

# Incongruity in Humour: Root Cause or Epiphenomenon?

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**Abstract:** Humour and incongruity appear to be constant bedfellows, for at the heart of every joke one can point to some degree of absurdity, illogicality or violation of expectation. This observation has led many theories of humour to base themselves around some notion of incongruity or opposition, most notably the semantic-script theory (or SSTH) of Raskin and the subsequent general theory (or GTVH) of Attardo and Raskin. But correlation does not imply causality (a reality used to good effect in many successful examples of humour), and one should question whether incongruity serves a causal role in the workings and appreciation of humour or merely an epiphenomenal one. It remains a key question for humour researchers as to whether listeners react to incongruities by constructing humorous interpretations, or whether they collaboratively create these incongruities as a result of opportunistically constructing humorous interpretations.

**Keywords:** Incongruity, resolution, semantic opposition, collaboration, opportunistic interpretation, SSTH, GTVH

## Introduction

Of the few sweeping generalizations one can make about humour that are neither controversial or trivially false, one is surely that humour is a phenomenon that relies on incongruity<sup>1</sup>. That is, the main body of a humorous structure – whether a narrative, a situation, an image, etc. – must be under-specified to the extent that it supports multiple conflicting interpretations. Such ambiguity may not be sustainable throughout the structure, however; it is generally conceived that part of the humorous whole, such as the final punch-line in a joke narrative, must be sufficiently over-specified to allow the ambiguity to be resolved. One of the key questions facing humour theorists is the role of this incongruity, and its resolution, in achieving the humorous effect of a joke. The role of incongruity resolution is generally believed to be of great importance to humour, and has even been attributed a neural correlate in Katz (1993). However, is this role a causal one or a diagnostic one? Does the resolution of incongruity cause the humorous effect (e.g., see Suls 1972, Paulos 1980), or is the humour already inherent in one of the possible interpretations and eagerly sought out by the listener? In other words, this paper asks whether incongruity resolution really is a driving force in the creation of humour or merely an epiphenomenon of under-specification and listener choice. The question is not at all clear cut, and the answer has serious ramifications for the nature of humour as a collaborative social construct.

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<sup>1</sup> Ritchie (1999) provides an extensive review of the role of incongruity and its resolution in theories of humour

## Forced Versus Collaborative Humour

Under-specification can occur at different levels of a narrative joke (by which I mean a joke body with a final punch-line, and the only kind of humour I will consider in this paper). For instance, homonymy and anaphora ensure that the mapping between the surface linguistic form of a narrative and its deeper conceptual representation is particularly vulnerable to ambiguity. Perhaps the most common instantiation of this mapping ambiguity is the pun, but arbitrary linguistic conventions can also be exploited.

(1) *[said by old man]* I still have sex at 74. I live at no. 75, so it's no distance for me.

The punchline in (1) creates a need to spatially reconcile a house number with what appears at first to be an age, but which can only sensibly be another house number. The listener, who is unaware of the ambiguity at first, is thus forced to back-track and recreate an alternate mapping between the surface and deep levels of the narrative. This recoil effect is conceived within the context of Raskin's SSTH as follows:

“The punchline triggers the switch from one script to the other by making the hearer backtrack and realize that a different interpretation was possible from the very beginning” (Attardo and Raskin, 1991, page 308).

The same sentiment is also expressed about computational models of humour in general, and models based on the GTVH in particular:

“The system [an NLP implementation of a theory like GTVH] will first attempt to analyze the text in a bona-fide communication and after it fails, will backtrack to at least one step before the source of the failure” (Raskin and Attardo, 1994, page 42).

The spatial incongruity between ages and locations in (1), established by the use of the word “distance”, does indeed cause the listener to backtrack in this case. But note that while the incongruity may contribute some additional frisson to the humorous effect, it does not actually constitute the humorous effect, which depends instead on the social implications of what the joke tells us about the speaker. By referring to a sexual partner by a house number, the speaker seems to suggest that it is her address, rather than her identity, that is her most salient feature. The house thus becomes a depersonalized placeholder for a sexual partner that can be instantiated in any number of ways (e.g., does the speaker always have sex with the same resident of number 74? How choosy is he?) As such, it is the interpretation itself, and the speaker’s curious emphasis on location rather than identity, that creates the humorous effect. But if an interpretation (or instantiated script) can be humorous in itself, this raises the question of whether the incongruity is actually needed to achieve humour.

