**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 humor research. The joke shares a mechanism with a large family of jokes, which is missed by the linguistic analysis.

**1.   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 humor 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 humor 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 humor 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 humor research community sold its integrity and independence of thought for a mess of pottage.

**2.   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 humor (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 humor. 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.

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This entry was posted in [Uncategorized](https://raharoni.net.technion.ac.il/category/uncategorized/) on [13/10/2018](https://raharoni.net.technion.ac.il/2018/10/13/a-test-case-for-the-ssth-gtvh-theories-of-humor/). [Edit](https://raharoni.net.technion.ac.il/wp-admin/post.php?post=317&action=edit)

[From meaning to carrier: a common denominator for three strains of humor](https://raharoni.net.technion.ac.il/2018/06/10/from-meaning-to-carrier-a-common-denominator-for-three-strains-of-humor/)

**From meaning to carrier: a common denominator for three strains of humor**

*Abstract*

Incongruity theories maintain that the core of humor is in interplay between two meanings. Two incompatible meanings – of situations, verbal utterances or actions –   are juxtaposed, one replaces the other or collides with it. In this paper, I suggest that often the interplay is not between two meanings, but between meaning and its carrier. I provide as examples two families of jokes and one general type of humor, sharing this mechanism. One of the two families comprises jokes of self-reference, and the other jokes based on deflation of symbols, which means using  them in a concrete sense. The general type of humor is the “automatic behavior”, as appearing in Bergson’s theory of humor. The mechanism common to all three is shift of weight, from meaning to its carrier. This mechanism is then traced also in other jokes, suggesting possible universality.

Key words: carriers of meaning, meanings of actions, hierarchy of symbols, incidental meaning vs. declared meaning.

**1.   Meanings  – declared and evoked**

The two protagonists of this paper are meanings and their carriers. In this introductory section I want to clarify how these terms are used in the paper. For us, the carrier is a pointer, and the meaning is what it points at. The carrier draws our thoughts to the meaning.

The first carriers of meaning that come to mind are of course words, or more generally verbal expressions. But these are far from being the only ones. Almost everything can carry a meaning. We ascribe meaning to objects (a watch inherited from your grandfather can have sentimental meaning), to situations (which often demand interpretation, hence be given meanings), and most importantly for the purposes of this paper – to actions. Here is a partial list of the meanings we ascribe to actions: the intentions behind them, their aims, motives, the responsibility attached to them.  All these are meanings, being interpretations we give the actions. Language agrees with this choice of terminology. We ask people for the meaning of their deeds, and “to intend” to do something is “to mean” to do it. The depth psychologist Fonagy (Fonagy 1980) uses this very term – he speaks about the meaning a baby ascribes to her mother’s actions. Understanding the meanings of actions of others is essential for our survival, because it entails understanding their intentions, enabling us to predict their actions and prepare in accord.

There is an important distinction to be made here, between declared carriers of meaning and incidental ones. Words carry pre-assigned meaning, so they are declared. A flag of a state is explicitly chosen and declared to symbolize its country. On the other hand, the grandfather’s watch was not constructed to evoke memories, so its meaning is incidental. Actions are usually not performed with communicative purpose in mind, so the meaning they carry is incidental. When the meaning is declared, as in the case of the flag, we call the carrier a “symbol” for the meaning.

In order to avoid repeating too often the rather cumbersome “carrier of meaning”, I will sometimes use substitute terms. The most common will be “pointer”. Less frequent will be “signifier”. When appropriate, and sometimes, when the need for variety is dire, also when not tightly so, I will also use the term “symbol”.

**2.   A mechanism**

“Good prose should be transparent, like a window pane”, wrote George Orwell (Orwell 1946). In prose, as in everyday usage, words are subservient to their meaning. We don’t think about them, but through them. We understand them and act upon them, usually without paying attention to them as independent entities.

Probably without being aware of the Orwell quotation, Jean Paul Sartre repeated the window pane metaphor, and added: “But for the poet, language is a mirror” (Sartre 1948). In poetry words are not transparent. They are not mere tools. Their uncommon  usage generates an effect of estrangement, causing us to heed them. Roman Jakobson (Jakobson 1960, Waugh 1980) claimed this is a main characteristic of the poetic language. In poetry, he argued, the means of expression is not merely a tool of communication but stands on its own.

There are many points of similarity  between poetry and humor. To list but a few: brevity; word games; the license to break the rules of reality (*licencia poetica);*implicitness. (This similarity, and the differences between the two, are the subject of (Aharoni 2012)). The special relationship between meaning and its carrier is one more point of affinity. In jokes, too, there is sometimes a shift of weight from the first to the second. The carrier of meaning suddenly gains a life of its own and moves to center stage. A classic example is puns: a word is suddenly set free of the shackles of its regular meaning, and is allowed to link to another meaning. The “two scripts” situation can also be viewed this way, where the carrier of meaning is not necessarily a word, but possibly a situation. A situation (say, a person standing before a doctor’s door) is detached from its natural interpretation (the person being a patient) and is free to connect to another meaning (lover). This can be viewed as a “situational pun”.

