

Meanings of Actions and Their Detachment

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Abstract:

The paper identifies a mechanism that generates humor: detaching actions from their meaning. I will show that it underlies seemingly distant types of humor: the amusing aspect of derision, Bergson's "mechanicality", humor based on stereotypes, and more.

Key words: meaning of actions, mockery, detachment of meaning, stereotypes.

1. Valid observations, non-valid generalizations

A recurring theme in humor research is valid observations that breed non-valid claims of universality. A cleverly detected humor-generating mechanism is declared, much too daringly, to be at the base of all humor. This happened for example with the oldest of all theories of humor – Plato and Aristotle's "derision" formula. In one direction, that of sufficiency, the theory is indeed true: mockery indeed involves laughter. It is no coincidence that we call it "laughing at", and that "ridiculous" comes from the Latin "ridere", to laugh. The children who jeered at the prophet Elisha "Go up baldy, go up baldy", did it with glee and mirth, at least in the first part of the story. But as is now widely accepted, this is not the source of all humor. The same is true for Bergson's "mechanicality" theory. Bergson noted that automatic behavior where a flexible human behavior is expected is always funny. This is very much to the point, but the deduction that all humor is like that is clearly an overshot.

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On the other extreme, there are theories that encompass a large part of humor, at the price of vagueness. The “incongruity” family of theories, that says that humor is generated when two incongruous conceptual frameworks meet, fits many jokes and humorous situations. However, as Roberto Latta pointed out (Latta 1999) it is too general to be informative. It doesn’t shed much light on most types of humor. For example, using these theories to explain what is funny in mechanicality results in tepid interpretations like “collision of human and mechanical behavior”. These theories are useless when it comes to derision, they fail to explain ethnic jokes or humor based on exaggerations, and they miss the point in jokes based on self-reference.

So, how to go about searching for the common denominator to all humor? The strategy taken in this paper belongs to the toolkit of every scientist: starting with a restricted task. Instead of looking for a mechanism pervading all humor, we shall try to find a common denominator to only two types of humor, those mentioned above – derision and mechanicality. As we shall see, this will lead to yet another welcome restriction of scope – it will imply concentrating mainly on what humor does to meanings of actions. It is quite possible that the same principles are applicable to other domains of humor, but this we shall only touch upon perfunctorily in the present paper.

2. Bergson’s “automatic behavior”

In their “derision” theory, Plato and Aristotle had in mind as a model the most classic of all comic events – slipping over a banana peel. This was also Bergson’s starting point, but instead to derision, he ascribed it to something more original: a mechanical reaction where flexible human reaction is expected. The slipper wanted to continue walking, and the banana peel wanted otherwise. Matter over mind.

The “automatism” theory has more than a grain of truth to it. Non-spontaneous reactions are always funny, for example the children who ask their parents on an outing

Are we having fun yet?

In the TV series "Modern family" a woman is mad with her husband.

"I could have slapped you", she tells him, turns around and walks away. After a second or two she is back, says "As a matter of fact - " and slaps him on his face.

What is funny here (the hired audience, at least, laughed) is the detachment between the slap and the immediate anger. In music, such delayed effect is called “syncope”, having its own humorous tinge.

Old age is an excellent vehicle for detachment of spontaneity.

Wife: "Do you remember how, when we were young, you used to nibble gently on my earlobe?"

Husband: "If you bring me my glasses and my false teeth, I can do it again."

Bodily expressions are usually spontaneous. Here is what happens when an expression is postponed:

A man approaches a passerby hugging a watermelon in his arms. "Could you tell me where the post office is?" he asks. The passerby asks - "could you please hold the watermelon for a moment?" The man does. "I have no idea",

says the passerby, shrugging and extending his arms to the sides.

3. A common denominator

Mockery and automatism look on the surface so far apart, that it seems unlikely that they can be linked. But in fact, they do have a common feature, a very obvious one, almost staring at our face: *detachment of empathy*. In both we stop identifying with the person's wishes, intentions and thoughts. We no longer view him as an intelligent planner of actions. In derision – because we no longer respect him; In automatic behavior because machines do not have intentions.

