

**Humor Research**

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**Salvatore Attardo**

**Linguistic Theories  
of Humor**

**Mouton de Gruyter**

## Linguistic Theories of Humor

# Humor Research 1

*Editors*

Victor Raskin  
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Mouton de Gruyter  
Berlin · New York

# Linguistic Theories of Humor

*by*

Salvatore Attardo

Mouton de Gruyter  
Berlin · New York 1994

Mouton de Gruyter (formerly Mouton, The Hague)  
is a Division of Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin.

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper which falls within the guidelines of the  
ANSI to ensure permanence and durability.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Attardo, Salvatore, 1962 —  
Linguistic theories of humor / by Salvatore Attardo.  
p. cm. — (Humor research ; 1)  
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.  
3-11-014255-4 (acid-free paper)  
1. Discourse analysis. Literary. 2. Wit and humor — History and  
criticism. I. Title. II. Series.  
P302.5.A9 1994  
809.7—dc20

93-43697  
CIP

*Die Deutsche Bibliothek — Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

**Attardo, Salvatore:**  
Linguistic theories of humor / by Salvatore Attardo. — Berlin ;  
New York : Mouton de Gruyter, 1994  
(Humor research ; 1)  
ISBN 3-11-014255-4 ISBN 978-3-11-014255-6  
NE: GT

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Printing: Gerike GmbH, Berlin. — Binding: Lüderitz & Bauer, Berlin.

Printed in Germany.

Neque satis ab ullo explicari puto  
*Quintilian Inst. Or.*

I have had great difficulty  
in determining what 'funny' is.  
*Lt. Comm. Data, Star Trek—The Next Generation*

Two people are laughing together, say at a joke.  
One of them has used certain somewhat unusual words  
and now they both break into a sort of bleating.  
That might appear very extraordinary to a visitor  
coming from quite a different environment.  
*Ludwig Wittgenstein*

à ma mère  
a mio padre



# Acknowledgements

My gratitude goes to the following persons: Hans Bickel, Caterina Candi, Cinzia Di Giulio, Yan Zhao, and especially Wei Hong and Jeanne-Françoise Spinoye for helping with the translation of some materials. I am also grateful to several friends in particular Ferdinando Attardo, Nicoletta Balzaretto, Paolo Boarato, Carla Caputo, Michele Pierpaoli, Alberto Reale, Claude Stas, and the interlibrary loan office staffs at Purdue University and Youngstown State University who helped me collect the material for the book.

I am indebted to all those who took the time to answer my queries, and in particular, Patrick Charaudeau, Diego Lanza, Robert Garapon, Michael Hancher, Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, Arnold Zwicky, and Elizabeth Zwicky.

I have benefitted greatly from discussions with and advice from Alfredo Civita, Bruno De Marchi, Giovannantonio Forabosco, Alan Harris, Douglas Hofstadter, Matthew Marino, Don Nilsen, Elliott Oring, Willibald Ruch, Cameron Shelley, Brian Torode, and many others.

I have also benefitted greatly from disagreeing with Paul Baltes, who always took our differences of opinion with great humor, and from discussions with friends and colleagues at Purdue University, among whom are Amy Carrell (now at the University of Central Oklahoma), Marc Deneire (now at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Wei Hong, Maureen Morrissey (now at Christopher Newport University), Dallin Oaks (now at Brigham Young University), Marnie Jo Petray, Gladys Vega, and Yan Zhao.

Several persons have read more or less advanced versions of parts of this book, and made suggestions and/or comments. I would like to thank Mahadev Apte, Margie Berns, Thomas Broden, Jean-Charles Chabanne, Shaun Hughes, Carla Locatelli, Monica Macaulay, Eddo Rigotti, Włodzisław Sobkowiak and all those who offered comments and suggestions when I presented some of the ideas from the book at conferences and professional meetings. Shaun Hughes deserves particular thanks for his help in making the bibliography more consistent. Don Nilsen repeatedly provided me with

materials and bibliographic data.

I am greatly indebted to Victor Raskin, both personally and academically. He helped me in too many ways to list them all here. I will only say that his advice was invaluable, and without his sustained help this book would not exist. I would also like to thank Victor Raskin and Mahadev Apte for their editorial comments.

Most specially I am indebted to my wife for a) marrying me in defiance of common sense, b) reading several drafts of each chapter, again against her better judgement, and c) helping in the elaboration of the index, in an unparalleled show of devotion. In her case, too, it is fair to say that this book would not have been completed without her help.

As it is customary to note, none of the above bears any responsibility for any errors and omissions.

# Contents

<b>List of Tables</b>	<b>xv</b>
<b>List of Figures</b>	<b>xvi</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>xvii</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
0.1 Metatheory of humor . . . . .	1
0.2 The Definition of Humor . . . . .	2
0.2.1 Internal Subdivision . . . . .	3
0.2.2 Anti-Essentialist Approaches . . . . .	8
0.2.3 Humor and Laughter . . . . .	10
<b>1 Survey of the Literature</b>	<b>14</b>
1.1 Introduction . . . . .	14
1.1.1 Why Have a Survey? . . . . .	14
1.1.2 Introduction for Linguists . . . . .	16
1.1.3 The Criteria of the Survey . . . . .	17
1.1.4 The Survey . . . . .	17
1.2 The Greeks . . . . .	18
1.2.1 Plato . . . . .	18
1.2.2 Aristotle . . . . .	19
1.2.3 The Peripatetic and Hellenistic Tradition . . . . .	22
1.2.4 The Treatises on Comedy and the Scholiasts . . . . .	25
1.3 The Latins . . . . .	26
1.3.1 Cicero . . . . .	26
1.3.2 Quintilian . . . . .	29

1.3.3	Horace . . . . .	33
1.3.4	Donatus . . . . .	33
1.3.5	The Middle Ages . . . . .	33
1.4	The Renaissance . . . . .	34
1.4.1	Vettore Fausto . . . . .	36
1.4.2	Franciscus Robortellus . . . . .	36
1.4.3	Madius . . . . .	37
1.4.4	Girolamo Muzio . . . . .	39
1.4.5	Giulio Cesare Scaligero . . . . .	39
1.4.6	Trissino . . . . .	39
1.4.7	Lodovico Castelvetro . . . . .	42
1.4.8	Bernardo Pino . . . . .	43
1.4.9	Influences in Europe . . . . .	44
1.4.10	The Transition into Modern Thought . . . . .	45
1.5	Modern Approaches to Humor Theory . . . . .	46
1.5.1	Classification of Modern Theories of Humor . . . . .	47
1.5.2	Freud . . . . .	53
1.5.3	Bergson . . . . .	57
<b>2</b>	<b>The Linear Organization of the Joke</b>	<b>60</b>
2.1	The Isotopy–Disjunction Model . . . . .	62
2.1.1	Greimas' Model . . . . .	62
2.1.2	The Notion of Isotopy . . . . .	64
2.1.3	Revisions of the Definition of Isotopy . . . . .	75
2.1.4	Applications of Greimas' Model . . . . .	81
2.1.5	Discussion . . . . .	85
2.2	The Definition of Function . . . . .	85
2.2.1	Morin's Definition of Function . . . . .	85
2.2.2	Narrative Functions in a Joke . . . . .	87
2.3	Linearity of the Joke . . . . .	92
2.3.1	The Isotopy Disjunction Model: A Synthesis . . . . .	92
2.3.2	Justification . . . . .	97
2.3.3	The Position of Elements in the Joke . . . . .	98
2.3.4	Elaborations of the Model . . . . .	98
2.3.5	Application of the IDM to Empirical Data . . . . .	101
2.3.6	Summary . . . . .	107

<b>3</b>	<b>The Analysis of Puns</b>	<b>108</b>
3.1	Generalities . . . . .	109
3.1.1	Definitions . . . . .	109
3.2	Review of the Literature . . . . .	111
3.2.1	A Taxonomy of the Taxonomies . . . . .	112
3.2.2	The Two Senses in a Pun . . . . .	127
3.3	Linguistic Mechanisms of the Pun . . . . .	128
3.3.1	Analysis of a Sample Pun . . . . .	128
3.3.2	Issues and Problems with the Analysis of the Pun . . .	131
3.3.3	Evaluation . . . . .	140
3.4	Why Study Puns? Puns as Linguistic Evidence . . . . .	141
<b>4</b>	<b>Resolution in Puns</b>	<b>143</b>
4.0.1	Justification . . . . .	145
4.0.2	Humorous Logics . . . . .	148
4.0.3	What is the Local Logic of Puns? . . . . .	148
4.1	Phonosymbolism as an Explanation for Puns . . . . .	149
4.1.1	Theoretical Foundations . . . . .	150
4.1.2	Cratylism and Motivation Theories . . . . .	152
4.1.3	Evidence for a Motivated Theory of the Sign . . . . .	154
4.1.4	A Non-Arbitrary Linguistic System . . . . .	158
4.1.5	Sound-Based Lexical Associations . . . . .	160
4.1.6	Towards a Phonosymbolic Theory of Puns . . . . .	163
4.2	Poststructuralism and Puns . . . . .	170
<b>5</b>	<b>Semiotic and Text Theories</b>	<b>174</b>
5.1	Semiotic Theories . . . . .	174
5.1.1	Bisociation Theories . . . . .	175
5.1.2	Towards a Semiotics of Humor . . . . .	175
5.1.3	The Bologna School . . . . .	177
5.1.4	The Evolutionary Cultural Semiotic Model . . . . .	181
5.1.5	Semiotics of Graphical and Visual humor . . . . .	184
5.2	Linguo-literary Approaches . . . . .	185
5.2.1	Schmidt's Text-Theory . . . . .	185
5.2.2	Fónagy's Psycho-Pragmatic Account . . . . .	187
5.2.3	Norrick's Frame Bisociation . . . . .	189
5.2.4	German Research on Narrative and Literature . . . . .	190

5.2.5	The British School: Nash and Redfern . . . . .	192
5.3	Summary . . . . .	193
<b>6</b>	<b>Script-based Theories</b>	<b>195</b>
6.0.1	Introduction . . . . .	195
6.1	The Semantic Script Theory of Humor . . . . .	196
6.1.1	Humor Competence . . . . .	196
6.1.2	The SSTH's Main Hypothesis . . . . .	197
6.1.3	Scripts . . . . .	198
6.1.4	Overlapping . . . . .	203
6.1.5	Oppositeness . . . . .	203
6.1.6	Non-Bona-Fide Communication Mode . . . . .	205
6.1.7	The Doctor's Wife Joke . . . . .	206
6.1.8	Evaluation . . . . .	207
6.2	The Reception of the SSTH . . . . .	208
6.2.1	Applications to Different Languages . . . . .	209
6.2.2	The First Expansion of the SSTH . . . . .	209
6.2.3	Application of the SSTH to ESL . . . . .	211
6.2.4	The Communicative Function of Jokes . . . . .	213
6.3	Raskin's Follow-Ups (1985 – 1993) . . . . .	214
6.3.1	On the Power of the SSTH . . . . .	214
6.3.2	Sophisticated Humor . . . . .	216
6.3.3	Methodological Issues . . . . .	216
6.3.4	Computational Linguistics and Humor . . . . .	218
6.3.5	Jewish Humor . . . . .	219
6.3.6	Historiography of Humor Research . . . . .	219
6.4	The Revision of the SSTH . . . . .	219
6.4.1	Is There Verbal Humor? . . . . .	220
6.4.2	Joke Similarity . . . . .	220
6.4.3	Application to Types of Texts Other Than the Joke . . . . .	221
6.4.4	The GTVH . . . . .	222
6.4.5	The Joke, According to the GTVH . . . . .	226
6.4.6	Advantages of the GTVH . . . . .	227
<b>7</b>	<b>Register-based Humor</b>	<b>230</b>
7.1	Bally's Stylistics of Humor . . . . .	231
7.1.1	Definition of Stylistics . . . . .	231

7.1.2	Natural and Evocative Affect . . . . .	233
7.1.3	Natural Affect and Humor . . . . .	233
7.1.4	Evocative Affect and Humor . . . . .	233
7.2	Recent Studies on Register Humor . . . . .	235
7.2.1	Register Theory . . . . .	236
7.2.2	What Theory of Register? . . . . .	242
7.2.3	A Polythetic Theory of Register... . . . .	244
7.2.4	... and its Application to Script-Theory . . . . .	245
7.2.5	A Script-Based Theory of Register . . . . .	246
<b>8</b>	<b>Non-joke Humor Texts</b>	<b>254</b>
8.1	A Short Story by E. A. Poe . . . . .	255
8.2	Register Humor in T. L. Peacock . . . . .	262
8.3	A Passage from Voltaire's <i>Candide</i> . . . . .	266
8.4	An Example of Menu-Propos . . . . .	268
<b>9</b>	<b>The Cooperative Nature of Humor</b>	<b>271</b>
9.1	Jokes as the Violation of Grice's Maxims . . . . .	271
9.2	Violating the Maxims . . . . .	274
9.3	The Mention Account . . . . .	277
9.3.1	The Weak Version of the Mention Theory . . . . .	278
9.3.2	Evaluation of the Weak Mention Hypothesis . . . . .	282
9.3.3	A "Strong Mention" Account of Jokes . . . . .	283
9.4	The Communicative Status of Humorous Texts . . . . .	286
9.4.1	A Hierarchy of CPs . . . . .	286
9.4.2	Jokes Convey Information . . . . .	288
9.5	The Importance of the Implicit in Jokes . . . . .	289
9.6	Relative Position of the Maxims . . . . .	291
9.7	Summary . . . . .	292
<b>10</b>	<b>Humor in Context</b>	<b>293</b>
10.1	Introduction . . . . .	294
10.2	Canned Jokes and Conversational Jokes . . . . .	295
10.2.1	A First Definition . . . . .	295
10.2.2	Jokes and Their Context . . . . .	296
10.2.3	Differences Between Canned and Situational Jokes . . . . .	298
10.3	Literature Review . . . . .	300

10.3.1 Canned Jokes in Conversation . . . . .	300
10.3.2 Puns in Conversation . . . . .	311
10.3.3 Evaluation . . . . .	319
10.4 The Communicative Function of Humor . . . . .	320
10.4.1 Types of Humorous Interaction . . . . .	320
10.4.2 The Social Functions of Humor . . . . .	322
10.4.3 The Secondary Functions . . . . .	329
10.5 Summary: Humor Research and CA . . . . .	330
<b>11 Directions in Humor Research</b>	<b>332</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>335</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>388</b>
<b>A Humorous Examples</b>	<b>388</b>
<b>B List of Acronyms</b>	<b>400</b>
<b>Index of Names</b>	<b>402</b>
<b>Index of Subjects</b>	<b>412</b>

# List of Tables

1.1	Italian Renaissance Treatises on Humor . . . . .	36
1.2	The Three Families of Theories . . . . .	47
2.1	Narrative Functions in the Joke . . . . .	87
2.2	Terms for Disjunctive and Connector . . . . .	97
2.3	Study A: Referential vs Verbal Jokes. . . . .	102
2.4	Study B: Referential vs Verbal Jokes. . . . .	103
2.5	Study A: Lexical vs Syntactic. . . . .	104
2.6	Study B: Lexical vs Syntactic. . . . .	104
2.7	Study A: Distinct vs Non-Distinct Disjunctive. . . . .	105
2.8	Study B: Distinct vs Non-Distinct Disjunctive. . . . .	105
2.9	Study A: Position of the Disjunctive. . . . .	106
2.10	Study B: Position of the Disjunctive. . . . .	106
3.1	Taxonomy I . . . . .	117
3.2	Taxonomy II . . . . .	119
3.3	Vittoz-Canuto's Taxonomy . . . . .	127
6.1	Combinations of Script Overlap and Oppositeness . . . . .	204
6.2	Hierarchical Organization of the KRs . . . . .	227
10.1	Sequential Organization of Joke Telling . . . . .	301

# List of Figures

0.1	The Semantic Field of “humor” . . . . .	7
3.1	The Organization of Senses in a Pun . . . . .	136
6.1	The Lexical Script for DOCTOR . . . . .	199
6.2	A Fragment of Semantic Network . . . . .	202
7.1	The Arrangement of Scripts . . . . .	247
7.2	Some Lexical Relationships of “tabloid” for this Author. . . .	251

# Preface

This book is the result of almost a decade of research in several related aspects of the linguistics of humor. As such, it is inevitably a composite and the result of a compromise between my desire to cover, on the one hand, as much as possible of the scholarship pertaining to humor research in linguistics and, on the other, my own research interests in the field.

The book combines a representative, if not exhaustive, survey of the literature in the linguistics of humor, with critical analyses of the more significant approaches and my own original ventures. For the most part, I hope I have provided enough indications to indicate which is which. No chapter is any one of those three things exclusively, but the beginning of the book clearly tends towards the survey, the middle towards the critique, and the end towards original work.

The intended audience of the book is similarly composite: theoretical linguists interested in the applications of linguistics to humor research and in its implications for linguistic theory; applied linguists, looking for empirical results and analytical methodologies to be applied to humor studies or exported from humor studies to other areas; non-linguist academics interested in the interdisciplinary role of linguistics, both as a substantive field and methodologically (i.e., what linguists have found out about humor and how they do it); and, last but not least, the educated non-academic wishing to inform him/herself about humor research from the point of view of the study of language. This broad audience has dictated some choices in organization, but primarily it is reflected in a special care in defining all non-elementary technical terms (or providing pointers to such definitions) so that non-linguists may be able to follow the discussion, or may decide to skip some sections in which the technical aspects of the discussion offer few insight into humor research (but many into a linguistic issue). From the linguists' perspective this may give the impression that at times I am defining the obvious or oversimplifying the issues, but close reading will reveal, I hope, that even when I have simplified definitions and discussions for the sake of clarity, this never affects the substance of my arguments.

Because a large part of the book consists of a survey of the scholarship on humor, this has imposed certain restrictions on the organization of the chapters. For example, an entire chapter is dedicated to a survey of the research on puns (Chapter 3) because this genre has been the center of an extraordinary, if not always insightful, amount of writing. For the same reason, the main focus of the book is on jokes and puns, while other humorous genres, such as riddles, irony, satire, etc., are not dealt with specifically.

Other choices were dictated by what I saw as lacunae in the available scholarship. For example, the issues surrounding register humor, in direct connection with the revision of the "script theory" of humor, have received much less attention from scholars than puns or other preferred topics, as have the issues concerning the analysis of texts other than jokes. Chapters 7 and 8 were written in the hope of making some progress in these directions, which strike me as central to the development of the linguistics of humor.

In some cases, the linguistic tools themselves were found lacking. For example, the concepts of "register" (Chapter 7), "isotopy" (Chapter 2), and "narrative function" (Chapter 2), were redefined and clarified before these theoretical tools could be applied to humorous phenomena.

Chapter 1 is designed to bring the pre-contemporary scholarship into the picture, as an attempt at historical inclusion as it were. Chapters 2 - 4 show some geographical unity by dealing mostly with European structuralist scholarship. Chapters 5 and 6 outline the semantic/semiotic basis of my approach to humor research. Chapters 7-10 can be seen as case studies of sorts, in which I venture in several directions, attempting to complement the theoretical basis in what I hope are relevant and useful ways. Chapter 11 is a look into the future and suggests directions for future research.

From a different perspective, the book loosely follows the traditional arrangement of introductory textbooks in linguistics: excluding the historical survey, the first three chapters deal with surface phenomena (Chapters 2-4), namely the organization of phonemes and morphemes (e.g., position of the punch line, processing of the ambiguity); the next two chapters deal with the semantics of the joke (script theory, text theories, (Chapters 6 and 5, respectively), and the remaining chapters deal with the pragmatics of the texts, first in terms of registers (Chapter 7), then of broader texts (Chapter 8), and in terms of their pragmatic mechanisms (Chapter 9), and finally in terms of their use in interaction with other speakers (Chapter 10).

Despite my efforts at completeness, I am sure that there are many areas

that have been covered insufficiently and that some materials that should have been included have been missed. I will be grateful for any communication on overlooked sources, and errors of fact and interpretation.

•   •   •

A few technical notes: mentioned terms are either in *italics* or between quotes (" "). Semes, features, scripts, and other metalinguistic constructs are in SMALL CAPS. Texts are quoted from the most recent edition mentioned in the bibliography; all translations are mine, unless otherwise mentioned. Translations appear in lieu of the original text without any note, unless they follow the original, and then they are between slashes /.../. The indexes cover the entirety of the book, with the exception of the bibliography and the appendices. The subject index does not provide entries for terms such as joke, humor, language, linguistics, etc., that appear almost on every page. The table of contents, however, should help the reader locate the relevant sections of the book. All humorous examples are listed in appendix A. A list of acronyms appears in appendix B.



# Introduction

Before discussing humor in detail it will be helpful to address some preliminary issues, namely how to define humor and its subdivisions. Since these matters are properly metatheoretical, the reader uninterested in epistemological hairsplitting may safely skip this introductory chapter altogether, provided he/she is willing to take this writer's word on a working definition of humor as a "competence"<sup>1</sup> held by speakers to be further specified by the theories that will be examined, and trust his claim that it is unnecessary and even counterproductive to attempt further subdivisions in the field of humor at this time.

## 0.1 Metatheory of humor

Where do linguistic theories fit in the type of investigation that is common in humor research? Simplifying a little, there are three types of theories used in humor:

1. essentialist theories,
2. teleological theories, and
3. substantialist theories.

At a very general level, essentialist theories strive to provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for a phenomenon to occur, and these conditions are taken to define the "essence" of the phenomenon, i.e., what makes the phenomenon what it is. Teleological theories describe what the goals of a phenomenon are, and how its mechanisms are shaped and determined by its goals. Substantialist theories find the unifying factor for the explanation of the phenomenon in the concrete "contents" of the phenomena .

---

<sup>1</sup>That is, something that speakers know how to do, without knowing how and what they know.

Faced with the problem of describing a bicycle, an essentialist theory would describe it, in part, as a lever and a mechanism to redistribute animal force. A teleological theory would describe it as a means of transportation, and a substantialist theory would describe it as an arrangement of wheels, pedals, a frame, etc.

Let us note that all three types of theories are reductive/explanatory theories—that is, they all account for large scale phenomena by reducing them to simpler, better understood phenomena; similarly, they are predictive, in the sense that they can account for data outside of the corpus used to establish the theory. All three types of theories can be formalized since formalization is independent of the type of theory and is an independent metric.

Generally speaking, linguistic theories of humor are either essentialist or teleological (sociolinguistic approaches). This fact differentiates linguistic theories from sociological, literary and (some) psychological approaches which are not concerned with the essence of the humorous phenomena, but with the modalities of their production and reception, as well as their development. The major exceptions to this classification are incongruity theories in psychology whose cognitive accounts of the mechanisms of humor are clearly essentialist. Often psychological or sociological theories are substantialist; for example, aggressiveness, superiority (e.g., Hobbes) or inferiority (e.g. Bakhtin) theories focus on the concrete psychological “contents” of the phenomena.

Needless to say, this classification of theories is only a heuristic tool, and each theory end up incorporating some elements of the other types. The differences between the three types of theories may only be different types of emphasis in the data, and may depend on the observer’s attitude. It remains the case, however, that a linguistic approach will tend to favor essentialist theories and will necessarily foreground essentialist problems.

The next section is a good case in point since it examines attempts at definitions of humor (defining is the essentialist activity *par excellence*).

## 0.2 The Definition of Humor

An important preliminary step to the discussion of the applications of linguistic research to humor will be to specify what is meant by the key term

“humor” and how this category is determined. Discussion of this issue is divided into two sections. The first section shows that it is impossible to define “a priori” the category of humor, let alone to provide more detailed internal subdivisions. The second section rejects the use of laughter as a defining criterion for humor. Finally, the use of a “humor competence” as a working solution is advocated.

## 0.2.1 Internal Subdivision

Humor research has seen several discussions both about the internal subdivisions of the subject matter and its definition (see Keith-Spiegel (1972)). Ultimately, it seems that, not only has it not been possible to agree on how to divide the category of “humor” (e.g. “humor” vs “comic” vs “ridiculous”), but it is even difficult to find a pretheoretical definition of “humor” in the most general sense. As a matter of fact, the claim that humor is undefinable has been advanced several times (see Escarpit (1960: 5-7) and references therein).

### An Impossible Definition

The issue can be put simply as: “What counts as ‘humor’ ?” The problems for an essentialist theory of humor are manifold, and the definitional issue (that is, the choice of the corpus of phenomena in the world that the theory will account for) is far from straightforward. A number of different approaches will be examined briefly to give an idea of the variety of issues at stake, and then a case for an essentialist approach will be made.

Ducrot and Todorov (1972:154) note in passing that comedy, a literary genre, should be distinguished from “the general category (...) of the comic.” If we look at the issue from this viewpoint, it appears that all the historical literary genres and modes are manifestations of the “general category” of “the comic,” or humor. Unfortunately, Ducrot and Todorov did not elaborate on what kind of “general category” humor was, or what the other general categories were, for that matter. Chateau (1950) argues that humor should be contrasted with seriousness, rather than with the tragic (or tragedy). A vast tradition (mostly German, see Cometa (1990)) argues for the opposite view.

Linguists, psychologists, and anthropologists have taken humor to be an all-encompassing category, covering any event or object that elicits laughter, amuses, or is felt to be funny. For instance, Raskin (1985) proposes to consider "humor" "in the least restricted sense" (Raskin (1985: 8); see also Apte (1985)).

In other fields the importance of clear subdivisions is more keenly felt. Literary criticism is a good example. Sinicropi (1981) clearly expresses the need for a rigorous definition of humor:

The lack of a rigorous, or at least reliable, definition of humor and of its categories causes (...) another difficulty that hinders research; it is represented by the fact that denominations of processes usually considered sources of humor (...) are often used as if they were synonyms or if they shared a semantic space. This denotes that the semantic field to which they belong does not have precise boundaries.

Sinicropi is referring to the differences among such literary modes as parody, irony, satire, etc. The argument could be broadened to include humorous literary genres, such as the "Fabliau" (e.g., Noomen 1978), the "farce" (cf. Bermel (1982) for an example of overgeneralization, as his definition encompasses humor), the humorous novel of 17th century France (Debaisieux (1988: 169) "the humorous story (...) evades any attempt at a strict definition"), etc. For a survey of some of the "modes" of literary humor, see Jardon (1988).

Eclectic theories of "literary humor" have been proposed, such as Gourévitch's claim that "comedy is a miscellaneous genre activated by a plurality of impulses: farce, humor, satire, and irony" (Gourévitch 1975: 13). This type of non-definition only strengthens the problems pointed out by Sinicropi.

Psychologists have tried to subcategorize humor on the basis of its subject matter (scatological, aggressive, sexual), in what are typical substantialist theories, or in some cases on the basis of structural factors, as in Aubouin's attempt at distinguishing humor and the ridiculous by the lack of "justification" (i.e. resolution) of the latter (Aubouin (1948), see also below). Other attempts have been made at discriminating between humor consisting of incongruity alone and humor with incongruity and resolution (see Forabosco 1992, and references therein).

Despite the frequent attempts at distinguishing areas inside the “general category” of humor, some researchers have come to the opposite conclusion: they have denied the possibility of a theoretical differentiation among some of the proposed subfields. Olbrecht-Tyteca’s (1974:19) refuses to distinguish between humorous and ridiculous, thus refusing *in toto* Aubouin’s suggestion and Eco’s claim that “the category of comic does not seem to have a possibility of theoretical differentiation from that of humor” (Eco, no date).

The pessimistic position that humor is impossible to subcategorize firmly is further strengthened by the fact that attempts to introduce distinctions or to delimit one’s field are hindered by numerous difficulties. Traditional lexical categories may lead to the erroneous belief that there are clear-cut distinctions in reality (such is the case of Jardon’s (1988) distinction between comic and humor), or the limited translatability of one author’s terminology may complicate the scholars’ activity—for instance, the problems found in the translation of Freud’s terminology (see Milner (1972: 9), and Orlando (1987) for a discussion).

