Research article

Why is there a place for humour when a heart breaks?

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the problematic area of humour in a story with an essentially serious plot. The author analyzes the text of the novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* written by Jonathan Safran Foer, which is known as a description of a life-after-tragedy experience. The main goal of the paper is to understand why the author uses humour in such a story. The methodology of the study is rather complex; such methods as the continuous sampling method and the quantitative method, as well as methods of semantic and pragmatic analyses based on the Semantic-Script Theory of Humour and General Theory of Verbal Humour are used. The term "humour" is applied as a generic term. The author defines 177 extracts with a humorous effect and distributes them according to two communicative situations (author/reader and character/character). The main functions of humour in the novel are to describe a character, to make a contact/to capture attention, to cope with a problem, to add an aesthetic value, to arouse an interest, to humiliate, etc. The distribution of the extracts with a humorous effect provides the possibility to illustrate the humour melody of the novel and show the general development from humour to seriousness. The results could be helpful to analyze the author's idiostyle, to better understand some linguo-cultural nuances, as well as for translation studies.

Keywords

Introduction

Humour studies at present are very popular in different fields of knowledge. It is interesting to understand (or at least to try) its nature, the impact it has on people, where it could be used, the purpose of its usage, the rules that govern its usage, the difference between humour creation and comprehension in different cultures, and much more besides.

Talking about literary texts, scholars are mostly interested in the problems of an author's idiostyle and some textual peculiarities connected with humour, but "the analysis of longer humorous texts has been a major challenge for humor researchers" (Chłopicki, 2017). Traditionally, humour has been assessed in a literary text by analyzing the general topics it covers or linguistic units that could be used to express it.

One of the issues on scholars' radar screen nowadays is the realization of such an opposition as the humour/laughter and pain/death/trauma. It is intriguing to understand why people use humour when it is more logical for them to cry and why authors insert humour into their texts.

The novel we chose for our study is entitled *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and "deals with loss and trauma after 9/11" (Quintero, 2019). It was written in 2005 by Jonathan Safran Foer (an American novelist) and called "the soaring flight of Foer's very

sad and very funny story" (Mudge, 2005). The author himself did not want to explain his intentions about the book, but said that "a book is a little sculpture <...> not just a vehicle for words" (Mudge, 2005).

Its breathtaking plot about the search of a nine-year-boy Oskar Schell includes the description of the firebombing of Dresden, the death of a pregnant young future-happy-wife, the loss of a child/grandchild/father/husband, the fears and scares, the inability of talking because of traumatic experience... The hearts break, but nevertheless there is a place for humour, which is quite peculiar within the humour/seriousness frame though. As one of the researchers pictures it, "the brilliance of Foer's storytelling lies in its poignant, wide-hearted, utterly seductive humor. Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close brings a reader to that high level of seriousness that only the very best comedy can achieve" (Mudge, 2005).

The text of the novel has already been regarded as an object of various studies, mostly in the context of traumatic experience study or ethics, as an example of a description of 9/11 or in the context of literary studies as a postmodern text, or as an object of interdisciplinary studies (Collado-Rodríguez, 2005; Uytterschout and Versluys, 2008; Saal, 2011; Vanderwees, 2015; Dowling, 2017; Lexana, 2017; Arnold, 2018; Quintero, 2019, etc.). But the humour of the novel has not been observed and analyzed from the linguistic point of view, although the problem of laughter through tears has been discussed by O. B. Karasik as one of the problems of literary studies (Karasik, 2011).

Thus, the necessity to understand the author's idea and the value of humour throughout the text with such a serious plot determined the aim of this study. To answer the question we pose in the title of our paper, three main steps should be taken:
- to identify the number of humorous lines/extracts used in the text of the novel;
- to analyze their functions;
- to find the place they occupy in the text.

The paper will logically follow these steps as the plan of our research.

Data and methods

Dealing with humour is not a simple matter, not least because of its elusive nature. In our paper humour is used as a general term without any specifications. Humour is always subjective, and its subjectivity, both in production and perception, arises from our differences as human beings.

To begin with, two main points should be discussed in connection with humour studies. First and foremost, the paper is based on two famous theories of humour: the Semantic-Script Theory of Humour (Raskin, 1985) and the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo, 2001).

According to the former theory, a joke can be seen when the text "is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts; the two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite (...). The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part in this text" (Raskin, 2001). According to the latter, there are six Knowledge Resources that should be analyzed in a text to prove the existence of humour: script-opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy and language. We would like to mention here that various studies within the cognitive paradigm and frame/script-based boundaries are topical now (Suleymanova et al., 2020).

