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The cognitive mechanisms of adversarial humor

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12 *Abstract*

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14 *In this paper, we provide an in-depth cognitive analysis of a specific humor*
15 *strategy we coin “trumping”, a multi-agent language game that revolves*
16 *around the subversion of the linguistic forms of exchange. In particular, we*
17 *illustrate how, in a conversational setting, agents can “reflect” and “dis-*
18 *tort” the linguistic-conceptual construal of each others’ utterances. Because*
19 *this reflection or parallelism in the trumping game can be situated on*
20 *different levels of linguistic organization, a multi-dimensional semantic-*
21 *pragmatic account is proposed. Using insights from cognitive linguistics,*
22 *we show that adversarial agents exploit the conceptual mechanisms under-*
23 *lying the opponent’s utterances in order to turn the tables in the humor*
24 *game. In doing so, an agent can trump an adversary by demonstrating a*
25 *“hyper-understanding” of the lexico-conceptual meaning of an opponent’s*
26 *utterance. This subversion of construal operations like metaphor, metonymy*
27 *and salience leads to a sudden manipulation of the discourse space that has*
28 *been set up in the previous utterance(s) (Langacker 2001). In general, by*
29 *providing an analysis in terms of basic principles of semantic construal, we*
30 *argue that a cognitive linguistic treatment of humor has an ecological valid-*
31 *ity that is lacking in most linguistic humor research.*

32
33 *Keywords: Adversarial humor; cognitive ecology; cognitive linguistics; se-*
34 *mantic construal; trumping.*

35
36 **1. Introduction**

37
38 However one might speculate about the inner workings of humor, it re-
39 mains a primarily social phenomenon. While it may be meaningful to talk

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1 of private laughter, humor is at its most potent in a multi-agent setting,
2 and at its most pointed when produced by one agent at the expense of an-
3 other. Adversarial humor is thus an important branch of humor research
4 since it allows cognitivists to understand and model the social interactions
5 of humor in relation to the specific goals and motivations of the agents
6 that produce it. It is the nature of these interactions, in particular how
7 they exploit and subvert linguistic norms, that interests us in this paper.

8 By definition, adversarial agents have competing interests, which can
9 produce conflicting communication goals if this competition is expressed
10 verbally. Furthermore, zero-sum goals, such as an argument concerning
11 the truth or falsity of a given proposition, can be advanced by undermin-
12 ing the competing goals of other agents or by undermining those other
13 agents themselves. To therefore understand the working of adversarial
14 humor, one must understand not only the specific communication goals
15 of the agents involved, but more significantly, one must also understand
16 the personal history that leads to an agent possessing those goals. This
17 makes adversarial humor an issue of encyclopedic proportions, where
18 the boundary between speaker and utterance is blurred to the point that
19 an integrated representation is required. The framework of cognitive lin-
20 guistics, with its dynamic account of meaning in terms of comprehensive
21 conceptualization, provides a number of methodological tools to tackle
22 these complexities. In this paper, one such representation, Langacker's
23 (2001) model of meaning construction in discourse, is used as a method-
24 ological handle on the treatment of adversarial humor.

25 To reduce the phenomenon to a more manageable level, it is useful to
26 demarcate a sub-trope that adheres to a well-defined usage pattern while
27 nonetheless exhibiting all the creativity of the phenomenon. To this end
28 we introduce a species of adversarial humor we call trumping, which can
29 be viewed as a form of multi-agent language game that generates its hu-
30 morous effect through subversion of the linguistic forms of the exchange.¹
31 Furthermore, the particular type of trumping we analyze in this paper
32 exhibits a strong lexical connection between the utterances of different
33 agents, allowing us to investigate the workings of trumping in a way that
34 sheds light on the broader phenomenon of adversarial humor.

35

36 1.1. *The ecology of trumping humor*

37

38 Since humor is undoubtedly a cognitive phenomenon, and verbal humor
39 in particular a linguistic phenomenon, it is natural to conclude that a

1 cognitive linguistic approach to humor research should yield the deepest
2 and most coherent insights. However, if this position is to transcend the
3 vacuity of a platitude, or worse, an ideology, it is necessary to show more
4 concrete benefits of a cognitive linguistic perspective.

5 In eschewing a strict modular view of cognitive function, cognitive lin-
6 guistics encourages theories to exhibit ecological validity. Humor does
7 not operate in a social or a cognitive vacuum, so neither can it be studied
8 and theorized in isolation from related cognitive phenomena that may in-
9 fluence its function or share a common representational basis. In this re-
10 spect, humor occupies one point on a continuum of cognitive behaviors
11 with which it shares a family resemblance to greater or lesser degrees.
12 For instance, the form of adversarial humor we consider in this paper
13 has strong family resemblances to social forms of language such as
14 double-grounded insults (e.g., referring to a surgeon as a “blunt scalpel”)
15 and argumentation by metaphor (e.g., “you say all men are pigs, but you
16 certainly seem to love bacon”), and social forms of behavior such as role
17 reversal, competitiveness and one-upmanship.

18 In particular, the kind of adversarial humor we consider here has as its
19 logical core the idea that one speaker may, linguistically speaking, snatch
20 victory from the jaws of defeat by *turning the tables* on an opponent. The
21 effect of this reversal is to elicit not just a sense of victory in the agent it-
22 self, but a form of admiration from any observers, while perhaps earning
23 the grudging respect of the opponent. So our reasons for appreciating this
24 kind of humor in others more quick-witted than ourselves is related to
25 our appreciation of the unexpected last-minute triumph of those more he-
26 roic than ourselves (see also Gruner 1997). In this ecological view, differ-
27 ent phenomena (humor, competition, etc.) are related by virtue of sharing
28 a common mechanism or set of mechanisms, and by virtue of eliciting re-
29 lated effects in the participant (cheering, jeering, laughter, etc.).

30 This notion of turning the tables on an opponent is not just a motif of
31 adversarial humor, but is indicative of a deeper mechanism that has been
32 studied both in humor research, in the guise of *figure-ground-reversal* in
33 the Attardo’s *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (GTVH, Attardo 1994,
34 2001a), and in cognitive linguistics as the mechanism of conceptual profil-
35 ing (Langacker 1987). In the GTVH, figure-ground reversal is seen as one
36 of possibly many different logical strategies or mechanisms for generating
37 a humorous effect; a representative example is the class of jokes where an
38 easy solution to a problem is eschewed in favor of a ridiculously hard
39 (and thus, extremely stupid) solution, such as rotating an entire room

1 around a socket to screw in a light-bulb. Cognitive linguistics, in contrast,
2 sees the figure-ground distinction as much more fundamental to the work-
3 ings of thought. Thus, in the work of Langacker and others, the profiling
4 of a conceptual structure to highlight certain elements more than others is
5 seen as central to the mechanism that gives words their meanings. For in-
6 stance, one cannot define the concept of HYPOTENUSE without first assum-
7 ing the existence of a conceptual structure that represents right-angled
8 triangles, and without secondly assuming the ability to foreground one
9 or more of the elements in the structure (e.g., the diagonal) while back-
10 grounding others. The fact that profiled aspects of a structure will appear
11 more salient than others allows linguistically-creative people to achieve
12 humorous misdirection, causing observers to focus on the profile (or fig-
13 ure) while the essence of the joke goes unmarked in the base structure (or
14 ground).

15 One of the basic tenets of the cognitive linguistic tradition then is that
16 the figure-ground distinction is given the status of a cognitive mechanism
17 that is neither ad-hoc nor specific to humor, but which instead applies to
18 each and every lexical-conceptual phenomenon. According to this view,
19 CL describes meaning as a dynamic value residing in the tension between
20 a linguistic unit's *profile* (figure) and its *base* (ground). Whereas the profile
21 (also "focus of attention") defines the entity designated by the linguistic
22 expression, the base represents the profile's background, in which differ-
23 ent kinds of conceptual structures are activated with different degrees of
24 salience. It is this ability of cognitive linguistic treatments of humor to
25 tap into a powerful cognitive substrate that transcends humor while link-
26 ing it to a spectrum of related phenomena that provide these treatments
27 with an ecological validity that is generally missing in other accounts or
28 investigative frameworks.

29

30

31 1.2. *Plan of the paper*

32

33 Our goal in this paper is to investigate the complex interplay of speakers,
34 utterances and meanings in multi-agent humor by framing a particular
35 form of adversarial language game that we call "trumping". This lan-
36 guage game has the advantage of being sufficiently circumscribed to per-
37 mit a focused analysis, while, in the hands of creative speakers, being suf-
38 ficiently open-ended to be non-trivial and thus scalable to other forms of
39 humorous discourse. In effect, trumping represents a "horizontal" rather

1 than a “vertical” slice of humorous behavior that cross-cuts through the
2 phenomenon as a whole.