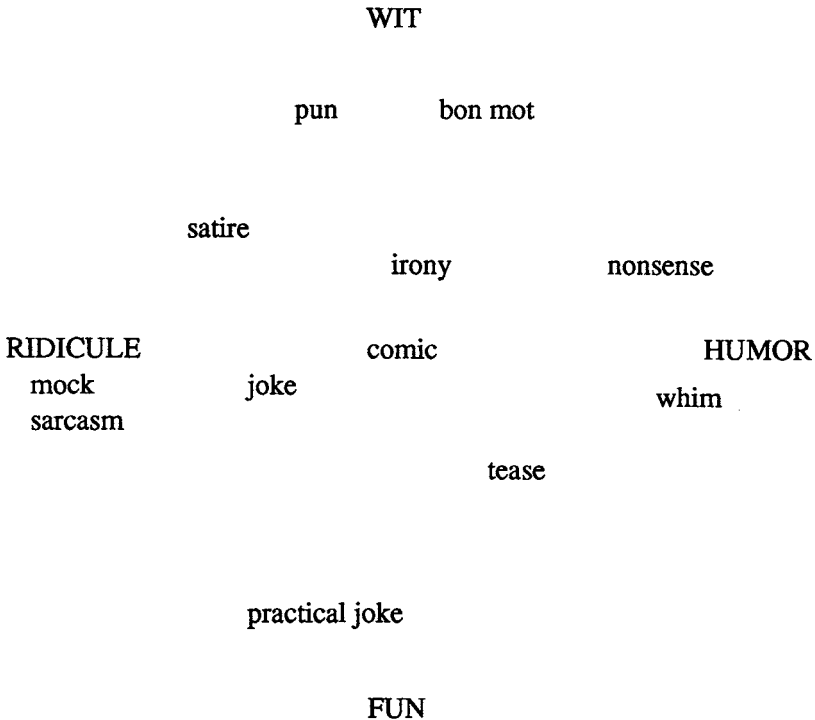
Moreover, different disciplines see the issues differently: where the psychologist sees indifferent manifestations of “humor,” the folklorist or the literary critic see “genres” like the joke, the humorous anecdote, the tall tale, etc. Thus, in transporting findings and methodologies, researchers must be careful to evaluate the scope of the research they face correctly.

For instance, in literature, “comic” and “comedy” are used in a restricted sense, often to denote “plays of humorous content,” or, more generally, literary works which deal with humorous subjects or are humorous. (cf. for example Herrick (1950), Garapon (1954), etc.)—see in particular section 1.4. Although it is perfectly legitimate to follow conventional academic partitions, Lewis (1989: 1-30) stresses the problems that emerge from ignoring the relevant research in related disciplines, even though he himself chooses to ignore the essentialist theories and focusses on the teleological, sociological, and psychological theories instead. Often researchers have adopted uncritically theories coming from one field (such as philosophy or psychology) and applied the theories of, for example, Bergson and Freud, to their subject matter, without questioning the validity of their source or taking the time to consult the literature which has been accumulating since these landmarks in the history of the field.

### **Lexicological Approaches**

But, if these could be dismissed as merely methodological issues, the root of the problems encountered in the attempts at definition seem to go even deeper. The very word “humor” is dated; it ultimately goes back to the “theory of humors” of Medieval medicine. The issues involved are so complex that several studies using the methodology of “semantic fields” have been dedicated to establishing the words involved in the semantic field of “humor” and their respective limits; see Escarpit (1960: 10-72) on English and its international repercussions; Schmidt-Hidding (1963) on the English tradition; Schütz (1963), Böttger (1981) and Renner (1984) on the German tradition; Hempel (1963) on the Spanish tradition; Revault D’Allonnes (1966-67) for a comparison among French, British and American English and German; and Attardo (1986) for a comparison of Italian, French and English. As an example of the degree of complexity involved in these attempts, a much simplified version of Schmidt-Hidding’s (1963: 48) schema for the semantic field of humor is reproduced in picture (0.1).

Figure 0.1: The Semantic Field of “humor”



Ultimately the very things that people find humorous seems to change. Croce (1903) claimed that humor could only be understood in a historical perspective and excluded the possibility of a theoretical definition of humor (Croce (1903:286); see Eco (1985:261) and Caserta (1983)). This has led to a perhaps not unjustified pessimism on the very possibility of finding a common ground of analysis among the many socio-/historical manifestations of humor, let alone a determination of the necessary and sufficient conditions for humor to obtain.

## 0.2.2 Anti-Essentialist Approaches

Although most theoretical research on humor has been done in what can be loosely termed the “essentialist” paradigm, some proposals have emerged recently that challenge the feasibility of an essentialist project and invoke a “prototypical” or “polythetic” approach to humor research. Prototype theories invoke Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances” as their model of ontological foundation. Wittgenstein noted that the class of “games” cannot be defined by finding one or more features common to all games (except that of being called games, obviously; Wittgenstein (1953: 31-36)). One intuitively knows that volleyball and Monopoly have something in common that solitaire does not share, namely competitiveness between players. Chess and checkers share the feature of being played on a board, while skipping a rope doesn’t. Prototype theories do not claim that random objects are assembled to form a class, but only that while each will have something in common with some others in the class, not all of the members of the class will share at least one feature (a more detailed discussion of prototype theories will be found in ch. 7).

Levin (1987), one of the prototype theory proponents, claims that

If there were any single generalization that could be applied with equal relevance to Chaucer, Mark Twain, Evelyn Waugh, Milan Kundera, Milesian tales, Jewish jokes, banana peels, mechanical toys, content analyses, laugh-counts, broadcasts, cartoons, monkeys, hyenas, and tickling, it would be much too sweeping for any plane but that of pointless platitude (Levin 1987: 6-7).

While this author, contrary to Levin, fails to see anything funny in content analyses (perhaps an inside joke for literary critics?), all of the above have been considered by the people who read, heard, or saw them, funny. Naturally, this excludes hyenas (their famous laughter is a kind of barking), and tickling induced laughter which is a physiological reaction (on the humor/laughter distinction see below). What is Levin objecting to, then?

This position seems to be a good example of the problems mentioned above. The literary theorist is interested in the differences between Waugh and Kundera (or rather between their literary works), and finds little interest in what these expressions of craftsmanship share with “folk” narratives or with some of the examples made famous by Bergson (the mechanical toy) that are

not expressed in a literary form. Moreover, if the list proposed by Levin were to stop at the first four elements included, certainly few would object to its legitimacy, which leads one to believe that the object of Levin's skepticism is not the possibility of a definition of humor but rather the legitimacy, from the point of view of the literary critic, of including in the category non-literary phenomena.

If one puts aside the "internal subdivisions" of humor and accepts a "broad" reading of the concept, it follows that humor (or the comic, etc.) is whatever a social group defines as such. At this point in the discussion, it is not necessary to be concerned with the modalities of the social construction of the "humorous object," or those of its changes and/or fluctuations among individuals. It has been claimed (Ferro-Luzzi 1990) that essentialist theories are falsified by examples of non-Indo-European cultures which do not fit the "incongruity-resolution" pattern. It appears, however, that these claims rest on terminological misunderstandings of the term "incongruity." Ferro-Luzzi's major claim is that alliteration is not incongruous. For a discussion of the incongruity of alliteration cf. ch. 3. I am not aware of any other claim that essentialist theories have been falsified by data.

Lewis's call for interdisciplinary research in humor (Lewis (1989); on interdisciplinary research in humor see also Apte (1988)) could be construed as a different "defeatist" approach. Lewis (1989) maintains a prudent attitude on the matter of an essentialist theory, but seems to imply that because of the complex nature of humor only "daring minds" (Lewis 1989: 159) attempt to propose comprehensive theories of humor which involve several fields of study at the same time. Since his example of such a daring mind is the linguist Raskin, it seems that this kind of preoccupation need not concern us excessively, since this book deals with linguistic theories and is thereby also "daring."

As a matter of fact, linguistic, philosophical and psychological analyses of humor have been the most outspoken in their essentialist approach, the most explicit example being possibly Attardo and Raskin (1991). Attardo and Raskin's claim is that a general theory of humor requires the consideration of six different and unrelated knowledge resources, each of which contributes to the creation of humor. While each discipline might be concerned with only one of the knowledge resources, or with several, a general theory must be concerned with all the six resources at the same time. The goal of a general theory is assumed to be essentialist, i.e., the identification of those

features that make a situation, a text, or an object funny.

A pre-theoretical definition either of humor or *a fortiori* of its subclasses may be impossible, and this has led to doubts about the feasibility of the essentialist approach. Yet from a linguistic point of view the essentialist approach is most promising (but see ch. 10).

Having accepted Raskin's "least restricted" definition of humor, which is also in essence a refusal to draw artificial boundaries between the humorous phenomena, it still remains to be seen how one is to decide which phenomena in the world are "humorous" and which are not. The next section deals with the most commonly accepted criterion: laughter.

### 0.2.3 Humor and Laughter

One common criterion seems to underlie the working definitions of humor implicitly, and sometimes explicitly: laughter. The assumption behind this identification of humor and laughter is that what makes people laugh is humorous, and hence the property is incorrectly seen as symmetrical—what is funny makes you laugh and what makes you laugh is funny. This leads to the identification of a mental phenomenon (humor) with a complex neurophysiological manifestation (laughter).

For example, Bergson clearly considers laughter and humor to be interchangeable, as can be seen from the complete title of his 1901 book "Laughter. Essay about the meaning of humor" (Bergson 1901), and so does Freud (1905: 15); see Lewis (1989: 163) for a discussion and more examples.

As Piddington says,

Very many writers on the subject of laughter (...) have failed to recognize the distinction between the two [ludicrous and laughter] (Piddington 1933: 87)

But he confuses the two terms himself later in his work:

In our analysis of the ludicrous we considered simple and even crude example of *laughter-provoking* situations" (Piddington 1933: 140; my emphasis, SA)

Even Milner, who was one of the first to introduce explicitly the use of semiotic procedure in humor research, adopts this criterion implicitly when

he claims that: "humour-based laughter is generated by discrete elements taken, not in isolation, but in conjunction" (Milner 1972: 2), and this only a few lines after having distinguished between the two by noting that "while humor is a very important element, it is only one out of a number of different detonators of laughter" (Ibid.).

This surreptitious identification of humor and laughter had in fact already been isolated in the Roman period (see ch. 1). More recently, Aubouin (1948), uncovers the aforesaid confusion in the scientific literature on humor:

Under these terms [laughter and humor] are confused very different reactions (...) which have only superficial similarities without common causes (Aubouin 1948: 12).

To summarize, laughter denotes an effect without specifying the cause (Aubouin 1948: 13). Aubouin ultimately adopts a distinction between physiologically originating laughter and intellectually originating laughter. In addition, the identification of humor with laughter has been discussed by Keith-Spiegel (1972: 37-39, with a large bibliography), Manetti (1976: 130-152), and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1974).

The most recent discussion is the most interesting as in it the author analyzes at length the possibility of the use of laughter as a criterion of humor. Olbrechts-Tyteca finds five reasons that make its application difficult, if not impossible.

1) "Laughter largely exceeds humor." (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974: 14) Olbrechts-Tyteca summarizes Aubouin's (1948) argument distinguishing between physiological laughter (originating from sodium pentathol or hallucinogens, for instance) and laughter originating from humor.

2) "Laughter does not always have the same meaning." (Ibid.) Olbrechts-Tyteca points out the phenomenon of ritual laughter and that laughter in Africa is more a sign of embarrassment or bewilderment than of amusement. Aubouin mentions the courtesy smile of Orientals with regard to this point.

3) "Laughter is not directly proportionate to the intensity of humor." (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974: 15) Olbrechts-Tyteca directs her attention to "the remarkable difference among individuals regarding the attitude toward laughter." (Ibid.) Aubouin mentions that age and education teach us to "hold back our impulses, to conceal our reactions" (1948: 14) He also notes that someone familiar with humor will tend to react to it more with a "blasé" attitude.

4) "Humor elicits sometimes laughter, sometimes a smile" (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974: 15). Olbrechts-Tyteca notes that there is no agreement among scholars about viewing smiling as an attenuated form of laughter (see also Keith-Spiegel (1972: 40)).

5) Laughter or smiling cannot always be observed directly. Olbrechts-Tyteca notes that laughter can be simulated, and that it must be interpreted, i.e., its social meaning must be assessed (see Jefferson's research on laughter, ch. 10).

These facts would render the use of informants problematic in assessing the humorousness of a text. It should be noted that the situation is not exactly parallel to that of psychologists measuring the funniness of a stimulus, in which the experimental setting is such that either the humorous quality of the text is presupposed, and the subjects are evaluating the degree of funniness, or the subjects rate texts for funniness, with some unfunny controls in the group. The linguists' position is closer to that of someone observing a videotape of a conversation, and trying to determine which of the remarks are funny or not.<sup>2</sup>

Olbrechts-Tyteca notes that tradition is a sort of "mutual guarantee," meaning that the fact that others have assumed that a given text was funny entitles us to the same assumption, but she finally falls back on introspection. The presence of a text in a collection of humorous texts, such as a joke book, allows one to infer that the text will in all likelihood be humorous, and this can be a sufficiently reliable empirical criterion. However, this criterion will be unable to assess new instances of texts (for instance, a new joke).

Introspection is not a reliable criterion, for obvious reasons, but linguists are faced with a similar problem concerning the data for semantic or syntactic analysis. Leech (1981: 71) points out that it is a problem of "intersubjectivity" i.e., shared intuition of a group of speakers, rather than a matter of subjective judgement.

Raskin appeals to the intersubjective judgement, expanding on Chomsky's "grammatical competence" and postulating a "humor competence" which is the linguist's task to make explicit (i.e., formulate its grammar). A

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<sup>2</sup>Recent research in psychology, and in the physiological correlates of emotions, seems to disprove the claim that there are no reliable correlates of humor, since it appears that there are fail-safe physiological correlates to humor perception (Ruch 1992, 1993). It remains the case, however, that one may fail to be amused by an otherwise humorous stymulus for theoretically irrelevant reasons, cf. the notion of humor "competence" in ch. 6.

more detailed discussion will be undertaken in ch. 6. Let us note as a temporary conclusion that Kerbrat-Orecchioni's (1981) and Roventa-Frumusani's (1986) pragmatic definition of humorous text—a text is humorous whose perlocutionary effect<sup>3</sup> is laughter—once one takes “laughter” with a grain of salt, is reducible to the humor competence of the speaker. For the usefulness and heuristic power of Kerbrat-Orecchioni's definition see Attardo (1989) and Attardo and Chabanne (1992).

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<sup>3</sup>I.e., extra-linguistic, as opposed to the locutionary (what is said) and illocutionary (what is implied) effects. The terminology is Austin's (1962).

# Chapter 1

## Survey of the Literature

### 1.1 Introduction

The goal of this introductory chapter is to provide a survey of the field of humor research from the point of view of linguistics. It begins with a short discussion of the necessity and criteria for the survey. The survey itself is divided into two parts: 1) a chronologically organized overview of the classical theories (Greek and Latin) and their tradition up until the Renaissance; and 2) the modern theories of humor. With the latter section, the organization becomes theory oriented rather than chronological. The chapter surveys the three major types of theories of humor as well as some influential thinkers who deserve individual attention.

#### 1.1.1 Why Have a Survey?

Beyond the tradition of beginning a scientific discussion of a topic by reviewing the literature, there are some topic-specific reasons to do so in the case of humor research. These issues are of some relevance in the interdisciplinary perspective of humor research, but a reader uninterested in these may safely resume reading in section 1.2.

There are some facts about research on humor that would discourage one from writing such a survey. To begin with, the usefulness of this particular survey might be questioned since reviews and syntheses of the literature on humor are available. The most authoritative is commonly held to be Piddington's (1933: 152-221) who lists and reviews 49 authors. The broadest

review is probably Bergler's (1956) who touches upon about 80 authors, although in a rather imprecise and questionable way. Milner (1972) depends on Piddington (1933) but adds several authors who published after 1933. A particularly helpful review is that of Keith-Spiegel (1972), which is probably the best known one, having appeared in the canonical Goldstein and McGhee (1972). McGhee (1979), Raskin (1985), and Morreall (1987) also provide reviews of the field. Nevertheless, none of these reviews of the literature exhibits a specifically linguistic perspective, i.e., attention to those aspects of a theory that are likely to be directly applicable to a linguistic analysis of humor. Raskin's survey comes the closest to this goal, but it was deliberately limited in scope (Raskin, p.c.).

Another problem facing a survey is that the body of literature concerning humor is so large that it is not pragmatically possible for any single scholar to cover it in its entirety. Goldstein and McGhee (1972) quote about 400 works concerning humor published between 1900 and 1971, but remarkably, their bibliography only covers the Anglo-Saxon world. Chapman and Foot (1977) include a bibliography of more than 30 pages. Davies' (1990) bibliography is longer than 50 pages (but also includes sources of examples). In its first four years of existence (1988-91), the journal *HUMOR* published 85 articles and reviewed 70 books, all of which had humor as their major topic. One could multiply the examples of the proliferation and variety of published research on humor.

To complicate matters further, contributions to humor research are widely diversified and range over a variety of disciplines, including (but not limited to) psychology, anthropology, sociology, literature, medicine, philosophy, philology, mathematics, education, semiotics, and linguistics. It is widely recognized that humor research is an interdisciplinary field and that its central problems are better understood if one takes into account diverse contributions that come from a variety of fields and subfields.

Therefore, it seems logical to cover some segments of the bibliography from different vantage points, of which linguistics is one, in order to provide the necessary specificity and manageability. It also should be kept in mind that the field of humor research is interdisciplinary brings up methodological issues related to the cross-disciplinary borrowing of methodologies and of criteria for evaluation of theories and proposals. It is important that the practitioners of other disciplines be aware that each discipline has its own

set of methodological requirements.<sup>1</sup>

Raskin (1985: 51-53) addresses the same issue, albeit from a different point of view, i.e., the application of linguistic theory to the problem of humor, thus setting the issue in terms of “applied linguistics.” His point is that the problems to be solved should come from the field of humor, whereas the methodologies (and the evaluations) should come from the respective disciplines—in the present case, linguistics.

From another side of the issue, it appears very clear that the field of linguistic research on humor is plagued by repetition of acquired results by researchers unaware of previous research, and by the fact that often a scholar will make one contribution to the field, but will not follow up on his/her idea(s). This leads to duplication of effort, both on the part of those who repeat observations that have already been made and by those who have to read redundant texts. A representative survey may help to cure this particular ill.

A further reason for this endeavor is that some of the relevant material is not readily available in English, and in some cases is not available in any language other than, say, the original Latin.

### 1.1.2 Introduction for Linguists

Little of what follows in this first chapter is directly relevant to linguistics. One may then question the utility of having a survey at all. There are at least three reasons:

- if the problems to be solved by the linguistics of humor are to come from the field of humor research, only a survey of the literature may provide the necessary background for discussion;
- it is important to position the linguistic theories of humor in the broader context of the general theories of humor. For instance, the isotopy disjunction model (ch. 2), the structuralist analyses of puns (ch. 3), and even the semantic theory of humor proposed by Raskin (ch. 6) can

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<sup>1</sup>This claim can be taken either from a positivist point of view, as the requirement that a theory meet some given standards that vary among the disciplines, or from a “post-modern” stand as the rhetorical manipulation of cultural shibboleths. Be that as it may, a discipline must maintain its identity, especially when engaging in an interdisciplinary endeavor.

be seen as instances of the so-called “incongruity theories.” To what extent this is correct (not really), and how enlightening (not very) it is to view them in this light cannot be decided unless one is familiar with the general background of humor research;

- however small the amount of linguistically relevant research to be gathered in the survey of Western thought about humor may be it is not irrelevant, as the survey itself will show.

### 1.1.3 The Criteria of the Survey

Since this book is oriented primarily towards linguistic theories of humor, and secondarily towards the kinds of materials that might be useful from the perspective of linguistic research on humor, some remarkable exclusions have been necessary. For example, Pirandello’s (1908) book on humor will not be made the object of detailed analysis because it bears little interest from a linguistic perspective. Needless to say, such exclusions are not value judgements. The importance of Pirandello’s essay for the understanding of his career and of the theories of humor developed in the first quarter of the century puts him on par with Freud and Bergson, as the already considerable amount of critical literature suggests (see Asor Rosa (1982), Borsellino (1982), Cappello (1982), Dombroski (1982), Geerts (1982), Schulz-Buschhaus (1982), Caserta (1983), Guglielmino (1986), Roić (1988), De Marchi (1988), and references therein.)

### 1.1.4 The Survey

The order of works presented will be almost strictly chronological, and the subject will be subdivided into periods. The purpose of the review is not to provide original solutions to the problems, but rather to show how some questions concerning humor have evolved and how the answers have changed. The review is not, and should not be construed as, a history of humorous literature, or even of the theoretical thinking on humor (although it may provide some hints as to how the latter task could be performed).

Instead, some moments in the development of the critical discussion on humor through Western history will be discussed in the hope that the consideration of different positions will yield a coherent image of the development of

the issues in humor research. An interesting conclusion of the survey is that there are some strands of research that keep resurfacing in the scholarly literature. These ideas seem to be fairly independent of the authors' historical and cultural environment, and their "fashionability" shows little apparent motivation. These strands are often overlooked in scholarly surveys, and some effort will be put into highlighting some of them.

## 1.2 The Greeks

Analysis of the Greek texts is rendered problematic by several issues. Often classical scholars disagree as to what exactly the original text was, let alone its meaning. In what follows, an attempt will be made to ignore the philological debate as much as possible. The goal of this text is not a philological one, nor is it intended as a history of Greek humorous literature, but rather as a presentation of some important phases of the development of the theories of humor in ancient Greece.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2.1 Plato

The literature is unanimous in considering Plato (427-347 BC) as the first theorist of humor (see Piddington (1933: 152); Morreall (1987: 10)). According to Plato, humor is "a mixed feeling of the soul" (Piddington 1933: 152), i.e., a mixture of pleasure and pain. The following passage from the *Philebus* gives an idea of Plato's position. Socrates is speaking:

...Our argument declares that when we laugh at the ridiculous qualities of our friends, we mix pleasure with pain, since we mix it with envy; for we have agreed all along that envy is a pain of the soul, and that laughter is pleasure, yet these two arise at the same time on such occasions. (*Philebus* 50A)

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<sup>2</sup>The critical edition of the text which is followed is always indicated in the bibliography, and the editor's work is relied on to establish the text. Passages will be quoted in the English translation, along with the original, wherever the passage warrants enough interest. Quotations in the original texts have been referenced with the traditional methods in use in the field (for instance by Book and Chapter). If a translation is indicated in the bibliography it means that the English text quoted comes from the translation. The translations have been modified to make them more literal without explicit mention, whenever this author felt the necessity to do so.

In the *Philebus* Plato presents his theory of the “good,” which is found in a “mixture” and in a condemnation of excesses. The passages that concern humor (48c/50a) are taken from a review of various emotions like anger, pity, etc. Plato puts humor in the field of the “ridiculous.” Whoever does not follow the Delphic Oracle’s admonition “Know thyself,” or in other words, lacks self-knowledge, is defined as ridiculous. Without doubt, the ridiculous is seen by Plato as belonging to the category of *πονηρία* (perversion, evil). Not surprisingly, Plato will list excessive laughter as one of the things to be avoided in his republic, because it is seen as an “overwhelming” of the soul. (*Republic* 388e *μεταβολή*).

Keith-Spiegel (1972) notes that Plato’s is the prototype of the ambivalence theory (i.e., theories that maintain that humor arises from the perception of two contrasting feelings). It is also the archetype of the aggression theories, with its mention of “envy” and its observation (a few lines before) that the ridiculous can happen to two categories of men, the strong and the feeble. Whereas the feeble cannot avenge themselves for jests, and are thus ridiculous, the strong, who can avenge themselves, are not ridiculous, but hateful. These observations, not lacking in wisdom, albeit “too fixed on the ungracious element in laughter” (Gregory 1923: 332), offer little interest from the perspective of linguistic analysis, but need to be addressed because of their historical relevance.

### 1.2.2 Aristotle

Aristotle’s (384-322 BC) main text on comedy in the *Poetics* has been lost<sup>3</sup> (see below for a discussion). The extant passage on comedy is worth quoting in full:

As for Comedy, it is (as has been observed) an imitation of men worse than average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind of the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous is something wrong (*ἁμάρτεμά τι*) and a deformity not productive of pain (*ἀνώδυνον*) or harm (*οὐ φθαρτικόν*); the mask, for instance,

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<sup>3</sup>The best discussion of Aristotle’s theory of humor is without challenge Plebe’s (1952: 7-30).

that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain. (*De Poetica* 1449a)

Aristotle's definition is (with Plato's) the archetype of the superiority theories (see below). In Aristotle's definitions, it is possible to note the influence of Plato's theory which envisages humor as a part of the "ugly" and in the "emphasis on the innocuousness of the laughably innocuous" (Gregory 1923: 333). Lanza (1987b) notes that Aristotle's definition is a definition of humor (the ridiculous) rather than comedy. Lanza also points out the parallel between Aristotle's definition of humor and the third part of the "story" (μύθος), the πάθος, or "violent act" which is precisely defined as φθαρτικόν, i.e. harmful.

The differences between Aristotle's and Plato's theory are interesting as well. Aristotle "recognizes the aesthetic principle in laughter" (Piddington 1933: 153). In addition, his attitude towards laughter is much more positive. Aristotle condemns only the excesses of laughter (*Nichomachean Ethics* IV 8 1128a), whereas Plato's condemnation is much more absolute. Moreover, Aristotle disagrees with Plato's claim that humor is an "overwhelming" of the soul. Aristotle sees it as a "stimulation" (Plebe 1952: 15-16) of the soul, which puts the listener in a mood of good will.

Aristotle also considers the practical use of humor in the *Rhetoric*. According to Aristotle, joking must serve the argumentation of the orator. The speaker must be careful to avoid inappropriate jokes, however. Irony is appropriate for the speaker, and buffoonery (βωμολοχία) should be avoided. (*rhetorica* III 18, 1419b).

In a little quoted passage, in the same book of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle sketches the first analysis of the mechanisms of humor, anticipating, as Morreall (1987: 14) notes, the theories of incongruity. While discussing liveliness and surprise in metaphors, Aristotle comments on several witticisms (ἄσπεϊα), puns, and on unexpected occurrence of words, and concludes: "the speaker says something unexpected, the truth of which is recognized." (III, 11 1412b). It is also extremely tempting to see in a passage like the following an anticipation of the theories of the "resolution" of the incongruity (see Suls (1983), or Aubouin's (1948) "justification" (see 4.0.1) or Ziv's (1984) "local logic" (see 4.0.2): "In all these jokes, whether a word is used in a second sense or metaphorically, the joke is good if it fits the facts." (III, 11 1412b).

Whether or not these passages anticipate modern developments is, after all, unimportant, when one assesses Aristotle's influence.

The importance of Aristotle's influence on the theory of humor cannot be exaggerated. For one thing, Aristotle is responsible for the "comedy/tragedy" opposition (albeit the division of poetry in serious and humorous is to be found already in Plato (Plebe 1952: 14)) and the corresponding "comic/tragic," which will be challenged only much later (Volkelt (1905), quoted in Propp (1976); Chateau (1950); Baudin (ed.) 1985). When humor is defined in pragmatic terms as a text with a given perlocutionary effect, it appears that the opposite of humor is not the tragic, but the "serious" or the "un-funny." The opposition "comic/tragic" appears then to be historically determined and linked to the analytical categories of the Greek thinkers who introduced it.

Because Aristotle and Plato were implicitly describing humorous practices as they were in the Greece of the 5th/4th century BC, much of the theoretical elaborations of the classical Greek thinkers on humor matches the extant anthropological observations on humor in that era. A detailed description of humor in Sparta is provided by David (1989) and several comedies and fragments of comedies, jokes, etc. are mentioned by writers to provide enough evidence for the accuracy of the picture drawn by Plato and Aristotle: most of Greek humor consists in what today would be rather crude slapstick, obscenity and profanity, insults, and puns.

The opposition between comedy and tragedy has been the background of a large part of the theorizing about humor within the paradigm of aesthetics until its 20th century turn towards poetics (Russian formalism, structuralism, etc.). For instance, in a bibliography on the tragic in German aesthetics (Cometa 1990), one finds 19 entries dealing with the opposition between comedy and tragedy.

Aristotle's discussion of puns is made in passing during a discussion of metaphors. The "literal reading of a metaphorical statement" will be one of the techniques commonly listed when thinkers try to categorize humor in a pre-scientific way (e.g., Bergson (1901: 88); Elgozy (1979: 99-106); on taxonomies of puns, see ch. 3). More importantly, Aristotle's theory, and especially his partitioning of the subject matter and the correlation of comedy and humor, was the paradigm upon which any theory of humor was to be evaluated for the next twenty centuries—that is well into the 17th century.

The influence of Aristotelian theory (or of what was taken to be Aristotelian theory) on those authors who deal with comedy and humor will be one of the major concerns of the rest of this chapter.

### 1.2.3 The Peripatetic and Hellenistic Tradition

#### Theophrastus

Theophrastus' (ca 373 - ca 287 BC) contribution to the theory of humor is a major one, for his name is linked with the introduction of the "comic of character" (ἥθος) which has been one of the mainstays of dramatic theory. A thorough exposition of Theophrastus' thought is to be found in Plebe (1952: 31-48); see also Janko (1984: 48-52). Theophrastus was the author of two lost treatises on humor and comedy (Plebe 1952: 31) so his views on humor have reached us through quotations and fragments, mostly of his *Moral Characters*. The "characters theory" is a literary analysis of characters, such as the boasting warrior, the drunk, etc., that are common in comedy. Each character is identified with some behavior or weakness, and comedy is seen as the use of these characters.

