

Why's *That* Funny?? An extension to the Semantic Script Theory of Humor

Abstract

Philosophies of humor date back at least to antiquity, but linguistic study of humor has developed only recently, perhaps due to the “lighthearted” nature of the field. Since its emergence as a serious linguistic topic, linguists have worked to formalize a linguistic theory of humor. While many different methods for such a formalized theory have been proposed, Raskin (1985) has made the largest strides in this direction with his SEMANTIC SCRIPT THEORY OF HUMOR (SSTH). This theory provides the most complete linguistic theory of humor and a good framework from which to work to achieve a complete linguistic analysis of humor. One of the key elements of humor that Raskin does not address is the great variance in how funny jokes are. This paper examines the literature concerning humor studies, describes the basic premises underlying Raskin’s SSTH, and then provides an extension to the theory, the EXTENDED INCONGRUITY MODEL (EIM), consisting of culture-neutral ways to predict how well a joke will be received. Specifically, the paper draws on ideas from the cognitive linguistics SURPRISE DISAMBIGUATION (SD) model of humor and explores new criteria for determining not only what constitutes a joke, but what constitutes a strong joke, as opposed to a weak joke. Using these criteria in tandem with the existing theory extends the scope of Raskin’s theory and moves linguistics closer to a full accounting of the phenomenon of humor.¹

1 Introduction

Everyone has heard bad jokes. Many of us know a few that we keep on hand as examples of “silly” humor, should the situation ever call for it. Of course we also keep with us in our memories our favorite joke, the one that made us

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guffaw the first time we heard it, and still brings a smile to our lips when we recite it, even after the novelty of it has worn off. It's the type of joke that we keep on hand to share with new acquaintances to break the ice at a first meeting, or to cheer up a friend. It may be a personal anecdote or a completely absurd pun, but witticisms are an important part of our conversational arsenal. What separates the bad jokes from the good? What makes a joke "silly"? Why do the jokes you found funny as a child now seem to you to be silly or inane? Is it at all possible to categorize humorous remarks as "funny" or "silly" using semantic processes or some comparably consistent rubric? These questions are the focus of this paper. By using existing linguistic theories of humor and building upon them, this paper aims to further the scope of linguistic (particularly semantic) theories of humor.

This paper begins with a brief essay on the importance of humor studies in general and from a linguistic perspective. An overview of the history of humor studies follows, from the philosophical studies of antiquity to more full-fledged modern theories. Then we will delve into the linguistic theory of humor with a review of Incongruity Theory, mainly through Raskin's *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Raskin, 1985), detailing the basic concepts underlying his model and how they account for a wide variety of joke types. I will then describe the Extended Incongruity Model, my proposed supplement to Incongruity Theory that recognizes different types of humor and degrees of incongruity, and will provide an more complete list of criteria

to help determine how funny the joke is.² To do this I will need to discuss some theories of the cognitive processes that underlie the resolution of incongruities in humorous remarks. Through this analysis I hope to further the scope of Incongruity Theory in a way that will allow construction of a schematic model that predicts how funny a joke will seem to a given listener and for what reasons.

1.1 The importance of humor

Humor is a daily occurrence in all of our lives. We read witticisms in the newspaper, engage in playful banter with friends, and laugh at the seeming absurdity of situations we encounter. Jokes are an integral part of every human society. They are a basic means of social interaction. People use humor to cope with unfamiliar or unpleasant situations, to build social connections, and to improve their confidence and comfort in associating with others. (Nezlek, 2001) Humor enables us to better interact with people and to be comfortable with ourselves. Jokes enable us to “let our guard down”, to use a common cognitive framework (humor through incongruity) to bridge any social divides that might exist, and to form social bonds more easily.

Understanding humor, especially verbal humor (which is more of a social

² Because taste in humor varies widely from person to person, and perhaps even more widely from culture to culture, this attempt at categorizing jokes on a gradient is quite an inexact science without substantial survey data. Because of time constraints on this study, there was not an opportunity for such a broad survey. I hope to address this omission at a later date.

humor than is situational humor) is important as a way of understanding one of the primary ways that humans interact using verbal communication.

Despite the fundamental nature of humor in human language and culture, analyses of humor are frustratingly complex. Although humor appears in all cultures, it is far from uniform from culture to culture. Different subcultures also develop very unique and varying forms of humor that cannot be understood by those outside the subgroup. Humor usage and understanding also alters greatly depending on the age of the listener. Some jokes are referred to as “juvenile” or “base” or “simple.” As people grow, they begin to understand more complex humor, but their tastes in humor vary wildly; there are no objectively “funny” utterances precisely because humor is such a subjective and personal subject. At once difficult and elementary, humor is an area of study that will take a long time to explore, but the exploration merits the effort and investment of time. Such an exploration may well yield insights into human cognition and, along with studies in sociology and psychology, may reveal precisely why what we consider humor is so fundamental to society.

