

Humor in American Sign Language*

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Abstract

Through a close-viewing of a comedy sketch by Bill Ennis and an analysis of other documented sources of signed humor, this paper compares and contrasts spoken and signed humor by seeing how well the current linguistic humor theories apply to signed humor. The leading theories, including the Semantic Script Theory of Humor and the General Theory of Verbal Humor, make it clear that the basic underlying linguistic mechanism of humor remains intact in sign language. Taking a step back from this fundamental mechanism reveals that some parts of each humor theory are unnecessary and that there is only one noteworthy difference between humor in signed and spoken language.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I attempt to evaluate how well two linguistic humor theories, the Script Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH), and its more-encompassing successor, the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), both originally derived from the humor in spoken languages, apply to the humor in a signed language. Although both theories try to account for a linguistic basis of humor (cf. a psychological, sociological, or cognitive one), they are slightly different. The SSTH describes the semantic mechanism of only gags or punch-line-type jokes and puns, while the GTVH is more ambitious, putatively applying the mechanism to all forms of humor conveyed with language (including, in addition to the above, anecdotes and narratives). The GTVH also tries to account for the similarities between different jokes. My paper will focus primarily on the GTVH, since it is the updated, more comprehensive version of the SSTH, but it will only examine the linguistic mechanism it describes and not how it explains the similarities across different jokes.

There is only one linguistic disparity between signed and spoken language that keeps American Sign Language (ASL) from fitting the theories exactly. Other than that, ASL generally does seem to employ the same underlying humor mechanisms as English (or, for that matter, any spoken natural language). The dissimilarity lies in the fact that there are many additional linguistic elements of ASL that English doesn't have but are still used for

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humor (e.g., fingerspelling, facial expressions¹, a capacity for slapstick, etc.). This is because ASL has a strictly visual modality and can therefore incorporate into its humor optically perceptible semantic elements that spoken language simply doesn't have.

Overall, my evaluation of the GTVH is accomplished through assessing already-documented signed jokes and a comedy sketch by Deaf comedian Bill Ennis. From these analyses it is evident that these humor theories do, in general, apply to signed language as well, but some are also lacking crucial components and could do without others. As it will become clear in analyzing the different types of humor in ASL, a humor theory must include not only pragmatic and structural roots but also visual-modality-based ones.

2. Humor Theories

Before looking into sign language and its humor, this paper looks into the two of the major linguistics-based theories of humor for spoken language. There are many different types of humor theories – cognitive, linguistic, semiotic, social, psychological, and even evolutionary – but this paper focuses on the linguistic mechanisms that make utterances funny. As I stated above, I intend to critique the SSTH and the GTVH by showing how inadequately they account for signed humor. From this analysis, I also suggest what could make the GTVH more insightful by making it more inclusive.

The main humor theory emphasized here will be the GTVH, but a discussion of the GTVH's predecessor, the Script Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH), will also take place to provide a fuller understanding of the GTVH. Puns will also be discussed because not only does signed humor include a lot of puns but also because puns provide a very clear example of how the SSTH and GTVH work.

Before getting to these linguistic theories, it is worth mentioning the other non-linguistic theories of humor because one of them highlights a mechanism of humor which has direct parallels to linguistic theories: incongruity. Victor Raskin (1985, cited by Attardo 1994, 2008) includes incongruity theories in his summarizing "tripartite classification," which also includes hostility and release theories². According to incongruity theories, humor stems from the mental resolution of an incongruity or clash between two interpretations of what is said (or between what is expected and what actually occurs); to hostility theories, humor comes from feeling superior, victorious, or antagonistic; and according to release theories, humor is said to arise from a discharge of psychological tension (Attardo 1994).

Although the SSTH and GTVH are linguistic and not cognitive theories, they still utilize the concept of incongruity (just as the original cognitive theories of humor do). The cognitive humor theories see humor as arising from recognizing and/or resolving a presented incongruity³ while these linguistic humor theories see humor as arising from an

¹ While English and other spoken languages do in fact use facial expressions, humorous or not, they do not affect the grammar. In ASL, facial expressions can alter the grammar of a sentence or even be important components of the sign (Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2006).

² Incongruity theories provide a cognitive approach to humor, hostility theories look at humor from a social perspective, and release theories are the psychoanalytical take on humor (Attardo 1994, 2008).

³ Attardo (1994) makes a distinction between 'incongruity' theories and 'incongruity-resolution' theories. The former emphasize that humor solely comes from the existence of an incongruity and the latter state that humor only arises when one reasons out the incongruity (Attardo).

utterance that contains incongruity somewhere in its linguistics (whether it's semantic, pragmatic, phonological, etc.).

2.1. Semantic Script Theory of Humor

To begin, it would be helpful to define what a script is. According to Raskin (1985:81), a script is both “a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it” and “a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker...[that] represents the native speaker's knowledge of a small part of the world.” These cognitive mappings of meaning help a listener form their interpretation of an utterance.

According to Attardo (1994:196), Victor Raskin's SSTH “is meant to account for the native speaker's humor competence” and not her performance. In other words, this theory wants to describe someone's linguistic reasoning in judging humor. This is a generative theory and thus something of a linguistic retrosynthetic analysis⁴. After it defines a set of primitives (i.e., irreducible units) and all the possible manipulations for said primitives, it looks at jokes and works backward to see how the joke was made from the primitives (Attardo). Ultimately, when the synthesis of jokes becomes apparent, one should be able to use the theory to describe how to construct a humorous utterance and how to recognize a humorous utterance when presented with one (Attardo).

The SSTH defines humor as a primarily semantic/pragmatic phenomenon (Attardo 2008). Its main ideas are summarized in (1):

- (1) A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying-text if both the [following] conditions are satisfied:
 - (i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
 - (ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite (...). The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to [sic, recte overlap] fully or in part in this text (Raskin 1985:99, cited by Attardo 1994)

In other words, jokes need to have two scripts (or interpretations) and they need to overlap yet oppose one another.

There is a continuum of how much the two scripts can overlap (anywhere from fully to only partially). When it comes to opposition, scripts are opposed between “real” and “unreal” situations, and can present this opposition in three different ways: actual situation/non-actual situation; normal, expected state of affairs/abnormal, unexpected state of affairs; possible, plausible situation/fully or partially impossible, much less plausible situation. The following examples, listed by portray each of these oppositions, respectively:

- (2) The Archdeacon has got back from London, and confides to his friend the doctor, “Like Saint Peter, I toiled all night. Let us hope that like Saint Peter, I caught nothing.” (Legman 1975:308, cited by Raskin 25)
- (3) “Who was that gentleman I saw you with last night?” “That was no gentleman. That was a senator.” (Esar 1952:177, cited by Raskin 25)
- (4) Nurse: That's a pretty bad cold you have, sir. What are you taking for it?
[Jewish] Patient: Make me an offer! (Spalding 1976:225, cited by Raskin 25)

⁴ In organic chemistry, a retrosynthetic analysis is used to figure out how to synthesize more complex molecules. It's a technique that works stepwise backwards, seeing how simpler but related molecules could be chemically manipulated to arrive at the final, desired molecule. This analysis continues backwards until the simplest (or commercially available) molecules are identified.

In (2), the opposition is between what is real and what is not real: the Archdeacon's promiscuous stay in London was real, but it was not the genuine and saintly toil like he suggests by alluding to Saint Peter. (Alternatively, there is also humor in the reverse interpretation, where his toils were indeed honest but he alludes to them as otherwise.) In (3), there is a disparity between what is normal/expected and what is abnormal/unexpected: normally, one would think of a senator as a publicly ethical and wholesome person (an apparent gentleman), but here the abnormal interpretation is clear in saying that senators are not, in fact, very gentleman-like at all. Finally, (4) presents a contrast between possible/plausible and impossible/implausible: for all intents and purposes, it's considered impossible to sell one's illness. (Raskin 1985)

Raskin (1985) also notes that, besides the three major types of oppositions listed above, there are many subcategories of types of oppositions that fall within them (good vs. bad, death vs. life, obscene vs. non-obscene, money vs. no money, rich vs. poor, etc.). He explains that these subcategories "can be introduced in various ways, can be more or less closely related to each other, and usually involve some basic, quintessential categories of human existence" (114). These subcategories can even be more tailored to particular kinds of jokes (e.g., sexual, political, and ethnic).

Moreover, under the SSTH, jokes are seen as violations of Grice's Cooperative Principle. Raskin observes that jokes follow slightly different maxims, contributing to what he calls *non-bona-fide* (NBF) communication, just as Grice's maxims contribute to cooperative communication. He defines the maxims for NBF communication as:

- (5) NBF communication:
 - (i) Maxim of Quantity: Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke;
 - (ii) Maxim of Quality: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke;
 - (iii) Maxim of Relation: Say only what is relevant to the joke;
 - (iv) Maxim of Manner: Tell the joke efficiently. (Raskin 1985:103, cited by Attardo 1994)

In a footnote, Attardo (1994) notes that Raskin saw these new maxims as trivial. This might be because even though every joke must adhere to NBF communication it can still contain *bona-fide* (BF) communication (Attardo). That is to say that "speakers are not committed to the truth of what they say in NBF mode" – the NBF communication maxims can be satisfied but Grice's don't necessarily have to be (Attardo 206).

A lot of jokes contain a "trigger" that allow the listener to recognize one script and then its opposite one. Triggers usually manifest themselves as ambiguity or contradiction. Ambiguity represents an important place where NBF communication might come into play. In the many jokes where ambiguity is intentional, if both the speaker and the listener are using NBF communication, the listener not only will notice the second interpretation but also might be inclined to actively look for it. The joke in (3) above contains an example of ambiguity; the listener knows that the person asking the question did not exclusively mean *gentleman* in the 'chivalrous man' sense, but both the speaker and the listener will willingly humor this interpretation. Contradiction has the same effect as ambiguity but is slightly more complicated. With contradiction, two equally valid interpretations aren't available – instead, a later one contradicts a preceding one. An example of contradiction is evident in (6) below. (Raskin 1985)

The example Attardo (1994:32) analyzes to demonstrate how the entirety of the SSTH works is known as the Doctor's Wife Joke. The joke goes as follows:

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

The analysis begins with two steps: 1) listing all the scripts (i.e., all the senses of the words) brought into play by the utterance, and 2) initiating the "combinatorial rules" that link the different scripts that deal with the same thing (i.e., they are paired up based on their "compatibility"). For this specific example, the words *is* and *at* in the first sentence are both assigned a SPATIAL script – consequently, the combinatorial rules set this as their common script and interpretation⁵. The next step – the formulation of inferences – occurs simultaneously to the application of combinatorial rules. For this joke, a reader makes the inference "that the second line is meant as an answer to the previous question, that the speaker of the first line does not know the answer to the question, and that he/she is interested in knowing the answer to the question" (206). These steps – applying combinatorial rules and making inferences – occur again and again until the whole text is interpreted. Ultimately, the reader concludes that what's going on is 'A patient seeks out a doctor at his house for the apparent purpose of fixing the illness evident in the raspy voice. The young and pretty wife of the doctor answers and, whispering like the patient, explains that the doctor is absent but then invites the patient to come inside.' The audience is presented with an incongruity because although the patient is seeking medical attention for his disease, the doctor's wife invites him into the house even though the script for DOCTOR requires the doctor to be present and in close proximity in order to help the patient. Here is where the audience begins to reason out the other reading of the situation – the "competing script" (Raskin 1985:125, cited by Attardo 1994:207) – and the NBF communication principles are activated. Thinking backwards, the audience will activate the LOVER script after taking into account the wife's gender and description as well as the fact that the doctor/husband is not there. This LOVER script insinuates adultery and the true intentions become clear (that she's taking her husband's absence as an opportunity to clandestinely meet another man). It is humorous because what goes on can almost entirely line up with either the DOCTOR script or LOVER script, and these scripts are opposed⁶. (Attardo 1994)

The script for DOCTOR easily arises from the words *doctor*, *patient*, and *bronchial*. Similarly, the patient's question seems expected (at least for when the joke was dated, back when doctors visited patients at home and vice versa) and the first part of the wife's answer is natural as well. The mention of the wife's attractiveness is not relevant but it does not pose any striking incongruities until the listener hears what else she whispers back (without prefacing her comment about how the doctor should be back soon), a twist that activates the LOVER script. The description of the wife and her reply are both apparent violations of Grice's maxim of Quantity – the description gives too much and her reply says too little. After the listener humors the LOVER script, however, the situation begins to make sense. This overlap of the DOCTOR script and LOVER script satisfies the first requirement for a joke.

⁵ According to Attardo (1994), this type of script analysis apparently goes on for every single word in the utterance – even non-humorous parts – until the listener makes sense not only of the utterance's literal meaning but also of the humorous, intended meaning.

⁶ Raskin (1985:111) suggests that the opposition is that of an actual situation vs. non-actual, non-existing situation. Attardo (1994) makes the opposition more specific and narrows it down as SEX vs. NO SEX.

