

SSTH, GTVH, OSTH—The “Two Scripts” Theory of Verbal Humor

Ron Aharoni¹

Abstract: Thirty odd years ago an upheaval occurred in humor research, a switch towards the use of linguistic terminology, maintaining that a joke is generated by one linguistic construct fitting two incompatible scripts. I attempt to show that most jokes need coercion to fit this formula. This coercion results in missing valid patterns, mechanisms that do generate humor.

Keywords: meaning, detachment, scripts, incongruity

1. A Revolution—SSTH

In the mid-1980s humor research saw a dramatic turn of events. Victor Raskin published a book, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Raskin 1985), expounding a theory which he declared to encompass all jokes ever invented. The formula is simple: a joke is characterized by the same text fitting two incompatible “scripts,” a term borrowed from linguistics. The canonical example is:

(J1) “Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in a bronchial whisper. “No,” the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. “Come right in.”

The two scripts are “patient” versus “lover” (though for some reason Raskin speaks of Doctor-Lover). With mock-humility, Raskin calls it “the most hated joke in humor research.” It indeed seems to fit the mold of “two scripts,” but the promise of “fitting all jokes” needs examining. In fact, it is not even clear that the formula goes to the bottom of (J1): as we shall later see, even in this flagship the theory misses something important.

¹ Professor Emeritus, Department of Mathematics, Technion, Israel Institute of Technology;
raharoni@gmail.com

Raskin gave the new theory an acronym—SSTH (“script based semantic theory of humor.”) More acronyms were to follow. Acronyms are known also in the natural sciences, but not in such abundance, and they are rarely coined by the inventors of the theory themselves. The message is “this is so basic, and its mention will recur so often, that we should exert economy when referring to it.” It also emanates “scientific” air, an important point for Raskin, who seems to envy the rigor of the natural sciences:

This author’s main discipline, linguistics, is the most theoretically advanced discipline among the humanities and social sciences, and it can probably beat quite a few natural sciences on this count. (Raskin 2008, 5)

I will later give more examples showing how eager is the humor research community for the stamp of “science,” which explains why it so promptly fell in line. Raskin quickly became the first editor of “Humor,” the (then) only journal dedicated to the subject. From this position of power, it was easy to dismiss opposition:

We do not intend this paper to kill off all the Hollywood-strength conspiracy theories, mostly of European vintage, of how a bunch of us have been trying to dominate humor research and claim the firstborns from everybody else. We do apologize for trying to remove the fun stuff from humor research: we realize we are acting as killjoys and killsports; instead of joining the fun and games of discovering the subverting humanity and inexhaustible complexity of humor, we boringly persist in discovering the truth about how humor works. (Raskin, Hempelmann and Taylor 2009, 285)

This style would be probably less necessary if the theory carried more substance. Here is another such paragraph, again formulated with mock-humility:

Linguistics made a grossly overrated entry into humor research (in this author’s work) in the late 1970s–early 1980s and has since developed into a major contributor. (Raskin 2008, 4)

It seems that linguists may nevertheless have something to learn from the sciences.

2. Does the Formula Add Anything New?

The “two scripts” theory obviously belongs to the “incongruity” family, of which there are many different formulations—Koestler’s “bisociation” (Koestler 1964), Asimov’s “change of point of view” (Asimov 1971), Kant’s “from high to low,” Schopenhauer’s “inappropriate metaphors” (Schopenhauer 1987), Hazlitt’s “disconnection of ideas” (Hazlitt 1987)—a meeting (in not necessarily a well-defined sense) of two incompatible modes of thought. This was at first vehemently denied by Raskin and his followers, who presented their theory not only as all-engulfing, but also as innovative (see, e.g., Attardo and Raskin 1991), in the section “The SSTH as an incongruity theory?” and also Raskin 1985). To avoid the term “incongruity,” they speak of “script opposition,” which is supposed to be totally different. Later, it seems that they gave in to the obvious (Attardo 1997, 2001).

However, the “script” terminology adds nothing new. It replaces “a way of understanding,” or simply “meaning.” The time-old claim that jokes are based on a play between meanings, in particular a switch between different and incompatible meanings, is just given a new, scientific-sounding attire. The only innovation is the restriction to linguistics, as if the only factor in jokes is the connection between words and reality. I will comment on this view below, in the section “The joke is a linguistic entity.”