From a linguistic standpoint, studying humor offers an opportunity to further the understanding we have of semantic phenomena and the cognitive processes that interpret meaning. Incongruity Theory lends itself well to analyses of this sort because the very basis of Incongruity Theory lies in the cognitive resolution of an utterance that is ostensibly irresolvable. The

semantic mechanisms that lead to utterances being perceived as humorous may also be modeled to determine how well a given person will react to a joke. This will yield a semantic model that more fully accounts for the phenomenon of humor and will further improve our ability to understand this unique and pervasive phenomenon.

2 A history of humor studies

Although the study of humor through a modern linguistic lens has only recently been formalized into a semantic theory, the study of humor, from a philosophical standpoint at least, was a point of interest as long ago as ancient Greece when Plato mused about what sort of forces caused the effect known as humor. These early instances of pontificating on the nature of humor (a task also undertaken by Aristotle) deals mostly with how to categorize humor (and the laughter response) in terms of the Platonic ideals of Good, Bad, Beauty, Ugliness, Truth, and Deception. Plato saw laughter to be a mix of ugliness (envy towards the speaker of the joke) and pleasure (the act of laughing). Laughter, Plato thought, was an “overwhelming of the soul” and therefore something to be avoided. (Attardo, 1994)

Aristotle gave a more thorough treatment to humor, though some of the text of his *Poetics* (c. 330 BCE) has been lost. He did, however, foreshadow three of the main strands of modern humor analysis: superiority theory (in describing laughter brought about by something that attempts to be frightening but fails), incongruity theory (in referencing secondary and

unexpected meanings of words), and release of tension theory. Whereas Plato saw humor as a negative “overwhelming” of the soul, Aristotle’s psychological angle on humor was that it stimulates the soul. Aristotle’s ideas about humor were a major influence on readings of humor in Hellenistic society and inform humor studies to this day. (Attardo, 1994)

The first text that can be considered as a linguistic study of the phenomenon of humor is Cicero’s treatise on oration, *De Oratore* (c. 55 BCE). Cicero analyzed humor and divided it into two categories that might today be described as situational humor and cognitive linguistic humor (puns, wordplay, etc.). He considered the former to have the humor “contained in the thing,” while the humor of the latter is “contained in the words.” Cicero created a further humor taxonomy in describing several humor types comprising the two main groups. (Attardo, 1994)

There were very few advances in humor study in Western civilization from Cicero to the modern era, with the notable exception of Madius, who in 1550 brought to the fore one of the mechanisms of humor that Aristotle discussed briefly. Whereas Aristotle wrote of humor coming from a secondary meaning or unexpected ending, Madius made this claim even more explicit, writing that surprise is a prerequisite to humor. Building on Plato’s “ugliness” theory of humor, Madius writes, “also those things that are ugly but familiar to us, do not make us laugh.” (Attardo, 1994) The idea that an

element of surprise aids humor is one that has not received the attention that it is due even to this day.

1.1 Humor studies in the modern era

The modern era heralded the end of holistic studies of humor in favor of studies that concentrated on specific academic aspects falling within one of the defined academic disciplines. Although Emmanuel Kant's discipline was philosophy, he provided one of the first modern theoretical approaches to what would become Incongruity Theory in his 1790 treatise, *Critique of Judgment*. What he added to the theory first espoused by Aristotle cannot be overestimated; it is one the first discussions of the process, not just the preconditions, that results in humor. He ushered in the beginnings of the broad cognitive theory of incongruity-resolution in his description of humor:

Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd [or contradictory] [...] Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.
(Kant and Pluhar, 1987)

This idea of a strained expectation (incongruity) into nothing (resolution) provided a cognitive—not just textual—mechanism to the debate, one that would later be taken up by cognitive linguists.

1.2 Release of Tension Theory

Popularized by Sigmund Freud (Freud, 1960), release of tension theory is based on the idea that joking has a vital psychological function to perform,

namely that of providing an environment in which subjects that are taboo in normal speech may be explored through humor in a consequence-free environment. Release theory has also been used to explain the tendency in jokes to deviate from the constrained use of language in everyday speech (such as the alternate uses of words in puns) as well as the deviation from speech that conveys language clearly and with a minimum of ambiguity (Gricean pragmatics; see below). (Attardo, 1994) Despite this theory's influence and utility within the realm of psychology, it is only interesting in linguistic analyses as an analog to the building of tension in a joke and the subsequent release brought forth by the punchline. It is too general a theory to be used in an analysis such as the one that follows. Like other psychological theories, it does not differentiate between joke typologies, making it unsuitable for the task that follows.

