

# A one hand clapping theory of humor

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## Abstract

The presently prevailing theories of humor belong to the family of "incongruity theories". Namely, they speak about the meeting of two incompatible conceptual structures. According to these theories, a joke is formed when a single verbal structure, or situation, has two distinct and incongruous interpretations.

In this paper I show:

1. That the deeper process in the joke is not a play between two meanings, but detachment between one symbol and its meaning. Switching between two meanings is but one way of achieving this aim.
2. That the carriers of meaning incurring detachment are very varied – verbal structures, situations, actions, artifacts. I will devote special attention to the detachment of actions from their meaning, since this type of detachment is very common and explains some phenomena in humor that cannot be explained in terms of "incongruity".

## Introduction

Jokes and poems have much in common. They are both terse, and they both disregard the rules of logic. Both use exaggerations ("hyperboles", in poems) and unexpected twists, both often combine the elevated with the

low and the concrete with the abstract. And above all, they both like combining seemingly unrelated ideas, or even opposite ideas (oxymorons, in poetry). All this suggests that the joke and the poem share some common secret, some deep underlying mechanism. In my book "Man detaches meaning" (Hakibutz Hameuchad 2011) I tried to pinpoint such a mechanism – detachment of symbols from their meaning. This paper is a summary of the jokes side of the book.

Before starting, a word about the character of the paper: it will abound with examples. At times, it will look like a list of jokes. But there is no way around it: "theories of one joke" (namely a single example), while possibly fitting many cases, are likely to miss the more refined processes that govern all jokes.

## Incongruity

The first theories of humor that appeared in writing were about derision. Plato, followed by his student Aristotle, ascribed laughter to scorn. This is well suited to our laughing at people's failures, like slipping on a banana peel. It is also in good accord with the fact that derision has a funny taint to it. Alas, most jokes do not contain even a trace of derision. Trying to maintain the scorn theory, Hobbs explained this by the fact that after we realize that the joke pulled our leg, we feel scornful towards ourselves – "how stupid were we to fall for that". This, too, is not very convincing, and most present humor theories accept that it is the pulling of the leg that is significant, not the self-derision. Still, any theory of humor that claims for comprehensiveness must be able to explain, among the many other facets of humor, why derision has a funny flavor.

"Leg pulling" is metaphoric. Can it be formulated in concrete terms? This is what "incongruity theories" set out to do. They share two main

features. The first is being cognitive, namely placing humor in the realm of thought rather than that of emotions or drives. The second is that they all concern play between two conceptual frameworks. A verbal expression or a situation is found to have two distinct and incompatible interpretations. To this a temporal dimension should be added, that of change, a switch between the two patterns. As is well known, the punch line of a joke must give the story a surprising twist.

Here is a joke that suits this idea perfectly:

- Why did you run away from the operation table?
- The nurse said "Don't worry, it is a simple operation, no need to get so nervous"
- She was just trying to calm you down!
- Yes, but she said it to the doctor!

A hidden factor emerges – the addressee of the nurse's words – and changes the picture. The listener swaps horses in the middle of the race, jumping from one interpretation of the expression to another.

True to their name, most incongruity theories stress the element of collision and discrepancy between the two conceptual frameworks. There are many different variations of this idea, and many different formulations. Kant speaks about a drop from a high plane of thought to low, and about frustration of expectations. Isaac Asimov claims that in every joke there is a change of point of view. Arthur Koestler speaks about "bissociation", which is the name he gave to the collision of two ideas, and which he claimed to underlie any act of creation. Viktor Raskin and collaborators speak about two incompatible scripts that describe the same text.

Here is a classical example, `classical' literally, a joke from ancient Greece:

- How do you put four elephants in two carts?
- Two in each.

The conceptual framework shifts from size to number. It turns out that we were just presented with an exercise in arithmetic.

