.e. beneficial effects in the mind of the listener. As the listener proceeds to understand the joke in order to recover optimal relevance, the concept of licking fingers has to be broadened; some conceptual adjustments have to be made to the concept.

Jokes that work on metaphors exploit the ability of the mind to make conceptual adjustments for the search of relevance (see Yus 2008, p. 149). In an African set-up, people do use their hands to eat, as they do lick their fingers after a meal when it was really tasty or to show they are not satisfied and would want more. The metaphor "licking fingers" now is related to greediness/gluttony. However, licking fingers and smoking cigarettes are incongruent; they disagree with the presumption of relevance as they violate the existing world knowledge. One can only lick a liquid e.g. soup/gravy from his/her fingers. We are aware that cigarette smoke cannot stick on the fingers after one has smoked. To claim that smoke is like soup or gravy and thus can be licked is outrageous (if not absurd) and that is how incongruence sets in. However, while trying to recover the optimal relevance and make sense out of incongruity of the utterance the hearer

realises that the incongruity was used to stress the smoker's stupidity and insatiate appetite and thus playfully insult him or her.

4.3 Incongruity expressed through stereotypes

Jokes that are based on social stereotypes form Yus' fourth category. Yus (2008, p. 142) states the stereotypes of a society can serve as a strong basis for the exploitation of humorous effects, as example (11), taken from www.kichizi.com, illustrates:

(11) Wasapere *ni wezi mpaka venye nilienda kugoogle "Onyango stole my fone [sic]" ikaniletea "Did you mean 'Kamau stole my fone?"' then kwa related searches "Njoroge steals a fone", "Nderitu hijacks a car", "Wangui takes of* [sic] *with a fone".*

> 'Kikuyus are such thieves that that when I googled "Onyango stole my phone" I got the message, "Did you mean, 'Kamau stole my phone?'", then in the related searches [I got the following:] "Njoroge steals a phone", "Nderitu hijacks a car", [and] "Wangui takes off with a phone"'.

The type of *mchongoano* illustrated in (11) has to be enriched i.e. the hearer has to recover the stereotype it is based on. The joke is inspired by the Kenyan social context, where members of the Kikuyu tribe are stereotyped as being thieves. This stereotype is available from the interlocutors' cognitive environment at the time they engage in the duel.[6] The incongruity of the joke lies in the violation of the world knowledge that computers have no memory about Luos being thieves but have the same about the Kikuyus, thus the search for optimal relevance is violated. As the hearer tries to recover the joke for optimal relevance the following implicatures are entertained:

  i. Kikuyu—referred to as *Wasapere* in Sheng—are such well-known thieves that even Internet search engines like Google know that.

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[6] Jokes that build on social stereotypes demonstrate the fourth category in Yus's (ibid.) classification of jokes.

ii.   Luos are not thieves and even Google knows that as well and can only suggest that the people known for stealing are Kikuyus.

iii. Since Kamau, Nderitu, Njoroge and Wangui are Kikuyu names they must be thieves.

The implicatures are intended by the speaker to arouse humorous effects. Through the entertainment of the implicatures the search for relevance is recovered as the awareness is created that the insult and the humorous effect is achieved through strengthening the stereotype that Kikuyus are thieves, which is based on the incongruent situation that google knows this Kenyan stereotype. Internet search engines are expected to be impartial and non judgemental. This is not the case in (11) where the search engine even exonerates the Luo (Onyango) from being accused of being a thief. The incongruence in (11) sets in to consolidate the held stereotype about Kikuyus and it is achieved through exaggeration of google's ability to judge.

Note that example (11) also employs processes of lexical adjustment.[7] There is metonymy where "*Wasapere*" stands for the Kikuyu tribe, the name Onyango stands for the Luo ethnic group while the term "*googled*" is a neologism. The verb developed from the search engine "Google". The verb can also be regarded as categorial extension standing for any kind of research activity.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the relevance theoretical approach of the humorous interpretation of the *mchongoano* variety of jokes. *Mchongoano* is a playful teasing game that is based on the mutual understanding by the contestants that the created insult is meant to be funny and not to be taken as critique or insult. The paper demonstrated that out of the relevance-theoretical four-fold classification of humour suggested by Yus (2008), three were

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[7] Sheng, in which most *mchongoano* is packaged, is reported by Ogechi (2005, pp. 342-3) as having common cases of semantic expansion, which is another word for broadening.

prevalent in the jokes: Humour that draws its humorous effects through entertainment of explicatures, humour that generates jokes through recovery of implicatures, and humour that uses stereotypes for creating jokes. The article also proved that the humorous effect was achieved in stages: first the hearer is puzzled by the incongruity in the jokes thus experiencing the violation of the word knowledge as manifested in his/her mind at the moment he or she engages in the game, by that the hearer also feels that his/her search for relevance is disturbed. While trying to makes sense out of the joke he/she realises that the purpose of the jokes is to create humorous effects through the incongruity of the situation, events and thoughts. The incongruity of the jokes is achieved through the pragmatics means of the recovery of explicatures and/or implicatures, through metaphorical extensions and pragmatic recovery of stereotypes, metonymies, and the disambiguation of homonyms in explicatures.

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