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Sense and Humor

Ron Aharoni

Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested, and the frog dies.

(E. B. White)

Prologue

What is the difference between science and the humanities? In science, an important person is someone who said something important. In the humanities something important is something said by somebody important. (Azriel Lévy, Israeli mathematician)

The protagonist of Mark Twain's *A Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is an American engineer who, as the result of a blow to his head, is transported to King Arthur's court. Something of that sort happened to me. I was transported from the cozy world of academic mathematics to the (to me) alien culture of humor research. There is a chasm between the two cultures that I am still trying to cross, but the common cause overshadows it – we are all trying to solve the same riddle – what is humor. In particular, what a joke is.

What was the blow that catapulted me to my new field – I only have a hunch, that I will share with you in the epilogue. Why do I persist, despite the hurdles posed by the cultural differences? Because it is there, and because as a mathematician I like this kind of riddles – finding a pattern in a seemingly amorphous ocean of instances.

I must confess that I feel like a fish out of water in my new field – we think too differently. I will dwell on the differences in a special chapter at the end of the book. This is a preamble to an apology about the meagerness of quotations of recent theories. They are not relevant to the ideas in this book. We live in parallel worlds, and so it should be.

What is the intended audience for the book? Naturally, the humor research community. Unfortunately, this is a nonstarter. In the last forty years the field has been pushed into a dark corner. A large portion of the community has been intimidated into accepting that the right terminology for the study of verbal humor (that is, jokes) is linguistics. No explanation why. Presently the reigning theory uses a scientific-sounding formula, that has little to do with reality. We live in parallel worlds, and so it should be. So, there remains the general public. I do not mind - I myself was "general public" when I started, which did not stop me from getting hooked. Not all people are interested in theoretical issues, but some do. Looking for the common denominator among seemingly distant phenomena is a detective puzzle that can attract curious minds. The book is aimed at those.

Part 0: A riddle

The problem that has the last laugh

- *Why did you flee the operation table?*
- *The nurse said – “Don’t worry, it’s a simple operation, no reason to be afraid”.*
- *She was just trying to put you at ease!*
- *Yes, but she said it to the surgeon.*

Did you laugh? I’d wager at least a chuckle crossed your lips. Did you wonder what made you laugh? I bet you didn’t. Humor is like breathing; it comes naturally, too smoothly to ponder "why". All it leaves behind is a smile and a convulsing diaphragm. Understanding what it is - what for? Why should I care why I laugh, as long as I enjoy it? Even worse, won’t understanding ruin the enjoyment? He who increaseth knowledge decreaseth pleasure.

And yet, hundreds of heavy-weight thinkers have found it worth pondering. Plato, Aristotle, Pascal, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Freud - this is just the beginning of a long list. All searched for the shape of the keyhole in our brains that the joke opens. Each thought that his predecessors got it all (or at least partially) wrong. The brain researcher De Bono claimed, with typical melodrama, that “humor is the most important function of the brain”. We shall later try to pinpoint its value (spoiler – enabling change). Hundreds of books have been published on the subject, and many thousands of academic papers. All based on the assumption that humor is more than mere spice added to

life. It is a serious business. Examine your daily interactions and you will realize its centrality. Young children laugh around 300 times a day. Adults laugh on average seventeen times a day, once every waking hour, and they, too, may feel the tickling of humor many times.

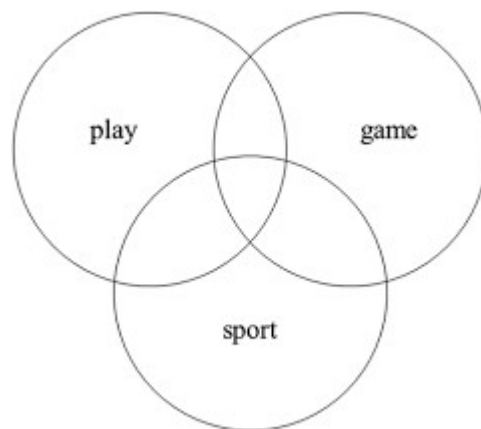
Hundreds of books, and no decisive conclusion, no agreed-upon formula. Those who try their hand soon realize they are dealing with a slippery eel. Humor is a notorious defiant of definition, a butterfly that refuses to be pinned to a board. In the hide-and-seek game it plays with its definers it has the last laugh. Ask anybody why they are sad or what makes them jealous, and they will know. What makes them laugh – this is a different matter. Something in humor does not want us to know. "Enjoy me", it says, "but don't ask wherefore you do. Seek not the things that are too hard for thee". Of course, this is good reason to insist. If somebody is hiding something, he has a reason. This something must be interesting. The problem is hard because, as philosophers can attest, thinking about thinking is peculiarly elusive. But one should not be daunted. The harder the better. There is no point in tackling easy problems.

The essentiality of essentialism

Essentialism in humor theories is the idea that humor has a single underlying essence—a core property that explains what makes something funny across all cases. Many classic theories of humor are, in this sense, essentialist: they try to reduce the wide variety of jokes, gags, and comic situations to one defining principle.

(ChatGPT)

There are those who give up – "We haven't found a common denominator because there is none". Some even quote a famous passage from Wittgenstein (Philosophical Investigations §66–§67.) He explains there how concepts can evolve stage by stage, each version partially overlapping its predecessors, and terminating in totally different meanings.



I believe in the wisdom of language. If two things carry the same name, it is because deep down they share the same structure. Language is the external manifestation of deep processes. Renouncing the ambition of one coherent solution to the riddle of humor is a desperate step. It should be a last resort – if at all. The definition "humor" is much more interesting if it assumes one key to the puzzle.

The linguistic approach, by which I mean the currently successful "two scripts" theory, has more scientific pretense than any other. Yet strangely, it has non-essentialism as a starting point – separating verbal from non-verbal humor, and dealing only with the first. This is not its weakest point (weakest is its inaptness in explaining most jokes), but it is good enough reason to question it. Science searches for generalities.

Verbal and non-verbal humor are not so distinct. Actions and situations that are described in words in verbal humor are alive and concrete in non-verbal humor. Let me give two examples – many others are to follow. Einstein did not conduct real life experiments – the Bern patents bureau did not have a lab. Instead, he conducted thought experiments – "what would happen if...". Let us concoct such an experiment in the realm of humor. Put on a person's eyes light-deflecting eyeglasses, and ask him or her to grab some objects around – say an apple laid on the table. He or she will keep missing, and inevitable outcome will be laughter, eventually also of the person himself. The reason is a rift between actions and intentions. "Man plans and God laughs", goes a Yiddish proverb. The person aims, the lens deflects his action. Actually, there is no need in a thought experiment: the popular game "the blind buff" does precisely this, with a blindfolding eye-cover replacing the deflecting lens.

Compare this with a joke:

A woman returns to her room at 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.

The old woman's motions are detached from intention. We attribute to them a motive, a drive and intention. They seem to be meaningful. They turn out to be

involuntary convulsions. We shall return to the mechanism of detachment of intention.

Another mechanism with both verbal and non-verbal manifestation is ascribing life to the inanimate. For example, the funniness of a hose "dancing" when a strong stream of water goes through it. Or Buster Keaton fighting a turkey on thanksgiving, or the seemingly alive roly-poly. Compare with the joke:

Doctor to skeleton: "You're coming to me now?"

There is no essential distinction between verbal and non-verbal humor. The mechanism characteristic to all humor that we shall find will be common to both.

Coercion

A conclusion is the point in which you got tired of thinking.

(Martin Fisher, an American medical doctor and wit)

Humor research was conceived in sin. A failing that would permeate it for the coming two and a half millennia - overgeneralization. In other words – coercion. Identifying a special type of humor and declaring it to be all-encompassing. Deducing from a valid statement "all A is B" its overreaching inverse – "also all B is A". For example, from "double meaning is funny" deduce "humor is always the outcome of double meaning". This requires high tolerance for counterexamples, that are nonchalantly ignored. It demands staring at an obvious non-pipe, and reversing the Magritte pipe painting, declaring it to be a pipe, namely fit your definition.





This is a pipe

Culminating in sin or not, the question "what is humor" was revolutionary. And like many other breakthroughs, it was born in ancient Greece, more specifically in Athens. The first humor theory, "superiority", promoted by Plato and his disciple Aristotle, equated humor with derision. We laugh at the failings of others. There is no denying - derision is funny. "To deride" is to "laugh at", not only in English. Every derision has a tinge of humor – a fact that should be accounted for by any theory of humor. But the other direction is false: not every laughter is born of derision. In fact, in jokes, our main focus, it is totally absent. Derision is restricted to jeering. The fact that the theory has supporters to this day may be partly attributed to reverence for its originators, the best-known philosophers of ancient times. But also, to a leniency towards breaches of logic. This is often a reflection of laziness, as Martin Fisher is quoted above. You struggle until you get tired, at which point you stop, and from there on coerce. Like Christopher Robin, who declares that the pole he and his friends found sticking out of the ground is the North Pole their "expedition" was after.

There are many ways to coerce. One is declaring all jokes to fit your mold, not bothering to test the claim against examples. This was, for example, Schopenhauer's

choice. His definition of humor is “imposition of inappropriate conceptual frameworks”. Some jokes are indeed based on this mechanism, like –

*Tourist: Last year there were ten windmills here, now only five,
what happened?*

Local: There wasn't enough wind for all.

The logic of “not enough resources” works in other places, not here. But testing Schopenhauer's formula on most other jokes will fail. So, wisely or lazily, he declares that the few examples he provides are “for the lazy, who cannot come up with examples of their own”. Meagerness of examples is the rule in humor research. Take, for example, a recent popular theory, Veatch's “norm-violation”. It says that humor results from a violation of standard logic, that is promptly followed by a realization it is in fact OK. It is expounded in a paper (Veatch 1998) that contains only three sample jokes, all appearing towards its end. In the present book I bring an abundance of examples, the only constraint being imposed by my personal taste. This is meant to avert off-hand dismissal (which will come anyway), and to show that finding a counterexample is not going to be easy.

Another way of imposing a definition is to use characteristics so general, that they end up saying nothing. This is the case with the presently most popular theory - “incongruity”. A joke, and humor in general, so says this theory, are the result of combining two incongruous ideas, or clashing them. This definition reflects the feeling aroused by every humorous act – of surprise, and the need to re-organize one's thoughts after a jolt. But analyzing jokes using this terminology is bound to disappoint. For example, look at:

The pig complains to God: “It is unfair. People ascribe to me all bad things – dirtiness, greed, gluttony”. God scratches His head, and says “Indeed, piggishness”.

Incongruity? Between what ideas? Something subtle is happening here, an interesting maneuver. The “piggishness” turns around to relate to itself. The “incongruity” formula will never capture such delicate processes. It is too insipid to be illuminating. Sharp criticisms of this theory can be found in (Morreal 1983, 1987, 2009) and (Latta 1999). A recent variation is McGraw and Warren's "Benign Violation" theory (McGraw-Warren 2010, 2014). Chat GPT summarizes it as

Humor arises when the mind recognizes a breach of how things should be, while simultaneously knowing that nothing is truly wrong.