Of clear Aristotelian inspiration (he was the successor of Aristotle in the Lyceum), Theophrastus is original in several points—for instance, in his claim that comedy is fictional, i.e. not connected to "verisimilitude" (Plebe 1952: 35-38), whereas Aristotle had maintained that comedy had to be realistic. For the same reasons for which the characters theory is important in literary studies, it bears little relevance from a linguistic point of view, since it does not deal with the linguistic aspects of humor. Theophrastus' contribution to the theory of humor has had little recognition and little significant mention of his ideas has been found in the "humor research" literature (with the all-important exclusion of the Elizabethan theory of humors).

#### The Pseudo-Longinus *On the Sublime*

As is to be expected, the Hellenistic transmission of classical thought on humor involves, some elements of reelaboration of Plato's and Aristotle's theories. An example is the famous treatise on the sublime (Περὶ ὑψους) attributed to Longinus (Arieti 1985), which claims that there is a form of comic sublime. The author (ca. 1st cent. AD) subscribes to the Aristotelian

view of the comic, which is classed as a "passion" (πάθος) but which, however, belongs to the pleasant, and thus is not tragic. The comic sublime is seen as a parallel of the "serious" sublime. The author notes that "hyperboles are not addressed only toward what is greater but also toward what is lesser" (*The Sublime*, XXXVIII 6; Arieti 1985: 191-192n). This idea will be found later in Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* VIII, 6, 67).

### The Problem of the *Tractatus Coislinianus*

The so-called *Tractatus Coislinianus* is a short Greek text to be found in a manuscript containing mostly introductions to the comedies of Aristophanes. Its name comes from the fact that the manuscript belongs to the Coislin collection at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Common agreement dates the manuscript to the tenth century A.D. (Plebe (1952: 115-125); Janko (1984: 4-18) reproduces four pages of the manuscript).

The importance of this short text lies in the belief that it is a summary of Aristotle's thought on comedy. Because the second book of the *Poetics* was lost, a controversy has arisen concerning its relationship to the *Tractatus Coislinianus*. Simplifying a little, three positions are to be found: 1) those who claim that there was never a second book of the *Poetics* or that we know nothing, or close to nothing, about it (e.g., Lanza 1987a/b); 2) those who claim that the *Tractatus Coislinianus* is a "summary" of the lost book (e.g., Cooper 1923; Janko 1984), and hence can be used to reconstruct fully Aristotle's views on comedy, and 3) those who take a middle stand and use only some of the materials in the *Tractatus* to reconstruct Aristotle's thought (e.g., Plebe 1952).<sup>4</sup>

The reliability of the *Tractatus Coislinianus* as a source of Aristotle's thought (see Janko 1984: 42-90; (Lanza 1987b)) will not be addressed here. For the present purposes it is important only to note that a number of classifications of humor mechanisms (possibly related, or similar to the *Tractatus*) circulated between Aristotle's death and the writing of Cicero's *De Oratore*, either because they came directly from Aristotle or because they were Peripatetic elaborations on Aristotle's thought. Whether or not the ideas were really Aristotle's, nothing prevents researchers from thinking that Cicero

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<sup>4</sup>The success of Umberto Eco's fictional work *The Name of the Rose*, whose plot revolves precisely around the missing second book, has done little to clarify the situation, as have those readers who confuse Eco's fictional work and his scientific one.

(who claims to have seen several treatises on comedy) might have been influenced by these, as there are numerous correspondences between the *Tractatus* and Cicero's text (see below).

The text of the *Tractatus Coislinianus* has been published by Cooper (1922), Janko (1984), Lanza (1987a) and is thus readily available. From the present perspective, the most interesting parts are the divisions of the types of humor. The relevant passage opens with "Laughter arises from the words (ἀπό τῆς λεξεῶς) and from the facts" (ἀπό τῶ πραγμάτων). Janko (1984: 25) translates these as "speech" and "actions"; these categories can be labelled "verbal" and "referential," respectively. Cicero's division (see below 1.3.1 is mirrored in the *Tractatus*'s division (but see Plebe (1952: 25n)). Plebe claims that Aristotle's original division was not bipartite<sup>5</sup> but tripartite, and that Aristotle analyzed laughter as coming from a) puns, b) unexpected events, and c) "contrast between the development of the elocution and the facts" (Plebe 1952: 26). Plebe's claim is substantiated by a passage by Hermogenes (a Greek rhetorician, see Spengel's *Rhetores Graeci* (1853-56 I, 215, 440-42)).

In the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, verbal humor is subdivided into:

"homonyms

synonyms

repetition

paronyms

by addition

by subtraction

diminutives (ὑποκόρισμα)

deformations by the voice, and similar

figures of speech (σχήμα λήξεως)" (Janko 1984: 70, Lanza 1987: 233).

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<sup>5</sup>Aristotle deals only with two kinds of jokes, puns and unexpected occurrences of words.

Janko (1987: 44-45) presents a slightly different sectioning, based on his reconstruction, which uses a different text, see Janko (1987: 162-167).

“Referential” humor is subdivided into:

“similarity (to the better or to the worse)

deception

the impossible

the possible and inconsequential

the unexpected

from vulgar dancing

when one of those who can, leaving aside more important things, chooses those of lesser value <sup>6</sup>

when discourse is not connected and incoherent.”

Both Plebe (1952: 27) and Janko (1984: 35n) note that there are similarities between the text of the *Tractatus* and Cicero’s treatment of the topic (see below). Thus it seems likely that there might have been some influence, however indirect, of the source of the *Tractatus* on Cicero. This claim is reasonable and does not necessarily involve a decision on the authenticity of the Aristotelian attribution of the *Tractatus*.

### 1.2.4 The Treatises on Comedy and the Scholiasts

Along with the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, one finds several other minor treatises “on comedy” which have been prefaced by the scholiasts to the comedies of Aristophanes. These have been published by Dübner (1883) and others. The most important among these short texts is one by John Tzetzes (1110 - 1185?). (With Tzetzes, however, we have already reached the Middle Ages (see Cooper 1923: 97-98).) Plebe (1952) has a discussion of the chronology of the various fragments. Janko (1985) uses Tzetzes to reconstruct Aristotle.

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<sup>6</sup>Lanza (1987: 233); cf. Janko (1984: 70): “From choosing the worst when one has power to choose the best.”

Unfortunately, several Greek treatises on comedy have been lost. Cicero claims to have studied several of these, none of which have been preserved. In other cases, authors mention treatises on comedy that are not extant. For example, Quintilian mentions a treatise by Domitius Martius. Cataudella (1970: 19) lists several lost treatises by Hellenistic authors, such as Demetrius Falerus, Dion of Prusa, a rhetorician Tiberius, Herodianus and others. Mention of most of these can be found in Spengel's (1853-56) *Rhetores Graeci*. Janko (1984: 46) mentions treatises by Lycophron (*On comedies*) and Eratosthenes (*On the old comedies*).

## 1.3 The Latins

This section deals with the Latin discussions of humor. Because the Greek influence on Rome was so great, the Latins were greatly influenced by Greek thinkers in matters of humor theory. No attempt will be made, however, to discuss the breadth of the influence of Greece on Roman comedy or humor. Instead, as in the previous section, the section reviews the theoretical positions of some major Latin authors. Particular emphasis has been put on Cicero and Quintilian, with a briefer section on Horace.

### 1.3.1 Cicero

Cicero (106-43 BC) deals with the problem of humor in the *De Oratore* (II LVIII-LXII). The general purpose of Cicero's dialogue is to instruct public speakers. In it, Caius Julius Strabo, one of the characters in the dialogue, delivers a long speech on humor. For the present purpose, it can be assumed that the character is Cicero's mouthpiece.

In the dialogue Cicero deals with five humor-related topics: 1) what humor is, 2) where it comes from, 3) if it is fitting for the orator to use humor, 4) to what extent it is fitting, and 5) what the genres of humor are. The first issue is dismissed by Strabo on the grounds that it does not belong to his topic. Strabo confesses his ignorance on the subject, which he claims to be common, and claims that for further explanations one should refer to Democritus. Democritus was believed to be always laughing at human folly, and hence to be an expert on laughter.

On the second issue Cicero follows Aristotle: "Turpitudinem et deformitatem quadam continetur" (LVIII, 236. /It [humor] is contained in some kind of baseness and deformity/). The third and fourth issues are not particularly interesting from a linguistic perspective, since Cicero limits his contribution to precepts of "rhetorical opportunity." Cicero advises against using humor in particularly pathetic or morally odious trials. This might be linked to issues of humor "neutralization" in the presence of strong emotions (see Bergson and Freud, below).

The fifth point is the most interesting one from a linguistic perspective. Cicero introduces the distinction between verbal and referential humor (involving the phonemic/graphemic representation of the humorous element and not doing so, respectively). In Cicero's terminology jokes (*facetiae*) can be "about what is said" (*dicto*) or about "the thing" (*re*). (LIX, 240; 248). This distinction has been tacitly used by a vast majority of humor researchers. Among those who use the distinction with a different terminology are Morin (1966: 181) "referential vs semantic," (Eco 1983) "situational play vs play on words," Guiraud (1976) "bon mots vs puns," Hockett (1973) "prosaic vs poetic." The distinction is also used by Freud (1905), Piddington (1933), Milner (1972), Todorov (1976), Pepicello and Green (1983), and many others. A full discussion of this issue will be found in ch. 2-3. The utility of the distinction has been discussed in Raskin (1987), who uses "linguistic humor" to refer to *de dicto* humor. The latter's position will be examined in Ch. 6.

Cicero's further elaborates his taxonomy by stipulating that referential humor (*in re*) includes anecdotes (*fabella*) and caricature (*imitatio*). Verbal humor includes ambiguity (*ambigua*), paronomasia (*parvam verbi immutationem* LXIII, 256), false etymologies (*interpretatio nominis*), proverbs, literal interpretation of figurative expressions (*ad verbum non ad sententiam rem accipere*), allegory, metaphors, and antiphrasis or irony (*ex inversione verborum*).

Cicero's taxonomy of humor reminds one of the *Tractatus Coislinianus*. The distinction between referential and verbal humor is the same, as are some of the further subdivisions. Because Cicero mentions several Greek treatises on comedy, the Greek influence comes as no surprise. If the *Tractatus Coislinianus* is really the summary of the second book of the *Poetics*, it would be easy to imagine that there is a continuous link between Aristotle's thought and Cicero's, i.e. that the treatises contained roughly the same material covered by the *Tractatus*. If not, the *Tractatus* could well be posterior to the *De*

*Oratore*, and so no claim could be made as to the contents of the treatises, and hence on Cicero's originality.

Whether inspired by Aristotelian thought or by a Hellenistic systematization, the taxonomy presented by Cicero is the first attempt at a taxonomy of humor from a linguistic viewpoint. If we compare the taxonomy to contemporary taxonomies (see ch. 3), it is amazing how little progress has been made. It is even more amazing that so few of the authors who introduced taxonomies of humor seem to be aware that the distinction verbal/referential was introduced two millennia before; furthermore, Cicero is completely original in proposing a surprisingly modern empirical test for the verbal/referential opposition. The clarity of the passage warrants its quoting in full:

Nam quod quibuscumque verbis dixeris facetum tamen est, re continetur, quod mutatis verbis salem amittit, in verbis habet leporem omnem. (LXII, 252) (...) quoniam mutatis verbis non possunt retinere eandem venustatem, non in re sed in verbis posita ducantur. (LXIV, 258)

/What, said in whatever words, is nevertheless funny, it is contained in the thing, what loses its saltiness if the words are changed, has all the funniness in the words. (...) because after changing the words they cannot retain the same funniness, should be considered to rely not in the thing but in the words./

Thus, according to Cicero, translation permits a clear cut determination of a humorous text to one of the two categories. The criterion of resistance to translation seems to be the only empirical technique able to ascertain whether the humorous effect depends on the form of the linguistic sign (see ch. 3). It is clear that if the humorous effect resists paraphrase (endolinguistic translation) or translation (interlinguistic translation) or even intersemiotic translation (for instance, representation with a drawing), it depends only on the semantic content of the text. On the other hand, if the text cannot be modified and still remain humorous, the humorous effect depends on the form of the text. It should be noted that "form" does not pertain exclusively to the phonological/phonetic representation but also to the shape of the characters in pictograms or ideograms, etc. For instance, Chinese speakers enjoy puns based on the shape of the characters (Alleton 1970: 63-64).

Cicero's criterion is not without its flaws (see Attardo et al. 1991 and 1994 for a review of some of the problems encountered in applying it practi-

cally). As many translators and linguists interested in the theory of translation know, it is often possible to translate puns from one language to another (see Laurian and Nilsen (1989), Laurian (1992) and references therein). Actually a good translator may be able to find similarities in the two linguistic systems that will allow the rendering of the pun in another language with a minimum of distortion. The issue is not that of the practical feasibility of the translation or the ability of the translators. The rendering of puns in another language is a functional translation wherein the original text is deformed to achieve the desired effect in the target language, or is the result of accidental asystematic congruencies between the two languages. It remains that literal, non-functional translation of puns between unrelated languages is theoretically impossible. The impossibility derives from the fact that puns associate, for instance, two signifiers (the sounds or characters used to represent a word) that are identical or similar and two signifieds (the meaning of a word) that are different. Because the relation between the signified and the signifiers is arbitrary, every language articulates it differently. These issues will be developed further in ch. 3 and 4.

Cicero's originality should not be overemphasized, because it probably derives from the fact that the chapter on humor in the *De Oratore* is one of the few extended treatises on comedy that have survived. If several treatises on humor had been preserved, Cicero's would probably appear quite commonplace; for example, the distinction between figures of speech and of thought was common in the Greek and Roman rhetorical tradition, and the translation test also appears in a fragment from Alexander, a Greek rhetorician of the late 1st century AD, translated in Einarson (1945: 81-83).

### 1.3.2 Quintilian

Quintilian's (ca 35 - ca 100 AD) treatise on humor has the breadth of a separate text, although it is included as the third section of the sixth book in the *Institutio Oratoria*. Actually, both Quintilian and Cicero's texts on humor have been published separately in book form by Monaco (1967).

It should be noted that in Quintilian, as well as in Cicero, the issue of humor is not addressed independently, but in relation to its instrumental use in the art of oratory. This accounts for the importance of the issue of the appropriateness of humor, already found in Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. Quintilian's utilitarian attitude also sees humor as something with which one

can “relax” the mind:

*Animum ab intentione rerum frequenter avertit et aliquando etiam reficit et a satietate vel a fatigatione renovat (VI-3-1)*

/Frequently it [laughter] diverts the soul from the attention to matters and from time to time it also restores and renews from satiety or fatigue./

Quintilian, conforming to an established tradition, recommends avoiding exaggeration, and applying rules of “correctness” (for instance, to avoid jokes in a pathetic case). From this point of view, the traditional condemnation of humor seems to apply to the excessive use of humor rather than to humor itself. According to certain passages in Quintilian’s text, Cicero himself did not shy away from joking in the Forum, and often in his private life. Cicero himself, in fact, was reproached for his excessive use of humor.

Quintilian presents some rather pessimistic remarks to the effect that humor has not been “explained” even though many have tried. On a less pessimistic note, and striking a very modern chord, Quintilian stresses the fact that laughter (*risus*) has a psychological as well as a physical source (tickling, *corporis tactu* VI-3-7). More specifically Quintilian points out the polygenesis of humor, which does not reduce laughter to the physical symptom of a psychical event (humor), but recognizes the broader scope of the physical phenomenon.

*Praeterea non una ratione moveri solet: neque enim acute tantum ac venuste, sed stulte, iracunde, timide dicta ac facta ridentur, ideoque anceps eius rei ratio est, quod a derisu non procul abest risus. (VI-3-7)* /Moreover it [laughter] does not come from only one reason: in effect one not only laughs about pointed or amusing sayings or facts, but also about stupid, angry, timid [facts or sayings]; and because of this very fact the reason of this is double, because laughter is not far from derision/.

Quintilian connects the difficulty of providing a unique explanation for humor to its relationship, already emphasized by Cicero, with derision, thus restating the aggressive and negative characterization of humor in rather strong terms.

Quintilian accepts Cicero's division of referential versus verbal humor (*facto aliquo dictove* (VI-3-7)), but he also proposes six different kinds of humor, independently of the referential/ verbal opposition: *urbanitas*, *venustum*, *salsum*, *facetum*, *jocus*, *dicacitas*. Piddington (1933: 115) notes that "a precis of his account of the differences between the meanings of these words would be of little value since Latin authors are extremely lax in their use of the various terms." Moreover, little depends on this division. To give an idea of the differences in meaning in the six terms, let us note that *urbanitas* corresponds more or less to Aristotle's ἀστεῖα since they both are derived from the root meaning "urban, civilized." *Venustum* is closer to our "beautiful," while *salsum* uses the same metaphor of the English "salty" or "spicy." *Facetum* comes from the root *fac-* (to make) and thus has the meaning of "well done" and hence "pleasing." *Jocus* is close to our "joke" in the meaning of "not serious." *Dicacitas* is connected with *dico* (to say) and thus means generally "saying."

Quintilian introduces a tripartite division of the subject of humor: the subject can deal with others, ourselves, or a "neutral" ("middle") category which involves neither of the above. With humor directed towards others, Quintilian claims, "either we censure others' activities, or we refute them, or we praise them, or we react to them or we avoid them" (*Aliena aut reprehendimus, aut refutamus, aut elevamus, aut reperiuntur, aut eludimus*, VI-3-23). Quintilian's attitude towards the interpersonal use of humor does not seem to be reducible simply to any of the superiority or correction theories of humor, but rather shows a deep understanding of the diversity of the social use of humor.

Concerning humor directed towards ourselves, Quintilian notes that the same act if done out of imprudence or distraction is considered a blunder, whereas "if we fake it, it is believed funny" (*si simulamus, venusta creduntur*). This observation contains, in a nutshell, the recognition of the "playful" attitude connected with humor. From a strictly linguistic point of view, it involves the speaker's intentionality, i.e., distinguishes between involuntary humor, which is not meant to be funny, but is observed by an outside spectator who interprets it as funny or ridiculous, and intentional humor, in which a speaker says something which he/she intends to be funny and which may or may not be perceived as funny by a hearer.

Dealing with the third, neutral kind of humor, Quintilian makes a claim that anticipates almost down to the wording the "frustrated expectations"

theory (see below): "The third kind is, as he [Cicero] says, in the thwarting of expectations, taking differently the things said" (*Tertium est genus, ut idem dicit, in decipiendis expectationibus, dictis aliter accipiendis* (...)VI-3-24)). It should be noted that polysemy and ambiguity (cf. the reference to "taking things differently") are at the center of modern linguistic research on humor.

Quintilian's anticipations of linguistic thought do not end there. He notes that all tropes (figures of speech) are possible sources of humor (VI-3-66) and he mentions both *de re* and *de dicto* tropes, with references to several authors who had devised taxonomies of these (*nonnulli diviserunt species dictorum; /several divided the kinds of jests/, VI-3-70). Quintilian also mentions irony and parody. His sources, besides Cicero, were clearly Greek, since some of his terminology remains in Greek, as is the case with "parody."*

Finally, to sum up Quintilian's thought, consider this passage which again shows surprising similarities between Latin thought and modern linguistic research:

Et Hercule omnis salse dicendi ratio in eo est, ut aliter quam est rectum verumque dicatur: quod fit totum fingendis aut nostris aut alienis persuasionibus aut dicendo quod fieri non potest. VI-3-89.

/And, by Hercules, all the meaning of making jokes is in this, that it is said differently than what is right and true: which is all done by pretending either our or someone else's beliefs, or by saying what cannot be./

Compare these claims with Raskin's (1985: 127; see also ch. 6) analysis of jokes, which isolates three basic semantic oppositions: real/unreal, normal/abnormal, possible/impossible. Strictly speaking, Quintilian gets only one category "right" (possible/impossible), but clearly *right* and *true* are not very far from *real* and *normal*. This is not meant to imply that modern research lacks originality or that "all has already been said." Rather, it is interesting to seek to identify those ideas that appear over and over in a field, constituting often overlooked threads which may unite researchers whose goals and interests often vary significantly.

### 1.3.3 Horace

Horace (65-8 BC) left no text dealing specifically with humor; he is mentioned here only because his influence was strongly felt in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. His influence was exerted through what seems to have been his last written work, the *Epistula ad Pisones*, known also as the *Ars Poetica*. This text is a digression on matters of poetic expression, with strong Aristotelian influences. The passages which have had the greatest influence on the theory of humor are those in which Horace claims the necessity of a correspondence between the subject matter and the form:

versibus exponi tragicis res comica non vult (Ars Poetica 89)  
/a subject for comedy refuses to be handled in tragic verse/  
(Kraemer 1936: 400)

Another topic which has become associated with Horace's formulation was the idea that comedy could "educate," that is, present ideas in an accessible and pleasant way. Both of these ideas will enjoy considerable reputation in the Renaissance (see below). For more on Horace's thoughts on humor, see Plebe (1952: 76-77).

### 1.3.4 Donatus

The grammarian Donatus (4th century A.D.), whose fame resides in his grammatical/rhetorical treatise, also wrote commentaries on Terentius' comedies. Included in these is a small treatise titled *De Comoedia*. Donatus' sources are generally Latin, and particularly Cicero. Donatus attached particular importance to the use of humorous names, and one finds traces of this interest in Renaissance plays. Donatus is not of particular interest as an original thinker, but deserves mention because of the great influence he had on the theories of humor and comedy through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (see Herrick (1950: 65-70)).

### 1.3.5 The Middle Ages

From the point of view of humor theory, the Middle Ages were really the "dark ages," because there was little theorizing on humor. The only name worth mentioning is that of John Tzetzes (1110 - 1185?), who wrote a brief

(92 lines) pedagogical poem entitled *Ἰάμβοι τέχνηκοι περί κωμωδίας* (*Technical Iambs on Comedy*) which deals with comic poetry, among other things. The text and some comments are to be found in Janko (1984). Tzeztes reveals little Aristotelic influence (Cooper 1923: 97-98), and by the time he was writing, *Poetics* had nearly been forgotten.

Not so, however, by the Arabs, who appear to have been familiar throughout the Middle Ages with the text of the *Poetics* (Cooper 1923: 94-95). Averroes' paraphrase of the Arabic translation of a Syriac translation has become famous because it was translated into Hebrew and Latin (1256, by Hermanus Alemanus), and it understandably bears little similarity to the Greek original. Averroes' translation includes the definition of comedy, which thus may have been familiar to those scholars who came into contact with the *Poetics* through his translation (see Herrick 1950: 24).

Dante, writing at the beginning of the 14th century, calls his masterpiece "comedy" on the grounds of its "mixture" of styles and subject matter. We can detect a faint echo of Aristotle's warnings on appropriateness of style in relation to the characters and the events, but the most important influence at work in Dante is that of Horace. Serper (1983) notes the same Horatian influence in the authors of the *Fabliaux* as well as the idea—made popular by Isidore of Seville (ca. 570-636)—that some types of literature were meant for "fun" (*delectatio*), .

## 1.4 The Renaissance

The sections on Greek and Latin thinkers above confirm that some ideas were common to both the Greeks and the Latins, who mostly derived them from Greek sources. The next sections will investigate how some of these ideas were picked up by Renaissance thinkers. Because the *Poetics*, one of the most important texts defining humor, had been "lost" during the Middle Ages, it was not part of the intellectual debate of that time (notwithstanding Averroes' translation and some influences on secondary authors). The Renaissance is marked by the rediscovery of Greek originals, including the *Poetics*. In 1508, Aldus Manuntius in Venice printed the first modern edition of the Greek text of the *Poetics*, a decade after Lorenzo Valla's Latin translation, and it had a great impact on literary criticism almost immediately (see Weinberg (1961: 361-371)).

Identifying the history of the theory of humor in the Renaissance with the history of the rediscovery and interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and of the theory of humor included therein, is roughly correct because most of the definitions of humor and comedy produced during the Renaissance appear in that context; however, one should not overlook the presence of Donatus' ideas or the commentaries to the comedies of Aristophanes, which contained the treatises "On comedy" and the *Tractatus Coislinianus*. Their influence is particularly evident in some of the authors that we will consider in this section.

The main part of our attention here is devoted mainly to the Italian theorists for the reason that, chronologically at least, they were the first to take advantage of the "new" ideas introduced by Aristotle to elaborate on a new theory of humor and comedy. In no way can the following considerations be construed as an attempt to reconstruct the debate within and around Italian Renaissance Aristotelianism. The goal of the following section is merely to present some of the ideas of the classical theories of humor before the great "division" between "psychological" and "literary" theories of humor in the early 17th century.<sup>7</sup>

Renaissance theorists were mostly concerned with the formulation of a set of rules (the well known "unities") for the purpose of distinguishing between Medieval farce and the new "cultivated" comedy. The rediscovered classics offered a tool suitable for this endeavor. As a result, two independent concerns were combined: on one side, the historical interest in what the classics had said, and on the other, the search for a set of criteria by which to judge comedies. Often the two are indistinguishable, but this need not concern this discussion.

Several published works cover the study of humor in the Renaissance. Weinberg (1961) is a thorough coverage of the influence of the classics on Renaissance literary theory in general. The history of the influence of the *Poetics* on literary criticism related to comedy has been summarized and presented by Spingarn (1908: 101-106), Cooper (1923[1956]), and by Herrick (1930) for England and (1950) more in general. Weinberg (1953) presents a brief but enlightening overview of how the Renaissance theorists distort the classical theories. Wimsatt (1969: 18-21) contains a brief summary of

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<sup>7</sup>Whenever possible and practical, an effort has been made to quote direct sources. When these were difficult to access, secondary sources have been employed.

the more important theories and useful bibliographic notes (see also Radcliff-Umstead (1969: 2-10)). The reader interested in a historical overview should turn to these sources.

Table 1.1 provides a chronological overview of the eight authors examined.

Table 1.1: Italian Renaissance Treatises on Humor

Date of Publication	
1511	Vettore Fausto
1548	Robortello
1550	Maggi
1551	Muzio
1561	Scaligero
1562	Trissino
1570	Calstevetro
1572	Pino Da Cagli

**1.4.1    Vettore Fausto**

In 1511, Vettore Fausto (1480 - 1550) published the *De comoedia libellus* (Booklet on comedy). It is one of the first books to include references to the *Poetics*. Aristotle's equation of comedy and *turpitude* (ugliness) and some historical information are quoted (see Weinberg (1961: 367) and Herrick (1950: 64)). Fausto also mentions the verbal/referential opposition (see Weinberg (1961: 90)).

**1.4.2    Franciscus Robortellus**

Robortellus (1516 - 1567) (or Robortello in the Italian version of the name) is the author of a commentary to the *Poetics* to which an essay on comedy was appended. An English translation of his *Explicatio eorum omnium quae ad Comoediae artificium pertinent* (1548) is to be found in Herrick (1950: 227-239). Robortellus' essay is a learned survey of the history of comedy, quoting all the usual sources: Aristotle (predominantly), Cicero, Quintilian, Horace,

Donatus and Aristides, the author of a *Rhetoric*, to whom Robortellus owes his emphasis on “humble style.”

Diction in comic discourse ought to be simple, easy, open, clear, familiar, and finally taken from common usage: for, as Aristides the rhetorician says, simple discourse, such as comic discourse is, does not admit lofty diction since, as has been said, it has thoughts that are simple and humble. (Robortellus 1548, in Herrick 1950: 237)

The Horacean idea of correspondence between style and subject matter is central to Robortellus’ concerns: “Since comic discourse is simple (...) its thoughts ought to be humble and not at all lofty.” (Robortellus 1548, in Herrick 1950: 236)

### 1.4.3 Madius

One of the most acclaimed Renaissance treatises on humor is Madius’ (? - 1564) (Vincenzo Maggi) *De Ridiculis*, published in 1550 with his commentary to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Herrick (1950: 41) calls it “the most elaborate discussion of the risible in the sixteenth century,” and Piddington (1933: 155) calls it “most interesting” from the psychological point of view.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Bergler (1956: 4) erroneously attributes Cicero’s “surprise” theory to Madius. Madius not only does not borrow the “surprise” theory from Cicero, but the following passage from the *De Ridiculis* clearly shows that Madius was criticizing Cicero for not mentioning it:

Unde mirari satis non possum cur Cicero, qui de ridiculis plenius tractavit de admiratione, quae est una risus causa, ne verbum quidem fecerit, cuius tamen omnino meminisse eum oportebat, cum risus numquam sine admiratione fieri possit. (Madius 1550 in Weisberg 1970: 98-99) /Hence I cannot marvel enough why Cicero, who dealt fully with the ridiculous, about surprise, which is a cause of laughter, did not even say a word, which [surprise], however, he really should have remembered, because laughter can never arise without surprise./

Cicero does mention surprise (*admiratio*) but only in a list of types of humor (see above) and in *De Oratore* LXX, 284:

Sed ex his omnibus nihil magis ridetur quam quod est praeter expectatione.  
/But of all this at nothing does one laugh more than at what is beyond expectations./

Madius' text follows Cicero's treatise very closely, commenting upon it and its examples. Herrick (1950: 41-52) follows Madius' text in detail. Madius echoes the division of humor into *de re* and *de dicto*, which has its roots in Cicero (1.3.1) and the *Tractatus Coislinianus* (1.2.3) (see Herrick 1950: 44).