The second requirement, opposition, is fulfilled by the two opposite interpretations: the patient goes to the doctor's house for the doctor vs. the patient goes to the doctor's house not for the doctor (or the wife invites in an adulterer vs. the wife invites in a patient). (Raskin 1985)

While the SSTH is a good and testable theory, it does have its limitations. The first lies in the fact that it is known to work only for jokes (Attardo 1994). And since jokes are not the only source of humor, this theory is expected to fall short when applied to other types of humorous text. A second shortcoming of the theory is that it focuses almost exclusively on the semantics of the joke and no other linguistic subfields (Attardo).

Early on, Raskin admits that the SSTH was not absolute and later publishes some 'follow-up' expansions. These included: the explanatory power of the SSTH, sophisticated humor, methodological issues of the application of linguistics to humor research, computational linguistics and humor, Jewish humor, and historiography of humor research. (Attardo 1994)

Despite the apparent irony, Raskin's most relevant follow-up, at least with respect to my paper, is the one that deals with Jewish humor. Raskin re-evaluates the SSTH as it applies to three different types of jokes – sexual, political, and ethnic – with a strong focus on Jewish jokes under ethnic humor (Attardo 1994). Jewish jokes are classified as jokes that employ a JEWISH script in particular for the script opposition (Attardo). (These jokes are contrasted with jokes involving Jewish characters or customs but do not expressly use the JEWISH script for the script opposition [Attardo].) Jewish jokes are relevant here because they show that different types of ethnic or cultural groups can create jokes focused on their particular script. For a more culture-based joke in ASL, there would surely be a DEAF script for the opposition.

On the whole, the SSTH cannot be viewed as incorrect per se; it does not ever claim to account for every type of joke, especially because it only looks at the *semantic* mechanisms at hand (Attardo 1994). Therefore it is not fair to try and apply an admittedly limited theory to all jokes. Instead I aim for this discussion of SSTH to complete the picture on script oppositions, which are pervasive throughout humor, and to highlight some key semantic mechanisms that the GTVH, SSTH's successor, does not emphasize enough.

2.2. General Theory of Verbal Humor

The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) could be considered a more inclusive revision of the SSTH (Attardo and Raskin 1991). It draws its explanatory powers from the fact that the SSTH cannot justify "differences in perceived similarity across jokes" (Attardo 1994:220). Attardo (1994) uses the following jokes to demonstrate this:

- (7) How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five, one to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's standing on. (Freedman and Hoffman 1980, cited by Attardo)
- (8) The number of Polacks needed to screw in a light bulb? Five – one holds the bulb and four turn the table. (Clemens 1969:22, cited by Attardo)
- (9) How many Poles does it take to wash a car? Two. One to hold the sponge and one to move the car back and forth.

According to Attardo, (7) is much more semantically similar to (8) than (9) despite the fact that (7) and (9) are syntactically very similar. Another problem with the SSTH, which the GTVH addresses, includes the fact that the SSTH cannot account for any other type of

humor besides simple jokes nor does it suggest ways to develop devices that explain the other types of verbal humor (Attardo). In addition, the GTVH accounts for any type of verbal humor and incorporates linguistics “at large,” not just semantics (Attardo 222).

Under the GTVH, there are six “parameters” (300) in which jokes can differ: Script Opposition, Logical Mechanism, Situation, Target, Narrative Strategy, and Language. These points of variation are then recognized as Knowledge Resources that fuel the generation of a joke (Attardo and Raskin 1991).

Script Opposition is seen as the incongruity of the SSTH (Attardo 2008). This is the one parameter that every joke will contain (Attardo 1994). The time and place in which it is used will affect how it is presented and the social/historical background used (Attardo 1994). In (7) and (8) above, the Script Opposition involves the script for DUMBNESS, with the opposition being between dumb and nondumb (which is an opposition between the normal, expected state of affairs and the abnormal, unexpected state of affairs) (Attardo and Raskin 1991)⁷.

Logical Mechanism is the parameter that brings the two opposing scripts together (Attardo 1994). A Logical Mechanism can take the form of a simple juxtaposition (e.g., “Gobi Desert Canoe Club”), false analogies (e.g., “Madonna doesn’t have it, the Pope has it but doesn’t use it, Bush has it short, and Gorbachev long. What is it? Answer: A last name.”), chiasmus (“Being honest isn’t a question of saying everything you mean. It’s a question of meaning everything you say.”), or figure-ground reversals ([7]-[9] above, where the bulb is the figure and the body is the ground) (Attardo 225-6; Attardo and Raskin 1991:305). Ultimately, Logical Mechanism is the “local logic” of the joke (i.e., the logic that doesn’t hold for anything but the joke) that allows the audience to solve the Script Opposition. A joke’s NBF element is tied strongly to this parameter (Attardo 226). This is also where the trigger for the Script Opposition comes into play (Attardo).

Situation includes all the “‘props’ of the joke: the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc.” (Attardo 1994:24). Like Script Opposition, a joke will always have a Situation, but some jokes will emphasize it and others will disregard it (Attardo). One example of the latter treatment of a situation goes as follows: “‘Can you write shorthand?’ / ‘Yes, but it takes me longer’”; although it is not obvious because it is essentially ignored, the situation here would be considered one that involves writing shorthand (Attardo 225). A good example of how this Knowledge Resource can be used as a differing parameter between two similar jokes is (7) and (9) above; they both make fun of the same stereotype and depict similar silly methodologies, but the actual ‘props’ used are different (Attardo and Raskin 1991).

Target is the individual/object/idea being made fun of – the “butt of the joke” (Attardo 1994:224). The names of people or groups of people that have humorous stereotypes associated with them are used here (Attardo). If the joke is not aggressive and doesn’t necessarily make fun of something, it has “an empty value” at this level (Attardo 224). The target cannot be just anyone – it must be a person or a group of people that are automatically assumed to fit the description of what they’re being ridiculed for without explanation (Attardo and Raskin 1991). For example, for the above jokes play off of the

⁷ Since Polack jokes generally involve the DUMB script, it is hard to see why there is an opposition here. Attardo and Raskin (1991) do not address this inconsistency. My guess is that although a listener expects the joke to contain a characterization that is unusually dumb, the dumbness portrayed is still abnormal/unexpected in the grand scheme of things.

stereotype that Polish people are dumb (Attardo and Raskin). The use of these stereotypes, especially the one for dumbness, works independently of how intelligent the people are in reality and hinges on the fact that the listeners at least know of the stereotype, even if they don't necessarily believe it (Attardo and Raskin).

Narrative Strategy is simply the type of joke – a riddle, dialogue/question-and-answer, narrative, knock-knock, etc. (Attardo 1994, 2008). Examples of different Narrative Strategies include (7) and (9) above: (7) is something of a riddle and (9) is an “expository text” (Attardo and Raskin 1991:300). Narrative Strategy is also responsible for omitting enough information to make sure that there is no redundancy in getting to the punch line, which sometimes nearly violates Grice's maxim of Quantity (Attardo and Raskin).

Language consists of the linguistic choices supporting the decisions made in other Knowledge Resources (Attardo 2008). It is the parameter in charge of not only the wording and syntax of the joke but also how the different elements of the joke are arranged (Attardo 1994). It is important to note that Language also commands how punch lines require fairly precise wording and placement within a text in order to be effective; this includes the use of triggers (ambiguity and contradiction) as outlined in the SSTH (Attardo and Raskin 1991). When used as a parameter in comparing jokes, the use of Language is especially evident in (7) and (8), which are both essentially the re-phrasing of one another (Attardo and Raskin).

Attardo and Raskin (1991) also spend an extensive amount of time delineating a hierarchy for the Knowledge Resources. This hierarchy, however, doesn't seem to offer any relevance or support to the description of humor and thus it will not be discussed in this paper.

The GTVH accounts for the similarity between jokes (which is something that the SSTH is unable to do) by measuring the number of parameters/Knowledge Resources that the jokes share. Correspondingly, how different jokes are can be measured by how many parameters differ between the two. And to explain the homology of jokes (i.e., their structural similarities or recursions), which the SSTH also does not do, the GTVH turns to Narrative Strategy. Since Narrative Strategy organizes how the joke is presented, it will be responsible for its “structural identity” – that is, the type of joke it is. (Attardo 1994:228)

When applied to longer texts, the GTVH has four revisions. The first suggests that a longer humorous text be viewed as something of a Euclidean vector since it is essentially a linear narration, with various humorous points along the way. The second revision points out that there are devices similar to but still different from punch lines also present in longer humorous texts: *jab lines*. There is no semantic difference between the two; *jab lines* are simply funny occasions that can occur anywhere in a narrative whereas punch lines are found exclusively at the end. The only other difference besides placement is their effect on the overall sketch: a punch line will disrupt and end a sketch while a *jab line* will not (and often it will enhance the flow of the sketch). The third revision deals with identifying patterns in the dispersal of *strands* (i.e., all the lines that are related to the same thing) throughout the text. One common pattern of strands is a *bridge*, wherein two related lines are fairly far apart from one another, and the other most common pattern is a *comb*, wherein a few related lines are close to one another. Linguists have discovered through statistical analyses that although the distribution of humor is not random within each sketch, it definitely varies across different sketches. The fourth and final revision tailors to the debate over whether humorous sketches entail humorous plots or serious plots with added humor.

There has not been a formal resolution for this dispute yet but both types of plots are noted to exist across multiple works. (Attardo 2008)

2.3. Puns

While no theory interprets humor strictly by its use of puns, the mechanisms of puns have been described and should be mentioned. As later discussions will show, the general idea of a pun plays a large part in linguistics-based humor in ASL. In essence, puns are instances of syntactic, morphological, lexical, or phonological ambiguity. But not just any case of ambiguity will constitute a pun: the key to a pun lies in its ability to keep the two separate meanings/interpretations clear even after pragmatics has disambiguated them. Other characteristics of puns have been identified but they are not relevant to this discussion. (Attardo 2008)

Puns also seem to bring into play the Cooperative Principle. In order to initially resolve the ambiguity, the audience must briefly “[mask] for an instant the absurdity of the judgment” by accepting the possibility that there’s an error (Auboduin 1948:95, cited by Attardo 1994). This sounds much like the driving force that allows for indirect speech acts to be understood.

3. Deaf Culture and Its Humor

To leave culture out of the discussion of signed humor would leave it tragically incomplete. Like humor in other minority cultures, the Deaf community’s trials/frustrations, folklore, and culture are the basis of many jokes.

The oppression of Deaf culture and its language was (and sadly still sometimes is) especially influential. This thorough linguistic oppression stemmed from oralism, the repressive policy of forcing Deaf individuals learn to lip-read and speak instead of using sign language, coupled with the implementation of English signing systems (invented communication systems that incorporate signs into English grammar/syntax to varying degrees, including Signed Exact English) and the consequent suppression of ASL. According to Bienvenu (1994), humor is a therapeutic and community-uniting response to oppression, so unsurprisingly ASL uses it. Bienvenu also notes how humor is an integral part of Deaf culture because it provides a way to establish an identity, form solidarity with others, and maintain morale. Sutton Spence and Napoli (2009) agree – they claim that jokes are a medium through which one can reinforce an identity because using jokes shows a strong command of the language.

“Signlore,” or one of the ways Deaf folklore is propagated, often contains humor (Carmel 2006:277). Normally with signlore (which can be thought of as sign play and will henceforth be referred to as such), signers create novel signs by combining signs, handshapes, and/or movements in puns or other clever language plays (Carmel). One example of this, which will be further discussed and analyzed in Section 4.1, involves tweaking the sign for UNDERSTAND; normally its sign is an S-handshape made into a 1-handshape near one’s temple (essentially going from a closed fist to one with the index finger extended; see Appendix A for more handshapes), but when the sign changes into an I-handshape instead of a 1-handshape (i.e., the pinky is extended instead of the index finger), the sign takes on the meaning UNDERSTAND-a-little (Klima and Bellugi 1979; example also cited by Carmel). Signlore also includes fingerspelling jokes, sign poetry, riddles, puns, and funny/satirical signs for names (Carmel).

Humor is also seen during expressions of culture. As Carmel (2006) notes, many jokes and anecdotes are based on stories wherein Deaf characters invent ways to solve problems inherent in the hearing world. Carmel cites the well-known story about two Deaf newlyweds who stop at a motel during their honeymoon to spend the night. The husband grows thirsty, leaves the room for a vending machine, but forgets his room number. He then has an idea; he goes to his car and honks the horn repeatedly. All rooms but one turn on their lights – the one where his Deaf wife lies sound asleep. When it comes to translated stories, Deaf storytellers often infuse “Deaf cultural behavior, values, or norms” into them either on purpose or unconsciously (Bahan 2006:32). For example, a storyteller might portray the mother, the girl, and the grandmother as Deaf and the wolf as hearing in an adaptation of “Little Red Riding Hood” (Bahan). Assigning Deaf and hearing qualities to these characters would create an allegory of sorts, paralleling the division and strain between the two cultures (Bahan).