The second vital issue is the unit of humour. Different authors use different terms denoting the part of a text with a humorous effect, which we do not clarify here as amusement, a humorous tone or something else. We strongly believe that using the term's extracts with humorous effect for the long narrative of a literary work is more appropriate. It allows to take into account not only a trigger but the context of the novel, and does not rely fully on the laughter of the recipient (Abaeva, 2017).

Thus, semantic and pragmatic analyses are applied to find out all the possible script oppositions throughout the text of the novel in connection with the other knowledge resources, when possible. The whole procedure probably could be defined as a cognitive analysis of a special type. This type of analysis is combined with the continuous sampling method and philological analysis of the text itself to find out all the possible extracts and count them. The aforementioned algorithm allows us to consider different types of extracts so that all of them are included in our list.

1. The extracts when a context is greatly separated from a trigger were counted and registered by the position of a trigger:

*My first **jujitsu class was three and a half months ago**. (p. 4) <...>My last **jujitsu class was three and a half months ago**. (p. 6).*

It should be noted that in this very example there are 342 words between the context and the trigger. What is more, we witness an extract when the first lines of the novel contain the first word of the context and the part with a trigger is placed in the final pages:

What about a teakettle? *(1) What if the spout opened and closed when the steam came out, so it would become a mouth, and it could whistle pretty melodies, or do Shakespeare, or just crack up with me? I could invent a teakettle that reads in Dad's voice, so I could fall asleep, or maybe a set of kettles that sings the chorus of "Yellow Submarine," which is a song by the Beatles, who I love, because entomology is one of my raisons d'être, which is a French expression that I know. (p. 3) <...>**What about a teakettle?** (2) (p. 404).*

2. All the trigger/context cohesion cases were taken into account as separate extracts:

*I got tired, I told him. Not worn out, but worn through. Like one of those wives who wakes up one morning and says I can't bake any more bread. You never **baked bread (1)**, he wrote, and we were still joking. Then it's like I woke up and **baked bread (2)**, I said, and we were joking even then. I wondered will there come a time when we won't be joking?*

Here, two extracts are analyzed because the trigger of the first one is the context of the second, which is frequently used in dialogues:

(1) I can't bake any more bread (context) + You never baked bread (trigger);

(2) You never baked bread (context) + Then it's like I woke up and baked bread (trigger).

3. Some failures in humour comprehension were also regarded as a part of our material because we do not correlate the laughter or misunderstanding with the humour itself due to its subjectivity. Humour functioning in the literary text touches upon all the cases of potentially deduced humour, so the cases when there is a failure of humour comprehension are also important, as in the following example:

"I was gonna go buy some tuna fish at the A&P. I clipped some coupons from the Post this morning. They're five cans for the price of three. What a deal! I don't even like tuna fish. It gives me stomachaches, to be frank. But you can't beat that price," she was trying to make me laugh, but I shrugged my shoulders and stirred my coffee.

For our study we believe that two different communicative situations should be analyzed separately due to the long literary narrative. The first is discovered when the primary recipient of humour is a reader and the second when the primary recipient is a character, and which is more frequently met in dialogues. These two levels are discussed as well, for example, as "the intercharacter level, representing the fictional participants' interactions, and the recipient's (i.e. the viewer's) level" in the papers devoted to the workings of humour in comedy (Dynel, 2013).

Pragmatic analysis is applied then to the extracts with humorous effect within the whole context of the novel to reveal the functions of humour and demonstrate the way

these functions are distributed according to the communicative situations. To avoid inconsistency with data and make our study more robust, only one dominant function was regarded for each case of an extract with a potentially humorous effect, although we know that "humor is incredibly versatile and any one instance may perform multiple functions – sometimes even simultaneously" (Schnurr and Plester, 2017). Finally, again the quantitative method is applied to show the correlation between the part of the novel and number and position of the humorous extracts.

Study and Results

As the main purpose of the study is quite complex and the methodology used is elaborate, the results are multidimensional as well.

Thus, due to the aforementioned methodology all the results are grouped into three parts: how many extracts there are in the text of the novel (**number**); why they are inserted in such a story (**functions**) and what place they occupy throughout the text (**melody**).

Number

The continuous sampling method was used to detect the quantity of extracts in the text of the novel. All the problematic nuances connected with the different structure of the extracts and their combinations are discussed in the section methods. We would like to point out that the extracts were not only structurally different, but their length was not identical either.

The scope of our material includes 177 extracts with a potential humorous effect which are being analyzed and discussed further. The total number of the extracts along with the plot itself allows us to categorize it clearly as a dramatic story with an essentially serious plot and comparatively many humorous diversions (Chlopicki, 2001).