Yet, verbal or situational puns are not the only ways the weight can be shifted towards the carrier. In this paper I want to present three families of examples in which the shift takes other forms. Two of these are families of jokes, and the third is a type of humor. One family of jokes consists of jokes based on deflation of metaphors, or more generally – of symbolic meaning. Metaphorical expressions are taken at face value, and objects loaded with symbolic meaning return to their concrete role. We call this “descending one order in the hierarchy of symbols”, since in both cases there is a move from higher to lower order of symbolism:  from a metaphor, which is second order symbol to its plain sense, which is first order symbol; or from a (first order) symbol to a concrete (0 order) object.

The second family consists of jokes of self-reference: a pointer turns out to point at itself. Here the shift of weight is explicit. The pointer, ordinarily a transparent entity serving the meaning, suddenly becomes the protagonist of the story.

The third line of examples relates to the meaning of actions. A famous type of humor pointed out by Bergson is mechanical behavior, where flexible human reaction is expected. We shall construe it as shift of weight from the meaning of the action to the action itself, the carrier of the meaning. An action that turns out to be mechanical is robbed of its various meanings. Suddenly it is devoid of intentions, motives, will or drives, simply because machines do not have all these. The carrier of the meaning – the action – is then left to be observed as empty motions. The Bergsonian theory is nowadays a step-daughter among humor theories, and the link we find brings it closer to the main body of humor research.

**The structure of the paper**

1. In Section 3, which is divided into four subsections, I will introduce the aforementioned two families of jokes and type of humor. A subsection is added concerning a crossbreed between reification (deflation) of metaphors and self-reference: reversal of roles between vehicle (simile) and tenor (the object of the simile).
2. In Section 3 I will describe the relationship between meaning and its carrier in these strains of humor in more detail. I will use the terminology of “struggle” between the two. The joke is a scuffle, from which the carrier comes out triumphant. This section also contains many examples not belonging to the three strains discussed in the paper, in which the mechanism is the triumph of the carrier of meaning.
3. Section 4 concerns a transition accompanying the shift of weight, which is another facet of the victory of the carrier. The meaning is outside our mind, and the carrier is within it. Thus the shift involves a movement from the outside to the inside, preferring thought to its object (a mechanism that was possibly first pointed out by Freud).
4. Section 5 introduces a special type of jokes based on emptied symbols: those in which the emptiness from meaning is declared explicitly.
5. Section 6 examines whether the incongruity theories of humor have anything useful to say regarding the type of humor we are studying. As we shall see, they mostly miss its point. They are too general and vague to illuminate it.
6. In Section 6 I will very briefly touch upon the intriguing question of “why”: what is the purpose of detaching the carrier from its meaning, and shifting the weight in its direction?
7. Section 8 is a summary, plus thoughts about the potential universality of the shift of weight in jokes.

**3A. Descending one level of symbolism: deflated metaphors and symbols**

3Aa. Girl: “I will never give you my heart”. Suitor: “I was not aiming that high”.

One technique used by this joke is implicitness. But the main one is taking a metaphor literally. This device is widely used not only by jokes, but also in poetry, where it is called “reification” (from the Latin “res”, meaning “thing”), or “realization of a metaphor” (see, e.g., Hartley 1989).

Symbols are ordered hierarchically.

* At level 0 there are concrete objects, that do not serve as pointers. This is not to say that they cannot serve as such, but that in the present context they do not.
* At level 1 there are pointers that are ordinary symbols – they point at 0 level objects. The word “cat” is a first order symbol, pointing at a particular cat, or at the species.
* Then there are metaphors, which are of order 2: they use first order symbols to point at other first order symbols. My beloved is “as the lily among thorns” (*Song of Solomon*, *2:2*) starts as a first order symbol: the words point at a flower among thorns. This image is then used to carry another meaning – the singularity of the beauty of the poet’s beloved.

Reification means descending one level. In the case of metaphors, it is from second to first order, taking the metaphor at face value. For example, taking the sentence above as referring to a real flower among real thorns. If it is an ordinary (first order) symbol, then the reification treats it as a concrete object, devoid of meaning – thus descending to order 0. Psychologists claim that this mode of thinking characterizes schizophrenics (Mckinley 1964, Olson 2013). In both cases, there is a symbol A pointing, presumably, at B, and then the joke rebounds to A: it turns out that the message is A itself. The pointer, bared of its symbolic meaning, becomes center.

In 3Aa, the girl uses “give my heart” as a second order pointer – pointing at the first order content, “love you”.  The guy relates to this as first order, ignoring the second order meaning.

In the next joke this is the main technique:

3Ab. What is the epitome of wastefulness? – Telling a hair-raising story to a bald man.

“Hair-raising” is a metaphor (order 2 symbol). Here the concrete meaning of the metaphor, namely the order 1 symbol “actual hair raising”, prevails. The symbol is taken literally, being detached from the original meaning, and gaining a life of its own: we actually think of hair.

The two examples above went from order 2 to order 1. The next example goes from order 1 to order 0, namely taking a first order symbol as a concrete object. In this case the symbol is not universal, but particular to the joke.