4. Humor within ASL

As mentioned before, fusing wit and humor into one’s language can strengthen one’s sense of pride because doing so demonstrates a fair amount of expertise (Sutton Spence and Napoli 2009). ASL signers are no exception. This paper now turns to the specific linguistic phenomena and methods that are used to create humor in sign language. Many of these ways are unique to sign language and as such the humor is strictly visual and thus very unlike most humor in spoken languages. Nevertheless, as will become clear, most of the same underlying humor theories discussed in Section 2 apply. There are, however, a few examples of ASL humor which these humor theories don’t entirely explain. Identifying these shortcomings should help form what might be an even better, more inclusive humor theory.

4.1. Internal Changes to Sign Phonology (Sign Play)

It was once debated whether or not signed languages could contain linguistic wit, mostly because a lot of puns in spoken language are rooted solely within a word’s phonological form (e.g., the slogan for a mustard advertisement that says “It brings out the best of the wurst” [319]). Now, however, linguists know that toying with the internal structure of signs is very prevalent in sign languages. (Klima and Bellugi 1979)

As in spoken languages, phonological play within signs can also generate humor. By tweaking certain aspects of the phonology (i.e., one of the five parameters of a sign: handshape, place of articulation [henceforth PoA], movement, orientation, or facial expression), the meaning of a sign can change. This semantic alteration via phonetics is only one of the ways to create humorous language play in ASL. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

As a side note, facial expression is left out of the discussion on phonological parameters henceforth because its use is not limited to phonology; although for some signs it is a purely phonological component, it can also portray extra-linguistic information (e.g., in role-shift and characterization) or affect sign morphology (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). Deaf storytellers will also take advantage of facial expressions “to convey additional messages in attempt to control the mood and trigger emotions from the audience for various episodes in the story” (Bahan 2006:27).

The parameters of a sign can affect its semantics on a continuum – from a great deal to scarcely at all. Moreover, some signs are inherently arbitrary while others are fairly transparent. In addition, while it is not always predictable, one parameter can sometimes hold a particular connotation (for example, ASL signs with foul undertones are generally made on or below the nose [e.g., UGLY, PISS-OFF]). But in any case, when the phonology of a sign is manipulated for the sake of humor, the subsequent signs are feasible but not legitimate ones. (Sutton Spence and Napoli 2009)

Substituting the parameters of closely related signs is a common trend in sign play. What's interesting is that sometimes, by doing this, the signers make their signs become much more visually significant and iconic. Ultimately, this means that the relationship between the meaning and associated phonemes is less arbitrary, and this is important to keep in mind when understanding some types of signed humor. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

Usually in ASL, when a certain parameter of one sign is jokingly swapped for the parameter of another related one, there is something of a reduction and blending of the two meanings. The conciseness of humorous signs in ASL epitomizes “the culmination of the underlying tendency toward conflation in the language: the ultimate in compression and in simultaneous display” (321). Additionally, this shrewdly exhibits the signer's extensive knowledge of the linguistics of his or her language. (Klima and Bellugi 1979)

It should be noted that some parameters are more favored than others when it comes to changing them for a humorous effect. There are four major qualities of a parameter that contribute to how influential the parameter is: how well it is cognitively recalled, whether it is shown with one or two hands, how it is physiologically limited, and how frequently it is used in rhyming and games. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

The first characteristic is a parameter's effect on how well signs are retrieved from the mental lexicon during perception or production (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). Studies have shown that the parameters of movement and PoA are more memorable than those of handshape and orientation (Corina and Hildebrandt 2002; Dye and Shih forthcoming; both cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli).

Using one hand or two hands is the second notable characteristic. (Two-handed signs have two subgroups: those that use the non-dominant hand as a fixed base and others where both hands are moving symmetrically.) This attribute is important when the second hand can't be used for two-handed signs (e.g., if the signer is holding something) and when one-handed signs can't use a part of the body as a base as they normally do (e.g., if the signer has an injury somewhere and wants to avoid touching it). And because two hands aren't always available for two-handed signs, signers learn to create and recognize signs made at various other PoAs. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

The third influential characteristic of parameters stems from human anatomy: physiologically, most parameters cannot be independent from others (Sutton Spence and Napoli 2009). For example, if the PoA or movement of a sign is changed, orientation is likely to change as well (Torres and Zipser 2004; Brentari 1998; both cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli). The only parameter that consistently remains unaffected by others is handshape. According to Liddell and Johnson (1989, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli), every handshape is feasible with any PoA or movement. Handshape is also the only parameter “that can be detached from the others and imbued with extra meaning” (Sutton-

Spence and Napoli 53). This is especially apparent in the use of classifier signs⁸; the classifier’s sense is preserved so long as the handshape doesn’t change, even if the classifier’s movement, orientation, or PoA do (e.g., in ASL, the classifier for vehicles is the 3-handshape, and no matter how it moves, it always refers to a particular vehicle) (Sutton-Spence and Napoli).

The fourth and final important characteristic is how frequently a parameter is used in rhyming and language games. Orientation is the only parameter never used for either but handshape is regularly used for both. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

As Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2009) explain, the four phonological parameters can be classified in how memorable, changeable (flexible), independent, and productive (fertile) they are:

	Memorable	Flexible	Independent	Fertile
PoA	+	+	-	+
Movement	+	-	-	-
Handshape	-	-	+	+
Orientation	-	-	-	-

Table 1: Phonological Characteristics of Sign parameters for Humor (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

Table 1 allows us to predict which parameters are most likely manipulated for humor. The most susceptible to change would probably be PoA, seeing as it holds the greatest number of useful characteristics (it is memorable, flexible, and fertile). Handshape is the second most likely to be altered and, because it is the only parameter with independence, it has the ability to extract itself from a sign and act like a classifier in terms of movement. Movement is the third most likely to be used for linguistic play and orientation is the least likely, respectively. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

In the next few sections, this paper will discuss specific examples of the kind of parameter manipulations discussed above.

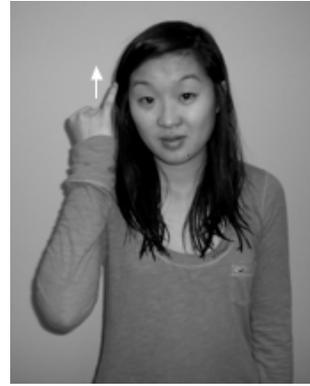
4.1.1. Example of Modifying Handshape

As mentioned earlier in Section 3, the manipulation of the sign UNDERSTAND is a prime instance of modifying the handshape of a sign to convey wit: a Deaf person, after being given a very technical explanation, was asked if he understood. The reply included the sign for UNDERSTAND but had an added dash of wit; instead of making the sign with a 1-handshape, he made his with an I-handshape (i.e., the little finger was used instead of the index finger). In actuality, instead of saying UNDERSTAND, the signer expressed UNDERSTAND-a-little. This downsizing effect on the semantics is rooted in the visual connotations and linguistic cognates of the little finger: not only is it the smallest of all the fingers but also it is often used in signs that convey thinness or small size (e.g., SPAGHETTI, THREAD, SKINNY-PERSON). This conversion of 1-handshape to I-handshape has been seen with other signs, as well (e.g., HURT-a-little, APPLAUD-a-little). Additionally, the reverse effect has also been observed by adding fingers to the sign. For example, to jokingly convey increasing-UNDERSTANDING, a signer slowly and continually opens the subsequent fingers. (Klima and Bellugi 1979)

⁸ A classifier sign is defined as a handshape that is designated and continually used by a signer in order to illustrate a particular noun’s movement, position, orientation, and/or physical characteristics (size/shape). Before a classifier can be used, the signer must specify which noun the classifier will refer to. (Drobney 2010)



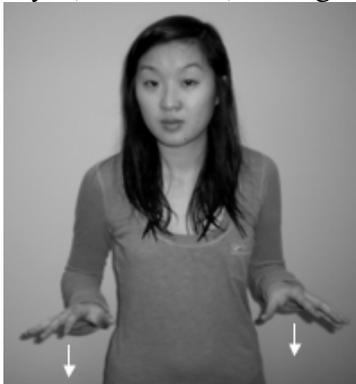
UNDERSTAND



UNDERSTAND-a-little

4.1.2. Example of Modifying PoA

One example of a clever sign made by substituting PoAs was manifest after a Deaf person had been participating in a visually straining experiment. During a break, when the signer was told to relax, she replied with a modified version of the sign RELAX. The PoA for the sign RELAX is usually the torso, but this time the signer articulated the sign just under her eyes; in essence, she signed RELAX-the-eyes. (Klima and Bellugi 1979)



RELAX



RELAX-the-eyes

4.1.3. Example of Modifying Movement

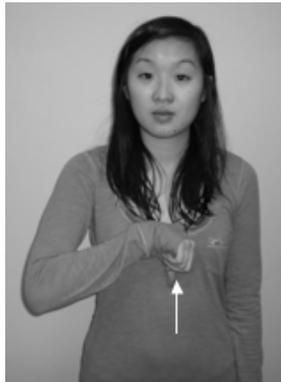
One common way of altering a sign's movement for play is reversing the original sign's movement. In the following examples, reversing movement essentially acts as a negative modifier (like un-, dis-, or a- in English). In a long and complex talk about linguistics and metalanguage, a signer expressed the UNDERSTAND sign but reversed its movement: instead of going from an S-handshape to a 1-handshape, the sign when from the 1-handshape to the S-handshape. By doing this, the signer effectively conveyed un-UNDERSTAND – or, in other words, 'I understand less than I did when I started'. This particular manipulation has also been reported to be used on the sign PROUD. Normally PROUD is signed with an upward movement from the torso. Reversing this movement gives a new meaning, un-PROUD (i.e., 'not proud'). (Klima and Bellugi 1979)



UNDERSTAND



un-UNDERSTAND



PROUD



un-PROUD

4.1.4. Example of Modifying Orientation

Klima and Bellugi (1979) cite an example of a signer inventing a new sign to convey the unsavory parts of New York City; he made the sign for NEW YORK, which entails a Y-handshape on the (horizontal) base of the other palm, but turned it upside down. Instead of the Y-handshape on top, it was below the base (which was also flipped upside down). This is now the sign for SUBWAY in some parts of the country (Doreen Kelley, personal communication, December 15, 2010) but, at the time of Klima and Bellugi's publication, the flipped sign for NEW YORK adopted a foul undertone because the 'underhandedness' it uses carries a negative connotation (Klima and Bellugi). The signs CHEAT, BRIBE, SWIPE, and OPPRESSION also use this underhandedness (Klima and Bellugi). Nowadays, to wittily convey blighted-NEW-YORK, a signer might use the handshape and movement from the sign for NEW YORK under his armpit (Doreen Kelley, personal communication, December 15, 2010).



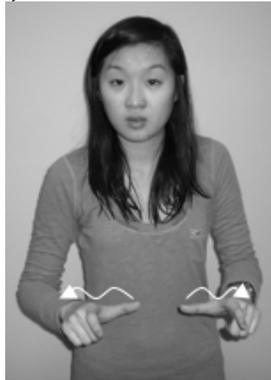
NEW YORK



blighted-NEW YORK
(as per Klima and Bellugi 1979)

4.1.5. Example of Blending Movements

Instead of co-articulating parts of signs (a phenomenon discussed later in the Syntax section), different signs can be melded together as one. One of the ways signs can fuse together is by combining their movements. A signer, who once became irritated after a discussion on linguistics, was noted to have started signing LINGUISTICS but soon switched the handshape and went right into the sign BALONEY. These two signs use similar, two-handed movements, so cleverly blending them was possible. (Klima and Bellugi, 1979)



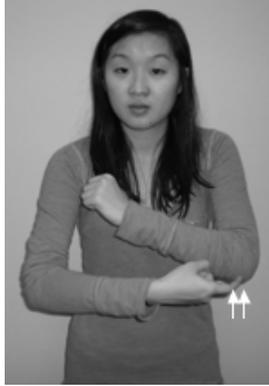
LINGUISTICS



BALONEY

4.1.6. Example of Blending Transitions

The other way to blend signs together comes from altering how the hands go from one sign to the next. Normally, the transition between signs contains no meaning. But when transitions are blended, the end of one sign blurs the transition to the next sign by being drawn out slowly in the space between each sign until the next sign can be started. This is only seen in sign play and more artistic utterances. A woman once demonstrated this when she described caving in to her sweet tooth after trying not to. She started out with TEMPT, which is a noniconic sign made by tapping the X-handshape on the elbow, and slowly moved the tapping up the elbow to her mouth, where her hand changed shape into a round object, symbolizing a cookie. After the hand made it to her mouth, she looked at her rounded hand and then abruptly pretended to eat it. (Klima and Bellugi, 1979)



TEMPT

What's really interesting about this example is that it also shows another phenomenon common in play in sign language: frame of reference shift⁹. A signer once said "I wouldn't be tempted if I cut off my elbow" (333). Such a joke shows a signer's knowledge that elbow is both a functional part of the signer's body and the PoA for a specific sign. This knowledge, in turn, allows the distinction between those two frames of reference to be playfully blurred. (Klima and Bellugi, 1979)

4.1.7. Application of Humor Theories to Signed Humor

It is clear that, at the very least, the incongruity-resolution mechanism holds for each example of sign play because the viewer is presented with illegitimate signs and she needs to make sense of them. In terms of the SSTH, this might be a case of real vs. unreal scripts. One might argue that there isn't a true disparity between interpretations here because the novel sign is essentially nonsensical (and thus semantically empty). I believe that even though there is not a definite meaning in the nonsense interpretation, it is an interpretation all the same, and the SSTH should apply.