His most interesting insight into humor, and also one of the departures from Cicero's commentary, is his emphasis on *admiratio*, i.e., surprise (see Herrick (1950: 44) who translates *admiratio* as "admiration" in "the old-fashioned sense of astonishment, wonder, surprise"). The following passage from the *De Ridiculis* gives a good idea of the nature of Madius' argument:

Si turpitudine tantum esset risus causa, ea perseverante, risum quoque perseverare necesse esset. At nulla cessante turpitudinis causa, cessamus tamen a risu; ea enim turpia quae nobis familiaria sunt risum non movent. Igitur satis constat turpitudinem ipsam tantum risus causam non existere, sed admiratione quoque opus esse. (Madius 1550 in Weisberg 1970: 99) /If ugliness alone were the cause of laughter [=the thesis of Aristotle], while it continues to exist, laughter also should continue. But, without ceasing the cause of ugliness, we nevertheless cease laughing; also those things that are ugly but are familiar to us, do not cause laughter. Therefore it is clear enough that the cause of laughter does not reside only in ugliness, but it is also the work of surprise./

Another original note is given in Madius' consideration of the physiology of laughter. Madius emphasizes the fact that laughter is a reflex, and on these grounds he posits a direct relation between laughter, the heart, and the genitals, since in his conception of anatomy these two organs are the only ones not controlled by reason. Although the details of his physiology may be quaint (but see Herrick 1950: 50-52), this is most likely, the first attempt at a description of the physiology of laughter, and it anticipates the classic Darwinian treatment by three centuries. Madius also distinguishes very clearly between physiological laughter (e.g., from tickling), and psychological laughter:

Invenitur et alius risus qui fit ex tractatione quarundam corporis partium, verbi gratia "axillarum," de quo nunc sermo non est. (Madius 1550 in Weisberg 1970: 100)/One finds also another

laughter which arises from treating some body parts, pardon my words “armpits,” about which are outside the present discourse./

Even if of little direct interest for the linguistics of humor proper, Madius’ emphasis on the surprise (and so incongruity) of humor is an important part of the discussion of the classical theories of humor in the Renaissance.

#### 1.4.4 Girolamo Muzio

Girolamo Muzio (1496 - 1576) published his *Dell’arte poetica* in 1551. It is a three-book treatise in verses and a “reduction” (Weinberg 1970: 667) of Horace’s. Muzio’s ideas on comedy are those of Horace as well, with particular emphasis on the *decorum* (appropriateness) of the action. Muzio was interested in the issues surrounding the appropriateness of the use of the Italian language (as opposed to Latin) and claimed that Italian is adequate for comedy (“la nova lingua (...) é intenta al riso” I, 265 in Weinberg (1970: 173)). On Muzio, see Weinberg (1961: 729-731) and Weinberg (1970: 667-668) and references therein.

#### 1.4.5 Giulio Cesare Scaligero

Giulio Cesare Scaligero (Scaliger) (1484 - 1558) published a seven-book commentary on questions of poetics (*Poetices libri VII*) in 1561. His principal source is Aristotle, although Scaliger “does not hesitate to disagree openly with Aristotle” (Weinberg 1961: 744). In general, his attitude is that comedy has to amuse, regardless of externally imposed rules (see Herrick 1950: 86). He was a very influential critic who contributed to the transmission of the “unities,” particularly to the French writers of the 17th century. On Scaliger, see Weinberg (1961: 743-750) and Baldwin (1959: 171-175); on the “unities” and Scaliger’s role in their establishment, see Spingarn (1908: 94-100).

#### 1.4.6 Trissino

Giangiorgio Trissino (1478-1550) wrote a treatise on poetics (*Poetica*) in six parts. Inspired by Horace’s theory, the first four parts examine metrical and stylistic differences among genres primarily. The last two parts were published posthumously in 1562, and are the most interesting from the point

of view of humor theory because they consist of a commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*.

The sections on comedy are a passive repetition of the historical information provided by Aristotle; however, Trissino's definition of the ridiculous is more original. He begins by noting that:

Il ridicolo, adunque, come dice Aristotele, é una particula del brutto et è un difetto et una bruttezza che non è nè mortifera nè dolorosa. Tullio poi e Quintiliano, che quindi per avventura lo tolsero, dicono che 'l luogo e la sede del ridicolo è ne la bruttezza e deformità, non bruttamente. Ma per che cagione poi questa bruttezza muove riso, non dicono; e quella parte di Aristotele che forse lo dicea è perduta. Ora noi lo investigheremo in questo modo: manifesta cosa è 'l riso vien da diletto e da piacere che ha colui che ride, il qual piacere non può venirgli da altro che dai sensi. (Trissino 1562, in Weinberg (1970: 69-70), vol II) /Ridicule, thus, as Aristotle says, is a part of the ugly and a defect and an ugliness which is neither lethal nor painful. Moreover, Tullius [Cicero] and Quintilian, who took it hence probably, say that the locale and place of ridicule is in ugliness and deformity, not in an ugly manner. But why this ugliness moves laughter they do not say; and that part of Aristotle which perhaps said it is lost. Now we will investigate it thus: it is obvious that laughter comes from the delight and pleasure that has the laughter, which pleasure can come only from the senses./

Yet, Trissino remarks, pleasure in itself does not generate laughter. When laughter arises, the object that generates pleasure is "mixed" with "some ugliness," such as "an ugly and distorted face, an inept movement, a silly word, an awkward pronunciation, a rough hand, a wine of unpleasant taste, a bad smelling rose." The humorous effect is enhanced, concludes Trissino, if one expected them to be different "since then not only the senses but also the hopes are lightly offended" (Trissino, 1562, in Weinberg (1970: 70); see Herrick (1950: 41)).

Overall, Trissino's contribution to the debate on the nature of humor is a synthesis of Cicero's views with those of Plato, with special emphasis on the "thwarted expectations." Because of its Platonic derivation, Trissino's definition of humor belongs largely to the realm of ethics, wherein humor

is explained by human badness ("this pleasure comes to us because man is naturally envious and malicious" (Trissino 1562 in Weinberg 1970: 71)). On Trissino's theory of humor see also Herrick (1950: 40-41).

An evaluation of Trissino's definition of humor should not be limited to the "moral" aspect of humor. After repeating Aristotle's definition of humor as coming from ugliness, Trissino gives an example:<sup>9</sup>

(Il) Pievano Arlotto, il quale trovandosi in Fiorenza sopra una strada e passandogli appresso una giovane assai bella e ardita, egli disse ad un compagno che gli era seco: "Questa è una bella donna"; e la giovane ardita si volse ver lui e disse: "Io non posso già dir così di voi." E il Pievano subito rispose: "Sí bene, quando voi volessi dire una bugia di me come io l'ho detta di voi." /The Pievano [a sort of priest] Arlotto was in Florence on a road and as a very beautiful and hardy young woman passed by him he said to a companion who was with him: "This is a beautiful woman"; and the young and hardy woman turned and said: "I cannot say the same of you." And the Pievano immediately answered: "Yes, indeed, if you wanted to lie about me as I lied about you." /

This joke may not seem funny to contemporary readers because of its misogynistic nature or perhaps because of differences in the organization of the text of a contemporary joke, but it is a very interesting document because Trissino gives a detailed analysis of why it is funny in his opinion:

Quivi fingendo il Pievano bruttezza di animo in se stesso, cioè di aver detto bugia, scopre anco bruttezza nell'animo ingrato della donna che biasma chi la loda; et insieme motteggia in lei la bruttezza del corpo. (Trissino 1562 in Weinberg 1970: 74-75)  
/Here the Pievano pretending ugliness of soul in himself, i.e., of having lied, uncovers also ugliness in the ungrateful soul of the woman who blames he who praises her; and at the same time mocks the ugliness of her body./

It is clear from Trissino's discussion that "ugliness" does not mean only physical ugliness, but also any "improper" (i.e., socially unconscionable) behavior (lying, ungratefulness). It is amusing that Trissino seems oblivious of

<sup>9</sup>Which is actually the 71st "facezia" of the *Facezie del Pievano Arlotto* and comes from the 271st of Poggio Bracciolini's *Liber Facetiarum* (see Di Francia 1924-25: 388).

the fact that the joke has defined the woman as beautiful, and claims that the Pievano Arlotto is making fun of her physical appearance are hardly plausible.

### 1.4.7 Lodovico Castelvetro

Lodovico Castelvetro (1505-1571) is another of the Renaissance commentators on the Poetics; his commentary was first published in 1570. What sets him apart is his declared intention of using his commentary for the creation of an autonomous literary theory. 1978: 375). Castelvetro begins with a close commentary of Aristotle's text, but develops a theory of humor independently.

Castelvetro lists four sources of laughter:

1. the sight of people that are dear to us;
2. deceptions of others than ourselves. This can happen because of four reasons:
  - (a) ignorance of customs, madness, drunkenness
  - (b) ignorance of arts or sciences, and boasting
  - (c) willful misinterpretations and witty retorts
  - (d) chance and intentional deceptions
3. evil and physical disgrace presented under cover
4. sex

The first category seems to have little to do with humor (and more with pleasure or surprise). The second and third offer few surprises—all these distinctions had been made already by authors of the classic period or by their commentators. The last category is quite interesting since it predates Freud by a full 330 years. Castelvetro claims that everything pertaining to “the pleasures of the flesh” is funny; however, Castelvetro continues, the genitalia or “lascivious unions” are not funny when openly presented, but rather embarrassing. They become funny when they are presented “covered” with “some veiling, through which we can pretend not to laugh at the dishonesty [improperness], but at something else” (Castelvetro in Weinberg 1970: 135).

### 1.4.8 Bernardo Pino

Bernardo (or Bernardino) Pino da Cagli (ca. 1530 - 1601) is the author of a letter to Sforza Oddi, the author of a comedy (*Erofilomachia*). The letter is entitled *Breve considerazione intorno al componimento de la comedia de' nostri tempi* (Brief thoughts about the composing of comedy in our times), is dated 1572, and in it Pino develops some ideas on comedy.

Pino's theory of comedy is based on Horace, but he uses Aristotle for "the limitation of the comic subject" (Weinberg 1961: 581). He also follows Aristotle and Cicero in his definition of humor as coming from the "ugly" (*brutto*). He defines *brutto* as a "lack of proportion" as Trissino had also:

Nè per brutto si dee sempre intendere il disonesto e l'osceno, chè per sè stesse tali parole d'osceno e di disonesto hanno sempre significato di male. Ma per brutto l'ha da prendere quel che non ha le sue parti proporzionate e corrispondenti, da la quale corrispondenza nasce la bellezza, la quale non è altro che l'ordine e la proporzione delle parti. (Pino 1572 in Weinberg 1970: 635 vol II) /Neither by "ugly" one must always understand the dishonest [socially unacceptable] and obscene, because by themselves these words "obscene" and "dishonest" have always the meaning of "evil." On the contrary by "ugly" one should take what does not have its parts in proportion and corresponding (to each other), from this correspondence is born beauty, which is not anything else than the order and proportion of the parts. (see Weinberg (1961: 582))/

As examples, Pino quotes a sentence "ill accustomed to the understanding of the speaker or poorly worded" (1572 in Weinberg (1970: 636)) and the analysis of an example from the *Erofilomachia*:

(Ella) fa dire a quel servo che egli (il servo) al maggior buio della notte, se li fussero date cinquecento bastonate le riconoscerebbe tutte ad una ad una; ridicolo veramente e legiadro in bocca d'un servo qualle ella il dipinge, per l'indebita proporzione del vedere al buio le bastonate, che sono oggetto del tatto non delli occhi, e del riconoscere con la schiena il numero d'esse, che è della virtù intelletiva o della ragione, non semplicemente della facoltà sensitiva. (Pino 1572 in Weinberg (1970: 638)) / (You) have a valet

say that he in the thickest darkness of the night, if he were given five hundred blows he would recognize them all one by one; truly ridiculous, and beautiful in the mouth of a valet as you paint him, because of the undue proportion of seeing in the darkness the blows, which are the object of touch and not of the eyes, and the recognition with the back of their number, which belongs to the virtue of understanding or of reason, not just to the sensitive virtue./

From this passage, it is quite clear that Pino, as Trissino before, does not necessarily link the idea of humor with “evil” but only with social inappropriateness.

### 1.4.9 Influences in Europe

The debate around the *Poetics* had an immediate effect outside of Italy. The French school of the *Pléiade* was influenced by the Italian theorists (Spingarn 1908: 171-189) as well as authors such as Nicolas Rapin (1535? - 1609?) (see Herrick 1949: 13-14), Corneille (1606 - 1684), Boileau (1636 - 1711) (Weinberg 1953: 198-200) and in the tradition of Renaissance anatomy and physiology, Laurent Joubert’s (1529-1583) *Traité du ris* (1579[1980]). In England, Sidney (1554 - 1586) and Ben Johnson (1573 - 1637) were influenced by the Italian Renaissance theorists. More generally, the Elizabethan theory of comedy “was based” (Spingarn 1908: 287) on the writings of the Italian Renaissance authors reviewed above. Spingarn (1908: 287-291) documents the use of Trissino by Sidney and Johnson, while Baldwin (1959: 178-180) lists references by Sidney to Aristotle, Horace and Scaliger. Herrick (1949: 12-13) notes that Sidney, Ben Johnson, Dryden (1631 - 1700), and Hobbes (1588 - 1679) mention unexpectedness as a source of humor, and this idea can be traced back to Cicero.

Another strand of discussion about humor in the Renaissance concerns its appropriateness for the courtesan and its social acceptability (see Bourhis 1985b). This is of less interest from the current point of view, but is also strongly influenced by Cicero and the classical authors.

### 1.4.10 The Transition into Modern Thought

Several conclusions emerge from the foregoing discussion of the definitions and analyses of humor in the Renaissance. Aristotle, Cicero, and Horace are the three thinkers who determine the paradigm of the debate; the Renaissance theorists agreed or disagreed with them, but needed to take these works into account in any case. Despite this, the view of the Renaissance as a mere repetition of the classical theories of humor (Bergler 1956: 4; Piddington 1933: 155) is simplistic. While these author's works are deeply rooted in the Renaissance imitation of the classics, their work also contain some original thoughts, some deviations from the norms (e.g., Scaliger), and some syntheses of different points of view (such as the Platonic and Aristotelian view in Trissino).

The rediscovery of and commentary on the thoughts of Aristotle, Horace, and Cicero established a relatively homogeneous body of critical theories that enjoyed widespread distribution (Italy, France, England), had an important influence on the comic literature of these nations, and inevitably set some standards in the debate on humor that had to be taken into consideration by the authors who followed.

The Renaissance theorists examined in the previous section are the last to propose "global" theories of humor—that is, theories that try to account for all<sup>10</sup> the aspects of the phenomenon in an integrated holistic approach. In other words, humor is an integral part of the discussion about comedy as a literary and oratory genre in their treatment, as it was in the Classical theories and their Medieval continuations.

With the modern separation of literary and philosophical thought that began with the Enlightenment, this unity of concerns was lost. After the Renaissance begins the modern division of science in (academic) branches. The theories of humor that appeared in the next centuries were elaborated within the framework of a single discipline; they were philosophical, sociological, physiological, literary, or psychological. They may have been applied to

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<sup>10</sup>Or at least for what the Renaissance theorists perceived to be the relevant aspects of the phenomenon: thus, we have detailed accounts of the rhetorical and sociological approaches, historical accounts, some attempts at linguistic taxonomies, several ethical/moral issues, occasional physiological descriptions, but no psychological descriptions (unless one counts some vague anticipations of the incongruity theories) or evolutionary descriptions (the differences between children's humor and adults' humor go unnoticed).

another field, to be sure, but their inception reflected the specialized boundaries of the discipline in which they began, in compliance with the modern specialist conception of science. The interest in humor is no exception, and hence the theories that are developed after this period exist independently of the concerns of the other sciences, sometimes ignoring their results. The current interdisciplinary approach is naturally a reaction to this trend (see Introduction).

## 1.5 Modern Approaches to Humor Theory

Within the cultural growth of the Renaissance, one can perceive the signs of the specialization of knowledge that would lead to the separation of academic disciplines as independent autonomous bodies of knowledge and methodologies. Thus literary criticism, philosophy, physiology, physics, etc. begin to exist more or less independently.

Naturally, the Renaissance theories, as well as the classical ones that inspired them, fall short of the ideal that they themselves set; that is, they do not explain the phenomenon, but rather mix a description of the phenomena with explanatory attempts that cover some of the phenomena, yet fail to be "descriptively adequate."

So many, varied theories of humor have been presented since the Renaissance that several authors have attempted to classify them (for a review of classifications of humor see Keith-Spiegel (1972)). Precisely because of the specialization of the theories of humor and of the linguistic slant of this review, it is not necessary to review systematically all the theories in their chronological order of appearance. Linguistics as such was not an independent player on the scene until the 19th century, and then showed little, if any, interest in humor. Those thinkers who dealt with linguistic humor often only included a mention of puns (on the negative aspects of this tendency see Raskin (1987, 1991, in press)). Two exceptions are Bergson and Freud, who have shaped modern thought on humor more than anyone else and provided some insights on linguistic humor; they will be covered in separate sections.

What follows then is a brief and necessarily cursory topical treatment of some of the principal theories of humor with emphasis on those aspects that are most important from a linguistic point of view. A large number of anthologies of texts dealing with humor and humor theory is available:

Table 1.2: The Three Families of Theories

Cognitive	Social	Psychoanalytical
Incongruity	Hostility	Release
Contrast	Aggression	Sublimation
	Superiority	Liberation
	Triumph	Economy
	Derision	
	Disparagement	

Morreall's (1987) anthology-cum-essay on the philosophy of humor deserves a special mention. When such a text is available, it will be quoted instead of the primary source for the sake of simplicity. The reader will usually find there further comments and discussions.

### 1.5.1 Classification of Modern Theories of Humor

A commonly accepted classification divides theories of humor into three groups: incongruity theories (a.k.a. contrast) (Raskin 1985: 31-36), hostility/disparagement (a.k.a. aggression, superiority, triumph, derision) theories (Ibid.: 36-38), and release theories (a.k.a. sublimation, liberation) (Ibid.: 38-40). This classification (Table 1.2) will be adopted for the rest of the review of the literature and will be integrated with two classes of research that for various reasons pursue perspectives somewhat different than the three main theories—physiological and literary theories. The analysis of two major thinkers, Freud and Bergson, will also be dealt with separately due to their great influence “across the board,” so to speak, and whom, therefore, it would have been reductive to place under just one heading (although their theories do fall under the three classes above).

#### Incongruity Theories

The first authors generally associated with incongruity theories of humor are Kant (1724 - 1804) (see Morreall (1987: 45-50)) and Schopenhauer (1788 -

1860) (see Morreall (1987: 51-64)), but as it has been shown, “incongruity-based” issues were already discussed in the Renaissance (e.g., Madius) and can be traced back to the earliest theories: for example, Aristotle’s definition of humor as “something bad” was interpreted as meaning something unbecoming, out of place, thus not necessarily “evil” (e.g., Trissino; see 1.4.6).

Kant’s famous definition of laughter reads: “Laughter is an affection arising from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Kant *Critique of Judgement*, (1790: 177), quoted in Morreall (1987: 47)). Attention is usually drawn to the suddenness of the transformation and to the fact that the expectation is turned into nothing. Certainly, these are the roots of the modern incongruity theories of humor. It may be remarked also that Kant anticipates the “justification” of humor (see ch. 3 and references therein) when he remarks that “the jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment” (Ibid. 48).

Schopenhauer’s definition of laughter mentions “incongruity” explicitly: “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity.” (Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, 1819, quoted in Morreall (1987: 52)).

Since incongruity theories are based on the mismatch between two ideas in the broadest possible sense, they are the direct ancestors of “cognitive” theories, which currently seem to dominate the psychological field (see Raskin (1985: 32-33) and McGhee (1984)). A good explicit definition of incongruity is McGhee’s (1979: 6-7)

The notion of congruity and incongruity refer to the relationships between components of an object, event, idea, social expectation, and so forth. When the arrangement of the constituent elements of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous.

For discussion, see Forabosco (1992). The proposals closest to linguistic concerns are Koestler’s (1964) bisociation theory (see Milner 1972; see also 5.1.1), Suls’ (1972) incongruity-based two-stage information-processing model, Paulos’ (1977, 1980) catastrophe-theory model, and recently Hofstadter and Gabora’s (1989) cognitive model. On “cognitivist theories,” see Suls (1983) and Fara and Lambruschi (1987: 45-63).

A special type of incongruity is related to the idea of "play," which is an important factor in humor theory and has numerous implications for linguistic humor theories (see Huizinga (1939), Bateson (1953, 1955)). An important proponent of the play theory was Karl Groos, a Swiss philosopher who was a major influence on Sully and Freud (see below and Simon (1985: 205)). On the connections between play and language, with an ethnographic and folkloric slant, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1976, especially pp. 183-189) and references therein.

Incongruity theories are conceptually closer to linguistic theories of structuralist descent because they are essentialist. This higher degree of closeness has led to the frequent classification of linguistically based theories with incongruity theories. Much to the dismay of its proponent, this has happened also to the script-based semantic theory, despite its proclaimed and carefully argued neutral stand with regards to the three major groups of theories (Raskin 1985: 131-132), see Attardo and Raskin (1991) and ch. 11.

Since both incongruity theories and linguistic theories of humor are essentialist theories (as opposed to the sociological and psychological descriptivist paradigms), they share some aspects of the general outlook on the phenomena to be explained; however, it would be incorrect to claim that any linguistic theory of humor is necessarily incongruity-based (see a refutation of a recent challenge to incongruity theories in linguistic humor research in ch. 3), but, in principle, one can conceive of a non-incongruity based essentialist linguistic theory. This issue will be elaborated upon further in Attardo and Raskin (forthcoming).

Precisely because of this "essentialist" outlook, elements belonging to incongruity theories are often co-opted by other theories. In fact, the incongruity theory is not incompatible with the hostility and release theories (see, for example, Raskin (1985: 30)).

## The Hostility Theory

The earliest theories (Plato, Aristotle) all mention the negative element of humor, its aggressive side. The idea has had numerous proponents and a great influence on the perception of humor in our culture. Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679) formulated most forcefully the idea that laughter arises from a sense of superiority of the laugher towards some object (what is commonly referred to as the "butt of the joke"). Hobbes uses the term "sudden glory,"

which has also been used to label this position. The most influential proponent of the superiority theory has been Bergson, for whom humor is a social corrective, i.e., used by society to correct deviant behavior. Sociological approaches to humor often emphasize the aggressive (or cohesive, depending on one's position in relation to the speaker) aspect of humor (for surveys see Hertzler (1970) and Fine (1983)). Aggressive humor is also known as "exclusive" humor; conversely, cohesive uses of humor are known as "inclusive" humor.

A discussion of Hobbes' theory will be found in La Fave et al. (1976: 63-66). On superiority theory, see Rapp (1951), Keith-Spiegel (1972: 6-7), Morreall (1983: 4-14), Zillmann (1983), Raskin (1985: 36-38; 1991, forthcoming). Because of their emphasis on the interpersonal, social aspect of humor, superiority/disparagement theories are of interest to the sociolinguistics of humor, but of limited application elsewhere. Among contemporary major researchers to follow hostility theories are La Fave (1972), Lixfeld (1978) Gruner (1978), and Mio and Graesser (1991). An interesting attempt at blending superiority and cognitive (incongruity) theories is Kreidler *et al.* (1988).

## **Release Theories**

Release theories maintain that humor "releases" tensions, psychic energy, or that humor releases one from inhibitions, conventions and laws. The most influential proponent of a release theory is certainly Freud (1905). For an overview of other proponents of release theories, see Keith-Spiegel (1972: 10-13), Morreall (1983: 20-37), and Raskin (1985: 38-40).

In terms of linguistic behavior, release theories are interesting because they account for the "liberation" from the rules of language, typical of puns and other word-play, and also for the infractions to the principle of Cooperation (Grice 1975, 1989) typical of humor at large. This aspect of linguistic humor has been labelled "defunctionalization" (Guiraud 1976: 111-119) (see ch. 10). Among contemporary major researchers to have proposed release theories are Fry (1963) and Mindess (1971).

## Literary Approaches

Until the Renaissance, literary criticism was intertwined with philosophical and psychological thought on humor. The emergence of literary criticism as an autonomous discipline, and the Romantic idea of the author as a genius detached literary criticism from the theory of humor. This was unfortunate since both literary criticism and humor theory could gain from attention to one another (literary criticism by being aware of advances in humor theory; humor theory by using literature to go beyond the simplest and most accessible examples). The break-up was probably inevitable, however, since the main focus of literary theories is the literary object, not the reason why a given text is funny.

Gourévitch (1975), Jardon (1988), Lewis, (1989) and Bariaud et al. (eds.) (1990) offer a good idea of some of the issues involved in the current discussion on humor in literary criticism. A short, but penetrating, characterization of the "Harvard theory of comedy," including Barber (1959), Segal (1968), and Levin (1987) is provided by Evans (1989). On literary research in America, see Nilsen (1992).

Resolutely anti-theoretical, uninterested in generalizations applicable to "humor" at large (see Lewis (1989: 3)), these authors seem to adopt a "polythetic" view of comedy and are interested in "recurring plots, characters and techniques" (Evans 1989: 309). The most quoted authors are Freud and Bergson as well as some authors who have proposed unsystematic and impressionistic views on humor which rely mostly on images (on Meredith's (1828-1909) views on humor, see Cooper (1918) and Sypher (1956); on Frye's see Gourévitch (1975: 17-19), Palmer (1984: 58-60), Jardon (1988: 216-217), and Lewis (1989: 64-65)).

Literary theories that mix psychological ideas (Freud, and often Jung) with genre theory and scattered observations (on these theories, see a review in Jardon (1988)) have had some success. The works by Bakhtin (1984) and Huizinga (1939) are also very popular and often quoted (see Ferroni 1974). The psychological and Bakhtinian traditions may not be unconnected; see Byrd (1987) who argues for an influence of Freud on Bakhtin.

Linguistics has had virtually no influence at all in this context—witness the uncomprehending quotations in Lewis (1989: 162-163) and Nelson (1990: 125-126) of Raskin's script-based theory. Jardon (1988) is one exception (see Attardo 1990b), since she is aware of the linguistic (mostly European) de-

bate on humor. Another exception is O' Neill (1987), who advocates the application of the "ludic" aspect of games (e.g. Huizinga) to literary criticism. Lately, there has been some evidence that the literary field may be opening up to humor research. For instance, Lewis (1989) considers sociological humor research in a literary context. However, it is possible that literary criticism and humor theory may not converge. Obviously, the authors have to explain what is "funny" before analyzing it, and that is why there is an overlap between the two fields, but that does necessarily imply some convergence is necessary or even desirable.

Another strand of philologically oriented literary research on humor comprises such authors as Lewicka (1974, and references therein), Garapon (1954), Bourhis (1964, 1985, 1986a/b, 1988), and many others (see the papers in Lewicka (ed.) 1981) who operate on the border between literature, the linguistic description of a language at a given moment in time, its humorous resources, and the typology of humorous genres, which often differ vastly from those current nowadays.

Among the most studied genres is the learned predecessor to today's joke, i.e. the Renaissance *facetia* codified in various collections (e.g., *Liber facetiarum* by Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), the *Detti del Piovano Arlotto*, etc.; see Sozzi (1966), Tateo (1973), Bowen (1985a, 1986a/b/c, etc.). Often these collections of jokes had been anticipated by the Greek and Roman collections of jokes (e.g., the *Philogelos*; see Cataudella (1971: 9-34), Baldwin (1983) and references therein). Some of those short stories have lost their humor in the couple of millenia that separate us from those who enjoyed them; others such as the *λόγοι συβαριτικοί* (*Tales about Sybaris*) translate naturally into today's ethnic jokes (Sybaris was a town in Southern Italy whose inhabitants were considered to be dumb; cf. the Jewish jokes about Chelm).<sup>11</sup>

## Physiological Theories

Even less related to linguistics are the physiological explanations/descriptions of humor. Their approach is somewhat different from the three main theories listed above because their focus is not on what is funny, but rather on the physiological causes and/or correlates and effects of humor.

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<sup>11</sup>On the subject of "fooltowns" see Esar (1952: 97-99; 1978: 295-296) and now Davies (1991a).

Decartes (1596 - 1650) was one of the first to present a physiological theory of laughter (his predecessors were Madius and Joubert, see above). According to him, laughter is caused by the blood flow, moving the lungs and the diaphragm (see Morreall (1987: 21-25)). A synopsis and critical discussion of the physiological/psychological theories of laughter by Darwin (1809 - 1882), Spencer (1820 - 1903), Bain (1818 - 1903), the founder of *Mind*, Hall (1844 - 1924), the founder of the American Psychological Association, Sully (1842 - 1923), the founder of the British Psychological Association, and others, is to be found in Simon (1985: 178-210). Simon emphasizes the early connections of these authors with the incongruity theory (mediated via Kant) and relationships with literary criticism (mediated via Meredith, see below).