3Ac. A Chinese couple makes a pact when they marry: each of them has a jar, and whenever one is unfaithful to the other, the unfaithful partner will put one grain of rice in the jar. After fifty years of marriage they decide to open the jars. In the husband’s jar there are three grains of rice. “What was the first?” asks the wife. – “You remember when your mother was ill, and you went to nurse her for a few months? I did it with the young school teacher”. And the second? – “Do you remember the nice maid we had some thirty years ago?” “And the third?” – “Do you remember the big flood, when I left for the big city?” Then they open the wife’s jar, and it is empty. “Have you never been unfaithful to me?” asks the husband. “Do you remember”, says the wife, “the big famine, when everybody starved and we had plenty to eat?”

The rice was given symbolic meaning, but hunger caused the woman to ignore it. Rice is also food, plain and simple.

Can these jokes be analyzed in terms of incongruity? Formally, yes. For example, in the last joke, incongruity between treating rice as a symbol and as food. But the word “incongruity” by itself does not carry much information. It misses the very special way the joke was formed, the play between meaning and its carrier.

Here is another case of first order turning into 0 order, a concrete object:

3Ad. An old lady tells her friend: “I changed my password to ‘incorrect’. This way the computer reminds me – ‘your password is incorrect’”.

A meaningful word turns to a string of letters. Here, too, “incongruity” misses the delicate process that occurs.

In the following children’s joke the carrier of meaning is an action. It is given symbolic (communicative) meaning, and then turns out to be the “thing itself”, a concrete motion subject to physiological laws. Thus this joke belongs to the “flattening of meaning” family.

3Ba. After an arduous march, the commander orders the soldiers: “Whoever cannot continue, two steps forward”. Everybody steps forward, except for Tom. “Kudos”, says the commander, “you are the only man here”. “No”, says Tom, “I cannot make the two steps forward”.

A natural question is – if both the joke and the poem use reification, what is the difference? What makes us feel in one case that it is funny, and in the other poetic? The difference is that in poetry the link between the carrier and the meaning is not severed. The carrier is open to other interpretations, but is still linked also to the original meaning. In jokes the link is terminally cut. The old meaning is mocked and removed – for example the suitor is not intent on giving the heart metaphor a deeper meaning. Rather, he ridicules it. This fits in with the Kantian view of the joke as going from high to low (Kant 1790) – in the “I didn’t aim that high” joke even literally.

Another way of viewing the difference is via the concept of “estrangement”, coined by the Russian critic Shklovsky (see Shklovsky 1998). Taking a metaphor literally is a means of estranging it, returning from the abstract familiar meaning, automatically assumed by the reader or listener, to the concrete meaning. This effect is obtained in both the joke and the poem. But there is a major difference: in poems this is only a first step towards a refreshing interpretation of the first order meaning. In the joke there is no new meaning expected – the dismantling of the metaphor is terminal. There is full detachment of the metaphor from the metaphorical meaning.

**3B. Flattened meanings of actions – Bergson’s automatism**

There is a special type of humor in which actions are detached from various meanings, and stand on their own. It is the type broached by Bergson’s theory of “automatism”. Nowadays this theory is a step-daughter in humor research, and gains little support. The analysis below shows that in fact it is well linked to the main body of humor.

Bergson was the philosopher best known to the general public in the first three decades of the 20th century, not only in France but in all of Europe. A book he published in 1907, “Creative Evolution”, became a best-seller, and won him the 1927 Nobel Prize for literature. In this book he developed an earlier idea of his, the “thrust of life”, or “élan vital”. It speaks about the advantage of man over machine. Man creates himself, so claimed Bergson. He is not subject to mechanical rules. Any attempt to pin his will or thoughts to a board will meet rebellion: “I can choose otherwise”. Bergson even went a step further: Evolution itself is not subject to physical rules. It is generated by creative forces.

Related to this notion, by way of reversal, is Bergson’s theory of humor, enunciated in his 1900 book, “Laughter”. We laugh, he claimed, when we discover automatic behavior where a human one is expected. When the *élan vital* has a day off, and a person behaves like a machine.

In fact, Bergson was not the inventor of the “mechanical behavior” theory. He was anteceded some 80 years by the German philosopher Stephan Schuetze (Schuetze 1817). “Every laughter”, claimed Schuetze, “is aroused by relating to a human being in terms of an inanimate object”. He gives the example of a stream of people going out of the same door – they appear comic, he says, since they remind us of a wheel turned by water.

Bergson uses this idea to explain the effect of the best known of all comic incidents – slipping on a banana peel. It is funny, he claims, because the person behaves like an automaton. We expect his behavior to be subject to his will, and instead the will of the banana peel prevails.  Matter triumphant over mind.

Of course, one swallow is no testimony that all birds are swallows, and Bergson did not base his theory on one instance. Another example he gave was comedies of character. The protagonists of such comedies – the hypochondriac, the miserly, the distracted – do not act by their free will, so we perceive it. They are marionettes of their character, obeying the commands of their trait. Bergson also explained this way the funniness of repeated occurrences. If somebody treads on your toe in a party, you will be annoyed. If three different people, without coordination, tread on your toe one after the other, you will laugh. Why? – Automatism, says Bergson. Stiffness of behavior of the world.

Bergson also succeeds where other theories of humor badly fail: explaining jokes of stereotypes. The incongruity theories do not fit here. When a Scott evinces miserliness, there is no incongruity. Quite the contrary, he behaves according to expectations. The Bergsonian theory offers an explanation: the Scott does not behave by free will. As in comedies of character, it is the stereotype that decides for him, his action is detached from his personal intentions.