As is well-known, the “incongruity” formulation is deficient. Anybody who tries his or her hand in defining “humor,” or “joke,” realizes very quickly that not all jokes, definitely not all forms of humor, fit the mold of “switch between meanings.” Derision, for example, does not involve switch of meanings. Neither does exaggeration, which is at the base of many jokes. A thorough criticism of the incongruity formula, as well as an interesting substitute theory, is offered by Latta (1999). Unfortunately, Latta did not pursue this direction, and as far as I can detect has left the field.

Let me offer just two examples that put the “incongruity” formula to the test. More jokes that do not fit it are to come:

(J2) A bank manager offers an old lady a few possibilities—here is a two-year savings plan, here a three-year plan. “Sir,” she says, “these days I don’t even buy green bananas.”

Two scripts? Buying green bananas versus buying yellow bananas? Every attempt to put this joke into this mold will be badly coerced. So, perhaps just plain incongruity? It is not clear what two conceptual structures are incongruous here. The true mechanism is detachment of planning and voiding from intentions. I will further address this below, in the section “Man Plans, God laughs.”

(J3) Two customers order tea at a restaurant. One of them admonishes—“but see to it that the cup is clean.” The waiter returns with two cups, “Now, who wanted the clean cup?”

Only coercion can find here “two scripts.” A situation where clean cups are assumed, vs. the opposite? The mere existence of two opposing possibilities does not form a joke. “Opposing scripts” of this type can be found in any verbal transaction, every statement can be juxtaposed with its negation. This joke, and the general family it belongs to will be discussed in the section “The Eye of the Beholder.”

In fact, the formula fits very few jokes. We shall see that even the patient-lover flag-joke has a more interesting mechanism and more apt an explanation than “two scripts.”

3. GVTH

A few years later, Salvatore Attardo, a student of Raskin, developed another system of ideas, and Raskin joined in (Attardo and Raskin 1991). It, too, came with an acronym—GTVH, “General theory of verbal humor.” It was presented as an organic continuation of the SSTH, with hardly any justification. The aim was to widen the scope, in order to avoid the obvious mismatch of the SSTH to most jokes. Six elements were added, called “Knowledge Resources” (KR’s, of course), which should complement the opposition of scripts. For example, as an attempt to explain derogatory humor, there is a KR called “target,” namely an appointed butt of a deriding joke. In what sense is this a knowledge resource, or how does it connect to the “two scripts” formula is not clear. There are logical mechanisms (LM’s), like faulty logic, and more: situation, narrative strategy (“how to

tell a joke”), language (understanding the meaning of the wording of the joke). No order or coherence can be found here. The SSTH is off mark in most instances of humor, but being narrow it has coherence, which is lost here. It is now almost impossible to attack—it is so hazy and multi-faceted.²

4. OSTH

Then came the OSTH, the “Ontological Semantic Theory of Humor.” The “ontological” means that at long last they relate to meanings in reality. It did not last long, wherefore I will not describe it, let me just quote a typical boasting:

The last theory is a work in (rapid) progress, and the last section of the paper will be devoted to a number of recent developments in blending the Ontological Semantic Technology (OST) our team is developing for Natural Language Processing applications with the improved and revised humor theory. (Raskin, Hempelman, Taylor 2009, 21)

The claim for being scientific is backed by declarations that “there are no exceptions (counterexamples) to the theory/theories.” Criticism of the form of counterexamples is met by declarations that “we are the strictest, in fact the only authorized, critics of our theories”:

As all influential theories, the SSTH/GTVH has been revered, attacked, coat-tailed, postured about, and taken advantage of in a variety of ways, most of which have ignored entirely what it is about and how it works. In fact, it has only been criticized seriously and much more effectively from within (see our Conclusion below for helpful suggestions on how the theory should be criticized effectively). (Raskin, Hempelmann and Taylor 2009, 289)

In mathematics this is called “proof by intimidation.” Raskin and Attardo claim they know what a proper theory is (see, e.g., Attardo and Raskin 2017), with the implicit message that their theories are the only ones in humor research that stand up to the standards. More often than not, the

² See Ritchie 2004, chapter 6, for more detailed criticism.

adherents of the “two scripts” theory don’t even bother to coerce. They have little need in that—simpler is to declare that the theory fits every joke, and then not bother going in depth into examples. One of the characteristics of their papers is scarcity of thoroughly annotated jokes.