3 As noted under the rubric of cognitive ecology above, trumping shares
4 many features with other cognitive processes, whether humorous or oth-
5 erwise, though it is best explored in the context of adversarial interaction.
6 In the next section then, we present a discussion of the most relevant past
7 research on the topic of adversarial humor, before we consider, in a third
8 section, the various ways in which the core trumping pattern can be
9 instantiated. We then organize these instances to create a typology of dif-
10 ferent trumping strategies. This typology will reveal the most fruitful
11 trumping strategy on which to focus our analysis efforts, yielding a spe-
12 cific sweet-spot in the space of adversarial humor for us to investigate in
13 this and future papers. Our analysis will draw upon some powerful con-
14 cepts from the field of cognitive linguistics, to explain how connections
15 are drawn between the utterances of different agents, and how inferences
16 can be made between what an agent says and what an agent intends. In a
17 fourth section, we present an inventory of these construal mechanisms,
18 before, in section on “complex construal”, we show how these mecha-
19 nisms interact in complex ways to produce the humorous effect in differ-
20 ent instances of trumping. Throughout, we emphasize the fact that none
21 of these mechanisms are humor-specific, but are instead part of the cogni-
22 tive ecology that humor occupies as one phenomenon among many. In
23 this vein, we conclude with some remarks on the overlap of these ideas
24 with the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH).

25

26

27 **2. Related work on adversarial humor**

28

29 The cognitive strategy of humorous trumping, and the concept of adver-
30 sarial humor in general, is in keeping with a number of insights from
31 previous humor research. Although exploring the common ground with
32 existing research would hopelessly go beyond the scope of the present
33 paper, some key notions need to be introduced that can be used as a
34 stepping-stone.²

35 The multitude of humor theories developed in more than two millennia
36 of philosophical considerations on laughter and humor can generally be
37 divided into three major families: the cognitive theories that give a central
38 role to *incongruity* and its resolution (e.g. Kant, Schopenhauer, Koes-
39 tler, Suls); social theories that highlight the importance of aggression,

1 disparagement and the confirmation of *superiority* in humor (e.g., Hobbes,
2 Bergson, Gruner); and the psychoanalytical *tension-release* models in-
3 spired by their most well-known proponent, Freud.³ Although the influ-
4 ential linguistic humor theories developed by Raskin (the *Semantic Script*
5 *Theory of Humor*, or SSTH 1985) and Attardo (the *General Theory of*
6 *Verbal Humor*, or GTVH 1994, 1997, 2001a) do not fully belong to any
7 one of the three families, they do demonstrate a very clear affinity with
8 the family of incongruity-resolution theories. In essence, both the SSTH
9 and the GTVH are wedded to the central notion of *semantic opposition*,
10 as expressed by an overlap and subsequent shift from one semantic script
11 to another, which presupposes an incongruity from the perspective of the
12 joke recipient.

13 One can certainly argue whether this perceived opposition is a cause or
14 merely an effect in generating the humorous effect. In either case how-
15 ever, when it comes to adversarial humor, social factors also seem to
16 play a central motivating role in the generation of the humorous effect.
17 In a multi-agent setting with opponents competing in a game of verbal
18 thrusts and parries, wittiness becomes the symbol of intellectual and so-
19 cial superiority. Within this competitive view of wit as verbal fencing or
20 jousting, Gruner (1997) develops a game-theoretic account of humor in
21 which participants can be winners (those who laugh) or losers (those
22 who are laughed at). It is argued that even wordplay and punning, often
23 treated as “non-tendentious” (Freud 1905) or neutral cases of humor, fit
24 naturally into the formula of “laughing is winning”. Despite the interest-
25 ing basic hypothesis, Gruner does not provide an analytical tool, let alone
26 a linguistic one, for a fine-grained description.

27 The literature on linguistic humor offers slim pickings to those seeking
28 analytical approaches to the interactional, game-like aspects of humor
29 production (a criticism leveled by Kotthoff 1998 and Norrick 1993 among
30 others), not to mention the specific case of agents in a creative verbal
31 competition. But despite the serious lack of foundations to build on, there
32 are some interesting concepts that crosscut the phenomena we are focus-
33 ing on. Davies (1984: 362) in her analysis of conversational joking styles,
34 refers to the thematic principle of *contradiction*, which is central in cases
35 of competitive humor types (e.g., *ritual insulting*). In one cited example,
36 participants jointly improvise and attack each other within the same joke
37 frame. Typical of this adversarial game is the expression of contradiction
38 through “parallelism across turns” (1984: 362), a feature that is essential
39 to the trumping strategy that will be discussed in the present paper.

1 Basically, humorous insults constitute a kind of *teasing*, which, according
2 to Drew (1987: 233) can be discriminated from other interactional strat-
3 egies by three criteria: “(i) the teases are not topic-initial utterances, (ii)
4 they are all in some way a second, or a next, or a response to a prior
5 turn, almost always the adjacent prior turn, and (iii) that prior turn is
6 spoken by the person who is subsequently teased, in multiparty as well
7 as two-party talk”. Most important in the context of the present paper is
8 the stipulation that teases are always a response to a prior utterance in a
9 given context, which squarely places teasing in the family of adversarial
10 humor types.⁴ Although Drew mentions the possibility of “going along
11 with the tease”, meaning that a second speaker, the victim of the tease,
12 can continue on a line introduced by the teaser, his data do not permit a
13 rigorous analysis of this type of reaction. Rather, in the majority of his
14 examples, the recipient of the tease responds in a serious manner. In
15 contrast, the trumping language game requires the active humorous en-
16 gagement of the recipient, remaining within the same linguistic space of
17 the instigator and assiduously avoiding what Drew terms “po-faced re-
18 cepts”. By elaborating upon the same discourse space, the respondent
19 not only parries but fully repudiates the original thrust, showing that
20 even if one were to fully accept the instigator’s premises, his conclusions
21 are without merit.

22 Venturing beyond the realm of teasing, Curcó (1998) offers a relevance-
23 theoretic account that extends the view of humor as a response mecha-
24 nism, proposing that all types of intentional humor be seen as *indirect*
25 *echoes*. Curcó (1998: 305f) argues that “a great amount of intentional
26 humor, if not all, consists to a large extent in implicitly making a specific
27 type of dissociative comment about a certain aspect of the world, or an
28 attributable thought. [...] [S]peakers lead hearers to entertain mental
29 representations that are attributable to someone other than the speaker
30 at the time of the current utterance, while simultaneously expressing to-
31 wards such representations an attitude of dissociation”. In other words,
32 if a speaker is confronted with two radically contradicting assumptions
33 at a time (incongruity), the search for relevance leads one to inferentially
34 attribute one of the assumptions to another agent, and therefore disso-
35 ciate oneself from this assumption. In effect, one can say that Curcó con-
36 siders all humor to be adversarial, since opposing assumptions are attrib-
37 uted to different agents in a way that causes one to become the subject of
38 criticism. For Curcó, incongruity is not a defining feature of humor, but
39 simply a means of invoking the additional processing effort one needs to

1 look beyond the purely propositional content of an utterance. Presum-
 2 ably, an agent that is attuned to the humorous potential of words and cir-
 3 cumstances does not need such prompting, making such agents the most
 4 skilled users of trumping.

5 This necessarily concise and highly selective sketch of previous work on
 6 the linguistics of adversarial humor serves as a point of departure from
 7 which to study the specifics of the trumping game. We argue, however,
 8 that the insights derived from our analyses have implications for the study
 9 of other types of adversarial (and even more generally, interpersonal)
 10 humor as well.

11

12

13 3. A typology of trumping strategies

14

15 The metaphor of verbal fencing, common enough in adversarial contexts,
 16 goes some way towards capturing the productivity of trumping as a hu-
 17 morous strategy. In essence, trumping occurs when an initial utterance
 18 U by an agent S (the instigating speaker) evokes a counter-utterance U'
 19 from a second agent H (the responding hearer), where U' undermines U
 20 (and thus S) not by mere contradiction or non-acceptance, but by reveal-
 21 ing U to be fundamentally unsuited to the communication intent of S.
 22 The following is a schematic view of the strategy:

23 S Opens with an utterance U containing a specific idea X where U serves
 24 a communicative goal G

25 (e.g., G = self-praise, insult, persuasion, consolation, etc.)

26 H Responds with an utterance U' containing an idea X' that is *parallel*
 27 to X so that U' serves a competing or contrary communication goal
 28 $\neg G$

29 U' subverts U and H trumps S to the extent that X' is apropos to X

31 U' must significantly parallel the speaker's utterance U in some key as-
 32 pect, whether phonetic, lexical, structural or conceptual, to achieve the ef-
 33 fect of neutralizing U using S's own language choices. We shall consider
 34 what it means for one utterance to parallel another in more precise terms,
 35 but for now the key point is that without a substantial parallelism be-
 36 tween U' and U, H's response does not subvert U but is at best a mere
 37 refutation of U. Trumping is a form of impromptu wit whose humor
 38 arises, at least in part, from our appreciation of an agent's verbal mastery
 39 in subverting the language of an adversary.

