# The eyes of the beholder: a test case for the SSTH-GTVH theories of humor

Abstract

An SSTH-GTVH – inspired analysis of a joke in (Attardo-Raskin 2017) is used as a prompt for assessment of the contribution of these theories to humour research. The joke shares a mechanism with a large family of jokes, which is missed by the linguistic analysis.

## A revolution

Thirty odd years ago humor research saw a dramatic turn of events. Victor Raskin published a paper, and later a book, expounding a theory which he declared to encompass all jokes ever invented. The theory is of the "incongruity" type, a fact that is vehemently denied by Raskin and his followers, who present the theory is not only as all-engulfing but also as new. The formulation is simple: a joke is characterised by the same text fitting two incompatible scripts. The scientific-sounding term "script" is borrowed from linguistics. The canonical example used is:

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

The two scripts are "patient" vs. "lover". With mock-humility, Raskin calls it "the most hated joke in humour research". Raskin hurried to give the new theory an impressive acronym – SSTH (script based semantic theory of humor). The humor research community, eager for the seal of being “scientific”, and not really being able to assess the value of the linguistic tools offered, quickly complied. Here is Raskin on the topic of “scientificality”:

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

Raskin quickly became the first editor of "Humor", the (then) only journal dedicated to the subject, and from this post ruled the field. From this position of power it was easy to dismiss opposition.

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

One can wonder whether such arrogance would be necessary if the theory contained real insight.

Some ten year later, another peculiar turn of events took place. Raskin and student, Salvatore Attardo, developed another system of ideas, totally orthogonal to the "scripts" idea, and presented it as an organic continuation of the theory. They declared that the incongruous scripts, which they name "script opposition" so as not to mention the word "incongruity" (suggesting non-originality), is just one of six (why six – this is not clear) "knowledge resources" ("KR's", of course). One of them, for example, is an added element of the "target" of the joke, meant to include humour based on superiority. There is also "narrative strategy", simply meaning the way the joke is told. How this is connected to the scripts – this is not really clarified. And yet, it is solemnly cited in dozens of papers.

Then there came the OSTH. Here not only the acronym is presumptuous, but also the wording of the title: Ontological Semantic Theory of Humor. I will not describe it, and only quote a boasting related to it:

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

(Raskin – Hempelman –Taylor 2009)

There are no exceptions (counterexamples), so declare the owners of the theory/theories. Of course, positive examples are not useful here – there are indeed such examples, though their proportion in the body of humor is not that large. The question is that of universality, and the claim for the latter hardly supported. Criticism is met by declarations that “we are the strictest, in fact the only authorised, critics of our theories”.

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

(Raskin, Hempelmann and Taylor, 2009)

In the teaching of mathematics this is called “proof by intimidation”. Raskin and Attardo claim they know what a proper theory is (see, e.g., Attardo-Raskin 2017), with the implicit message that their theories are the only ones in humour research that stand up to the standards. They go into great length to differentiate their theories from the incongruity theory/ies (ibid., in the section "The SSTH as an incongruity theory?", and also in (Raskin 1985)), with the message that they are original, new, and that they point the way for the entire field. Of course, such declarations would not be necessary if they were really original. In fact, it is hard to find the difference from other formulations of "incongruity", like Koestler's bisociation. Raskin and Attardo repeat again and again, unabashedly, that the SSTH, GTVH and their successors are the theories ruling the field nowadays. Sometimes, again, with mock-humility:

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

It seems that linguists may well have something to learn from the sciences – you will not meet anything the like there.

Very few jokes, and even fewer instances in other forms of humor, fit the “two scripts” pattern. A lot of coercion is needed, for example, to fit the jokes appearing in the next section to this framework. The fact that a whole community succumbed to oppressive vanity is not a decoration of honor to the field. In its craving for “scientificality”, the humour research community sold its integrity and independence of thought for a mess of pottage.

## What the SSTH misses

Something is lost by this coercion: finding real patterns. The flat concept of “incompatible scripts”, like its brother, “incongruity”, misses conceptual manoeuvres, whose understanding may be eventually integrated into a theory of humor. To exemplify the loss, I will use a rare occasion – an analysis of a joke, given by GTVH people. The SSTH and GTVH supporters are frugal with examples. They are satisfied with the declaration of “universality”, and do not make real attempt to demonstrate it. For example, besides the famous doctor's-wife joke, Raskin’s first book on humour (Raskin 1985) contains hundreds of jokes, mostly political jokes from pre-Perestroika Russia, but they are not analysed and there is no attempt to connect them to the SSTH. So, when an example, with analysis, does appear in the SSTH literature, it is an opportunity to examine the value of the theories. The following joke is analysed in (Raskin-Attardo 2017).

