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## Social Construct on Doctor-Patient Relation A Study of Tamil Jokes

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### Humour and Jokes

Humour is a unique human endeavour as speech. The sense of humour makes one's life smooth and healthy. The Tamil proverbs vaayviTTu siricca nooy viTTu pookum (if you laugh with your

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mouth open, that is, if you laugh heartily, the disease or pain will go away), *tunpam varum velaiyile sirinka* (when there is sorrow, laugh), etc. exemplify the relation between humour and stress-free healthy life. Recognizing the importance of humour, all societies have a social sanction to tease and make fun of certain kinship relation/s. Through humour, one can fulfil several functions, both at the individual level and the societal level. Humour can be used to attack existing standards and values and to promote social bonding.

Humour is the only mechanism which can be used to express and demonstrate both hostility and familiarity. Humour is some kind of ability to perceive and express incongruities or peculiarities present in a situation or character. It is frequently used to illustrate some fundamental absurdity in human nature or conduct whereas jokes, according to *New Webster English Dictionary*, are “Something said or done to amuse or provoke laughter; something funny or humorous; especially, a brief usually oral narrative designed to twist or denouement” (1961, p.1220).

### **The Focus of This Paper: Doctor-Patient Relation through Jokes**

In this paper an attempt is made to study the social construct of doctor patient relation through jokes. The data for analysis was collected for three months from *Ananda Vikatan*, a Tamil weekly magazine. This weekly describes certain important events that had taken place some twenty five years ago and the jokes appeared in those times along with the current events and jokes. The jokes related to doctor-patient relation alone are taken up for this study.

### **Jokes and Context**

Communication usually takes place between speaker and hearer. People talk because they have ideas and feelings to express. The speaker will encode the meaning in such a way to make it relevant to the hearer/listener. If the listener can get or infer the speaker’s deep motives, it will be of great help for them to enhance cooperation during the conversation. The inner meanings the speaker encode or the listener derives from it are all dependent on the context of the utterance. In certain contexts, meanings may wrongly be understood and may result in incongruence. This is true in the case of jokes also, since a joke is usually a kind of short oral exchange. Jokes are actually a special type of topic, and these must be injected appropriately in talks or conversations.

We know from our experience that certain jokes only bring laughter to certain group of people, and that some jokes can only be exchanged among very close friends. While a few could be mentioned in public, some jokes may even offend the audience if the narrators of jokes have no idea of their cultural social psychological background.

### **Context and Implicature**

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Context is defined as a premise used to interpret an utterance. Spencer and Wilson (1989) consider that context is a construct which is largely under the control of the hearer. It is a psychological construct, a subset of hearers' assumption about the word. The context will include any encyclopedic knowledge that may be necessary to process the utterance.

When an utterance is made in a particular context, it will generate a number of implicatures. Some may be explicature which can be inferred from the combination of linguistically encoded and contextually inferred concepts. There are some implicatures in which elements of message are not encoded directly, and whose recovery is based on the assumption that the hearer will be able to make appropriate inference.

### Picture as Context

In the jokes that appeared in the weekly magazine *Ananda Vikatan*, picture is an integral part of the joke and the picture of a joke gives context to the utterance. For example, a picture depicts a husband trying to tie a knot in the fan to commit suicide. The wife, on seeing this, says, 'I was searching for this rope to dry clothes. Better select some other rope'. The utterance of the wife is contextualized in the picture to evoke humour.

### Immediate Utterance as Context



In some jokes, the immediately preceding utterance and physical environment of the interlocutor may create humour. For example, a child asks her mother, "Mummy, is not the name of next door aunty Radha?" Mother replies, "Yes, why?" The child then tells the mother, "Papa doesn't know her name. He calls her as darling."

In the above conversation, the discourse itself functions as context. Here the innocence of the child is used to expose the hidden relationship.

There are stupidity jokes that are unfortunately and mistakenly revolves around the persons of a particular community or a particular group of people. The Sardarji jokes are a case in point in the Indian context. Pollack jokes revolving around the immigrant Polish community were popular in the past in the United States.

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A major element virtually in all jokes is that someone is being mocked.

Jokes also lend opportunity to express aggression or prejudice in a concealed manner towards people not liked by the narrator. The utterance itself is the context in the following joke.



Husband: I would better hang my self rather living with you

Wife: You always say something but do not do.

To understand the above joke we do not need any context. The answer itself is a surprise ending with unexpected twist. In the normal situation, the wife may pacify the husband with some other words. In this context, the expression of aggression in a concealed manner evokes humour.