On the "arousal" theories, which explain humor as a change in degrees of arousal, see McGhee (1979: 15-19; 1984: 38-39), and Berlyne (1972). Numerous scholars have maintained either that laughter is "good for the body" (on the relationship between humor and health see Robinson 1983), or that laughter is an "adaptive behavior" (McDougall 1908: 386-397; Chafe 1987), or that it is a physiological "relic" of some lost instinctual reaction (see Keith-Spiegel (1972: 5-6)). Proponents of the latter thesis often emphasize the connection between laughter, smiling, and showing teeth (e.g., Porteous (1989)). Currently, studies lean more towards the study of humor as an enabling mechanism for thought (e.g., Ziv (1984)), or on the physiological effects of humor (e.g., Cousins (1979) and numerous publications by Fry, for example, Fry (1977), and Fry and Savin (1988)).

### 1.5.2 Freud

In this section, Freud's contribution to the linguistics of humor will be analyzed. The analysis will begin by presenting the reasons for Freud's importance from the vantage point of linguistics and will subsequently discuss the impact that these aspects of Freud's thought have had on the field. The following should not in any way be construed as a presentation of Freud's theory of humor, let alone of Freud's thought. Technically speaking, Freud's theory would fit under the "release" theories; it is dealt with independently here for its great influence on humor research.

The major point of interest in Freud's work (Freud 1905) derives from the fact that, as Manetti notes,

for the first time in the history of the problem a large and accurate attention was given to the technical phenomenological aspect of humorous problems (in a broad sense) and to morphological [not in the linguistic sense, SA] rules of production of humorous expressions (Manetti 1975: 132).

Freud's work on the techniques of jokes constitutes the first chapter of *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Freud's procedure consists of analyzing several jokes with the use of mechanisms of "reduction" and in grouping the jokes into categories according to the humorous techniques which are used in them. "Reduction" is a form of paraphrase, see Ferroni (1974: 57-58). The twenty different categories which are the outcome of Freud's analysis (see Bergler (1956: 31-32), Toschi Nobiloni (1984: 11-12), Wenzel (1989: 24-26) will not be quoted in full here because, while Freud himself admits that the limits between the different categories are not absolute, Todorov notes that

the subdivisions (...) do not correspond to waterproof groups but constitute characteristics that can be identified successively, and that taken together, could eventually apply to one joke (Todorov 1977: 315).

Critical discussion of this aspect of Freud's theory has focused on the possibility of improving Freud's list of mechanisms. Freud accepts the division of humor into verbal and referential (*de dicto* vs. *de re*). In the former,

the technical operation [on the grounds of which the jokes are classified] consists of a direct intervention in the single units of meaning and in their relationships, in the second they consist of an intervention in the conceptual disposition of a sentence or a broader group of sentences (Ferroni 1974: 59).

Todorov discusses Freud's analysis at length. He notes that, rather than introducing the referential/verbal distinction, Freud tacitly accepts it and that after accepting it, he never discusses it explicitly. Todorov notes that translation alone allows one to determine whether a joke belongs to the verbal or referential category. No mention is made by either author of Cicero's earlier suggestion in the same sense. Cicero's discussion is, however, mentioned by

Toschi Nobiloni (1984: 12). The problems with Cicero's empirical translation test have been discussed above (see section 1.3.1).

Freud's twenty different mechanisms operate inside both verbal and referential humor. They can be reduced to two major mechanisms: condensation and displacement (see Manetti (1976: 132) and Ferroni (1974: 61)). Todorov's analysis reaches the conclusion that "there is condensation each time that only one signifier takes us to the knowledge of more than one meaning; or more simply: *each time that meaning exceeds the signifier*" (Todorov 1970: 320). Displacement is so called "because the essential element is given by the diversion of the mental path, by the displacement of the psychic accent on a theme different from the initial one" (Freud 1905: 75) i.e., "a change in the way of considering [something]" (Freud 1905: 74).

According to Todorov, condensation and displacement correspond to the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships.

Condensation includes all tropes, metaphor as well as metonymy, as well as other relationships of evocation of sense; displacement is not a metonymy, it is not a trope, because there isn't a substitution of sense, but the institution of a relationship between two senses which are present at the same time. (Todorov 1977: 333)

This leads Todorov to the conclusion that "the symbolic mechanism that Freud describes is not specific at all: the operations he identifies (in the case of the joke) are simply those of each linguistic symbolism, as they have been classified, in particular by the rhetorical tradition" (Todorov 1977: 345). Todorov also notes that Benveniste reaches similar conclusions while analyzing the role of language in Freud's analysis: "the unconscious uses a proper 'rhetoric' which, such as style, has its own 'figures'" (Benveniste 1966: 86). In short, Freud's analysis is not so much specific to humor, but rather serves as an analysis of the linguistic tools that express it which are not peculiar to humor (see also Todorov (1981)).

After the discussion of the techniques of humor (Freud 1905: 16-89), Freud moves on to introduce other distinctions, such as "neutral" jokes versus "tendentious" jokes and concepts such as "economy of psychical expenditure," which are familiar to all scholars in humor research. These are, however, less interesting from the linguistic perspective (but see Nilsen (1989) and Wenzel (1989) on the use of the category of "tendentious"), and they will not be pursued here. On the possibility of treating Freud's thoughts on

humor as a “collection of hypotheses” that can be handled separately, see Kline (1977: 11).

More interesting than Freud’s speculations are the reactions from subsequent scholars to Freud’s analysis of the techniques of jokes. Piddington (1933) only mentions the study of humor techniques. Bergler (1956) lists all the twenty categories, with examples, but does not comment upon them and does not even mention the “condensation/displacement” subdivision. Gregory (1923) does not mention the analysis of the techniques and only comments on the economy theory. So does Milner (1972), who also comments on the “ethnocentricity” of the subdivision in *Witz* (jokes), comic and humor, based on “German lexical categories.” Curti (1982) provides an in-depth critical discussion of the economy theory, which he rejects.

Aubouin (1948: 213-223) ridicules the economy theory but, more importantly, he shows that Freud’s theory can be proven to be equivalent to the incongruity/contrast theory. Consider the following passage by Freud:

If, therefore, we derive unmistakable enjoyment in jokes from being transported by the use of the same or a similar word from one circle of ideas to another, remote one (...), this enjoyment is no doubt correctly to be attributed to economy in psychical expenditure. The pleasure in a joke arising from a ‘short circuit’ like this seems to be the greater the more alien the two circles of ideas that are brought together by the same word – the further apart they are, and thus the greater the economy which the joke’s technical method provides in the train of thought. (Freud 1905: 120)

Aubouin notes that “being transported (...) from one circle of ideas to another” and being “apart” are “circumlocutions” for contrast. Freud dismisses contrast after a brief discussion as “a mean of intensifying their [=jokes] effect” (Freud 1905: 154). Freud argues that contrast might play a more important role in the comic, as opposed to jokes. The possibility of this distinction between the two subjects has been refuted by Ferroni (1974: 56). This issue is far from being purely terminological. As has been anticipated, linguistics is much closer conceptually to the so-called incongruity/contrast theories. Freud will be found to be the unacknowledged source of some of the structuralist accounts in chapter 2; therefore, it is important to acknowledge

the uninterrupted filiation of the contrast theories, down to their manifestations in linguistics. Freud's work is still very important in German linguistic research (see ch. 5) and elsewhere (see Dascal (1985) and Todorov (1981)).

Freud's thought was further developed and applied to other realms of study (such as caricature) by a number of scholars (e.g. Kris 1952). Fónagy's (1982) work on the connections between humor and metaphors combines Freudian thought and sophisticated linguistics (see Ch. 4). A detailed account of Freud's thought and a criticism of the "economy of psychic energy" theory will be found in Morreall (1983: 27-37). Accounts on Freud and his followers will be found in Grotjahn (1957: 1-32), Kline (1977), McGhee (1979: 31-35), Civita (1984: 59-86), Lixfeld (1984: 200-207), Oring (1984), Simon (1985: 211-244), Kofman (1986), Fara and Lambruschi (1987: 7-43), Weber (1987), and Neve (1988). Freud's work has been extremely influential in literary criticism and has had an impact on (non-psychoanalytic) psychological research as well. Another important aspect of Freud's thought, upon which he was heavily influenced by Groos, is the "liberation" from the constraints of mature, adult, logic that humor provides. See the "release" theories above, 1.5.1.

### 1.5.3 Bergson

Bergson's work on humor<sup>12</sup> has aged faster than Freud's. This is not due to what either author had to say about humor, but rather to their academic background. Freud was starting a new discipline, whereas Bergson was writing a treatise in aesthetics, a branch of philosophy which has undergone a serious crisis and has been subsumed in part by "philosophically-based" literary criticism (e.g. Marxist), structuralism, post-structuralism, and in general by branches of various disciplines concerned with art. Thus, whereas Freud's book has enjoyed a growing interest and still remains a classic inside and outside of psychology, interest in Bergson's text has been limited mostly to literature (see Attardo (1988, 1991b) for reviews). Humor theories based on aesthetics are still present (see Noguez (1969, 1989), Baudin (ed.) (1983, 1984, 1985, 1986), Preisenzand and Warning (eds.) (1976), etc.), but they enjoyed their heyday in France in the post-war period (see the debate on

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<sup>12</sup>As with Freud, Bergson's theory would fit in one of three groups above, namely in the incongruity theories, but it is dealt with individually because of its importance.

the review *Revue d'esthétique* which involved Lalo (1948), Victoroff (1948), Bayer (1948), Aubouin (1950), and others).

Bergson's theory is an incongruity-based theory (it has its prime example in the contrast between the natural and the mechanical), but this premise is exploited for a sociologically-oriented analysis (humor as a social corrective).

Bergson begins from three points: laughter is a human phenomenon, it is social, and it requires an intellectual outlook from the participants rather than an emotional one. In other words, humor does not withstand (strong) emotions. Linguistically, Bergson has little to add to observations made before him: he discriminates between referential/verbal humor very clearly (Bergson 1901: 78-79) and gives three "mechanisms" (*procédés*) valid for both referential humor and for verbal humor (repetition, inversion, interference of series). Bergson's examples come primarily from French classical comedy and from the *Vaudeville* theater. Bergson also hints at a "logic of imagination" (Bergson 1901: 32) which anticipates Aubouin's "justification" and Ziv's "local logic" (see below).

Bergson's influence on French literary theory has been undeniable. His influence extends also to Anglo-Saxon literary criticism, as well as to other traditions: see Hernandez (1983) on the influence of Bergson on Spanish literary criticism, for example, or Acevedo (1972), where Bergson is quoted, and Freud is not.

Perhaps the fact that Bergson's theory is based on the incongruity theory and thus can offer interesting insights, even from a linguistic point of view, can account for some of its influence, rather than attributing it to his fame gained outside of the field of humor. The incongruity-based theory can account for developments such as Garapon's (1954) or Tetel's work (1964) in French literature: both are strongly influenced by Bergson's views but have little interest either in the social corrective or the "mechanical" doctrines. Interest in Bergson is not dead either: see Weber (1987), Rich (1989), and Bariaud et al. (eds.) (1990) in which Bergson's work was the second most frequently quoted text, after Freud.

In fact, the mere presence of these two works in the current debate on humor is proof of their significance: consider the fact that most authors who write on humor still discuss Freud and Bergson, while nobody bothers reading the scores of books on humor published perhaps much less than 90 years ago. Unfortunately, the importance and greatness of these two works often overshadows subsequent contributions. Humor research has advanced

in the last half of the century well beyond Freud and Bergson, and it is time for scholars to become aware of this.

## Chapter 2

# The Linear Organization of the Joke

The purpose of this chapter is to present and discuss contributions to the analysis of jokes by structural linguists in Europe, and in particular those who are influenced by the theories of structural semantics as developed by Greimas. Algirdas Julien Greimas is an influential linguist/semiotician of a structuralist and post-structuralist orientation. He is well known for his studies on the theory of narrative, but in this context another aspect of his research the notion of “isotopy” will be the focus of the analysis. A number of scholars interested in humor in Europe have adopted the terminology and the formal apparatus of this branch of structural semantics, and therefore it is necessary to examine the definition of some important concepts in some detail, which are not without some problems. This chapter deals, then, with the analyses of the text of jokes proposed by structuralist scholars. The discussion will reveal that the most promising aspect of their work is related to the linear organization of the text of the joke.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The various works that will be reviewed and analyzed all refer, in varying degrees, to a semantic model of the joke which this writer has elsewhere called the “isotopy (disjunction) model” (Attardo 1987[1989], 1988: 351-352). Therefore it is necessary to examine in detail the concepts on which the theory is based. To that end, the first section deals with the isotopy theory. Unfortunately, two obstacles present themselves: a) several conflicting definitions of isotopy have been proposed by Greimas and his followers, and b) Greimas, and the other scholars who

adopt his model, have a tendency to use largely neologisms and technical (re)definitions of terms, which make access to the theory and the formulations difficult, if not impossible, unless one has armed oneself with a thorough understanding of the way the definitions have been reached. To this end, the first section of the chapter will follow Greimas' deductive introduction of the notion of isotopy, starting from the definition of the smallest semantic unit, and through the various ways these units are combined. Somewhat ironically, the conclusion of the entire section will be that the notion of isotopy parallels that of semantic unification, and ultimately overlaps with the idea of "meaning" or "sense" of a sentence/text.<sup>1</sup> The reader unwilling to follow the rather technical discussion may resume reading on section 2.1.4 where a review of the applications of Greimas' model begins.

The second section of the chapter deals with the narrative function theory, proposed by Violette Morin. Also in this case, various authors have used and/or revised the proposed description; in order to follow the various proposals regarding Morin's original three-function schema for the joke text it is necessary to begin by reviewing the notion of "narrative function" and its relevance to the humorous aspect of the text. Morin's definition of function will be found to be different than the standard meaning (introduced into folklore studies by Propp), and closer to that introduced by Claude Brémont in his "virtual function."

Because the isotopy disjunction model is based on the two fairly technical notions of "isotopy" and "narrative function" it is necessary to go into some detail in the exposition of these two concepts. This explains also why, after a very sketchy presentation of Greimas' model in section 1, a more thorough discussion is postponed until section 3 of the chapter.

The last section deals with the linear organization of the text of the joke proper. It will take advantage of the concepts discussed in the first two sections to present a summary of this author's research on the linear organization of jokes, which is inspired by the isotopy disjunction model.

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<sup>1</sup>French structuralist terminology runs parallel to customary semantic terminology in the US, e.g., *sème* = feature, etc. although they seem to have developed independently, at least initially. Unfortunately, the lack of exact matches between some terms complicates the task at hand.

## 2.1 The Isotopy–Disjunction Model

Discussion of the isotopy-disjunction model (henceforth IDM) must take into account the following four factors: 1) Greimas' definition of isotopy, 2) the context in which this definition was applied to humorous texts, 3) the revised definitions of isotopy that followed from the debate on isotopy, and, finally, 4) the ways in which the IDM has been applied to humor research. The next subsection will examine each of these in turn.

Greimas' position in humor theory is rather peculiar: to the best of this author's knowledge, Greimas never explicitly claimed to have proposed a model of jokes or of humor nor do any of his published materials deal primarily with humor-related issues, yet he is considered the origin of a branch of relatively important humor research in Europe.

Greimas' interest in humor is limited to two pages in Greimas (1966: 70-71)<sup>2</sup> in which he deals with the structure of jokes, and his remarks are inserted as an example in his broader discussion of the concept of isotopy. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Greimas disavows empirical relevance to the examples he introduces in *Sémantique structurale* (Greimas 1966: 32); thus one cannot attribute any responsibility to Greimas for the content of the analyses he proposes, let alone for the elaborations that other scholars have proposed and which are based on the text of Greimas (1966). Nevertheless, to simplify matters, the discussion will proceed assuming that Greimas would "stand by" his definitions.

### 2.1.1 Greimas' Model

Greimas (1966: 70) analyzes the following story:

- (1) C'est une brillante soirée mondaine, très chic, avec des invités triés sur le volet. A un moment, deux convives vont prendre un peu d'air sur la terrasse:  
— Ah! fait l'un d'un ton satisfait, belle soirée, hein? Repas magnifique... et puis jolies toilettes, hein?

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<sup>2</sup>Contrary to the usage in the rest of the text, in this case references are from the original French edition. Some marginal, but problematic, differences between the original text and the English translation made it simpler to translate the text literally. This does not imply a negative judgement on the translation which has been used as a reference.

- Ça, dit l'autre, je n'en sais rien.  
 — Comment ça?  
 — Non, je n'y suis pas allé! (Greimas 1966: 70)

/At a sophisticated party, two guests are talking outside. "Ah," says the first, in a satisfied tone, "nice evening, isn't it? Magnificent meal, and beautiful *toilettes* (=lavatories/dresses), aren't they?" "I wouldn't know," answers the second. "What do you mean?" "I did not have to go." /

Greimas singles out two parts which must be present in jokes: the *narration/presentation* and the *dialogue* (Greimas 1966: 70). The narration/presentation part has the function of establishing the first isotopy. Isotopies will be defined precisely below; at an intuitive level they are semantic interpretations of the text. The dialogue part of the joke "breaks" this isotopy, "suddenly opposing the first isotopy to a second one" (Ibid.). The collision of the two isotopies is brought about by the connecting term, which draws together the two isotopies. So, in the example above, the connecting term "toilette" allows the passage from the mundane isotopy (evening dresses) to the "lavatories" isotopy. According to Greimas, "in the simplest cases (puns, plays upon words), identity, or even simple similarity of the *formant*" (phonological representation) is enough to connect the two isotopies." (Greimas 1966: 71).

Greimas' analysis thus consists of two separate claims: 1) jokes are composed of two "parts"; and 2) jokes contain an "opposition" or a "variation" (Ibid.) of an isotopy, and at the same time a "camouflage" (Ibid.) of the opposition, performed by the connecting term.

The first claim will be developed fully by Morin (1966) and will be discussed in the forthcoming second section on narrative functions. A more detailed discussion of the "connecting term" will be undertaken in Ch. 3. The following subsection will examine the concept of isotopy, upon which the entire proposal is based.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>A little noticed fact is that Greimas' analysis of jokes is directly inspired by Freud. Greimas' isotopic clash strongly resembles Freud's "displacement" (Freud 1905: 51). Beyond the terminological diversity, there is little difference between a semantic isotopy and a "train of thought" or a "topic" (Freud 1905: 51). Thus the displacement from one train of thought to the other (Freud) corresponds to the passage from one isotopy to another (Greimas).

### 2.1.2 The Notion of Isotopy

In order to appreciate the discussion of Greimas' analysis from a linguistic viewpoint it is necessary to follow the arguments brought forth both by Greimas and some of the scholars who refer to his works rather closely in order to clarify the concept of "isotopy" and especially to distinguish among the various definitions of isotopy that have been proposed by Greimas and his followers alike, as will be done in section 2.1.3.

The exposition will be organized around the definition of semantic units and/or categories. Thus the concepts of "seme," "sememe" and "classeme" will be introduced first, followed by the concept of isotopy and the ways in which isotopies are identified. Several types of isotopy will be reviewed, and the section will be closed by a first discussion of the definition of isotopy reached thus far.

Greimas's goal in *Sémantique structurale* is to formulate a deductive foundation of semantics on a Hjelmslevian basis. Hjelmslev's (1943 [1953]) formalization of the Saussurean idea of *valeur*, i.e., a purely relational characterization of meaning, is the model for Greimas' analysis. Greimas' exposition begins from the discovery procedure of the smallest units of meaning (*sèmes*) and builds up to larger units.<sup>4</sup>

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A direct derivation from Freud's book is possible, if not probable: Freud (1905) is one of the few books explicitly quoted in Greimas (1966) and one of the jokes analyzed by Freud is also quoted by Greimas (albeit in a context unrelated to humor). Thus Greimas certainly knew Freud's model. On the other hand, since they are both examples of "contrast" theories (see Introduction, and ch. 1) the convergences might be coincidental. Ultimately, it matters little if Greimas' theory is dependent on Freud's. The important issue is that both theories are descriptively equivalent, and in any case Greimas translated Freud's impressionistic terminology into the more rigorous one of structural linguistics.

A counterargument to the claim above of the direct inspiration of Greimas' model from Freud's might be that for Freud displacement is only one of two basic techniques: displacement and condensation (Freud 1905: 16ff). However, as it has been shown in ch. 1, the distinctions between Freud's techniques are not exclusive, and in fact both displacement and condensation may coexist in a joke.

<sup>4</sup>The general background of his endeavor is to be found in Greimas (1956), since Greimas (1966) is practically without footnotes or bibliography, due to its origins as notes of courses taught at the Institut Henry Poincaré in the school year 1963-64 (see Brémont 1973: 9n). For a rich bibliography on Greimas, see Broden (1986). A broader description of the linguistic panorama in France in the 1960s (and before), with autobiographical details by Greimas and others, is to be found in Chevalier and Encrevé (1984). Cf. also Greimas (1986) and Coquet (1982).

## Semes, Sememes and Classemes

Greimas' starting point is the reckoning that phonological differences, determined using the principle of commutation, do not match semantic differences. For instance, in French /ba/ ("low") and /pa/ ("step") are phonologically opposed (they commute, i.e. the two words have different meanings), but '*bas*' is semantically opposed to '*haut*' ("high") not to '*pas*'. Hence Greimas' concluded that the analysis of phonemic oppositions will be useless at the semantic level, and therefore concluded that the semantic level must be analyzed autonomously, albeit with the same methodology (i.e., the principle of commutation); see Hjelmslev (1953: 74-75).

Greimas' ultimate goal is to identify the smallest units of meaning, which Greimas calls *sèmes* (Greimas 1966: 22). These units correspond, largely, to Katz and Fodor's (1963) semantic markers/distinguishers, and in general to what is known as semantic features (see Crystal 1991).

Semes can be considered from two different points of view—one abstract, the other concrete. Greimas labels the distinction as being between "immanence" and "manifestation." Semes are immanent (in other words, they are abstract entities) and can only be observed in their realizations within linguistic units—lexical, inflectional and derivational morphemes, etc. In Greimas' terminology, lexemes are any kind of linguistic unit having a meaning; see Schleifer (1987: 69); Ducrot and Todorov (1972: 265-266). Lexemes are "bundles" of semes, with an hierarchical organization (Greimas 1966: 36); for instance, VERTICALITY presupposes SPATIALITY. Hence, semes are manifested (i.e., instantiated) in lexemes.<sup>5</sup>

Since lexemes are the manifestation of semes, the next logical step of analysis is that of "breaking down" the lexemes in order to identify the semes and their hierarchical relations. Greimas uses the lexeme "head" (*tête*) as an example. The basic meaning is that of a part of the body.<sup>6</sup> Using a dictionary, Greimas lists a number of other meanings and more or less figurative expressions which reveal a "constellation of meanings" (Greimas

<sup>5</sup>Greimas discusses, and partially accepts, Pottier's analyses of the semantic field of "seats." Pottier was one of the first scholars to attempt componential semantic analysis in France and this is one of the few explicit acknowledgements in Greimas (1966). The terminology "sème," "lexème" and "classème" (see below) is borrowed from Pottier (1963); see also Pottier (1973).

<sup>6</sup>Greimas gives no indication as to how this semantic/logical primacy is ascertained.

1966: 44). These meanings can be arranged according to their greater or smaller generality. For instance, "head" as the whole body, e.g., "put a reward on someone's head," is opposed to "head" as part of the cranium, e.g. "face").

The presence of these different meanings is attributed by Greimas to the different contexts in which the lexeme "head" is to be found; hence, he draws the conclusion that "variations" in meaning are caused by differences in contexts (Ibid.). Greimas postulates that the lexeme has at least one seme which does not change in the various contexts (probably to account for the fact that there is a constant identity of the lexeme). He calls this invariant "semic nucleus"<sup>7</sup> (*noyau sémique*), formally denoted as "Sn." In "head," the semic nucleus are the two semes, EXTREMITY and SUPERATIVITY (i.e., the fact of being above). An example of non-nuclear seme is HORIZONTALITY, as in "the head of the line" (Greimas 1966: 46-47, see Schleifer 1987: 71).

Having postulated the existence of a "semic nucleus," the only cause for the differences in meaning listed above, according to Greimas, is that they "come from" the context: "context must present the semic variables which alone can explain the changes in the *meaning effects* which can be registered" (Greimas 1966: 45). These "contextual semes" are labelled "classesmes," denoted "Cs."

Any "meaning effect" (i.e., any of the actualizations of a lexeme in a context) is a sememe ("Sm").<sup>8</sup> From the foregoing definitions, it follows that any given sememe is the result of the sum of the semic nucleus and of whatever contextual seme(s) it occurs with. Formally, this definition yields the following often quoted formula:

$$(2) \text{ Sm} = \text{Sn} + \text{Cs}$$

It is worth noting that in this formula the symbol "+" represents "the unspecified relationships, often hypotactic [i.e., of inclusion<sup>9</sup>] between the

<sup>7</sup>Schleifer (1987: 71) translates "nuclear semes."

<sup>8</sup>Not to be confused with other definitions of sememe; see Crystal (1991: 312) and Eco (1975a: 136-137, especially 136n).

<sup>9</sup>Greimas (1966: 49) notes that the hypotactic relation of semes is defined in terms of presupposition (i.e., the seme SUPERATIVITY presupposes EXTREMITY.) It seems that a certain confusion in the notation complicates a fairly simple issue. Semes are in hypotactic relationships, which are defined in terms of presupposition. Classesmes co-occur with semes (or rather with their manifestations: i.e., sememes), and hence cannot be defined in the same terms.

semes" (Greimas 1966: 156), and thus does not correspond to Chomsky's (1957: 109) earlier use of the symbol to denote concatenation. No other explanation is offered for the formula, which must be understood intuitively. In the context in which it occurs, the most plausible interpretation seems to be that of the union of two sets.

### The Analysis of Classemes

According to Greimas, there are two possible ways to describe the functioning of classemes: an actual and a virtual description. Greimas presents both in some detail.

#### Actual Description of Classemes In example (3):

(3) The dog barks. (Greimas 1966: 50).

Greimas distinguishes in "bark" the semic nucleus KIND OF CRY, which goes unanalyzed because it is not the focus of his analysis. The lexeme can occur with two classes of subjects: animals and humans. Greimas labels the seme ANIMAL "classeme<sub>1</sub>" and the seme HUMAN "classeme<sub>2</sub>." The occurrence of the seme ANIMAL with the semic nucleus KIND OF CRY yields the sememe which appears in example (3). In a context such as (4):

(4) The man barks.

the semic nucleus is the same, but the seme HUMAN yields a different sense effect, i.e. a different sememe. The semes that cause the change in the sense effect are the classemes. Using the notation introduced above this situation can be represented as:

(5)  $Sm_1 = Sn_1 + Cs_1$   
 $Sm_2 = Sn_1 + Cs_2$

**Virtual Description of the Lexemes** Another way to describe classemes is to take the semic nucleus as an invariant and list all the contextual semes (classemes) with which it can co-occur. This virtual description of the semic nucleus and its relationship with the classemes results in a description of the acceptable combinations manifested in the lexemes; in other words, it is an

immanent description of the functioning of a lexeme, in which any one of the possible sememes will be selected, prior to any actualization within a text. That is, a virtual description of a lexeme is a description in general terms, not of a specific meaning of the lexeme.

### Sequences of Sememes

Example (3) is the result of the combination of two lexemes (or rather of two of their sememes): DOG and BARK. This is labelled "sequence," formally "Sq."

Consider the case in which the sequence is formed by the sememe "dog" (as in "the animal called dog" and as opposed to another meaning of "dog," i.e., "any of various usually simple mechanical devices for holding, gripping, or fastening consisting of a spike, rod, or bar" (Webster)) and the sememe BARK in its "animal-cry" meaning. The presence of the classeme ANIMAL in the first part of the sequence selects the same classeme (ANIMAL) in the second part of the sequence, and vice versa.

Formally, this can be represented by the formula:

$$(6) Sq = [N_2 + Cs_1] + [N_1 + Cs_1]$$

where  $N_2$  represents the semic nucleus of "dog."

Greimas considers another example

$$(7) \text{ The commissioner barks.}$$

in which the presence of the classeme HUMAN in the first half of the sequence will select the same classeme (HUMAN) in the second part of the sequence. Formally this is represented as:

$$(8) Sq = [N_3 + Cs_2] + [N_1 + Cs_2]$$

where  $N_3$  represents the semic nucleus of "commissioner."

Greimas finally proposes a slightly different notation for example (6) which emphasizes the presence of the same classeme across the sequence:

$$(9) Sq = (N_2 + N_1) Cs_1$$

In other words, "contextual semes (=classemes) correspond to units of communication, either syntagms or propositions, larger than lexemes, within which are manifested, *grosso modo*, the semic nuclei" (Greimas 1966: 53).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>This corresponds closely to Katz and Fodor's (1963) "selection restrictions."