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

The authors’ analysis is lengthy, and the reader is prompted to read it in the origin. Their main claim is that there is a switch of aims, between "cure" and "lengthening the subjective experience". This is "violation of expectations, and hence incongruous". The other main idea in the analysis is that there is implicit inference needed, that living in South Dakota and being married to an economist are both boring (let me add – there is implicit equating of the two, which means combining two distant elements, another well-known joke technique). The concluding paragraph of the analysis summarizes its basic ideas:

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

So, the main elements are re-interpretation of the doctor's words, implicitness, and implicit aggression. The "implicit aggression" is classified under the GTVH as "targeting" – the complementary notion, mentioned above, that connects with superiority theories.

Implicitness, of course, is one of the best known characteristics of jokes (and of poems). Almost any implicit statement has a humorous tinge. We all know - "jokes should never be explained". Yet, it is not directly related to "change of interpretation", or “two scripts”, apart from the fact that the less the change of interpretation is obvious, the more humorous it is. It amplifies the effect of the switch.

But this is only a minor comment. The main problem is that a pattern is missed here. The joke belongs to a large family, in which a switch occurs from relating to the external world to the way we perceive it. It is important to realize that there is such a family, since its common mechanism may be relevant to the nature of humour. Something deeper is happening here than just "change of interpretation”.

Before giving example of jokes belonging to this family, let me give a famous example from poetry:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee, -

One clover, and a bee,

And revery.

The revery alone will do

If bees are few.

(Emily Dickinson, poem number 1755)

The centre of gravity switches from reality to its grasp. And here are jokes – a small selection from a large body.

After long years of therapy, I solved my wetting problem. –You no longer wet your bed? – I do, but I am no longer ashamed of it.

Wife: "You must stop drinking. We are out of money". Husband: "Just yesterday you spent $200 on make up!" Wife: "This is so that you would find me pretty". Husband: "That's what the beer is for, too".

The difference from the poem is that the preference of inner perception over reality is erroneous. We do not really believe that the "perception" expresses a truth. If it were a poem, we would believe the husband genuinely seeks to find his wife beautiful. In the joke he is deriding her, what he really wants is to forget her plainness.

The famous cartoon scene of the hero-figure treading air but falling only when looking down, is an example of "perception before reality", and indeed, it is poetic. Its funniness comes from the collision between reality and its perception. Dickinson evades this clash, the cartoon takes it head on.

Here is another example, from Freud's book on the joke (Freud 1905):

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

Freud calls the mechanism used here "fantasy over reality". What happens in your head is more important than the actual external events. Thought over its content. Not committed to reality, the carrier of meaning plays its own game. Here is a famous Mark Twain saying:

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

Here is a "perception before reality" solution to getting old:

You cannot keep young forever. But you can stay immature.

If this contained some truth, it would be poetic. It is funny because immaturity, as opposed to youth, is not desirable or coveted.

A letter to the income tax authorities: “All night I was rolling around in my bed, recapitulating how I cheated on you. I am sending a check to the amount of $1000. If I still fail to fall asleep, I will send the rest”.

It is not the cheating that is important, but its perception.

Here is a victory of show-off over actual profit:

Oligarch A: "I bought this watch for $100,000". Oligarch B: "That's stupid. In the shop across the road you could purchase it for $200,000".

Two more such jokes:

Why do women invest so much in makeup and so little in learning? – Because most men are stupid and only a few are blind.

A ship rescues a Jew stranded on a desert island. Passengers on board observe two constructions on the shore. "What is this building?" they ask. “This is my synagogue”, replies the Jew. “And the other?” “This is the synagogue I don't attend”.

The "imaginary shunned" (mirror image of imaginary friend) synagogue does not play a role in reality. It is only for internal use.

A woman complains to her friend: “Last week I went to see a dentist. The man reminded me of somebody from school, but I thought to myself – 'this cannot be. He looks so old and wrinkled'. But then I saw the diploma on the wall, and recalled – 'yes, this was his name'. I asked him 'what school did you go to?' `Walt Whitman School', he said. Aha, I said, so you were in my class! And then this decrepit bastard says 'Yes? What did you teach?'”

In jokes, what the eye "beholds" is separate from reality.

A Jewish mother introduces her children to a guest – “The four year old is the lawyer, the two year old is the doctor”.

Reminiscent of the Magritte classic “eye of the beholder” painting, in which the painter looks at an egg, and paints a bird. Indeed, this painting is also funny.

The abundance of such examples cannot be coincidental. It must carry some secret, calling to be integrated into a general theory of humor. What is it? Let me just point at a basic mechanism. There is here withdrawal of what Freud called “cathexis”, namely energy invested in an object. The energy is detached from the object, and directed to the thought about it. Is this characteristic also of other jokes? Perhaps, but the important point is that the SSTH is too shallow and too coercive to be able to even detect this mechanism, let alone try to explain it.

References

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