Again, most jokes need mental gymnastics to fit this mold. The following joke, for example, does not seem to fall within its scope:

Doctor: You are ill.

Patient: I want a second opinion!

Doctor: OK. You are also ugly.

Double-meaning is always funny, but "violation" misses its essence, the jump from one meaning to another. The two meanings are indeed different (hence incongruous), but the main point is the jump.

The most peculiar coercion was offered by Freud. The year 1905 saw him working simultaneously on two books – one short, the other heavy and long, the first brought him immediate fame, the other was all but forgotten. This feat of writing is all the more impressive, given that he turned to writing only late in the evening, after a long

day of analyses. The short, successful book was *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (sexuality sells!), in which he developed his best-known ideas – childhood sexuality, its three stages, the formation of paraphilias, the Oedipus complex. The heavy book was *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, in which he developed a theory of jokes. The idea was that the joke, like the dream, bypasses inhibitions. It is an outlet for forbidden ideas. For this purpose it uses distortions of logic, that conceal the real content. The problem is that most jokes (definitely those appearing in the present book) are not "tendentious" (the term used by Freud), namely they do not allude at sexuality or aggression. There is nothing forbidden in them. Freud's solution is a feat of mental gymnastics: "naïve" jokes also contain forbidden contents, which is the distorted logic. The means generating the camouflage suddenly becomes the forbidden substance itself.

Freud himself seemed to have regretted the energy he put into this project. In *An Autobiographical Study* (1925) he wrote that it did not occupy an important role in his later work – a euphemistic way of saying that it was not worth the effort. But as Jacques Lacan repeated in his writings, even when Freud's threads of ideas are not substantiated, they always contain beautiful beads. "The wit" is a source for some of the most illuminating ideas of Freud on aesthetics. In particular, the role of saving mental energy, and the pleasure accompanying such economy. We shall later get to it.

Another method of coercion is scientific pretense. The humanities are desperate for the stamp of "science". Alan Sokal, a mathematical physicist, exploited this craving in a hoax that gained fame – he garbled pseudo-scientific terms, submitted it to a leading philosophical journal, and got it published

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokal_affair).

A relatively recent trend is the use of linguistic terminology. The formula is "a joke is generated by one text fitting two incompatible scripts". The scientific sounding term "script" plainly means "interpretation". The flagship joke (Raskin 1985), is

A man stands before the door of a doctor, and asks "is the doctor in?" "No", the voice of young woman is heard from the other side, "come right in".

This is plain ambiguity, and not even of text – it is the situation that is ambiguous, namely has two possible interpretations. It has nothing to do with linguistics.

Here is another joke that fits this pattern:

On his deathbed the husband asks his wife: "I always thought that our son Richard is different from his three brothers. Now, that I am dying, you can tell me: am I right that he is not mine?"

- Now, that you are dying, I can tell you. He is the only one that is yours.



Raskin gave his terminology a pompous name - Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor, acronymized "SSTH". The acronym goes to say "This is so central, and will be referred to so often, that parsimony in words should be exerted". The theory (or rather, terminology) fits only a small proportion of all jokes – the reader is encouraged to test it against the jokes appearing in this book. This, and its exclusion of non-verbal humor (anything beyond jokes), should have warranted it at most a cursory mention. The reason I dwell on it is that at the time of writing this book it is the prevailing theory, partly because of the scientific-sounding, terse formula, but more so because it currently dominates the two leading journals in the field, a very powerful position. As I mentioned, the humor research community is small in comparison with scientific communities, and does not seem to value intellectual integrity. It took me some time to realize that there is no reason to take them seriously, just as there is no reason to be angry with them. Am I right? For our purposes it doesn't really matter. My dialogue is not with the humor research community, but with jokes and their patterns.

So, the first question is how to avoid coercion. A useful strategy is *divide and conquer*. Gather families of jokes sharing common maneuvers, and then search for a common denominator to those. This strategy is called “clustering”. The formidable task of searching for a mechanism common to all jokes is replaced by that of finding common mechanisms for a few families. Why this strategy is not common – this is one more riddle about academic humor research. A large part of the book is about such families.

Part 1: Meaning

Meanings and their carriers

Humor, like all human discourse, is about meaning. Hence the “sense” in the name of the book: it is there in the sense of “meaning”.

A crucial point about meaning is that not only words have it. So do actions and situations. In fact, the meaning relevant to jokes is mainly of actions. Jokes are not "linguistic entities", as the linguistic school claims. No more than "War and peace" is. The words describe something – actions, emotions, motives – and the meaning is vested in those.

Meaning is interpretation. The meaning of a word is what it points at, and the meaning of an action or situation is the way they are construed. For example, intentions ascribed to actions. "To mean to do something" is to intend to do it. Close to intentions, but not identical, are drives, aims and motives.

Attributing motives and intentions to actions plays a crucial role in our lives. It is a main tool for understanding and predicting reality.

In the patient-lover joke the carrier is a situation: the visit of the guy, his standing at the doctor’s door. The meaning is its interpretation: first “patient”, and after the switch - “lover”. In the patient-lover and the "second opinion" jokes, a switch of meaning occurs. But don’t rush to conclude that this is characteristic of all jokes - two swallows do not forebode that all birds are swallows. Switching meaning is but

one possible type of vicissitudes the meaning can undergo. Sometimes the meaning is not replaced, but is totally detached. Here are a few examples.

Two laborers 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 action is detached from its meaning, the aim of planting. It is not given another aim, so it is not a "pun". No double meaning. It remains hanging in air.

An example in which the carrier is a situation:

An Irishman is rushed for an important meeting, and he roams the area to find parking. In his despair he turns to God: "If you help me just this time, I will go to church every Sunday, and say Hail Mary every evening for a year". He barely finishes the sentence, when a parking spot appears before his eyes. "Forget it", he addresses God, "I found".

The meaning of the situation is here a causal interpretation. Note that there is no switch of meaning – the Irishman does not replace "God's response to my prayer"

(the correct interpretation of the situation) by another explanation. It is plain denial, meant to absolve him from his promise. Like Magritte's "This is not a pipe", captioning the picture of a pipe.

A rift

The theory of humor developed in this book rests on three key tenets:

- (a) Humor is generated by a rift between meaning and its carrier.
- (b) The rift is a shift of weight, from meaning to carrier.
- (c) The carrier is not necessarily verbal. As noted, actions and situations also carry meanings.

(b) means that the carrier obtains a life of its own. In ordinary discourse, the carrier is indeed a "carrier", a porter. It is a transparent servant, just a vehicle. The attention is directed at the meaning. When we use words, we do not think about them, but through them, namely about the meaning. In humor the carrier is freed from the shackles of the meaning, victorious over it. In the case of double meaning, it attaches itself to another meaning, in others it remains bare of meaning. A change of role occurs. For example, a metaphor may lose its metaphorical content, to be taken at face value – the metaphoric meaning is thereby detached. An action that starts as a carrier of meaning – intention, drive, will – turns out to have no such meaning, or receives unexpected new meaning.

Evidence?

How can this formula, or for that matter – any formula, be proved? How can we tell that our theory is not coercive like its sisters? There is a whole book ahead, devoted to examples. The aggregation of so many instances conforming with the same mold should be convincing. Of course, it is always possible to dismiss the examples - "This is not a pipe". I will do my best to explain the fit; the rest is given to the reader's understanding and, in some cases, integrity.

Let me start with three examples that set me on the way, those that connected things in my mind. Three types of humor that, on their faces, are miles apart, and yet they share a common mechanism. Affinity between seemingly distant phenomena is a strong clue. These are:

- (1) Derision,
- (2) Mechanicality, a humor mechanism pointed out by Henri Bergson, and
- (3) Ethnic jokes.

The three share the same maneuver: detachment of empathy. And since empathy is a main tool for interpreting intentions, all three brands are about a rift between actions and their most basic meaning - intentions.

Empathy – the great interpreter

Social situations are too complex and too fast to be followed using verbal tools. Too much is going on. Interpreting them is a must – we should know people's (and animals') intentions, to predict their actions. So, how do we do it? The main tool is empathy. Empathy is another word for identification – putting yourself in the other's shoes. Sharing emotions and intentions. When we see a person tilting to one side and almost falling over, it is hard to avoid tilting to the other side, to “prevent” the fall. Empathy is highly valued by its receiver, justly so: it means compassion and understanding. But it is valuable mainly for the giver. It is much more than being nice to our fellow human beings: it enables predicting them.

Empathy is so essential for survival that natural selection has stamped it into our genes. Apart from autists, nobody needs to learn empathy – 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 instigating action) when their owner observes others performing some specific action (Rizzolatti & Craighero 2004). These are “empathy neurons.” Their aim is to practice feeling others. They are wildly activated in sport events, that provide us with opportunity to desire something – success, being loved and admired – vicariously.

The other place in which empathy is activated is drama, whether theatrical or literary. We identify with the protagonists – their aspirations, struggles, pains and joys. This differentiates drama from comedies. In tragedies the spectator is absorbed in the plot and feels empathy. In comedies empathy is detached. The actions of the protagonist are viewed as stupid – sometimes the fault of the hero, sometimes because their intentions are foiled. The protagonists are often not in full control of their actions,

certainly not of the results. The spectator in a comedy is dissociated from the characters. He laughs at them, not with them. The self-mockery, that is characteristic of standup shows, is based on the gap between intentions and their materialization. Not taking the intentions of the protagonists seriously means not identifying with them. We feel detached, often superior. The saying “comedy is tragedy plus time” (attributed to the comedian Jack Benny) means precisely this: temporal distance generates distance.

In the coming three chapters we shall meet three major types of humor that are based on detachment of empathy.

Detachment of empathy I: derision

The ridiculous is a certain form of vice... a kind of ignorance in the weak... and when we laugh at it, we mix pain and pleasure together.” (Plato, Philebus 49b–d).

As already mentioned, the oldest humor theory is the “derision” theory of Plato and Aristotle (Plato [1987], Aristotle [1895]). See (Gruner 1999) for modern day support. Every laughter, according to the theory, is a leer at the misfortunes or shortcomings of others.

Plato suggested that the exhibition of ignorance-based vain conceit of beauty, wisdom, or wealth ought to be punished by laughter. (Zillman (1983: 86)).

Neither mentor nor disciple blinked an eye vis a vis the obvious fact that it hardly fits any joke. And if you wonder whether there were jokes in that era – of course there were. There were even joke books. Here is a joke from that time:

A fortune-teller predicts long life to a customer. He asks for his pay, and the customer tells him he will pay tomorrow. "And what if you die by tomorrow?" says the fortune-teller.