### Change in Context

The change of context itself is a source for jokes.

- A. Our leader does not like advertisement.
- B. Is it so?
- A. Yes, he immediately changes the channel.

The political context of the utterance is given a twist here.

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It may be pointed out here that most of the jokes are enjoyable if one understands or shares the social, political and cultural context of the utterance.

### **Construct**

A Construct is an image, idea or theory, especially a complex one formed from a number of simple elements.

By analyzing jokes related to doctor-patient relationship, we can identify the constructs that create the context/s for these jokes. Doctor's profession is considered to be a noble one like the teaching profession. If this were really the case, why the doctor-patient relationship, or the doctors are mocked at in the same way politicians, police officials, lawyers, et al., are mocked at? The constructs on doctor tell us the social perception of the doctors. In order to understand the constructs in a better way, we need to study these jokes through speech act theory.

### **Speech Act**

The term *Speech Act*, according to Black, 2006 does not simply refer to the act of speech but to the whole communicative situation including the context of the utterance and the para- linguistic features which may contribute to the meaning.

It is concerned with the contextualized speech (Leech, 1983) and also concerned about whether the speaker achieve his communicative purpose. Austin (1958) says that whenever we produce an utterance we are engaged in three acts. A locutionary act is the production of well formed utterance. The illocutionary act is the meaning one wished to communicate. The illocutionary force we attach to a locutionary act is the meaning we intend to convey. The perlocutionary act is the effect of our words.

The husband-wife dialogue in the earlier joke can be explained better by using the notion of speech act. The husband utters the locutionary act with the illocutionary force of anger and contempt. But the wife's reply is a statement with the illocutionary force of inducing and persuading.

### **Illocutionary Force**

The conversation between a judge and a thief in the following can be explained through speech act.

Judge: How did you steal in seven houses in a night?

Thief: Excuse me, my lord, you are always asking the secret of my profession.

The illocutionary force in Judge's utterance is of expressing wonder in anger, but the thief took it as a direct question. In speech act, a direct question need not be a question with illocutionary force.

### Pattern and Construct Jokes on Doctor-Patient Relationship



The general patterns of the jokes on doctor-patient relationship are of the following:

- Statement vs. Statement
- Question vs. Question
- Statement vs. Question
- Question vs. Answer

Even though the patterns are same for many jokes, the illocutionary force differs from joke to joke. Take, for example, the following jokes.

- You don't know how to live in this world.
- You are the one who does not know how to live.

In the decontextualised situation, the first statement contains illocutionary force of compliment and advice. The reply to this statement has the force of anger. But, in the context of doctor-patient relationship, the second statement is a kind of satire which results in humour. The main aspect behind this humour is the construct on doctors that prevails in the society. The patient

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through the locutionary act expresses that the doctor is innocent and charging less. But the satirical expression of the statement is made explicit through the verb *pizhai* 'to live,' which brings out the meaning of the construct that there is no assurance to his life. The construct of 'unsafe' or no guarantee to one's life if he goes to see a doctor is taken as the context of this joke.

### **Greediness of the Doctors**

The basic construct of Doctor's Jokes is the greed of the doctors running after money. The jokes are constructed in such a way the greed is revealed through the utterance of the doctors. The following jokes illustrate the greediness construct.

Patient: Doctor, I have fixed my daughter's marriage this month. Can we postpone the operation to next month?

Doctor: No, No, It is not possible. I have also fixed my daughter's marriage.

The illocutionary force of the patient's utterance is his request to postpone the operation. The locutionary act of doctor is a statement that expresses a straight negative answer, but the force is the need of money to conduct his daughter's marriage.

Patient: Should I take a scan, X-ray, blood test for falling from the cycle?

Doctor: Will you give 10,000 Rupees if I ask you?

Above joke explicitly states the construct of greediness.

Patient: When can I see you free, doctor?

Doctor: Whenever you come, I charge fee.

The direct question of the patient is replied directly but it is constructed on the world free. The patient means the availability of the free time but doctor means free of cost for consultation.

### **Fear Psychosis about Surgery**

Some of the jokes are created on the constructs of fear psychosis, mistrust of the doctors, and failure of surgical operation, etc.

Patient: Doctor, a thought of committing of suicide comes to my mind now-a-days.

Doctor: How can you get such thoughts when I am here?