In spite of being rather neglected nowadays, Bergson’s theory is often quoted and is well-known to humor researchers, a sign that it contains a grain of truth. Indeed, automatic, non-spontaneous behavior is often funny. For example, the children who ask their parents, on a day of outing –

3Ba. Are we having fun yet?

Old age is an excellent vehicle for detachment of spontaneity, and detachment of drives in general.

3Bb. Wife: “Do you remember how, when we were young, you used to nibble gently on my earlobe?”

Husband: “If you bring my glasses and false teeth, I can do it again.”

Facial expressions are usually spontaneous, and not subject to conscious control. Here is what happens when an expression is delayed:

3Bc. A man approaches a passerby hugging a watermelon in his arms. “Could you tell me where the post office is?” he asks. The passerby asks – “could you please hold the watermelon for a moment?” The man does. “I have no idea”, says the passerby, shrugging and extending his arms to the sides.

Another example of delayed reaction:

3Bd. In the TV series “Modern family” a woman is mad with her husband. “I could have slapped you”, she tells him, turns around and walks away. After a second or two she is back, and tells him “As a matter of fact – ” and slaps him on his face.

What is funny here (the hired audience, at least, laughed) is the detachment between the slap and the immediate anger. Like syncope in music – a trick having its own humorous tinge.

**Automatism as flattening of meaning**

How does this connect with flattened meaning? The secret is that when an action is mechanical, it is emptied of intention. It is detached from drives and will, since machines do not have intentions, drives or will. And since the intentions and motives are the meaning we ascribe to the action, the action is emptied of its meaning. It remains a concrete entity, having a separate life from its meanings. This is precisely what happens in the next joke.

3Be. 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 assumed to be loaded with meaning, turns out to be involuntary contortions.

Bergson’s theory is considered passé nowadays, unjustly so.  It points at a basic humor mechanism, and it deserves being merged into the main body of humor research. The fact that the “shift of weight” notion does this is some evidence for its validity.

**3C. Arrows Rebounding on the Archer**

The family of jokes we consider next seems distant from the two discussed so far. But the distance serves our purpose well: a common denominator, if found, will probably indicate something of essence. The family in question is that of self-referential jokes. Something that appears to relate to the world turns out to point at itself. Another name for this mode of thought is “circularity”. [[1]](https://raharoni.net.technion.ac.il/blog/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn1)

3Ca. I always thought I was indecisive. But now I am not so sure.

3Cb. How is it that everybody complains all the time, and only I don’t?

3Cc. Non-conformists of the world – unite!

3Cd. I don’t understand women. Whenever they hear anything, they ascribe it to themselves. –  I am not like that!

3Ce. Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question?  – Why shouldn’t he?

In each of these instances, the sentence is subject to judgement by its own content. The pointer becomes its own object. As with all sentences, we direct our attention to the content. But then it turns out that the content applies to the pointer itself, making the pointer the protagonist, that draws our attention.

3Cf. He is such a total loser, that if a contest of losers were held he would come out last.

We apply the criterion for “loser-ship” (coming out last), and find that this criterion refers to itself – coming out last means being the epitome of loser-ship, so it means coming out first – the famous vicious circle.

Circularity is responsible for some beautiful mathematics, and it plays a major role (perhaps even more than is usually admitted) also in philosophy (see, e.g., Aharoni 2016). But its most pleasing manifestation is in jokes. There is something amusing in an arrow shot into the world, only to hit its sender. In self-reference jokes the shift from meaning to its carrier is even more transparent than in flattened symbols. A pointer addresses some part of the world, and then turns out to be the subject of the information.

3Cg. There are two secrets to success in life. One is not telling all you know.

Again, a saying applies to itself. Circularity is one of the easiest ways of generating humor. Form a self-relating idea, and almost surely you will have a joke at hand.

3Ch. A man comes home, squats on the couch, turns on the TV, and calls: “Woman, beer! It is soon coming”. His wife brings him beer, he finishes it and then calls: “Woman, beer! For it is coming.” After the third time the woman explodes: “You brute. All you know is to watch TV, drink and growl”. “Ah, it has come”, says the husband.

This is a case of self-justifying prediction, a prediction that causes its content to come true.

3Ci. A manager has a hundred CVs on his desk. He shuffles them well, and throws half to the trash bin. Asked why he did it, he answers: “I don’t want losers”.

The manager speaks of misfortune, but it is his action that generates it.

3Cj. Three friends sit in a café, and as often happens in such cases, a fairy appears. She turns to one of the diners and offers him a wish of his choice: beauty, a million dollars, or wisdom. He thinks and thinks, and eventually chooses wisdom. The fairy waves her wand, and suddenly the man’s friends see that he is crestfallen. “What’s the matter?” they ask. “I should have chosen the million dollars”.

Is there a way of casting the essence of 3Cj in “incongruity” terminology? Feebly, if at all. There are indeed two ways of relating to the situation: one before the guy became wiser, and one after. But see how much is lost by calling this plainly “incongruity”. It does not carry any significant information about what really happens in the joke, which is that the choice turns out to be very relevant to itself, in a self-negating way.

The “incongruity” formula does not shed much light on jokes of self-reference. Here is an example, taken from (Oring 2003):

3Ck. Patient: “Nobody believes what I say”. Psychiatrist: “You are kidding!”