## A First Definition of Isotopy

Having defined the minimal units of his semantic system, Greimas next approaches their combinations in units of greater size. It is in the context of linguistic units larger than lexemes that Greimas presents his first definition of isotopy. The definition of isotopy is done mainly by way of example: Greimas shows how a text establishes an isotopy (i.e., by way of repetition of semes), how to determine the boundaries of isotopies, and how to establish isotopies in situations where little seme repetition seems to be taking place.

**Isotopy and Textuality** A text is supposed to have a “totality of meaning”<sup>11</sup>—in other words, to mean something as a whole. Isotopies are introduced as disambiguation tools (although it could be argued that they are more the result of disambiguation). Greimas (1972: 16) claims that isotopies “overcome the obstacles posed (...) by the polysemous nature of the text” (see also Groupe  $\mu$  (1977: 37): “Isotopy (...) is a criterion whose goal is to eliminate ambiguity.”). The unity of meaning of the text can be achieved by selecting one meaning (one reading) that is compatible with all the elements, that is the isotopy of the text, among the various meanings of the elements that make up the text.

How is this selection implemented? Greimas argues that “a message, or any sequence of discourse” can be considered “isotopic” only if its elements have one or more *classemes* in common. It is at this point in Greimas’ argument that joke (1) is introduced as an example of a text that “voluntarily showcases the linguistic processes that it uses” (70). In joke (1) the introduction of the joke (“presentation”) establishes the “mundane” isotopy by repetition of *classemes* such as MUNDANE or +SOCIALITY<sup>12</sup>. The “connecting term” introduces the second isotopy by introducing *classemes* such as PRIVATE (–SOCIALITY) or possibly BODILY FUNCTIONS.

The shift from an implicitly phrastic (i.e., limited to the sentence) to a trans-phrastic conception of the unity of a text (or segment thereof) is extremely important. This interest in the trans-phrastic nature of sense is arguably one of the main reasons for the success of the concept of isotopy in

<sup>11</sup>McDowell et al., the American translators of Greimas (1966), have “meaningful whole,” probably after Culler (1975: 79).

<sup>12</sup>Greimas does not provide an explicit discussion of the example. +SOCIALITY has been proposed by Schleifer (1987: 77).

European structuralism. This issue will be dealt with in more detail below.

**Delimitation of the Boundaries of Isotopy** Since isotopies are defined as the repetition<sup>13</sup> of *classemes*, it becomes important, to Greimas' argument to define the boundaries of the linguistic context (co-text) within which isotopies can manifest themselves. The smallest co-text in which an isotopy can occur is easily identified with "the syntagm grouping at least two *semic figures*" (=semic nuclei) (Greimas 1966: 72). It is more difficult to identify the largest co-text. Greimas mentions some "attempts" at defining transphrastic units, such as paragraphs, texts, dialogues, but is skeptical about their value on the grounds that the techniques of commutation are difficult, if not impossible, to apply to linguistic units larger than the sentence.

In response to these issues Greimas introduces the concept of "hierarchy of contexts" (Greimas 1966: 72). In sentences such as

(10) = (3) The dog barks.

or

(11) = (7) The commissioner barks.

the corresponding isotopies are readily selected within the co-text of an "elementary utterance." This is not the case in sentences such as:

(12) The commissioner's dog is barking.

wherein only a broader linguistic and/or pragmatic context can select between the two possible repetitions of *classemes* (i.e., HUMAN or ANIMAL, since the sentence is compatible with two readings: a literal one, or one in which the commissioner's dog is his secretary (Greimas 1966: 72). Thus, if (12) occurs in a context capable of disambiguating it, this context will be "hierarchically superior" to the simple sentence. This procedure is naturally recursive; that is, if a context does not disambiguate an utterance, a broader one may do so, and so on.

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<sup>13</sup>Greimas uses "redundancy," a neologism, in the meaning of "repetition." This use is unfortunate, as redundancy has other connotations, such as superfluity. Cf. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1976: 15); Mounin (1972: 190).

## Isotopic Continuities

Isotopies can be established across linguistic units of different sizes and functions. The following sections will review some types of isotopy-forming situations. At this point in his argument, Greimas' goal is to identify all processes that can result in the establishment of isotopies. He therefore reviews several processes that enable him to show that isotopic continuities exist even where superficially there would seem to be little or no "redundancy," i.e. repetition of *classemes*. The processes of Expansion, Condensation, Translation and Figuration (to be examined below) enable Greimas to account for "all sorts of periphrastic and figurative locutions and circumlocutions" (Greimas 1966: 87).

It is not necessary to follow Greimas through the details of his analyses<sup>14</sup>, which are often complex and sometimes questionable (see for instance Mounin (1972: 190)). A brief presentation will suffice.

**Expansion and Condensation** The linguistic mechanisms examined by Greimas include "expansion," i.e., the fact that any lexeme can be replaced by a paraphrase (an expansion) of its meaning, as happens in dictionary definitions, for instance. Thus the lexeme "dog" may be expanded to the paraphrase "highly variable carnivorous domesticated mammal (*Canis familiaris*) probably descended from the common wolf; broadly: any animal of the dog family (*Canidae*) to which this mammal belongs," here borrowed from Webster's dictionary. A lexeme can also be expanded in a "complex lexeme" such as in the translation of the English "potato" (one word) with the French *pomme de terre* (three words). Immediately related to expansion mechanisms are the converse mechanisms of "condensation and denomination," i.e. the process by which a larger sequence of linguistic units is reduced to a smaller one. If the resulting unit is a single lexeme, the process is called denomination (*de-nominare*, to give a name). For example, the description "an instrument for reproducing sounds at a distance; specifically one in which sound is converted into electrical impulses for transmission over wire" can be condensed to "acoustic transmission device" and denominated as "telephone" (again the definition comes from Webster's dictionary).

From the point of view of the establishment of isotopies, it is important

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<sup>14</sup>As does Attardo (1986: 90-99).

to note that an expansion and its original term, or a condensation and its original fragment of text do not match all their semes perfectly, but “share some.” Hence, Greimas concludes that isotopies can be based on partial matches between classemes.

**Translative and Figurative Denominations** Both of these types of denomination are based on “derivative” (Greimas 1966: 76) meanings. Figurative denominations are, *grosso modo*, metaphorical uses of a semic nucleus, as in “the head of a nail.” Translative denominations are “the transfer of a segment of discourse (lexeme or syntagm) from one semantic domain to another, relatively distant from the former” (Greimas 1966: 77), or in other words, translative denominations are metonymic transfers, such as in *tête de nègre* (literally, “negro’s head”) which refers to a certain brown color. In both cases some semes and classemes are “suspended” in the new context in which they operate after the figurative or translative transfer. To use a worn example, in the metaphoric expression “She’s a flower,” said of a woman, the seme VEGETAL is suspended. Greimas provides a formula for this situation, where “Sm (t)” stands for the transferred sememe, “Cs” for the original classemes, and “Cs<sub>1</sub>” for the classemes of the new context:

$$(13) \text{ Sm (t) = (Ns + Cs) Cs}_1 \text{ (Greimas 1966: 78}^{15}\text{)}$$

### Establishing Isotopies Without Classematic Basis

After having shown how isotopies may be established by the repetition of semes, even in contexts that apparently do not seem to present adequate identical semes, Greimas notes that in some situations the classematic basis (i.e., the number of classemes repeated across sememes) may be insufficient to establish an isotopy (Greimas 1966: 88). In these cases it is necessary, according to Greimas, to refer to a “stored semantic universe” (Ibid.) or in other words to encyclopedic knowledge<sup>16</sup> in order to establish the isotopy.

Greimas’ examples are somewhat peculiar: a long definition by Bossuet that can be paraphrased as “God” (Greimas 1966: 87); a crossword puzzle, in which, according to Greimas, the grid and the black squares have the same

<sup>15</sup>The formula is slightly amended and streamlined to make it conform to the previously introduced notation.

<sup>16</sup>See ch. 6 on encyclopedic knowledge.

function of the encyclopedic knowledge above (Greimas 1966: 89-90)—albeit only at the level of the *signifiant*<sup>17</sup>; and, finally, one of the jokes analyzed by Freud (1905: 54): the horse-dealer praising his horse.

It is unnecessary to follow the analysis of the joke (in which no use is made of the previously introduced division and terminology), as Greimas' conclusion has been safely accepted by most semanticists, namely that "the expected information is in large part predetermined by the isotopy of the context" (Greimas 1966: 92). The "isotopy of the context" is nothing more than the situation or context established by the text (in the case of the joke, the sale of a horse). The horse-sale situation has a number of predictable events (praise of the merchandise, offer, counter-offer, signature of the contract, etc.), and on the basis of this knowledge, the hearer can build expectations and disambiguate the text (or, according to Greimas, establish isotopies). All of this has been defined and developed in "script-" or "frame-"based semantics; see 6.1.3 and, specifically on Greimas, Eco and Magli (1985).

### Complex Isotopies

Finally, in this review of possible types of creation of isotopies in some types of texts, two (or more) isotopies may remain present in the text after all the linguistic mechanisms have applied; this is commonly known as ambiguity (the text is two- or n-ways ambiguous). Greimas lists certain mythical texts, or texts from cultures that accept that a man can also be the spirit of an animal. Literary texts display this property; one can also think of the four levels of reading of the Scriptures in the Medieval tradition, and also of symbolist poetry (Greimas 1966: 96-98). These texts in which more than one isotopy are present are not a problem for the isotopy theory, however, since these texts are meant to have the property of being interpreted at different levels.

### Discussion of Greimas' First Definition of Isotopy

From the previous section it should be clear that, according to Greimas (1966), two linguistic units are isotopic if they share some *classeme*, or in other words an isotopy is the repetition of a certain kind of *semes* (*classemes*)

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<sup>17</sup>Vântu (1991) pursues a Greimasian analysis of crossword puzzles, which involves a comparison of crossword definitions and jokes.

across parts of a text and/or its context. In the following section the concept of isotopy as well as Greimas' definition will be discussed critically.

**What are the Classemes?** Before addressing the issues related to the definition of "isotopy," it is first important to clarify the exact nature of the classemes. It is clear that Greimas and his followers assume that classemes are "very general" semes. Greimas (1966) does not explicitly address the issue, but Rastier (1972: 84) claims that classemes correspond to Katz and Fodor's "semantic markers" (and the semic nucleus would correspond to the distinguishers). In a more recent article, Rastier (1985: 36n) problematizes the equation, noting that Pottier (Greimas' source for the term "classeme") uses "virtuemes" which are absent from Greimas' theory; nevertheless, this does not change the basic identity between Greimas' classemes and Katz and Fodor's markers. Postal (1966: 179) and Coseriu and Geckeler (1981: 68) also claim the identity of markers and classemes and distinguishers and semes. This identity, briefly mentioned earlier, will be assumed in what follows.

### **Of Cats and Dogs**

One cannot but agree with Mounin's observation that it is difficult to discuss Greimas' points because of the care he takes to disclaim any validity for the examples he uses (Mounin 1972: 189). Regardless of this difficulty, it is upon the example used by Greimas to establish the concept of isotopy that the present analysis of its definition must rest.

Recall that in example (3) Greimas claimed that the repetition of the classeme ANIMAL established an isotopy. Consider, however, the following example:

(14) \*The cat barks.

"Cat" must share the same semic analysis of "dog" since there is no reason to believe that "dog" is more "primitive" or less "marked" than "cat;" if "dog" can be analyzed as an unspecified semic nucleus, plus the classeme ANIMAL, so can the lexeme "cat." Therefore one may come to the conclusion that it is necessary to refer to the semic nucleus of "cat" in order to rule out (14). From this, it follows that, contrary to Greimas' claims, also in (3), reference is made to the semic nucleus of the lexeme "dog," cf. Coseriu (1967) and Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1976: 23n). This leads to the conclusion that

the purported distinction between *classemes* and *semes* is untenable because *classemes* were introduced to account for the possibility of *semic nuclei* to occur in different *isotopies*. If it is shown, as above, that the establishment of the *isotopy* requires reference to the *semes* in the *semic nucleus*, there is no need for distinct *classemes*.

Because of its simplicity and “exemplarity,” this criticism is devastating for Greimas’ definition of *isotopy*. The reality of the lexicon is much more complex than Greimas’ model. Among different solutions to the analysis of examples such as (3) and (14): Coseriu (1967) claims that any use of “bark” with a non-canine agent will be metaphorical (because it breaks a “lexical solidarity;” Mel’čuk (1974) would describe the relationship between “dog” and “bark,” as well as “cat” and “meow,” “horse” and “neigh,” etc. as the “lexical function” SON (sound uttered by the argument, so that SON (cat) = meow).

The issue is not, however, how to account for the semantic coherence of the example, but rather that the distinction between nuclear and *classematic semes* does not seem to hold. The difference between *semes* and *classemes* was based on the *classemes*’ greater generality and capacity to occur in more contexts, but when these differences are shown to be non-existent, the purported distinction is nullified. In other words, it is not the case that *classemes* alone are sufficient to identify an *isotopy* (disambiguate a text).<sup>18</sup> To the best of this writer’s knowledge, no attempt has been made within the Parisian school to answer Coseriu’s or Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s criticism (but see Rastier (1985b: 516)).

### 2.1.3 Revisions of the Definition of Isotopy

Having presented the first definition of *isotopy* and some of the problems in its wording, it is now possible to address the revisions of the notion. Shortly after Greimas’ original proposal, numerous revised definitions appeared, which led some authors to attempt taxonomies of the types of *isotopy*. Although it was originally proposed as a semantic concept, new definitions of *isotopy* stretched its application outside of the scope of semantics, making it necessary to distinguish between semantic and non-semantic *isotopies*. Another

<sup>18</sup>The same conclusion can be arrived at also for the distinction between distinguishers and markers in Katz and Fodor’s model (1963); see Raskin (1983: 55-56).

proposed distinction is between vertical and horizontal (i.e., metaphorical and literal isotopies; Rastier (1972), see below. This section will review some of the most important definitions.

Almost immediately after the publication of *Sémantique structurale*, Greimas and his associates began presenting different definitions of the notion of isotopy. These revised definitions are all "broader" than the original classematic definition of isotopy. In order to avoid further confusion, reference will be made to the different definitions by using subscripted dates of publication of the first proposal. Thus far the discussion has focussed on isotopy<sub>1966</sub>, i.e., the definition of isotopy proposed first in 1966.

### Semantic Isotopy

In some of the essays collected in Greimas (1970), which appeared between 1965 and 1970, Greimas presents a "generically" semantic definition of isotopy (isotopy<sub>1970</sub>), cf:

By isotopy we understand a redundant set of semantic categories which makes possible the uniform reading of the text (1970: 188)

or

With the term isotopy we intend generally a bundle of redundant semantic categories, underlying the discourse under consideration. (1970: 10n)

The most striking aspect of these definitions, beyond the idiosyncratic use of "redundant" for "repeated," is the fact that Greimas has abandoned the distinction between *semes* and *classemes*. This is clear from his use of the generic term "semantic categories." Given the problematic distinction between the two categories, discussed above, this broadening appears to be a positive evolution. Another interesting new aspect of the isotopy<sub>1970</sub> definition is the emphasis put on the trans-phrastic function of isotopies. From this point of view the mention of "text" and "discourse" as the "natural" environments for isotopies are of some relevance, and can be contrasted with the former emphasis on definitions limited to the smallest possible environment of two *sememes*.

## Beyond Semantic Isotopies

Further definitions of isotopy in different publications broaden the range of isotopies even further. In Greimas (1972: 8) isotopy is defined as the “syntagmatic coherence of discourse.” A few pages later (1972: 16), Greimas claims that: “it seems to be possible to postulate a phonemic level yielding an isotopic reading.”

In other words, Greimas proposes here to treat the repetition of elements at the phonemic level also an isotopy. It is necessary to consider the context of this proposal in order to understand the reasons behind it. Greimas was building on Jakobson’s (1961) and Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss’ (1962) studies of the poetic function of repetition. In the context of phonemic repetition used for aesthetic purposes, e.g. paronomasia, the notion of isotopy has little to do with the notion of “semantic isotopy;” nevertheless, it is necessary to consider even these broadenings of the original concept of isotopy in light of further developments. Moreover, the first instance of definition of phonological isotopy is to be found in Greimas (1967), and thus one has to acknowledge that both definitions seem to have coexisted in Greimas’ mind at the time of the elaboration of the notion.

## Further definitions

Another definition, broader than any of those proposed by Greimas prior to 1972, was proposed by Rastier (1972: 82): “we call any iteration of a linguistic unit an isotopy.”

Both Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1976: 15) and the Groupe  $\mu$  (1977: 34) comment that Rastier’s definition is broader than Greimas’, but they are comparing Greimas’ 1970 formulation, rather than the revised 1972 one; Greimas’ (1972) formulation is equivalent to Rastier’s.

Summarizing, there are three significantly different definitions of isotopy:

- iteration of *classemes*, isotopy<sub>1966</sub> (Greimas 1966)
- iteration of *semes*, isotopy<sub>1970</sub> (Greimas 1970)
- iteration of linguistic elements, isotopy<sub>1972</sub> (Greimas 1972, Rastier 1972).

The above summary finds a progressive broadening of the operational realm of the notion of isotopy and the parallel loss of specificity of the con-

cept. The historical development of the concept is much less linear: for example Greimas was already talking about phonetic isotopies in 1967, and hence the pattern of progressive broadening breaks down. Furthermore, in 1979 Greimas reverted suddenly, and without explanation, to a definition of isotopy consistent with isotopy<sub>1966</sub> (Greimas and Courtés 1979: under *Isotopy*). Even if the development of the concept of isotopy is not linear chronologically, the pattern of progressive broadening of the concept is maintained. Thus, isotopy remains a somewhat ill-defined concept, and it is always necessary to check which definition of isotopy an author is referring to.

In an attempt to bring some order to the terminological confusion just reviewed, Kerbrat-Orecchioni claims that we can, at least tentatively, identify a number of types of isotopies, each characterized by the repetition of a given linguistic unit. She therefore proposes the following list of types of isotopy:

- semantic: repetition of semes and/or classemes;
- phonetic: repetition of phonemes (alliteration, rhyme, paronomasia...);
- prosodic: repetition of suprasegmental traits;
- stylistic: register, socio-economical connotation, etc.;
- discursive (*énonciative*): repetition of the same discourse parameters (deictic anchoring);
- rhetorical: repetition of the same rhetorical figures;
- presuppositional: permanence of the same presuppositions along a sequence of sentences;
- syntactic: number, gender, person, tense, etc. agreement;
- narrative: repetition of narrative schemata,<sup>19</sup>

In the following discussion of isotopy, reference will be made only to semantic isotopies.

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<sup>19</sup>Kerbrat-Orecchioni points out that the last two categories are particularly problematic (1976: 21).

## Vertical and Horizontal Isotopies

Beyond the distinction between semantic and non-semantic isotopies, another distinction that has been much debated is that between horizontal and vertical isotopies. Rastier (1972: 88) introduces vertical isotopies to account for metaphors. Put simply, in a metaphor relating two distinct ideas (say, a flower and a woman), the two "units of content" share some *semes*, and thus are "isotopic" (since all definitions of isotopy emphasize the repetition of *semes*). These types of isotopy are called vertical because they do not extend on the syntagmatic axis of language (represented in a famous Saussurean diagram as a horizontal line (Saussure 1916: 115)), but they conjoin elements that belong to a paradigmatic series (represented by a vertical line).

Regardless of the accuracy of the analysis, it does not seem advisable to further stretch the range of applications of the concept of isotopy (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1976: 89).<sup>20</sup> As has been shown in some detail, there is already an abundance of phenomena covered by the notion of isotopy. In addition, the analysis of metaphors has a long and articulated tradition to which the idea "vertical isotopy" adds little beyond new terminological problems. The notion of horizontal/vertical isotopies will then be ignored in the following discussion.

## Discussion of the Various Definitions

In previous sections, the various definitions of isotopy have been reviewed, and some problems with the isotopy<sub>1966</sub> definition have been presented. The significance and the validity of the isotopy<sub>1970</sub> and isotopy<sub>1972</sub> definitions remain to be discussed.

**Formalization of the Definition** A serious criticism has been levelled against the definitions of isotopy reviewed so far (1966-1972)—namely that they are "informal" and necessitate serious glossing to become operational (Groupe  $\mu$  1976: 42). In general terms, the Groupe  $\mu$ 's point is well taken, and a more formal definition might have helped to avoid some of the terminological confusion documented above.

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<sup>20</sup>Eco (1979: 94-96) discusses the opposition vertical/horizontal in detail, but his contribution is marred by terminological problems (see also Eco (1984: 187-201)).

The Groupe  $\mu$  distinguishes sharply between semantic isotopies and other types of isotopy, as has been done above. They propose a formalization of the notion of isotopy which applies only to the former. They propose to redefine the process of finding an isotopy in a given text as the union of the two sets of meanings possible for the units involved in the isotopy. Quite interestingly, treating the “finding of an isotopy” as the union of two sets is essentially identical to Katz and Fodor’s (1963) “amalgamation” and, even more interestingly to the so-called “unification-based grammars” (see Karttunen (1984); see also Groupe  $\mu$  (1977: 39-41) for a more complete discussion although without mention of “unification” and “amalgamation”).

**Umbrella Term?** After a review of various types of isotopies, Eco (1984: 201) comes to the conclusion that “isotopy is an umbrella term covering various phenomena,” a conclusion strikingly similar to Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s perplexities on the proliferation of types of isotopy. Even restricting one’s attention to semantic isotopies (repetition of semes), one ends up conflating disparate phenomena such as contextual disambiguation, subcategorization and selection restriction, anaphoric antecedent attribution, morphological agreement, etc. under the same label (isotopy).

**A Common Core** However, there seems to be a common core to all the phenomena subsumed by the notion of isotopy. Eco (1984: 201) defines it as a “constancy in going in a direction that a text exhibits when submitted to rules of interpretive coherence.” In other words, all the phenomena that can be incorporated within the notion of isotopy end up being part of the processes that establish the “topic” of a text.<sup>21</sup> In other words, when engaged in the process of deciding the topic of the text the hearer/reader is parsing, he/she uses a number of linguistic and logical tools. Some of these tools are directly related to what has been called isotopy, while others are less directly related.

The interconnections between the process of finding the “topic” of a text and the process of establishing an isotopy are an important issue in text-linguistics. While commenting on the notion of isotopy, Van Dijk (1972:

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<sup>21</sup>The notion of “topic” is not without its problems. An intuitive definition as “what the text is about” will be sufficient here. For a more detailed definition, see Van Dijk (1977), Eco (1979: 87-92), Reinhart (1981).

200) notes that the repetition of *semes* does not necessarily have to be “lexematized on the surface” and that the hearer will use his/her knowledge of the world and all available implicatures and presuppositions from the text to determine the isotopy. This latter revision equates isotopy with coherence as defined by Bellert (1970). Coherence, i.e., the presence of a “common thread” in discourse, is intimately connected with the notion of topic (in order to be coherent a text must be “about” something, since it will keep referring to the lexical item present, or inferable, in each part of the text).

If the notion of (semantic) isotopy and that of coherence are unified, it becomes a problem to keep isotopies and topics distinct. Eco (1979: 87-92) has proposed to distinguish between isotopy and topic on the grounds that while the former belongs to the semantics of the text, the latter belongs to its pragmatics. While intriguing and certainly deserving further discussion, this issue is only marginally relevant in this context.

For the purposes of the present discussion, it will be sufficient to note that within the multiplication of definitions of isotopy, once the isotopy<sub>1966</sub> and isotopy<sub>1972</sub> definitions are discarded (the former because it was too specific, the latter because it was too general), a definition of semantic isotopy as the repetition of semantic features proves the most fruitful. This definition subsumes a large number of semantic phenomena, all related to the coherence of the text and the establishment of its topic.

In an earlier discussion, this author has proposed (Attardo 1988: 362) to equate semantic isotopies with the meaning of a text. This proposal seems to be supported by the fact that both the coherence of a text and the selection of its topic presuppose the decoding of the (literal) meaning of the text. Pursuing this discussion any further would be outside of the scope of this book, and the definition given above equating isotopies and meanings is sufficient for the purposes of the current discussion.

### **2.1.4 Applications of Greimas’ Model**

Greimas’ remarks on jokes, although meant as examples of isotopic variation, attracted the attention of several scholars interested in humor. The goal of this short section is to review the applications of the IDM model specifically to humor theory. Only those works which have humor as their principal subject and use the IDM will be reviewed in the following section.

### **Morin's Narratological Analysis**

Morin (1966) is the first article directly inspired by Greimas' observations. Her analysis is based on a corpus of 180 jokes collected from a daily newspaper. Morin does not stress the isotopy-disjunction mechanisms, but is more interested in the two-part subdivision of the text, which she refines into a three-part division.

Through a procedure, unfortunately left implicit, Morin reconstructs a "unique sequence which sets, argues and solves a certain problem" (1966: 108) in every joke. This sequence corresponds to "constants of construction" which consist of the presence of three narrative elements she calls, after Propp, "functions." The three functions are: 1) function of normalization, 2) locutory function of interlocking, 3) locutory function of disjunction. The last two functions correspond to Greimas' "dialogue" (see 2.1.1)

A more detailed analysis of the functions will be undertaken below, as well as a discussion of the concept of "function" itself. Further works by Morin on humor are Morin (1970, 1973, 1990).

### **Charaudeau on the Functions of the Disjunctor**

Charaudeau's (1972) important article distinguishes very subtly between the two functions of the disjunctor element (=Greimas' connecting term, i.e., the element that forces the passage from one isotopy to the other, see 2.1.1). To restate Greimas' ideas, the passage from one isotopy is caused by a linguistic element, but is also "camouflaged." Greimas lumps both functions in the connecting term, whereas Charaudeau shows that they are distinct and not necessarily overlapping. A full discussion of this contribution will be found in chapter 3. Although neither Greimas or Morin are quoted in Charaudeau's article, his work is directly inspired by, and in part corrects, theirs (P. Charaudeau, p. c.). Directly related to Charaudeau's article is Bãrdosi (1976), who applies Charaudeau's model to some Hungarian examples.

### **Niculescu on Italian Jokes**

In an (unfortunately) little known article, Niculescu (1972) uses Greimas' and Morin's suggestions as part of an elaborate discussion of a typology of jokes. Niculescu's view of jokes involves contextual and illocutionary issues

which go beyond the Greimassian model; nevertheless, Greimas' model plays a central role in his analysis (1972: 394).

### **Hausmann's Application to Puns**

Hausmann (1974: 23-28) adopts Greimas' isotopic model for jokes as the theoretical foundation of his own work and applies it to puns. He uses the isotopy<sub>1966</sub> definition, but is aware of some of the problems involved in it and mentions Coseriu's (1967) criticism. Hausmann considers (1974: 47-52) isotopies as one case of coherence, the linguistic one; in his view, coherence is "broken" by a pun. Other types of coherence are "objective" coherence (determined by extralinguistic knowledge) and "conventional" coherence which involves all sorts of "frozen" expressions, idioms, etc. On Hausmann, see ch. 3, below.

### **Guiraud's Application to Puns**

Guiraud's (1976) book, is a classic in French humor research and was published in the prestigious "Que sais-je?" series of the *Presses Universitaires de France* as was Escarpit (1960), another influential French text on humor. Guiraud dedicates a few pages (Guiraud 1976: 108-110) to Greimas' and Morin's ideas to puns. Guiraud lists four different examples of ways in which a disjunctive (which he calls "signal") can be introduced: aside, parenthetical, the "as X would say...", and spelling disjunctives. Guiraud's list is not meant to be exhaustive. See also ch. 3 and Guiraud (1980).

### **Manetti's Semiotic Model**

Manetti (1976) uses Greimas' isotopy<sub>1966</sub> model (see above); a fuller discussion of Manetti's work will be found in chapter 5. Manetti and Violi (1977) analyze a type of linguistic puzzle, popular in Italy, which shares some traits with jokes (specifically, the presence of two isotopies and the disjunctive). Violi and Manetti (1979: 61-62) present a short but very effective summary of Greimas' and Morin's work on the joke.

### German Linguists and Folklorists

The IDM (and Greimassian semantics in general) has been quite popular in German linguistics, and it has blended, with the local tradition of folklore studies (e.g. Lixfeld (1978, 1984)), aesthetics and literature (e.g., Preisendanz (1970), Preisendanz and Warning (eds.) (1976), Wenzel (1989), see ??), and communication and teaching (e.g., Reger (1975), Ulrich (1977, 1978, 1979, 1980)), in a more or less diluted form. A good overview is Renner (1984) which provides a very lucid statement of the isotopy/disjunction or bisociation (see 1.5.1) mechanism (1984: 926); see also 5.2.4.