Moving on, the part of SSTH that says humor arises from violating the Gricean Maxims can also be validated here – the signers blatantly flout the maxim of Manner, which says that speakers or signers should be clear and avoid ambiguity. Making up a novel, nonsensical sign on the spot does everything but.

Similarly, the GTVH seems fairly applicable to sign play. The fact that the GTVH does not emphasize the role of Gricean Maxims is a matter of concern here, because the Logical Mechanism in these jokes would likely have ties to the Cooperative Principle or the maxims of NBF communication since this is an instance of NBF communication. Nevertheless, most of the Knowledge Resources are easily identified. There is an empty value for Target; the Script Opposition arises from the disparity between seeing the nonsense sign and the cleverly altered one; the Logical Mechanism is the inference made when the knowledge of the original sign is blended with the gestalt from the substitution; and the Narrative Strategy is lexical play. The Situation and Language parameters, however, are not so easily explained. This might be because sign play can be taken out of context and can still be humorous. Without context, Situation and Language (when dealing with punch lines) don't appear to work. Arguably, Situation could be considered the conversation at hand without ever explicitly being mentioned. The Language parameter is

⁹ This is not to be confused with "role-shift," which will be discussed later in the paper in Section 4.7.1.

hard to place because there is no proper punch line, unless the playful sign itself is considered to be the punch line of the signer's overall utterance. If the Language parameter is a moderator of all other parameters/Knowledge resources, though, it could still perhaps be seen within the Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism. The Script Opposition is resolved because of the signer's knowledge of (a) how parts of other signs can be fused with another sign to give an additional meaning and (b) how some parameters may be altered by limitations of the signer (e.g., how different bases can be used for two-handed signs when the signer is holding something). The GTVH's addenda for longer texts obviously don't apply here.

While the aforementioned definition of a pun does not constitute a totally inclusive humor theory itself, it might still be able to adequately describe sign play, but only under one condition: that the nonsense view of the sign is recognized as such. Assuming that this does, in fact, happen, then just like when we hear or read the word *slithy* in "Jabberwocky," the nonsense signs aren't immediately incorporated into the viewer's lexicon as a concrete and ready-to-use new entry. Therefore, viewers are still able to recognize the sign play as such, and the two interpretations are preserved even after disambiguation.

4.2. Other Uses of Phonological Play

Phonological play extends far beyond merely altering the parameters of a sign. Puns, canons (breaking an expected pattern for a humorous effect), symmetry tricks, and meta-jokes (jokes that use and display a signer's linguistic prowess) are also dependent on plays within phonology. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.2.1. Puns

Puns in ASL are made when two meanings can be interpreted from one pre-existing sign. Simon Carmel (October 25, 2007, in a performance at Swarthmore College, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009) uses a pun in the following riddle:

(10) Q: "Why do Deaf people love flying?"

A: Moving the I-L handshape in front of the signer

In ASL, I-LOVE-YOU is nearly the same as AIRPLANE (the sign for AIRPLANE involves making the I-L handshape jab twice in the neutral signing space) (Sutton-Spence and Napoli).

4.2.2. Canons

Canons, like puns, also present incongruity to the viewer, but in a different way. Instead of having two inconsistent interpretations, the incongruity develops from an unexpected deviation from a pattern that is presented. For example, in English, there is a poem that goes: "An ancient Carthusian monk / Was sleeping one night in his bunk / He was dreaming that Venus / Was kissing his elbow / And woke up all covered in sweat" (71). This pseudo-limerick¹⁰ is humorous not only because the expected rhyme scheme is broken but also because we expect a somewhat vulgar ending to the fourth line and are given a surprisingly innocent one instead. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

Although limericks and their associated canons are not actually seen in ASL, performers will still set up comparable patterns and disjunctions by setting up 'rules' that

¹⁰ By definition, a limerick is a poem that uses an a-a-b-b-a rhyme scheme.

govern the language comprising their act (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). One example of this is in Ken Lerner and Peter Cook's story "Baseball" (cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli), wherein Peter embodies each member of a baseball team but always keeps one of his feet planted in one spot. He moves his body all around but always keeps the one foot fixed, whether he is portraying the pitcher, catcher, runner, first basemen, umpire, third basemen, or batter. A lot of humor is found at the conclusion of the story, when the batter makes a hit and Peter moves both of his feet (Sutton-Spence and Napoli). The breaking of the system used to describe the characters' positions is analogous to the breaking of the rhyme scheme of an anomalous limerick. It's imperative to note that the breaking of the pattern is not the sole source of funniness, however; a lot of humor is derived from the entertaining non-manual elements of the performance (e.g., exaggerated facial expressions) (Sutton-Spence and Napoli).

4.2.3. Symmetry Tricks

Symmetry tricks also bear a good deal of wit. There is an internationally known joke about a biplane whose two tiers of wings talk to one another (Bouchauveau 1994, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). The signer telling the story mimics the biplane by keeping his dominant hand and arm horizontal in front of him, making the B-handshape, and the non-dominant hand and arm parallel to the dominant one but below it, also with the B-handshape. Throughout the story, the two 'wings' move but always stay parallel with one another. Eventually, the bottom wing taps the elbow of the top wing to ask for a change in direction (which is a humorous sight itself in its absurdity). After the top wing agrees, the bottom wing signs GO, and each wing goes in an opposite direction (to each side of the signer's body), creating quite the mid-air catastrophe. The linguistic slapstick provides humor and a moral for the Deaf community (saying that they must stick together no matter what because going separate ways would end in a disastrous split similar to the biplane's). (Napoli and Sutton-Spence 2009)

4.2.4. Meta-Jokes

The last way of playing with phonology, meta-jokes, utilizes the signer's understanding of the structure of her language. One noted meta-joke exploits another way of saying INVOLVE and it uses two bits of information about the formation of signs in ASL. Normally, in the sign for INVOLVE, the dominant hand, starting in a 5-handshape, hovers over the non-dominant hand, which is in an O-handshape on its side; when the dominant hand moves towards the non-dominant hand, it changes from the 5-handshape to the O-handshape, and inserts itself into the 'O' the non-dominant hand has made. The first piece of linguistic knowledge implemented into the meta-joke sign is in knowing that the change from the 5-handshape to the O-handshape (without the extra movement) is also the sign for the number 50. The second piece of linguistic knowledge used, which completes the meta joke, deals with how one intensifies a sign: a signer can sometimes intensify one-handed signs performing the sign on both hands, literally doubling it. Therefore, a clever way of saying 'very involving' in ASL is done by signing 2 then 50 (roughly, '50 on both hands'). (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.2.5. Application of Humor Theories to Other Types of Phonological Play

Overall, most of what the SSTH and GTVH have to say appears applicable to ASL puns, canons, symmetry tricks, and meta-jokes. While the Knowledge Resources are usually easily accounted for (with the occasional exception of Situation), exactly how Grice's maxims come into play is often not as easy to explain. Furthermore, the examples of a canon and symmetry trick above present three types of humor that don't fit in anywhere with the SSTH and GTVH: incongruity in the form/presentation (not in the meaning), slapstick, and exaggeration.

The pun in Section 4.2.1 is a humorous instance where all but one of the Knowledge Resources (Situation) under the GTVH are recognized. The Script Opposition is between a normal, expected state of affairs vs. an abnormal, unexpected state of affairs – the signs I-LOVE-YOU and AIRPLANE. The Logical Mechanism is identical to the one used in phonological sign play, with the trigger lying in the answer of the riddle. The Narrative Strategy is, quite obviously, a riddle. There is an empty value for Target or it is meant to be ASL in general, since the nature of the riddle points out an ambiguity in the language. The Language follows the lead of the Narrative Strategy here, placing the 'punch line' at the end (since the pun is in the answer to a riddle). This Knowledge Resource also constructs the answer by simply making the sign – having to explain that AIRPLANE is nearly equivalent to I-LOVE-YOU would probably take away some humor. Once again, the Situation, in this joke, is not clear.

For the pun, it is also not clear where Grice's maxims or NBF communication come into play. The maxim of Manner is probably violated if and when the punning riddle is kept strictly in the format above, because the answer makes the viewer discover the correlation between I-LOVE-YOU and AIRPLANE herself. Nevertheless, it is hard to say if this instance of NBF communication is crucial to creating the humor or not.

As would be expected, the definition of puns given seems to line up nicely to the pun above. The ambiguity is obvious because the two signs in question are nearly identical. All the same, I-LOVE-YOU and AIRPLANE are truly distinguishable by movement (I-LOVE-YOU is stationary while AIRPLANE is not), so the signs are not homophones and the disambiguation between the two is possible. Both meanings are still kept in mind even after disambiguation, however, by remembering key words in the question: "Why do Deaf people *love flying*?"

For the canon in Section 4.2.2, there are some issues with identifying the scripts and Script Opposition required by the SSTH and GTVH. The Script Opposition here is tricky because it's not rooted in semantics or the viewer's personal interpretation of it. Unless Raskin and Attardo would allow for a script to also include other types of interpretations (other than a specific word's semantics), the humor of canons cannot be explained with these theories. In canons, the Script Opposition comes more from the actual presentation rather than from the meaning itself (via an disparity between a normal, expected state of affairs vs. an abnormal, unexpected state of affairs). Despite the challenge to Script Opposition, all of the other Knowledge Resources as outlined by the GTVH are fairly obvious.

NBF communication does not seem totally relevant for canons, either. Technically speaking, no Gricean maxim is violated by purposely messing up one's supposed rhyme scheme.

The very last observation regarding canons (and their humorous supplements) in Section 4.2.2 provides another good challenge for the SSTH and GTVH. It's difficult to say if comical overstatements or embellishments, such as exaggerated facial expressions, are comical because they entail the flouting of a Gricean maxim because they are simply incongruous. Unless sarcasm is employed, exaggerations wouldn't be ambiguous (i.e., flouting Manner), irrelevant (i.e., flouting Relation), superfluous (i.e., flouting Quantity), or untruthful (i.e., flouting Quality). Especially with regards to ambiguity, it almost seems contradictory to think that something taken to the extreme could simultaneously be used for vagueness. Exaggerated facial expressions could arguably come from flouting Manner because they can be likened to over-articulating in spoken language. Ultimately, the SSTH's idea that humor comes from disobeying Grice's Cooperative Principle doesn't always cleanly account for suprasegmental humor. Humor from exaggeration can be interpreted as a resolution of incongruity rather well, however. An exaggerated facial expression could be seen as funny because it is defying what is expected (namely, an appropriate and normal expression). Suprasegmental humor will also be discussed later, in Section 4.7.

Although not every joke or witticism that plays on it contains slapstick or absurd imagery, the symmetry trick in Section 4.2.3 does present another fair test (similar to that of exaggeration) to the SSTH and GTVH. The absurdity/farce element of slapstick supports the incongruity/Script Opposition model, but slapstick's prominent aspect of violence/embarrassment isn't so easily explained. Unless the situation is ironic, a (humorously) violent occurrence won't entail much incongruity, unless the incongruity is said to come from witnessing the absurdity itself. The humor might possibly be explained as a flouting of Grice's maxim of Manner (specifically, the signer disobeys "be orderly"). This, unfortunately, is a fairly convoluted (and somewhat punning) interpretation of the maxim, and it only works if the instruction "be orderly" can be seen as advice for controlling one's *behavior* as well as structuring the discourse¹¹. On the other hand, hostility and/or release theories might be more adept in explaining this mode of humor. Perhaps incongruity is only the dominating mechanism behind humor, with hostility and/or release as less common but still independently employed mechanisms. Regardless of which type of model can account for humor, slapstick can still present itself as a *linguistic* element of humor in ASL but it cannot be explained by the GTVH.

The meta-joke perfectly exemplifies a Script Opposition: the watcher is literally given the numbers two and then fifty but can reason out the meaning 'very involving' from it instead. Once again, though, the GTVH seems to predict too much beyond what is available in this joke. Once again, the Situation cannot be easily accounted for. What constitutes the Target is unclear as well – since these are meta-jokes, is the joke making fun of the language itself? The use of NBF communication also works here – using a meta-joke like this plainly flouts Grice's maxim of Manner ('avoid ambiguity of expression').

4.3. Internal Changes to Sign Morphology

Sign play can also be a product of modifying a sign's morphemes. What makes sign play with morphology possible is the fact that ASL uses both classifiers and incorporation.