Empathy is highly valued, from the point of view of the receiving side. It involves understanding and compassion, and what is nowadays called “emotional intelligence”. Being its subject is desirable and pleasant. However, its main benefit is not for its subject, but for its owner – it enables him or her to predict the behavior of their fellow human beings. Identifying with another person's wishes and intentions is the king's road to understanding where he or she are heading. Since this has obvious survival advantage, it is no wonder that Evolution imprinted it in our genes. About thirty years ago Italian researchers discovered the existence of what they called “mirror neurons” (Rizolatti – Caighero 2004). These are neurons that are activated when we observe actions in other people. They do not trigger an actual action, but enable us to understand the actions of others.

Empathy means sharing the will and intentions of others. In mockery it is no longer there: derision is the precise antipode of empathy. It means denying the object his or her will, intentions, or intelligent planning. We no longer identify with their will, labeling it as stupid and worthless.

The situation is very much the same in observing mechanical behavior. A machine does not have will or intentions. Thus, when a person behaves

like a machine our identification with him or her ceases. The action is perceived as hollow of motives. There is no point in identifying with the intentions of a person slipping over a banana peel: his actions are not guided by his intentions.

This is at the base of the difference between tragedies and comedies. In tragedies, we identify with the protagonist, and undergo a psychological process similar to his, while in comedies we are dissociated from the characters. We laugh at them, not with them.

4. Stereotypes

Two swallows are not enough evidence that all birds are swallows. Two examples are not enough to form a theory. Are there any other examples of humor based on detachment of empathy?

The answer is “yes”, and we shall give two such examples – two wide families of jokes, based on this mechanism. The first is ethnic jokes, or more generally – jokes based on stereotypes. Ethnic jokes baffle most theories of humor, certainly those of incongruity. There are no two incongruous perceptions of the same situation, but quite the opposite, the protagonist acts according to the stereotype.

The only theory that tackles this problem successfully is that of Bergson. He claims that stereotypical behavior is funny because the protagonist's actions are not governed by his will. Instead, he acts according to his expected characteristics. He is a marionette of the stereotype. Thus – it is not scorn that makes ethnical jokes funny, as is sometimes suggested, but detachment of will.

Character comedies, those based on idiosyncrasies of their protagonists, use the same mechanism. When a protagonist of a sit-com is supposed to be, say, cowardly, and he or she acts in accord with this image, we laugh. When we look at a person through a label, it is not the person

who acts, but the label. We no longer identify with the person, and do not try to understand his or her motives. We do not view their actions as outcome of the exertion of will or drives, but as the result of an image that exists in our own minds.

5. Detachment of intentions

Three families of jokes are already sturdy evidence. However, there is yet another bulk of evidence, larger than all three put together. There is a fourth, very wide, family of jokes, based on the same mechanism. These are jokes of detachment of intentions. An action turns out to be void of its original intention or of any intention at all. A throws a custard pie at B, B bends over and the pie hits C. What makes this funny is the split between intention and outcome. To convince the reader of the ubiquity of these jokes, I will give many examples.

An old woman returns to her room and finds her husband with another woman from their golden age home, her hand on his pants. "What does she have that I don't?" she is enraged. "Parkinson", he answers.

What is funny here? “Surprise”, “switching to another mode of thought” – these are there, but they are not essential to the joke. The core of the joke is in that an action that is assumed to be loaded with meaning, turns out to be involuntary contortions. The action is detached from intention.

If it weren't for the fact that the TV set and the refrigerator are so far apart, some of us wouldn't get any exercise at all.

The intention of the "sportsman" is a bit different. The following children's joke is endearing in its silliness, but it is also a distilled example of detachment of intention:

A scuba diver with the best diving equipment tries to dive and fails. Suddenly he sees a man with no equipment sinking effortlessly. "How do you dive so well?" he asks him. "I am not diving", comes the reply, "I am drowning".

6. The many possible meanings of actions

Language tells us that an intention is the meaning of a deed. To "intend" to do something is to "mean" to do it. We ask people for the "meaning" of their actions – what are their purpose, aim, or motive. All these are "meanings", in the sense that they are deep interpretations of an overt action. Witnessing an action, we automatically link it in our minds to its past, namely the drives, intentions, motives and causes leading to it, and to its future - its aims and possible outcomes.