1.3 Superiority Theory

The modern linguistic Superiority Theory of humor bears much resemblance to Plato and Aristotle's views on the subject. Under this theory, we laugh as a result of a perceived superiority to some character in the joke. The first person in the modern era to espouse this theory was the philosopher Thomas Hobbes. In the *Leviathan* (Hobbes, 1958) (originally published in 1651), Hobbes speaks of laughter as being caused by a feeling of "sudden glory."

Sudden glory is the passion which makes those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER, and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleases them or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in

another, by comparison whereof they suddenly
applaud themselves. [Emphasis in original]
(Hobbes, 1958)

Around this simple paragraph arose a school of thought concerning the cause of humor. It is a tempting theory indeed in that it is simple, elegant, and accounts for most—if not all—forms of humor. The theory as it stands today has changed very little in the over 350 years since the paragraph above was penned. Joking is a game, a contest of sorts. As such, every joke, claims the theory, has winners and losers. The listener's felt relation of superiority to the loser in a given joke triggers laughter. Proponents claim that this theory covers not only verbal humor, but practical jokes, slapstick, clowning, and a plethora of other humor forms as well. (Gruner, 1997) Although it is almost certainly true that Superiority Theory, which comes from a psychological vantage point, covers more data than do purely linguistic theories, Superiority Theory is not without its drawbacks.

1.3.1 Inappropriateness of superiority theory for the current study

The first thing that should be addressed is the theory's vagueness. Although this theory accounts for a wide range of data, what does it tell us about the processes that trigger humor? There is little doubt that humor is at least in part a psychological phenomenon, but simply saying that when we laugh, we are laughing at the loser in a "contest" does not do enough to distinguish one type of joke from another. All jokes are funny for basically the same reason under this model: someone loses, and the listener laughs.

The only deviation from this exact explanation within the Superiority Theory model occurs where wordplay is concerned. Here is a case, some proponents argue, where the other prong of Hobbes's argument becomes germane; listeners laugh at puns, witticisms, and all other humor that Cicero categorized as being "contained in the words" because we "get" them. Listeners laugh to applaud themselves for their ability to understand the humor. This is not in dispute, for everyone who has experienced humor has experienced the thrill of "getting" a joke; it is this thrill that causes us to laugh at all jokes.

The reason this theory, otherwise so elegant, becomes much less potent is that it is neither necessary nor sufficient in describing what we understand as humor. Instead, the theory now applies to any sort of accomplishment or realization. Instead of isolating something unique about humor, it describes the sudden realization that one has left one's umbrella at home, or, to use an example from Gruner (Gruner, 1997), figuring out the answer to a *Wheel of Fortune* puzzle. The former experience will most certainly not produce laughter, and while the second one might well evoke laughter, it is not laughter from humor, but laughter from success, which is a separate phenomenon. Superiority theory also fails to account well for absurd jokes, which are caused purely by a situation and seem to be driven by all listeners' sense of confusion. Whereas one might be said to be laughing at the

ineptitude of the speaker, the same phenomenon occurs with television shows, for instance, where the “speaker” is not readily apparent.

Thus, while superiority theory need not be discounted—indeed, superiority theory has a great deal to offer in terms of psychological explanations of laughter, as well as something to offer the field of humor studies—it is inappropriate for a linguistic analysis of humor typologies as it makes little distinction between the typology and the mechanism. Were this the only theory in existence, creating a gradated joke typology would prove to be a very difficult endeavor. I will cite superiority theory throughout my study, especially where the joke typology in question exhibits a particularly strong tendency toward a superiority theory reading, but the categorizations of the jokes and the analysis will be through the lens of a more linguistic theory, and one that is far more fleshed out than is superiority theory.

1.2 Incongruity theory

Much of the treatises on humor in Antiquity through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance reflect the character of the humor predominant at the time. Because these treatises were informed by Plato and Aristotle, most of the emphasis was on Superiority Theory, and they downplayed or ignored altogether other possible explanations for humor that, while not as elegant, might have more in the way of explanatory power. But Kant in 1790 reemphasized Aristotle’s point about the secondary meaning of words, providing a modern basis from which linguists would later begin to explore the potential of a fully developed linguistic incongruity theory.

In the 1970s, linguists (especially cognitive linguists) began to formalize Kant's philosophical idea of incongruous meanings causing a statement to be perceived as funny.³ Linguists began to detail the rational mechanisms that might cause incongruous statements to be perceived as funny.

1.2.1 Gricean Pragmatics

Although not intended as a study of humor, Paul Grice's (Grice, 1975) study of pragmatics serves as a good foundation and early explanation of the general semantic theory of incongruity. In 1975, Grice developed the idea of the co-operative principle, a set of presumptions on the part of any listener in a conversation as to what sort of conversational rules he or she can expect the speaker to follow. These rules, or maxims, allow for what is known as *bona fide* speech, speech where both the listener and the speaker expect these maxims to be followed. The maxims that comprise Grice's co-operative principle are as follows:

- (1) **Cooperative Principle.** Contribute what is required by the accepted purpose of the conversation.
 - (a) **Maxim of Quality.** Make your contribution true; so do not convey what you believe false or unjustified.
 - (b) **Maxim of Quantity.** Be as informative as required.
 - (c) **Maxim of Relation.** Be relevant.