¹¹ In this way, if a signer flouts Manner for a slapstick effect, her signs might be better described as *unruly* than *disorderly*. Her thoughts and signs wouldn't necessarily be jumbled and hard-to-follow – they'd be rowdy and undisciplined.

Classifiers, as discussed before, are designated handshapes used to represent a specified noun so that the original sign for the noun doesn't have to be signed while moving to articulate a verb. Similarly, incorporation is using specific number handshapes in place of the normally occurring handshape of nouns in order to quantify them. (For example, the sign WEEK, normally made by sliding the 1-handshape across a base made by the non-dominant hand, can be made with all the cardinal number handshapes to indicate a certain number of weeks.) Although incorporation is primarily only seen with numbers, it appears that other meaningful handshapes can be used for the sake of sign play. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.3.1 Example of Changes in Sign Morphology for Humor

Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2009; examples originally from Carmel 2006) provide an analysis of some well-known examples of morphological play. These examples involve varying the sign for I-LOVE-YOU in ASL. This sign, which dates back to circa 1895, is made on one hand with the thumb, index finger, and pinky sticking out from a fist – a sign which simultaneously makes the letters I, L, and Y (the I-L handshape). One variation of I-LOVE-YOU involves making the sign but also twirling the index finger in front of the body (a place known as 'neutral space'). This sign now takes on the meaning "I always love you" because I-LOVE-YOU has been incorporated into the sign for ALWAYS (which is made by twirling a 1-handshape in neutral space). A second variation of I-LOVE-YOU ends up with the meaning "Do you love me?" This meaning arises when the index finger stretches up and down and the signer's eyebrows are raised; unsurprisingly, the sign for I-ASK-YOU is made by raising one's eyebrows and bouncing the index finger (basically switching from a 1-handshape to an X-handshape). One last variation of I-LOVE-YOU does not add any movements but instead incorporates the R-handshape: the thumb and pinky still stick out but the index finger is now crossed with the middle finger. Here, the meaning "I really love you" is created. As Donna Jo Napoli (personal communication, December 4, 2010) noted, this is also an instance of initialization superimposed on the sign for I-LOVE-YOU.

4.3.2. Application of Humor Theories to Morphological Play

The humor in morphological play provides the same evaluation of the humor theories as does the cases of phonological play in Section 4.1.7. The SSTH and most of the GTVH seem valid, as well as the definition for puns.

Just like phonological play, all but the Situation and Language Knowledge Resources are easily to identify. Again, the Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism come from being presented with a nonsense sign, all the while possessing knowledge of a similar, legitimate one. (This again assumes that a nonsensical interpretation can be considered a script.) The Target is again empty and the Narrative Strategy is word play. Once more, the Situation as a Knowledge Resource does not seem appropriate or necessary. The Language, as was explained in the section on phonological play, must have the playful sign itself as the punch line since these signs can exist independently for humor. The signer again flouts Grice's maxim of Manner since she is purposely using a sign that does not officially exist.

As with phonological play, the definition of puns only works if the viewer keeps the nonsensical meaning in mind. This is not impossible and most likely probable, seeing as these playful signs are able to inspire entertainment (meaning the viewer must recognize their meaning from something seemingly nonsensical).

4.4. Changes to Sign Syntax

In sign languages, syntax is generally fashioned more from the structure and meaning of the signs rather than the order in which the signs are presented. Overall, there are four features of sign language that are particularly syntactic: multiple articulators, repeating predicates, faceting, and cinematographically-used classifiers. And, as it turns out, all four of these features can be played with for a humorous effect. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.4.1. Using Multiple Articulators

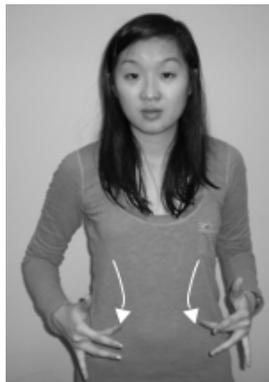
Since ASL has multiple potential articulators (i.e., two hands), more than one thing can be expressed at a time (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). Signers use these multiple articulators for humor through “simultaneous articulation” and “double articulation,” as explained by Klima and Bellugi (2009).

4.4.1.1. Simultaneous Articulation

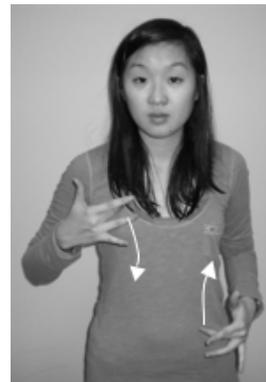
Klima and Bellugi (1979) provide an example for a novel humorous sign that contains two concomitantly articulated signs. Their example appears to use slightly older variations of the constituent signs but it provides a valid illustration nevertheless. When a signer was once asked how he felt about leaving one job and starting another, he replied, roughly translated into English, ‘I’m excited about the new position but depressed about leaving.’ During this utterance he combined the signs for EXCITED and DEPRESSED by articulating both signs concomitantly, one on each hand. At the time of Klima and Bellugi’s (1979) publication, the signs for EXCITED and DEPRESSED were identical except for one parameter; both signs used the same handshape, two hands, the same movement path, and the same PoA, but their directions were different (EXCITED brought the hands up while DEPRESSED moved them downwards). Thus the signs, despite being antonyms, could easily be co-articulated and fused.



EXCITED (as per Klima and Bellugi 1979)



DEPRESSED



EXCITED-DEPRESSED-at-the-same-time

This particular example of sign play is now obsolete, however. It would no longer be made because at present the sign for EXCITED involves moving two open-8-handshapes upward in alternating circles in the neutral signing space (Doreen Kelley, personal communication, December 15, 2010).

4.4.1.2. Double Articulation

In addition to simultaneously articulating two signs in order to form a novel one, two signs can be co-articulated by freezing one (or part of one, if the original sign is two-handed) and actively performing the other. This is called double articulation. A young man once demonstrated an example of this when he agreed with someone's comment that he was good at looking out for attractive young women. The signer created a new sign to convey this skill of his by first signing a more pantomimed version of EYES, a sign that requires both hands starting up by the eyes. He then moved his one hand down into the sign EXPERT, which is articulated by the mouth, while still holding his one hand in the sign EYES. Ultimately this created the meaning 'eyes-pert' or 'a knack for watching girls'. This sign shows that cases of double articulation generally involve exploiting the formational similarities between two signs with semantic dissimilarities. (Klima and Bellugi, 1979)



EYES (as per Klima and Bellugi 1979)



EXPERT



'a knack for girl watching'

4.4.2. Repeating Predicates

The second syntactic feature of ASL is that predicates, after being used once, can be repeated two or more times with additional information. Fischer and Janis (1990), as cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2009), refer to these types of constructions as “verb sandwiches.” If the additional information that is inserted is ridiculous, verb sandwiches then become a means for humor. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli, 2009)

An example of this is in Darrell Holman and Michael Roby's (n.d.) short video “Fastest Hands in the West.” In this presentation, two cowboys have a showdown of absurd stories. The first cowboy starts by signing that a person gets on a horse and is riding it. He continues by repeating the riding sign and adding that the person is nearly falling off the horse – first sliding off the one side, then the other, and then riding upside-down until he finally regains his seat in the saddle. Rejoining, the other cowboy makes the sign for a person riding and adds that he soon finds himself running alongside the horse. The two continue back and forth, adding more and more silly clauses until one cowboy's character finishes the other cowboy's off with what looks like a bazooka or cannon. The sandwiching of predicates here creates for a rather absurd and thus humorous story. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009; Holman and Roby n.d.)

4.4.3. Faceting

A third syntactic feature of ASL involves a signer shifting the perspective of a certain event or character. This linguistic occurrence is known as “faceting,” a term coined by

Humphrey and Alcorn (1996, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). In sign languages, faceting is done by adding extra phrases to signs, not by altering parameters of a sign (as in spoken languages, where perspective change is sometimes indicated by inflectional morphology). (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2009) note that Bouchauveau's (1994) bulldog story perfectly exemplifies using faceting for humor. In the story, Bouchauveau describes a bulldog by detailing his paws, ears, face, tail, etc. individually to depict the dog's proud swagger. As each new description is added, the picture becomes funnier and funnier because of the unconventional nature of the presentation.

4.4.4. Cinematographic Classifiers

The fourth and final syntactic feature of ASL, cleverly using classifiers to convey cinematographic-like expressions, was discovered by Bahan (2006a, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). A signer can use different kinds of classifiers to mimic close-ups, long-shots, panning a scene, and different point-of-view angles. For example, if a signer is telling the viewer about a horse, a close-up would use a classifier for his hooves and a long-shot would use a classifier for the whole horse. This method is not strictly used for humor, but when it is, the new perspectives are unconventional and surprising. Bahan's (2006) example details when a signer describes a pinball machine – the signer zooms in so close that he feels the paddles' every strike, just as if he himself were a pinball. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.4.5. Application of Humor Theories to Humor from Changes in Syntax

The simultaneous articulation and double articulation examples from above test provide the same result as phonological (Sections 4.1 and 4.2) and morphological play (Section 4.3). The SSTH, GTVH, and definition of puns are all validated here with the same reasoning as above.

Repeating predicates for a humorous effect, however, is not so easily explained by either theory. Since “The Fastest Hands in the West” above (Section 4.4.2) is funny because of its ridiculousness, there's an opposition between what's expected and what's shown, but not necessarily two overlapping scripts (unless, of course, one script is COWBOY and the other is something along the lines of RODEO CLOWN). Similarly, how humor is a product of a violation of Grice's maxims is not apparent. The two comedians in “The Fastest Hands in the West” are telling a story and, quite frankly, anything can happen in a story.

Using faceting and cinematographic classifiers for humor give the same evaluation as canons (Section 4.2.2). The SSTH and GTVH can only be accounted for if there can be a Script Opposition between the expected and given *presentation* of a single script. Bouchauveau's bulldog story and Bahan's pinball story (Sections 4.4.3 and 4.4.4, respectively) don't have two overlapping but incongruous scripts, just unconventional and unexpected presentations. For faceting and cinematographic classifiers, however, the Grice's maxim violation is obvious: Manner is violated because the presentation is fairly obscure, however humorous.

In addition, Bahan's pinball story brings up the element of slapstick again, which is not accounted for by the SSTH or the GTVH.

4.5. Internal Changes to Sign Semantics

When the semantics of a sign are the object of humorous play, the byproducts are usually meta-jokes. These jokes usually arise when there is a purposeful disparity between a sign's semantics and pragmatics or between the hands' indexical and bodily uses. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.5.1. Disparity between Semantics and Pragmatics of Signs

For jokes where the humor stems from clever play between semantics and pragmatics, the signer no longer recognizes handshapes and PoAs as linguistic components of signs but instead as simple hands and body parts, respectively. These jokes present an entertaining "ambiguity" that "asks the audience to decide if the hand is a formational element or something to manipulate the sign" (80). And in the resolution of this ambiguity, people can enjoy a pun that is both visual and linguistic. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

Klima and Bellugi (1979; Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009) give a good example of a joke based on semantics vs. pragmatics. Usually, the sign CLEAR involves both hands moving from the center of the neutral signing space outward while changing from the O- to 5-handshape. A clever spin on CLEAR starts with the non-dominant hand in the O-handshape. The dominant hand then opens up the non-dominant hand to the 5-handshape, transforming a sign for CLEAR into one for MAKE-(THINGS)-CLEAR.

Another example of this is a play on the signs NOTHING and KNOW. NOTHING is made by shaking an O-handshape in the neutral signing space; KNOW is made by tapping a bent (i.e., slightly curved) B-handshape on the part of the forehead adjacent to the temple. Consequently, signers can create a playful sign for KNOW-NOTHING by patting an O-handshape on the middle of the signer's forehead twice. The must recognize that the PoA has moved from the temple to the middle of the forehead to realize this joke plays with a sign's meaning via its physical presentation. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.5.2. Using Hands as Hands vs. as Indexicals

Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2009) note that the key to jokes that use the duality of the hands' use as indexicals and body parts is the fact that they unify an abstract representation of meaning with a very visual classifier.

A well-known example of this type of humor, as pointed out by Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2009), is a story of a giant and a little person. As Bienvenu (1994:20) summarizes,

- (11) A huge giant is stalking through a small village of wee people, who are scattered throughout the streets, trying to escape the ugly creature. The giant notices one particularly beautiful blonde-haired girl scampering down the cobblestone street. He stretches out his clumsy arm and sweeps up the girl, then stares in wonder at the slight shivering figure in his palm. "You are so beautiful!" he exclaims. The young woman looks up in fear. "I would never hurt you," he signs. "I love you. I think we should get MARRIED." With the production of the sign MARRY, of course, the beautiful mistress is crushed. The giant then laments, "See, ORALISM is better."