Oring, who supports a theory belonging to the incongruity family, writes (among other comments) “The doctor’s denial is incongruous in that it confirms the very problem about which the patient complains.” In fact, this is hardly “incongruity”. The doctor’s reaction fits well the complaint. It is only incongruous with a doctor’s duty, but this is not the point – had he said “I don’t care” it wouldn’t be funny. But the real problem is that the term “incongruity” is so general that it totally misses the essence of the joke – that “you are kidding” relates to the message “people think I am kidding” – and thus points at itself. A very similar joke:

3Cl. The pig complains to God: “Everything bad people ascribe to me – dirtiness, gregariousness, gluttony”. God scratches His head, and says “Indeed, piggishness”.

Here are some more examples. When the extent of Fed snooping after American citizens came to light the following cartoon appeared:

3Cm. Obama goes to a McDonald’s branch, and strikes a conversation with a kid. “Dad says you are spying on us”, says the child. “He is not your dad”, answers Obama.

3Cn. What is worse, ignorance or apathy? – I don’t know. But who cares?

An ad on the radio:

3Co. Saleswoman: We now have a special offer, two for the price of one.
Man on the other side of the phone: Wonderful! Why don’t you advertise it on the radio?
Saleswoman: We do. There was an ad just now, you just missed it.

**The difference between flattening of symbols and self-reference**

Pointers becoming pointed-at appeared also in jokes of flattening of symbols. For example, when the rice of the Chinese couple in 3Ac ceases to be a symbol, it gains attention as itself. What is the difference between this and self-reference? The answer is that in flattening of symbols the concrete symbol replaces the meaning, and the meaning disappears. In self-reference jokes the relation of pointing is maintained. For example, “I am no longer sure that I am indecisive” keeps its meaning all along. It just points at itself.

**3D: Rebounding metaphors**

In this section I want to discuss a joke technique which is a crossbreed between self-reference and flattening of metaphors: reversing the metaphor.

The secret of success of the metaphor in poetry is in its double function: conveying information and veiling it, at the same time. On the one hand, it is an extremely efficient means of transferring information. It takes a familiar conceptual structure (“vehicle”) in one situation, and transfers it *en bloc*to another situation (the “tenor”). Since we know the vehicle well, we can use it as one unit, thus saving a lot of work – like moving a whole building in one piece, instead of brick by brick. Moreover – sometimes the tenor is abstract while the vehicle is more concrete and hence easy to grasp. This happens, for example, in the passage from handing material objects – “give my heart” –  to abstract love.

Or take Shakespeare’s famous

3Da. All the world is a stage (*As you like it*)

The vehicle (theatre) is more concrete than the tenor (life), since it is more compact – a theatrical play is shorter than life. We know what theatre is, and the various aspects of behavior of the actors, and the analogy enables us to glean from it insights about life. On the other hand, the metaphor is used to veil the information, enabling both author and reader to pretend (or believe) that they are speaking about the vehicle, not the tenor. “Give my heart” is less direct than “love”. Exit from stage is less frightening than death: “All men and women are merely players, they have their exits and entrances”. The simile allows indirect knowledge, thus distancing us from our immediate life, at least momentarily, which is a gateway to the artistic effect.

That metaphors play a central role also in humor is well known (see, e.g., Müller 2015, who traces this observation to Aristotle; see also Piada 2016). But of course, their role there is very different. Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer 1860) claimed that humor results from the application of inappropriate (“broken”) metaphors. For example:

3Db. Visitor: Last year there were here 10 windmills, now only 5. What happened?
Local: The wind was not sufficient for all.

This is based on a metaphor, whose vehicle is the situation of insufficient resources, so familiar to us in other contexts, but inappropriate in this one. Broken metaphors are different from flattened metaphors, and are not within the direct scope of this paper. What I want to mention in this section is yet another ruse used by jokes: reversing tenor and vehicle. The result involves both flattening of the metaphor, and the vehicle pointing at itself.

In the next joke a metaphor is dismantled by exchanging the roles of tenor and vehicle. The result is, again, going one level lower – to the plain meaning.

3Dc. Johnny’s parents think it is time their son knew the facts of life and ask his older brother to illuminate him. The brother summons Johnny and asks: “Do you know what my girlfriend and I do every night?” – “Yes”, says Johnny. “So”, says the brother, “Mom and Dad want you to know that the birds and the bees do the same”.

In the next joke it is not a metaphor that is reversed, but metonymy (representing something by its part or something pertaining to it).

3Dd. “My wife is unfaithful to me with a carpenter”, complains a man to his friends. “How do you know?” – “I found sawdust in our bed”. “My wife is unfaithful to me with an electrician”, says the other. “How do you know?” – “I found electric wires in our bed”. “My wife is unfaithful to me with a boxer”, says the third. “How do you know?” – “I found him in our bed”.

Metonymy is a kind of pointer, and in this case it turns out to point at itself. The carpenter and the electrician needed such a pointer, the boxer did not. He himself is the pointer.

A rather subtle reversal of roles of vehicle and tenor occurs in the following joke:

3De. There is “Playboy” for married men. The same playmate every month.