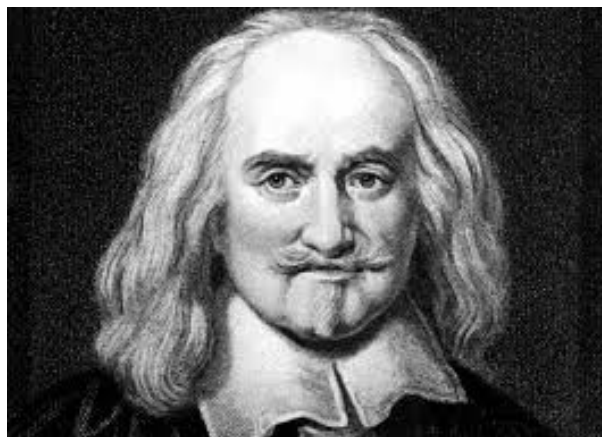
Funny? Perhaps. Derision? Only with some coercion. The point is not stupidity of the fortune-teller but his lack of integrity, the rift between the prediction and its corollary.

Still, like other humor theories, it is not totally off – it fits many instances of funniness. Derision always carries a tinge of humor. The word “derision” comes

from “ridere”, the Latin for "to laugh". "To deride" is “to laugh at” (not only in English), and there is the statistics done by Arthur Koestler, that of the 29 times the word “laugh” appears in the bible 27 are in the sense of derision. For instance, the children who, in the biblical story (Kings 2, 2:23-25) mocked the prophet Elisha – “go up baldy, go up baldy” – were gleeful, at least in the first part of the story. (They were later punished by two bears, who devoured forty-two of them. No humor to be found in the bible).

In a feat of coercion, Hobbes (Hobbes 1650) tried to reconcile the theory with its obvious counterexamples. He claimed that in jokes we laugh at ourselves, for having had our leg pulled. We were deceived, believing that the joke meant A, only to realize it meant B.

The passion of laughter is sudden glory arising from sudden conception of eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly. (Hobbes, Human Nature, Chapter 9, §13.)



Thomas Hobbes 1588 - 1679

Why is derision funny? There is no incongruity, no change of `scripts' (the linguistic approach is totally helpless here), no benign violation. All these theories need major contortion of logic to fit it into their mold. The secret is that scorn is detachment of empathy. In fact, it is its precise opposite. It means distancing ourselves from the worthless other. The derided person is rejected. He is so stupid, and his actions so meaningless, that we do not bother to understand them. The rejection is manifest in the facial expression: an imitation of spitting food out, and pulling the nostrils as if to avoid bad smell. The identification, that comes to us so naturally in every human encounter, is detached.

Many jokes are based on detachment of empathy.

An operation is held in India, of sterilization of men. A journalist interviews one of the sterilizers: "How do you do it?" "We take two stones, put the member between them, and hit". "And doesn't it hurt?", asks the journalist. "Sometimes, when a finger gets caught".

There is also switch of identity – who is getting hurt. A joke from the times that husbands did not attend labor:

A man is waiting while his wife is in labor. He walks to and fro, bites his nails. Eventually the nurse comes out and says: "Congratulations, it is a girl". "Thank God", the man says. "I wouldn't want my child to go through what I just experienced."

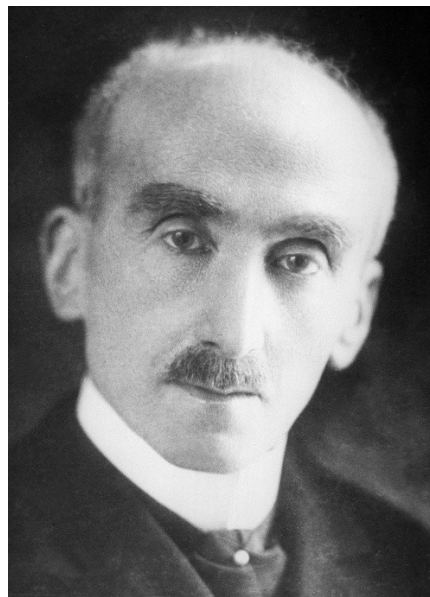
Many doctors jokes are based on detachment of caring. The authorities whom we wish so much to trust turn out to be either not caring or incompetent.

Doctor: "Try this medication, and tell me how it worked. I have precisely the same problem".

Before the complicated operation, Joe sees the doctors conferring intently at the corner of the operation theater. Eventually the head surgeon approaches him and asks: "Before we start, where, precisely, does it hurt?"

Detachment of empathy, II: Mechanicality

Henri Bergson (1859 – 1941) was the best-known living philosopher during the first quarter of the 20-th century. His 1907 book, *Creative Evolution*, won him the 1927 Nobel prize for literature. He spoke in it about 'élan vital', the force of life, that differentiates the animate from the inanimate. While the inanimate obeys the rules of physics, the animate 'creates itself'. Not my cup of philosophy, but things are less mystical in his theory of humor. In his book 'Le rire' ('Laughter'), published in 1900, he claimed that humor is the result of the élan vital taking a day off. When the animate, mainly people, behave in an inanimate way; when flexibility is replaced by mechanical, automaton-like behavior.



Henri Bergson

Daring, isn't it? What do mechanical reactions have to do with laughter? But it works. Bergson's theory is closer to the truth than many other, more conventional, theories. In the movie 'Modern times' Charlie Chaplin becomes an automaton after

a day's routine of the same screw-turning. The buttons on a woman's dress remind him of the bolts he turns in his work, and he tries to turn them. Another familiar example is the funniness of slipping over a banana peel – a case of 'matter over mind'. The slipping person thought he or she controlled their motions, the banana peel thought otherwise.

As promised, mechanicality shares a common denominator with derision. It, too, detaches empathy, for a very simple reason: we do not empathize with machines. Empathy extends only to humans and animals. Machines do not have will and emotions. Having discovered automatism in a person's behavior, we stop identifying with him, because his actions are not guided by will, and empathy means identification with intentions and will.

Examples

One facet of automatic behavior is detachment of spontaneity. For example, the children who ask their parents, on a day of outing –

Are we having fun yet?

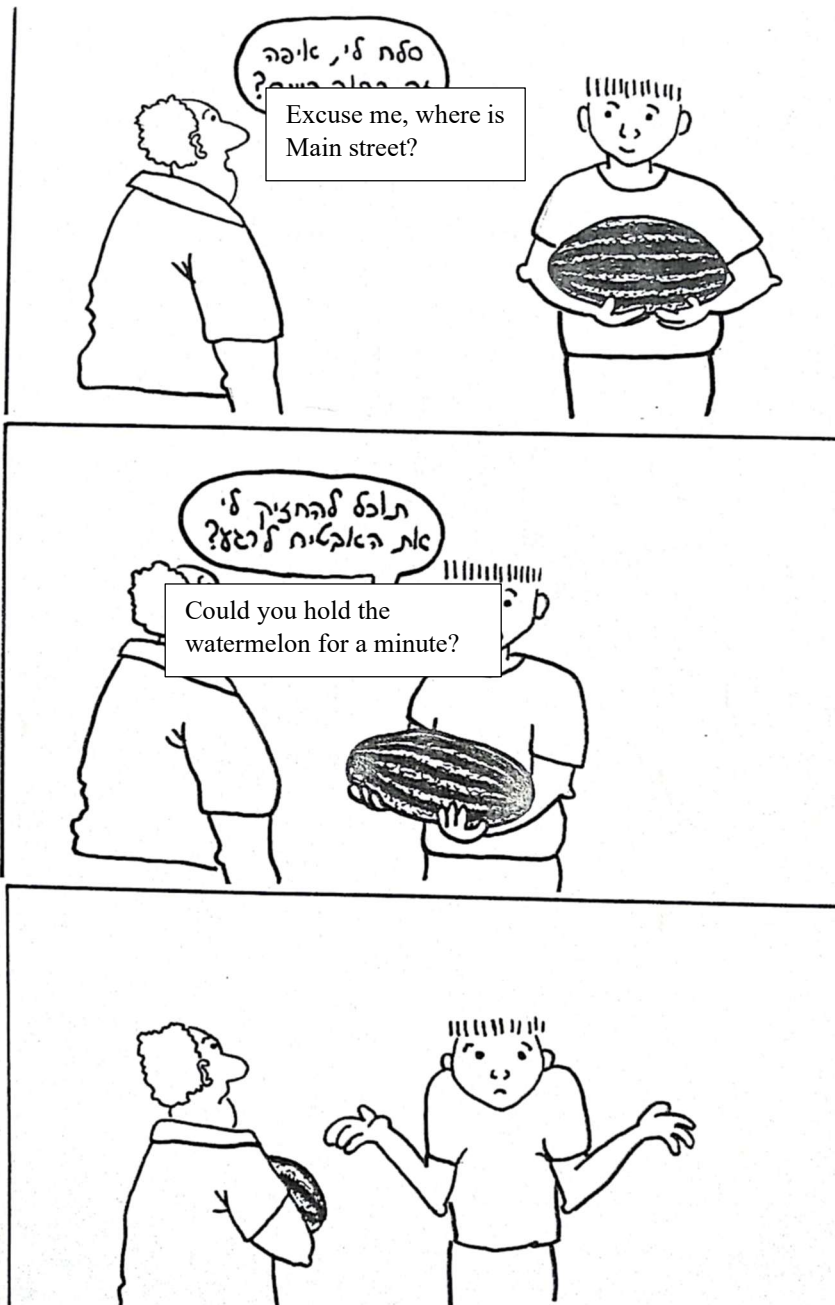
It is detachment from emotions. A joke about delayed, mechanical passion:

Wife: "Do you remember how you used to nibble gently on my earlobe?"

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

Calculated passion is no passion. In music a delayed effect is called "syncope", having its own humorous tinge.

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



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. This is yet another example of a syncope.

“Detachment of intentions” can explain a riddle regarding the Bergsonian theory - why not every mechanical-like actions are funny. For example, in a parade the soldiers behave mechanically, and still we do not laugh. The reason is that the soldiers’ action is not detached from their will. Their will is subjugated to orders, but it is there.

Detachment of empathy, III: Ethnic jokes

A Scotsman asks the chemist if it is possible to repair his toothbrush. 'Sorry', the chemist delivers the bad news, 'You will have to buy a new one'. 'I don't know', says the Scotsman. "Let me consult my partners".

The all-popular Ethnic jokes pose a challenge to every humor theory (see Christie 1997). Incongruity? Quite the opposite – the Scotsman plays up to his image.

The key is in realizing that ethnic jokes lie at the confluence of derision and mechanicality. They fit both patterns. Why derision, this is clear, though the derision component is not as significant as is sometimes assumed. Why mechanicality? Because once a person behaves according to his or her label, they are robbed of their free will. They are marionettes of the label. It is the stereotype that acts. They are rendered mechanical.

This explains why not only ethnic jokes, but also label-based jokes such as the following are funny.

An old man sits with a young fellow in the main street of a village. 'Do you see this fence?' asks the old man. 'I built it with my own hands. Do you think that they call me McGregor the fence builder? – no'. Silence ensues. 'Do you see this wharf on the lake? I built it with both my hands. Do you think that they call me McGregor the wharf builder? – no'. After another pause, the old man continues – 'Do you see this church spire? I built it with my own hands. Do you think that

they call me McGregor the spires builder? – no'. Silence ensues again, and then the old man sighs – 'Ah. But screw a sheep just once'.

