Detachment of empathy: a common denominator for two theories of humour

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Abstract

Humour research is currently dominated by incongruity theories. These speak about collision of two meanings of a verbal expression or situation. In a previous paper (Aharoni 2018) I suggested that this is but a special case of a more basic mechanism: detachment, or withdrawal, of a meaning from its carrier. The carrier can then assume another meaning, resulting in "incongruity", but this is not compulsory. In the present paper I offer evidence for this view, taken from two theories of humour, both not belonging to the "incongruity" family. One is the superiority (or derision) theory, and the other is Bergson's "automatic response". Though seemingly far apart, the types of humour they point at share a deep mechanism: detachment of empathy. Since empathy, or identification, is man's (and even animals') main tool in deciphering meanings of actions, this results in detaching actions from their meanings.

Key words: empathy, detachment of meaning, incongruity, superiority, mechanical reaction.

1. Introduction

> A problem worthy of attack
>
> shows its worth by fighting back.
>
> (Piet Hein, Danish mathematician and poet)

Few riddles in the history of thought have put up as vigorous a fight as the definition of humour. Two and a half millennia have produced little on which there is general consent. Judging by the ease with which we identify humour, its contours must be sharp. The sensors in our brain identify it with little hesitation – it is rare that we don't know if something is funny or not. But fathoming how these sensors work is still beyond our understanding. We are strong in identification, but weak in putting to words how we do that. Every so often somebody claims to have finally caught the eel by its tail – but usually this claim does not hold for long. We shall analyse a relatively recent such claim below.

Most recent theories, in particular those receiving the widest support, belong to the "incongruity" family. Such theories speak of collision of two modes of thought, or two interpretations of the same verbal expression, or situation, or action. Incongruity has many formulations, that are all

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akin in spirit. Hutcheson's "incongruity", Koestler's bisociation, and the more recent "two scripts" theory of Raskin, all speak about two modes of thought that meet at the same playground. An interpretation of some section of the world – be it words, situation, or actions, is replaced by another or coexists alongside with it.

There are two notable theories that do not belong to this family. Both drew a lot of attention in the past, testimony to at least partial validity of their arguments. Yet, both are markedly less popular nowadays, and for a good reason: their claim for universality is obviously off mark. The first of these is the oldest theory of humour, that of derision, originating with Plato and Aristotle. The other is Bergson's "automatic behaviour", mechanical response where a human, flexible reaction is expected.

As already remarked, the two theories undoubtedly point at types of humour that do exist. Ridicule is indeed funny, and automatic behaviour does make us laugh. Since only brazen coercion can fit them into the "incongruity" pattern (we shall meet such attempts later on), this means that at least in some cases humour does not involve collision of two meanings. There must be some other mechanism at play. Finding it may point the way to a general characteristic of humour, of which incongruity should be a special case, not vice versa.

New ideas in the paper

In a take on the famous Schopenhauer's "three steps of acceptance of an idea" (ridicule, opposition, self-evidence), the Polish mathematician Hugo Steinhaus had his own three stages. "First, they say it is wrong; then, they say it is trivial; finally, they say I did if first". (Another version: "This is utter nonsense, and besides it has been said a million times before.") What both Schopenhauer and Steinhaus missed is that in most cases the idea does not even reach the first stage. It is not even noticed. I want to save the ideas in this paper that I deem original from this fate. I want them to reach at least the first stage. So, to ease the toil of the reader in identifying the (hopefully) new claims, let me summarize them. The reader is not presumed to accept them, only to realize that they are there, and possibly comprehend them.

1. The basic mechanism in humour is not a play between two meanings, but between a meaning and its carrier. Specifically: detachment of a meaning from its carrier. This may involve switching to another meaning (in which case "incongruity" may apply), but not necessarily.
2. Next to verbal expressions, the main carriers of meaning are actions. As impact on our lives goes, they are possibly even first in the list.
3. The possible meanings of actions are intentions, motives, drives, and some more. These are "meanings" in the sense that they are interpretation of the actions.
4. The reason that these are so significant is that it is important for us to know the intentions behind actions, be they trivial or major. Knowing them enables us to predict the people surrounding us.
5. Empathy, or identification, is the main tool in deciphering other people's intentions.
6. Bergson's "mechanicality" and derision both involve detachment of identification. The first, because we do not ascribe intentions to machines, and the second because derision means declaring the object to be worthless.
7. Alongside detachment of meaning, there is loading with meaning, which is the temporal opposite. The carrier is detached from the meaning in the beginning of the joke, and

loaded at its end. This is still detachment, "in hindsight", which is not very different from "forward detachment". Our brain goes very fast back and forth, and realizes that a carrier that is now loaded was detached from its meaning before. Hence the ubiquity of jokes based on this mechanism.