But does "collision of two incompatible conceptual frameworks" really capture the essence of the joke? There are many problems with this idea. One, that it does not explain all types of humor. Here are some types that would need some coercion to fit into this mold:

1. Coincidences
2. Derision
3. Ethnic jokes
4. Jokes of exaggeration
5. Self reference jokes

Here is another type of humor that is hard to explain by incongruity. Bergson speaks about "a human behaving like an automaton". For example, the slipping on the banana peel is like this. It is victory of matter over mind, of mechanics over the slipping person's will. Does this fit the "meeting of two conceptual planes" framework? It could be said that on one level we think that this is human action, on another that it is mechanical. But there is something strongly funny about it, much more than just misunderstanding.

So, although there is no doubt that all formulations of the incongruity idea do capture some side of humor, another concept is needed, a more flexible one, and a deeper one, that underlies them all.

## "Symbols", "meanings" and "detachment"

Consider the following joke:

The owner of a tail docked cocker spaniel goes to the vet, and asks him to cut the tail still shorter. To the surprised vet he explains: "My mother in law is coming to visit, and I don't want any sign of joy in the house."

There is no shift of point of view here, and "two scripts for one situation" is totally off (though, as usual, some coercion can work: looking at the tail and looking at the inner joy). Something else happens: the symbol – the tail wagging, takes the place of its meaning, the joy. It is not important whether the dog is happy or not, only that the tail is not wagged. The symbol is victorious over its meaning.

My claim is that this process lies the base of every joke, and every instance of humor. Humor is based, so I will claim, on the detachment of symbols from their meaning.

This is a very bold statement, and I have to support it. But before I do this, let me explain what are, for the purpose of this article, "symbol" and "meaning". I am using here the word "symbol" in a different way from the way it is usually used. For the purpose of this paper, a "symbol" is any object in the world, concrete or abstract, that points at something else. Namely it is linked in our minds with some part of the world (again, concrete or abstract). A more appropriate name would be "carrier of meaning", but this is too academic, and I preferred terseness over rigor.

The part of the world that is pointed at is called the "meaning" of the symbol.

As to "detachment", it means that the link between the symbol and the meaning is severed. This is not done by negation: negating the content of a message still relates to its meaning. The negator still thinks about the object, not about the symbol. Detachment means shift of attention from the meaning to the symbol. The symbol receives a life of its own – either by acquiring a new meaning, or by becoming the center of attention.

So, the main characteristic of detachment of symbol from its meaning is a shift of weight from the meaning to the symbol, just as in the cocker spaniel's joke. Symbols, in particular words, are usually transparent: we use them to think about the meaning, without paying attention to them as objects in their own right. Detachment of meaning means before everything that the symbol is no longer a slave of the meaning. It has a life of its own, free to adopt another meaning if it wishes, or stay hollowed of meaning, in another type of jokes.

For example, there are many jokes in which the carrier of meaning is a verbal expression, and yet the expression does not change its meaning, but is hollowed of meaning. In the following joke it turns out that the meaning of the words does not matter, only their form (or number, in this case).

- Honorable prime minister, could you please summarily describe the state of the country?
- In one word - good.
- And in two words?
- Not good.

In many jokes it is plainly declared that there is no connection between words and their meaning.

- How do you know that a salesman is lying?
- His lips are moving.

The salesman's words are detached from their meaning; one doesn't even have to listen to them to know they are false. Here is the feminist (or anti-feminist) version:

If a man speaks, and no woman hears, is he still wrong?

The abundance of stutterers jokes is due to precisely this technique, of matter over content:

- What is your name?
- Bo-bo-bo-boris.
- Are you a stutterer?
- No, but my father was, and the clerk at the office of population registry was an idiot.

The clerk stuck with external appearance of what he heard.

Often the victory of the symbol is subtle, and needs pointing out.

An engineer is stranded on a desert island, and lives miserable Robinson Crusoe life. After a few months, he discovers that on the other side of the island there is a beautiful blonde, stranded as well, and finds that she has arranged for comforts of civilization - she built a cabin,

with running water, a kitchen, furniture. She invites him for a lavish dinner, with wine. After the dinner she says - you have been here so long, you must feel lonely. Is there anything else I can do for you? His eyes are alight - "Do you have e-mail?"