Since the sign for MARRY in ASL involves hooking two C-handshapes tightly together, the girl who was once standing on the giant's palm, is tragically (but also humorously) crushed by the giant's proposal. The first punch line of the joke uses the fact that the hands can be seen using both their normal function (as grasping body parts) and their

linguistic one (as indexicals). From the first point of view of the hands, the second view of them becomes inconsistent and absurd, adding the humorous element to the joke. This joke's second punch line, which is sometimes omitted, sarcastically condemns society's oppressive use of oralism. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.5.3. Application of Humor Theories to Humor Rooted in Semantics

For both ways of creating humor with a sign's semantics, the SSTH and GTVH account for them in the same way they do phonological, morphological, and some syntactic play (specifically double/simultaneous articulation). There must be a Script Opposition between a nonsense interpretation and the intended one. The Target for this type of humor might be the language itself or an empty value. And, once more, the Situation seems superfluous, since these jokes could also probably stand on their own without too much additional context. The remaining Knowledge Resources seem obvious enough.

For semantic sign play, there seems to be a violation of Grice's maxim of Manner, since an illegitimate sign is given instead of a direct paraphrasing.

4.6. Cross-linguistic Jokes

Although ASL and English are two completely separate languages, their proximity facilitates borrowing and influence. English's influence on ASL is seen a variety of ways: ASL users can mouth the English word for a sign as they are performing it, use loan translations (e.g., using the signs FIRE + WOOD for the English noun "firewood"), and fingerspelling (i.e., using the ASL alphabet to spell the English translations of signs). The first two influences are more commonly seen in BSL but English still affects ASL nevertheless. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

These influences provide a lot of substance for humor in ASL. Cross-linguistic jokes in ASL can develop from highlighting the similarities and differences between ASL and English, blending a hearing culture's gesture and one of ASL's signs, or emphasizing the contrast between ASL's visual modality and other languages' aural modality. More specifically, these methods of humor can be seen in bilingual puns, fingerspelling jokes, sarcasm with English signing systems, and gesture/sign jokes. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.6.1. Bilingual Puns

Bilingual puns in ASL can use ASL signs + a gesture alluding to a phrase in English or ASL signs + a meaning from English. The ASL sign + gesture combination is more commonly seen in ASL (or at least it appears so from what has been documented). One example of this type of pun is when a signer uses the sign PLAY by their ears to convey the meaning "play it by ear" (essentially, the PoA for PLAY is changed from the neutral signing space to next to the ears). Another example makes a joke out of "pasteurized milk." The sign for MILK, which is normally made in neutral-signing space by opening and closing an O-handshape multiple times, is instead made in a path going in front of the signer's eyes. This joke sign for PASTEURIZED-MILK makes an already silly pun in English ('past-your-eyes' or possibly 'pasture-eyes') into an even sillier one in ASL. A third example involves a joke sign for the store SEARS: instead of fingerspelling the store's name, the signer holds two S-handshapes next to her ears (presenting S + ear + S to the viewer). What solidifies this as a pun is that during the sign the signer usually makes it clear that this is a

‘tongue-in-cheek’ joke – she will noticeably push her tongue into her cheek while signing it. One last pun example plays off of the sounds in the name for a mountainous region in Pennsylvania, the Poconos (pronounced like [pɒʊk ə noʊz] or “poke a nose”). Typically, to refer to the Poconos, a signer would fingerspell the name out. A joke sign for POCONOS, however, is made by literally poking one’s nose with the dominant hand’s index finger. This pun not only presents an English pun in a visual and literal way but it also is very close to the sign for FUN (which is made by taking the dominant hand in a U-handshape [which is the same as the H-handshape] and grazing the tip of one’s nose with it before bringing it down to the fingers of non-dominant hand, also in a U-handshape, in the neutral signing space). (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

An example of a pun that combines an ASL sign with a meaning from English can be witnessed when a signer wishes to express that she wants to take a break. In general, this is indicated by signing PAUSE or REST, but to request it with humor, one can sign BREAK instead. The ASL sign BREAK exclusively refers to physically damaging something, made by moving two S-handshapes as though one was breaking a stick into two. What makes this pun particularly funny is that it jokes about English homophony. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.6.2. Fingerspelling Humor

Fingerspelling in ASL¹² corresponds to the spelling of the English word for a sign (this is true for other sign languages as well – words from the associated spoken language can be fingerspelled within the sign language). Words that are fingerspelled can be incorporated seamlessly into an utterance, and are often used to ensure understanding. Fingerspelling also influences the creation of some signs, such as in initialization and coinage. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

In initialization, a sign is made with a handshape that corresponds to the first letter of the English word for the sign (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). An example of this would be the sign LAW, which is made by bouncing an L-handshape down a base made by the non-dominant hand. The other way that fingerspelling can influence the creation of signs is by using fingerspelled word for the sign but changing its form enough over time so that the individual letters are no longer recognizable (Napoli and Sutton-Spence 2009). An example of this is one variation of the sign for ASL: one sign for it is slightly opening and closing an A-handshape over and over (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009).

Although fingerspelling does not have a great influence on ASL’s grammar (seeing as it only contributes to the lexicon), it certainly has many manifestations within ASL’s humor. It is most notably used in simple fingerspelling jokes, fingerspelling story games, “fingerspelled/ASL word characterizations,” and “fingerspelled/iconic representations” (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009; Rutherford 1993).

4.6.2.1 Fingerspelling Jokes

One rather famous fingerspelling joke is for the word HONEYMOON. The word is spelled concurrently with both hands, moving from the outside of the signing space to the

¹² Fingerspelling is used in BSL as well but not as often for linguistic play and novel sign creation. This is because the BSL manual alphabet is two-handed (except for C) and therefore harder to incorporate into new signs and fingerspelling play. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

middle of it gradually by letter. The spelling concludes in the middle with two adjacent N-handshapes; these N-handshapes look vaguely like two classifiers for people reclining or sitting next to one another as well as the sign for FORNIFICATE (which is made by changing two adjacent S-handshapes into two V-handshapes, palms down). Another joke that uses fingerspelling is another play on “I love you.” A joke sign for it is made in signing the numbers 1-4-3. These numbers refer to how many letters are in each word of the English phrase “I love you” and therefore this is also a cross-linguistic meta joke of sorts. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.6.2.2. Fingerspelling Story Games

Another way to use fingerspelling for humor is through games, which Bahan (2006: 37) refers to as “stories with handshape sequencing constraints.” They are more commonly known ABC stories (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009; Bahan) and “flying” manual alphabet stories (Carmel 2006), but they can also use numbers or a fingerspelled word (Bahan). In these games, signers create stories using a series of signs that utilize the letters of the manual alphabet in ‘ABC order’ (Sutton-Spence and Napoli), numbers in numerical order (Bahan), or the letters in the order of a particular fingerspelled word (Bahan). Regardless of the type of sequence, all of these stories must obey the following rules:

- (12) 1. The handshapes must be used in correct sequence. For example, in ABC stories, each handshape in the alphabet, from A to Z, needs to be used in succession. The same applies for number stories where the handshapes must be used in numerical sequence (e.g., 1 to 10).
2. If there are handshape deviations, they must be kept within the boundaries of allowable deviations.
3. There must be clear use of paralinguistic and discourse mechanism (such as shifting between characters, pausing, and use of space).
4. The story needs to make sense. (Bahan 37)

Since a fair number of letters in the manual alphabet use the same handshapes and differ only by movements or orientations (e.g., K/P, U/H/N, I/J), signers participating in these stories are permitted to focus solely on the handshapes of the letters and not how they actually move or are oriented (Rutherford 1993, cited by Bahan). Furthermore, since some handshapes have very few signs that use them (e.g., E and M), signers can borrow signs from English signing systems that use them (Bahan). For example, “EEE,” representing a screech (‘Eeek!’), is used for E and “MMM,” representing a humming noise, is used for M (Bahan).

Bahan (2006) also notes that some stories will designate either a single handshape or set of a few handshapes to use rather than a sequence. In this case, the first rule outlined in (12) is modified but all others still must be followed. This kind of story is used in Freda Norman’s piece “A Full Hand” (Lentz, Mikos, and Smith 1996, cited by Bahan). Norman uses only the B- and 5-handshapes to tell a story of how a man and woman’s child grows up, goes off to war, returns home, and grows depressed when he finds out his mother is dead. Throughout the story, the handshapes do change, but all within the limits of the constraint – the changes are in bending and spreading of the fingers in the 5-handshape and in bending the fingers in a B-handshape. According to Bahan (42), “the way the story unfolds [sic, recte helps] create a sense-making mechanism that viewers identify.”

Carmel (2006) cites an example of an ABC story that uses an A-handshape tapping on the non-dominant hand to represent a knock at the door, a B-handshape pulling away from a similarly-oriented non-dominant hand to show the door opens, a C-handshape moving in a circle in front of the signer's face to show the signer is looking for something, a D-handshape against a turned ear to show that the signer is saying "I heard something", and two E-handshapes moving out from the mouth to represent a shrill scream "Eeek!" The story goes on, using all of the letters, and concludes with the letter Z, which is seen as one wagging their finger in the air as if to say "No way!"

Another somewhat similar example given by Bahan (2006:37-8) tells the story of a person who enters a haunted house to find a devil sitting inside:

- (13) [*A man walks up to a haunted house*]
- | | |
|---|--|
| A: BEATING-HEART | (his heart beats loudly) |
| B: WALK | (as he walks up toward the door) |
| C: TURNS-DOORKNOB | (opens the door) |
| D: HEARS | (hears something) |
| E: "EEEE" | (a screeching sound) |
| F: TURNS-EYES-RIGHT | (glances quickly to the right) |
| [<i>As the devil</i>] | |
| G: POINTY-SHAPED-EYES | (sporting pointy eyes) |
| H: BOW-TIE | (and a bow tie) |
| I/J: HORNS | (with long pointy horns [note: it becomes clear at this point that this is the devil]) |
| [<i>Back to the man, who is very worried</i>] | |
| K: KILL-ME | (thinks to himself, "He'll kill me...") |
| L: LATER | (...later.) |
| M: SWEAT-TRICKLES | (sweat trickles down his face) |
| N/O: "FUNNY^ZERO | (thinks to himself, "This is serious...") |
| P: SEE-SEE" | (...let's see what I can do.) |
| [<i>Worriedly, he looks down and spots something in his pocket</i>] | |
| Q: PULLS-OUT | (pulls out a thin object) |
| R: CIGAR | (a cigar) |
| S: HANDS-OVER | (hands over the cigar to the devil) |
| T: "TRY | (and says, "Want to try...") |
| U: SMOKE" | (...smoking this?") |
| [<i>As the devil</i>] | |
| V: PUTS-CIGAR-IN-MOUTH | (puts the cigar in its mouth) |
| W: CIGAR-EXPLODES | (the cigar explodes in the devil's face) |
| [<i>Back to the man, who says...</i>] | |
| X: "SHOULD | (the man says, "I should...") |
| Y: NOW | (...at this very moment...) |
| Z: RUN-OFF" | (...flee.) |

The humor and entertainment value come from seeing how clever and creative the signer can get when selecting signs to use as well as from using more taboo themes for the story (e.g., sex; the latter mode of humor is much more common among adolescents) (Sutton-Spence and Napoli). Sutton-Spence and Napoli also note that a great deal of humor

can also come from exaggerated and comical facial expressions and body movements made while telling the story.

4.6.2.3. Fingerspelled/ASL Word Characterizations

While ABC games have been dated back to the beginnings of sign language, using fingerspelled/ASL word characterizations only dates back to the 1960s (Rutherford 1993, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). Fingerspelled/ASL word characterizations are presentations of a fingerspelled word wherein each handshape contributes to a short, highly visual description of the meaning and essence of the word. One example uses the word G-O-L-F:

- (14) (right hand) G: a tee is placed on the ground
(left hand) O: a ball is placed on the tee
(right hand) L: a club swings at the ball
(left hand) F: the ball becomes airborne
(Rutherford 1993, cited by Bahan 2006:42; also cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.6.2.4. Fingerspelled/Iconic Representations

In addition to the fingerspelling characterizations, there are also fingerspelled/iconic representations that use the signed letters to create an image of the word (Rutherford 1993, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). Two examples include F-A-L-L-I-N-G-L-E-A-F and B-O-U-N-C-I-N-G-B-A-L-L, which would have their fingerspelled letters moving like falling leaves or bouncing balls respectively (Sutton-Spence and Napoli). What makes these humorous is that they breach the grammar of ASL; normally signs do not change handshape more than once nor do they contain both internal movements and path movements simultaneously¹³.

4.6.3. Sarcasm and Signed Exact English

One way that education has tried to both bridge and close the gap between ASL (/BSL) and English in the education of Deaf individuals is by using English signing systems. In one of these English signing systems, called Signed Exact English, ASL (or BSL) vocabulary is used but with English grammar (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). Additional signs are also created for certain grammatical elements of English that ASL (or BSL) lacks (e.g., a sign for AND) (Sutton-Spence and Napoli). As Bienvenu (1994:22, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli) notes, Deaf signers will often use Signed Exact English signs for English verb endings (e.g., -ING or -ED) and signs for the English verb “to be” (e.g., AM, WERE) with particularly derisive sarcasm “toward those who created them.” Bienvenu (22, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli) also says how this use of the Signed Exact English signs is often supplemented with “contorted faces” that serve as “an editorial on the ineffectiveness of these codes.” With this type of humor it becomes apparent that bilingual jokes don’t only derive their humor from a signer’s creativity, wit, and knowledge of both languages – they also cultivate humor from a therapeutically silly response to oppression.