5. Non-essentialism

A major drawback in the linguistic approach is that it gives up, even before the starting line, on connecting verbal humor with other types of humor. This is called “non-essentialism,” fragmentation of the theory. For a theory that has pretensions of being “scientific” this is a drawback. In physics it would compare to applying quantum theory to one type of materials, a different theory to another. Attardo and Raskin claim that the GTVH has implications on non-verbal humor, but it is hard to find any relevance of it to derision, for example, or to comic situations such as slipping on a banana peel. As we shall see below, “essentialism” is viewed by part of the community, the proponents of “Cognitive Linguistics” (Brône et al. 2015) as a felony—a choice that is bound to lead to over-simplification. Imagine a physicist blamed for over-simplification, for claiming that quantum theory applies to all natural phenomena.

6. “A Joke Is a Linguistic Entity”

This is a quotation from a report in a rejection letter of one of my articles. For me, it was an illumination. It made me realize the narrow straits to which humor research has been pushed. An entire community was made to accept the premise that the proper tool for understanding jokes is linguistics. This does not make more sense than claiming that a short story is a linguistic entity, and that truly scientific understanding of it demands linguistic terminology. Just imagine how would literary research look like if the only journals in the field had a linguistic orientation. Just like in a short story, some dynamics takes place in a joke in the realm of thoughts and emotions, involving will, intentions, wishes, and thoughts.

The basic mechanism of jokes is indeed based on the relationship between meanings and their carriers. But not only words have meanings. Events, situations and actions have, too. We construe the events and actions around us, and assign to them meanings.

True, jokes are very different from stories, but not in one being a linguistic entity and the other not. The difference is in the mental process, in fact not merely difference but antipodality. The core of the literary experience is empathy towards the protagonists and identification with

their wishes and struggles. In jokes it is the opposite: empathy is detached. As pointed out by Bergson (in papers that would be instantaneously rejected in the “linguistic” journals of humor research [1911]), humor is characterized by detachment from the intentions of the observed person. The Bergsonian “automatic behavior” does not arouse empathy since it is mechanical, and machines do not arouse empathy. In humor, aims and intentions of the protagonists are de-valued and ridiculed. The punch line causes the abandoning of involvement, precisely the opposite of what literature strives to attain.

The fact is that humor, even verbal humor, has nothing to do with “linguistic mechanisms,” just as literature does not. Jokes are about life. Their essence is in the forces that they describe, and their vicissitudes. Only occasionally (puns) do words occupy center stage.

7. The Eye of the Beholder

In most jokes, using the “two scripts” formula requires major coercion. Worse than that—it diverts from discerning valid thought patterns that form jokes. In the rest of the article, I will examine analyses of jokes, given by the “two scripts” school, and show what humoristic mechanisms they miss. In the last section I will try to find a common denominator to all these mechanisms, thus offering a coarse framework for a theory of humor.

The first mechanism I want to point out is “the eye of the beholder”-shift from observed to observer. Raskin is frugal in analyses. Most examples are just earmarked by some “opposition of scripts” tag. Usually, in the form of “A vs. non-A.” So, when a detailed analysis appears, it is an opportunity for a closer look. The following joke is analyzed in Raskin and Attardo (2017, 59):

(J4) A woman is told by her doctor that she has only half a year to live. The doctor advises her to marry an economist and to move to South Dakota. The woman asks, “Will this cure my illness?” “No,” says the doctor, “but the half year will seem pretty long.”