1 Parallelism is the signature character of trumping as a humor strategy.
2 Adversarial exchanges are not always humorous, nor are they always in-
3 stances of trumping, even if they are humorous or linguistically creative.
4 For instance, the following is not an instance of trumping:

- 5 (1) S: (*consoling*) Every cloud has a silver lining.
6 H: (*angry*) What do you know, you idiot!?!
7

8 H is here clearly adversarial to S, yet (1) is not an instance of trumping
9 because H merely rebuffs S without using the form or content of U
10 against S. Mere contradiction or disagreement does not constitute trump-
11 ing. In contrast, parallelism can support trumping even when the initial
12 utterance U is neither adversarial nor overtly provocative. Consider the
13 following exchange, usually attributed to Mr. and Mrs. Winston Church-
14 ill after an election defeat in 1945:

- 15 (2) S: (*consoling tone*) Perhaps it is a blessing in disguise, dear.
16 H: (*angry tone*) Well, it must be a bloody good disguise then.
17

18 Whereas (1) can most generously be described as petulant rebuttal, (2)
19 rises to the level of humor precisely because H manages to use S's figure
20 of speech—a stock metaphor often used as a hollow platitude—as a
21 weapon against the well-meaning but ultimately unhelpful S. Indeed, it is
22 possible to view H's reply as a highly compressed *reduction ad absurdum*
23 for S's argument: H begins by accepting S's proposition (signaled by
24 "Well"), which leads him to express his contrary opinion (that there exists
25 no positive perspective on the situation) in terms of S's metaphor (any
26 such positive perspective is so well hidden as to be virtually non-existent),
27 thereby reducing S's utterance to absurdity. It is this ability of H to sub-
28 vert the particular metaphor employed by S, that makes H's response so
29 witty. The humor of (2) arises out of a combination of this rather pointed
30 cleverness and the social dynamic of one agent defeating another.

31 The seemingly innocuous use of the word "well" in (2) is actually of
32 some significance when considering the mechanics of humorous trump-
33 ing. One of the most socially cohesive aspects of trumping is that it pre-
34 supposes acceptance on the part of the hearer (H) of the premises on
35 which S bases the instigating attack. Tacit in this acceptance is the idea
36 that the hearer can defeat the speaker even using the linguistic weapons
37 (logical premises) the speaker himself has chosen. The effect is to not
38 only counter the speaker's conversational gambit, but to additionally
39 show that the speaker must surely be confused and inept, or at least

1 under-informed, to work from such premises. Indeed, the hearer's accep-
 2 tance need not be so tacit, but may be so bold as to highlight the speaker's
 3 own prejudices. For instance, consider (3):

- 4 (3) Sheriff of Nottingham (S): You speak treason!
 5 Robin Hood (H): Fluently!

6 The riposte in (3) demonstrates not only an acceptance of the speaker's
 7 accusation, but a proud affirmation of it. The effect is twofold: first, pride
 8 offers an "offensive defense" that blunts the speaker's insult, since insults
 9 are most often targeted at characteristics that one should find shameful;
 10 second, the speaker's implicit belief that treason is wrong (as would be
 11 conveyed by a shocked tone of voice) is seriously questioned, which sug-
 12 gests that the situation is more complex or subtle than the speaker can
 13 comprehend. In this case, the suggestion is that when faced with corrupt
 14 governance, patriotism and treason must be one and the same thing.

15 Parallelism is the key to the humorous effect in these examples. Note
 16 how in (2) the speaker utterance U and the hearer utterance U' are con-
 17 nected via the use of the word "disguise", while in (3) a connection is
 18 forged via the adverbial ellipsis of "fluently" to "speak". Parallelism is
 19 not a substitute for incongruity in trumping, but rather the framing device
 20 through which incongruity can be focused and appreciated. In particular,
 21 it is by aligning the content of different utterances that trumping achieves
 22 its subversive goal, allowing the hearer to expropriate the speaker's own
 23 words and ideas and mould them to a contrary communicative goal.
 24 However, parallelism is not an inherently structural operation, and is not
 25 limited to the repetition of key words or the aping of syntactic form. The
 26 diversity of forms that utterance parallelism can take provides the most
 27 useful basis for organizing a typology of trumping strategies.

28 We consider first the simplest class of trumping, those that exploit a *ho-*
 29 *mophonous parallelism* between utterances. This general strategy relies on
 30 the hearer being able to assign a different lexical interpretation to one or
 31 more of the phonological chunks in the speaker's initial utterance. In
 32 other words, homophonous trumping relies on the speaker being able to
 33 make a pun using the phonological material contributed by the speaker.
 34 The strategy is illustrated by the following example:

- 35 (4) Chamberlain (S): I believe that Herr Hitler genuinely wants
 36 peace.
 37 Churchill (H): Yes, a *piece* of Poland, a *piece* of France, a
 38 *piece* of ...
 39

1 If such homophonous trummings are not entirely satisfying, it is perhaps
2 because the speaker has a legitimate claim to being deliberately misunder-
3 stood by the hearer. The speaker is not trumped by having his words
4 and ideas against himself, but rather by having the *sound* of his words
5 turned against him. Though trumping can exploit mis-understanding
6 to achieve parallelism, it is by no means a class of humor based on mis-
7 understanding. In fact, one might say trumping more frequently exploits
8 a form of hyper-understanding, wherein the hearer demonstrates a fuller
9 understanding of a speaker's argument than the speaker himself.

10 One needs to exploit progressively deeper language phenomena to
11 achieve more complex trumping victories. For instance, looking past the
12 phonological level of U, H may find a structural basis for trumping S by
13 instead echoing the syntax or logical form of U. If U contains a pointed
14 attack at H, the hearer may deliver a riposte in the same form to effec-
15 tively neutralize this attack. Though each has successfully attacked the
16 other, H is deemed victorious since his attack has been specially molded
17 to mimic the form of U. Since S must operate under significant time-
18 pressures and structural constraints not imposed on H, the effect is, all
19 else being equal, that H triumphs over S, as in the exchange in (5)
20 below.

- 21 (5) G. B. Shaw (S): Here is an invitation to the opening night of my
22 new play.
23 Bring a friend, if you have one.
24 Churchill (H): I'm afraid I can't make it on the opening night.
25 But I may attend on the second night, if there is
26 one.
27

28 The *structural parallelism* of (5) hinges on the repeated use of the *if exists*
29 construction, but the humor lies deeper than this. In each case, the *if*
30 establishes a positive supposition for the opposing agent (e.g., that the
31 agent has friends, or that the play will not close on its first night), before
32 immediately casting doubt on the validity of this supposition.

33 Though the parallelism in (4) and (5) is overtly signaled, such explicit
34 echoing is not essential. In some cases, one must employ a sophisticated
35 chain of metonymic inferences to connect the content of U' to U, and
36 this higher cognitive demand typically adds to the perceived cleverness
37 of the trump. Consider the exchange in (6), from a parliamentary debate
38 in Spain in the 1930s between the Prime Minister and an opposition MP
39 (example from Barcelona 2003: 93ff):

- 1 (6) Opposition M.P. (referring to the Prime Minister) (S):
 2 But what can we expect, after all, of a man who wears silk
 3 underpants?
 4 Prime Minister (H):
 5 Oh, I would never have thought the Right Honorable's wife could
 6 be so indiscreet!

7 The *metonymic parallelism* here is deeply rooted in the kind of experien-
 8 tial knowledge that one does not find in the mental lexicon, but rather
 9 in the episodic memory structures that support common-sense reasoning
 10 with world knowledge (e.g., that underwear is not publicly visible, so
 11 that only an intimate partner would know of its color and material) and
 12 with cultural stereotypes (e.g., that silk underwear has feminine connota-
 13 tions, and so is suggestive of homosexuality for a male).

14 Metonymic parallelism requires the hearer to look beyond the words of
 15 the speaker's utterance to see the chain of associations and implications
 16 that lurk beneath. So perhaps easier to understand and analyze are exam-
 17 ples of trumping that exploit lexical relations and readings stored directly
 18 in the lexicon, such as those pertaining to conventional metaphors and
 19 stock figures-of-speech. Such metaphoric trumping relies on the salience
 20 gap that exists between the literal and extended interpretations of a lexi-
 21 cally entrenched metaphor. Consider the following exchange between a
 22 husband and wife who are driving past a zoo after a vicious argument:

- 23 (7) Wife (S): (*pointing to monkeys*) Your relatives, I suppose?
 24 Husband (H): Yes, my in-laws.
 25

26 The noun "relative" has both a literal and an extended sense. In the lat-
 27 ter, the word is used to imply a relationship based on similarity, which
 28 suits the wife's purpose of merely comparing her husband to a monkey
 29 (a standard jibe, suggestive of low intelligence and bad manners). But in
 30 its stronger, literal sense, "relative" denotes a familial relationship recog-
 31 nized in law, and often based on the sharing of genetic material and com-
 32 mon ancestry. The literal relationship between *in-law* and *relative* in (6) is
 33 one of hyponymy, of the kind one expects to find in a standard lexicon.
 34 The relationship is used metaphorically here since *in-law* is not a hypo-
 35 nym of the sense of "relative" employed by S, but of a related sense that
 36 better suits H's purpose.

37 The connection between U and U' in (7) must thus be determined by
 38 metaphoric inference. But a significant sub-class of metaphoric trumping
 39 relies on the more overt notion of *lexical parallelism* between utterances,

1 where the speaker and hearer employ different, but related, senses of the
2 same polysemous word. It occurs, as in (7), when the speaker uses a poly-
3 semous word in an extended, but contextually prominent sense, and is
4 trumped by a hearer who uses the same word in its literal sense, which is
5 contextually less salient. Consider the following example:

- 6 (8) Von Braun (S): I aim for the stars! (*title of coffee-table book*)
7 Book critic (H): I aim for the stars, but I keep hitting London.
8 (*title of book review*)
9

10 The trump here turns on the polysemy of the word “aim”, used in an ex-
11 tended sense in the rather grandiose title of rocket-scientist Werner Von
12 Braun’s book on rocketry, and in its core literal sense by a critic of Von
13 Braun who remembers the London bombings of WWII. So in the first
14 case, “aim” is used to describe the ambitious goal of a project, while in
15 the second it is used more literally to describe the physical target of a fly-
16 ing projectile. The extended sense of S, used to convey a sense of human-
17 istic altruism, is trumped by the literal sense of H which better dovetails
18 with the far-from-altruistic history of Von Braun (S) as the scientist
19 whose V2 rockets bombarded London in World War II. Perhaps this
20 switch between senses can be seen as a form of figure-ground reversal,
21 since Von Braun directs our attention to the future while his critic reso-
22 lutely draws us back to the sins of the past? If so, it says little for the util-
23 ity of figure-ground reversal as a concrete mechanism of humor produc-
24 tion, but speaks volumes for the need to identify specific language games
25 such as trumping in which such generic strategies can be meaningfully
26 exploited.