The absurdity of the request is but one side of the joke, and not the important one. The main point is that e-mail is a means of communication, and as such it is a "symbol", pointing at the addressee of the mail. The blonde offers the thing itself, the engineer prefers the symbol.

Anything can be a carrier of meaning. For example, a menu points at the choices that can be made from it. In the following joke it becomes the object of choice:

A gluttonous woman studies at length the menu of a restaurant, and then says "OK".

Change of meaning? Perhaps, from "list to be chosen from" to "list to be approved". But the main point is that the thing that should have pointed at a meaning turns out to be pointed at.

One stratagem for detaching meaning is change of meaning. Once it is discovered that a symbol (in the above joke, a verbal expression) can change its meaning, it is no longer a slave of the meaning. It has a life of its own, free to choose which of the two meanings to adopt. Of course, this is classical "change of point of view", or "two scripts". Here these formulations do fit:

Doctor: You are sick.

Patient: I want a second opinion!

Doctor: OK. You are also ugly.

## Actions as carriers of meaning

Our own actions and those of others determine our fate, and hence we invest a lot of effort in interpreting them. Witnessing an action, we automatically link it in our minds to its past - the drives, intentions, motives and causes leading to it, and to its future - its aims and possible outcomes. All these, and more, are meanings of the action, and all can be detached.

Whenever this happens, it is possible to describe the process in terms of "two interpretations": one ascribing intention to the agent of the action, and one not; one taking into account the natural outcome, and one in which the outcome is not there; one purposeful, the other purposeless. But this would miss the whole point. The point is not in change of direction, but in the hollowing of the action of its will-intention-purpose-aim-motive-outcome. In the case of actions, more than in other types of carriers of meaning, the change is more often not between two different meanings, but between meaning and no meaning.

I chose to concentrate in this paper on actions as carriers of meaning, mainly so as not to expand over too wide a range – such expansion would demand the span of a book, not an article. But I will give many examples, all pointing at the conclusion that "two conceptual frameworks" is much too narrow a formulation.

## **A. Detachment of intention**

Possibly the most common detachment of meaning of actions is that of intention. Something that looks voluntary, loaded with aims, turns out to be unintended.

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

An action that is loaded for us with meaning turns out to be involuntary contortions. "Mechanic reactions replacing will", Bergson would call it.

Here is detachment of purpose:

A tourist observes two workers on a hill. One digs a hole in the ground, the other fills it with soil, the first digs, the other fills. Eventually he get curious - what are you doing? "Usually we are three", says the first. "I dig, John plants a tree, and Dave covers the plant. Today John is sick".

The actions are hollowed of their meaning.

Moses and Mohammed are seated next to each other in the plane. After takeoff they relax, take off their shoes. At some point Mohammed asks Moses - you are near the isle, why don't you go and bring me juice? - Willingly, complies Moses. When they are off the plane, Mohammed says to Moses: You know, when you went to bring me juice, I spit in your shoe. - Oy Vey, says Moses. - Spitting in shoes, pissing in the juice, where will it all end.

The vengeance ploy is nice, but the funny part is the disclaim of intention. Moses describes the peeing as if he was not responsible for it, and who knows where all this will lead.

Two old ladies ride a car. To the dismay of the woman sitting next to the driver's seat, they drive through a red light. She keeps silent, but then it happens again. When it happens for the third time she leans towards the woman sitting next to her, and says politely - Do you know? You just went through a red light for the third time. - What? Says the other, - Am I the driver?

**Change of points of view? Or shifting from one script to another?**

Possibly, but this is not what is funny here. The funny part is that the 'driving' is detached from intention.

Why do they make ballet dancers stand all the time on their toes? Couldn't they just hire taller dancers?

There is change of interpretation here, of the motive. But "change" does not capture the crux of the matter, that the action that is so loaded with meaning for the dancers, and into which they put so much effort, is described as mere wishing to be taller.

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

There is double detachment here - of knowledge (how come the Pole did not know what is in his lunch box?), but also of intention, as if the person who wanted something for lunch was different from the one preparing the lunch.

If the refrigerator wasn't far from the TV, many people wouldn't do physical exercise at all.