³ Early studies into Incongruity Theory undertaken by cognitive linguists include Suls (1972) and Schultz (1974)

- (d) **Maxim of Manner.** Be perspicuous; so avoid obscurity and ambiguity, and strive for brevity and order.
(Grice, 1975)

The maxims themselves enable listeners to draw conclusions from the words used that aren't explicitly communicated in the text itself. Grice labels these conclusions implicatures. It is due to these implicatures that we can have a conversation like the one in (2):

- (2) Joe: Where's John?
Flo: His car is right out front.

Flo's response to Joe's query does not explicitly answer his question. Joe didn't ask about John's car, he asked about John himself. Indeed, if Joe were the concrete type, he might tell Flo as much. But because both Joe and Flo are well versed in everyday conversation, and by extension are well versed in Gricean maxims and implicatures, Joe can infer that Flo intends to say that the position of John's car is related to John's position, and therefore John must be nearby. This can be assumed due to (2d); the cooperative principle states that Flo must contribute to the accepted purpose of the conversation. The conversation is a simple question/answer, so to satisfy the co-operative principle Flo must provide a response that is appropriate to the question. *Prima facie*, this does not appear to be the case. Flo doesn't mention John's location, which was all Joe asked about. However, we must assume that Flo is attempting to satisfy the co-operative principle. We must then assume that she is fulfilling the maxim that it appears she's violating (relevance). We know from that John's car has a relationship to John, but that's not what the

question was about. So we draw the conclusion (the implicature) that John's car is a proxy for John's location. What we know about the relationship between people and cars allows us to make the most plausible assumption that Flo may not know exactly where John is, but that John must be somewhere around because his car is out front.

Grice's implicatures are useful in an examination of humor because, though the theory is obviously broad and intended for general conversational use and not for humor study, Gricean maxims provide a good place to start with modern semantic incongruity theory. Many jokes rely on the listener expecting the speaker to follow Gricean rules and being disappointed. Throughout the "setup" of the joke, the listener fills in any non-explicit information that he can through implicatures. The punchline reveals with a few words that the speaker was in fact using a meaning of the sentence that violates one of Grice's maxims. Though it is a weak (and simplistic) example of humor, an exasperated "I didn't ask you where his car was" from Joe might evoke at least a smile in some listeners. While the superiority theory would say that you're laughing at Joe's inability to follow accepted rules of conversation (his inability to "get" the implicature that Flo is conveying), incongruity theory would use Gricean pragmatics as an example of incongruity being resolved when the speaker understands the two different readings of the text that the two characters espouse; the laughter comes, from the fact that both the speakers are correct in their own interpretation

(both interpretations are valid), and the fact that both can be “right” and still not understand each other suddenly makes sense. This is what people will find humorous, according to incongruity theory. This is illustrated in (3) below:

- (3) A man walks into a bar and is startled to see a tiny toy piano sitting on the bar being played by a one foot tall musician. The man asks the bartender quietly, “Where did you find that guy? He’s amazingly talented! And so small!”
“I wished on this lamp and he just appeared,” the bartender replies. “You can have it if you like.”
The man can’t believe his good fortune. He thanks the bartender and eagerly rubs the lamp, wishing with all his might for a million bucks. All of a sudden, a bevy of mallards are swarming around the bar. As the man ducks for cover, he yells to the bartender “I asked for a million *bucks* not a million *ducks!*”
The bartender replies, “You think I asked for a twelve-inch pianist??”

In the above example, the narrator of the joke has several opportunities to be accurate and avoid ambiguity, as required by the Maxim of Manner (1d). The narrative could have been prefaced with the story of the bartender using the lamp. The bartender could have warned the man about the lamp as he offered it. The most obvious place where the ambiguity is almost purposefully avoided is when the bartender states, “I wished on this lamp and he just appeared.” While this is not technically untrue (and thus does not violate the Quality maxim), it is certainly ambiguous and avoids giving away the punchline too early. Even the punchline does not explicitly explain what has happened. The punchline merely provides enough information for the discerning listener to resolve the incongruity.

Despite its great utility in providing a simple, broad framework in which to begin to analyze jokes, Gricean maxims are not enough to determine whether an utterance is humorous. Consider the following exchange:

- (4) Q: Where is John?
A: She is a whimsy.