27 In fact, very general mechanisms of language use can be subversively
28 exploited to achieve humorous effects, and only by focusing on specific
29 language games like trumping can we hope to understand their potential
30 for humor. For instance, the assignment of referents to anaphors and def-
31 inite descriptions is a process that crosscuts much of language use and
32 which, in certain forms, can be exploited to humorous effect by trumping.
33 Consider for instance the following hypothetical exchange between a
34 company’s chairman and its under-performing CEO:

- 35 (9) CEO (S): I do the work of two men for this company!
36 Chairman (H): Yes, Laurel and Hardy.
37

38 Example (9) demonstrates what we choose to call *referential parallelism*,
39 where U’ provides referents for under-specified elements in U, typically

1 running counter to the expectations of the speaker who employs these ele-
 2 ments as generic forms. It is clear that the speaker in (9) employs the con-
 3 cept *man* in its generic form, to refer not to any specific male person but
 4 to evoke the concept of a capable and competent worker that has neither
 5 physical nor mental impairment. However, the risk of using such generic
 6 forms is that they license the hearer to assign referents to them that fur-
 7 ther the goals of the hearer more than those of the speaker. The hearer in
 8 (9) thus chooses an ideally degenerate referent for “two men”—Stan
 9 Laurel and Oliver Hardy—to undermine the inference (and implication)
 10 of the speaker that two men are more productive than one.

11 Since pragmatic dimensions of utterance meaning may interact with
 12 other dimensions, whether structural, phonological, lexical or conceptual,
 13 it is entirely possible that a trumping exchange may simultaneously fall
 14 into multiple classes of the trumping typology. For instance, the follow-
 15 ing exchange can be classified both as an instance of polysemous trump-
 16 ing and referential trumping:

- 17 (10) Emperor Charles the Bald (S): What separates an Irishman
 18 from a fool?
 19 Irish philosopher John Scotus (H): Just this table.

21 The humor in (10) hinges on two forms of parallelism that are masterfully
 22 combined: the polysemy of “separates”, which possesses both a physical
 23 meaning (*spatial disconnection*) and an extended abstract meaning (*con-*
 24 *trast and difference*), and the generic nature of the descriptions “an Irish-
 25 man” and “a fool”, to which the hearer assigns particular referents (the
 26 hearer and the speaker respectively).

27

28

29 3.1. *The typology in a nutshell*

30

31 Our typology of trumping divides the phenomenon into five primary,
 32 non-exclusive branches, reflecting the different ways in which the hearer’s
 33 response parallels that of the speaker’s initial utterance: homophonous
 34 parallelism, structural parallelism, metonymic parallelism, metaphoric
 35 parallelism and referential parallelism. Sub-classes of each of these
 36 branch-defining criteria—homophony, syntactic structure, metonymy,
 37 metaphor and reference—can lead to further sub-branching of the typol-
 38 ogy. For instance, conventionalized metaphor is often encountered in the
 39 guise of polysemy, wherein a word exhibits a multiplicity of related or

1 extended senses. When the polysemy of a word is used to create a trump-
2 ing effect, we dub the strategy polysemous parallelism and consider it a
3 sub-class of metaphoric parallelism. Strictly speaking, polysemous paral-
4 lelism is also a sub-class of homophonous parallelism, since each sense of
5 the polysemous word has the same surface realization and thus the same
6 pronunciation. But the use of polysemy gives this sub-class a conceptual
7 basis that is lacking in the purely homophonous trumping of punning
8 humor, while providing an overt lexical bridge between U and U' that
9 enables us to consider the trumping mechanism from a mostly lexico-
10 conceptual perspective. That is to say, polysemous trumping is a variety
11 of metaphoric trumping that relies more on the kind of word knowledge
12 one is likely to find in a lexicon and less on the kind of encyclopedic
13 world knowledge required by a general model of metaphoric competence.
14 This word knowledge might well be found in a machine-readable dictio-
15 nary or lexical resource like WordNet (see Miller et al. 1990).

16 In many ways, polysemous parallelism offers the ideal trade-off for
17 studying trumping humor, since it simultaneously offers a considerable
18 conceptual breadth within appealingly narrow structural constraints. As
19 such, we believe it makes an ideal starting point for the cognitive study
20 of adversarial humor.

21
22

23 **4. Cognitive mechanisms of meaning construal**

24

25 To understand the semantic processes involved in adversarial humor, one
26 must look at the multiple ways that interlocutors can negotiate the mean-
27 ing of their utterances. Cognitive linguistics presents itself as an adequate
28 tool for the analysis of this type of utterances, since it offers a dynamic
29 account of meaning in terms of a comprehensive conceptualization of dis-
30 course elements. This inclusive account is also highly cohesive, integrating
31 the objective conceptual content of an utterance with every element that
32 also pertains to the interactive circumstances of the ongoing discourse.
33 However, before we turn to the specific mechanisms of cognitive con-
34 strual that cognitive linguistics offers the study of adversarial humor, we
35 should first take a closer look at the rich conceptual landscape in which
36 these mechanisms operate.

37 Prominent in this landscape is the idea of a *Current Discourse Space* or
38 CDS, which grows out of Langacker's (2001) discourse-level extensions
39 to his theory of Cognitive Grammar. Langacker defines the Current

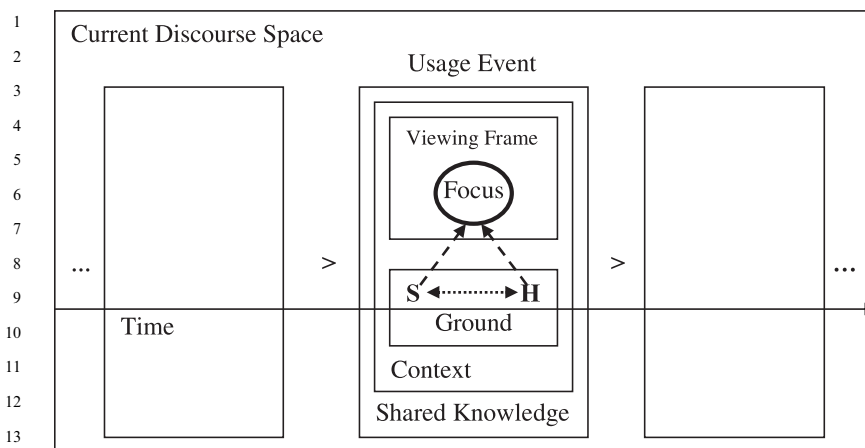


Figure 1. A schematic view of a Current Discourse Space of CDS (Langacker 2001: 145)

Discourse Space as “the mental space comprising those elements and relations construed as being shared by the speaker and hearer as a basis for communication at a given moment in the flow of discourse” (2001: 144). The notion of a CDS allows us to integrate the utterances of both speaker (S) and hearer (H) in a trumping game into a coordinated discourse representation. Figure 1 represents how, in successful communication, speaker (S) and hearer (H) are joined in their coordinated *focus* on the conceptual entity that is designated by the linguistic unit (*profile*). Bearing in mind that meaning resides in the tension between a linguistic unit’s *profile* and its conceptual *base*, all other elements in Figure 1 may be evoked as relevant structures of the base. As such, the *viewing frame* represents the immediate scope of attention, which delimits those conceptual entities which are of particular relevance and immediately conceivable at any given moment in the unfolding process of discourse. As the word *knee* profiles one specific body part, only those (concepts of) body parts that are particularly relevant for an adequate characterization of the concept KNEE, such as the leg, some muscles and bones and maybe the foot, are activated as elements of the viewing frame. Obviously, the CDS also contains a vast amount of *knowledge* presumed to be commonly accessible and on the basis of which speaker and hearer engage in all kinds of interaction. Since any utterance (or usage event) is embedded in a—broadly defined—*context of speech*, elements pertaining to both bodily, mental, social and cultural circumstances may be conceptualized

1 as aspects of the base as well (see Langacker 2001: 145). As the central
2 element of the context of speech, finally, the *ground* consists of the speech
3 event itself, the speaker and hearer, their interaction (the double-sided
4 arrow), and the specific circumstances (time and place) of the utterance.⁵

5 The multifaceted CDS provides the schematic conceptual setting for
6 linguistic meaning. It is the operational playground for the various cogni-
7 tive mechanisms of construal, which are constantly at our disposal to re-
8 arrange the internal structure among the elements of the CDS and there-
9 fore enable us to decide in what way an experience will be represented.
10 “The speaker’s ability to conceptualize situations in a variety of ways is,
11 in fact, the foundations of cognitive semantics” (Casad 1995: 23). One of
12 the main interests of cognitive linguistics is a careful analysis of the ways
13 in which basic conceptualization processes or *construal operations* are re-
14 flected in language use (Croft and Cruse 2004: 40–73). In this respect, CL
15 may contribute to an account of humor as a highly marked and complex,
16 yet structurally not irregular kind of language use. Accordingly, one
17 might expect to find patterns in the cognitive construal of humorous texts:
18 in what ways are construal operations exploited, combined and embedded
19 in humorous discourse, and how do they relate to the achievement of hu-
20 morous effects? In accordance with the cognitive linguistic view of lan-
21 guage as a *cognitive* capacity, several typologies of construal operations
22 have been proposed, e.g. by Langacker (1987, 1991), Talmy (2000) and
23 recently also by Croft and Cruse (2004). As a systematic discussion of
24 each and every construal operation would extend well beyond the scope
25 of this contribution, we will restrict our attention to those mechanisms
26 which seem particularly relevant for our cases of adversarial humor: met-
27 aphor, metonymy and salience.