8. Implicitness, one of the joke's main techniques, is based on loading of meaning. A phrase that looks innocuous turns out to contain a loaded message.

The structure of the paper

1. In Sections 2 and 3 I will describe the two theories that are the main topic of the paper.
2. Section 4 treats the mechanism common to the two: detachment of empathy.
3. Section 5 puts detachment of empathy in a more general context. Empathy is the king's road to deciphering the meanings of actions, and its detachment is detachment of actions from their meaning.
4. Section 6 discusses a humorous instance in which disparagement and mechanicality concur.
5. Section 7 is an attempt to clarify better what "detachment of meaning" means. The carrier of meaning is emptied. As the meaning has disappeared, the carrier remains alone on stage, victorious over the meaning.
6. Section 8 uses the tools acquired to examine a special case of mechanicality: detachment of spontaneity.
7. In Section 9 I examine how fit are the incongruity theories to deal with scorn and with mechanicality.
8. Section 10 studies the analysis of a joke by SSTH researchers, and compares it with the "detachment of meaning" interpretation. In particular, we show that the "incongruity" or "two scripts" terminology misses a deeper pattern, that is common to a large family of jokes. This family can be well understood in terms of "detachment".
9. In Section 11 we discuss the opposite of detachment: loading with meaning. This is relevant to a basic joke technique, mentioned in the SSTH analysis of the joke in the section before: implicitness.
10. Section 12 deals with the question "why" – what is the purpose of detaching of actions from their meanings. (No, it is not to arouse laughter – there is a deeper aim.)

2. Matter over mind

Throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, Henri Bergson was the philosopher best known to the general public, 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 "force 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 laws. Any attempt to pinpoint his will or thoughts will meet rebellion: "I can choose otherwise". This is one formulation of the sensation of Free-Will, man's feeling that his decisions depend only on his choice. Bergson even went a step further: Evolution itself is not subject to physical rules. It is generated by creative powers.

If you find all this too hazy to comprehend, let me console you in that so do I. I am not sure that this idea is going to win eternal glory. But another idea of Bergson, on the relationship between man and machine, probably will. It is his definition for "humour" that he published in a 1900 short book, "Laughter". We laugh, so he claimed, when we detect automatic behaviour where a human one is expected. This occurs when the *élan vital* has a day off, and a person behaves like a machine.

Strange, indeed. How does "automatic behaviour replacing flexibility of thought" connect to the known properties of humour, like the use of ambiguity, or the skip from one mode of thought to another? Let us investigate this step by step.

Every theory of humour must address the best known of all comic incidents – slipping on a banana peel. Why is it funny? Plato (428 – 348 BC) and his student Aristotle (384-322 BC) opted for the natural answer: *Schadenfreude*. Gloating over the person's mishap. Bergson, too, made tumbling (he does not mention the banana peel, but let me do use it here) the starting point of his theory. His explanation is that we laugh because the person behaved like an automaton. We expect will-controlled behaviour, and instead we witness victory of matter over mind. The will of the banana peel prevailed.

Bergson explained other forms of humour using the same terms. For example, comedies of character. The protagonists of such comedies – the hypochondriac, the miserly, the distracted – do not act according to their free will, but by the behaviour dictated by their trait. They are marionettes of their character. Most impressive is the success of this idea in explaining jokes based on stereotypes, in particular ethnic jokes. Incongruity theories fail here miserably: the protagonist of the joke does not behave incongruously. Quite the opposite: he or she fits our expectations (though in exaggerated form, usually). Bergson's explanation is beautiful and convincing: the person does not act by his or her will, but by the stereotype. He or she are slaves of their image.