The authors’ analysis is lengthy, and the reader is prompted to read it in the origin. Their main claim is that there is a switch of aims, between “cure” and “lengthening the subjective experience.” This is “violation of expectations, and hence incongruous.” The other main idea in the analysis is

that there is implicit inference needed, that living in South Dakota and being married to an economist are both boring. The concluding paragraph of the analysis summarizes its basic ideas:

Ultimately, the repeated application of the principle of commutation will reveal that if the doctor's responses did not violate the expectation built in in the script that doctors should try to heal diseases, hence creating an opposition between good and bad doctor (a doctor that, rather than healing the patient, insults economists and South Dakota is not a good doctor), and if this incongruity were not partially resolved by the logical mechanism of analogical reasoning (if you cannot live longer, at least have the impression of your life being longer), there would be no joke. If the (mild) aggression towards economists and South Dakota were not present, the incongruity would not appear as funny. Likewise, if the information inferred were presented before the punch line the joke would also misfire. So, in conclusion, these characteristics of the text are what makes the text funny. (Raskin and Attardo 2017, 60)

So, the main elements are re-interpretation of the doctor's words, implicitness, and implicit aggression. The “implicit aggression” is the “KR” of “TA” (“targeting,” the target being the victim of aggression). Adding it as a “KR” is empty of information. It is just to say—sometimes the “two scripts” formula doesn’t fit, and we need another tool.

Implicitness, of course, is one of the best-known characteristics of jokes (and of poems). It often has a humorous tinge. “Jokes should never be explained.” Yet, it is not directly related to “change of interpretation,” or “two scripts,” apart from the fact that the less obvious the change of interpretation is, the funnier it is.

But the main problem with the Raskin-Attardo analysis is that it misses a pattern. (J4) belongs to a large family, in which a switch occurs from the external world to its perception. Here is a famous Mark Twain quote, with the same mechanism—what really matters happens in your mind:

(J5) When I was a boy of fourteen, my dad was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.

A victory of perception over the object itself. Here is another joke of that type:

(J6) A customer in a café asks for coffee without cream. The waitress returns from the kitchen and says “Sorry, we do not have cream today. You will have to do with coffee without milk.”

It is intriguing to imagine a “two scripts” explanation. “Drinking without something because you don’t want it” vs. “drinking without something because you don’t have it”? As usual, unilluminating, flat, and diverging from the mold of switching between scripts. Something deeper is happening here, which is that the pointer (the request, and wish, of the customer) is given priority over the part of reality pointed at (in which it does not really matter without what the coffee is served). The waitress relates to what goes on in the customer’s mind, not to external reality. Note that she does not bring the coffee, instead she returns to discuss the request. Freud called this pattern “fantasy over reality.” An example he gives is:

(J7) The Rabbi of Kutsk raises his head from the Holy Book, pulls at his hair and says—“the worst has come to pass. The great Rabbi of Gori has died.” His students tear their clothes and settle to mourn the Rabbi of Gori. A week later a visitor from Gori appears and informs that the Rabbi of Gori is as hail and hearty as ever. A follower of another Rabbinical court teases one of Rabbi of Kutsk’s students—“what a fool he has made of himself.” “Yes,” says the student, “but you must admit that the leap of vision from Kutsk to Gori was impressive.”

What happens in your head is more important than the actual events.

Let us go back to (J3)—“who wanted the clean cup?” Here the waiter relates to the admonition of the customer, rather than to the self-evident assumption on reality, that glasses should be clean. A victory of the pointer over the object pointed at.

8. Detachment of Intentions—Man Plans, God Laughs

(J8) On Monday, on his way to the Gallows, a prisoner mutters—“A nice start for my week.”

The joke, used by Freud in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (Freud 2014) is analyzed by Raskin as follows: “The man was not going to live the entire week vs. The man was going to live the entire week.”

Of course, the “A vs. not A” formula does not contain any information—after all, everything is “A vs. not A.” “I am wearing a yellow shirt” when in reality I wear a blue shirt, is “yellow vs. non-yellow” and is not (very) funny. Something delicate is going on in (J4), involving basic mental processes—the will to live, and the constant planning going on in our minds, assessing the opportunities offered by the world. If it were a literary piece, we would empathize with the convict. The convict’s sentence detaches this empathy. Our identification with the intentions and planning is severed.

Let us go back to (J2) (“green bananas”), and try to analyze it in this light. Two mechanisms in this joke are exaggeration and representing a general principle by a concrete example (metonymies all have a humorous tinge). But a third mechanism is dominant—detachment of all planning. Voiding from intentions. The same mechanism as in (J8). Elaboration on the funniness of voiding from intentions and planning can be found in (Aharoni 2018).