This exchange violates the cooperative principle (Q did not ask for John's description), as well as the maxims of quality (John is not a woman) or relevance (if A is not referring to John at all). This is an example of completely muddled speech, violating several of the maxims. If flaunting of Gricean maxims were necessary and sufficient to making an utterance humorous, A's response in (4) would qualify as humor. While it certainly qualifies as strange, it is not a joke, *per se*. At best, (4) represents a non-sequitur, but these rely on the second script (the script elucidated by A) being a humorous situation in itself. This is clearly not the case in (4). A more well-developed and precisely tailored framework is necessary to fully examine and explain humor.

2.1.1 The Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH)

By the mid 1990s, one formalization of incongruity theory had established itself as the "most powerful epistemologically and promising theory available in the field of linguistic-based humor research." (Attardo, 1994) Attardo here refers to the Semantic Script Theory of Humor, a theory the Victor Raskin elucidated beginning in the 1980s. His 1985 work, *Semantic Mechanisms of*

Humor, provided a holistic account of the theory and applied it to a corpus of jokes.

The theory suggests that verbal humor is best described as a text containing aspects of two opposing “scripts” that are both compatible with the joke text and that the humor comes in the realization of how the two scripts, ostensibly opposed, can both be compatible within the context of the joke. In the next section, I will analyze Raskin’s *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* in some detail.

2.2 *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor: How much does it account for?*

The Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) is laid out most fully and with the greatest detail in Raskin’s 1985 *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. The book can be divided into five sections: a review of previous literature on humor theory, an introduction to linguistic theory, an introduction to semantic theory, semantic theories of humor, and application of the SSTH to various broad types of humor. I will concentrate my analysis mostly on the fourth section as it is in this section that Raskin lays out his theory and begins to show its general applications. Raskin (Raskin, 1985) positions his theory as separate from the theories he discusses in his review of humor studies by referring to the reviewed theories as “informal theories” through which observations can be made, while his is a formal analysis that creates a theoretical framework to explain those observations. He then goes on to reveal the main hypothesis of the SSTH:

- (5) A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the [following] conditions...are satisfied.
- (a) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
 - (b) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite in a special sense defined [later]
- (Raskin, 1985)

These two conditions, Raskin argues, are both necessary and sufficient to establish a text as containing a joke. The theory is very well-illustrated through Raskin's sample joke:

- (6) "Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in."
- (Raskin, 1985)

The first sentence of the joke is compatible with the reading that an ill man has gone to visit the doctor for aid. The second sentence, on the other hand, becomes incongruous with the patient/doctor relationship, and is far more congruous with a reading suggesting an illicit affair (how this reading comes to the fore is discussed below in Section 2.5.2).

2.2.1 Grice and the SSTH

Raskin then wisely incorporates Grice into his argument, describing how joking is achieved conversationally. Joking is a form of non-*bona fide* speech, a type of speech in which aspects of the cooperative principle are flouted (Raskin, 1985). Whereas a purpose of *bona fide* speech is to convey meaningful and useful knowledge, the humor act is not very concerned with the practical utility of the information it conveys, but rather focuses its

attention on conveying information in a manner that will prompt a humor response. As shown in Section 2.4.1, jokes and their incongruity rely on a form of misdirection; the two scripts allow for the incongruity and the speaker must leave the realm of *bona fide* speech in order to find a way to resolve the incongruity. If the speaker does not intentionally veer from *bona fide* speech, the result is an unintentional joke. If the listener adheres strictly to *bona fide* speech, he or she will miss the speaker's point entirely. Both of these cases result in confusion rather than shared humor. Thus Raskin applies Gricean pragmatics to the general concept of conveying jokes while using his more well-developed and nuanced formal theoretical framework to handle the cognitive semantic processes of incongruity.

2.2.2 Scripts

Raskin's theoretical mechanism for handling incongruity is the use of scripts, which he describes in great detail. Each script is a recognizable or typical narrative whose whole is implied by its beginning. The idea of scripts originated in psychology in the 1930s and moved to the study of artificial intelligence and by the 1970s had moved to the realm of linguistics. (Attardo, 1994) As prescribed by the Main Hypothesis in (5), to qualify as a joke, a text must be fully or partially compatible with two scripts. Compatibility simply refers to the possibility of a reader reading the text of a joke and being able to apply two different scripts at certain points. In section 2.5, it was noted that the DOCTOR script is compatible with the first sentence (and with most of

the second, with extraneous information), while the LOVER script becomes compatible midway through the second sentence, when the wife starts to whisper.

Script switch triggers are a fairly straightforward mechanism that prompts the listener to consider scripts other than the one he or she first had in mind for the narrative. In the DOCTOR/LOVER joke, there are several triggers that predispose the listener to choose the LOVER script when the DOCTOR script proves unviable. The doctor's wife's youth and beauty are details that are completely extraneous to the DOCTOR script thus causing a violation of the Gricean maxim of Quality (say only what needs to be said, no more, no less). However, because the details are not necessarily at odds with the DOCTOR script, the triggers do not yet cause the switch. When the wife whispers back and the joke ends without an explicit explanation of why she has invited the patient into the house, the trigger is complete and the listener must go back and reinterpret the joke through the LOVER script lens.