28
29

30 4.1. *Metaphor*

31

32 A highly pervasive construal mechanism prominently studied in CL is
33 metaphor. Metaphor can be defined as the systematic mapping of the
34 conceptual structure of an experientially salient domain (source) onto
35 another domain (target), which because of its complexity and/or high
36 degree of abstractness is cognitively less accessible. In the examples pre-
37 sented here, metaphor figures among the mechanisms being deployed to
38 attain the humorous effect of trumping. A straightforward case is the met-
39 aphorical basis of the example in (7), in which the wife instantiates a

1 highly conventional, schematic metaphor (HUMAN BEING IS ANIMAL) to ex-
 2 press her negative feelings towards her husband: MAN IS A MONKEY. What
 3 is particularly interesting for our purpose, however, is the creative way in
 4 which the husband makes use of the same construal mechanism (meta-
 5 phor) to trump his wife linguistically. Underlying his reply in which he
 6 refers to his in-laws, the husband reverses the information structure of
 7 this conventional metaphor. The originally profiled, extended concept of
 8 “similarity” is relegated to the base as the husband’s reply (*my in-laws*)
 9 profiles a specific instance of the literal concept of “familial relationship”.
 10 Since in metaphorical mappings the source concept provides the profiled
 11 target’s primary domain and as such a prominent, perspectivizing element
 12 of its base, the difference in meaning can be described as a figure/ground
 13 reversal, in which the metaphor’s original source structure enters the focus
 14 of attention as part of the new profile. It must be noticed, however, that
 15 this lexical parallelism does not function on the reversal of the metaphor
 16 alone. On the literal level, in order to use it as a strategically reversing
 17 argument, the concept “relatives” has to be instantiated in the *hyponymi-*
 18 *cally* related notion of *in-laws*.

19 Basically, the same creative exploitation of a metaphor can be observed
 20 in the examples (8) and (10), in which the reversal is achieved within the
 21 semantic structure of a single lexical item. In (8), the extended metaphori-
 22 cal meaning of *aim* is juxtaposed with its literal meaning by specifying a
 23 literal target in “*hitting London*”. In (10), the reference to a concrete ob-
 24 ject “*this table*” as an answer to the initial question activates the literal
 25 meaning of the finite verb *separates*, thus abandoning its contextually sa-
 26 lient metaphorical meaning.

27

28

29 4.2. *Salience*

30

31 In looking for an explanation for the humorous effect achieved in the
 32 examples above, the identification of metaphor as an operational con-
 33 strual mechanism alone does not suffice. An additional facilitator of the
 34 sudden profile switch from figurative to literal is the unexpected activa-
 35 tion of a meaning which may appear *non-salient* to the speaker S. Salience
 36 plays a crucial role in negotiating meaning between agents, but different
 37 agents may attribute conflicting levels of salience or prominence to differ-
 38 ent word readings, inferences and entailments. Thus, depending on pa-
 39 rameters such as frequency, conventionality and context, as well as the

1 particular expectations and mind-set of the agent, some aspects of con-
2 ceptual structure may appear more *salient* than others. On a schematic
3 level, this relationship can be characterized as the difference between *fig-*
4 *ure* and *ground* of a scene, in which the figure counts as the fore-grounded
5 element with all other elements relegated to the background. This sche-
6 matic relationship appears in different instantiating structures, such as
7 the entity of profile and base, or the relationship between subject (figure)
8 and objects (ground) in a sentence, or between trajector and landmark in
9 a relational predication. Although one can identify general principles of
10 relative cognitive salience according to which, for example, something
11 visible tends to be more salient than something non-visible, something
12 concrete more salient than something abstract, something human more
13 salient than something non-human etc., the alignment of a scene is not
14 an object-inherent matter as far as the identification of figure and ground
15 is concerned (Langacker 1993: 30). This observation is of major impor-
16 tance for an adequate characterization of the way in which cognitive
17 mechanisms of construal operate in humor.⁷ Giora (2002: 12) describes
18 the interpretation of humorous utterances, e.g. jokes, in terms of a *sa-*
19 *lience imbalance*, which occurs when a linguistic context profiles a salient
20 first meaning while simultaneously suppressing a possible secondary in-
21 terpretation (the joke interpretation activated after encountering the
22 punchline). In the resolution process, the salience imbalance is uncovered
23 and reconsidered in favor of the previously suppressed interpretation. A
24 similar observation can be made for the examples of trumping discussed
25 here, as the answer provided by speaker 2 elicits the reinterpretation of
26 the key term (*relatives, aims, separates*) in its literal, contextually non-
27 salient meaning.

28 Although the examples discussed so far only involve metaphorical
29 meaning extensions being “reversed” to their literal base, the example in
30 (9) illustrates that differences in salience may be exploited in other kinds
31 of polysemous relations as well. Recall that in this example, the hearer
32 creatively employs “Laurel and Hardy” as an atypical instantiation of
33 “two men”. In this exchange, *to do the work of two men* has the status of
34 a fixed, yet highly motivated expression, in which the *work of two men*
35 does not have to be interpreted literally as the amount of work which
36 equals the sum of the work being done by two employees. Instead, this
37 phraseological string has acquired the extended meaning “more than
38 the amount of work which is normally required”. The hearer (H), how-
39 ever, exploits the analyzability of this expression and operates a form of

1 *de-automatization* process to interpret this expression literally.⁸ He seizes
 2 the opportunity to pin down this generically used expression onto two
 3 non-salient referents, in order to undermine the inference (and implica-
 4 tion) of the speaker (S) that two men are more productive than one. In
 5 the CDS, the folk model about productivity logics is replaced by the
 6 canonized cultural stereotype of two clumsy vagabonds as primary do-
 7 main (viewing frame) of the sentence profiled by the speaker (S).

10 4.3. Metonymy

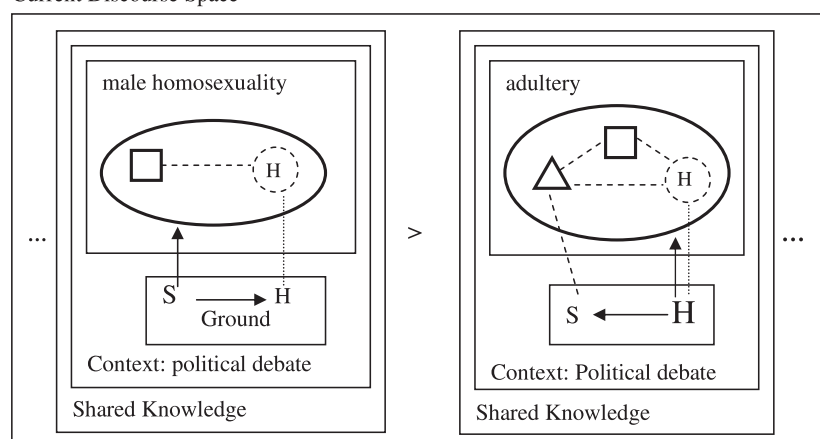
11
 12 The humorous exchange in (6) illustrates that metonymy provides an-
 13 other cognitive mechanism which may structure instances of adversarial
 14 humor. Avoiding the long-lasting discussion about definition and scope
 15 of metonymy (Panther and Radden 1999; Barcelona 2000; Dirven and
 16 Pörings 2002), we generally subscribe to the definition proposed by Rad-
 17 den and Kövecses (1999: 21), in which metonymy is characterized as
 18 a conceptual phenomenon that functions within an idealized cognitive
 19 model (ICM) or *cognitive frame*:⁹

20
 21 Metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, pro-
 22 vides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same ideal-
 23 ized cognitive model.