As the second step for this part of the study, all the extracts are differentiated into two big groups according to the communicative situation – author/reader or character/character – as mentioned above. The results of the distribution are presented in Fig. 1.
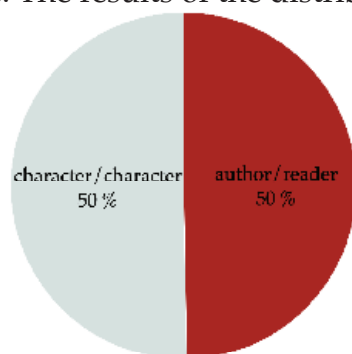

Fig. 1. **Distribution of extracts according to communicative situation**

The number of extracts in each of the group is practically identical: it is a bit more when the communicative situation implies the character as the primary recipient of humour (89 extracts) and less when the primary recipient is a reader (88 extracts).What is more, this distribution helps us separate the functions that is our next question to be explored.

Functions of humour (according to the communicative situation)

Functions of humour are usually discussed within the framework of different communicative situations and different life contexts. For example, in one study that illustrates "the functions of humor in friendship groups and how the sex composition of such groups affects humor usage" (Hay, 2000) the author develops the framework that originates from the general function and strategies: solidarity (to share, to highlight similarities or capi-

talize on shared experiences, to clarify and maintain boundaries, to tease), the psychological base (to defend, to cope with a context) and power (to foster conflict, to control, to challenge and set boundaries, to tease). Analyzing the humorous usage of proverbs, such functions as excusing, greeting someone, and creating the atmosphere of negotiation, etc. are defined (Lauhakangas, 2009).

As so many scholars analyze the traumatic experience in the novel, it could be important to enumerate the humour functions from the research dedicated to the so-called "genocide humour": "A primary function of genocide humour is coping. It can be seen as an emotional mechanism: a reduction of, or an escape from pain" (Üngör and Verkerke, 2015). The functions of expressing solidarity and being critical are also important here.

Among the broad functions there are solidarity-oriented functions, controlling others, conflict, exploration and coping, boundary function (Hay, 2000), etc.

In literature humour functions slightly differently. For example, in Chekhov's prose scholars believe humour helps to make people laugh, cure some social diseases and make this world a better place. Chekhov creates humour "to satirise people's distance from each other and their materialism, their urge to submit to authority and to show that people's expectations hardly come true in a world where there is a legitimacy of incongruence" (Yilmaz, 2019). Humour in film discourse "is orientated towards entertaining, yet not necessarily amusing" (Dynel, 2013). In novels humour could be used to create an aesthetic value, to arouse an interest/attract attention, to describe a character and so on (Abaeva, 2016).

We can clearly see that many scholars have already thought about the functions that humour can perform in different contexts. But, unfortunately, there is no classification to fit all the communicative circumstances. Thus, for our specific purposes we entirely draw the functions from within the context of the novel.

Sometimes the characters of the novel describe the reason for using humour themselves; they do it **to support each other**:

> *How could such a lonely person have been living so close to me my whole life? If I had known, I would have gone up to keep him company. Or I would have made some jewelry for him. Or told him hilarious jokes. Or given him a private tambourine concert.*

To cope with the problem:

> *<…> because if I could make him crack up, my boots could be a little lighter.*

Or:

> *We all rode in the limousine together. I could not stop touching you. I could not touch you enough. I needed more hands. You made jokes with the driver, but I could see that inside you were suffering. Making him laugh was how you suffered.*

Or:

> *"He had a great laugh. I remember that. It was good of him to laugh, and to make me laugh. He was laughing for my sake."*

To share common experience and to show love:

> *Our marriage was not unhappy, Oskar. He knew how to make me laugh. And sometimes I made him laugh.*

Talking about the functions of humour in the novel we should again point out the specific situation of a literary text's context with its double communicative situation (author/reader and character/character). These two communicative situations merged into one text obviously give us more functions than when taken separately. This is clearly illustrated in Table 1 below.

It is apparent from the table that only four functions are used in both communicative situations (to describe a character, to cope with a problem, to add an aesthetic value,

to avoid a conversation//to skirt a conflict).