(Raskin, 1985)

Most nebulous is the particular type of scripts that are "opposed" to one another. Raskin (Raskin, 1985) initially describes this opposition by simply taking a main element from the first script and one from the second script and describes that as an opposition as in (7):

(7) doctor vs. lover

He realizes, however, that this is not a true opposition and rephrases these oppositions as being between what is actually the case and what isn't. His framework consists of three types of real vs. not real oppositions as in (8):

- (8) (a) actual vs. not actual
 - (b) expected vs. unexpected
 - (c) plausible (or possible) vs. implausible (or impossible)
- (Raskin, 1985)

In the case of the DOCTOR/LOVER joke, there would be an actual vs. not actual opposition (the man is actually looking for a doctor, not to be a lover.)

2.2.3 Humor interpretation, taxonomies, and presentation

The final sections of Raskin's chapter on the SSTH concern general frameworks of how humor is perceived (and what is a "sense of humor"), joke types and the different levels of knowledge required to "get" them, and how joke presentation affects the perception of jokes.

Raskin asserts that ability to interpret a joke—what is often referred to as a sense of humor—is dependent upon the ease with which one can switch between *bona fide* communication and non-*bona fide* communication. The more willing and able a person is to switch between these two modes, the more likely he or she is to understand and respond to a joke.

Of course understanding the scripts is also of great importance to one's sense of humor. Thus the number of scripts with which the listener is familiar is therefore directly correlated to the range of jokes the listener will understand. If the listener was unfamiliar with the LOVER script—if he or

she did not know that inviting a strange man into the house when you are a young and pretty wife might be viewed as strange—the listener may fail to realize the humor in the DOCTOR/LOVER joke, being only familiar with one of the two required scripts.

Similarly, if the hearer is of a mind that patients frequently become lovers of their doctor's wives, and that such a state of affairs (no pun intended) is perfectly socially acceptable, there is no inherent contradiction in the hearer's mind between DOCTOR and LOVER. The lack of opposition necessarily entails a lack of the incongruity necessary to trigger the humor response.

The last section of the chapter concerns presentation of the joke. It seems that Raskin glosses over this section somewhat, making only brief statements about the strength of the opposition of the two scripts (how opposed are they?) and the overlap between them (are they completely or partially compatible?) Raskin quickly sets out some quick guidelines for which jokes will achieve a greater response on average without giving many examples or using any solid framework to support his claims.

Raskin's discussion of what separates good jokes from what he calls "feeble" jokes has to do with the oppositeness of the scripts and the obviousness of the trigger. An example of a Raskin-described "weak joke" is below in (9).

(9) Joe: Visiting professors are always boring.

Bob: Not if the visiting professor is a gorgeous blonde and you visit

her in her apartment.
(Raskin, 1985)

Here there is no indication that the first sentence is anything but *bona fide* speech. Bob must make the trigger and invent the second script. This results in an “admittedly weak joke.” (Raskin, 1985) What Raskin does not make apparent, however, is why this is a particularly weak joke.

We have here informal theories based on observation, the exact situation that his theory attempts to avoid. In Section 2.6, I will examine in greater detail the mechanisms that may determine the degree of a joke’s humor.

1.1.1 Shortcomings of SSTH

Though *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* provides the most complete linguistic analysis of humor to date, it is not without its shortcomings. Most of these have to do with Raskin’s description of scripts, which remains broad and overgeneralized. This limits the theory’s ability to correctly predict humor and to differentiate between structurally superior and inferior humor.

The first problem with the script analysis is that Raskin only recognizes jokes as evoking two scripts. A joke, as it is read, can evoke numerous scripts, which are pared down as the joke is completed. Even then, however, there are multiple interpretations. The DOCTOR/LOVER joke, for example, may trigger a DOCTOR/HOSTESS script in some. Where the LOVER script is absent from the hearer’s inventory of scripts, for example, the DOCTOR/HOSTESS script will suffice, though it will result in a lesser

joke focused mainly on laughing at the confusion of the woman (here again Superiority Theory rears its head).

Another (albeit minor) problem with Raskin's theory is that it seems not to account for some nonsensical or absurd joke types such as (10):

- (10) Q: Why did the chicken cross the road?
A: To get to the other side.

