



Deconstructing a Contemporary Egyptian Newspaper Caricature

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Introduction

Journalese is a complex discourse genre which may be broken down into a large number of sub-genres, e.g., the headline, news stories, editorials, opinion columns, advertisements, obituaries, matrimonial columns, letters to the editor, horoscopes, and caricatures, to give only a partial list.

Caricature, also referred to as comics or cartoons, has already established itself as a regular newspaper and magazine sub-genre; in fact, there are magazines entirely devoted to caricature — *Punch* is probably the most famous example. Caricatures usually aim at amusing the reader, illuminating public opinion, expressing shared symbolic consensus and concretizing abstract concepts (Morris, website). Press (1981) concludes that cartoons/caricatures are low satire, ridiculing individuals and parties (77).

Most caricatures contain an element of incongruity within or between schemata (Deckers & Buttram, 1990). A schema is "a cognitive structure for representing generic knowledge in memory." It represents "stereotypical concepts of objects, situations, and behavior sequences. Dinner at a restaurant is an example of a schema" (pp. 53-54). Deckers and Buttram (1990) identify two types of incongruity:

(1) Within schema: when an actual event does not fit within the expected instantiation of the schema variable, and

(2) Between schemata: when two activated schemata are opposite or incompatible with each other (p. 54). Resolution of the incongruity or in-

compatibility normally results in a perception of humor in a joke or a caricature.

In spite of its popularity and cultural significance, caricature has not received adequate research attention; the focus has so far been on political cartoons from a content analysis perspective (Morris, Press, 1981). The present paper extends the application of semiotic analysis tools to the caricature discourse genre, although on a very narrow scale.



[Woman: “Marry me, mister? Man: “No thank-you, I’m a vegetarian.”]

Method

The caricature text analyzed is taken from the second page of the March 2, 2000 issue of the Egyptian national daily newspaper *Al-Akbar* (“The News”) and it bears the signature of Amr Fahmi, a contemporary Egyptian caricaturist.

The method used is semiopragmalinguistic analysis, one that addresses the semiotic, linguistic, and pragmatic aspects of the text. Pragmalinguistic analysis alone is not enough, because the text is made up of a verbal code and a nonverbal code. A semiotic analysis can accommodate anything that has meaning, anything that signifies: a word, a sound, a color, a smell, a photo, an illustration, a movement, a posture, or a gesture, and so on.

Those signifiers belong to different semiotic codes, e.g., the linguistic code, the garment system, body language, traffic signals, to mention only few codes. A signifier does not function in isolation, but it does so in relation to other signifiers and within a code. The relations between signifiers may be paradigmatic (i.e., selectional and vertical), or syntagmatic (i.e., combinational and horizontal). The relation between a signifier and its meaning (the signified), on the other hand, may be iconic (i.e., one of resemblance, e.g., a photograph), indexical (i.e., one of causal association, e.g., smoke and fire), or symbolic (i.e., arbitrary and conventional, e.g., a number).

A group of signifiers that combine into a cohesive and coherent whole make up a text. A text has affinities to other texts — previous, contemporaneous, as well as forthcoming. Each text inevitably belongs to a genre, a text-type, and it may have similarities with texts from other genres. And each text normally consists of a body and a periphery. The periphery of a text subsumes its title and subtitles, preface, introduction, signature and publisher information, although not all of these exist in every text.

A semiotic analysis also addresses the modality in a text — its formal and content modality, the address forms used therein, as well as the connotation/s of signifiers. The connotations of a signifier may be so universal and far-reaching as to make up a myth (Chandler, WWW; Lane, 1992).

This is not an exhaustive list of the possible aspects of semiotic analysis. It is, however, a partially adequate framework for the analysis given below. The analysis takes the notions of conversational analysis, pragmatics and functional grammar for granted.

Analysis

General

The caricature text analyzed consists of a rectangular 5.5 x 8.5 cm double-lined frame separating it from the rest of the page. Within the frame, there is an illustration of a man and a woman, the man walking and the woman “posing,” and two dialogue balloons. The locale is not obvious; the line and dots at the bottom of the image indicate a ground, probably part of a street. Between the two figures, at the bottom, there is the signature of Amr Fahmi, the author of the text.

The entire text is in black and white. Moreover, the illustrations are flat, or one-dimensional, and are obviously still, unlike a movie, for example. As regards other modality cues, the illustrations are somewhere between de-

tailed and abstract. There are many details, but not as many as in a photograph. Below, a closer analysis of the visual and verbal components of the text is given.

Visual Modalities

In addition to the comments made above, the cartoon text is silent and unedited. It contains a mini-dialogue, but it is not audible or 'montaged.' Speech is indicated, not performed, by the mouth shape of the two figures.

The two main visual signifiers in the text are the woman and the man. The man is formally-dressed, wearing a jacket, trousers, a shirt and necktie, carrying a soft briefcase with his right hand, while his left hand is raised, forefinger extended vertically, and the other fingers extended horizontally to the left. The bag the man carries is a variety of the portfolio or attaché-case form, one that is usually used by a teacher, lawyer, white-collar worker, or a businessman.