Another evidence are jokes in which the characteristic is not conveyed by the nationality, but by plane declaration-

Joe is so miserly, that when the radio broadcasts a song he heard before, he turns it off.

The stereotyped person is a Bergsonian automaton, obeying his image instead of being a free agent. Identification is no longer the name of the game. Indeed, acting in accordance with an image, rather than by free will, is one of comedy's oldest tricks. In comedies of character somebody is given one or two prominent traits, and acts according to them. It is not a matter of scorn (as is often assumed). It is a matter of telling ourselves "Aha, just as expected".

While tragedies are based on identification with the protagonists, vicariously living their conflicts, comedies are based on the precise opposite – detachment from them. This is why tragedies are named after their heroes, while comedies are often named after characteristics – *The Miser, The Hypochondriac*.

In fact, this works also in everyday life. When somebody acquires the name of a miser, and he acts miserly, we laugh. If somebody is known, say, for his cowardice, then when he acts cowardly we laugh.

It is not necessary for the joke to use a stereotype. It is enough to declare the characteristic:

Harry is so slim, he has just one stripe in his pajamas.

Joe is so miserly, that when the radio broadcasts a song he heard before, he turns it off.

Then there are the "epitome" jokes. They use the same mechanism – declaring a property, and then letting the person act upon it:

What is the epitome of Jewish dilemma? – Free pork.

And there are personal images that are used in jokes. For example, Bill Clinton's name as a womanizer:

Clinton and the Pope die the same day. By mistake, they are exchanged – Clinton goes to heaven and the pope to hell. When the error is discovered, Angel Gabriel orders them to go each to his right place. On the way they meet, and the Pope tells Clinton – Oh, how I long to see Virgin Mary. “You are a day late”, says Clinton.

There is another mechanism here at work, which was named by Freud "shifting". Weight is shifted within the same situation or the same expression. The Pope's stress is on "Mary"; Clinton's response shifts the weight to "virgin".

Moishe and Berl walk in the street, and see a sign on the door of a church: "\$100 for conversion". Moishe asks Berl to wait for him, and goes in. When he goes out, Berl is curious: "How did it go? What did they do? Did you get the \$100?". "You people, all you think of is money", says Moishe.

Part 2: Detachment of Intentions

Man plans, God laughs

'Man plans and God laughs', says a Jewish proverb. Why should She laugh? Why not be helpful, compassionate or empathetic? She laughs because a gap between intentions and actions is always funny. This is why slipping over a banana peel is funny. The person intends to walk, the peel has other plans. Or take the classic scene of a custard pie missing its targeted person and hitting another.

Einstein did not conduct real life experiments – the Bern patents bureau did not have a lab. Instead, he conducted thought experiments – "what would happen if...". Here is such an experiment. Put on a person's eyes light-deflecting eyeglasses, and ask him or her to grab some objects around – say a book laid on the table. He or she will keep missing, and inevitable outcome will be laughter, eventually also of the person himself. Actions are separated from intention. Actually, there is no need in a thought experiment: the popular game "the blind buff" does precisely this, with a blindfolding eye-cover replacing the deflecting lens.



In the diggers on the mountain joke the meaning of the action, the aim (planting), is detached. Motives, a bit different from 'goal' or 'aim', can also 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 on him. 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 learned 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. 'What about me?' asks the insulted barman. 'You', says the customer, 'when you drink you become violent'.

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

Walking in the wood, a man runs across a bear. He feigns death, and indeed the bear sniffs him and walks away. The overjoyed survivor invites his friends to the local pub to celebrate his salvation. Suddenly, who should appear but the bear? How embarrassing.

Feigning death is suddenly viewed as plain cheating, forgetting the motive behind it. There is another mechanism here, to be discussed later - personification of the bear. It is reverse mechanicality.

The Joys of Frustration

Laughter is the result of a sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. (Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, Kant 1790).

A special case of thwarting plans is frustration. This time these are not plans that are foiled, but expectations. "Frustration of expectations" is often mentioned as a possible definition for "joke". Mountains that give birth to mice (an expression coined by the Roman philosopher Horace). Strangely, we enjoy the frustration. It saves the effort of striving to obtain the goal. It is also emptying the shell from its content.

Three sailors are stranded on a desert island. After seven years, a fairy appears and grants each of them a wish. The first says: "I miss my wife. I want to return home". The fairy waves her wand, and he is back home. The second says "I miss my village. I want to be home again". She waves her wand, and there he is. The third says: "I am lonely. Bring them back".

If you wish, this is detachment of outcome, or even self-reference: you end up where you began. In jokes, frustration serves as a means of detachment. And strangely, it makes us happy.

Three missionaries are taken captive by a savage tribe. The chief offers the first a choice – death or bubu. What can be worse than

death? – thinks the missionary, and chooses bubu. The members of the tribe assault him, rape him, and he dies in great agony. The second is given the same choice. He thinks he may be more resilient than the first, and also chooses bubu. The brutes assault him, rape him, and he dies in great agony. The third, having learnt the lesson, chooses death. “OK”, says the chief, “but first bubu”.

We ascribe great importance to the choice, only to find that it is totally meaningless. If you wish – this is detachment of the result of choice. But this means frustration.

A tourist is watching two cows in the meadow, one white and one black. A farmer stands next to him, and the tourist is curious: “These cows, do they produce a lot of milk?” – “The white cow does”, answers the farmer. “And the black?” – “The black one, too”. After some silence the tourist asks: “Do they give birth to calves every year?” “The white cow does”, says the farmer. “And the black?” – “The black does, too.” This kind of exchange goes on for a while, until finally the tourist gets curious: “Why do you always answer on the white cow first, and only then on the black?” “You see”, says the farmer. “The white cow is mine”. “And the black?” – “The black one, too”.

This is also a circular joke: it returns to its beginning. The puzzle of why the farmer answers first on the white cow becomes its own "solution". The vending machine returns the coin you just put in.

We shall later tag the maneuver taken as “victory of the symbol (carrier of meaning)”. It is the same process that occurs in tautologies. The listener is tempted

to follow the chain of ideas with the hope of attaining some information, only to be left high and dry. How can frustration be amusing? It is a clear case of detachment of meaning. Tautologies, too, involve frustration – you expect information and receive what you knew before.

When man is too stupid to plan

Worse than missing a target is not having a target at all. Funnier than thwarted intentions is not having a sensible intention at all. As already mentioned, this is the mechanism behind the funniness of derision.

The American cartoonist Gary Larson likes situations in which man does not plan, and just behaves stupidly. In the personal control board in a plane there is a switch with two possibilities – "wings stay on" and "wings fall off". The caption goes "Fumbling with his recline button Ted inadvertently causes a major air disaster". Of course, the stupidity is not Ted's. Another cartoon in this vein – a couple returns home after an evening out, and meets there the babysitter – an old, hunched witch with the wand, pointed hat and black garment as all witches have. The husband says "Now let me get it straight – we hired you to babysit the kids and you cooked and ate them *both*?" Larson explains that the point is that the couple did not hire a witch-like babysitter, they hired an actual witch. And funniest is the "both" – as if eating one kid would be tolerable. Another detachment – the shift of stress diverts from the actual crime to a numerical issue.

Detachment of Drive

Old man A: Ach, do you remember how we used to chase girls?

Old man B: Yes, I just forget why.

Note: B does not relate to the meaning of the chasing, the drive. He does not say 'I no longer have the passion' - that would not be funny. He still speaks about the carrier of the meaning, the action. He just empties it from meaning. The carrier is victorious over the meaning – a feature to which we shall return.

A man is stranded on a desert island and finds there six women. They decide on an arrangement: every weekday he does it with another woman, and Saturday is a day off. One day another man reaches the island. The first comer is pleased – 'we can share the work'. 'Sorry, I am gay', announces the newcomer. 'Shucks', says the guy, 'there goes my Saturday off'.

Who wouldn't swap places with the lucky guy? But for him it is work, that he did not ask for. Sex is detached from its meaning, the drive. It is a duty. There is also detachment of "not wanting": The guy doesn't really want to do it with a man, but work is work. The carrier remains, its meaning, the drive, does not.

A woman asks her husband to change a light bulb. "What am I", he says, "an electrician?" She asks him to repair the tap. "What am I", he says, "a plumber?" This goes on for a while, until one day the husband comes home to find everything fixed. "Who fixed

it all?” he asks. “The neighbor did”. “And what did you do in return?” “He asked me either to sing for him or to sleep with him”. “And what did you do?” “What am I, a singer?”

The only reason she slept with the neighbor is that she cannot sing.

A woman returns to her room at 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 seemingly loaded with meaning turns out to be involuntary convulsions.

Another detachment of drive:

A man walks into the kitchen. His wife, who is facing the stove, turns to him and says: ‘You must do it with me, right now’. – ‘My lucky day’, he thinks, and they do it on the kitchen table. The woman dresses, and says ‘Thanks’. – ‘What was all that about?’ asks the man. – ‘The egg timer broke’, she says.

Bergson would have had here a field day – sex as done by automata. In our terms, sex disengaged from drive and from spontaneity.

Detachment of responsibility

A man stands before a grave in a cemetery, and laments 'Why did you die, oh why did you have to die?' A passerby is intrigued: 'Was he a relative?' – 'No', says the man. 'A friend?' 'No, never met the guy'. 'So why are you so sad?' 'He was my wife's first husband'.

Denying one's own responsibility for the choice of spouse is not uncommon, also in real life.

What is the Englishman's grace? – "Please, God, give me strength to eat this meal in front of me".

As if the meal was prepared by aliens. A similar one:

Three construction workers, an American, an Arab and a Pole sit for lunch on the scaffoldings of a high rise building. Before opening their lunch boxes, the American says – "if I have a hamburger again, I am going to jump". The Arab says – "if I have Pita bread with Hummus again, I am going to jump". The Pole says – "if again I have sausage with sour cabbage, I am going to jump". The American opens his box, and indeed finds there a hamburger. He jumps. The Arab opens his box, finds pita bread with hummus and jumps. The Pole opens his box, finds sausage with cabbage and jumps. At their funeral the American widow laments – "had I but known I would have prepared

anything he wanted". The Arab widow is also remorse stricken.

The Polish widow says – “But he prepared his own lunches!”

A case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand does. There is also detachment of knowledge - the Pole does not know what is in his lunch box, though he prepared it.

The next joke is from South Africa, where power cuts are frequent, and people get stuck in elevators:

Three hours late for work, after a long power outage, a worker explains: “I was stuck on an escalator”.

This is an illustration for Schopenhauer's thesis - wrong logic is applied: the logic of elevators doesn't work for escalators. But on a deeper level, the funny thing is in ascribing the responsibility for walking to the escalator.

A responsibility-disclaimer:

Your personality is determined by your parents, that of your kids by genetics.