However, a closer reading of jokes such as this one reveals that the theory may in fact account for it anyway. The humor from this joke comes in large part from the knowledge that the first line is the traditional beginning of a joke that relies on *double entendre* or some other sort of wordplay. The second line, however, reveals that it involves none of this, but actually resembles *bona fide* speech. Therefore the two scripts that are called are JOKE/NON-JOKE or BONA FIDE/NON-BONA FIDE and it is from the expectation of non-*bona fide* speech that causes the incongruity. Thus the chicken crossing the road is an inversion of a joke and a type of meta-joke. Due to the nature of the opposing scripts, the joke is dependent upon the listener's understanding that Q's utterance is intended to be a joke. The incongruity between the predicted non-*bona fide* response prompted by the question itself and the actual (*bona fide*) response provides the joke; the incongruity of the question in everyday speech and the general structure of it are triggers for the switch to non-*bona fide* speech, and the answer in context is perfectly *bona fide*.

Absent these two problems—the second of which barely qualifies as a problem—Raskin's theory does a good job of determining what qualify as

jokes, but only in the roughest sense. Raskin's theory makes very few claims about the degree of humor; in some cases, this degree can be so impoverished that the joke would barely qualify as humor (many listeners may feel this way about the chicken crossing the road). In the next section, I will discuss why Raskin's criteria are necessary—but not truly sufficient—to ensure a humorous joke.

2.2 Why some jokes are funnier: an addition to the SSTH

Throughout the explanation of his theory, Raskin uses jokes to exemplify his claims, and he often describes the effectiveness of the jokes, describing them as weak or mild. He seems to believe, however, that the reasons for the degree of humor are merely anecdotally explicable, following certain guidelines, but not rules. I maintain that there are indeed rules to be applied that are more general and integral to Raskin's theory than merely involving "joke construction." To do so, it will be necessary to first look at the cognitive processes underlying jokes. In understanding how we process incongruity, we can come to understand how certain jokes play into this process while others do not.

2.2.1 Cognitive Theory: Incongruity-Resolution

Looking at humor as it has been described—in a setup/punchline form with two competing scripts—we can begin to see what cognitive mechanisms might look like. One of the simplest and elegant cognitive schemas with which we can look at verbal humor is the Surprise Disambiguation (SD) model introduced by Schultz (Schultz, 1974) and expounded upon by others.

This model is a formalization of Raskin's ideas about the two scripts and the resolving punchline and the cognitive situation that must be present for a humor act to occur. The two scripts are represented by M_1 and M_2 , where M_1 is the obvious script in the setup and M_2 the hidden script. M_3 is the punchline. (Ritchie, 1999) To be humorous, the listener must interpret the obvious script, M_1 , while the punchline, M_3 , supports the unexpected hidden script M_2 . Much like Raskin, Schultz and those that developed the SD hypothesis lay out several conditions that should be present for humor to be transmitted. The idea of contrast or clash between M_1 and M_2 , and of M_3 being compatible with only one of these scripts. However, SD goes further, saying that the punchline should be compatible with the less obvious of the two scripts (M_2). In addition, SD offers another condition (though it's doubtful that this condition is necessary) that M_2 be in some way strange or taboo. (Ritchie, 1999)

Though this theory has its drawbacks (in that its definitions are vague and it makes no claims as to which conditions are necessary to evoke humor), it provides a good look into the cognitive processing of the joke, and offers obviousness as a determiner of humor. It also provides cognitive backing for Raskin's proposed mechanism, including an additional definition—vague though it is—of the “opposed” property; in this case, it is proposed as a condition that the two scripts merely be “related” and that it is merely possible—not necessary—that they clash.

Using Raskin's SSTH as a starting point and cognitive studies as guidelines, we can begin to determine what qualities objectively provide for a more humorous joke.

3 The Extended Incongruity Model (EIM)

In order to improve upon Raskin's theory, several conditions separate from the "opposing and overlapping scripts" clauses of Raskin's theory must add that relate not to whether or not something is a joke, but rather what sort of joke it is (simple or complex), what processes are required to view it as funny, and how funny it is. These supplementary conditions can then be used in tandem to determine whether a joke will be viewed as funny.

3.1 Obviousness

The first is taken from SD, adding an obviousness condition to humor. It is not sufficient for a joke to merely contain two possible scripts. If the "punchline" is congruous with the more obvious script, the listener will likely have predicted the punchline from the start, disregarding the less obvious script early on. Thus, for all intents and purposes, the scripts overlap, but the listener understands one to be more obvious and correctly predicts the punchline. In some cases, this will cause the joke to be perceived as *bona fide* speech and the joke will not be perceived at all. This is especially true in cases where the two scripts are fully compatible. But even when there are possible triggers toward the less obvious interpretation, the reaffirmation of the initial script does not cause humor. This can be illustrated through Raskin's example joke (6), with just a change of the "punchline."

- (11) "Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in. The baby is sleeping so keep your voice down. The doctor will be with you in a moment."

