

# Laughing and laughing at

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## Abstract

Two of the main families of humor theories are those of scorn and incongruity. In this paper I suggest a theory unifying the two, that applies both to jokes (the natural subject of incongruity theories) and to derision. A leading clue will be given by a wide family of jokes, in which actions are detached from their intentions.

This is a summary of the humor part of a book, "Man detaches meaning" [Aha2010], on the mechanism of detachment of meaning in jokes and in poetry.

## Introduction

Possibly the oldest theory of humor is that of scorn. Plato and his student Aristotle [Ari] ascribe laughter to scorn. A closely related notion is that of "superiority". We laugh when we discover that we are superior to somebody on some issue. This was the formulation of Hobbes, and following him Stendhal. Propp (printed in [ProDebPer2009]) claimed that laughter is intended to debase something or somebody, and best – of high stature. Rapp [Rap1951] theorized that ridicule preceded all other types of humor. The caveman laughed at the physical misfortunes of others, as they foretold of a coming victory in battle.

Language agrees: derision is called "laughing at", and the word "ridiculous" comes from the Latin "ridere", to laugh. There is no denying the humorous flavor of scorn. Parodies are as efficient means for arousing laughter as jokes. This suggests that there is some underlying process that is common to jokes and derision. Laughter probably has one deep generating mechanism, not many unrelated sources. A unified theory is needed, encompassing both jokes and scorn.

Not many attempts have been made to achieve this. Most humor theorists are reconciled to the idea that humor may have more than one mechanism. One theory that links the two sides of humor is that of Mindess [Min1971], who associates laughter with a sense of liberation. Jokes free us from our commitment to logic, and scorn is plainly the joy of triumph, termed by Mindes "liberation from inferiority". But possibly the bravest attempt at a unified theory was that of Thomas Hobbes [Hob]. His solution was subjugating one type of humor to the other - jokes to scorn. Jokes, so he claimed, make us ridicule ourselves. They pull our leg, and once we realize we fell for their trick we think "how stupid we were to fall for that".

This argument did not have many followers. The current theories of humor stress the leg pulling, not the derision. And the concrete way of formulating the "leg pulling" is that of incongruity. Incongruity theories 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. The "leg pulling" is in that the joke surreptitiously switches from one to the other. This is the famous surprising twist of the punch line. For example:

- 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 identity of 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 frustration of expectations, and Herbert Spencer about drop from high plane of thought to low. Isaac Asimov claims that in every joke there is a change of point of view. Arthur Koestler speaks about "bisociation", the name he gave to the collision of two ideas, collision that he claimed to underlie any act of creation. Looking from the linguistic angle, Viktor Raskin and collaborators speak about two incompatible scripts that describe the same text [Ras1985] [Att1994], [AttRas1991].

But "collision of two incompatible conceptual frameworks" seems irrelevant to scorn. It does not explain for example why do we laugh at a person slipping over a banana peel. Another problem is that in many jokes "incongruity" needs some coercion to make it work. For example, it is hard to fit ethnic jokes into the "two conceptual frameworks" mold. The same goes also for jokes based on exaggeration, or self reference.

All this is evidence that something deeper and more general is at work. There must be some underlying process, that is common to incongruity

and scorn, that provides also explanation for the jokes that do not easily fit the "switching between two interpretations" mold. I will suggest here such a process, a mechanism that fits all jokes, and also explains the funny flavor of derision. I will introduce it via a family of jokes that is very common, and does not get the amount of attention it deserves. These are jokes based on detachment of an action from its meaning.

## Actions as carriers of meaning

Our own actions and those of others determine our fate, and hence we invest a lot of energy in interpreting them. Witnessing an action, we automatically link it in our minds to its past, namely the drives, intentions, motives and causes leading to it, and to its future - its aims and possible outcomes. All these are meanings of the action, in the sense that we associate them with the action, and automatically search for them. And all these meanings can, under certain circumstances, be detached. The action can be separated from its aim, drive, purpose, intention or outcome, becoming an empty gesture. This is what happens in the family of jokes in question.

Before theorizing, I want to give many examples. Humor researchers have a wonderful advantage – unlimited data, in the form of infinitely many jokes that are available, of all sorts and forms, and I want to make use of this advantage. The abundance of examples will also help clarifying what are, for the purpose of this paper, "meaning" and "detachment".

### **A. Detachment of intention**

Possibly the most often detached meaning of actions is that of intention. Something that looks voluntary, loaded with aims, turns out to be unintentional.

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 with meaning turns out to be involuntary contortions. This conforms with the Bergsonian theory, to which we shall return, of "automatic reactions replacing voluntary actions". Here is detachment of purpose:

A tourist watches two workers on a hill. One digs a hole in the ground, the other fills it with soil, the first digs, the other fills. He is 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 point is not the existence of two interpretations of the same action. It is that the action of digging is hollowed of its meaning, in this case the purpose - the planting.

Moses and Mohammed are seated next to each other in the plane. 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 some 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?

"Shifting from one script to another", from "the woman is aware that she is driving" to "she is not aware" misses the really funny part, that an action is detached from responsibility.