Moses and Mohammed sit next to each other on a plane. They relax, take off their shoes. At some point Mohammed appeals to Moses – "you have the aisle seat, would you kindly fetch me a drink?" – "Willingly", says Moses and goes for the drink. Off the plane, Mohammed says to Moses: "You know, when you fetched the drink, I spat in your shoe". "Dear-dear", says Moses, "spitting in shoes, pissing in juice, where will it all end?"

Had Moses said “Really? And I peed into your juice” it would not be funny. What makes the joke is Moses' disclaimer of responsibility. The peeing as if happened on its own, and who knows where it will lead.

Two psychologists meet. "You'd never guess what a Freudian slip I had today", says one to the other. "I was going to tell my wife 'please pass me the salt' and instead I said 'you bitch, you ruined my life' ".

A case of applied psychoanalysis.

Causes – the intentions of nature

Detachment between cause and effect is a common mechanism in jokes. Gary Lineker, the English footballer, explained:

Football is a simple game. Twenty-two men kick the ball for 90 minutes, and the Germans win.

A friend of mine has a similar view of education:

In child-raising you do what you do, and you get what you get.

There is no connection between your efforts and your children's character, or between the efforts invested in playing and the result of the game.

Why is this funny? Because causality is "intentions of Nature". It constitutes the meaning of events. We interpret the events according to it. And once you detach causes from effects, you detach this meaning.

A hare and a turtle hold a joke-telling contest. The umpire is a monkey, and the rule is that whoever makes the monkey laugh will win a prize, and whoever tells a joke that fails to amuse the monkey will be devoured by the lion. First the turtle tells a very funny joke, all animals crack their ribs laughing – except the monkey, who remains impassive. Well, a rule is a rule, and the lion devours the turtle. Then the hare tells a totally inane joke, no animal laughs – except the monkey, who falls around laughing. "Why are you laughing?" - ask the animals. – "The joke the turtle told, it's really funny", says the monkey.

In music a delayed effect is called "syncopé". Strangely, in music too, the effect is pleasing, even funny.

Coincidences

If we see two identical faces, and know that they are not twins, we laugh. (Blaise Pascal, 1623 – 1662)

If somebody treads on your toe at a party, you will be annoyed. If three different people tread on your toe one after the other, you will laugh. Coincidences are always funny. They constitute detachment of causality. The idea comes naturally to mind, that there is a causal connection between the events, and then it turns out there isn't.

The American cartoonist Gary Larson is fond of coincidences. The annual meeting of poodle breeders happens to take place next door to a vulture's aviary; a nursery is located next to dingo kennels (this cartoon was published after an Australian baby was allegedly snatched from its tent by a dingo); a parachute club operates next to a crocodile farm. In a New York apartment a man is half swallowed by an alligator as the alligator is being strangled by a boa constrictor. How likely? Well, two cops are watching, and one says "I have seen this scene before, and it is not a pretty sight".

Detachment of moral Judgment

A couple is preparing for their annual vacation. – "You know what?" says the woman. – "This time you will check whether the alarm is on, the main faucet is off, the electrical gadgets are unplugged and all doors are locked, and I shall sit in the car and honk the horn".

Honking the horn signifies many things – childishness, laziness, inconsideration. The woman detaches all these meanings, and relates to the honking as part of a fair distribution of work.

Detachment of emotions

Detachment of emotions is the hallmark of humor. A funny story should be told with a stiff upper lip.

A customer wishes to open a bank account. "Please sign here and here and here", the clerk asks him. "No", he says. "I am giving you the money, only you have to sign". The clerk argues, and argues, to no avail. Eventually she gives up, and calls the bank manager. He comes and tells the customer – "Sign, or fuck off". The man signs. "Why when I asked you refused, and when the manager told you you agreed?" "You asked", says the man, "He explained".

The man ignores the emotion linked with the manager's threat. He takes rudeness as part of the information. In fact, this was indeed an "explanation" – this time the man understood.

Part 3: Victory of the carrier

A struggle

An engineer walks in a field, when a frog appears on his way, and tells him "If you kiss me I will turn into a beautiful princess, and will do whatever you wish." The engineer picks up the frog, and carefully puts her in his pocket. "What is the matter with you", says the frog. I told you – if you kiss me I will become a beautiful princess and will be all yours". "I do not have time for a girlfriend", says the an engineer", "but a talking frog is cool".

The frog points at something – the promised transformation. The engineer keeps the pointer, and ignores the promise.

It is time to attempt a definition of our main concept – "detachment of meaning". What does it mean? One of its manifestations is simple - plain disconnection. In the diggers on the mountain joke the act of digging (the carrier of the meaning) remains unattached to the aim; the tremor of the Parkinson lover is detached from the sexual meaning. But this is not the end of the story. There is a significant point to be added. A tectonic shift occurs in all brands of humor – a shift of weight from meaning to carrier. The carrier gains importance over the meaning, which suddenly looks less significant and less compelling – it can be different from what it was at the start. We

start, as always, with our attention given to the meaning. The carrier suddenly moves to center stage. It ends up having the upper hand.

Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard 1854) offered a clever metaphor. In a shop window you see a sign: “Shoes Repaired Here.” You enter to have your shoes mended, only to discover that this is not a cobbler’s workshop—the sign itself is for sale. The original metaphor was for the emptiness of the Church's symbols. Nowadays it has been repurposed to describe the philosophical enterprise. According to this interpretation, what marks philosophical problems is an optical illusion. You believe you are investigating one thing, while the true object of inquiry lies elsewhere. It appears that you are addressing an object O, while in fact, you are examining the concepts through which O is discussed. A major philosophical school, "linguistic analysis", born in the 1920-s, made this idea its banner. It speaks about deflection, which is a gap between the declared subject of discussion and the true subject. We believe that we study something, while the real subjects are the concepts used.

But the real playground where this process appears is poetry.

Good prose should be transparent, like a window pane (George Orwell)

Words are transparent, but for the poet language is... the mirror of the world. (Jean Paul Sartre)

Words are transparent also in everyday life. We don't think of them – we think through them. But in poetry, so tells us Sartre, it is different. Words are not transparent. They are not mere tools. They draw attention because they are put to irregular use. The same happens in jokes. The transparent symbol-window rebels "I am here, and not as a servant".

Orwell and Sartre express in a poetic way a claim of the linguist Roman Jakobson, that in poetry there is a shift from symbolized to symbol. The symbol is no longer a servant – it receives an independent status.

A similar thing happens in humor. The balance between carrier and meaning changes. The jolt in the link between meaning and carrier is followed by a change of status: the symbol is no longer subjugate to the meaning. It has a life of its own.

Words are transparent also in everyday life. We don't think of the words we are using – we think through them and don't see them as objects. But in poetry, so tells us Sartre, it is different. Words are not transparent. They are not mere tools. They draw our attention because they are put to irregular use. The same happens in jokes. The transparent symbol-window rebels "I am here, and not as a servant".

An apt metaphor for detachment was given to me by a proud couple, who told how they taught their baby names of objects, by pointing at them and articulating their names. But the baby did not understand the point of pointing. Instead of looking at the object, he would clutch the finger. A shift of weight occurred, from meaning to carrier. The carrier here is a pointer in the literal sense. The baby related to it, not to its meaning, thereby moving the carrier to center stage.

The same happens in the laborers on the mountain joke. They don't relate to the aim (the meaning), namely the planting. They solemnly relate to the carrier, the digging. Similarly, in the "am I hungry" joke the saying, not the hunger, turned out to be the protagonist. Or, look at the patient-lover joke (*coercion 6*). Had the joke gone "A man was standing at a doctor's door, but actually he was a lover", it wouldn't be very

funny. No, the change is affected by sticking to the "patient" script – keeping the original meaning. In all these examples, the carrier is victorious over the meaning.

Consider the drowning diver (*Detachment of Intentions 4*). It is important that we first ascribe him (through the "professional" diver who is trying hard) effort and aim. It is important that our attention is given to the carrier, the sinking. Then it turns out that the intention was not there.

In (*drive 1*) (the old guy who doesn't remember why he chased girls) if the old geezer said "Yes, but I no longer possess the drive", it would not be funny, because 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 addresses the symbol, namely the action of chasing, independently of its purpose. It is for him an empty shell.

Flattened metaphors

Girl: I will never give you my heart.

Suitor: I never aimed that high.

Flattening a metaphor means taking it at face value. This detaches the metaphoric meaning. The symbolic air is blown out of the balloon. In the theory of poetry it is called "realization of the metaphor", or also "reification". This is one of the simplest ways to detach meaning. And it is also the most clear-cut case of victory of the carrier – in this case, of the symbol (literal form) over the symbolized – the metaphoric meaning.

The metaphoric meaning of "heart" is replaced by the face-value one. The symbolic meaning vanishes, and "heart" assumes the role of a noun. An elephant in a china shop, the carrier ignores niceties. A heart is just a body organ, free of the burden of metaphorical meaning. We already mentioned that in poetry this it is called "realization of a metaphor". The metaphorical sense is flattened. Following Spencer, Freud claimed that we feel pleasure when we save energy of thought. This is clearly the case here – when a metaphor is flattened, we save the energy invested in connecting it to its meaning.

In (*flattened 1*) there is also another flattening – of emotions. Love is replaced by sex. This is combined with another technique, allusion. The suitor does not say explicitly where he is aiming. As is well known, implicitness is an essential ingredient in jokes.

Here is the same in a children's joke:

The commander to his platoon: Those who are too tired to continue, take a step forward. Joe – kudos. You are the only real man here. Joe: No, I am too tired to take a step forward.

The step, that should have symbolized tiredness, receives a concrete meaning. In fact, there is also self-reference - “I am too tired to say I am tired”. From a symbol that points at something else, the (non)-stepping forward becomes the object of attention. A very similar example is:

Ten men reach the gates of heaven, to be met by Angel Gabriel. "Those who were masters at home – to the right, those whose wife called the shots - left", orders the angel. Nine burly guys go to the left, and only one frail looking chap goes right. "What?" says Gabriel, "of all ten, you are the one who wore the trousers at home?" "I don't know", says the guy, "my wife told me to go right".

Going right starts as a symbol. It loses this function, and is detached from the intention that would give it its symbolic meaning. There is yet another mechanism, that will be central later on: an action is detached from will, which is in fact detachment of intentions.

A famous relative of the metaphor is the synecdoche, representation of a whole by a part or something pertaining to it. Synecdoches, too, can lose their symbolic meaning and be given a concrete role.

A patient complains to the doctor – “My hearing has deteriorated so much, that I don't hear myself fart”. “Take these pills”, says

the doctor. “Will my hearing improve?” asks the patient. “No, but you will fart louder”.

There is a shift here, from the meaning of the farting as indication to the weak hearing to the fart itself – the carrier of the meaning.

Synecdoches are not the only tools common to jokes and poetry. For example, look at their love for conciseness. In (Aharoni 2011) I tried to explain the reason for this affinity.

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

Realization of a metaphor is but one example of a more general mechanism: symbols taken at face value, relating to a symbol as if is a concrete object rather than a conveyer of meaning.