24
 25 The humorous effect in example (6) hinges on the creative reorientation
 26 of the linguistically coded reference point *silk underwear* towards an unex-
 27 pected target concept. As such, this exchange appears to be structured by
 28 a metonymic parallelism. In his opening move, the speaker S attempts to
 29 compromise the hearer H by appealing to the social stereotype of male
 30 effeteness and, by implication, homosexuality, by alluding to the wearing
 31 of typically female silk underwear. In terms of metonymic construal, the
 32 silk underwear functions as a reference point that provides mental access
 33 to the social stereotype as a whole. Grounded in the political situation of
 34 Spain in the mid thirties, the utterance by S intends to identify H as be-
 35 longing to a socially undesirable category. Taken further within the
 36 context of a misogynistic political system, it suggests a fundamental inad-
 37 equacy on the part of H to perform politically since, due to his implied
 38 homosexuality, he lacks the prerequisite class membership (i.e., the class
 39 of stereotypical alpha-males). In his reaction, H implicitly affirms the

1 main charge (that he wears silk underwear), but as noted earlier, this
 2 affirmation is a signal characteristic of trumping humor and is done
 3 not to support, but to undermine, S. So in re-orientating this reference
 4 point towards another target structure (adultery), H manages to reverse
 5 the implications derived from it as well. By appealing to the common
 6 world knowledge that underwear is not publicly visible, so that only an
 7 intimate partner would know of its color and material, H changes the
 8 viewing frame in which the silk underwear is profiled such that it sug-
 9 gests cuckolding on the part of S rather than homosexuality on the
 10 part of H.¹⁰ Applying Langacker’s model as introduced in Figure 1,
 11 the major changes in the CDS of this exchange can be represented as
 12 follows:

13
 14 Current Discourse Space



15
 16
 17
 18
 19
 20
 21
 22
 23
 24
 25
 26
 27
 28
 29 Figure 2. *The CDS for example (6)*

30
 31 This visualization may require some clarifications. Inside the viewing
 32 frame, the square represents the silk underwear, the dashed circle repre-
 33 sents the (non-profiled) hearer H and the triangle represents the wife of
 34 speaker S. The dashed lines connecting these elements represent metonym-
 35 ic links or contiguity relations, while the dotted lines represent an iden-
 36 tity relation. Additionally, the arrows related to elements in the ground
 37 indicate the alignment of the interlocutor’s interaction, whereas the rela-
 38 tive size of the abbreviations S1 and S2 indicates the winner of the ex-
 39 change: the winner (H) is represented bigger.

1 If one compares both usage events within this CDS, it is apparent
 2 that both *turns* of this brief dialogue have structural features in com-
 3 mon: not only does the context and the elements of the ground remain
 4 stable across turns, the contiguous relationship between the silk under-
 5 wear and hearer H is also maintained. The only structural adjustment
 6 that marks the shift between both usage events is the change of per-
 7 spective from homosexuality to adultery as the primary domain of the
 8 contiguous relationship. What makes this conceptual shift the perfect
 9 counterargument in the ongoing discussion is the inclusion of S's wife
 10 into this relationship, which necessarily casts S in the undesirable role of
 11 cuckold.

12 The anecdote in (11) provides another example of the way in which
 13 metonymic inference patterns are exploited for humorous purposes.

14 (11) Winston Churchill entered a men's washroom in the House of
 15 Commons one day and, observing Labor leader Clement Attlee
 16 standing before the urinal, took up his stance at the opposite end
 17 of the room. "Feeling stand-offish today, are we, Winston?" Attlee
 18 chirped. "That's right," Churchill replied. "Every time you see
 19 something big, you want to nationalize it."
 20

21 Interestingly, in this example the same conceptual manipulation is used
 22 by H to beat S on his own linguistic footing, since the conceptual struc-
 23 ture of this exchange can be described in terms of metonymic reasoning.
 24 In his opening move, Attlee refers to Churchill's surprising behavior in
 25 terms of the feeling that might be causing it (shyness), to imply an insult-
 26 ing basis for this feeling (sexual inadequacy, perhaps).¹¹ In turn, Churchill
 27 admits that Attlee's implication is correct (implicit acceptance of his feel-
 28 ing), but refutes the implication of its cause by adding yet another impli-
 29 cation that in turn places his accuser in a negative role. By identifying
 30 Attlee's typically bullish political behavior as the specific cause of his shy-
 31 ness, Churchill cleverly elevates himself and demeans Attlee, as measured
 32 on precisely the same value scale as introduced by Attlee. In this trump-
 33 ing account, Churchill is shy not because he compares poorly with Attlee,
 34 but because he compares so well that it might elicit some instinctively
 35 predatory behavior in the latter. Just as in the previous example, the
 36 hearer H maintains the initial contiguous relationship that was estab-
 37 lished by S, but extends this relationship in such a way as to include S
 38 and re-align the argument to target S himself. This construal operation
 39 can be schematized as shown in Figure 3:

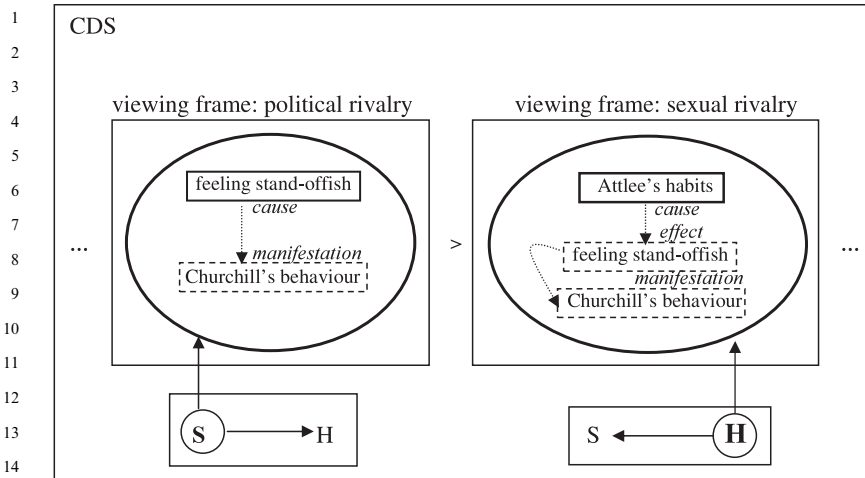


Figure 3. The CDS for example (11)

Compared to the examples of lexical parallelism discussed in the previous section, both cases of metonymic trumping reflect a different manipulation of the construal mechanism underlying the utterance by speaker S. In the former case the polysemous structure of a lexical item is exploited so as to allow the activation of a non-salient meaning to neutralize and overcome an initially salient but undesirable meaning, while the creative construal operation in cases of metonymic trumping such as (11) is entirely situated on the conceptual level. The conceptual relationship of contiguity, introduced by speaker S, is extended by hearer H in such a way as to include S as a negative participant or victim.

5. Complex construal

Metaphor and metonymy are powerful and pervasive forces in language, with the latter often providing the necessary degree of freedom for the former to operate. However, to fully appreciate the structural impact of construal operations in adversarial humor, it must be recognized that the humorous effect does not result from the creative manipulation of a metaphor or a metonymy alone. Crucially, the achievement of the humorous effect resides in the interplay of different construal mechanisms throughout the CDS. The following examples offer a close reading of some of the

1 cases discussed above as they draw attention to the different levels and
2 aspects of the CDS that may be affected in a single instance of trumping.

3

4

5 5.1. *Examples*

6

7 In our analysis of the “in-laws” example in (7), we observed the interac-
8 tion of metaphor and literal instantiation via hyponymy as two mecha-
9 nisms of meaning construal. Whereas (7) mainly involves relationships
10 on the lexical-semantic level, the exploitation of the polysemy of *aim* in
11 (8) clearly involves a broader *conceptual* rearrangement of the CDS as it
12 pertains to the unexpected activation of some elements which belong to
13 the shared knowledge between speaker and hearer. In the initial CDS set
14 up by speaker S, knowledge of Von Braun’s activities during WWII may
15 be present as a low-salience element of the shared encyclopedic informa-
16 tion. In H’s reply, however, this negatively connoted fact is brought into
17 the viewing frame by the activation of *aim* in its non-salient meaning.
18 Crucially, bearing in mind the fundamental interpretation in CL of mean-
19 ing as a *conceptual* structure, a profile shift from a salient metaphorical to
20 a non-salient literal meaning, does not, taken by itself, constitute a case of
21 linguistic trumping.

22 Another interesting example is presented in (10), where the philosopher
23 John Scotus exploits the polysemous structure of the verb *to separate* by
24 choosing to favor its literal meaning (“achieve spatial disconnection”)
25 over its metaphorical meaning (“express contrast and difference”),
26 though the latter is the one most primed in the context of a philosophical
27 discussion. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that more construal op-
28 erations are involved. As a matter of fact, in the use of the deictic demon-
29 strative (*this*) referring to a specific table, the spatial groundedness of both
30 speech act participants enters the viewing frame, thus triggering the pro-
31 file shift towards the verb’s literal meaning. This construal operation can
32 be described in terms of *subjectification*, as the use of the deictic demon-
33 strative brings both speech act participants into the scope of predication
34 (or viewing frame) without them being profiled. This complex construal
35 constellation is of particular relevance to this situation as the mere im-
36 plication of participants avoids any directly offending confrontation. In-
37 terestingly, the introduction of this deictic element involves an addi-
38 tional change of meaning, as both noun phrases (*an Irishman, a fool*)
39 are no longer assigned their initial, salient generic interpretation, but an

1 individuated, referential meaning instead. The philosopher being an IRISH-
2 MAN, the emperor must be construed as instantiating the concept FOOL.
3 Now, one might argue that this exchange is a fine example of trumping
4 as deliberate misunderstanding, since it should be clear to Scotus that
5 the Emperor's intent for the word "separates" is entirely figurative.
6 However, we are inclined to view this instead as an example of trumping
7 as hyper-understanding (see next section). It is perhaps unfortunate that
8 the Emperor uses the concept of SEPARATION to achieve a unity between
9 IRISHMAN and FOOL whereas Scotus more appropriately uses the concept
10 to insert conceptual distance between both.