Another instance of humour that is illuminated by this interpretation is the comicality of repeated occurrences. If, walking in the street, three people come across you, clearly unrelated to each other, and all wear green trousers and a yellow shirt, you will find it funny. Coincidences are always funny. Why? – Automatism, says Bergson. Stiffness of behaviour of the world. Schuetze, a precursor of Bergson in linking mechanicality and humour (Schuetze 1817), 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.

No doubt – automatic behaviour is often funny. A living creature that behaves like a robot, and does not change its behaviour with changing circumstances, makes us laugh. Cartoons take such a

situation to absurdity in the well-known scene of the protagonist continuing to tread in air after the ground has disappeared beneath his feet. The circumstances have changed, but they continue their automatic behaviour.

Does all laughter result from the observation of automatism? Obviously, not. Most jokes go in different directions. It is no wonder that Bergson's theory has not caught on. But the grain of truth it contains will be useful for us. It points at a head of a trail leading to interesting places.

3.   Derision

The first theories of humour ever proposed were those of Plato and his disciple Aristotle. As already mentioned, they gave the same answer: derision. Every laughter is a leer at the misfortune of others. Not a very complimentary theory, and indeed Plato denounced humour and recommended graveness. Laughter may end up in disrespect for the Gods – Gods forbid.

This obviously carries some truth. Scorn always has humorous tinge. Deriding is accompanied by joy, sometimes even laughter. "Ridicule" comes from the Latin *ridere*, to laugh, and it is described as "laughing at". The children who mocked the prophet Elisha "go up baldy, go up baldy" were gleeful, at least in the first part of the story. Arthur Koestler (Koestler 1964) counted 29 mentions of laughter in the bible, 27 of which are in the context of scorn.

This is not the only case in which Aristotle did not confront his theories with reality. Had he checked the facts, he would have found that only a small fraction of jokes are based on mockery. For example, he may have known the following joke, which dates back to ancient Greece:

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

This is the forerunner of the present day joke –

How do you fit four elephants in a Mini? – two in the front, and two in the back.

The Greek version has the advantage that the leg-pulling is clearer: the listener thinks of size, only to find out it is an arithmetic riddle. Classical incongruity. Mockery? you'd have to bend over backwards to detect it here.

Strangely enough, there was a thinker who was prepared to perform this feat. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) maintained that laughing at a joke derives from self-mockery. "How naive we were", we tell ourselves, "to have fallen for it".

There are supporters of the derision-superiority theory to this day. Extensive literature survey on the topic can be found in …But, like Bergson's theory, it is not widely popular nowadays. It suffers from the curse of many humour theories – over-generalization. Obviously, it is applicable only in a limited domain of humour.

4.   Detachment of empathy

Is it possible that so dissimilar branches of humour have something in common? The answer is "yes", if you dig a bit under the surface. Let me start with the obvious: both involve de-humanization. The person observed is deprived of human motives. In mechanical behaviour, because machines do not possess human intentions or intelligent planning. In scorn, because the derided person seems to be so stupid, or worthless, that we do not take his or her intentions seriously. He or she lose their status as human beings with wishes, intentions and will. They are degraded to the status of the inanimate.

The concept most pertinent to this is *empathy*. In scorn and in ascribing mechanical behaviour, our empathy to the person is detached. In other words, we withdraw our identification. Scorn is the precise opposite of empathy. We reject the person, an attitude that manifests itself in the facial expression: an imitation of spitting food out, and pulling the nostrils as if to avoid bad smell. The person is perceived as hollow, devoid of intentions and emotions. In mechanical behaviour, we do not empathize because one cannot identify with a machine.

Empathy is no minor figure in our lives. It plays a major role. It is highly valued by its receiver, and justly so: it means compassion and understanding. But in fact, it is more important for the giver. It is much more than being nice to our fellow human beings: it enables predicting them. Identifying with a person is the king's road to understanding him or her, and knowing where they are heading. This, of course, is essential for survival.

Such an advantage must express itself genetically, and indeed Evolution has shown its respect for empathy by imprinting it in our genes. In fact, in the genes of all primates. We don't have to learn empathy (well, most of us don't) – we are born with it. Some forty years ago it was discovered that the brains of primates contain so-called "mirror neurons", that operate (mutedly, namely shooting signals without causing action) when their owner observes others performing some specific action (Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004). These are "empathy neurons".