As Bergson pointed out, detachment of intention is what makes slipping on a banana peel funny. Here is this mechanism in a children’s joke, endearing with its silliness:

(J9) A scuba diver, with the best equipment, tries to dive and fails. Suddenly he sees next to him a man with no equipment, going down. “How do you manage to dive?” he asks. “I am not diving, I am drowning,” comes the answer.

(J10) A king orders all chefs in his country to his palace, to prepare him chicken the way his mother used to prepare. They try, one after one, and all fail (of course, having to depart from their heads). Until one cook burns his chicken by

mistake. He awaits the beheading, but the king says—“Ah, this is my mother’s recipe.”

Intentions are meanings of actions. They are the interpretation we assign them. Understanding the intentions of our fellow men are a matter of life and death for us, and hence meaning of actions is more important than that of words. And detachment of intentions is detachment of meaning.

Person A throws a custard pie at B, B bends over and the pie hits C—this classical comical situation is based on detachment of outcome from intention. “Mench tracht un Gott lacht,” goes the Yiddish saying—man plans and God laughs. Why, of all possible reactions, should she laugh when things do not go as planned? It is not she who laughs. It is we who laugh—an outcome detached from intention is always funny.

9. Loading with Meanings

(J11) Lady to her new chauffeur: “What is your name?”—“Thomas, ma’am.”
“No, I meant last name, that’s how I call my drivers.” —“Darling, ma’am.” —
“OK, drive on, Thomas.”

Raskin’s analysis is as follows:

The lady calls the driver by his family name vs. The lady calls the driver “darling” [A lover calls her lover “darling vs. A lover calls her lover by his family name.]

Again, this analysis is unilluminating, and in this case also unclear, and not generalizable. One could get away with “darling with a meaning, and Darling as a name not intended to mean anything.” This would be better, but still, it would miss a pattern. The joke belongs to a wide family, whose common denominator may shed light on the nature of humor in general. Before naming this family, here is another member:

(J12) Three men, called Stupid, Nobody and Nothing, go on a fishing trip. Suddenly Nobody falls into the water, and Nothing asks Stupid to phone the police. Stupid calls: "Hello, I am Stupid. I am calling for Nothing. Nobody fell into the water."

Like in the "Darling" joke, at first hearing, the names sound silly and inane. We assume that their conventional meaning will not be used. But then the meaning emerges and becomes important. This is "loading with meaning," a realization that something has a significant, usually spicy, meaning. Naturally, the loading with meaning involves a switch of interpretation, as exemplified by the last two jokes. But not any switch is funny. It is the loading with new interesting meaning that generates the funniness. Here is another analysis by Raskin:

(J13) An English bishop received a note from the vicar of a village in his diocese: "Milord, I regret to inform you of my wife's death. Can you possibly send me a substitute for the weekend?"

Raskin's analysis is terse: "sexual" vs. "non-sexual." Yet the point here is, of course, not the switch between any two meanings, but the passage from an innocent meaning to a sexually loaded (and inappropriate, considering the circumstances) one. Loading words, and importantly—also situations and actions, by a new, more interesting meaning, is a basic strain of humor. In fact, even the patient-lover joke is like that. It is not just "two scripts." It is important what are the scripts. Here is another example of loading with intention.

(J14) --Whe-whe-whe-re –i-i-i-is the s-s-s-chool fo-fo-fo-for stammerers?—
You don't need it. You stammer very well.

This is a case which the "two scripts" theory does fit well (it happens, occasionally). There are two scripts: wanting to get rid of stammering and wanting to stammer. But it is important that the switch loads the stammering with meaning—intention. It changes stature, from involuntary to intent.

(J15) —What is ten lawyers at the bottom of the sea?—A good start.

The question sounds like a logical riddle. The answer loads it with a new meaning—a wish. And, of course, (J1) (patient-lover). An innocent looking situation is suddenly loaded with a more interesting meaning. In fact, an interesting intention.

10. Detachment of Drive

(J16) An old customer at a brothel insists on a certain girl. “What does she have that the others don’t?” they ask him. “Patience.”

Raskin’s analysis—“sex vs. impotence.” That’s all...as if a mere contrast can form a joke. What happens here is that the sex act is emptied of “meaning,” in this case its drive. From another angle, it is passing from the act to the way one relates to it—akin to “the eye of the beholder” jokes.