¹³ Signs are known to use two types of movement: internal movement and path movement. Internal movement is defined as movement ‘within’ a sign (e.g., changing handshapes or orientations) while path movement is the change of a sign’s location from one PoA to another. (Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2006)

4.6.4. Gesture/Sign Jokes

Jokes that use gestures vis-à-vis signs for humor aren't technically cross-linguistic, but they contrast two modalities (often from two different cultures) all the same.

One joke of this type, which exemplifies how a lot of signs can be misunderstood as gestures, involves a polite Deaf man traveling on a plane. He signs THANK YOU to the stewardess who helps him throughout the flight so when the flight ends he finds the stewardess waiting for him. She says, "You've been blowing me kisses all flight long. What do you intend to do about it?" This short anecdote is humorous and cute because THANK YOU, which is made by bringing a flat-B-handshape from the chin outwards, does look fairly similar to one blowing a kiss. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

Another well-known joke also plays off of misunderstandings with gestures but this time it is the Deaf individual that has the misunderstanding. As Rutherford (1983:313) writes,

- (15) There is a Deaf man driving along in his car. He is hurrying to get home because his wife will get very angry if he is late. He then comes to a railroad crossing and the gates are down. He waits as the train passes. The train is long past and still the gates are down. The man waits and waits and is thinking of how his wife is going to yell if he's late. The Deaf man then gets out of his car and proceeds to the control booth at the crossing, where there is a person who is in charge of all the controls. The Deaf man takes out his pencil and paper and tries to think of the English words to put on the paper requesting that the gates be raised. He thinks and thinks (in sign) and says to himself, ah ha, and writes the words, "Please b-u-t," and hands the paper to the hearing gatekeeper. The gatekeeper does not understand and says, "Huh?" (313)

First, in order to understand exactly why this is linguistically funny, one must know that BUT in ASL looks very similar to the lifting of the railroad gates. BUT starts with two 1-handshapes crossed in front of the signer, elbows out, and then has the hands move so the forearms are vertical. The cultural implications of this joke make it especially funny. One Deaf person's analysis of it, also quoted by Rutherford (315), shrewdly explains,

You have to understand both languages in order to understand the joke. The joke makes fun of the Deaf person...The joke makes fun of Deaf English and the writing problems, which 'they' blame on the influence of sign language. People blame sign language, so we have jokes that blame sign language. We laugh at that.

Another common theme among gesture/sign jokes shows that a Deaf person will commonly teach a new, hearing signer incorrect signs for laughs. One example, noted by Carmel (1989, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009), explains that students were teaching a new (hearing) professor at Gallaudet University some signs. One of these signs included GOOD MORNING – but instead of using its normal B-handshape, one of the students instructed her to use a fist with her middle finger sticking out. After she found out she had been deceived, she made sure to sign a proper GOOD MORNING to all students but the prankster, whom she greeted with his special version.

4.6.5. Application of Humor Theories to Cross-Linguistic Jokes

Both bilingual puns and gesture/sign jokes support the SSTH and GTVH in the same way. They both have a Script Opposition between a nonsense sign and the real meaning. Bilingual puns might even be considered to have a Script Opposition within a Script Opposition, since they are using English puns embedded in ASL's modality. The Target for bilingual jokes could possibly be English, at least sometimes, as evidenced in the BREAK joke (Section 4.6.1). Along the same lines, the Target for gesture/sign jokes is probably the recurring misunderstanding created by seeing signs as gestures. All other Knowledge Resources, with the exception of Situation for bilingual puns, are easily identified.

Bilingual jokes and gesture/sign jokes can also be explained by the violation of Grice's maxims, but in different ways. Bilingual jokes can be seen as a violation of Manner because a purposely obscure sign is created. On the other hand, the violation of Gricean maxims for gesture/sign jokes depends on the type of misunderstanding. If the misunderstanding is intentional, like the GOOD MORNING/middle finger prank, then someone must violate the maxim of Quality. If the misunderstanding is unintentional, like the THANK YOU/blowing a kiss joke or the BUT/please raise the gate joke, none of Grice's maxims are truly violated and NBF communication is not used.

The application of humor theories to the many types of fingerspelling jokes unsurprisingly yields many types of evaluations. For jokes like H-O-N-E-Y-M-O-O-N, the Script Opposition of the SSTH and GTVH can only work if it can be between a normal, expected form/presentation and the unexpected, given one. A joke like the 1-4-3 one is similar in this respect, though it contains the added elements of meta- and cross-linguistic humor. The other Knowledge Resources for both types of jokes are fairly easily identified with the exception of Situation, since the Situation seems to be part of the spelling itself in jokes like the H-O-N-E-Y-M-O-O-N one and nonexistent in jokes like the 1-4-3 one. Also, jokes like H-O-N-E-Y-M-O-O-N don't seem to violate any of Grice's maxims, since the presentation of the word is rarely unclear or ambiguous, though Manner might arguably be violated because it's not the most concise method of portraying the word. For 1-4-3 jokes, the maxim of Manner is definitely violated because the presentation of it is highly obscure and indirect.

Fingerspelled/ASL word characterizations and fingerspelled/iconic representations are other instances where the SSTH and GTVH can only be explained if there is allowed to be a Script Opposition between an expected *form* or *presentation* and the given one. Since each word is clearly and unambiguously spelled out, the only possible space for incongruity is between the expected, normal presentation and the unexpected, abnormal presentation given. Since nothing in the utterance is really obscure, just unconventional, it's hard to see these types of humor as flouting Grice's maxims. Once again, one could argue that Manner is violated because it's not the most concise way of articulating the concept, but the intended meaning is still pretty clear, even if not enhanced.

Humor involving sarcasm and Signed Exact English brings forth a whole new type of humor and evaluation. Here, in terms of the SSTH and GTVH, the Script Opposition would be between what is literally said and what is implied, whatever those differing scripts entail. Here, the Target would be Signed Exact English itself and the Situation as a Knowledge Resource does in fact work (the Situation would vary depending on the context in which the sarcasm is used, but it would be present nevertheless). Jokes of this type are plainly violations of Grice's maxim of Quality and Manner.

4.7. Suprasegmentals

Humor in ASL doesn't always involve a silly meaning or punch line of a joke. Because ASL is visual, there are many additional elements that can be used for comedy. In spoken languages, these extra-linguistic elements are generally referred to as suprasegmentals, and are defined as the features that can be added to a phoneme without changing its identity (e.g., intensity or volume, pitch, duration). Also, in spoken language, suprasegmentals can (but needn't always) be used to create minimal pairs and to change the pragmatics of an utterance. Although sign languages do not use sound, they still use suprasegmentals. This section focuses more on the pragmatic suprasegmentals, including role-shift, facial expressions, the sizes of signs, the dynamics of signs, the orientation of the signer, and personification/anthropomorphism, and how they can be used for humor. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.7.1. Role-Shift

Changing the point of view from which the story is told (i.e., role-shift) can offer a lot of possibilities for humor in ASL. Humor can be created if a new perspective is absurd, unconventional, or surprising. Role-shift is indicated in many ways; it can be conveyed by slightly changing one's orientation to the interlocutor (e.g., by pivoting the torso from the center about 45° to different sides to represent different characters), shifting or tilting one's head to either side or up and down for each different character, shifting one's eye-gaze up or down for each character, changing the classifier or which type of classifier is used, or changing facial expressions for each character. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

Bouchauveau (1994, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009) provides an example of using different classifiers for different characters. Although the story is in French Sign Language (LSF), since it uses pretty iconic classifiers, it could work in many other sign languages (Sutton-Spence and Napoli). In his story, Bouchauveau depicts the death of both a human and a bird. To convey this, he emphasizes the form and movement of their feet (Sutton-Spence and Napoli). When the human dies, he is depicted as falling on his back, feet sticking up (as indicated by two flat-B-handshapes side-by-side), each eventually falling to the side (Bouchauveau 1994:30). But when the bird dies, the performer shows first that the bird falls to his side by presenting both feet classifiers, in what look like 3-handshapes, stacked vertically in the neutral signing space, and then that it has died, by curling his fingers (representing the bird's toes) into fists (Bouchauveau 30). The way Bouchauveau decides to portray this scene is creative and unconventional, making it humorous despite its morbid subject matter.

4.7.2. Facial Expressions

Changing facial expressions can be used for humor in role-shift but it can also stand on its own for such purposes. Facial expressions also can give a great deal of information about how the character looks and are the closest elements that ASL has to intonation. Illustrating characters in this way is arguably one of the most common and important means of humor. Facial expressions can be humorous because of how accurately they can imitate a person or portray a caricature and because of how effectively they can anthropomorphize non-human creatures or objects. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

Another universally applicable example comes from Bouchauveau (1994, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009) in a story about a man pursuing a woman. During his

performance, he uses all the regular signs to tell the story but accompanies his signs with rather telling facial expressions; although it is never explicitly stated, the audience knows that the man is intrigued, hopeful, and perhaps a bit piggish, all from the signer's facial expressions. Without the facial expressions, a lot of the story and a lot of the humor would not be conveyed. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

It's also important to note that the lack of facial expressions in ASL can be humorous as well. This is because absent facial expressions are associated with the less proficient hearing signers who maintain blank faces while signing. In a sketch about being asked to teach his fellow students a song in ASL, Keith Wann (n.d., cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009), who is a Child of Deaf Adults (CODA), uses this fact for humor. When he comes to describing the boys in his class, he makes sure to keep a blank expression. This is especially hilarious because it's incongruous; the audience knows that a signed song without facial expression is absurd. Making sense of this incongruity occurs when the audience realizes that hearing people generally lack facial expression while signing. (Sutton Spence and Napoli)

4.7.3. Changes in the Sizes of Signs

Changing the size of the neutral signing space can have the same humorous effect as exaggerated facial expressions. Normally the neutral signing space is a square-shaped plane that extends from the signer's eyes to waist. When signs are made so large they extend past these boundaries, it gives the sign an exaggerated effect and is somewhat like yelling. One joke displaying this fact involves a Deaf couple arguing. After the wife gets so irritated that her signs exceed the signing space, her husband tells her, "NOT NEED YELL, I DEAF NOT BLIND." (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

In his lecture at Swarthmore College in 2000, Ben Bahan mentions exaggeration and going outside of the signing space while describing techniques used in ASL storytelling. He uses examples involving the sign LONG. LONG is made by dragging a 1-handshape along the length of the non-dominant hand (oriented downwards). However, an exaggerated LONG, carrying the meaning 'very long,' might extend this dragging from wrist to elbow or even out past the shoulder. The humor in this play stems from seeing the ridiculous exaggeration and from seeing how cumbersome it can be for the signer to make. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.7.4. Changes in Dynamics (Speed/Energy) of Signs

Changing a sign's dynamics (slowing down the movements or speeding them up) can be seen in many types of creative sign language, including poetry and humor. The slowing or quickening of most signs is entertaining because such an act exhibits a large amount of skill; it is challenging for signers to slow down or speed up all elements of a sign (including non-manual features and movements of the body) in precise unison. On the other hand, altering the dynamics of *classifiers* is also entertaining because it represents an actual change in the speed of the character. In general, unnatural dynamics are humorous because they bring an element of absurdity to the narration. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

In either case, when the dynamics are slowed, the non-manual features are underscored and exaggerated, contributing to the depiction of a caricature (especially when the narrated events should be occurring rapidly and this slow motion is used somewhat cinematographically). An example of this use can be seen in Judith Jackson's haiku about a

snail ascending Mt. Fuji. In order to demonstrate just how small and slow the snail is in relation to the mountain and mission at hand, she slows all of the snail's motions. Because snails are already known to be quite slow, using slow motion to describe the snail is funny in its overstatement. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

Speeding up the dynamics is most commonly seen in games. While these are not jokes per se, they can be humorous nevertheless. Just like English has tongue twisters, ASL has finger fumlbers. In these finger-fumlbers, signers must sign a message as quickly and as clearly as possible, which is a different from but as challenging as slowing an utterance down. A popular finger fumbler in ASL involves fingerspelling an English sentence: "If it is up to be, it is up to me." (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009; finger fumbler from Radner and Carmel 1981, cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli)

4.7.5. Varying Orientation to Viewers

As a rule, when signers communicate, they look at one another's face. Consequently, when performers purposely turn their backs to the audience, it is humorous because a very basic and simple rule of conversation has been deliberately broken. Keith Wann exemplifies this at a performance at Gallaudet University (entitled "Keith Wann," n.d., cited by Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). While Wann signs a song, he frequently spins around, and the audience can be heard laughing at his every turn. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli)