Automatism, like derision, also involves detachment of empathy. Having discovered automatism in a person's behaviour, we stop identifying with him, because his actions are not guided by will. Empathy is felt only towards humans, or animals. Empathy means identification with intentions and will, and machines do not have those. In fact, this is precisely what characterises "mechanicality". Mechanical behaviour means, for us, actions devoid of motives, intentions, aims – all that makes us human.

When we identify with a person's actions, we want and intend and plan together with him or her. Sport events are attractive for us because they provide opportunity to desire something together with the participants. But there is no point in identifying with a person slipping over a banana peel, because his action is not governed by his intentions. He wanted to move forward, and the peel wanted otherwise. When we realize that he or she are acting as an automaton, the identification vanishes. The action is perceived as hollow of motives. It remains alone in the field, devoid of its meaning.

This is the reason that while in tragedies we identify with the protagonist, and undergo a psychological process similar to his, in comedies we are dissociated from the characters. We laugh at them, not with them. The main element in comedies is that the protagonists are not in full control of their actions. They are fallible, and what they want does not materialize. The famous Mark

Twain dictum - "comedy is tragedy plus time" – says precisely this: the time distance generates distance in identification.

5.   Meanings of actions and their detachment

We swim in an ocean of meanings. Everything around us demands interpretation penetrating beneath external appearance – the "meaning" we ascribe to them. And every meaning is interlaced in a rich fabric with other meanings. In this ocean words are just froth on the waves. Actions are no less significant - in final account even more so. And fathoming their meanings is no less important for our survival than understanding verbal utterances. For this reason, detachment of actions from their meanings is no less important in humour than detachment of meanings of words. In final account, the term "verbal humour" should be reserved only to puns. All other types of humour relate, in final account, to actions and to situations.

The most common meanings of actions are goal, purpose, will, intention, aim, responsibility, drive and motive. Why do I call these "meanings"? Here language comes to my aid. We ask people for the meaning of their actions, and it is no coincidence that "intending to do something" is expressed as "meaning to do it". Perceiving an action, we assume a guiding force behind it. Its overt manifestation has a covert side, that has to be interpreted, and hence we view it as "meaning". Deciphering this meaning tells us what to expect – where is the acting person heading, and what the consequences of the action will be.

Of course, if at all true, the idea of "detachment of meanings of actions" should not stop at scorn and mechanical behaviour. It must manifest itself also in other instances of humour. Indeed, this is the case. There is no shortage of such instances. Comic situations are often based on this mechanism. X throws a custard pie at Y, Y bends over and the pie hits Z. What makes this funny is the split between intention and outcome. Drama is based on accentuation of the meanings of actions: the protagonists are in deep love, or mortal danger. We go along with them, imagining ourselves in their shoes. Comedies, by contrast, are based on failures of meaning of actions: wishing things on pretension, or senselessly. For which reason, we do not identify. We feel detached from the protagonists, often superior to them.

 There are also countless jokes in which actions are detached from their intentions, motives or goals.

> Two labourers toil on a mountain. One digs a hole in the ground, the other fills
> it, one digs, the other fills. An onlooker is puzzled – "what are you doing?"
> "Usually we are three", explains the digger. "I dig, Sasha plants a tree, and
> Misha refills. Today Sasha is sick".

The act of digging is detached from its goal - the planting. It acquires a life of its own, independent of its original intention, like a lizard's tail that continues wiggling after being detached from the body.

Actions can also be detached from drives:

> A woman returns to her room in the old age home to find another old lady with her hand on her husband's pants. She is furious: "What does she have that I don't?" "Parkinson", answers the husband.

An action presumably loaded with meaning turns out to be involuntary convulsions.

"Motive" is something a bit different from "goal" or "drive". It, too, can be detached.

> A guy walks into a bar and orders the barman – "a drink for me, a drink for you, drinks all around". The barman serves out the drinks but when asked to settle the bill, the generous customer declares that he hasn't a penny. The angry barman gives him a good thrashing and kicks him out. The following week the same guy appears, and orders again – "a drink for me, a drink for you, drinks all around". Certain that the customer has learnt his lesson, the barman complies. But again, when it's time to pay, the customer declares he has no money. Again the barman beats him up and throws him out. The following week the same guy appears: "a drink for me, drinks all around", he orders. The barman is offended: "what about me?" "You", says the customer, "when you drink you become violent".