Table 1. **Functions of humour in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close***

№	Functions	Number of extracts	
		Author/ Reader	Character/ Character
1	to describe a character	69	29
2	to make a contact/to capture at	-	19
3	to cope with a problem	9	7
4	to add an aesthetic value	6	7
5	to arouse an interest	-	6
6	to humiliate	-	5
7	to avoid a conversation/to skirt a conflict	1	5
8	to tease each other	-	3
9	to criticize	3	-
10	to share common experience	-	2
11	to pay a compliment	-	2
12	to support	-	1
13	to motivate	-	1
14	to persuade	-	1
15	to defend	-	1
	Total number	**88**	**89**

Interestingly, critically used humour appears only in the author/reader communicative situation as in the example below where the author uses humour to show the absurdity of society:

> One of my favorite parts is the beginning of the first chapter, where Stephen Hawking talks about a famous scientist who was giving a lecture about how the earth orbits the sun1, and the sun orbits the solar system, and whatever. Then a woman in the back of the room raised her hand and said, "What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." So the scientist asked her what the tortoise was standing on. And she said, "But it's turtles all the way down!"

Moreover, this function is the only one which is absent when the recipient of humour is a character.

The next thing is not so surprising: **the function of describing a character** more often appears in the author/reader communicative situation, although it is frequently used in both situations. Humour helps the author show different shades of a hero's personality, as, for example, Oskar's naivety, cleverness and creativeness, lack of life experience and failure to comprehend the rules of social interaction. Oskar wants to love and be loved. One of the scholars gives such explanations of the boy's personality: Oskar is an atheist who believes in science and logic only; he cannot see the nuances of life, so knowing the plain truth is the only possible scenario for him; besides, he has some problems when people "use irony, idiomatic expressions or complicated words" (Quintero, 2019).

All these traits are depicted through humour and the example below is a nice illustration:

> She said, "I know what I am." I nodded my head, even though I didn't know what she was talking about or what it had to do with anything. "Even if I don't like what I am, I know what I am. My children like what they are, but they don't know what they are. So tell me which is worse." "What are the options again?" She cracked up and said, "I like you."

One important comment should be made here as Oskar does not always use humour intentionally. The humorous effect can be oriented to the reader's or another character's experience and, as a result, perception. For example, Oskar is told that in one apart-

ment he wants to visit a ghost is living:

I walked back up the steps, this time past our floor and to the sixth. There was a mat in front of the door which said Welcome in twelve different languages. That didn't seem like something a ghost would put in front of his apartment.

The **function of avoiding a conversation** is more fruitful for the character/character communicative situation:

She took my pen from me and wrote on the next blank page of my daybook, the final one: Please marry me. I flipped back and pointed at, "Ha ha ha!" She flipped forward and pointed at, "Please marry me." I flipped back and pointed at, "I'm sorry, this is the smallest I've got." She flipped forward and pointed at, "Please marry me." I flipped back and pointed at, "I'm not sure, but it's late."

As there are a lot of dialogues in the novel and the communicative situation between characters is obviously well-presented, the number of functions there is vast: 10 out of 15 functions appear in this communicative situation exclusively (to make a contact/to capture attention, to pay a compliment, to arouse an interest, to humiliate, to tease each other, to share common experience, to support, to motivate, to persuade, to defend).

Turning now to the last question, we should define the humorous extracts' positions throughout the text of the novel.

Humour melody of the text

The quantitative method is used in this paper to show the place of extracts with a potential humorous effect. The final point is the illustration of the humour melody of the text which is set out in Fig. 1 below. To show this melody we need to distribute the extracts throughout the text and bring them into correlation with the number of pages. The clusters and trigger/context cohesion cases are reflected in peaks: the more extracts a part of the text has, the higher the peak.

Fig. 1. **Distribution of extracts in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close***

From Fig. 1 we can see that the first part of the novel (up to page 200) has more peaks than the last part and most of them are higher: five clusters with more than five
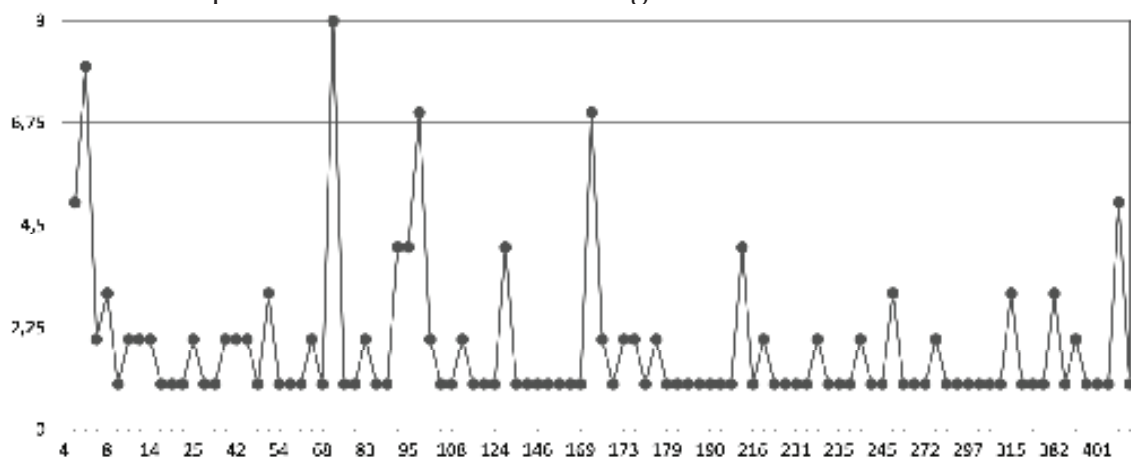
extracts compared with only one cluster with five extracts in the second part of the novel. We would like to note that some chapters lack any humour at all. But, of course, the text of the novel has enough clusters which can logically appear in the dialogues or be the marker of a child's spontaneous way of speaking; thus, every previous extract functions as the warm-up background for the next one.