The SSTH and the GTVH each put forward the idea that resolution is forced on the listener (“making the listener backtrack”). In many jokes the effect of this forced retreat can certainly be wrenching, and can amount to the verbal equivalent of a practical joke played on the listener by the speaker. By resolving the incongruity, the listener acknowledges the speaker’s trickery, and so, in these jokes at least, incongruity resolution *is* a causal contributor to the humorous effect. But as far as humorous interaction goes, this is as minimal as narrative humour can be without talking to oneself. The speaker exploits the listener’s drive for rational comprehension much like the ruthless logic of a computer virus exploits the programmed behavior of an operating system. Interactive, yes, but hardly collaborative.

Moreover, this view of humour, in which incongruity resolution is both necessary and logically prior to the humorous effect, is predicated on the assumption that the punch-line is sufficiently over-specified to force the listener to abandon a preferred interpretation in favour of a less likely one. But if we look at the empirical data, we see that many punchlines fail to reach the level of specificity needed to force an incongruity. In some important sense, the listener must actually *will* the incongruity to occur. To see what I mean, consider the following short joke:

(2) Women are always using me to advance their careers. Damned anthropologists!

The set-up in (2) suggests two facts that nicely serve to flatter the speaker: firstly, he appears to occupy a position of some power in his little world; secondly, he clearly does not want for sexual attention. The punch-line, however, pitilessly shatters these illusions; the speaker is not a powerful sexual magnet after all, but a subject of study for female anthropologists who wish to profit academically from his implied primitiveness.

We see in (2) a clear demonstration of what Giora (1991) describes as the ‘marked increase of informativeness’ of the punchline relative to the joke body. One can argue that it is this increased informativeness, or over-specification, that forces us to reject our initial flattering interpretation of the speaker and construct an alternate, self-deprecating interpretation. But is this really what happens? If one has constructed the obvious sexual interpretation, then it is surely more consistent to construe the punch-line as a monotonic extension of this interpretation, i.e., that the speaker finds the sexual politics of anthropologists to be particularly damnable. For instance, if we replace the word “anthropologists” with “actresses”, the punchline remains as markedly informative but we now feel no need to reject the sexual interpretation; in fact, this interpretation is

actually reinforced. So nothing in the punch-line forces us to undo our initial interpretation or, in SSTH terms, to discard our initial script. What seems more likely is that as listeners, we instinctively choose the alternate interpretation because to do so creates a humorous effect. In this view, the punch-line is not a crisis of interpretation that forces a retreat, but an opportunity that allows a willing listener to collaboratively engage with the speaker in the creation of humour.

Now, it may seem that this collaboration is simply another way of construing the willing suspension of disbelief that humour is often assumed to involve, but in fact it is a markedly different philosophy, inasmuch as it does not presuppose the importance of incongruity. A situation that has no overt incongruity may have no disbelief to suspend, but may nonetheless present a significant opportunity for humorous collaboration. To understand why a speaker would create this opportunity and why a listener would eagerly grasp it, and in effect escape from the chicken-and-egg circularity that seems to bind incongruity and humour, we need to look at the social logic behind the joke. As social beings we are conditioned to find self-deprecation much more appealing than arrogance, so there is an elegant symmetry to a narrative arc that begins with feigned pride and ends in humiliating honesty. In jokes such as (2) this arc is established collaboratively, and no force or necessity need be hypothesized. It is the attractiveness of the structure we are allowed to construct, rather than the logical deficiency of the one we are forced to reject, that decides our interpretation.

We see the same collaborative process at work in the following classic example:

- (3) Serenissimus was making a tour through his provinces and noticed a man in the crowd who bore a striking resemblance to his own exalted person. He beckoned

to him and asked: “Was your mother at one time in service at the palace?” – “No, your highness”, was the reply, “but my father was” (Freud, 1938).