The generous-on-others'-expense nonchalantly construes the behaviour of the barman to his convenience, detaching it from its real motive.

6. A joint example to derision and mechanical behaviour

Treating a person as inanimate is sometimes a means for degrading him. So, the two – derision and relating to a person as if he or she is a machine, sometimes concur. A nice example is given in (Tsakona 2017). The purpose of the paper is to examine how the general public perceives humour, via their reactions to a humorous ad on TV. A mobile phones seller promised that, if not satisfied, customers could return the phone for no penalty. The metaphorical situation they gave in the ad was that of a man returning his wife to her mother.

> M(an): Wha::::t's that? {ironically to his wife who brings okras to the table}
>
> W(oman): Okras! {with enthusiasm}
>
> M: Okras! {with fake enthusiasm} Okras again. {Sound signaling that the
>
> man starts fantasizing} Get up! Get up you! {in an angry tone}
>
> {We watch the couple go to her mother's house and knock at the door.
>
> The husband's mother-in-law opens the door, happy to see them.}
>
> Mother-in-law: Wel[come]
>
> M: [A::::]haha:. So dear mother-in-law do you see her? Well, I am bringing
>
> her back [exactly] as I took her [from you]. Untouched, unworn, and in her
>
> packaging.
>
> {The mother-in-law looks surprised.}

M: She has cost me 650 coffees, 152 meals, 1 birthday present and 2 nameday ones, Maria dear {he addresses his wife}, can you tell me, did we watch it together that great movie "Love in Swaziland"? {his wife nods positively} Well, plus 39 movie tickets.

{Sound signaling that the man's fantasy is over.}

W: Okras! {with enthusiasm}

M: Uh? {waking up from the fantasy}

W: Like my mum cooks them.

M: U:::::hhhh

The comments arriving from the public were, of course, that this is derogatory, for the wife and for women in general. But the devaluation is done via one main vehicle: equating a human being to a mobile phone. Treating the wife as an object, devoid of human will.

Note this is not always the case. Neither derision nor mechanical reaction imply the other. In this case, they coincide, but in general derision does not entail perceiving the person's actions as mechanical, and vice versa - mechanicality does not imply scorn.

7. Emptying from meaning

Detachment of meaning is also emptying of meaning. It results in the object remaining mechanical motions in the case of actions, and empty words if the carrier of meaning is verbal. External appearance prevails. Even if the meaning is replaced by another, the carrier turns out to be more important than meaning: it is suddenly free to choose which meaning to wear. Here is an example of a joke of detachment without replacement by another meaning:

How do you know that a salesman is cheating? – His lips move.

The movement of the lips replaces the meaning: you do not have to understand the words to recognize the lie.

American: Lincoln never uttered a lie from his mouth.
Englishman: Of course. He spoke through his nose, like all of you.

The way the words are produced is exulted over their meaning. Does this fit the "two scripts" paradigm? Barely. One script could be listening to the meaning of the words and the other relating to the way of their production. But more illuminating is to note that the production of words is emptied from meaning. There is a shift of weight from meaning to its carrier, the physical utterance. This shift is essential to the process of detachment of meaning. Once the carrier is emptied, it remains the sole protagonist of the play.

8.   Detachment of spontaneity

Let me dwell on one form of automatic behaviour, detachment of spontaneity. My aim, as in other parts of this paper, is to show that the "incongruity" interpretation misses something – there is something deeper going on. There is a pattern here, a mould into which a large family of humorous instances falls, and which the "incongruity" terminology is too coarse to apprehend.

Before discussion, let me give a few examples. One is the famous question of the children who, on a day of outing, ask their parents –

> Are we having fun yet?

This is "automatic behaviour" in the sense that it is detachment of emotions, that are here supposed to come from the outside. Is it possible to detect "incongruity", or "two scripts"? Only the obvious, that "fun" should come from the inside, and here is comes from the outside. But the mere notion of "incongruity" doesn't address the main issue – detachment of the action (in this case "fun") from the forces governing it.

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

> Wife: "Do you remember how, when we were young, you used to nibble gently on my earlobe?"
>
> Husband: "If you bring me my glasses and my false teeth, I can do it again."