Cher Marcel,
Allô. I am Oskar's mom **(1)**. *I have thought about it a ton* **(2)**, *and I have decided*

that it isn't obvious why Oskar should go to French lessons **(3)**, *so he will no longer be going to go to see you on Sundays like he used to. I want to thank you very much for everything you have taught Oskar, particularly the conditional tense* **(4)**, *which is weird* **(5)**. *Obviously, there's no need to call me when Oskar doesn't come to his lessons* **(6)**, *because I already know, because this was my decision* **(7)**.

Also, I will keep sending you checks, because you are a nice guy **(8)**.
Votre ami dévouée,
Mademoiselle Schell

Turning again to Fig. 1, we would like to note that fewer peaks tell us about the author's strategy to lead us from the life that could be funny to the serious idea of life that could be not funny. Analyzing another novel by the author (Everything is Illuminated), O. Karasik tells us that "the story that was a funny adventure in the beginning, gradually takes on an increasingly serious tone" (Karasik, 2011). As we can see the same direction in the author's second novel, we might suggest that probably it is the author's idiostyle. Humour draws the reader in to show real life with pain, death and tears, but finally there is always a positive moment in the end. It is a brilliant strategy of drawing the reader into the world of the novel where, as in our life itself, there is always a place for everything.

We believe that some future research devoted to the problem of humour and pain / death / trauma could be done using this method because the distribution of humorous extracts and, for example, words from the lexico-semantic group "death" throughout a text could possibly be an illustration of some specific correlations, if any. Of course, there are a lot more things to discuss and analyze in the novel through the prism of humour, for example, thematically we can see there **cases of black humour**:

Next I went to the penitentiary. My uncle was a guard there. I was able to get the handwriting sample of a murderer. My uncle asked him to write an appeal for early release. It was a terrible trick that we played on this man.

From the angle of literary studies, we can see **the cases of irony**:

You asked me in your first letter if you could be my protégé. I don't know about that, but I would be happy to have you join me in Cambridge for a few days. I could introduce you to my colleagues, treat you to the best curry outside India, and show you just how boring the life of an astrophysicist can be.

From the linguistic point of view, several interesting **examples of word play**, especially based on malapropisms in a child's speech, could be discussed:

"But it's not for a fixed safe, I don't think. Nothing too big. Maybe something portable. Could be a safe-deposit box, actually. An old one. Or some kind of fire-retardant cabinet." That made me crack up a little, even though I know there's nothing funny about being a mental retard.

For the purposes of our research, however, we have examined only systematically registered issues.

Conclusion

Answering the main question, which was the driving force for the paper – Why is there a place for humour when a heart breaks? – we have come to several conclusions. First of all, we could determine that there is a relative abundance of humour in this evidently mournful novel: we found at least 177 extracts with a potential humorous effect based on SSTH and GTVH.

Then, discussing the purpose of humour usage, fifteen functions were defined and distributed according to the two communicative situations relevant for a literary text: five functions within an author / reader communicative situation and fourteen functions for a

"character/character" situation. In general, the main functions are to describe a character, to make a contact/to capture attention, to cope with a problem and to add an aesthetic value.

The humour melody of the text helps us understand the strategy of the text's development (from humour to serious topics) and the author's desire to paint the picture of a real world. The presumable correlation between humour and grief/pain/death (although more studies on the topic are needed) allows the author to create a reality.

The data we observed and results we discussed are important for the perception of an author's idiostyle, as well as for future research in the field. Some comparative studies connected with the sphere of linguoculture could be undertaken with the help of the suggested system. Moreover, it could be evidently helpful for a translator to analyze a text and find an adequate translation strategy.

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