11 For our final illustration of the conceptual complexity in this type of
12 utterances, we return to the anecdote in (11). As already indicated above,
13 the exchange between Churchill and Attlee is structured by a creative ex-
14 tension of the initial metonymic relationship between apparent feeling
15 (sexual inferiority) and external behavior (standoffish-ness). Lacking any
16 other context, the vagueness in the expression of this primary cause trig-
17 gers the ultimate humorous effect, as "something big" allows for a non-
18 salient, humorous interpretation that focuses on the physical (and thus
19 sexual) attributes of Mr. Churchill. In the CDS, the place of the speech
20 event—the men's washroom—advances from being an element of the
21 ground to being an element of the primary domain in which the utterance
22 is profiled. As such, Churchill's answer changes the context of speech
23 from being genuinely political to being sexually charged. By merely sug-
24 gesting the slightest interest on the part of Attlee for his physical attrib-
25 utes, Churchill steps out as the moral winner, exposing his opponent as a
26 predatory fanatic who is prepared to surpass moral boundaries of dec-
27 cency in achieving consummation of his goals.

28 This example also nicely demonstrates that in unfolding discourse, both
29 humorous and non-humorous interpretations may be simultaneously acti-
30 vated, a point also advanced by Kotthoff in this issue. The semantic
31 vagueness of *something big* brings about an ambiguous semantic structure
32 of the entire exchange: it activates the "non-salient" interpretation, but
33 by no means does it rule out completely the "salient", political interpreta-
34 tion, in which, for example, Attlee might interpret Churchill's reaction as
35 referring to a heavy political debate about a "big issue", which they just
36 interrupted before both entering the washroom etc.¹² In this respect, com-
37 ponents such as "every time" or "you want to nationalize it" are profiled
38 in the domain of politics. On the other hand, the setting of the men's
39 washroom as well as the description of both men standing in front of the

1 urinal, introduce the domain of sanitation as an element of the conceptual
 2 base. This element is initially of no direct importance but facilitates,
 3 via metonymy, the introduction of more personal elements that allow
 4 Churchill to imbue the exchange with sexual connotations.

5

6

7 5.2. *Hyper-understanding*

8

9 It is apparent from the examples above that an adequate description of
 10 the complex conceptual structure of this type of adversarial humor needs
 11 to take into account all dimensions of the CDS as the operational field of
 12 all kinds of construal mechanisms. At this point, it is relevant to consider
 13 a final construal operation that seems to establish a common conceptual
 14 feature for the category of humorous trumping. One might wonder, for
 15 example, in what way cases of trumping are to be differentiated from reg-
 16 ular puns. Puns clearly exploit a strategy of deliberate misunderstanding,
 17 allowing the hearer to introduce a concept whose salience to the CDS es-
 18 tablished by the speaker is based wholly on a coincidence of pronuncia-
 19 tion (e.g. example 3) rather than on a *legitimate* and *functional* confluence
 20 of concepts in the course of argumentation. At best, the speaker S is
 21 undermined for a poor choice of words rather than for a poor choice
 22 of concepts. However, misunderstanding is not at all central to the idea
 23 of trumping, which, as noted earlier, often exhibits a form of *hyper-*
 24 *understanding* on the part of H.

25 By hyper-understanding we mean that H demonstrates an understand-
 26 ing of the subtleties of lexico-conceptual meaning that appears to be lost
 27 on the speaker S. It is this understanding-gap that gives H the conceptual
 28 room to out-manuever S. In (3), for instance, the hearer H loudly affirms
 29 a charge of treasonous speech with an affirmation (“Fluently”) which
 30 suggests that H better understands the concept of treason and its relation
 31 to the body politic than does the speaker. Incidentally, (3) presents an
 32 exchange where a metonymy by S (“to speak treason” = “to speak
 33 treasonous statements”) is interpreted as metaphoric polysemy by H
 34 (“speak” = “express” = “behave accordingly”). But this is not so much
 35 misunderstanding as redundancy, since both construal operations (meton-
 36 ymy versus metaphor) have the same intended effect. In general, H trumps
 37 S because S is locked into a habituated mode of language use that H can
 38 transcend due to a finer understanding of the potentialities of meaning.
 39 Thus, the hearer’s response in (7) employs the concept RELATIVE in a

1 compatible sense to that of the speaker, but in a way that appreciates the
2 distinction between blood relatives and those that are merely related by
3 marriage. The hearer thus shows a greater understanding of the speaker's
4 chosen concept than the speaker herself, and uses this more sophisticated
5 understanding of the concept to both agree with the speaker and simulta-
6 neously subvert and even surmount the speaker's intention to insult him.
7 Likewise in (8) and (10), the hearer gives proof of his superior semantic
8 understanding of the key notions *aim* and *separate* in re-using and extend-
9 ing the corresponding concepts in a contextually appropriate way.

10 Interestingly, the same observation holds for cases of trumping which
11 are characterized by the creative extension of an initial metonymic struc-
12 ture as in (6) and (11). Located mainly on the conceptual level of con-
13 strued inference paths, these examples demonstrate a more sophisticated
14 understanding of the concept by H that was first introduced by S. By fur-
15 ther extending the original inferential structure in a functional way, H
16 also corrects and outstrips S in his attempt at disparagement, just as effec-
17 tively as in cases that instead exploit lexical parallelism. In terms of re-
18 aligning the internal structure of the CDS, this feature pertains to the
19 changing interaction between both interlocutors, as H gains the upper
20 hand over S. In his creative manipulation of a semantic structure and/or
21 an inferential path, H causes the speech event itself to enter the viewing
22 frame. Accordingly, the utterances made by H may appear as epistemic
23 predications since they direct the scope of predication (viewing frame)
24 at the elements of the ground (in their newly established hierarchy)
25 without construing them "onstage", i.e. as objective elements in the
26 profile.

27

28

29 **6. Concluding remarks**

30

31 Trumping amply demonstrates how agents in a conversational setting
32 can, for humorous purposes, reflect and distort the linguistic-conceptual
33 construal of the utterances of other participants while tacitly agreeing
34 with them. This kind of verbal dueling can take extremely complex forms,
35 even within the rather stylized variation of the trumping language-game
36 considered here, in which speaker and hearer sequentially contribute a
37 single utterance to the CDS. In metaphoric terms, this is akin to a duel
38 with muskets where each antagonist is given a single shot. However, it
39 has not escaped our notice that a large number of such variations exist.

1 For instance, speaker and hearer may sequentially trump each other, with
2 the speaker responding to the hearer's riposte with an even more humor-
3 ous retort, and so on indefinitely. Alternately, the trumping may involve
4 more than two agents, and may even operate with just one agent that
5 trumps itself, either deliberately to achieve a self-deprecating effect (e.g.,
6 "I speak Esperanto like a native"), or unintentionally through a poor
7 choice of words or an improper regard for context. These variations dem-
8 onstrate that trumping is a rich phenomenon deserving of a wider investi-
9 gation in future work.

10 The trumping strategy that we have focused on in this paper provides a
11 compelling example of the need for a non-exclusive approach to the con-
12 struction of humor, allowing functional boundaries to be blurred and
13 viewing each component of meaning (lexical, semantic and pragmatic)
14 as re-entrant and available at every level of linguistic analysis. Because
15 in the trumping game, the parallelism between the initial utterance U
16 and the trumping retort U' can be situated on different levels of linguistic
17 organization at the same time, a multi-dimensional semantic-pragmatic
18 representation is needed for an adequate analysis. We have argued that
19 cognitive linguistics, with its ecological view of language as highly
20 grounded in bodily, interpersonal and cultural experience, provides the
21 most comprehensive constructs for tackling this complex phenomenon.
22 Most notably, CL's focus on the general conceptualization operations
23 that determine linguistic structure (see the introductory chapter of the
24 issue) and on *usage events* as actual instances of language in use (in dis-
25 course) offers an interesting vantage-point from which to study humorous
26 linguistic behavior.

27 On the level of the mechanisms that are used in the trumping game, we
28 have argued that the second player exploits the construal operations un-
29 derlying the first player's utterance, by distorting the profile-base (literal/
30 figurative; source/target; salient/non-salient) relationship, and/or by pur-
31 suing different inferential pathways. By manipulating the individual con-
32 ceptual mechanisms, the second player can subvert the CDS established
33 by the speaker, and hence simultaneously communicate a refutation and
34 an interpersonal-adversarial stance. With respect to the multi-agent set-
35 ting, the notion of a CDS is indispensable in the light of the importance
36 of encyclopedic knowledge and background information in the trump-
37 ing game. Ultimately, as meaning is grounded in discourse, experiential
38 information needs to be treated on a par with core linguistic meaning
39 since they only differ in degree of conventionalization and since both are

1 inseparably integrated in the negotiation of meaning in conversation (for
2 a similar argument, see Kotthoff, this issue).