Bodily expressions are usually spontaneous, and not subject to conscious control. Here is what happens when an expression is postponed:
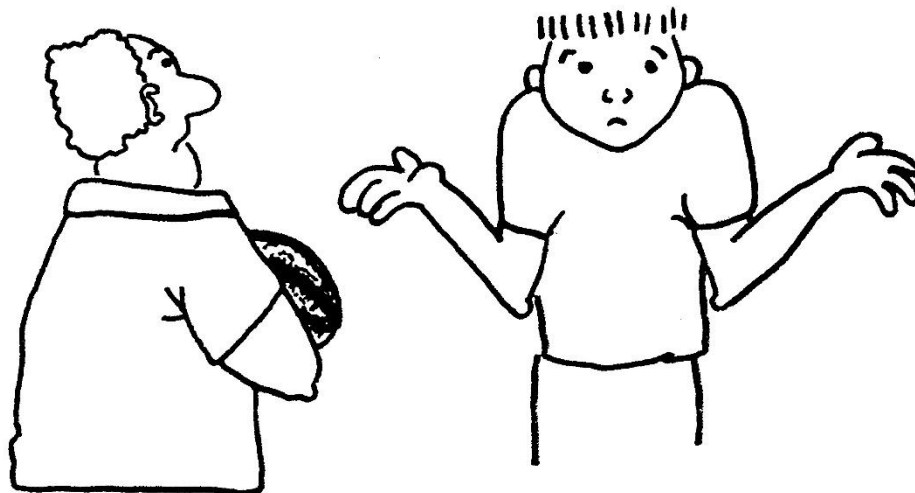
In the TV series "Modern family", a woman is angry with her husband. "I could have slapped you", she tells him, turns around and walks away. After a second or two she returns, says "As a matter

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. In music, such a delayed effect is called "syncope", having its own humorous tinge.

"Detachment of intentions" can explain a riddle that arises with respect to the Bergsonian theory: that there are actions that look mechanical, and still are not funny. For example, a parade. The soldiers appear to behave mechanically, and still we do not laugh. The reason is that the soldiers' action is not detached from their will. Indeed, their will is to obey, but the action is still connected to their intentions.

And yet another riddle. Chaplin's "Modern Times" looks like an illustration to Bergson's theory – though Chaplin probably didn't hear the name. It starts with mechanization of humans: Chaplin is a workman, whose job is to turn two screws on a fast moving conveyor belt, all day long. Eventually mechanicality takes over: he is trying to turn the screws on everything he sees. How come this is funny, and watching a real workman on a conveyor belt is not? The reason is that we identify with the real workman, and sympathize with him. Chaplin gives us clues that his "work is not for real, and so the empathy is detached.

9.   The (ir)relevance of incongruity to scorn and mechanicality

Can incongruity theories explain the funniness of derision, or of mechanical behaviour? Here are some thoughts of Morreal on the way incongruity theories tackle scorn ("Philosophy and religion", in The Humour Primer Book, Raskin 1990).

> Why was the Superiority Theory the only theory of laughter and humour for two millennia? To answer this question, we should note that most of the incongruities we laugh at, especially in comedy, are human shortcomings – ignorance, stupidity, awkwardness, mistakes, misunderstandings, and moral vices. The Incongruity Theory would say simply that it is the unexpectedness, the out-of-placeness of these shortcomings that we enjoy.

In his dialogue Philebus (Plato 1987), Plato claims that derision points at incongruity between the person's self-perception and their real persona. We laugh at people who think of themselves as wealthier, better-looking, more virtuous, or wiser than they really are.

Both these attempts are coerced. The prophet Elisha knew he was bald. It is not that the children perceived him differently from the way he perceived himself. It is not that we dissociate ourselves from the self-image of the scorned person. Rather, there is total dissociation. We cease to identify with his or her wishes and intentions. There are no "two scripts" in the children's call. Elisha was bald, plain and simple. Out-of-placeness? It would be no less out of place if he played the recorder marvellously. "Incompatibility between the way the person perceives him/herself and the way we see them" would fit also the situation in which the person is too humble. Funniness requires a negative gradient: we must deny the person his positive view of himself. And obviously, we are not really thinking about the way the person perceives himself. We ignore it, since we dissociate ourselves from him.