Though by now a very tired example of humour, (3) is still a wonderful demonstration of the idea that narrative jokes are the verbal equivalents of physical pratfalls and double-takes. We imagine Serenissimus being, quite literally, knocked off his high horse as he realizes that it is he, rather than the peasant, who is the lowly bastard. But again, as markedly informative as the punch-line is, it does not actually force this conclusion. We can conceive of at least two alternate construals of the punch-line that are not humorous:

1. The peasant’s father did work in the palace, but no affair with the queen took place. The physical resemblance with Serenissimus is merely a quite reasonable coincidence.
2. The fact that the peasant’s father worked at the palace is another explanation of how the father of Serenissimus had sexual access to the peasant’s mother.

So we are not forced to adopt the Serenissimus-as-bastard interpretation. Yet we do, eagerly, because this is the only interpretation that is humorous. We enjoy imagining the look on the arrogant prince’s face as the realization of his lowly birth dawns on him. In effect, we, as listeners, collaborate with the speaker to lay low a figure of privilege and authority. By no means is the speaker tricking us into a wrenching reversal of interpretation, but rather, in a manner consonant with the Freudian view of humour (Freud, 1938), we collaborate together to achieve a socially licensed spot of ego-popping.

## Necessity and Sufficiency

Despite the emphasis on opposition and re-interpretation in the SSTH and the GTVH, Raskin and Attardo have also championed a version of the collaborative view, providing a cooperative-principle for joke telling that is a homologue rather than an extension of the better-known Gricean principle:

“... the speaker and the hearer [in explicit joke contexts] are not only both attuned to humor but also to each other. They are both actively, consciously – and cooperatively – engaged in the joke-telling non-bona-fide communication mode. ... [Hearers] perceive the intention of the speaker as an attempt to make them laugh. As a result, hearers will look for the necessary ingredients of the joke in the speaker’s utterance.”

(Raskin and Attardo, 1994, page 37)

At first, this cooperative principle seems to provide a solution for the lack of over-specification in (2). Presumably, at least in the context of the SSTH and the GTVH, one of the “necessary ingredients” is semantic opposition, and the listener finds a sex/no-sex opposition in (2) by choosing the more insulting interpretation. But this seems to me to put the cart before the horse: we choose the insulting non-sexual interpretation precisely because it is enjoyably insulting, and the incongruity arises as a natural, though epiphenomenal, consequence. To explain why (2) and (3) are funny, a humour theory must not look to incongruities, but provide a social explanation for why we enjoy insulting others, and why a feeling of social intimacy can arise when this insult is licenced by the cooperative principle of joke-telling.

Humour is such a diverse phenomenon that it easily resists any essentialist attempt to define it in necessary and sufficient terms. We should thus be slow to invoke the idea that



humour has any “necessary ingredients”. For instance, it is easy to show that neither incongruity or its resolution can be considered logically sufficient ingredients of humour since incongruity resolution is an ingredient in such unfunny phenomena as poetic metaphors, magic tricks and the denouements of whodunnit thrillers. As for necessity, an ingredient may be necessary in a weak predictive sense rather than a strong causal sense; the distinction is like that between, on one hand, red blotches and measles, and on the other, HIV and AIDS. Just as red blotches do not cause measles, allowing us to at least conceive of cases where they are not present, incongruity resolution may simply be the natural symptom of the listener’s freedom to choose between two or more conflicting interpretations. Choice highlights the conflict but is not necessarily caused by it. Thus, a listener may choose a sexual interpretation of a narrative because it allows a mundane story to take a titillating turn, highlighting as a symptom of this choice the sex/no-sex distinction between interpretations. Or conversely, as in (2), a listener may choose a non-sexual interpretation of a sexually suggestive scenario to humiliate a pompous or self-flattering figure, bringing the sex/no-sex difference into the foreground. Choice, by definition, will always highlight contrasts, and to some extent is created by these contrasts. Yet it is not the contrast itself, but the intrinsic value of the available options, that drives the decision process, so we need some basis of evaluating these options if their attractiveness as interpretations is to be explained. What is needed is not a logical mechanism as such, or a logic of oppositions, but a social logic that allows a theory to ground the interpretation in the specific concerns and prejudices of the listener as a social agent.