Here are some more examples belonging to this family:

(J17) 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."

The act is detached from its meaning, passion. It loses spontaneity, and becomes mechanical—befitting the Bergsonian theory, which as we already noted contains a lot of wisdom. Any “two scripts” interpretation of this joke will be coerced: “doing it with passion” vs. “doing it without passion”? Yes, but this is no more illuminating than "doing it on Wednesday" and "doing it on Thursday.” The linguistic interpretation misses the point, which is that actions have meanings—intentions, drives, responsibility, purpose.

(J18) First old man: “Do you remember how we used to chase girls?”

Second old man: “Yes. But I don’t remember why.”

The act remains, as a pointer at some meaning—passion. But the meaning disappears.

11. Stereotypes

Incongruity theories have a hard time explaining jokes based on stereotypes. There is no clash of two conceptual frameworks in a miserly behavior of a Scotsman, quite the opposite—this is expected from him. Bergson's theory is doing a better job here: the Scott behaves mechanically, he is a puppet of his trait, the stinginess. This fits Bergson's mechanical behavior where spontaneous one is expected.

Raskin's solution—the stereotype becomes a "script." What is the role of this script, and what is the competing script, is not clear, and actually, is not really stated. To find out, I had to turn to somebody explaining it—Christie Davies, an expert on stereotypes-based humor:

It was Raskin's account of the fictional, conventional, and mythical scripts used in jokes that freed us from the earlier tendentious and misleading analyses of jokes in terms of "stereotypes." (Davies 2004, 373)

For the uninitiated—"tendentious" jokes are sex- or aggression- oriented, as Freud explains (2014). Here the tendentiousness would be in venting aggression (derision) on the Scotts. Raskin dismisses this interpretation (in this case justly so. As I argued above, Bergson is much closer to the truth, at least he integrates it into a general theory), but replaces it by a non-coherent explanation—a "script," telling us that Scotts are stingy. There is now a "normal" script and the stinginess script.

This does not make sense. There are no "two incompatible scripts applied to the same situation," and it does not clarify in any way what is so special in stereotypes. Another testimony to the emptiness of the "two scripts" formula.

12. Exaggeration

Stereotype-type jokes are often accompanied by exaggerations. Here is a classic (not from Raskin's book):

(J19) A Scotsman asks the pharmacist: "My toothbrush is broken. Can you fix it?" "No," says the pharmacist. "I am afraid you will have to buy a new one." "I don't know," says the Scotsman. "I will have to consult my partners."

Two scripts? “Normal perception of the behavior of toothbrushes vs. stingy perception”? Such analysis doesn’t connect with anything, and could be applied to any text. Or, can you find “two scripts” in the following?

(J20) Harry is so slim, he has just one stripe in his pajamas.

(J21) Joe is so miserly, that when the radio broadcasts a song he heard before, he turns it off.

Raskin’s favorite type of jokes within the exaggeration genre impossible genital size, or supernatural virility, of Georgians—a stereotypical trait attributed to them in Russia. The jokes are crude, and there is no point in quoting them. Raskin’s analysis is again terse: it is opposition of possible vs. impossible. This is totally off, in all respects. “Possible” is not a script; these are not “scripts fitting the same situation”; not every impossibility is funny. And finally, this pattern can fit anything. “I rode the bus” is not funny, though it is opposite to “I did not ride the bus.” So, perhaps it is about digression from our normal perceptions? Not really. Riding the bus can also digress from expectations. Again, Bergson is doing here a better job. To follow his argument, look at

(J22) Your mama is so fat, she has her own zip code.

The trick is declaration: the special characteristic is stated, and only then illustrated by an exaggeration. The declaration can take the form of a stereotype—speaking of Scotts, we expect stinginess. Once this happens, the protagonist is a puppet of the characteristic. He or she are no longer a subject for empathy. More than that—when something is so exaggerated, we do not empathize because it is beyond our ordinary experience. This is precisely the way poems use exaggeration, the famous “hyperbole.” Poetry strives to say things indirectly, and the hyperbole seems to do the opposite. But in fact, it does precisely this: when something is exaggerated beyond our powers of perception, we experience it in a detached way.