3 Having developed this general cognitive linguistic approach to a spe-
4 cific case of verbally expressed humor, the question now arises how this
5 treatment relates to the existing linguistic theoretical work on humor. As
6 is argued in the introductory chapter to the present issue, the linguistic
7 treatment of humor shares some common ground with CL since the pub-
8 lication of Raskin's *Semantic Script Theory of Humor* (SSTH). The SSTH
9 is based on the essentially semantic (rather than conceptual) idea that hu-
10 mor revolves around the opposition, overlap and switch between scripts
11 or frames (Raskin 1985). In this account, understanding the punchline of
12 a joke corresponds to the cognitive process of shifting from a previously
13 activated script (one that is salient in the set-up of the joke) to a second
14 script that previously remained in the background (non-salient). A more
15 elaborated version of this theory, the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*
16 (GTVH; Attardo and Raskin 1991; Attardo 1994, 1997, 2001a), adds sev-
17 eral parameters to the script-switch mechanism via labeled knowledge
18 resources (KRs) that address structural, discourse-level, sociolinguistic,
19 cognitive and logical issues relevant to the humor process.¹³ One of these
20 KRs, the so-called *logical mechanism* or LM, is defined as the cognitive
21 operation needed to achieve a (partial) resolution of an incongruity. In
22 recent publications, a heterogeneous range of LMs has been introduced,
23 including different types of reversal (figure-ground reversal; role reversal,
24 etc.), garden-path constructions, false analogy, faulty reasoning and many
25 more (Paolillo 1998; Attardo et al. 2002). These mechanisms are to be in-
26 terpreted as re-occurring patterns of mapping configurations guiding the
27 script switch process.

28 Given this general cognitive orientation in the SSTH and GTVH, it is
29 hardly surprising that some of the views presented in this paper reflect
30 major assumptions in those theories. For instance, the sudden manipula-
31 tion of the CDS inherent in the trumping game can be considered—at
32 least in some examples—as a case of script switching. In (8), for example,
33 the shift from the metaphorical to the literal interpretation of the verb *to*
34 *aim* triggers the switch from the frame of positively valued ambition to
35 the one of physical targeting. In Raskin's terms, it is the sudden, deliber-
36 ate switch between (at least contextually) opposed scripts that yields the
37 humorous effect. On the level of the connection between different read-
38 ings, the GTVH has proposed a number of logical mechanisms that play
39 an essential role in the phenomena under analysis here. Among others,

1 the categories referred to as “figure-ground reversal” (or “reversals” in
2 general; Attardo et al. 2002) and “parallelism” have been shown to be
3 key mechanisms in the trumping game.

4 Nevertheless, in our analysis of the trumping examples throughout,
5 we avoided the introduction of such tailor-made logical mechanisms to
6 explain the humorous shift that occurs in the CDS. Rather, we have
7 observed that speakers exploit very general construal operations in the
8 adversarial humor game, by de-automatizing and subverting habitual
9 patterns of speech. What characterizes these examples is a sudden manip-
10 ulation of the CDS via a skilful parody of (parts of) an adversary’s own
11 conceptual and linguistic construal. No humor-specific logical mecha-
12 nisms are needed for a full semantic description of the trumping strategy.
13 What is more, the interplay of conventionalized and marked construal
14 sheds more light on the essentially unexpected character of the trumping
15 utterances than does a description in terms of recurrent logical mecha-
16 nisms and basic semantic oppositions (Raskin 1985).¹⁴ As noted by
17 Brône and Feyaerts (2004), many cases of (verbal) humor revolve around
18 the non-prototypical use of very common organizational principles like
19 metaphor and metonymy, and the analysis of patterns in the marked set-
20 up in terms of normal cognitive operations would render the theoretical
21 hypothesis of logical mechanisms redundant. In consequence, one would
22 need to argue for a prototypically structured model of construal opera-
23 tions, in which deviations from the prototypical core use potentially yield
24 humorous effects.¹⁵ One of the basic propositions of cognitive linguistics
25 is that the human conceptual system is highly fluid in nature (cf. Hof-
26 stadter’s notion of *conceptual slippage*; see also Veale et al. 1999 for a
27 cognitive linguistic treatment of slippage). Concepts are argued to be
28 structured around a prototypical center, with specific instantiations being
29 more or less representative of that concept, depending on the position
30 they take up vis-à-vis the prototype. Just as conceptual categories can be
31 used in a fluid way through the basic conceptualization mechanism of
32 analogy, the construal operations themselves can be treated as prototypi-
33 cally organized categories. However, the effects of manipulating the pro-
34 totypical use of construal operations on understanding and appreciation
35 have not yet been explored to the full (cf. Brône and Feyaerts 2003;
36 Feyaerts and Brône 2004). Needless to say, more empirical analysis is
37 needed to corroborate this claim.

38 The aim of the present account was to show that the analysis of verbal
39 humorous interaction needs a cognitive orientation in order to tackle the

1 complex humor game in all its dimensions. We have argued that the cog-
2 nitive linguistic notion of a discourse space that includes elements of
3 shared knowledge and context, and the cognitive mechanisms that serve
4 to construe that space, provide an encompassing semantic approach that
5 takes into account several dimensions of humorous linguistic interaction.
6 By doing so, we have focused on the linguistic norm subversion inherent
7 in the examples under analysis, and hence on the fundamentally marked
8 character of humor, rather than on independent instruments of humor in-
9 terpretation and generation.

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14 **Notes**

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- 17
18 1. Although we are well aware of the broader meaning of the term “trumping”, we use
19 the notion in a technical sense here, to include only the subclass of adversarial humor
20 under analysis.
- 21 2. An extensive overview of humor theories and central concepts in linguistic humor re-
22 search can be found in Attardo (1994).
- 23 3. A more detailed overview of the classification of humor theories can be found in Keith-
24 Spiegel (1972) and Attardo (1994). Keith-Spiegel develops a typology of eight categories
25 in humor theories, Attardo reduces this to the three major groups mentioned above.
- 26 4. Kotthoff (1998) stresses that conversational teasing can best be analyzed from the per-
27 spective of interactional sociolinguistics, since very often, this type of interaction pre-
28 supposes a common background (cultural, (con)textual, etc.).
- 29 5. It should be noted that the notion “ground” as it is used here, does not correspond to
30 the definition of “ground” as the conceptual background in contrast to the fore-
31 grounded “figure”.
- 32 6. Giora (1997: 185) defines salience as “a function of its conventionality, familiarity, fre-
33 quency, or givenness status in a certain (linguistic and non-linguistic) context” (see also
34 Giora 2003: 15ff).
- 35 7. Further work on salience phenomena in ironic, sarcastic, and non-literal language use
36 in general can be found in Giora (1997, 1999, 2001, 2003), Giora and Fein (1999a,
37 1999b), and Attardo (2001b). Attardo (2001a: 19) refers to salience phenomena in rela-
38 tion to scripts: “Scripts come with a default, unmarked foregrounded subset of ele-
39 ments (cf. Langacker 1991: 226ff). The human perceptual-processing system seems
hardwired into considering certain types of stimuli more salient than others. Gestalt
psychology and more recently cognitive linguistics has pointed out a number of criteria
that predetermine saliency/foregrounding. [...] Hence an element of a script is a more
normal (unmarked) figure if is cognitively salient”.
8. Compare Langacker (1987: 461) on the analyzability of fixed expressions: “A fixed
expression appears capable of retaining some measure of analyzability almost indef-
initely”, but also Gibbs (1990: 426) with respect to the creative use of idiomatic

- 1 expressions: “Speakers will tend to be significantly more creative in their use of seman-
2 tically analyzable idioms both in terms of their syntactic productivity and their lexical
3 flexibility”.
- 4 9. Idealized cognitive models (ICMs), in Lakoff’s terminology, define people’s structuring
5 of knowledge in cultural or “folk” models. The label “idealized” serves to stress that
6 ICMs “don’t fit actual situations in a one-to-one correspondence but relate many con-
7 cepts that are inferentially connected to one another in a single conceptual structure
8 that is experientially meaningful as a whole” (Gibbs 1994: 58). Although the concepts
9 “frame”, “ICM”, “domain”, “script”, “scenario”, etc. are used with slightly different
10 interpretations in cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence and linguistics, these dif-
11 ferences are of minor importance to the present account.
- 12 10. Note that the context of speech, a political debate, remains intact.
- 13 11. Notice that Attlee designates the feeling metonymically as he labels it in terms of the
14 perceived behavior.
- 15 12. In the context of an anecdote, of course, the ‘salient’ political meaning becomes the
16 non-salient one, turning the private parts-meaning into the newly profiled one.
- 17 13. For a detailed overview of the different knowledge resources, see Attardo (1994: 222ff),
18 Attardo (1997), and Attardo (2001a: 22ff).
- 19 14. For a similar argument, see Kotthoff (1998: 50f).
- 20 15. This claim is related to Giora’s *Marked Informativeness Requirement* for jokes, which
21 states that “jokes and point-stories are markedly informative. Their final informative
22 messages are marked in that they are too distant, in terms of the number of similar fea-
23 tures, from the messages preceding them” (Giora 1991: 469). Marked informativeness,
24 on Giora’s account, is defined in prototype theoretical terms: a piece of text is marked/
25 marginal in comparison to the preceding text because it provides an unusually high
26 amount of extra information (and does not provide straightforward coherence with
27 the rest of the text). Giora, however, does not discuss the cognitive mechanisms that
28 are responsible for the delicate balance between marked coherence and unrelatedness,
29 between sense and non-sense, between incongruity and (partial) resolution.

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