The woman is wearing a striped shift dress revealing her shoulders, the lower part of her thighs, her neck and the upper part of her chest. The dress is so close-fitting that it accentuates her breasts, belly, waist, hips, thighs and crotch. In contradistinction to the watch the man wears, she has a necklace and a number of bracelets on each wrist. And instead of holding anything, she rests the back of her hands on her hips. There are two short, slightly-curved lines next to each hip to indicate their side- to-side swaying movement. The man is apparently not interested; only his head is turned towards the woman, while her entire body is turned towards him. The female body is represented as the object of masculine gaze and a cause of voyeuristic pleasure, while the male seems indifferent. On the other hand, the female body seems to belong to the age bracket of maximum sexuality and to conform to the masculine ideal of attractiveness and normalcy for women. The woman is not noticeably fat or thin, and she is neither pregnant nor deformed (cf. Fiske, 1994, pp. 241-242). And while most of the man's body is concealed, most of the woman's body is revealed, whether naked or clearly demarcated.

Verbal Modalities

This is a mini-dialogue, initiated by the woman, and the second pair-part (the response) is given by the man:

—“*Titgawwazni?*” [lit. You-marry-me?]

(How ‘bout you marrying me?)

—“*La, shukran, ?asli nabaati.*”¹

(No, thank-you; I’m a vegetarian.)

In the first part, which reveals the agglutinative tendency of the Arabic language, the prefix ‘ti-’ refers to a singular, masculine addressee ‘you’ or ‘?ant’ (?inta in Colloquial Egyptian Arabic), and the suffix ‘-ni’ refers to a singular, neutral addresser ‘I’ or ‘?ana,’ in an object position. Thus, the male addressee is in the hypothetical position of an agent and the female addresser is in the hypothetical position of a victim or patient, the object of the verb. (‘Hypothetical’ because the action of marrying is in the *irrealis* mode, being a question not a statement).

The locutionary form of the first pair-part is that of a question, but its illocutionary force is that of an invitation or offer. It is obviously more polite than an equivalent imperative. In any case, it is a square violation of a social norm: in the Egyptian society, a female does not ask or propose to get married; she must wait until a male proposes to marry her. Intimate lovers do not have to follow this norm, but there is nothing in the illustration to tell the reader that the man and the woman are lovers, or even friends. In fact, there is evidence that they are almost total strangers. First, there is a wide gap between his formality and her informality; she does not look like a career woman. Second, while the woman’s body talk telegraphs her interest and availability, the man’s indicates his lack of interest. The woman is thrusting forward her left knee and thigh, her breasts and shoulders, with her head slightly leaning backward, in addition to an inviting smile. The man, contrariwise, is close-eyed, pointing ‘No’ with his forefinger, and not even stopping to continue the dialogue. This takes us to the third piece of evidence for the absence of intimacy which is the lack of what Hall (1976) calls ‘syncing’: “People in interactions either move together (in whole or in part) or they don’t and in failing to do so are disruptive to others around them.” Syncing — moving together — is itself “a form of communication” (p.71). As we have already noticed, the man and the woman are not syncing. Given this, together with the other pieces of evidence for lack of intimacy, it becomes obvious that the woman’s utterance is a violation of a social norm.

1. The *sh* is the same as the initial sound in ‘shall’ in English, while the initial “?” is the Arabic hamza, a form of glottal stop.

The man's response consists of two main components: a polite refusal, No+Thanks, and a justification for the refusal, "ʔasli-nabaati" (I'm a vegetarian). The usage "ʔasl+clitic" is a colloquial Egyptian Arabic discourse marker. It means "origin" or "cause," and is used simply as an equivalent of "because" or of a semi-colon.

The first component of the response is not a preferred second adjacency pair-part. Its face-threatening effect, however, is mitigated by the expression of gratitude "shukran" (thanks). It is obviously a violation of the Agreement Maxim of the Politeness Principle (Leech, 1983) The second component of the response, the justification, is more problematic. On the one hand, it mitigates an already mitigated refusal — through the positive politeness redress "shukran." A justified refusal is more polite than an unjustified one. On the other hand, it flouts the Relevance Maxim of the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975). The word "nabaati" (vegetarian) is an educated adjective which places the man's utterance at the level of High Standard Colloquial Egyptian Arabic in Badawi's (1973) taxonomy.² Yet, it is not immediately relevant to the proposal of the woman; it has to do with eating habits rather than with getting married.

The second component of the man's response is then the "surprise pulse" of the joke, so to speak, the punch-line of the caricature (cf. Hetzron (1991). The punch-line poses an understanding test because of its superficial irrelevance to the woman's proposal. There must be something non-vegetarian in getting married to this particular woman, and there must be something that relates to "eating" in marrying her. The incongruity between the two schemata — marriage and eating habits — and its resolution are the main sources of humor in the caricature. The man's response is an appropriate second part to an invitation to a meal where meat is served. The man refuses, because he does not eat meat. The only kind of "meat" in the text is the woman's partially naked body. "Languorously rolling her hips" (Fast, 1970, p.88), drawing attention to her bottom, thrusting her breasts, neck, and left thigh forward, wearing a tightly-fitting dress that reveals more than it conceals, smiling, with her head slightly bent backward, the woman seems to be saying "I'm available, my body is my real asset." The image of the woman in the text, in addition to her body language, justifies the man's response, where her body is mistaken for a meal, a very fleshy meal to be sure.