The joke starts with a promise of information on the playboy version for married couples. Instead, we receive information (and a mocking one at that) on married life. The analogy between “being married” and “reading ‘Playboy`” is taken in the reverse direction to that promised.

**4.             Victory of the pointer**

In all types of humor discussed above, the carrier of meaning changes role, from servant to master, from a transparent entity whose sole *raison d’être*is conveying the meaning, to occupying center stage. This move is not restricted to these families. It can be found in many jokes.

4a. The owner of a tail docked cocker spaniel brings it 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.”

The maneuver is transparent: from meaning to its signifier. The wagging of the tail is a sign of joy. The man is not interested in the meaning of the wagging, the joy (it is going to be there whether the tail is short or long), only in the sign. The pointer is triumphant over its meaning. The tail is wagging the dog.

This has two sides:

* The symbol is detached from its meaning.
* The weight shifts from meaning to symbol. The symbol, depleted from meaning, is left as sole victor in the battlefield.

These two steps are precisely what happens in flattening of metaphors. Taking a metaphor at face value means that the external wins over the internal. The carrier of meaning turns out to be more important than the meaning itself. Here is a classic of this sort:

4b. A woman praises her friend’s baby for its beauty. “Wait till you see the pictures!” responds the mother.

A picture is a pointer: it points at the object itself. Here it is preferred to the object. Proud parents provided me with a metaphor for this state of affairs.

4c. They were trying to teach their baby names of objects, by pointing at them while articulating their names. But instead of looking at the object, the baby clutched the finger.

This is what happens in the jokes we are considering: you look at the finger, instead of what it points at.

In Athens there was a philosophical school called “cynics”, meaning “dog-like”. Like dogs they lived in the street, some say that like dogs they even made love there, defying common morality. The most famous of them was Diogenes (323-412 BC), about whom it is told that his possessions amounted to a waist cloth, a bowl and a jar. When one day he saw someone drinking from the stream by cupping his hands, he broke the jar. The symbol behaves in jokes in a similar way. Its most precious possession is its meaning. But it happily forsakes it, to become liberated of worldly possessions. Relieving itself of the burden of the meaning, it is free and jubilant.

Often this victory is subtle:

4d. An engineer is stranded on a desert island, and leads a miserable Robinson Crusoe existence. A few months on he has an excursion to the other side of the island, and discovers there a beautiful woman who was also stranded. He finds that she has managed to provide herself with the comforts of civilization – a cabin with running water, kitchen and furniture. She invites him to a lavish dinner, wine included. After dinner she says: “you have been stranded 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?”

Is it the absurdity of the request that is funny? Partly. But there is something subtler going on. E-mail is a means of communication, and as such it is a carrier of meaning, pointing as it does to the addressee. The woman offers the thing itself – the engineer prefers the pointer. Is it legitimate to ascribe such sophistication to a joke? Most definitely. As Papa Freud taught us, even non-assuming products of thought are often deeper than meets the eye. And general terms, like “incongruity”, are unlikely to lock horns with the deeper processes occurring in the joke.

4e. A gregarious woman studies the restaurant menu and eventually says to the waiter – “yes”.

A menu is a carrier of meaning, in that it points at possible choices. Here it becomes the thing itself. The woman chooses its entirety.

Mindess (1971) spoke of the joy of liberation in laughter. This can be viewed in two ways. One is the (metaphorical) joy of the carrier of meaning, of triumph over the meaning. Then there is the joy of the listener, who finds that he or she is not bound to the ordinary meaning of the pointer – this is joy of freedom from commitment.

A classic example is play on words – shared, actually, by both poems and jokes. The words rebel against their meaning: “We are not committed to the meaning ordinarily assigned to us”.

4f. What is the difference between in-laws and outlaws? – Outlaws are wanted.

The external appearance of the words precedes their meaning. By the way – this is another characteristic shared with poetry, where the rhyme and meter play an important role. “Form over meaning” – the rhyme and the meter divert our attention away from the meaning, to external features of the words. And here, too, there is a difference between jokes and poems: in poetry the diversion does not annihilate the meaning, but enriches it. In jokes, the connection between form and content is accidental, and is eventually mocked and discarded.

In the next joke a symbol is formed, only to materialize as “the thing itself”:

4g. Two nonagenarians marry. On the first night he gropes for her hand, they hold hands and fall asleep. On the second night he gropes for her hand, they hold hands and fall asleep. On the third night when he gropes for her hand she says: “No, darling, not tonight. I have a headache”.

The holding of hands is a pointer, arousing anticipation of what is expected to follow. But it then transpires that it carries no meaning beyond itself – this is it.

In the next joke the words (in fact, their hearing) are exulted over their meaning:

4h. A violist arrives at his orchestra’s rehearsal and finds the hall empty but for a janitor sweeping the floor. “Where is everybody?” he asks. “Didn’t you hear? The conductor died. The rehearsal is cancelled.” “OK”, he says, and walks away. After a few minutes he returns. “Where is everybody?” – “I just told you, the conductor died, and the rehearsal is cancelled”. “OK”, he says, and walks away. After a few minutes he returns, and asks “Where is everybody?” – “I told, you, the conductor died. Are you deaf?” – “No, I just enjoy hearing you say it”.