13. A Common Denominator: Detachment of Meaning

What is common to all the above mechanisms? There is a simple answer: detachment of meaning from its carrier. This needs a separate (long) paper to explain. Let me just present the main points:

- A. Not only words have meaning. Situations and actions have it, too. We interpret every situation and every action (ascribing to it an intention), which gives them meaning.
- B. In all these mechanisms there is a shift of weight from the meaning to its carrier. The meaning is detached, the carrier loses the shackles binding it to the meaning, and is free to carry new meanings or stay unattached.

For elaboration, I refer the reader to previous publications (Aharoni 2018; 2014). Let me now observe this process in the above joke patterns.

The eye of the beholder. Take for example the economist-South Dakota joke. There is a shift of weight, from the object (the threat to the woman's life) to the way we (together with the woman) perceive it. This is detachment, in the sense that the perception no longer points at the world. It points at itself. The "long" half a year is not really long. The same happens in the Mark Twain saying: there, too, the "boomerang" means a rift between perception and reality. We learn that the original perception, when Twain was 14, was in fact in the distorted lenses of the beholder.

Loading with meaning. The "Darling" joke: A person's name is usually just a way to address him, or to think about him. We do not think about the name itself. In the joke the name assumes a new role. It moves to center stage, because it acquires a meaning. In the lawyers' joke, you think about the lawyers, what are they doing there, at the bottom of the sea. Then the attention switches to the speaker, and to his intentions—the "riddle" turns out to be a wish.

Detachment of drives. When we think about men chasing girls, we assume as self-evident that they are motivated by a sex drive. The jokes of the "patient prostitute" and "I don't remember why" empty the action from this meaning. The action (which in this case is the pointer, namely the carrier of meaning) is emptied of its meaning, and remains a free agent in the world.

Exaggeration. As mentioned above, exaggeration by itself is not necessarily comic. There needs to be some declaration—either by ethnicity, or by "what is the epitome of..." ("What is the epitome of self-deception? Pulling in your belly, when standing on the scale") or just by "Joe is so ... that ..." ("Joe is so slim, he has to take care not to slip into the slit of the elevator.") There is

detachment here, of the concept from reality—the exaggeration is so impossible, that it tears itself away from the concept.

However, the “two scripts” formula misses all these.

References

- Aharoni, R. (2014). *Man Detaches Meaning— Techniques Common to Jokes and Poetry*. Tel-Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad (in Hebrew).
- Aharoni, R. (2018). From meaning to carrier—a common denominator for three strains of humour. *The European Journal of Humour Research* 6(3): 13–29.
- Asimov, I. (1971). *Treasury of Humor*. New York: Houghton and Mifflin.
- Attardo, S. (1997). The semantic foundations of cognitive theories of humor. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 10(4): 395–420.
- Attardo, S. (2001). *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Attardo, S., and Raskin, V. (1991). Script theory revis(it)ed: joke similarity and joke representation model. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 4 (3–4): 293–347.
- Attardo, S., and Raskin, V. (2017). Linguistic and humor theory. In S. Attardo (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, 49–63. London: Routledge.
- Bergson, H. (1911 [1900]). *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. New York: Macmillan.
- Brône, G., Feyaerts, K., and Veale, T. (eds.) (2015). *Cognitive Linguistics and Humor Research*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Davies, C. (2004). Victor Raskin on jokes, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 17 (4): 373–380.
- Freud, S. (2014). *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. New York: Penguin Books. E-book.
- Hazlitt, W. (1987). Excerpt from “Lectures on the English Comic Writers.” In J. Morreall (ed) *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Koestler, A. (1964). *The Act of Creation*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Latta, R. L. (1999). *The Basic Humor Process*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Raskin V. (1985). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

Raskin V. (Ed.) (2008). *The Primer of Humor Research*. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.

Raskin, V., Hempelmann, C. F, and Taylor, J. M. (2009). How to Understand and Assess a Theory: The Evolution of the SSTH into the GTVH and Now into the OSTH. *Journal of Literary Theory* 3(2): 285–312.

Ritchie, G. D. (2004). *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*. New York: Routledge.

Schopenhauer, A. (1987). Excerpt from “The World as Will and Idea.” In J. Morreall (ed), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.