Calling the walk from the fridge to the TV "exercise" is funny, but the main point is that the "exercisers" do not mean to exercise.

## **B. Detachment of drive**

Another "meaning" of an action is the drive behind it. The Parkinson joke is an example (I put it under "detachment of intention" since the act is involuntary, not controlled by will). Here are a few more examples:

A man is stranded on a desert island (yet another one...) and finds there six women. They reach an arrangement: every weekday he does it with another woman, and Saturday is a day off. One day another man reaches the island. The guy is

pleased - we can share the work. "Sorry, I am gay", announces the newcomer. "Shacks", says the guy. "Saturday is gone as well".

There is no change of script in this joke. The entire point is in that the sexual act is detached from its drive, and is perceived as work. There is yet another type of detachment here - detachment of non-wish. The guy does not really want to do it with the newcomer, but work is work.

Here is a very similar one - sex as work:

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

A famous one:

First old man: Hey, do you remember how we used to chase girls?

Second old man: Yes. But I forget why.

Note that the second old man does not say "I no longer want to chase girls" - this would be denying the drive, and denying a meaning does not form a joke. The man still relates to the act of chasing - the symbol, in our terminology, but detaches it from its meaning.

Here is yet another detachment of a sexual act from its drive:

The husband walks into the kitchen, and his wife that stands near the oven tells him - you must do it with me right now. - This is my day, says the husband to himself, and they do it on the kitchen table. The woman dresses, and says "Thanks". - What was all this about? Asks the man. - The egg timer broke, she says.

It is not only detachment of drive on the side of the woman, but also detachment of spontaneity in their sex life, meaning detachment of lust.

### **C. Detachment of responsibility**

A man stands in front of a grave in a cemetery, and cries "Why did you die, why did you die". A passerby is curious: "Was he a relative?" - "No", says the man. "A friend?" "No, I did not know him at all". "So why are you so sad?" "He was the first husband of my wife", says the man.

Certainly, there is here ambiguity – we suspect one reason for the wailing, and another reason transpires. But the ambiguity in itself is of very minor importance. The main point is the denial of responsibility for the marriage. As if it is the sole responsibility of the dead husband.

Here is a responsibility-disclaiming dictum:

Your personality is determined by your parents.  
That of your kids by genetics.

#### **D. Detachment of causality**

If three friends meet, and find out that without coordinating all three wear precisely the same shirt color and the same pants color, they will probably laugh. The reason is detachment of causality: it looks as if the events are causally related, but of course they are not. This is the reason that coincidences are funny – an ostensible causal link is detached, turning out to be accidental. Here is detachment of causality in a joke:

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

#### **E. Detachment of outcome**

The hare and the turtle hold a contest of telling jokes. The umpire is the monkey, and the rule is

that whoever the monkey laughs at his joke is rewarded with a prize, and whoever the monkey does not laugh at his joke is to be devoured by the lion. First the turtle tells a very funny joke, all animals fall off their feet laughing - except the monkey, who remains unimpressed. Well, a rule is a rule, and the lion devours the turtle. Then the hare tells a totally inane joke, no animal laughs - except for the monkey, who bursts into loud laughter. Why are you laughing? -ask the animals. - I understood the joke of the turtle, says the monkey.

**In music this is called a "syncope".**

## **F. Detachment of motive**

A guy walks into a bar, and tells the barman - a drink for me, a drink for you, drink for everybody. The barman complies, but when time comes for the guy to pay he declares that he does not have a penny on him. The angry barman beats him up, and kicks him out. The next week the same guy appears, and says again - a drink for me, a drink for you, drink for everybody. The barman is sure that the guy has learnt his lesson, and complies. But again, when time comes to pay the guy declares he has no money. Again the barman beats him up and throws him out. The next week the same guy appears, and says - a drink for me, drink for everybody. - What about me? Says the offended barman. - You, when you drink you become violent.

No doubt - there are here two interpretations of the same action. But the funny thing is that a very loaded meaning ascribed to the action of the barman, the meaning that our attention is concentrated on, is emptied.