All these types of meanings are detached in jokes. For example, the "Parkinson" joke detaches the sexual drive. Here is another of this type, sex as work:

"Now in, now out. Now in, now out" - the farmer's daughter instructs the inexperienced farm boy. "Make up your mind", he tells her. "I must feed the cows."

A well-known one:

First old man: Do you remember how we used to chase girls?

Second old man: Yes. But I forget why.

Note that the second man does not say "I no longer want to chase girls" – this would be denying the drive, and denying a meaning does not generate a joke. Detachment is not negation, but rather shift of weight from the meaning to its carrier. The man still relates to the act of chasing, but not to its meaning.

Coincidences are funny because there seems to be a causal link between the concurring events, and then we realize there isn't. Thus, it is detachment of causality. Causes are the "intentions" of the physical world: just as intentions explain the actions of living creatures, causes are the explanations we give to events in the physical world. Here is a detachment of causality, which plays in favor of the detacher:

An Irishman is rushing for an important meeting, and cannot find a parking place. After an hour of searching, he turns in his despair to God: "God, if you help me just this time, I will go to church every Sunday, and say Hail Mary every evening for a year." He barely finishes the sentence, when a parking place appears before his eyes. "Forget it", he tells God, "I found a spot".

Another meaning of actions is their moral judgement.

A couple is preparing to go on their annual vacation. –You know what? Says the woman. – This time you check whether the alarm is on, the main faucet is closed, the

electrical gadgets are unplugged, and that all doors are locked, and I will sit in the car and honk the horn.

Honking the horn signifies many things – childishness, laziness, inconsideration. The woman detaches all these meanings, and relates to the honking as part of a fair distribution of tasks. It is possible to analyze this joke as a switch of meanings, or two ways to interpret the same situation – judgmentally and in a matter-of-fact way. But this would miss the entire point of the joke, which is that the honking is hollowed of its intent.

Here is another detachment of judgment – an inscription on a T-shirt of the American beer association:

Finish your beer. There are sober kids in Africa.

The analogy to the hungry kids in India is broken mainly because sobriety is supposed to be desirable, and the inscription detaches the judgment against drunkenness.

Three construction workers, an American, an Arab and a Pole sit for lunch on the scaffoldings of a high rise. Before opening their lunch boxes, the American says – if I have a hamburger again, I am going to jump down. The Arab says – if I have Pita bread with Hummus again, I am going to jump. The Pole says – if I have a sausage with sour cabbage again, I will jump. The American opens his box, finds a hamburger, and jumps. The Arab opens his box, finds pita bread with hummus, and jumps. The Pole opens his box, finds sausage with cabbage, and jumps. In their funeral the American widow says – if only I had known, I would have prepared anything he wanted for his lunch. The Arab widow is also

remorseful. The Polish widow says – but he prepared his lunch by himself.

There is double detachment here – of knowledge (how come the Pole did not know what was in his lunch box?), but also of intention, as if the lunch was prepared by aliens.

7. The meeting of two meanings, or the detachment of one

“Once you have found her, never let her go”, say wise lines from the musical “South Pacific”. If you find a handle on a problem, a plank to hold on to in choppy sea, don’t let go. Can we pursue this line, of “detachment”? In particular, having identified it in four types of humor, can we extend it to the very general type pointed out by the incongruity theory? Is there a common denominator that includes also it?

The answer is obvious. The fact that so many instances of humor are based on detachment alone, not switching between meanings, suggests that this is the essential ingredient. Switching between meanings, or clash of meanings, is only one route to detachment of meaning. So, in incongruity, it is the detachment of meaning that is funny.

In incongruity, often meaning is not detached, but quite the opposite – a new, unexpected, meaning is attached.

Knock-knock
Who's there?
Hutch.
Hutch who?
Bless you.

Doesn’t this refute the “detachment” thesis? Quite the contrary, it is a case in point. When “Hutch who” gains the meaning of a sneeze, we realize

that before it was detached from this meaning. This is detachment backward in time. In jokes of switching between meanings, the two things occur together – one meaning is detached, and the new one is loaded. But, as we have seen, a newly loaded meaning is a backward-in-time detached meaning.