Of particular interest is Marfurt (1977), who adopts Greimas' model of jokes within the theoretical framework of tagmemics (see Pike 1976). His adoption of Greimas' work is not uncritical. Greimas has stated that the "humorous pleasure" of a joke came from the discovery of two different isotopies in the text. Marfurt (1977: 67-68) attributes the *geistige Vergnügen* not to the presence of the two isotopies, but rather to the discovery that stems from it of the inadequate reaction of the speaker compared to the norm (i.e., that of producing a non-ambiguous text). Marfurt (1977), Ulrich (1979), and Lixfeld (1978) adopt a tri-partite model of the joke similar to Morin's, see below.

### Further Contributions

Segre (1982), Rutelli (1982), and Kemeny (1982) mention and/or use Greimas' and Morin's ideas as well as Koestler's (1964). Rutelli uses a two-part model of the joke (see below). One remarkable detail is that she mentions (Rutelli 1982: 214) the fact that the disjunction model can be traced back to Freud (2.1.1). Without being critical of the papers themselves, which have other qualities, they add little to the isotopy theory *per se* since they accept it uncritically and use it as background. Borgomano (1982) applies Morin's (1966) model to the teaching of French; Vittoz-Canuto (1983) uses Greimas' model, and Guiraud's in the context of the taxonomy of puns (see ch. 3). Landheer (1989) applies the IDM (mediated via Hausmann) in the context of translation.

### 2.1.5 Discussion

Subsequent works that rely on the IDM are of various degrees of interest. In general, there seems to be a certain loss of specificity in the model: by the time the most recent authors reviewed use the IDM, it had become a synonym of bisociation models (see chapter 5), and has lost the linguistic formulation that set it apart from other “contrast” theories of humor. If little or no technical sense is given to the term isotopy, there seems to be little difference in defining humor as the result of the clash between two ideas or two isotopies. Although some authors (Manetti, Niculescu, Rutelli) strive to broaden the horizon of the model, primarily by introducing other perspectives that are foreign to the original formulation, the IDM seems to be somewhat too narrow to accommodate the many issues involved in humor.

Before turning to the one aspect of humorous text that the IDM most efficiently captures, namely the linear organization of the joke, another issue left suspended during the discussion of the applications of the IDM must be addressed: the analysis of jokes in narrative functions.

## 2.2 The Definition of Function

As briefly noted above, Morin introduced an original idea into the IDM, namely the analysis of the text of the joke in terms of three functions.<sup>22</sup> This section will examine the exact nature of Morin’s definition of function, the nature of the three functions that are necessary to describe the text of the joke, according to Morin and others, and finally the fact that the three functions are not specific to the joke, but are present in any narrative text.

### 2.2.1 Morin’s Definition of Function

Morin (1966) introduces the concept of narrative function without definition. An implicit reference is made to Propp’s (1928) definition.

Propp’s definition of “function” is “An act of a character defined from *the point of view of its significance* for the course of the action” (Propp 1928:

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<sup>22</sup>Morin’s article consists of a long discussion of various types of organization of the narrative structure within the text of the jokes of her corpus. A radical critique of this aspect of her work is to be found in Baudin (1981: 9-17). For a more positive evaluation, see Borgomano (1982: 41-42).

21, emphasis mine, SA). In other words, two different actions may turn out to be an actualization of the same function: “‘John killed Peter’ and ‘the dragon kidnapped the princess’ might both constitute villainy” (Prince 1987: 37). Or, conversely, the same action may constitute an instance of different functions: “‘John killed Peter’ (...) might constitute a villainy in one tale and the hero’s victory in another” (Prince 1987: 37).

Propp’s well-known analysis of a corpus of folk-tales showed that a superficial multiplicity of events could be reduced to a list of 31 functions. Greimas’ (1966) and Brémond’s (1973) revisions of Propp’s work reduce the number of functions further (see below).

There are two inconsistencies in Morin’s use of the term “function” when compared to Propp’s definitions: one concerns the concept of “initial situation,” the other the content of the functions.

### **The Initial Situation**

Morin’s definition of her three functions is as follows:

- (15) a. normalization: puts the characters in their situation;
- b. interlocking: establishes the problem to be solved, or questions;
- c. disjunction: solves the problem humorously (Morin 1966: 108)

Morin’s definition of the first of her three functions, the function of normalization, makes it the equivalent of Propp’s “initial situation.” For Propp, however, the “initial situation” is not a function, but only “an important morphological element” (Propp 1928: 25) since it is still outside of the tale itself. It is necessary to conclude, therefore, that the concept of function has been weakened and broadened by Morin so as to include the initial situation in the functions.

### **The Content of the Functions**

The second difference between Propp’s and Morin’s definition is that Morin’s functions are more abstract than Propp’s. Propp’s functions all have a specific semantic content, such as “departure of the hero,” which makes the

storyline progress. Morin's three functions in the joke are variables instead, empty spaces that can be filled by almost any event or action that fulfills some requirement. These requirements are function-related, i.e., the event must allow the "interlocking" of the story, or the "disjunction." Morin's functions do not require any positive semantic content, because they refer only to the development of the text.<sup>23</sup>

Morin's definition of functions is thus more general than Propp's. It remains to be seen what the content of the three functions is specifically, in her sense of the term.

### 2.2.2 Narrative Functions in a Joke

Several authors reviewed above give definitions of the narrative functions, rename them, and/or change their respective boundaries. Rather than going through everyone's definition in detail a table will provide an overview, and then a more detailed discussion will follow.

Table 2.1: Narrative Functions in the Joke

	F1	F2	F3
Greimas	récit-présentation	dialogue	
Morin	fonction de normalisation	fonction locutrice d'enclenchement	fonction interlocutrice de disjonction
Marfurt	Einleitung	Dramatisierung	Pointe
Ulrich	Exposition	Bruch ("fracture")	Pointe
Lixfeld	Einleitung	Überleitung	Pointe
Rutelli	Narrazione	rappresentazione punch line	
Wenzel	Exposition		Pointe

For reasons that will become clearer below, this author has chosen not to

<sup>23</sup>A bibliography on narrative functions is to be found in Attardo (1989).

name the three functions, but rather to use opaque labels for them (function 1 (F1), function 2 (F2), function 3 (F3)) instead. In the following sections, the three functions will be surveyed, as a preliminary literature review, for the narrative analysis of the joke that will follow.

### Function 1

The first narrative function consists of a textual sequence, often narrative, that introduces the characters, determines the situation, and in general establishes the context of the events narrated in the text.<sup>24</sup> Its goal is the “establishment of the narrative frame” (Marfurt 1977: 94); it “works as the background for the articulation of the dialogical part” (Rutelli 1982: 203). It corresponds, as seen above, to the “initial situation” in Propp. F1 tends to be short and elliptical (see Attardo and Chabanne 1992).

The foregoing characterizations are only tendencies, however (see Campanile (1961: 34) and Niculescu (1972: 394)). In some cases F1 can be completely missing if it is inferable from the following functions or the context. Consider the following example:

- (16) “Can you write shorthand?”  
       “Yes, but it takes me longer.” (Lieberman 1957: 19)

in which there is no F1, as it is inferable from the context entirely (a secretarial-job interview, most likely).

### Function 2

F2 follows the first function. According to Morin (1966: 108) “it establishes the problem to be solved, or questions.” F2 is usually dialogical (see *Dramatisierung* = dramatization, in Marfurt). According to Rutelli (1982: 204), it belongs to the linguistic modality called by Benveniste (1966: 239) “discourse” (i.e., to simplify it somewhat, any non-narrative form). F2 creates “expectations”; it introduces the need for a resolution in the story (see (16), where the first line (F2 in that joke) takes the form of a question which obviously needs to be answered). In verbal humor<sup>25</sup>, it often contains the

<sup>24</sup>For a definition of “context” applied to humor, see ch.10.

<sup>25</sup>Puns, and the like, see ch. 3.

connector, which enables the switch between the two senses in the joke (see ch. 3).

### Function 3

This function occurs at the end of the text, and concludes the narration. It contains the disjunctive (see below and ch. 3), i.e., the element that causes the passage from the serious to the humorous sense, and hence is responsible for the humorous effect itself. The first two functions establish a probable sense which is belied by the third function. Both the tradition of humor research and the terminology used by authors insist on the brevity and immediacy of F3.

(1) is repeated here as an example, with the three functions marked, and the connector and disjunctive italicized:

F1 At a sophisticated party two guests are talking outside.

F2 "Ah, says the first, in a satisfied tone, nice evening, isn't it? Magnificent meal, and beautiful *toilettes* (=lavatories/dresses), aren't they?"

F3 "I wouldn't know," answers the second. "What do you mean?" "I did not *have to go*."

### The Joke as a Sequence of Functions

In this analysis of narrative functions, the joke-text is the result of the concatenation of the three narrative functions (F1 + F2 + F3). The three functions can be realized in any story that respects the requirements of the functions.

Clearly, the above model applies only to narrative jokes. The existence of non-narrative jokes has been claimed (e.g. Niculescu (1972: 394-95)), but this author and J. C. Chabanne (1992) have shown that apparently non-narrative texts can be reduced to a narrative model. It would be premature, however, to claim that all jokes can be reduced to a narrative model. This would be a fruitful venue for future research. For an interesting cross-cultural comparison, see Eastman (1986) who shows that Swahili jokes have a narrative

structure divided into seven parts; however, one may note that Eastman's seven elements can be reduced to the three functions presented here.

### The Elementary Sequence

This tripartite subdivision is bound to remind one of Brémont's "elementary sequence" which, according to Brémont (1966, 1973), underlies any "process."<sup>26</sup> The elementary sequence is defined as a sequence consisting of three functions:

- a function which "opens the possibility of the process";
- a function which "realizes" the possibility;
- a function which "closes the process" (Brémont 1966: 66).

Brémont's use of function is the original Proppian one in general (Brémont 1966: 66), but, in this case, Brémont is dealing with a "virtual" sequence. A virtual sequence of functions, as opposed to an actual sequence, is a sequence of functions that may or may not be selected by the story (contrary to Propp's definition, in which (some of) the 31 functions must follow each other in a given order). In other words, Brémont's virtual sequence is a sequence in which the story may choose to go in one direction or another. For example, when a function "opens the possibility" for a process to take place, the story may eventually continue with the process not taking place (e.g., the hero draws his/her gun, but does not shoot the outlaw because numerous children are playing nearby). A virtual sequence is also "virtual" in another important sense: because it is generic, it can be filled by any process that fulfills the requirement of the virtual function. Thus the opening of a possibility may be filled by "drawing of a gun" but also by "opening of a door," or by "buying of fresh tuna at the local market," which respectively open the possibility of "running away" or "preparing sushi."

Brémont's use of "virtual function" and Morin's definition of function are equivalent. If we compare Brémont's virtual sequence and the tripartite division of jokes outlined above, it appears clear that they are notational

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<sup>26</sup>A process is a change of state, characterized dynamically and temporally: Brémont provides examples, such as "events and behaviors" (e.g., "received order," "obedient/non-obedient behavior," etc.; Brémont (1973: 31)).

variants. By creating a context for a subsequent dialogical exchange, F1 does indeed “open the possibility of the process” (process = dialogue). F2 realizes the virtuality of the process by introducing an element which requires “closure.” And finally F3 closes the process.<sup>27</sup>

As a matter of fact, the only difference between the elementary sequence and the narrative structure of the joke is that F3 does not “close” the process in the way that would be expected on the grounds of the context set up in the previous functions. Instead, it resolves the process in an unexpected, non-standard fashion that goes against the expectations set up in F1 and F2 and often is nonsensical. In humor theory, these aspects of humor are referred to as “incongruous” (see 1.5.1).

### **Relevance of the Functional Analysis to Jokes**

The division into the three functions is not a specific trait of jokes; but rather is common to all narrative text. Since the sequence of three (virtual) functions in which jokes can be analyzed is found to correspond to the elementary sequence that underlies any process, and since the events in a joke are a process in themselves, it follows that every narrative, humorous or not, will match the three function description (with the proviso of the incongruous ending which does not “close” the narration). Jokes have been taken as “simple forms” (Jolles 1965), and so it comes as no surprise to find that they would embody the most elementary type of narrative structure.

While the narrative organization of the text is not specific to the joke because it is shared by all narrative texts, the special way in which F3 closes the narration (disjunction) is specific to the joke. This does not mean that a study of the organization in narrative functions in jokes would not be fruitful, but it is not specific to humor and so has a limited, though important, place in a general theory of humor (see Attardo and Raskin 1991).

An important issue of the relation between narrativity and humor arises at this point. This issue is outside of the boundaries of the present book, but nevertheless it is quite obvious that not all forms of humor are narrative (while it may well be that all forms of jokes are, or can be reduced to,

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<sup>27</sup>To be precise, since the initial situation is not a function in the sense intended by Propp, some minor adjustments would have to be made. Given the higher degree of abstraction of a virtual sequence, it is possible that even the “initial situation” may fill the slot of the first function in the sequence.

narrative, see Attardo and Chabanne (1992)). Other genres of humorous texts, such as satire, parody, irony, or comedy may have narrative structures more or less close to the narrative model, but need not share the narrative actualization of jokes. These issues will be discussed in more detail in Attardo and Raskin (forthcoming).

## **2.3    Linearity of the Joke**

Having discussed the notions of isotopy and narrative function, as well as the proposals, based on these two concepts, of analysis of the text of the joke, it is now possible to present a coherent proposal for analysis of the text of the joke, with special emphasis on its linear organization. This proposal builds on the materials discussed in sections 1-2 of this chapter and modifies them freely when necessary.

The presentation will follow the process of disambiguation, taken here as the primary phenomenon involved in the humorous functioning of the text. Thus, the process of disambiguation itself will be discussed first. The IDM has highlighted two mechanisms in the joke, disjunction and connection. Both will be described, on the basis of the discussion in sections 1 and 2 of this chapter. The mechanisms are somewhat different if verbal or referential jokes are involved, so it will be necessary to introduce a distinction between the two types.

A number of important issues related to the model being outlined would require extensive elaboration, such as the notion of "justification," the relative position of the elements of the joke, and the final position of the disjunct. Due to the availability of materials, only the latter will be examined in some detail, with specific attention paid to its connections with the functional sentence perspective analysis of the sentence.

### **2.3.1    The Isotopy Disjunction Model: A Synthesis**

In this author's view, the contributions of the IDM to humor research are principally in the analysis of the disjunction mechanisms and the analysis of the text as a linear sequence of elements. From the previous discussion of semantic isotopies, it has become clear that isotopies are an important part of the process that establishes the sense of a text. For the sake of clarity, an

integrated and streamlined version of the IDM is presented below.

### The Establishment of the Text

Each well-formed text produces a “sense” which the recipient is able to extract from the information present in its constituents (lexical meanings, and syntactic, morphological, suprasegmental, etc., information), as well as the information that the text allows him/her to infer from the non-linguistic context. For our present purpose, we will restrict our interest to the processes of disambiguation which this sense extraction process involves (see Brown and Yule (1985), and De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) for further details).

### Disambiguation Through Application Rules

In contrast to the view of naive pre-theoretical semantics, practically every lexical item of the general nonrestricted vocabulary (i.e., excluding sublanguages, see Raskin (1971), Kittredge and Lehrberger (1982), and Nirenburg and Raskin (1987)) is ambiguous, i.e., can be actualized in various ways (see Simpson (1989) for a review of various types of lexical and non-lexical ambiguity). For example, the lexeme “point” in English has, according to Webster, 17 different meanings. Even prepositions are polysemous (see Brugman (1983)). Ambiguity goes well beyond lexical ambiguity and encompasses the entire aspect of linguistic underspecification. Any variable of any linguistic item which is not explicitly determined may be interpreted in any of the ways available by the paradigm. Outside of the context, a linguistic element is unspecified in terms of determinedness (e.g., “horse” may be *a* horse, or *the* horse), gender (e.g., nurse), number (e.g. “deer”), aspect (e.g., “run” or “running”), etc. Other non-lexical phenomena may be ambiguous, e.g. the assignation of anaphoric referents. Consider the following example from Eco (1984)

(17) John sleeps with his wife; so does George.

where only the context may reveal if George is engaging in adultery.<sup>28</sup> One could multiply the examples but it may be safely assumed that ambiguity

<sup>28</sup>An example of humorous exploitation of this ambiguity is the following very sophisticated example, from the cartoon *Astérix et Cléopâtre* by Goscinny and Uderzo, discussed by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977: 143n):

(that is underspecification) in language is the norm in general, rather than the exception.

The above claim should not be taken imply that utterances are necessarily ambiguous or vague. Context (both linguistic and situational) reduces the level of ambiguity of an utterance to zero (or rather to levels pragmatically acceptable for the purposes of communication). This phenomenon is known as disambiguation.

### The Disambiguation Process

The disambiguation of a sentence occurs when a progressive choice is made between various meanings (semes) of the lexical items (lexemes) that form it. When a coherent set of options (isotopy) is chosen, it yields the meaning of the sentence (for the sake of simplicity we will ignore all non-lexical information in this exposition). The operation of matching the various semes against each other is performed by a unification-like application rule, as per the Groupe  $\mu$ 's proposal (see also Ch. 6, on application rules in Katz and Fodor's semantic theory (amalgamation rules) and in script-based semantics.)

The disambiguation process operates in a linear fashion (see Brown and Yule (1985:125-134)). This is because the linguistic sign is eminently linear; because disambiguation is a model of "understanding" rather than "production" (Planalp (1986: 111); see also ch. 6) it follows that the process of disambiguation will depend on a linear input. In turn this implies that the processing of a verbal joke will be linear as well. The introduction of linearity is equivalent to the introduction of a chronological axis, i.e., of a temporal organization of the joke, in which its elements (whatever their nature) are processed one after the other.<sup>29</sup>

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Numérobis [an architect from Alexandria, Egypt]: "Je suis mon cher ami,  
très heureux de te voir."  
Panoramix [to the others]: "C'est un alexandrin."  
/I am, dear friend, very happy to see you/  
It's an "alexandrin" (12 syllable classical French meter)/ He's from Alexan-  
dria./

The ambiguity of the reference of "ce" is not resolved and is absolute, as the sentence by Numérobis has 12 syllables.

<sup>29</sup>Obviously in an oral presentation of a joke suprasegmentals will co-occur with seg-

## The Process of Disambiguation and the Joke

A theory of the processing of the text of jokes must distinguish two moments in the disambiguation of a joke text (for the sake of simplicity, "joke" will be used hereafter instead of "joke text"): in the first part of the process, a first isotopy/sense ( $S_1$ ) is established, until the recipient encounters an element that causes the passage from the first sense to a second sense ( $S_2$ ) antagonistic to the first one.<sup>30</sup> The passage from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$  must be "unexpected," on the one hand, and "immediate" (i.e., should not involve "exceptional" mental expenditure), on the other.<sup>31</sup>

## Disjunction

The element that causes the passage from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$  is called "disjunctor" or *indicateur* (Charaudeau 1972: 285); it corresponds to Raskin's (1985) "script switch trigger" (see ch. 6). The disjunctor operates very closely with the "connector." Whereas the former causes the passage from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ , the latter playfully justifies the passage. The two terms will be discussed in more detail below (see also ch. 3).

## Verbal and Referential Jokes

There are two kinds of jokes that behave differently as far as the nature of the disjunctor and connector goes. On one side, we have "referential" jokes, and on the other, we have "verbal" jokes. The former are based exclusively on the meaning of the text and do not make any reference to the phonological realization of the lexical items (or of other units in the text), while the latter, in addition to being based on the meaning of the elements of the text, make reference to the phonological realization of the text. The former can be translated interlinguistically and intersemiotically (Jakobson 1961), while the translation of the latter is either impossible or must rely on unsystematic correspondences between the codes, or on sophisticated recreations of the

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mentals. This is patently irrelevant to the issue at hand, which is semantic in nature.

<sup>30</sup>Raskin (1985:107-114) was the first to explicitly formulate the nature of the (locally) antonymic relation between the two contrasting senses in the joke.

<sup>31</sup>Although these notions are rather vague, they are widely accepted in humor theory, and their definition is a problem for psychology, not linguistics.

same kind of meaning/sound correlation (see Laurian 1992).<sup>32</sup>

It should be emphasized that both referential and verbal jokes are “verbalized” jokes, i.e., jokes which are expressed by means of a linguistic system (or its derivatives, like writing). The reason for the introduction of the verbal/referential subdivision is that referential and verbal humor behave differently in their disjunction mechanisms. Verbal jokes will be dealt with in detail in ch. 3.

### Disjunction Mechanisms for Referential and Verbal Humor

The disjunctive causes the passage from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ . The basic enabling condition for the disjunctive to operate is clearly the possibility to perform a passage from the first sense to the second one. The passage from one sense to another in referential humor is always possible because the text is relatively free to introduce new topics. Consider the following example:

(18) Taxi crashes in Glasgow. 15 injured. (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974:89)

Whenever the text can introduce a new topic, a disjunction may occur. The “headlines” style of (18) dramatizes the referential arbitrariness<sup>33</sup> of the passage from one topic (the accident) to the other (the number of victims). In example (18) the disjunctive is the elliptic sentence “15 (people were) injured” (or possibly just “injured”), which introduces a new topic.

### The Connector

While the disjunctive of a referential joke can be introduced without any special preparation, as see above, verbal humor presupposes a lexicalized connector.<sup>34</sup> A connector is any segment of text that can be given two distinct readings (see Morin (1966:108)). The disjunctive causes the passage from one of the possible actualizations of the connector to another which had previously been discarded by the process of selection. Thus, in the famous example:

<sup>32</sup>Consensus on this division is widespread (see for instance Hockett (1973) and 1.3.1). For a partially different viewpoint, see Raskin (1987, 1991, forthcoming).

<sup>33</sup>The speaker has no necessity of switching to the topic of the injured people, he/she might have continued to deal with the crash, for instance providing further details on the exact location within Glasgow, the type of car, etc.

<sup>34</sup>Referential humor does not have a connector.

(19) Q: Do you believe in clubs for young people?

A: Only when kindness fails (Pepicello and Weisberg 1983: 79)

the polysemous word “club” acts as a connector, while “kindness fails” is the part of the sentence which redirects the interpretation of the connector. A detailed analysis of a verbal joke will be undertaken in ch. 3.

### 2.3.2 Justification

The passage from one sense to another is not the only function of the disjunct- or/connector in a joke. They also serve the cognitively and psychologically important function of establishing a “resolution” of the incongruity triggered by the disjunct- or/connector. This function is referred to as “justification.” It is not possible to go into detail here concerning this extremely interesting aspect of humor (see Aubouin (1948) *justification*; Ziv (1984) “local logic”; Attardo (1989), Attardo and Raskin (1991) and Forabosco (1991) for a brief review, see also ch. 3 and 4).

For the present purpose, it will be sufficient to characterize the process of justification as a playful motivation for the presence of the second sense. In this connection, Greimas (1966) mentions “connecting” and “camouflaging” the passage from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ . Charaudeau (1972), who is the first to distinguish explicitly between the two functions of the disjunct- or/connector dyad, uses the terms *embrayeur* and *désembrayeur*. Morin (1966) introduces the term “disjunct- or” but does not have a corresponding term for the function of justification. The terminology is summarized in Table (2.2).<sup>35</sup>

Table 2.2: Terms for Disjunct- or and Connector

	Greimas	Morin	Charaudeau
disjunction	connector	disjoncteur	désembrayeur
justification	camoufler		embrayeur

<sup>35</sup>To respect the original wording, some categorial inconsistencies appear in the table.

### 2.3.3 The Position of Elements in the Joke

Without exception, the authors reviewed above implicitly<sup>36</sup> assume a linear organization of the joke. The three functions are in part defined on the grounds of their linear organization (i.e., one must precede the other or vice versa). Thus the IDM's insistence on the narrative organization of the joke is related, at least in part, to the importance of the final position of the punch line. The best example of the implicit use of the linear aspect of jokes is perhaps Manetti's (1976) analysis of the high degree of informativity of the disjunction in terms of Markov chains (see ch. 5).

There seems to be a lack of interest in an explicit discussion of the linearity of jokes. This may be due to the tendency, common in Greimasian narratology, to reduce the plot of a story to a series of paradigmatic oppositions (see Ricoeur (1983)). Consider a narrative relating the following events: a) the hero leaves home, b) is hungry, c) eats a large omelette with basil and cheese, d) is not hungry, etc. A narratological analysis would reduce events b-d to the oppositions hungry/not-hungry, with/without basil and cheese, and so on, leaving in the background the fact that the "not hungry" state follows the "hungry" one. Since the linearity of the text is by definition a syntagmatic phenomenon, the tendency to analyze stories as oppositions would account for a lack of explicit interest in this issue.

Implicitly, the IDM assumes the final position of the disjunctive (the punch line must occur in the last of the narrative functions in which the text is analyzed). This position has been independently confirmed by Oring (1989).

### 2.3.4 Elaborations of the Model

The importance of the linearity of the joke text and the final position of the disjunctive can be further refined, as this author has attempted to do (Attardo 1987a/b, Attardo et al. 1991, 1994). The next section will briefly examine the results of these studies.

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<sup>36</sup>In some cases, the implicit claim surfaces as an explicit assumption which remains unfounded theoretically; see the following quote from Morin (1966: 108) "*after having reestablished the linearity of the joke the tales presented certain constants of construction that we tried to classify*" (my emphasis, SA).

### The Position of the Disjunctor

The disjunctor must necessarily follow the connector. A formal representation of the joke would schematize it as a string of linguistic elements (denoted by "X")

$$(20) \text{ joke} = X_1, X_2, X_3, \dots, X_n$$

If the position of the connector is assigned arbitrarily at  $X_k$ , the disjunctor will be  $X_i$  and  $i \geq k$ .

As we have seen, the position of the disjunctor is not only linearly subsequent to the connector, but is also "final." It should be noted that "final" position is defined as the last "phrase" of the last sentence of the text. The last but one phrase of the sentence will be referred to as "prefinal position," and any other position in the text as "non-final." In example (19) above, the disjunctor is the embedded sentence "when kindness fails," or, arguably, the VP of the embedded sentence, i.e., "fails." In the formulation above, the joke has a final disjunctor. Consider now these two versions of the same joke:

- (21) Do you believe in clubs for young people?  
Only when kindness fails, my friend.

- (22) "Do you believe in clubs for young people?" Someone asked W. C. Fields. "Only when kindness fails," replied Fields.

In (21) only a NP follows the disjunctor, whereas in (22) a VP and a NP follow the disjunctor. Thus, (21) is prefinal and (22) non-final.

### On Apparent Counterexamples

Examples such as (21 – 22) above may be taken as providing counterexamples to the claim that all punch lines occur in the final position, but further research has shown (Attardo 1987b, Attardo et al. 1991, 1994) that in all the cases of jokes with non-final disjunctors, the linguistic material occurring after the punch line could be ellipsed and/or eliminated altogether without ruining the integrity of the joke. This fact shows that whatever linguistic material occurs after the punch line, it is superfluous for the fruition of the text as a joke. The possibility of ellipsing the material occurring after the punch line is also relevant from the point of view of the analysis of the text

of the joke in terms of the functional sentence perspective, as it matches Hockett's (1973) technique of "cutting off" the final part of the joke text in order to find the punch line (when the text is no longer funny, that last element to have been cut is the punch line).

### **FSP and the "Theme/Rheme" Opposition**

Before dealing with the applications of the so-called functional sentence perspective (FSP) theory for humor research, it will be useful to summarize briefly some notable points of this influential theory. FSP (see Firbas 1964 and references there) is based on the notion of "communicative dynamism," i.e., the amount to which a given element of a sentence contributes to the "advancing process of communication" (Crystal 1991: 266).

In English, as well as in many other languages, the final position of the text is identified as the element with the highest communicative dynamism in the sentence (Firbas 1964), while the initial position has the lowest communicative dynamism. The elements in the middle are transitional. The notion of communicative dynamism is intimately linked with that of theme/rheme. The theme of a sentence is defined in the literature as the "old" information, about which something is said, and the rheme as the "new" information in the sentence, i.e., what is said about the theme. The position of the theme, in English, is sentence initial (Halliday 1970: 161).

The notions of communicative dynamism, and of theme/rheme, are not uncontroversial (see Dahl (1974), Lyons (1977: 500-511), Gundel (1977), Prince (1981), Raskin (1983: 27-28), Levinson (1983: x)). A discussion of the linguistic implications of their use is clearly out of place here, but it is possible to deal briefly with their implications for humor research in what follows.

### **The Position of the Disjunct**

It is finally possible to bring together all the elements that have been introduced in this chapter concerning the linearity of the joke. The IDM implied attention to the linear organization of the text of the joke. Empirical research has shown that the disjunct will occur primarily in the final position in the verbal joke.

On the basis of the final position for the disjunctive element in each

joke and of the FSP notion of theme and rheme, one can predict that the disjunctive is the rheme of the last sentence of the text of the joke (Attardo 1987a/b; Attardo et al. 1991, 1994). The apparent counterexamples of prefinal and non-final jokes are again not problematic for this hypothesis: the fact that the linguistic material occurring after the punch line can be ellipsed is a clear indication of non-rhematicity of the material itself (since ellipsed material must be recoverable, and so cannot be new or at least cannot be the element of highest communicative dynamism).