A Chinese couple makes a pact when they marry: each will have a jar, and whenever they are unfaithful they put a 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. “What was the first infidelity?” 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 schoolteacher”. And the second? - “Do you remember the nice maid we had some thirty years ago?” “And the third?” – “Do you recall the time of the big flood, when I went to 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 only we had plenty to eat?”

Rice is also food, plain and simple.

Going from second order symbols to first has other means, besides flattened metaphors. Here it is in a joke (recall that boxes are devoted to more subtle analyses).

Husband: "You are ugly!" Wife: "And you are drunk".

Husband: "Yes, but I will sober up by morning".

On the surface, this is a verbal scuffle, and a vulgar one at that. On a deeper level, there is a subtle shift from second to first order symbols. The wife's retort is of second order – it is not plainly a demeaning remark, but an attempt to explain the husband's rudeness: "... and that's why you are so obnoxious". The husband brings it back to first order, as if it is all about reciprocal evaluation. To this there is added a strange form of detachment: it transpires that there are attributes (drunkenness) that can be shed.

Here is another case of second order turning into first:

An old lady tells her friend: "I changed my password to 'incorrect'. This way the computer reminds me – 'your password is incorrect'".

Replacing the meaning of the word by its external form.

The next joke can also be considered as realization of a metaphor. A symbol is formed only to materialize as "the thing itself":

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 symbol, in that it arouses anticipation of what must follow. On the third night it transpires that it carries no meaning beyond itself – it is the thing itself.

(tail 1) A shipwreck survivor is stranded on a desert island, and leads a miserable Robinson Crusoe style existence. A few months on he discovers a beautiful woman stranded on the other side of the island, and 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. Absurdity is also a form of detachment of meaning. But the real detachment here is subtle. 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.

Carrier beats meaning.

There are many ways in which the pointer can prevail.

“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”.

The pointer turns out to be the thing itself. So, it can also be viewed as a self-reference joke – the boxer points at himself.

The owner of a tail-docked cocker spaniel brings it to the vet, and asks him to trim 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 at home.”

Meaning is subjugated here to the symbol. The wagging of the tail is a symbol, pointing at something – an emotion. The man is not interested in the meaning of the wagging – he doesn’t care whether the dog is happy or not. He relates solely to the symbol. Between meaning and its carrier, he chooses the second.

*American: Never did George Washington's lips utter a lie!
Englishman: Of course not. He spoke through his nose, like the rest of you.*

Unlike most slaves' mutinies, in the joke the mutiny of the symbol carries the day.

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

A menu is a pointer, in that it indicates various referents and the choice to be made between them. Here it becomes the thing itself.

The victory of the symbol can be subtle:

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 it and then keeps saying “Wow, was I hungry, was I hungry.”

Neither the hungry passenger nor his impatient travelling companion is concerned with the hunger or lack of it so much as with the verbal expression thereof.

The next joke could easily be considered a joke of exaggeration – a type we shall get to soon. In fact it is sophisticated, and the mechanism is "pointer becomes pointed".

A Beetle stops next to a Rolls-Royce at a red light. The owner of the Beetle rolls down his window, and calls – "Hey, you. I have a TV in my car, do you?" "Of course", says the Rolls owner. "This is a Rolls Royce". "I have a bar in my car", says the beetle owner. "Do you?" "Of course", says the Rolls owner. "This is a Rolls Royce". "I have a double bed in my car", says the Beetle's owner. "Do you?" The Rolls owner is irritated. He does not have a double bed. He goes to the Rolls agency, and fixes a double bed in his car. He is looking for the Beetle, and finds it in a parking lot, its windows covered with steam. He knocks on the window, and

when the Beetle owner sticks out his head, he says: “I have a double bed”. “For this you took me out of the shower?” says the beetle owner.

The funny part is the role of the "shower" in the sentence. In the previous exchanges, the "I have" was a pointer, used for bragging. The "shower" is not – it is the thing itself, in fact standing in the way of the bragging. Pointer becomes pointed at.

A similar mechanism is in the following joke, based on exaggeration (below – under the heading of "hyperboles"). But no – "Big Joe" becomes pointer at the "real" Big Joe.

In a bar in the Wild West a call is heard – “Big Joe is coming”. Most guests disappear, some hide beneath the tables. Heavy steps are heard, the door is smashed with a kick, a mountain of a man appears, hits the counter with his fist till all glasses rattle, and orders “Barman, two beers. Be quick, Big Joe is coming”.

Ivor Armstrong Richards, a literary critic (1893–1979) coined the terms "vehicle" and "tenor" for the two participants of a metaphor – the fable and the meaning, respectively. In humor the tenor beats the vehicle. The metaphor is realized.

Older brother: Do you know what my girlfriend and I do every night?

Young brother: Yes.

Older brother: So, Mom and Dad asked me to tell you that flowers and butterflies do it too.

Telling over told

The medium is the message. (Marshall McLuhan, Canadian scholar.)

The "is" in McLuhan's dictum may be a bit too strong, but the saying suits our present theme. In the telling of a story, the "telling" is the carrier, and the story is the meaning. There is a large family of jokes in which the telling turns out to be more important than the content. The telling has its own aim, beyond conveying the message. Carrier before message.

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 that he does it every night. What should I do?" Doctor: "What should you do? Tell him, too".

Had the doctor said: "your friend is lying", the joke would have been lost. He would be relating to meaning. The funny point is that the doctor relates to the conveyer of meaning – the saying. To enhance confusion he relates to it as "doing".

A violist comes to his orchestra's rehearsal and finds the hall empty but for a janitor sweeping the floor. "Where is everybody?" he asks. "Haven't you heard? The conductor died and the rehearsal was 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 was 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”.

The saying is more important than the act, the doing:

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”.

An interviewed maid upon being asked for her fee – “Fifty rupies a week. There is 20 Rupies extra for reporting the gossip in town”.

Information beats reality. Telling gossip is important per se. Relating to the information may be as important as the information.

A violist comes to his orchestra’s rehearsal and finds the hall empty but for a janitor sweeping the floor. ‘Where is everybody?’ he asks. ‘Haven’t you heard? The conductor died and 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 was 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'.*

Eye of the beholder

"Symbol before meaning" means "internal before external". Inner thoughts are more important than reality. This is characteristic not only of jokes, but also poems. Poems convey the message that the inner truth is more important than the external. A famous example:

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)

In poems the preference of inner perception over reality conveys truth. In jokes it is erroneous. Contrary to poems, we do not really believe that the "perception" in the joke expresses the truth.

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.

(eye of the beholder 2)

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".

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 be too drunk to recognize her lack of beauty. Another change from perceiver to perceived:

A woman calls her husband, who is riding his car. "Careful, it has just been announced on the radio that there is a car going against the right direction". "One car?" he answers, "hundreds!"

(eye of the beholder 3)

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 perceives them. It is not the outside event that matters, but its perception. This is a victory of the pointer – it is the speaker's attitude to reality that matters, not the real-world events.

(There is another mechanism at work here: detachment of will. It is as if the man is not in control of whom he marries.)

Or take Mark Twain's famous quip:

(eye of the beholder 4)

When I was 14 my father was such a fool that I couldn't tolerate having him around me. When I met him again at 21 I was surprised to see how much the old chap learnt during the seven years.

This is a common theme in jokes. From the object pointed at, to the pointer. The pointer gaining over its object. Here is an example from Freud's book:

Many poems carry this message. In poetry the preference of inner perception over reality carries inner truth. In jokes it is plainly erroneous.

The familiar cartoon scene, of the protagonist treading air and falling only when looking down, is an example of "perception before reality". It has a poetic tinge, as well as comic.

(eye of the beholder 6)

A letter to the tax authorities: "All night I rolled in my bed, recalling how I cheated you. I enclose a check on 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 impact on the guy's sleep.

(eye of the beholder 7)

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 will never put my foot in".

"Imaginary shunned", the mirror image of "imaginary friend".

(eye of the beholder 8)

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

Wishes of the beholder.

The following joke serves in (Raskin-Attardo 2017) as an example for the “two scripts” theory, completely missing its essence.

*Belgium is planning on sending a satellite to the sun.
"Won't it burn?" ask the journalists. "No, stupid", say the
Belgians, "We shall send it at night".*

The sun only looks different (actually, doesn't look at all) at night. But this is what important for the Belgians.

Attardo and Raskin (Attardo-Raskin 2017) use the following joke as illustration for the "two scripts" theory, but in real it is about perception before substance.

*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."*

There is also a backhand message about South Dakota and about economists – this belongs to the category of “implicitness”, to be addressed later.

Stereotype jokes are based on the same maneuver – the stereotype, that is after all in our heads, not in reality, runs the show. Again a "victory of the symbol", the symbol being in this case the label.

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

*(eye of the beholder 10)
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 neither desirable nor coveted.

A victory of show over actual profit:

(eye of the beholder 11)

*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:

(eye of the beholder 12)

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

(eye of the beholder 13)

*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 poems the inner perception reflects deep truth. In jokes, what the eye "beholds" does not reflect reality. It is erroneous.

Perception Before Perceived

"Victory of the pointer", "self-reference", "carrier beats meaning", "eye of the beholder" –all these are the same: our thinking about the object gets priority over the object itself. Perception precedes perceived.

(perception before perceived 1)

Two women visit Cuba, and in a night club they attend an impressive performance: a black guy takes two nuts and smashes them with his member. Twenty years later, they decide to visit the same place again, to see if this show is still on. Sure enough, the guy is still there, doing the same trick, but this time with two coconuts instead of nuts. Curious, they go behind the curtain and ask – "why coconuts?" "You see", he says, "The eyesight is not what it used to be".

Freud, please lay down your pen. This has nothing to do with sex. The real mechanism in this joke is putting the sight of the object before the object itself. Here is a subtle one:

(perception before perceived 2)

Jack and Joe go for a walk with their dogs. They come across a restaurant, and Jack says – "I'm hungry, let's go in". Joe points at a sign NO DOGS ALLOWED. "Do as I do", says Jack. He shuts his eyes and goes in. When the waiter tells him that dogs are forbidden, he says "this is my seeing eye dog", and the waiter lets

*him in. Joe follows suit, and when the waiter stops him he says
“this is my seeing eye dog”. “A chihuahua?” says the waiter.
“What?” says Joe, “Is that what they gave me?”*

Like many jokes, this joke is more sophisticated than meets the eye: the seeing eye dog is turned from a tool for sight, to the object of sight, or in this case, non-sight – Joe does not see his eye-sight dog.

(perception before perceived 3)

*Airplane passengers wait patiently as two men in pilot uniforms
and dark glasses, white sticks in hand, grope their way along the
aisle to the cockpit. The passengers are a bit perplexed, but they
don't say anything. The plane picks speed on the runway, but does
not take off. As it gets closer to the end of the runway, the
passengers are more and more terror stricken. When the plane is
a few meters from the end of the runway they shriek with fear.
The plane takes off, and one of the pilots turns to the other: “you
know, one day they might not shout loudly enough, and we shan't
know when to take off”.*

There is detachment of emotion – the shrieks become a mere technical tool used to time the takeoff. But the main point is a type of self-reference: the reaction to the (almost non-) takeoff becomes a tool towards it.