And the same idea again – the saying is what matters:

4i. A man in a train car keeps moaning – “Wow, am I hungry. Am I hungry”. The man on the opposite seat gets annoyed, and eventually pulls a sandwich out of his bag and offers it to him. The guy devours the sandwich and then says “Wow, was I hungry, was I hungry.”

The hungry passenger, his impatient travelling companion, as well as the reader of the joke, are all more interested in the words uttered than in the hunger itself. Another example in which the saying is that which matters:

4j. An old man goes to confession and tells the priest: “I am 80 years old, and yesterday I met two 18-year-old beauties and wow, what a night we had”. “Say three Hail Marys and you will be forgiven”, says the priest. “But I am Jewish”, says the confessor. “So why did you tell me?” – “I am telling everybody”.

**5.   Inside or Outside?**

There is a special family of self-reference jokes, in which the listener suddenly finds him/herself to be part of the joke. A quick transition occurs from the position of an observer to that of a participant.

5a. – To qualify for the Ku-Klux-Klan you have to kill a Negro and a dog.  – Why the dog?  – You are in.

The listener becomes a candidate himself, and a successful one at that.

5b. Want to hear a joke from end to beginning? -Yes! -Then laugh first.

5c. Would you like to hear a joke? – Yes! – OK. Once there were two jokes. One fell ill. The other sat by its bed, consoled it, fed it soup. Isn’t it a good joke?

In spite of being a children’s joke, this joke is quite sophisticated. There is a quick transition from being outside to being inside the joke – you realize that “a good joke” relates to the one you are presently hearing, and you have to admit that indeed, it is a good joke.

The Monty Python group cultivated this type of humor. In a famous skit, The Arguments Clinic, a person enters an office, and the man sitting there attacks him viciously: “You vacuous, toffee-nosed, malodorous, pervert! Your type makes me puke!” and so on. The visitor says – “I came in for an argument!” At which his attacker becomes excessively sweet: “Ah, sorry, this is Abuse”. So far, we witnessed a case of “detachment of intention”, or actually of emotions. The man in the office does it as a job, not driven by real emotions – Bergson may glee. Now comes the self-referential part: the visitor finds the right room, asks “is this Arguments?” and the man inside tells him “I told you once”, the guy says “no you haven’t”, and so on. The client remonstrates – “contradiction is not an argument!” to which the arguer answers of course “yes it is”. After about a minute the arguer says “your time is up”, and the visitor protests – “it should have been five minutes!” and an argument evolves on this matter. At any given moment the man may wonder whether he is having an argument or arguing his right to have one.

And speaking of Monty Python, there is the classic self-reference in “Life of Brian”. Brian (read “Jesus”) opens the window of his room in Jerusalem, and sees a multitude gathering in the street below, calling “A grace, a grace!” “You don’t have to follow me”, he calls, “you are all individuals!” “Yes, we are all individuals”, they shout back in unison. “You are all different”, he tells them, and they all call together “We are all different!” A sole dissenting voice is heard: “I am not!”

The move we are describing in this paper is like that – from external to internal. From the meaning, which is outside, to the carrier, which is inside our thoughts. This is another facet of the “victory of the carrier”. It was possibly first pointed out by Freud in (Freud 1905), who called it “victory of the phantasy (over reality).” He gave an example of the followers of the Rabbi from Lamberg, who boasted of the prophetic powers of their rabbi: he sensed that the Rabi from Minsk just died. When it turned out a few weeks later that the Rabi from Minsk is alive and well, the followers still boasted: “yes, but consider what wonderful jump it is, from Lamberg to Minsk!”

Here are two more examples:

5d. Twice I failed in my marriage. My first wife left me, the second didn’t.

From the external events – the wives leaving or not, the joke moves to the internal – how the person relates to this. It is not the outside event that matters, but its perception. It is a classical victory of the pointer – it is the speaker’s attitude to reality that matters.  Similar is the famous Mark Twain’s quip:

5e. When I was 14 my father was such a fool that I couldn’t bear him around. When I met him again at 21 I was surprised to see how much the old chap learnt during the seven years.

**6.   Carriers explicitly depleted of meaning**

Some jokes go to an extreme and explicitly declare: “there is no need for the meaning to be linked to its carrier”. The symbol can be free of commitments.

6a. The commander to the recruits: “I will call you ‘Sir’, and you will call me ‘Sir’. You will mean it”.

As in 3Aa, besides the detachment of meaning there is another technique, of implicitness: “I will not mean it” is said only implicitly.

6b. Patient: “I am 70, and in bed it is not what it used to be. My next door neighbor in the old age home is 74, and he tells me he does it every night. What should I do?” Doctor: “What should you do? Tell him, too”.

Something significant to note here is that the victory of the carrier is not achieved by negation. Had the doctor said: “your friend is lying”, the joke would have been lost. Negation still relates to the meaning. The doctor relates not to the meaning, but to its carrier – the saying. To enhance confusion, he speaks of it as “doing”.

Actions, too, can be depleted of meaning.

6c. Old man A: Do you remember how we used to chase girls?
Old man B: Yes, but I don’t remember why.

Here it is not a word that is emptied of meaning, but an act – that of chasing girls. Old man B could have just said “Yes, but I no longer have the drive”. This would not be funny. The reason is that it would not constitute a detachment of meaning. It would still relate to the meaning of the chase, the sex drive. What makes it a joke is that the old guy still addresses the carrier, namely the action of chasing, independently of its purpose – which is its meaning.