This is a normal conversation one may hear in the situation. This may not evoke humour if the construct is not connected to the situation. The locutionary act of patient is that a statement which has illocutionary force of seeking advise and complaint. Though the doctor's utterance is in question form, it has the illocutionary force of assurance and compassion. The implicature one gets in this context is the construct that the doctors finish the life of the patient. The social

construct that if some one is admitted in the hospital then he may not return home, is prevalent more in Tamil jokes.

### Linguistic and Cultural Elements

The same type of construct is expressed through different mechanisms by exploiting the linguistic and cultural elements. Many linguistically based jokes are created using pun and ambiguity. In order to understand some jokes, we need the cultural knowledge of particular society. The proverbs are one of the elements which express the culture through language. For example,

Doctor: My nurse is very smart.

(eḷḷunna e NNaiyairuppaal) (Literally the saying means that “if I mention sesame seed she would instantly bring out sesame oil”, so easy and ready to grasp the meaning or the intent of my utterance”)

Patient: It is too much doctor, she puts cotton in nose before operation.



The proverb ‘eḷḷunnaeNNaiyaaka’ is used to express one’s smartness in work which literally means if someone says gingelly she becomes/brings gingelly oil. The act of putting cotton in the nose is usually done after one’s death.

The doctor’s utterances express his compliment to the work of the nurse. The utterance of the patient is also about the work of the nurse, but it is created on the construct of fear psychosis, and mistrust of the doctor. The implicature of nurse’s activity shows that this surgical operation may

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be a failure and the nurse would readily put cotton in the nose of the patient even before the operation begins.

Another joke to illustrate the need for the cultural knowledge to appreciate the humour is as follows. It is a conversation between two persons.

A: It is not good to visit a patient with empty hands (He carries milk in a jar.).

B: But it is too much milk to carry while going to see a patient.

‘Paal eTuttal’ (“carrying milk”) is a cultural activity associated with death ceremony in some communities. This shows the common belief system that surrounds the surgical operation by a doctor.

### **Pun**

There are also jokes created using pun on the same construct. The word ‘kaariyam’ has two meaning, namely, 1. A favour, help, work. 2. Rituals after death. The first meaning (favour, help) is generally prevalent in the southern districts of Tamilnadu. In other places, the meaning of the word is associated with work. The meaning of death rituals is highly contextualized and is culture specific. The general meaning is interpreted as the specific cultural meaning in the following jokes.

Patient: Can you do me a favour (kariyam) doctor?

Doctor: No, No. I can go and do only operation. I won’t do kariyam (rituals).

The humour is created exploiting distrust in the operation.

The following joke is also another example for word play or pun. The word ‘kol kol’ is an onomatopoeic word and in isolation it means ‘Kill, Kill’.

Nurse: Doctor, if you feel like coughing, please do not do it in front of the patient.

Doctor: Why?

Nurse: You cough as ‘kol kol’

The implicature of this cough before the patient is an order to the nurse to kill the patient.

The social construct about doctors is very much directly given in the following joke.

Doctor : Why are you asking me the list of patients I had operated upon?

Politician: To cast the vote of dead people.

### **Context-dependence of Jokes**

Most of the jokes are context-dependent. The happenings in the society and the current events are depicted in the form of jokes. This is very much evident when we compare the jokes of two

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different times. Jokes also reflect the changes and attitudes of the people in a society. A comparative study of jokes would show that there may be no change in the topics of the jokes. They all seem to veer around political events, politicians, police officials, judiciary, family, lovers, doctors, etc. But we could find changes in the content depending on the current events. Jokes related to pick-pockets, stolen cycles and the police, stealing chappals in the marriage hall are not very frequently found now-a-days. This reflects the social change. It is also strange to notice that jokes related to IT field are not at all seen. I have no doubt that the peculiarities of the IT personnel, their focus on amassing wealth and buying urban and rural property, their spending habits, preference for fashion, etc., may soon attract the attention of the creators of jokes.

### **Change of Focus between Past and Present Jokes Relating to Doctor-Patient Relationship**

As far the content of the jokes related to doctors, we could see some changes. Earlier the jokes are created on the topics of fake doctors, carelessness of the doctor during operation, doctor-nurse relation, etc. Doctors are taken as a topic of humour as they are very close to the public audience. Due to globalization, most of the clinics are turned into multi-specialty hospitals and services are converted into business. The social constructs like mistrust of doctors, fear psychosis of operation, exorbitant charges for treatments, are explicitly formed as the basis for jokes. The public anger and their inability to meet the medical expenditure and highly elevated status of doctors are constructed in the form of jokes to express their anxiety for relief.

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