Look at the Jar

Don't look at the jar but at what's inside it (Talmud – Pirkey Avot 4, 20)

Jokes look at the jar. That is, at the symbol and not at its content-meaning. Again, drawing attention to the carrier, at the expense of the message.

In the following joke words take priority over content.

- Could your honor, the Prime Minister, summarize the state of the nation?

- In one word – good.

And in two words? - Not good.

The number of words dictates the message. Their meaning becomes irrelevant. This is “shell over content”. what matters is the external form of the symbol.

This is another surprising tangential point with poetry: "look at the shell" is a central feature of poetry. Until not so long ago, most poetry was written in rhyme, and in constant meter. Nowadays rhyming is less prominent, but meter is still there, even if not totally regular. Why is this so? The answer is surprising: diversion, from content to form. The similarity of sounds lulls our mind to believe there is similarity in content, and the constant meter has a hypnotic effect. The content is then delivered subliminally, which is how the poem wants its message transmitted.

Something similar happens in the joke. Similar, but not identical. The poem circumvents our critical thought in order to transmit some underlying truth. In the joke the message turns out to be erroneous.

Up the steepest street in San Francisco a truck is seen going backwards. To the curious passers by the driver explains – “they say there is no room to turn around at the top”. After a while, the same truck comes back down – again, in reverse. “Stupid guys”, he explains, “there was room”.

The content is convenience of driving. The driver detaches this aim from the words used – hadn't we said "turning"? Turning it will be.

Puns are all about form. So are knock-knock jokes:

-Knock knock

-Who's there?

-Little old lady.

-Little old lady who?

-I didn't know you could yodel!

Here are two jokes in which content is overshadowed by the form of pronunciation:

A story-telling contest is held, using the words green, pink and yellow. The three finalists are a Frenchman, an Englishman and an Indian. The Frenchman says: "I had dinner at a restaurant and ate green peas with pink salmon and yellow mustard". The audience applauds enthusiastically. The Englishman says: "I sat in the green meadow, drinking pink lemonade and watching the yellow sun". The audience is beside itself with enthusiasm. The Indian says: "I was sitting in my living room and suddenly the

phone went 'green, green'. I pick up the phone, and says 'yellow'".

In the next joke it is the mode of speaking that matters:

A blonde girl goes into a library and bellows: "A pizza with all toppings and a can of coke". The shocked librarian whispers to her – "this is a library!" The blonde whispers back – "OK, a pizza with all toppings and a can of coke".

A well-known genre of "look at the jar" is stammer jokes. It is based on the form of the message – how it is said.

What is your name? – Da-da-da-david. - Have you always stuttered? – Not at all, but my father did, and the clerk at the registry of births was an idiot.

The center of gravity shifts from content to form, from what a person says to the way he says it. There is also adherence to the letter of the law rather than to its spirit – another "form over meaning".

The other mechanism that appears in stammer jokes is detachment of spontaneity. What most people achieve effortlessly involves hard work for the stutterer. So, the next joke can also be categorized as detachment of intention:

A man gets on a bus and asks the driver – "How-how-how-ma-ma-many sto-stops to the hos-hospital?" "Fi-fi-fi-five stops" answers the driver. The next passenger asks "how many stops to the police station?" and the driver answers – "Seven stops". The stutterer is furious – "W-w-why di-di-did you ma-ma-make fun of

me?” The bus driver answers – “I-I-I di-di-didn't. I-I-I ma-ma-made fun of him”.

The play is between intentional and non-intentional. Loading the stammering by intentions – a kind of detachment that we shall soon get to.

The next joke is based on both stammering and double entendre:

Whe-whe-where i-i-is the-the-the school for stu-stu-stutterers?

You don't need. You stutter very well.

Words totally emptied of meaning.

Some jokes do not swap meanings, but do something extreme: empty the meaning entirely. From meaningfulness to meaninglessness. For example, it is possible to talk about nothing:

Usually your phone conversations are long. This time you spoke for only ten minutes. What happened? – It was a wrong number.

A letter from a nursery schoolteacher to the parents: “If you don't believe everything the children tell you about kindergarten, I promise not to believe all they tell me about home”.

Beyond the veiled threat there is also plain detachment – “Not everything said reflects reality”. Or “Let us collude in pretending it does not”.

How can you tell that a salesman is lying? – His lips move.

There is no need to listen to content. He lies as he speaks, that's his job.

A group of old Jewish ladies sits in a restaurant. A waiter comes and inquires – “is anything alright?”

You do not need to know the women's complaints to know there are such. Here is detachment of communication:

How can you tell an introverted mathematician from an extroverted one? – The extrovert looks at your shoes when he speaks to you.

Of course, there is more in this joke than plain non-communicability – there is implicitness, and a twostep exaggeration (one step is looking at the shoes, the other is accepting it as communicability if the shoes are yours.)

Detaching an anchor

A familiar format of jokes starts with a premise that is then annulled. A switch of initial assumptions. Usually the premise is implicit:

Oh, if I only had some egg, I would make egg and bacon, if I only had some bacon.

- *Have you heard? They give away cars in Moscow!*
- *I heard, only it is in St. Petersburg, it is not cars but bicycles, and they take, not give.*

Joe likes aping. When Jim ordered coffee with milk and sugar, he ordered – “I want the same, only tea instead of coffee, lemon instead of milk and aspartame instead of sugar.

These jokes share the same underlying mechanism: starting with a premise, constructing a building upon it, only to pull the carpet from beneath our feet, nullifying the premise.

The anchor can be our trust of authority – often of doctors, who are supposed to be caring and knowledgeable:

The late Hungarian mathematician Paul Erdos went to visit a mathematician, Sidon, who was a bit on the weird side. Erdos knocked on his door, and behind the locked door heard –

Could you come another time, and to another person?

The premise at the beginning of the story (come to ME) is pulled from under our feet at the end (come NOT to me).

Hyperboles

Your mother is so fat they built a ring road around her.

Your mother is so fat, she has a zip code all her own.

Why are exaggerations funny? This is a tough nut for all theories. Raskin (who gives as examples Georgian jokes on excessive virility) claims it is “normal vs. abnormal”, which as we said is vacuous. Everything is “X vs. not X”.

So, what is funny in exaggeration? There is nothing mechanical in it, neither does it involve meeting of incompatible elements.

Two nuts are easier to crack than one, by pressing them one against the other. Let us combine the riddle with another – the role of hyperboles in poetry. There they are baffling indeed: isn't poetry about understatement, expressing ideas and emotions in a muffled way? Shouldn't poems be non-explicit, hinting at things rather than bringing them to full day light, and blown up at that? The answer is that a hyperbole does not stress things, it does the contrary – it detaches them. When Auden, in Funeral Blues, ascribes his pain on the death of his lover to the moon and to the sun, he makes his personal pain bearable. When something goes beyond ordinary reality, it is no longer ours.

The same is true in humor. Hyperboles are funny because they detach. They are a way of placing things beyond reality. And they do so by labels. You give the label "fat", and then have permission to say something ridiculous, so ridiculous that it is connected to the origin only by the label. "Fat" and "surrounded by a ring road" both relate to being big, but they are not really related, the link is totally external.

Ambiguity

You are hereby permitted to all men. (Declaration in a Jewish divorce ceremony)

At long last we get to the best-known family, the one closest to the "incongruence" formula – switch of meaning. Starting with one meaning, ending with another. When a change of meaning of words occurs, we call it "pun". But there are also "puns" in actions and situations. That is, jokes using ambiguity, or "double meaning". Swapping horses in mid race. This is how, for example, Asimov defines "joke" (Asimov 1965. The famous sci-fi author was also an avid collector of jokes). In the following classic the carrier is an action:

A man holding two penguins, one under each arm, approaches a policeman and asks him 'do you have any idea what to do with them?' 'Of course,' says the policeman. 'Take them to the zoo'. The next day the policeman meets the same guy, with the same penguins. 'Didn't I tell you to take them to the zoo?' he asks. 'I did', says the man. 'Today I am taking them to the movies'.

Besides the double meaning of 'what to do with them' there is another technique, of 'personification'. The penguins receive human attributes. We shall place this technique in a general context later on.

Swapping interpretation means that the carrier of meaning is liberated. It is no longer committed to the old meaning, it is 'permitted to all meanings', as in a divorce.

- *Do you talk to your wife after lovemaking?*
- *Yes, yes, if my phone is at hand.*

The implicit assumption, that 'making love' is to your wife, changes state. The carrier of meaning is the image of love-making to the wife, and it is detached. Note that the husband does not declare that he is not doing it with his wife. That would not be a joke. He sticks to the carrier of meaning, the image of him speaking on the phone – this image remains victorious. It is liberated of its original meaning. See (Mindess 1971) for the liberation aspect of jokes.

And then there are of course the word plays. Puns are supposed to be a low form of humor, but there are also sophisticated ones.

*There was a young fellow named Paul
Who into a spring he did fall.
Oh, what a poor thing,
Did he die in that spring?
No he didn't, he died in the fall.*

A special treat: "spring" has not two, but three meanings!

Detachment of self

What is a minor operation? – An operation on somebody else.

Hershele (the Jewish Till Eulenspiegel) was known for his ugliness. “When I was born”, he explained, “I was a handsome baby. But a wicked neighbor replaced me in my crib”.

Part 4 – Boomerang

Self-reference.

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

This is called "self-reference". The pointer points at itself. No incongruity, double meaning, two scripts, only a change in the direction of the pointer. From pointing at something external, to pointing at itself.

How is it that everybody complains all the time, and only I don't?

Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question? -

Why shouldn't he?

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

Self-reference is a powerful technique for shifting from meaning to carrier. The carrier turns out to be the meaning. The pointer is shifted to center stage - a classic case of its victory. Mathematicians are particularly fond of this technique: it is a major tool in two branches of mathematics, set theory and logic.

In the following two jokes something is its own cause.

A man returns from work, sprawls on the couch, turns on the TV, and calls: "Woman, beer! For it is coming". The wife brings him beer, he finishes it and then calls: "Woman, more beer! It is coming." After the third time the woman explodes: "You brute. All you do is watch TV, drink and growl". "Ah, it has come", says the husband.

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".

On top of circularity there is here personification (to be discussed below) – as if the CVs have a will of their own, by which they decide to be thrown into the trash bin.

A fairy appears at a restaurant, turns to one of the diners and offers him one of three wishes: beauty, a million dollars or wisdom. He thinks and thinks, and eventually chooses wisdom. The fairy waves her wand, and his friends watch him crestfallen. "What's the matter?" ask his friends. "I should have chosen the million dollars".

From pointed at, the wisdom becomes the pointer, by which the choice is judged.

What is worse, ignorance or apathy? - I don't know. But who cares?