In their GTVH, Attardo and Raskin add another element to the "scripts", that of "targeting". This is seemingly relevant to superiority, in which somebody is targeted as the inferior object of the humour. But it doesn't really connect to the scripts. Rather, it comes as an attempt to fill some gaps in the theory (see, e.g., the analysis in (Kirkman 2006).)

The same goes for mechanical reaction. Here, too, the "two scripts" explanation is forced. The only two-scripts explanation that comes to mind is "human behaviour" vs. "mechanical behaviour". But this carries little information. What is it in this particular juxtaposition that makes us laugh? This must be spelled out. "Detachment of identification" puts it in a general context. For example, it enables unification with scorn.

10. The eyes of the beholder: a family of jokes as a test case, and some remarks on SSTH-GTVH

In this section I want to study an analysis of a joke, by GTVH researchers. I will show how restrictive is sticking to "two scripts", and how it misses deeper processes. But let me first refer to how I, as an outsider (I am a mathematician), view the advent of the SSTH, GTVH and their successors. In the humanities there is much greater emphasis than in science on reference to other people's contributions. In a philosophy department you can find people whose expertise is Wittgenstein, in a mathematics department you will not find an expert on Pythagoras. A friend of mine once summarized the difference between mathematics and philosophy: "In mathematics, somebody important is somebody who said an important thing. In philosophy something important is something said by somebody important." This should be born in mind also in this case. It seems that the linguistic approach is revered not for its aptness, but for external reasons.

The main attraction of the theories is "scientificality". Here is one of Raskin's claims for being scientific:

> 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)

The "scientificality" is accentuated by innumerable scientific looking acronyms – these exists also in the sciences, but not in such concentration, and the first to use the acronym for a theory is usually not its inventor. It seems to me that the humour research community craves so much for the seal of being a science, that it has sold its integrity and independence of thought for lentil stew.

The claim for being scientific is backed by declarations that "there are no exceptions (counterexamples) to the theory/theories". Of course, positive examples are not useful here – there are indeed such examples, the question is that of universality. Criticism of the form of counterexamples 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)

This is "proof by intimidation". Raskin and Attardo claim they know what a proper theory is (see, e.g., Attardo-Raskin 2017) implying that their theories are the only ones in humour research that fulfil the requisitions for being such. 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, this 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, 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)

It seems that linguists may well have something to learn from the sciences – you never see anything the like there.

As to providing examples: Raskin's first book on humour (Raskin 1985) contains as a central example the famous doctor's-wife joke – Raskin called it later, with the same mock-humility as in the previous quotation, "the most hated joke in humour research". Besides this there are, towards the end of the book, many examples of jokes, most without detailed analysis. In the publications of SSTH and GTVH researchers since then, examples are few and far between. For this reason, when an example, with analysis, does appear, it is an opportunity to examine the value of the linguistic theories of humour. 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" (a victim of aggression) – a complementary notion, that is used to fill obvious gaps in the "two scripts" interpretation (see for example … for comments on this).

Implicitness, of course, is one of the best known characteristics of jokes (and of poems). Any implicit statement has a humorous tinge. This is where the rule "jokes should never be explained" originates. 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. In the next section I will discuss how implicitness is related to the idea of "detachment of meaning".

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, and that its common mechanism may be relevant to the nature of humour. Something deeper is happening here than just "change of interpretation", and it must be addressed.

Before giving example of jokes, 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 "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.

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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 of this joke "fantasy over reality". What happens in your head is more important than the actual events outside. Of course, this is one form of detachment of meaning. 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.

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 external show 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 painting, in which the painter looks at an egg, and paints a bird. Indeed, this famous painting is also funny.

The abundance of such examples cannot be coincidental. It must carry some secret. And the secret is detachment of meaning. Our mind invests energy in objects in the world – what Freud calls "cathexis". In humour, as we saw in the examples of scorn and of mechanicality, the cathexis is detached. The energy invested in the meaning of a word, or an action, or (in the joke of South Dakota) coping with the closeness of death, is disengaged. The carrier of meaning remains then on its own, victorious over the meaning. This is what happens in these jokes: the perception of an object is victorious over the object itself. All this is lost when using the term "incongruity". It stops short of the deeper patterns.