6d. An e-mail message from a Jewish mother to her son: “Start worrying. Details to follow”.

Worrying is a pointer: it points at the cause for concern.  Here it precedes its referent. You can worry just so.

**7.   What do the incongruity theories have to say on this type of humor?**

How much light do the incongruity theories shed on the mechanism discussed here? As I tried to show in various examples above – very little. The incongruity formula misses the point, or at least blurs it. In jokes of flattened metaphors or flattened symbolic meaning, the incongruity that can be found is between the two ways of understanding the message: the abstract and the concrete. But saying “incongruity” does not capture the essence of the two ways. As Latta (Latta 2009) pointed out, the “incongruity” formula is too wide and too vague to really shed light on the mechanisms of humor. (In (Forabosco 2008) there is analysis of the present day relevance of the formula.)

Consider for example Joke 8a. How would you analyze it in terms of incongruity? Let me try: there is incongruity between being unhappy about your wife leaving you and being unhappy with her staying. But this completely misses the deeper point of the joke, which is that it is not the external event that matters, but its perception.

The inappropriateness of “incongruity” is conspicuous also in jokes of self-reference. Take for example Joke 3Ca. A possible attempt at putting it into the mold of incongruity is: there is a clash between understanding the content of the sentence – “indecisiveness”, and judging the sentence as evidence for this indecisiveness. If all this means is “construing the sentence on two levels”, then the entire point is missed. Critical is the particular nature of these levels: the sentence as carrier of meaning, and as an object of this meaning.

The difficulty is even more pronounced in the case of the SSTH and GTVH theories, that speak about “two incongruous scripts” that can be used to describe the same situation, or fit the same verbal utterance. The commitment to this scientifically sounding terminology removes the analysis even further from the real process going on in the joke. Take for example Joke 3Aa. Script 1 is the metaphorical interpretation of “give one’s heart”, and Script 2 the concrete meaning of “high” and “low”. But these are hardly scripts (even in the sense used in linguistic research), and again – it misses the main point. There is a transition here of very special type, that should be explicitly pronounced, and which the “scripts” formulation does not address at all.

**8.   The purpose of the shift**

Humor plays too important a role in our life to be considered a mere diversion. Clearly, it serves some important purpose. Edward de Bono (quoted, e.g., in de Bono 1990) went to the extreme of declaring it to be “by far the most important activity of the brain”. What is its function? The “shift of weight” notion provides a plausible answer. The magic word is “change”, that so coveted and so hard to achieve aim. “Humor is meant to change the way we think”, said the Chinese-American writer Lin Yutang. The shift of weight is a first step in this direction. Change of thought patterns demands, before all, dismantling the old frameworks. In order to form a new conceptual bond, you first have to unhook the old bonds, or in our terminology – detach the carrier of meaning from its object, the meaning. Detaching concepts from their objects enables the construction of new conceptual or emotional links. Once on its own, the carrier of meaning can form new connections. This is also the reason that humor is so often associated with creativity.

Of course, this is a vast topic. Here I could touch on it only perfunctorily.

**9.   Concluding remarks**

Is humor a tight entity, with well delineated borders? Or is “humor” a loose concept, like the proverbial way Wittgenstein viewed the concept of “game”? Namely, does humor have a basic underlying single mechanism (“essence”, in the philosophical terminology used in this context), or has it evolved by fortuitous jumps according to superficial similarities? A comprehensive survey of this debate can be found in (Morreal 2008). It would be nicer if the first of these is true. Indication that this is the case is that people usually recognize humor with confidence and no hesitation. On the other hand, two and a half millennia of unsuccessful attempts at pinning down the essence of humor testify that the common denominator, if it exists, is not to be found on the surface. It may be there, but it is not easily accessible to verbal description.

A less ambitious approach is not to search for a common denominator for all of humor, but try to connect islands: find a common mechanism of specific types of humor. This is what I tried to do in this paper. The main ingredient in the mechanism we found is the one that stars in most theories of humor, even if sometimes implicitly – “meaning”. The aspect particular to the mechanism we found is that the play is not between two meanings, but between a meaning and its carrier. The carrier is detached from the meaning and gains a life of its own. This entails a shift of weight, namely of attention, from meaning to its carrier. We saw that even Bergson’s theory, which on its face relates to something else – type of behavior –  revolves around meanings, in this case of actions, and involves such a shift.

Should we pursue this direction further, and look for a shift of weight also in other parts of humor? It may be worth trying. A very preliminary step in this direction is done in the paper itself, in the form of sporadic examples of jokes following this pattern. It is worth-while examining whether the shift from meaning to its carrier is the significant part also in incongruity. Namely, that the clash between meanings is funny precisely because the carrier of one meaning is suddenly free to connect to another meaning, thus gaining a life of its own. Whether this is indeed the case, it is safer to withhold judgement. The aim of this paper is not to offer a general theory of humor, but to present a direction and stimulate discussion.

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[[1]](https://raharoni.net.technion.ac.il/blog/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref1) I am not aware of academic study of this genre, apart from my own (Aharoni 2016), which contains a more extensive discussion than the present one. But there are sites on the internet on such jokes.