8. Victory of the symbol

We have been using freely the term “detachment of meaning”, without committing ourselves to a specific meaning of it. What does it mean, precisely? Here is a joke in which the play between symbol and meaning is obvious.

A woman praises her friend's baby for its beauty. "Wait till you see the pictures!" responds the mother.

The joke is based on a shift of weight, from meaning to symbol. A picture is a carrier of meaning – a “symbol” for short. It points at the object. Here the symbol is preferred to the meaning, the object. This is the main characteristic of detachment. The meaning is not negated – negation still addresses the meaning. However, the symbol gains priority. For example, in puns words are put before what they signify. In other jokes actions remain while their meaning disappears; or the overt side of a metaphor is put before its meaning. A struggle occurs between symbol and meaning, from which the symbol comes out victorious.

The Greek philosopher Diogenes (323-412 BC) had only three possessions: a waist cloth, a bowl and a jar. When one day he saw someone drinking from the stream by cupping his hands, he broke the jar. In jokes, the symbol behaves in a similar way. Its most precious property is its meaning. However, it happily forsakes it, to become liberated of worldly

possessions. Relieving itself of the burden of the meaning, it feels free and jubilant.

An e-mail message from a Jewish mother to her son: "Start worrying. Details to follow".

Worrying is a symbol, in the sense that it points at something – the thing to worry about. For the Jewish mom what her son worries about is not important – the worry itself is important.

Sometimes the victory of the symbol is subtle.

An engineer is stranded on a desert island, and lives a miserable Robinson Crusoe life. After a few months, he discovers that on the other side of the island there is a beautiful blonde, stranded as well. He realizes that she has managed to provide herself with the comforts of civilization – a cabin with running water, kitchen, and furniture. She invites him for a lavish dinner, wine included. After dinner she says – you have been here so long, you must feel lonely. Is there anything else I can do for you? His eyes light up – "Do you have e-mail?"

What is funny here? The absurdity of the request? Not quite. The main point is that e-mail is a means for human interaction, and as such it is a carrier of meaning, pointing at the addressee of the mail. The blonde offers the interaction herself, the engineer prefers the symbol pointing at it.

The victory of the symbol sheds new light on what Harvey Mindess (Mindess, 1971) called "the liberties of humor". The joy of humor is the glee of victory. The symbol, ordinarily a slave of the meaning, is suddenly free of its shackles.

9. Jokes of self-reference

I always thought I was indecisive. But now I am not so sure.

How come everybody complains all the time, and only I don't? A man comes home, squats on the couch, turns on the TV, and calls: "Woman, beer! It is soon coming". His wife brings him beer, he finishes it and then calls: "Woman, beer! For it is coming." After the third time the woman explodes: "You brute. All you know is to watch TV, drink and growl". "Ah, it has come", says the husband.

An arrow shot into the world rebounds at the archer is almost invariably funny, a sure way to form a joke. The reason? – Precisely victory of the symbol. The pointer points at itself. The symbol, pointing at something, replaces the meaning as the center of attention. From being the servant of the meaning, it goes to become master.

There are two secrets to success in life. One is not telling all you know.

10. Concluding remarks

An eternal debate among humor researchers is whether humor is one thing, or a multitude of loosely related phenomena. Does it have a succinct definition, or does it behave the way Wittgenstein famously describes the concept of "game", namely a notion that evolved rather amorphously? There is strong evidence for the first possibility, from the sensors of humor in our brains, which identify humor with little hesitation. The ease and sharpness by which we identify laughter-arousing texts or actions or situations indicates that the contours of humor are well defined. The assumption behind the present paper is that this is the case. That there is one mechanism common to all manifestations of humor. Rather than being

too ambitious, I chose only a few types of humor – some of which baffling for the mainstream theories of humor – and tried to assemble them under one conceptual roof, one thought mechanism that underlies them all. The fact that this mechanism links so distant types of humor as derision, mechanicality, stereotypes, coincidences, self-reference and flattened metaphors, suggests that it may be pertinent also to other parts of humor. Better understanding of it may shed light on some aspects of humor in general.

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