The LOVER script triggers (whisper, young, and beautiful) are extraneous here, but still make sense with the DOCTOR script. The punchline does not trigger humor because it works perfectly well as *bona fide* speech, and can be parsed using only one script. This would cause the SD model to fail, as only M_1 and M_3 are present cognitively.

An example of a joke weakened by obviousness can be found in (12):

- (12) Speaker 1 [referring to a quarrel between friends]: Matt and Susan were really going at it last night. It was amazing.
Speaker 2: They let you watch??

Here the second script is already strongly implied by the existence of the ambiguous phrase "going at it," which can have sexual connotations, a night setting, which lends itself to sexual interpretation, and the subsequent "it was amazing." In the context, both speakers know that Matt and Susan are just friends, which predisposes towards a reading of Speaker 1's sentence as being *bona fide*. Only the incredulity of Speaker 2's response prompts the switch to non-*bona fide* interpretation. However, because Speaker 2 adds very little to the humor (simply providing a trigger to an existing pair of scripts), the joke may be viewed as superfluous or obvious. This is an example accounted for by Schulz's cognitive framework, which conditions humor on the punchline being congruous with the less obvious (hidden) interpretation of the setup. The triggers in the speaker's unintentional "setup" ("going at it"

and “[i]t was amazing”) may cause listeners (and perhaps even the speaker himself, as he says it) to think of the alternate interpretation. The laying out of the only slightly less obvious (though, in the context, very incongruous) interpretation merely calls attention back to a cognitive process that already undergone. In fact, those for whom sex euphemism scripts are strongest will be more likely to be led to this process, and thus be less likely to find the exposition of the punchline humorous. Thus, a joke with a strongly implied second script will lose humor it would have had were the script more hidden.

Because the possible prediction of a sex euphemism script is contemplated before the end of the joke, the punchline conforms to a previous (though discarded) prediction and the humor is thereby lessened.

3.2 Novelty

People grow and adapt based on experiences, and this quality has an effect on how funny jokes seem to be. The classic joke in (10) no longer tickles adults’ fancy as much as it did when these adults were children. This is because a new trigger has been introduced. The setup of the joke now triggers the punchline. The punchline is thus rendered redundant, and some—if not all—of the humor is lost. The punchline is no longer a surprise; the disambiguation is accomplished by the listener, not the speaker, and thus occurs without surprise.

3.3 Naturalness

Also adding to the humor of the joke is its “naturalness”—its fitting into the course of conversation and its guiding of the listener from one script to

another. This builds upon the overlapping scripts requirement in the SSTH. If the second script comes out of the blue, the joke will seem forced. This is illustrated in (13):

- (13) [Bob is presumably hitting on Jill incessantly]
Joe [to Bob]: This reminds me of last night's game: they wouldn't score, but they wouldn't let go of the ball, either.
(Raskin 1986:143)

Here, the speaker must bring up a script completely foreign to the current situation and provide overlap through comparison. There is thus less of a clash between the two scripts, and subsequently more artificiality.

3.4 Abstractness

"Brevity is the soul of wit," Polonius says in *Hamlet*. This is indeed true, as Gricean principles dictate that no extraneous words should be used. However, there is another reason to be especially brief in humor. Humor is more likely to be funny if it is universal and describes an abstract (and therefore more applicable) situation. With verbal humor it is the idea of the jokes that is funny and not the details. In non-*bona fide* speech, the general schematic is what is necessary to convey something humorous. This does not mean that there cannot be long jokes. Some jokes rely on a build-up of tension that necessitates length. However, jokes generally rely upon general sketches of people. We know very little about the doctor, his wife, or the patient in (5); it is sufficient that they fill the general job descriptions they are given. Even when a joke relies on specific people, it does not rely on the intricacies of that person's character, but on one or two archetypal characteristics. Examples

would include “George W. Bush can’t speak English properly,” “Mike Tyson is a brute,” etc. The reliance on archetype and not on specific people allows the listener, in some cases, to put himself in the joke itself. This enables him to take part in, for example, the doctor’s wife’s confusion about the situation she’s in. This kind of reliance on archetype to achieve a wide audience is similar to that found in comics, where characters are drawn in a non-realistic but more universal style.⁴

4 Where to go next

This paper represents only one addition to the SSTH, some additional criteria by which to examine statements and determine how well a joke will be received. The SSTH is a theory whose simplicity and elegance make it easily extensible. Issues of cultural (limited knowledge) scripts and issues of register-shifting humor are not covered in this paper and merit further study. Such studies (as well as this one) would benefit further from field tests and extensive surveys examining how people perceive certain jokes and whether or not criteria can be given coefficients pertaining to how much each criterion contributes to the overall humor of the joke. This paper is a starting point toward allowing the SSTH to account for differences in degrees of humor.

⁴ For an interesting study of abstracts and universality used in comics, see McCloud (1993)

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