## **G. Detachment of aim**

Two men work on a hill - one digs a hole, the other covers it with soil, the first digs, the second covers. An intrigued onlooker asks - what is it that you are doing? - Usually we are three, says the first. I dig, Johnny plants a tree, and Bob covers. Today Johnny is sick.

Change of interpretation? Possibly. From "purposeful" to "purposeless". But using just "change of interpretation" misses the main point - that an action turns out to be empty motions, detached from its aim.

## **H. Detachment of moral judgment**

A couple is preparing to go on their annual vacation.

-You know what? Says the woman. - This time you will check whether the alarm is on, the main faucet is closed, the electrical gadgets are unplugged, and that all doors are locked, and I will sit in the car and honk the horn.

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

## **I. The most famous comic event**

Detachment also explains the funniness of slipping over a banana peel. Bergson's theory does apply here – the voluntary action is replaced by mechanics. But the simpler formulation, that connects it with other types of humor, is detachment. Slipping means that the action of the person is detached from his or her will. The person wants one thing, the banana peel wants something else, and the peel wins. In fact, the Bergsonian "automatic behavior" is nothing but detachment of will. An automaton is not driven by will. There is definitely no change of meaning, or two scripts applied to the same (situational) text. It is plainly detachment of intention.

## **Detachment of self**

A very special type of detachment is that of the sense of the self.

Be yourself, everyone else is already taken.  
(Oscar Wilde)

This is wise, and beautiful, but also funny. It is possible to fit this into the two planes theories: there is use here of of inappropriate logic. The logic is that of taking chairs, say. You can take an untaken chair, but not another person's life. But this misses something. It is not any old logical link that is broken. It is the basic meaning of the notion of the self.

A man goes every evening to a bar and orders two glasses of wine. To the curious bartender he explains: "I have a brother, and we used to drink every day a glass of wine together. He now moved abroad, and this way I remember him". One evening he appears, and asks for just one glass of wine. "Sorry", says the bartender, "I didn't know". "My brother is OK", says the man, "The doctor forbid me to drink".

Herschel, who was known for his ugliness, explained: "When I born I was a very handsome baby. But a wicked neighbor grabbed me from my cradle one day and replaced me by an ugly kid".

## Loading with meaning

The phenomenon of the joke cannot be properly understood without the realization that just as meaning can be detached, it can be loaded. Namely, some object – verbal or physical, that at the beginning of the joke seems to be devoid of special meaning, turns out to carry some significant meaning. Note – it is not change of meaning, but a switch from meaninglessness to meaningfulness. In a common type of such jokes, words that sound meaningless turn out to be meaningful. More often than not these are children jokes:

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

The secret is that our brain works much faster than we think it does, and it goes back and forth very quickly. When the word is loaded with meaning, we realize that beforehand it was detached from this meaning, for example that we thought that "Nobody" is an inane, meaningless name. This backwards detachment operates on our brain just like detachment that goes forward.

Even more common in jokes are actions that seemed devoid of special intention, or involuntary, and are suddenly loaded with some purpose.

A woman disappears. Her husband looks for her everywhere, informs the police - to no avail. Two days later she appears at home. The husband asks - what happened to you? - Don't ask, she says. Five brutes abducted me and made me their sex slave for a week. - A week? Says the husband, You have only been away for two days. - No, she says. I came just to pick up a few things.

**Of the same spirit:**

An old woman calls the police and complains - two young guys walk in the neighboring apartment naked. The police arrive, and see no naked guys. - Climb the cupboard, says the woman, and you will see.

**A question that disguises as a riddle, but turns out to be loaded with intention:**

What is ten lawyers at the bottom of the sea? - a good start.

"Loading with intentions" can be done by ascribing choice to those who cannot really choose:

What is the difference between involvement and commitment? In bacon with eggs the hen is involved, the pig is committed.