11. Loading with meaning, and the joke's indifference to temporal direction

It has been noticed by many that not only man behaving like a machine, but also a machine behaving like humans, is funny. For example, the Roly-Poly toy, that returns to standing position when pushed, is funny not because it is strange, but because it seems to have human will. There are innumerably many jokes based on animals behaving like humans. In a Gary Larson cartoon, a dog puts a sign saying "Cat Fud", pointing at the washing machine, and the dog is seeing praying that the cat will be deceived. These are based on the opposite of detachment of meaning: we ascribe meaning (in the cartoon above intentions and thought) to things that do not really carry this meaning.

So, loading with meaning is as funny as detaching from meaning. To further exemplify this, let us compare two silly children's jokes. The silliness does not hinder funniness, and besides it means that the joke mechanism is bare, which is useful for our purposes.

A scuba diver with the best diving equipment tries to dive, with all his might, and fails. Suddenly he sees a man next to him, with no equipment, sinking effortlessly. "How do you dive so well?" he asks him. "I am not diving", comes the reply, "I am drowning".

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

The two jokes go in opposite directions. In the first, meaning is detached. An action is detached from intention. The diving, that seems meaningful, turns out to be inadvertent. In the second the precise opposite occurs: meaning is loaded. Names that are at first apprehension seem silly and

inane, are suddenly loaded with meaning. So, in the first there is emptying from meaning, in the second filling with meaning.

It is hard to tell which type of jokes is more prevalent. There are no end of jokes of either type. Let me just give another example, for grownups, of a joke with new meaning – in this case intention - loaded:

> 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's happened?" – "Don't ask", she says. "Five brutes abducted me and made me their sex slave for a week". – "A week?" Wonders the husband – "But you have only been away for two days!" – "No", she says. "I just came to pick up a few things".

So, which mechanism is characteristic of jokes? Detachment, or loading? The answer is that these are the same. At their core there is the same mechanism. The secret is that the joke is indifferent to temporal direction. Our brain is very fast, faster than we think it is, and it can quickly scan events in both directions of time. When meaning is loaded, we look back and realize that before, it had been detached. It is "hindsight detachment". Looking back, we realize that "stupid, nobody, nothing" were detached from their meanings, before. Here is another example:

> Pete and Repeat went for a swim. Pete drowned. Who remained? – Repeat.
> OK, Pete and Repeat went for a swim. Pete drowned. Who remained?

In the beginning of this joke the word "repeat" is a seemingly meaningless name. At its end, it acquires meaning. So, although the process is the reverse of what we are accustomed to, there is true detachment of meaning. Once the word is loaded with meaning, we realize that beforehand it had been detached.

Let me turn now to the "implicitness" claim of Attardo and Raskin, that is supposed to connect to incongruity. In fact, implicitness has little to do with incongruity. Its main point is loading of new and interesting meaning onto a seemingly innocuous expression. Indeed, there are two meanings: the innocent looking and the loaded one. But it is the fact that one meaning – the underlying one, is detached from direct expression, that works.

12. Why detach

But why should we wish to detach meanings? Having worked so hard in generating them, why should we dismantle them? The magic word is "change", that so coveted and so hard to achieve process. To enable change, you must first detach old fixations. Humour, with its detachment, enables us to be sceptical, to raise the possibility that things are not what they appear to be. This is what cynical perception of human actions is about: viewing people's motives with a grain of salt. Indeed, cynicism has its humorous taint. And this is what satire is about – unveiling the motives of powerful institutions. This, in fact, brings us back to Plato's derision theory. In his dialogue Philebus (Plato 1987), he claims that we laugh at people's ignorance about themselves. We laugh at people who think of themselves as wealthier, better-looking, more virtuous, or wiser than they really are. Ordinarily, we identify with people's actions and their self-perception. In humour we detach the identification, perceiving things more objectively.

Scepticism towards other people's motives is useful, but even more so is detachment of self-perception, casting in doubt your own intentions and motives. This is the key to change – that so desired and so difficult to achieve aim. In general, detaching meanings of actions is the gate to changing the track of thinking. "Humour is meant to change the way we think", said Lin Yutang, the American-Chinese writer. This is the reason that humour is so highly esteemed, and that it is so essential to our lives.

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