A cute little ad on the radio:

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 on the radio, you just missed it.

There is something amusing in an arrow shot into the world, only to hit its sender.

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

In fact, circularity is almost invariably funny. Form a self-relating idea, and almost surely you will have a joke at hand.

Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question? Why shouldn't he?

Doctor: "You have got two problems - with your heart and with your memory". Patient: "Memory shmemory. The main thing is that the heart is OK".

A joke from the period when the extent of Fed snooping after American citizens came to light:

President 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.

Interviewer: What is your weakest point?

Job candidate: Honesty.

Interviewer: In my opinion this is not a drawback!

Candidate: Your fucking opinion doesn't interest me.

The form of the candidate's retort is relevant to its content.

I told my friend she drew her eyebrows too high.

She looked surprised.

In jokes of self-reference (or by its other name, circularity), a pointer (carrier) ends up pointing at itself. Diverting attention from the pointed to the pointer constitutes a 'victory of the carrier' – the carrier ends up occupying center stage.

Tautologies

*In recent years our import is more and more from other countries
(President J. W. Bush II)*

*Upon being asked about the quality of some book, President
Lincoln answered – "it is a good book, for those who like such
books". Asked "How long should the legs of a man be?" he
answered "long enough to reach from his body to the ground".*

Inscription on the grave of a hypochondriac: "I told you."

Doctor: "Have you had it before?" Patient: "Yes".

Doctor: "Hmmm. I think you have it again".

Tautologies detach content – they pretend to have some, only to be found empty. There is an obvious common feature to this family, to flattened metaphors and “shell over content”: emptiness of the shell. Of course, a tautology by itself (“water is wet”) is not very funny, the trick is to first entice the listener to expect genuine information. Like in self-reference, a tautology is a slot machine that returns the very coin you put in.

Enticing the listener into the joke

In a peculiar genre of self-reference, the listener is maneuvered to be part of the joke. A quick transition from an observer to participant.

- 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 "why a dog" acquires a new meaning: "the listener pities dogs, not blacks".

- A man went to the toilets. (pause). - And? - Wait till he comes out!

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

- Do you want 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, it is sophisticated. There is a quick transition from being outside the joke to being in it – 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 likes this type of humor. In a classic 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 work, not motivated by real emotions. 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 saying: "I am not!"

A famous class of jokes in which the listener has a role is the "Knock-knock" jokes. Here is one imbued with circularity:

-Knock knock

-Who's there?

-The interrupting cow.

-The interrup –

-Mooooh!

Part 5: Loading by meaning

New factors

Detachment of meaning? Aren't jokes famous for the opposite, unexpected new meanings? A new meaning of a word or a situation emerges. Here is an unexpected feature of a situation:

- *What is the first thing a blonde does when she wakes up?*
- *Introduce herself.*

A new element (actually, person) is added to the picture. Of course, not every new element generates a joke – "Jack and Jill went up the hill, to fetch a pail of water. And you know what? – they met there also Joe!" does not constitute a joke. What does, is

Jack fell down on top of Jill, and now they have a daughter.

The difference is that here the action is loaded by intentions.

Loading by new meaning - doesn't this refute our formula? No, it doesn't. Detachment can go both ways in time. You can start with the carrier loaded and end up with it detached, or you can start with the carrier empty and end up with it loaded. The temporal order is often immaterial. Detaching of meaning and loading by new meaning are one and the same thing, because our brain works fast in both directions of time. When a new meaning is loaded, we recall that it was detached before. "There is no early or late in Torah", goes a famous dictum. This is true also for jokes.

There are two types of loadings:

- a. Loading seemingly meaningless words by an unexpected meaning – taking an innocuous looking object or phrase and loading it with a meaning.

- b. Loading by intentions: seemingly neutral actions turning out to have covert intentions.

Three Jewish mothers sit on a bench in the park. "Oy vey", sighs one. "We agreed not to talk about the children", says another.

When words or actions receive new meaning, we look back and realize that this meaning was detached before. It is a "hindsight detachment". Jokes are indifferent to the direction of time.

*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. Once the word is loaded with meaning, we realize that beforehand it had been detached.

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".

After hearing Stupid's call we realize that before, the names were detached from meanings. This is "hindsight detachment".

This is loading by intentions. We met jokes (like the Parkinson joke) in which an act that looked intentional turns out to be unintentional. Here it is the opposite – a seemingly unintended action is loaded by intention.

A special case of loading by meaning is letting inanimate things or animals behave like humans. Jack in the box, a dancing irrigation hose, a monkey dressed as a human, a dog wearing a Halloween attire – all make us laugh. For a second we think they are human, only to discover we were deceived – the meaning is detached. This is also the mechanism behind jokes on talking animals – for lack of space I will let the readers choose their favorite example of this genre.

This is another tangential point of jokes with poems - personification is a well-known poetic device. The Italian-American psychologist Silvano Arieti gives a nice example. When Italians read Spanish they laugh. The reason is that at first sight the words look meaningless to them, but they quickly realize that they are in fact familiar. Even a matzo, the Passover bread, can be loaded with meaning:

A blind man fingers a matzo and asks – "who wrote this nonsense?"

Loading actions with Intentions

Not only words can undergo this transition, of receiving unexpected meaning. It happens also with actions.

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".

An action that seemed not given to the wife's will, devoid of intention, turns out to be bursting with it. The opposite of what happened in the Parkinson joke. In the Parkinson joke an act that looked intentional turns out to be unintentional.

A bizarre attribution of intentions:

*To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness (Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*)*

A question disguised as a riddle, that turns out to be a wish:

What are ten lawyers at the bottom of the sea? – A good start.

In the following classic, the mother ascribes an intention (or rather, preference) where an intention is impossible:

A Jewish mother buys her son two shirts. He takes them to his room, and comes out with one of them on his body. "You do not like the other one", moans the mom.

Babies' rolling laughter

The happiest laughers are babies. The rolling laughter of a tot is irresistible. When my grandson was about a year old, he would laugh himself to exhaustion when his father juggled three balls for him. Sometimes it is enough to sneeze, or throw some toy up high to elicit rolling laughter. Two scripts? Benign violation? Mechanicality? Detached meaning? Frankly, I don't know, and I am leaving it for others to speculate. Like in the formula of "benign violation" the stimulus should be surprising, but not frightening. The "peekaboo" game is clearly about detachment of meaning – the meaning being the hidden object, preferably one that carries significance. Juggled balls are hard to follow, they look impossible to the baby. Does it pertain to the family of hyperbole? All this is well worth researching.

Why detach?

This I conceive to be the chemical function of humor: to change the character of our thought."

— *Yutang Lin, writer*

Humor is such a central part of our lives, that its mechanism must be of some specific value. If the mechanism is indeed detachment of meaning, this detachment must fulfil some function. Indeed, it does. It enables change. To build new conceptual links, the old ones must be dismantled.

How many shrinks are needed to change a light bulb? - One is enough. But it has got to really want to change.

As every light bulb knows, wanting to change is not enough. Change is hard. Yet, minor changes are possible, because it is not necessary to change all links between the synapses. It is enough to change something in the headquarters. Humor is one of the best ways of doing the job. To change, you must relinquish your attachments to the external world. And humor does it, by breaking old ties, telling us "It ain't necessarily so". It definitely ain't necessarily so important.

Epilogue - envy

I promised to tell you what made me interested in the subject. Of course, there is the curiosity, shared by all attackers of the problem. We all share the wondering of what makes people tick. Why jokes, of all human phenomena? The answer varies from one person to another. In my case I have a suspect - a strange episode in my childhood. Its heading is "envy".

When I was nine, my family moved from a satellite town to the mother city. Until then, I had been the best student in class by a wide margin. So much so that I was barely aware of it. Good? The best? It simply didn't concern me. Things changed dramatically at my new school. My narcissism was dealt a hefty blow. Its deliverer was a perfect boy. Meir (not his real name) was the most beautiful boy in class, the fastest runner, and, above all, possessed a seemingly supernatural memory. He could recite the names of the first twenty Roman emperors, while I barely knew what an "emperor" was. Everything he read was etched in his memory. There was no question he couldn't answer. He was a gentle soul, not competitive by nature, and his status had never been challenged before, so the question "Who is best?" never occurred to him. Until I came along.

For me, this question was very real. Faced with the obvious answer, I was devastated. My envy knew no bounds. Every compliment he received (there were plenty) was a knife stab to my heart, a deliberate blow directed at me personally.

The story didn't end so badly—we eventually became good friends, first connecting via chess (in which I was better). But before that, there was a peculiar chapter—jokes. During every recess, Meir would gather a group of children, mostly adoring girls, and tell them jokes. The laughter of the audience seemed like a personal

conspiracy against me, another link in a chain of humiliations. As I later learned, he was quoting from a joke book he had at home, but I didn't know that at the time and I envied his mysterious source of power.

Life went on, and I completely forgot this episode. At the age of seventeen, I decided I had to understand what a "joke" is. Without the slightest awareness of the myriad thinkers who had tackled the subject before, I wrote a long essay. In it, I rediscovered the superiority-mockery theory of laughter. Only much later did I learn that this is the oldest theory of humor. How I arrived, independently of those great minds, at such an inane theory is a mystery.

Since then, I've returned to this problem roughly every decade. Recently, I recalled Meir's jokes. Is the origin of my interest in the subject to be found there? Possibly, the episode slyly resurfaced in my mind, causing me to try to fathom the charm of humor. Of course, life has more depth to it than this. But for the time being let me stick to it. It's a good story.

Epi-epilogue – some impressions from the world of humor research

As I told you, the academic culture in the humanities is different from that of science. Not to the better, in any way. I had to reach old age to understand the self-evident – that society's stamp of approval is no sign for validity of ideas. While scientific ideas are tested against reality, in the humanities one looks for the consent of the community, which in this case is indication for nothing.

Here are some personal impressions, for illustration.

My first article on the subject, some 40 years ago, was rejected for "not quoting the editor of the journal". The reply to a recent article was even more bizarre. The rejection letter started with "After careful consideration...". It reached me one day after submission, so I inquired what was the careful consideration. The answer was answer that I did not quote any paper from the journal to which I submitted. There are only three journals that are officially devoted to humor research, all three run by proponents of the linguistic terminology. So, I tried sending to another, general journal. I got a request to revise. One of the referees recommended rejection not for the content but because "the author openly attacked a humor researcher". I revised. The referee wrote "I did not ask for a revision. I recommended rejection". The content of the paper was immaterial. This is true in general. I never received a single substantial reaction. Not one comment on ideas. Neither positive, nor negative. Only "you do not quote enough", and "what you claim is wrong" – no attempt to refute. Not even in the papers that were accepted. One review went scathingly "Here the author is offering a theory of humor". As if only scientifically grounded linguist

geniuses are permitted to offer a theory. I wasn't trying to hide my intentions, the message was that I should have.

And more and more and more. An amazing world. It all stems from the absence of anchor points. But also from putting intellectual integrity very low in the scale of values. There is little genuine attempt to test theories against facts.

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