2. Badawi (1973, pp. 89-91) identifies five levels of Contemporary Egyptian Arabic: Classical Arabic; Modern Standard Arabic; High Standard Colloquial; Low Standard Colloquial; Low Colloquial.

Furthermore, the man seems to want to convey his belief that marrying this woman will be only a carnal relationship.

Visual and Verbal Modalities

Much of the resolution of incongruity discussed above comes from identifying syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations in the caricature. Syntagmatic relations therein include:

- 1) The relation between the two adjacency pair-parts: the utterances of the woman and the man,
- 2) the relation between the two characters, as already elaborated above : a relation between two human types, not necessarily between two individuals, and
- 3) the syntactic relations within each utterance.

Paradigmatic relations in the text include:

1) the relations between the woman's utterance, her inviting smile, her thrust breasts, tightly-fitting dress, her rolling hips and her thrust thigh. These relations are relations of congruity and compatibility.

2) the relations between the man's educated utterance, his formal haircut, close eyes, necktie, formal clothing, and his bag. Again, these are relations of congruity and compatibility.

3) the relation between the man's pointing forefinger and his refusal of the woman's invitation. Pointing with the forefinger seems to indicate that the man is in a position of power. This is also manifest in the syntagmatic relation between the two adjacency pair-parts — the invitation and the refusal.

The source of incongruity is, thus, the mismatch between two paradigms: the woman's and the man's. Most of the differences between the two have already been discussed. But there are still other differences that relate to the connotations of each of these two major signifiers and of the minor signifiers attached to each.

The two main signifiers denote what they apparently are: a female body (thrust breasts, rolling hips, a smile, etc.) and a male body (a pointing forefinger, a watch, a necktie,) etc. The visual and the verbal signifiers in the woman's paradigm, however, connote availability, liberation (some would

say looseness), some middle class manners, violation of norms, and sexuality. The signifiers in the man's paradigm have an opposing set of connotations: sophistication, formality, business orientation, reserve and rationality. The two sets of connotations are not unfamiliar in most media and print texts in Egypt as well as elsewhere.

Intertextuality

The present text belongs to the caricature genre in particular and to humorous discourse in general. The main requirements of a humorous caricature instantiated in the text include:

(1) a comic illustration,

(2) a mini-dialogue which contains a set-up — the woman's invitation plus the first part of the man's response — and a punch-line. Dialogue is of course not an obligatory part of a caricature, but most caricatures include a caption, a mini-dialogue, or a mini-monologue, as it were, and

(3) an example of incongruity the resolution of which creates the effect of the ridiculous or satirical.

A more significant case of intertextuality in the text relates to its content, namely, the representation of woman as sex objects, intellectually inferior to men. Feminist critiques of literary works (e.g., Mills, 1992), school textbooks (e.g., Kalia, 1982), and media texts and popular culture (e.g., Strinati, 1995; Mazid, 1999) have concentrated on what Tuchman (1981) calls the 'symbolic annihilation of women': how such texts "ignore, exclude, marginalize, or trivialize women and their interests" (Strinati, 1995, p. 180). Contemporary advertisements, fashion and woman magazines and popular movies still depict women as sex- objects, irrational, emotional, intellectually inferior, dependent and striving to satisfy men mainly through food and sex.

The present caricature text is no exception. The woman therein is represented not only as the sex object of masculine gaze, the semantic patient in her own utterance, and the available 'meal' ready to be eaten by the man, but also as having nothing to crow upon except her body. She is also represented as irrational; only an irrational Egyptian female "proposes" to a stranger. The man is represented as the opposite: formal, busy and following certain eating habits. The woman in the caricature is not only the object of symbolic annihilation by men but also an active participant in her own annihilation.

Conclusions

In the previous sections, the sample caricature was shown to be intertextually related to recognizable discourse genres and to media and popular culture texts. It is also related to; in fact, it is a by-product of a socio-cultural context which is urban Egypt at the end of the twentieth century. A more sociologically enlightened analysis would reveal the socioeconomic factors behind this depiction of woman in the caricature text. For example, it would argue that the unbearable conditions of marriage, the remarkable increase in the number of females, and other developments in the Egyptian society are responsible for this unfamiliar, entreating behavior of the woman in the caricature. However, the caricature may simply be a representation of a male conception or misconception about females (the caricaturist is a man)! It could also be a satire of male stereotypes or misconceptions of females. In fact, the caricature, like all texts, does not offer a single meaning that will be decoded in the same way by all readers.

The analysis given above is not meant to be the final word on the content of caricature in general or of the present text in particular. It is only one possible reading of the text indicating the resiliency of sexism therein. More semiopragmalinguistic studies of contemporary Egyptian caricature are needed to validate the findings of the present study, to examine the presence or absence of sexism in this discourse genre: the degree and the depth of sexism, and the ways in which misogyny manifests itself and what those manifestations say about our collective consciousness and socio-cultural norms and values.

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