## Stereotypes

There is one type of jokes and comic situations, that cannot at all be analyzed using the "two conceptual structures" terminology, and makes a lot of sense when viewed through the lens of "superiority of the symbol". It is jokes, and character comedies, that are based on stereotypes. A stereotype based joke starts by declaring, through the nationality of the hero or the hair color of the heroine, "my protagonist is miserly", or "my protagonist is going to act stupidly", and then proceeds to a story of stupidity or miserliness taken to absurdity. Note, first, that there is no switch of meaning – quite the contrary, the joke does what it promised to do. There is no collision of two opposing patterns. And still, this is funny. When a character of a sit-com is supposed to be, say, cowardly, and he or she acts in an exaggerated cowardly way in some situation, we laugh. Strangely so, since there is no collision of modes of perception – the person matched his or her image. So, what is funny?

The answer is that the person acts "like an automaton", in the language of Bergson. Not he or she is acting, but the image. Namely, the idea we have of them. It is action detached from intention – the image, which is in our brain, is victorious over the will of the person. In drama we identify with the characters, feeling vicariously their inner conflicts and their wills. In comedies we can laugh at the characters precisely because we are detached from them. We view them as marionettes of the stereotypes. A

similar thing happens in stereotype based jokes: we are not identifying with the stupid blonde or the miserly Scotsman, and do not imagine ourselves in their place, as we do in dramatic stories. Instead, we view them as figures that are emptied from will, acting according to our idea about them.

## Self reference

Yet another class of jokes that the "switch between meanings" theory does not explain in full is that of self referential jokes. "Victory of the symbol", on the other hand, explains them perfectly. The carrier of meaning suddenly becomes the focus of attention. Instead of pointing at the meaning, it finds itself at the spotlight.

I once thought that I was indecisive, but now I am not so sure.

It is possible to speak here about change of meaning – it transpires that the sentence does not refer only to something external, but also to itself. But "change of meaning" does not capture the main point, that the focus shifts from the meaning of the expression to the expression itself.

A manager has one hundred CV's on his desk. He shuffles them well, and throws fifty to the garbage bin. Asked what is he doing, he explains – "I don't want losers".

There are no two scripts – it is just that the reasoning is circular, the action becoming its own justification. From thinking something (following the logic of the manager) we turn to think about the thought.

Three men are dining in a restaurant, when suddenly a fairy appears, approaches one of them and offers him the choice between three wishes: beauty, wisdom or a million dollars. He thinks, and thinks, and eventually chooses wisdom. The fairy waves her wand, and disappears. The friends

see that the guy's face is overcast. What happened? They ask. "I should have chosen the million dollars", he says.

Again, "two conceptual frameworks" or "two scripts", if at all applicable, fail to grasp the point, which is that the choice becomes relevant to itself. The act of choice is here a carrier of meaning, pointing at the three possible options. Suddenly the roles are reversed – one of the options, wisdom, is what is needed for the choice. Which means that the carrier of meaning becomes the focal point.

## Scorn

Finally, why is derision funny? There is no way of denying the funny flavor of scorn, and the scorn theories of humor are not there for nothing. There is definitely no change of meaning here. But there is detachment of meaning. It is detachment of identification. Deriding somebody, we do not relate to him or her like we usually do to all human beings, with some identification, trying to put ourselves in their place. Scorn involves distancing ourselves from the person – a form of detachment. In tragedies the audience identify with the characters. In comedies they detach themselves. The characters are more marionettes than real people, motivated by drives and great desires.

## Concluding remarks

There is no doubt that the most relevant concept to the study of humor is "meaning". Something happens in it to conceptual links. They are distorted, they change course, and most importantly - they do so surreptitiously. A joke is successful if it succeeds in deceiving us for a moment by external appearance. The question is what form does the change of course take. The most common answer is "switching from one interpretation to another". Similar formulations of this process are

"collision of two conceptual modes", or "two meanings ascribed to the same text or the same situation". The aim of this paper was to show that the more significant part of this process is not the switch between two meanings, but the detachment of one meaning.

One test against which this idea should be examined is that it explains jokes that do not fit in the "change of meaning" mold. I tried to provide such examples throughout the paper. Another test is that detachment should be found also in other types of humor, not only the joke. And indeed, it does – comedies of errors are based on detachment of knowledge (the audience knows something that the protagonists don't); character comedies are based on behavior that is as if automatic, detached from intention.