## **Social Content**

According to Paulos (1980), a joke-teller uses under-specification to construct an uneven landscape that supports multiple trajectories, and guides the listener on that trajectory which ensures that a surprising discontinuity will be experienced. This metaphor of discontinuity allows incongruity to be modeled via the mathematics of catastrophe theory (see Thom, 1974; see also Veale 1996 for a related computational treatment of catastrophe theory in humour). Paulos effectively views a narrative joke as the mischievous act of a speaker who guides a gullible listener over a cliff, while keeping the safe path to the bottom a secret until it is too late. Following Attardo and Raskin's cooperative principle for joke-telling, the listener may know to expect a cliff but proceeds along the dangerous route anyway. Yet this view of cooperation does not go far enough. For many jokes it is more appropriate to view the speaker and listener as willing conspirators who collectively shape the trajectory of the narrative, perhaps to throw a deserving third-party, a character in the narrative, over this cliff.

Some narrative structures, and thus some interpretations, will follow a more satisfying trajectory than others. Our social conditioning means it is gratifying to see narratives where pomposity is deflated, excessive authority is thwarted, modesty is rewarded and arrogance is punished. It should not be surprising then to see a listener choose, when given the freedom, an interpretation with the most satisfying trajectory. Office jokes that poke fun at a dictatorial boss or a hopelessly inept colleague work best when we share the scorn of the speaker and thus jump directly to the most derisive interpretation. Even when a joke does not have a victim as such, it may, following Freud, serve as a collaborative means to engage a titillating or taboo topic. In many ways jokes

are like gossip: we enjoy telling jokes as much as we enjoy hearing new ones. As subjects of gossip, certain stories are much more contagious than others, and like new jokes, we are excited to be the ones that pass them on. To allude to a much discussed joke in humour research, a story about a colleague's affair with the doctor's pretty young wife is good gossip, but a story about the same person's bronchial cough is not. Stories like the latter never rise to the level of gossip because they lack a trajectory satisfying enough to make eager conspirators of their listeners.

## Conclusions

Attardo and Raskin's cooperative principle for Joke-Telling demonstrates that, philosophically, the SSTH and GTVH are not incompatible with the notion of collaboration in humour, but the idea nonetheless sits uneasily with the suggestions of force and necessity that accompany these theories. In trying to understand humour in terms of computational forces, it is all too easy to forget that we indulge in humour simply because it is enjoyable, and as such, we seek out opportunities to enjoy humorous effects whenever the context allows. We do not need to be forced into resolution, only to be told, somewhat emptily, that it is this resolution that we find enjoyable. Were humour to really hinge on semantic oppositions, it would surely make pedants of us all. It seems odd indeed that if humour really does play an important social role, we are so inclined to laugh at abstract structuralist oppositions. In this light, the emphasis placed on opposition as a causal force or "trigger" by the SSTH and GTVH seems misplaced. It perhaps makes more sense to think of structuralist opposition as an excellent basis for categorizing jokes than as a computational basis for explaining them. This does not weaken the SSTH and

GTVH as theories, but simply suggests that the level of oppositions and logical mechanism may not be most important or the most pivotal. Just as we could not properly conceive of a theory of gossip or a theory of invective independent of a shared system of social values (e.g., see Burgen 1996), we should be equally loathe to develop a deracinated theory of humour where notions like Situation and Narrative are simply place-holders for arbitrary domain content. The social logic that drives humour should not be treated as a simple plug-in to a schematic theory, but should be elucidated as a fundamental part of the theory itself. As such, a great deal of work is still needed to flesh out the situation and narrative Strategy levels of the GTVH – if that is where it belongs, perhaps a distinct social KR is needed – with the appropriate social logic to explain how specific situations and narrative trajectories are humorous and opportunistically appealing in themselves, rather than in opposition to others.

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