4.7.6. Personification/Anthropomorphism

Whenever a non-human creature or object is personified or anthropomorphized, there must be a suspension of disbelief because what is being said is ridiculous (in terms of humor theory, incongruous). Once the audience resolves this incongruity, however, they can appreciate the creativity employed by the signers to portray how these non-human things act like humans. Unsurprisingly, personification and anthropomorphism provide a lot of amusement and wit. More specifically, humor in personification/anthropomorphism can come from seeing the skill it takes to map corresponding parts of inanimate objects onto one's body parts as well as from making non-human things Deaf. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

Ben Bahan provides an example of clever non-human-thing-to-body-mapping in his sketch entitled "Ball Story"; the audience knows that the ball displays a huge grin because Bahan outlines a smile across his own face. Since he lets the audience know that his actions embody the ball's, detailing his own face accordingly details that of the ball. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

Using personification/anthropomorphism with the added element of deafness is widespread. One famous example of this is given by Carmel (2006). Carmel explains that a lumberjack goes into the forest and begins to cut down a tree. When the tree starts to fall he yells "Timber!" He successfully uses this same technique on a second tree. The third tree he comes across, however, simply will not fall when he comes to the "Timber!" part. Frustrated, the lumberjack calls up a tree surgeon. After examining the tree, the surgeon explains that the tree is Deaf. The lumberjack then asks the surgeon to step aside and faces the tree. He fingerspells T-I-M-B-E-R and, needless to say, the tree falls right down. Jokes like this always ask the signer to question how non-human things would act if they were Deaf. Invariably, the Deaf non-human things act, perceive, and communicate just as any

Deaf signer would. As a result, there is a lot of comedy in seeing how these non-human things adapt to being not only human-like but also Deaf. (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009)

4.7.8. Application of Humor Theories to Humor with Suprasegmentals

For all types of humor derived from the use of suprasegmentals except anthropomorphism/personification, the definition of Script Opposition under the SSTH and GTVH would need to be modified in order to include form/presentation. In humor that uses role-shift, facial expressions, changes in size of signs, changes in dynamics of signs, and varying orientation to viewers, the only incongruity again arises from an opposition between a normal, expected presentation and the given, abnormal/unexpected presentation. Otherwise, the other Knowledge Resources are identifiable in each and would vary depending on the individual joke.

Within these types of humor that are rooted in opposition of forms/presentations, with the exception of the use of purposely blank facial expressions and varying orientation to viewers, there does not seem to be any violation of Gricean maxims. Purposely blank facial expression might be seen as a violation of Manner, since it might be equated to saying something sans intonation in English, which can be very obscuring (e.g., saying *You want a muffin* without intonation when the intended meaning is evident in an intonation like *YOU want a muffin?* or *You want a MUFFIN?*). Somewhat like blank expressions, purposely turning away from viewers is violating a rule of discourse (in terms of Grice's maxims, this might also be a violation of Manner). Exaggerated facial expressions and changes to the size/dynamics of a sign aren't really violating any maxims because the effect just causes a meaning to be greatly emphasized, not necessarily difficult to comprehend. In reality, exaggerated facial expressions might be equivalent to over-enunciation in spoken languages (Ted Fernald, personal communication, November 22, 2010), similar to how making signs bigger can be equated to yelling.

For humor that involves personification and anthropomorphism, the Script Opposition would be between ANIMAL or INANIMATE OBJECT scripts and (DEAF) HUMAN scripts. Since personification and anthropomorphism are common and long-used techniques for entertainment, what truly makes their use in these jokes funny is the fact that they employ the DEAF script. Without also attributing them the characteristic of 'Deaf,' the personified/anthropomorphized creatures and objects are not anything special. What really intrigues audiences is seeing how other Deaf creatures or things might also function in a hearing world. Like above, all other Knowledge Resources would depend on the humorous utterance at hand. In terms of Gricean maxims, anthropomorphism and personification arguably violate Quality, because animals/objects generally cannot act, think, speak, or perceive the world like humans, Deaf or hearing.

5. Close Viewing of a Sketch Performed by Bill Ennis

In Bill Ennis' (n.d.) *Live at SMI* sketch "Nitty," he talks about his pet cat. After telling the audience what he looks like and where he came from, he explains the cat's peculiar name. The translated voice over of the sketch says: "So where does Nitty come from? Why not Kitty? Everyone knows you call a cat 'Kitty.' Yeah, you got it – that's it, you got it: I can't say a K!" When Ennis signs, 'I can't say a 'K'', he really signs a REALLY-NO-GOOD-AT and then SPEECH. The story continues and Ennis explains how a family friend tried to call in Nitty from the outside one day but was unsuccessful. The family friend kept

calling “Kitty Kitty Kitty Kitty,” until her niece explained “He’ll never come to ‘Kitty’ if you call him like that. He just won’t come...Uncle Bill always says ‘Nitty’. Nitty! He can’t pronounce the K.” So upon calling *Nitty*, the cat immediately shows up. Ennis then explains what turns out to be a good twist on his inability to pronounce ‘K’: the cat knows never to respond to all the calls for *Kitty* and always waits until he hears *Nitty*. There are also elements of personification and exaggeration in the last portion of the sketch. While Ennis narrates a typical call for cats in the neighborhood, he embodies Nitty waiting to hear his name and makes silly, overly excited (i.e., exaggerated) gestures when finally hearing his name.

I was given two interpretations of the humor in this sketch. The first, given by Rosanna Kim (personal communication, November 15, 2010), a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) and a member of Deaf World, says that Ennis insinuates that “oralism has screwed him over.” Ultimately, though, Ennis’ twist shows that, despite how oralism doesn’t work, especially in his case, he’s almost proud of the fact that he can’t pronounce a ‘K’ because it has become quite useful. Doreen Kelley (personal communication, November 29, 2010), an ASL interpreter and course instructor who learned ASL later in life, does not see the anti-oralism interpretation here. Instead, she explains, that this is a cute story about one trait common to Deaf people, not necessarily a political satire.

Since this sketch plays off of life as a Deaf person, the major script in play here is probably that of DEAF. The Script Opposition in this joke would be in the realm of normal, expected state of affairs vs. abnormal, unexpected state of affairs. This opposition arises twice in two different parts of the sketch: first when the listener expects the cat to be named *Kitty* (but instead hears/sees *Nitty*) and again when the speech impediment actually turns out to be helpful. The Logical Mechanism isn’t any well-known rhetorical device; the opposing scripts are simply brought together when Ennis explains why the cat’s name is Nitty. The Situation is obvious and includes the characters, places, and settings described in the sketch. In Kim’s interpretation, the Target would be oralism, as many jokes with the DEAF script are, and with Kelley’s interpretation, the Target is probably Ennis himself. An anecdote is used for the Narrative Strategy. Language makes this a light story and has to do with the placement/presentation of the two triggers. The first trigger, towards the beginning, involves saying REALLY-NOT-GOOD-AT SPEECH instead of simply ‘I can’t pronounce a K’. The second trigger towards the end, which explains the twist, is more of a narration than an insinuation (like the first trigger) or a witty one-liner. Altogether, this anecdotal sketch seems to fit the Knowledge Resource portion of the GTVH quite nicely.

Where NBF communication comes into play in this sketch is unclear, however. It is plausible that Grice’s maxims are violated in the first trigger, where he alludes to what oralism has done to him rather than saying he cannot pronounce a ‘K’. The audience must make an inference about his inability to pronounce ‘K’ from what he really says, thus a maxim (most likely Manner) must have been violated. It’s unclear, however, if the humor arises solely from using REALLY-NOT-GOOD-AT SPEECH instead of ‘I can’t pronounce ‘K’ or simply because of the fact that, once again, oralism has messed something up. The second trigger, at the end of the poem, does not seem to violate any maxim at all (unless, of course, the act of personifying another humor or creature is seen as violating the maxim of Manner).

Similarly, the definition of puns also doesn’t quite line up here because the only possible pun within this anecdote is in the cat’s name. Since names can really be anything, it

is not hard for the audience to accept the fact that the cat is named Nitty (however more appropriate the similar name Kitty is). None of the humor in this sketch appears to arise from ambiguity, so clearly the definitions of puns cannot account for all types of humor.

6. Conclusions

The SSTH and GTVH are largely applicable to humor in ASL. There are some jokes, however, that either fail to be explained by either theory or fail to account for every part of each theory. Nevertheless, these weaknesses shed light on how these theories can be improved so as to explain more humor from more languages.

The first suggestion I propose is to eliminate the Situation as a Knowledge Resource. While it may be a good parameter since it can be a fundamental and distinguishing difference between two jokes, it fails to apply to a lot of signed humor (particularly sign play, whether phonological, morphological, syntactic, etc.). Since every bit of humor does not crucially need a Situation, I think the parameter should not be considered in a mechanistic theory. (The same might be also be said for Target since it sometimes has an empty value.)

Another correction that I suggest deals with the definition of a script or what can be opposed. As the analyses of humorous canons, cinematographic classifiers, faceting, fingerspelling jokes, fingerspelled/ASL word characterizations, fingerspelled/iconic representations, role-shift, facial expressions, size and dynamics of signs, and varying orientation to viewers show, Script Opposition doesn't always arise from two different meanings or interpretations. Instead, in these uses of humor, the opposition is between an expected form or presentation and an unexpected one. This new type of opposition most likely comes from the visual modality of ASL. Nevertheless, linguistics-based theories of humor should be able to account for even visually articulated languages.

A third suggestion I make is for a humor theory to include some way of analyzing slapstick (as seen in the biplane joke of Section 4.2.3 and the pinball sketch of Section 4.4.4) and humorously exaggerated facial expressions (as seen in Sections 4.2.2 and 4.7.2). In ASL, slapstick can be a byproduct of linguistic form and facial expressions are often grammatical elements. Therefore, slapstick and facial expressions should be able to be accounted for by a linguistic theory of humor.

My fourth suggestion is to abandon the parts of the theories that state that humor arises from violating Gricean maxims. While this true for a lot of humorous utterances, humorous utterances that employ repeating predicates, faceting, unintentional misunderstandings (in gesture/sign jokes), role-shift, facial expressions, changes in a sign's size or dynamics do not appear to be violating any of Grice's maxims. If articulated humor were truly a product of flouted maxims, all humorous utterances would support this. Speech Act Theory, a theory which says that implicatures are created by disobeying Grice's maxims, is validated because there are no examples of implicatures that don't violate a maxim. Although a lot of jokes do contain these violations (a fact which makes sense because the humor of an utterance is sometimes implied, not unlike the intended meaning of an implicature), some do not and therefore this is not a universal mechanism behind humor. In addition, the act of resolving a violated maxim does not seem all too important when interpreting a humorous utterance. The common mechanism behind humor seems to come from the resolution of an incongruity or opposition (between scripts). While it seems likely for Grice's maxims to create these incongruities and oppositions, that is not always

the case (again, as exemplified in humor that uses repeating predicates, faceting, unintentional misunderstandings [in gesture/sign jokes], role-shift, facial expressions, changes in a sign's size or dynamics. I think that NBF communication and the maxims listed in (5) shouldn't necessarily be included in the description of the underlying linguistic mechanism of humor. Nevertheless, NBF communication might be better served as rules for good jokes or for tools in predicting how well jokes may be received.

My fifth and last recommendation is a minor one; I suggest that a DEAF script be added alongside those for ethnic humor (e.g., JEWISH, POLISH, etc.). Consequently, I might advise that the classification of 'ethnic humor' might be renamed or reworked to include cultural humor as well, since a DEAF script seems to function much like the JEWISH or POLISH one does.

A more universal humor theory might want to focus primarily on the fact that all humor contains an *incongruity* or *opposition*. Instead of investigating and accounting for parameters that can describe the similarities between jokes, it might prove more useful to try and describe all the different kinds of oppositions/incongruities, whether they are between scripts, interpretations, presentations, or other elements of communication.

I originally started this paper expecting to find major differences between signed and spoken humor. Much to my delight, however, I was wrong. Really, there is only one readily apparent difference between signed and spoken humor – the fact that ASL uses fingerspelling, facial expressions, a capacity for slapstick, etc. in its humor. This dissimilarity is to be expected, given the visual nature of ASL. Otherwise, ASL creates and uses humor just like any spoken language.

In short, analyzing the humor in ASL has unveiled some of the weaknesses of the SSTH and the GTVH as well as what might be two linguistic universals. The first potential universal is apparent within each of my analyses: the fact that (linguistically-based) humor arises from an incongruity or opposition. The second potential universal is so obvious it's almost obscure: although humans and their languages can vary very greatly, the need for and dissemination of humor is essentially the same for everyone, whether the medium is oral or visual, spoken or signed.

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Appendix A: The Handshapes



1



5



B



A



D



F



G



H



I



L



N



R



S



T



V



X



Y



3



4



8



GOOD/A with
thumb out



Flat B



Bent B



Clawed V



I-L



Open 8