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, which is that the action into which the dancers put so much energy 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 was in his lunch box?), but also of intention, as if the

person who wanted something for lunch was different from the one preparing 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 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. "Shucks", 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. As we shall see later, in a joke detachment needs shift of weight from the meaning to its carrier. The man still relates to the act of chasing – the carrier of meaning, in our terminology.

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

A 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, thinks husband, 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, namely 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 pre-coordinating all 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.

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

Finish your beer. There are sober kids in Africa. The analogy to the hungry kids in India is broken mainly because sobriety is supposed to be desirable, and the inscription detaches the judgment against drunkenness.

## **Bergson's theory of humor and detachment of intentions**

In 1900 Henri Bergson published a series of three papers, that were later collected to a book, "Le rire", "The laughter" [B1911]. Among the claims he made in the book, one acquired particular fame: that laughter arises when an action that is presumed to be human, namely motivated by intentions and will, turns out to be automatic and mechanical. The famous

comic event of slipping over a banana peel is a classical case in point: it is victory of matter over mind. The person wants one thing, the banana peel wants something else, and the peel wins. Instead of acting according to her intentions, the slipper succumbs to the laws of physics. So, the Bergsonian "automatic behavior" is nothing but detachment of intention.

### Detachment of meaning as the base of humor

Is detachment of meaning characteristic of all humor? In my book "Man detaches meaning" [A2010], on the mechanism of detachment in jokes and poetry, I try to show that this is the case. I provide evidence that the switching from one meaning to another, of which incongruity theories speak, is but one of many ways that meaning is detached in jokes. The scope of the present paper allows me to unfold only part of the arguments there, but let me summarize two main claims from that book. One is that the possible meanings detached in jokes are very varied. The most common is that of words, or verbal structures. A close second is actions, the type of carriers of meaning discussed in this article. Other meanings prone to be detached are causal links, metaphoric meanings (many jokes are based on flattening the metaphoric meaning and taking the metaphor concretely), sensation of self, information (comedies of errors are based on detachment of knowledge, the audience knowing something that the protagonists don't).

The other main point that should be stressed about detachment is that it is different from negation. In negation one still thinks of the meaning. In the detachment characteristic of jokes the attention is drawn to the symbol, namely the carrier of meaning, that suddenly receives a life of its own. Here is an example, in which the symbol is a tail:

The owner of a tail docked cocker spaniel goes to the vet, and asks him to cut the tail even 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 are no "two scripts fitting one situation" in this joke. You can find shift of point of view: from the meaning of the tail wagging to the tail wagging itself. But this is not "meeting of two conceptual frameworks". It is detachment of one meaning: a symbol – the tail wagging, takes the place of its meaning, the joy. It suddenly occupies center stage, triumphant over its meaning.

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

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

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 carrier of meaning, pointing as it does at the addressee of the mail. The blonde offers the thing itself, but the engineer prefers the symbol.

One conclusion is that if we want to combine scorn with humor, we need to find detachment in it.

## Loading with meaning

To complete the picture, it should be realized that just as meaning can be detached, it can be attached. 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 meaning. This 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 rapidly. Once the word is loaded with meaning, we realize that beforehand it was detached. This is "hindsight detachment". For example, we realize that we mistakenly assumed that "Nobody" was 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 seem devoid of special intention, or involuntary, and are suddenly loaded with 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 "detachment of intention" and "superiority of the symbol". These are jokes, and character comedies, that are based on stereotypes. A stereotype based joke starts by declaring, through the nationality of the hero or the heroine's hair color, "my protagonist is miserly", or "my protagonist is going to act stupidly", and then proceeds to a story of miserliness or stupidity 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 accord with this image, we laugh. Strangely so, since there is no collision of modes of perception - the person precisely matched his or her stereotype. 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.

### Detachment of identification and scorn

This brings us close to the question with which we started: what do jokes have in common with scorn? Here is the answer – scorn involves detachment of something, and this something is identification. Scorn is detachment of identification. It is the opposite of empathy.

When observing a person in the midst of an action, we always imagine ourselves in her shoes. We perform in our mind her small motions, and want to achieve her goals with her. When seeing a person falling to one side, it is next to impossible to avoid tilting our bodies to the other side, to "prevent" the fall.

Derision involves distancing ourselves from the scorned person. Ridiculing somebody means first of all dissociation, relating to him or her as a machine, devoid of intentions and emotions. This is the reason that slipping over a banana peel is funny. Watching the person walking, we unconsciously identify with her. When she falls, the identification

dissolves. When the motion becomes mechanical, it is as if our own action was detached from intention.

This perfectly fits the above explanation for ethnic jokes and the mechanism of character comedies. Scorn now sits comfortably within a general theory of humor.

### Concluding remarks

There is no doubt that the most relevant concept to the study of humor is "meaning". Something happens to conceptual links. They are distorted, they change course, existing links are detached and new ones formed, and most importantly – all this happens surreptitiously. A joke is successful if it succeeds in deceiving us for a moment by external appearance. Like a magician it draws our attention to the external symbol, performing some trick beneath it. The question is what form the change of course of meaning takes. The most common answer is "switching from one interpretation to another". 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. This being accepted, it is possible to understand what scorn has to do with humor. Scorn means detachment of identification, hollowing the scorned person of his or her intentions and will, relating to him or her as a mechanical being. So, in final account, it is detachment of intentions.

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