### 2.3.5 Application of the IDM to Empirical Data

Two applications of the IDM to the analysis of jokes have been carried out (Attardo 1987b; Attardo et al. 1991 and 1994). Both gave substantially similar results, which will be reviewed in this section. A complete discussion of the methodology, the sources of the text of the corpus, the procedure of the analysis and protocols as well as a detailed breakdown and discussion of the results can be found in the studies mentioned above. The following description is meant as an example of the application of the IDM to a concrete set of data as well as an indication of the type of results that can be obtained with this methodology.

#### The Methodology

A corpus of jokes was selected using commercially available printed sources. The first (preliminary) study (study A) was conducted on a sample of 600 jokes, evenly divided into 300 American jokes and 300 Italian jokes (Attardo 1987b). The second study (study B) was conducted on a sample of 2000 jokes gathered from four different collections of American jokes (Attardo et al. 1991 and 1994).

For both corpora, four principal hypotheses were tested extrapolated primarily from the IDM:

- a) referential jokes outnumber verbal jokes;
- b) within the number of verbal jokes, jokes that are based on lexical ambiguity for the disjunctive function outnumber all the other categories (syntactic and alliterative jokes);

- c) within the verbal jokes, the jokes in which the disjunctive follows the connector outnumber the jokes in which disjunctive and connector coincide; and
- d) the position of the disjunctive is final (in the sense defined above).

All hypotheses were found to be confirmed by the data, and the quantitative differences between the various factors to be quite significant. The preliminary study (study A) involved a cross-linguistic (cross-cultural) angle beyond the four hypotheses outline above, given that the corpus to be analyzed consisted of jokes from Italian and American collections. Although the proportions between the categories may vary somewhat, the results show that no substantial differences seem to exist between the Italian and American sample as far as the variables under investigation are concerned.

### **Are There More Referential Jokes?**

Hypothesis (a) is the only hypothesis of the four that does not follow directly from the IDM. It is based mainly on the "common wisdom" of the preference of speakers for non-punning humor. Tables (2.3 – 2.4) give the break-down of the results by category. Hypothesis (a) is thus confirmed for both languages.

Table 2.3: Study A: Referential vs Verbal Jokes.

	Referential	Verbal	Total
American	235	65	300
Italian	262	38	300
Total	497	103	600

Table 2.4: Study B: Referential vs Verbal Jokes.

	Referential	Verbal	Total
collection 1	382	118	500
collection 2	388	112	500
collection 3	389	111	500
collection 4	400	100	500

It is not clear what the reasons are for this marked preference for referential jokes. Possible factors may be a higher degree of sophistication in verbal jokes (see Raskin (1990)) which would make verbal jokes harder to process and hence scarcer, or a widespread perception of verbal jokes as “bad quality” humor (the previous remark notwithstanding) which would lead authors of commercial collections to leave verbal humor out. At this stage of research, no conclusion can be drawn on this finding.

### Are There More Lexical Jokes?

The IDM has put forward the idea of the “connector” element (see above), an ambiguous element in the text of the joke that allows the passage from one sense to another. Research in psycholinguistics has shown that syntactic ambiguity is more difficult to process than lexical ambiguity (e.g., MacKay and Bever (1967)).<sup>37</sup> On these grounds it seems logical to predict that verbal jokes will tend to be based on lexical ambiguity, rather than the-harder-to-process syntactic ambiguity. This was precisely hypothesis b). The data confirm the correctness of the assumption, as tables (2.5 – 2.6) show.

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<sup>37</sup>Shultz (1974) is a direct application of these results to humor processing, although Shultz uses data with some similarity to those discussed here to draw conclusions which seem problematic. In particular, he seems to claim that jokes based on syntactic ambiguity are easier to process. Shultz (1974) had speakers relate in what order they perceived the “first” and the “second” sense of a joke. His findings show that with jokes based on syntactic ambiguity the number of speakers claiming to have seen the “second” sense first grew. This is erroneously attributed to the fact that “syntactic ambiguities (...) may have been somewhat easier to detect than the lexical (...) ambiguities” (Shultz 1974: 414). The error is corrected in Shultz (1976: 22) where the opposite claim is made, namely that syntactic ambiguities are harder to process.

Table 2.5: Study A: Lexical vs Syntactic.

	Lexical	Syntactic	Alliterative	Total
American	52	5	8	65
Italian	29	6	3	38

Table 2.6: Study B: Lexical vs Syntactic.

	Lexical	Syntactic	Alliterative	Total
collection 1	110	6	2	118
collection 2	107	2	3	112
collection 3	92	15	4	111
collection 4	99	0	1	100
Total	408	23	10	441

It should be noted that the lexical/syntactic ambiguity is that of the connector element, and that the disjunctive element does not have to be particularly ambiguous (although it may be, in the case of overlapping disjunctive/connector—see below).

The alliterative category is not really a case of ambiguity, but rather the repetition of phonemes/morphemes along the text of the joke. It will be dealt with in more detail in ch. 3. It is included here and compared with the lexical/syntactic ambiguity, because it is one of the mechanisms of disjunction.

It is not clear whether jokes based on pragmatic ambiguity should be classified with referential jokes or with verbal jokes (and the corresponding category should then be added to the tables). So far the choice has been not to classify pragmatic ambiguity as verbal jokes, although it should be noted that few instances have been encountered.

### **Distinct and Non-Distinct Disjunctors**

It will be remembered from the previous discussion that the IDM distinguishes two functional elements in the text: the disjunctive and the connec-

tor. It was also shown that the disjunctive must occur after or on the same linguistic element in which the connector occurs. The data were entirely consistent with these claims. Beyond this the frequency of the cooccurrence of connector and disjunctive was also tested. Hypothesis (c) was formulated, on the basis of an assumed greater complexity of processing of the cooccurring connector and disjunctive. Therefore the hypothesis predicted that the non-cooccurring (distinct) pairs of disjunctive/connector would be more frequent. The data also confirmed this hypothesis (tables 2.7 – 2.8).

Table 2.7: Study A: Distinct vs Non-Distinct Disjunctive.

	distinct	non-distinct	Total
Italian	33	5	38
American	50	15	65

Table 2.8: Study B: Distinct vs Non-Distinct Disjunctive.

	distinct	non-distinct	Total
collection 1	77	41	118
collection 2	92	20	112
collection 3	95	16	111
collection 4	94	6	100
Total	358	83	441

### Final Position of the Disjunctive

Finally, hypothesis (d), based on the IDM's assumed linearity of the processing of the text and on the elaboration of this idea presented above, was tested. The results were less sharp (see tables (2.9 – 2.10)), but still the hypotheses seem to be confirmed.

Table 2.9: Study A: Position of the Disjunctor.

	Referential		Verbal		Total
	Final	Non-final	Final	Non-final	
Italian	251	11	34	4	300
American	231	4	60	5	300
Total	482	15	94	9	600

Table 2.10: Study B: Position of the Disjunctor.

	Referential		Verbal		Total
	Final	Non-final	Final	Non-final	
collection 1	357	25	102	16	500
collection 2	375	13	109	3	500
collection 3	334	55	88	23	500
collection 4	381	19	94	6	500

The data seem sufficient to conclude that, quantitatively, a very strong fraction of the texts analyzed does indeed have final disjunctors and so follows the rule stated above, which constitutes hypothesis (d). A qualitative interpretation of the data is also possible by noting that, although the position of the disjunctor may not always be final, its functional role is always that of rheme because all linguistic material that occurs after the punch line may be deleted without loss of meaning for the punch line itself. The claim made above that the material coming after the punch line is non-rhematic is thus found to be supported by the data.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>A detailed analysis of the types of material that may occur after the punch line is to be found in studies A and B. They are time and manner adverbs (that must occur in sentence final position in English), repetitions of the punch line, empty expletives (*uh*, *ah*, *Ecco!*), identification of the character in the text of the joke that utters the punch line, etc. A full list will be found in Attardo *et al.* 1994. Paul Baltes is to be credited for the attention accorded to the ellipsability of those materials. See also ch. 10.

### **2.3.6 Summary**

The picture of the joke text which results from the above model is as follows: the text begins by setting a context, which will be the background of the joke. This can be done very briefly, or omitted altogether if the context is inferrable from the text. An element (disjunctive) then occurs in the text which causes a passage from the sense reconstructed thus far in the joke to a second, opposed sense. This element occurs at the end of the text, a position which is the location of the rheme of the last sentence of the text.

## Chapter 3

# The Analysis of Puns

Puns have been the object of significant amounts of research in the structuralist framework. As a matter of fact puns were seen as the only legitimate field for the interdisciplinary contacts between linguistics and humor studies, for quite a long time (this attitude was still present recently (Pepicello and Green 1983) and is critiqued in Raskin (1987)). To a certain extent, it is fair to say that the subject of puns is the area of humor research in which linguistics has traditionally been most active. Regardless of this fact, large parts of the territory of punning phenomena still remain uncharted. This is not to say that the efforts of linguists who have analyzed puns have been wasted. The prevalently taxonomic approach which has by and large dominated this area dictates “low-intensity” explanatory patterns, where explanations and generalizations emerge by slow accumulation, rather than by “high pressure” deductive methodologies.

The goals of this chapter are: a) to present the relevant linguistic literature, b) to outline the areas that require further investigation, c) to provide partial solutions to some of the problems that arise in the process of analysis or to indicate in what direction fruitful solutions might be pursued.

The organization of the presentation is as follows: a few preliminary definitions are introduced to frame the discussion and the relevant literature is presented, organized primarily by types of taxonomy. The nature of the linguistic phenomena involved in puns is then investigated. A final section deals with the issue of using puns as external evidence in linguistic research.

The next chapter is also dedicated to puns, but will tackle a specific issue, namely a psycholinguistic explanation of punning.

## 3.1 Generalities

Although this introductory section is somewhat charged with linguistic jargon, the reader is advised to familiarize him/herself with the terminology since it will be used extensively throughout the next two chapters.

### 3.1.1 Definitions

From a linguistic (and semiotic) point of view, puns are phenomena which involve the “*signifiant*”<sup>1</sup> facet of the sign of which they are part in a relevant sense, to be defined later. It will be one of the goals of this section to illustrate in what measure and with which modalities the phonological structure, or other means of representation, are “involved” in puns.

#### Spoken / Written / Graphic / Signed Puns

In the most common sense, puns are spoken jokes (or jokes meant to be interpreted as if read aloud). When one is discussing a pun’s signifier, one needs only to refer to its phonological representation, but, there are also instances of visual puns (see examples in Harris (1984), Yule (1985: 19), Forabosco (1990), and Lessard (1991)). Alleton (1970) gives examples of Chinese puns based on the shape of the characters used. Foy (1986) discusses American Sign Language puns, based on all four of the parameters that make up a sign (location, handshape, movement, orientation).

The observations in this chapter are meant to apply not only to spoken puns, but to puns written, signed (for instance in ASL), or conveyed in any semiotic system. Consideration of graphemic representations, or other forms of representation, are possible and legitimate, but would result in parallel outcomes of the discussion, so, for the ease of discussion and presentation throughout the chapter, reference will be made only to phonological representation with the implicit assumption that consideration of other forms of “emic” representation would yield parallel results. For the same reason, the terms “hearer,” “speaker” and “utterance” will be used generically, i.e., subsuming “writer,” “reader,” “signer,” etc.

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<sup>1</sup>The distinction between the signifier and the signified in a linguistic sign goes back to Aristotle and the Stoic grammarians. De Saussure (1916) is generally credited for its systematization and it plays a central part in his system.

## Phonological Structure

phonological structure will be used in this chapter to refer to the phonological representation of any linguistic unit (phonemes, morphemes, etc. through texts), including suprasegmental information, if any, and any “expressive” tone, pitch, or volume information, i.e., any characteristic of the physical phonetic production that is used to convey meaning.

## Casual Speech

It should be noted at the outset of any discussion on puns that they are an example of “non-casual” speech (Jakobson 1960: 64, Voegelin 1960<sup>2</sup> and its problematic aspects for a phonology of puns.) or “exceptional” language (Obler and Menn 1982). In casual speech, the speaker and the hearer are not aware of the phonological structure of the utterance. Thus in casual speech, the speakers are not aware of the fact that, for example, the word “bus” is composed of the three phonemes /b/, /ʌ/, and /s/, in that order. In this mode of speech, speakers are only aware of the phonemic string’s meaning, namely that of a vehicle which can carry several passengers.

There are several types of non-casual speech, for instance artistic usages of language, the most notable being poetry (see Jakobson 1960). Metalanguage is another example of non-casual speech type, of particular importance in logic (see Reichenbach (1947: 9-16) and 4.0.1).

## Paronyms, Homonyms, Homographs, Homophones

Throughout this chapter, reference will be made to strings of sounds and to their relationships with meanings and among themselves. In order to avoid confusion, these relationships are defined briefly here. For ease of definition, reference will be made in the wording of the definitions to “words,” but arbitrary strings of sounds can be substituted for lexical morphemes without altering the value of the definitions. Two words are paronyms when

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<sup>2</sup>“Casual” here means only “not involving exceptional attention, carefulness or other non strictly communicative goals on the part of the speaker.” Jakobson (1960) reframes the casual/non-casual opposition in terms of his six-function model of language. Puns would fit in the poetic function of language. Voegelin (1960) discusses the issue in term of style, a notoriously complex issue. See also Raskin (1992) and Sobkowiak’s discussion of the “conscious” (i.e., non-casual) processing of language in puns (1991: 24-32

their phonemic representations are similar but not identical. Two words are homonyms when their phonemic or graphemic representation is identical, and two words are homographs when their graphemic representation is identical (i.e., they are spelled the same). Two words are homophones when their phonemic representation is identical (i.e., they are pronounced the same). Homographs and homophones are subclasses of homonyms.

## 3.2 Review of the Literature

The research literature on puns is vast, but largely inconclusive. Generative linguistics has had little to say about them. Structuralist linguistics has been more attentive: some structuralist studies are more anthropological in nature; for instance, they establish the existence of puns in non Indo-European languages, their uses, their social relevance, etc., see Sapir (1932), Emeneau (1947), Dinh Hoa (1955), Bamgbose (1970), Hill (1985). A good survey of studies on puns across languages is to be found in Hausmann (1974). From these data, it seems possible to conclude that puns are almost certainly a universal phenomenon.

Most of the efforts of structural linguists have gone into the establishment of taxonomies of the phenomena involved in puns. The reasons for the structuralists' interest are many, but one of them is certainly the fact that traditional historical linguistics had considered puns a source of evidence in establishing the pronunciation of a linguistic item at a given time. For instance, Saussure's only reference to puns is in this context (Saussure 1916: 60-61). Traditional texts on linguistics (e.g., Ullmann (1957: 128-129; 1962: 188-192)) often have a few scattered mentions of puns, along these lines or in discussion of phenomena such as homonymy (see below).

A field in which considerable attention has been paid to puns is literary criticism (a bibliography can be found in Hausmann (1974)). Unfortunately, most of the studies on puns in literary criticism focus on the puns of a given author/period and analyze their relevance to the author's literary achievements, and so having little to say from a structural, or essentialist, perspective. Another field that has recently shown interest towards puns is poststructuralist literary criticism, which will be discussed briefly at the end of the next chapter.

### 3.2.1 A Taxonomy of the Taxonomies

Much of the linguistic interest in puns has manifested itself in the form of taxonomies. The explanation for this flourishing of taxonomies is probably the unstated structuralist assumption that by providing a scientific classification of the observed phenomena, the structure of the object of investigation would emerge, at least in part. Moreover, descriptive theories are often the first step towards predictive, and hence explanatory, theories. Four major types of classifications have been used or proposed: a) by linguistic phenomenon, b) by linguistic structure, c) by phonemic distance, and d) eclectic. After a few general remarks, all four types will be discussed in some detail.

**What Taxonomies Can Do** The purpose of a taxonomy is to provide order. If the classes are chosen in a significant manner, knowing to what class a pun belongs reveals something about its internal structure or functioning; for example, classifying a pun as paronymic immediately tells the reader that the match between the two phonological structures involved is not perfect. Classifying puns by sources of ambiguity tells the reader that puns involve ambiguity. As a matter of fact, classification is always informed by a theory (implicit, most of the time). It is possible to decide what constitutes a class of puns only if a decision has already been made about what the relevant features in the object of analysis are.

**What Taxonomies Cannot Do** Taxonomies lack explanatory power. Classification is no substitute for analysis and theory building. A more serious criticism can be levelled at the taxonomies of puns: any linguistic item can be used as punning material. This observation is tantamount to claiming that taxonomies of puns lack descriptive adequacy. Consider that puns revolve around an ambiguity (see 2.3.1). Every linguistic element out of context is ambiguous (or vague, unspecified), and only contextual disambiguation enables the hearer to select one sense among the various possible ones in a sentence. No taxonomy can classify all the possible factors of ambiguity in language, so no taxonomy of puns can be exhaustive.

Taxonomies based on systematic (structural) linguistic phenomena are somewhat more successful than taxonomies based on linguistic items because of their higher degree of generality, but their coverage is proportional to their degree of generality (the more general the classification, the higher

the coverage of the phenomena). It is clear, however, that the more general a taxonomy gets, the less interesting it becomes. Taxonomies based on phonemic distance are orthogonal to these concerns (see below).

The following subsections will present these three types of taxonomies, with a discussion of their advantages and limitations, as well as an “eclectic” type of taxonomy.

### **Taxonomies Based on Linguistic Phenomena**

Taxonomies based on linguistic phenomena try to list all linguistic facts that are involved in puns. Scholars often display ingenious ways of subclassifying the data and of establishing categories. The obvious problem is that their lists cannot be exhaustive, as has been pointed out above.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, they provide a wealth of examples and of problems that have only marginally been tapped into.

Ducháček’s (1970) attempt is the most accomplished in this group of taxonomies. He claims that puns are inspired by “different linguistic phenomena such as homonymy, paronymy, polysemy, antonymy, association of ideas, etymological consciousness (popular etymology), tendency to motivation, lexical attraction (morphematic and semantic) . . .,” etc. (Ducháček 1970: 117), but that they differ from these phenomena because puns are intentional (see also Noguez (1969: 42), and below).

His major contribution, however, is his extremely elaborate taxonomy of puns, arranged according to the linguistic phenomena involved:

#### 1. Homonymy

##### (a) Homophony

- i. between different words
- ii. two or more words
- iii. a simple word with a composed one
- iv. one word with a group of two or more words
- v. two groups of words

##### (b) Homography

##### (c) Paronymy

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<sup>3</sup>Unless they “graduate” to a systematic taxonomy, see below.

2. Polysemy
3. Antonymy
4. Morphemic attraction (e.g., *delirium tremens*  $\Rightarrow$  *délire d'un homme très mince* /Delirium of a very thin man/),
5. Tendency to motivation (e.g., *souffrante* for *allumette*<sup>4</sup>)
6. Contamination (*Franglais* from *Français* and *Anglais*; see *Famillioner* in Freud 1905).

It should be noted that Duchàček's classes are not mutually exclusive and that their epistemological status varies greatly: descriptive categories (some his classes, e.g., homonymy and paronymy, are lexical phenomena) are combined with some tentative explanations "tendency to motivation," for instance, (see below) which is a psychological fact.

Other examples of taxonomies based on linguistic phenomena are Boyer (1968) (a remarkably detailed analysis based on five French writers), Montes Giraldo (1969), Milner (1972), Huber (1970), Holmes (1973), Gervais (1971), Angenot (1972), Raynaud (1977), and Vittoz-Canuto (1983; see below). Often these taxonomies are mixed with "systematic" taxonomic principles (e.g. Milner's), see below. A frequently used taxonomic system parallels the subdivisions of linguistics (phonetics/phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, etc.) (see Alexander (1981), Pepicello and Weisberg (1983: 66-67), Huerta Macias (1984)).

### Systematic Taxonomies

Systematic taxonomies are based on very general linguistic categories which are not specific to puns and so could be used to classify other linguistic phenomena. Generally, the criteria are chosen because they allow "neat" classifications. Several independent, but very similar, taxonomies have been proposed.

One such productive taxonomy (used by Milner (1972), Hausmann (1974), Guiraud (1976), and Sherzer (1978), among others) uses the paradigmatic and syntagmatic (Saussure 1916; Hjelmslev 1954) axes of language as the

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<sup>4</sup>*Souffre* = sulphur, matches (*allumette*) contained sulphur in the past.

bases of their classification (augmented by a third possibility in some cases: chiastic reversals for Milner, inclusion for Guiraud; see below for definitions of these terms).

As all puns, paradigmatic puns involve two senses of a linguistic expression (or string). What sets these apart from other types of puns is that only one of the two strings is actually present in the text (the uttered string), and the second has to be retrieved by the hearer from his/her storage of homonymic or paronymic strings (i.e., the paradigm of the targeted string).

Consider the following example:

- (23) Phonological paradigmatic reversal:

Diplomacy: The noble duty of lying for one's country. (Milner 1972: 17)

The reversal between the two sounds /l/ (*lying*) and /d/ (*dying*) occurs at a phonological level (the units involved in the reversal are phonemes) and is paradigmatic because the second item of the reversal (the targeted string) does not occur in the text (it comes from the paradigm). The same principle can be applied at other linguistic levels:

- (24) Morphological paradigmatic reversal:

Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. (Ibid.)

- (25) Syntactic paradigmatic reversal:

All teachers of children who are mentally retarded. (Ibid.)

- (26) Lexical paradigmatic reversal:

His sins were scarlet but his books were read. (Ibid.)

- (27) Situational<sup>5</sup> paradigmatic reversal:

Traffic warden giving a ticket to her own son. (Ibid.)

Syntagmatic puns, on the other hand are, slightly more difficult to define, mostly because different and not entirely overlapping definitions have been proposed. Milner's (1972) taxonomy remains one of the most systematic ones, so it is a good starting point for the discussion:

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<sup>5</sup>Note that situational jokes are not puns, but since Milner's taxonomy covers them as well, it seemed helpful to include them in this review.

- (28) Phonological syntagmatic reversal:  
You've had tee many martoonis. (Milner 1972: 18)
- (29) Morphological syntagmatic reversal:  
(British voter signing his letter): I assure you that you are, Sir, my obedient servant. (Ibid.)
- (30) Syntactic syntagmatic reversal:  
(Comment about exchange rates): A giant leap for the International Monetary Fund, a small step for mankind. (Milner 1972: 19)
- (31) Lexical syntagmatic reversal:  
(Definition of 'hangover'): The wrath of grapes. (Ibid.)
- (32) Situational syntagmatic reversal:  
A dog taking his master for a walk. (Ibid.)

As can be seen, if paradigmatic puns require the absence (from the explicit text) of the second sense, syntagmatic puns require the presence of the second element in the linguistic string (the syntagm). Milner's examples all involve the inversion of the position of two linguistic units within the syntagmatic chain. Incidentally, this fact makes it difficult to distinguish between syntagmatic puns and chiasitic<sup>6</sup> ones, the last taxonomic category in Milner's classification.

- (33) Chiasitic phonological reversal:  
Yesterday the dear old queen gave an audience to the queer old dean.  
(Milner 1972: 20).
- (34) Chiasitic morphological reversal:  
Girls who do not repulse men's advances are often girls who advance men's pulses. (Ibid.)
- (35) Chiasitic syntactic reversal:  
The fair sex: Yes. The sex fair: No. (Ibid.)

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<sup>6</sup>The Chiasmus is a rhetorical figure. It consists of arranging elements of a sentence in a XYYX schema. It is called "chiasmus" because of the shape of the Greek letter "chi" (χ).

- (36) Chiastic lexical reversal:  
Mind your till and till your mind. (Ibid.)
- (37) Chiastic situational reversal:  
The house in the garden, the garden in the house. (Ibid.)

Guiraud's (1976) definition of paradigmatic puns is substantially identical with Milner's, but his definition of syntagmatic pun is different, although not unrelated. For Guiraud a syntagmatic pun is created by "concatenating" two expressions. At the phonological level, alliteration is the most common humorous effect (for a detailed discussion of alliteration see below). At the lexical level the most representative humorous effect is that of the zeugma, i.e., "the use of a word to modify or govern two or more words usually in such a manner that it applies to each in a different sense or makes sense with only one." (Webster)

- (38) Zeugma: He left the house and a good impression.

Guiraud also introduces another category, that of "inclusion," which can, in part, be reduced to Milner's chiastic category. Klinkenberg (1977) notes that introducing this third category has the function of salvaging the otherwise weak paradigmatic vs. syntagmatic opposition, which, according to Klinkenberg, would be inadequate to the description of puns. The first taxonomic table (3.1) summarizes the discussion so far.

Table 3.1: Taxonomy I

Milner	Paradigmatic	Syntagmatic	Chiastic
Phonological	(23)	(28)	(33)
Morphological	(24)	(29)	(34)
Syntactical	(25)	(30)	(35)
Lexical	(26)	(31)	(36)
Situational	(27)	(32)	(37)
Guiraud	Paradigmatic	Syntagmatic	Inclusion
Phonetic	(23)	alliteration	(33)
Lexical	(26)	(38)	(34)-(36)

Hausmann's (1974) distinction between "horizontal" and "vertical" puns is based on similar grounds. Horizontal puns are syntagmatic (both linguistic expressions are present in the text), vertical are paradigmatic (only one linguistic expression is in the text). Hausmann's definition of syntagmatic is similar to Guiraud's concatenation, but Hausmann goes into considerably more detail in the subdivision of the linguistic elements that come into play, as follows

- (39) Syntagmatic lexical homophony:  
*De grand vins et des petits vains* (Great wines and small proud persons)  
 [vẽ] (Hausmann 1974: 76)
- (40) Syntagmatic homophony based on syntagm:  
*Un alibi pour la Lybie* [alibi /(l) a-libi] (Alibi for Lybia) (Ibid.)
- (41) Paradigmatic homophony based on syntagm:  
*Lard militaire* [larmiliter] (military fat/military art) (Ibid.)
- (42) Syntagmatic paronymy:  
*Du fric pour les flic.* (Money for the police) (Ibid.)
- (43) Paradigmatic paronymy:  
*Marché coma (commun)* [koma/komũ ] (Comatose market/Common market) (Ibid.)
- (44) Partial syntagmatic paronymy:  
*Incon/Incompatible.* (Member of an unconstitutional party/Incompatible) (Ibid.)
- (45) Partial paradigmatic paronymy:  
*été tory /torride.* (Tory summer/torrid summer). (ibid.)

The resulting schema is presented in the second taxonomic table (3.2). Syllepsis is defined as the use of a word in two senses. See Noguez (1990).

Table 3.2: Taxonomy II

Hausmann	Syntagmatic	Paradigmatic
Homonymy	Syllepsis	(26)
Homophony		
a) lexical	(39)	(26)
b) syntagmatic	(40)	(41)
Paronymy		
a) quasi-homophony	(42)	(43)
b) partial	(44)	(45)

The distinction between homonymy and homophony is irrelevant here, hence the identity between paradigmatic lexical homophony and homonymy.

Using the two axes of language, syntagmatic and paradigmatic, as a taxonomic tool is not peculiar to puns. Jakobson's research on aphasia and metaphors was based on the same two categories (Jakobson 1956). The problematic aspects of these classifications are already evident from the first two schemata presented above: the necessity of introducing a third category (chiastic or inclusion puns) is clearly the sign that the binary opposition is not powerful enough to describe the phenomena. Moreover, cross-classifications show that membership in a given class may be problematic; for example spoonerisms are inclusion puns, for Guiraud (33, 34 – 36), but syntagmatic puns for Milner (28 – 32). The very notion of syntagmatic pun is unclear, as shown by Milner's and Hausmann's different definitions. In addition, the three schemata address different levels of generality (for instance, all of Hausmann's paradigmatic categories would fall under Guiraud's paradigmatic lexical; compare also Hausmann's two way subdivision of homophony with Duchàček's five way subdivision).

Even assuming that the classifications were not problematic, these taxonomies address only a very limited range of the issues involved in puns: the presence of the two senses in the linguistic context of the punning utterance (distinction between syntagmatic/paradigmatic puns), and some of the types of manipulation that either the targeted string or the uttered string are subjected to (reversal, chiasmus, etc.).

### Taxonomies Based on Surface Structure

This method of classification is different from those considered so far because it is based on an apparently extrinsic feature: the number of phonemes (or features) by which two linguistic expressions differ. This classification has not been widely adopted in the context of the analysis of puns until recently and was first implied by the organization of the materials in Hausmann (1974). Hausman's intent was not to provide a taxonomy of puns, as can be gathered from the fact that he had already presented the taxonomy of puns just described in the previous section; nevertheless, the principle upon which Hausmann's tables are organized is strong enough to construct a taxonomy of puns. This classification of puns opens up an interesting perspective on puns, which will be briefly developed below. Other approaches that classify puns on the basis of their phonemic distance are Lagerquist (1980), Monnot (1981), Vittoz-Canuto (1983), Zwicky and Zwicky (1986), and most significantly Sobkowiak (1991).

**The Thresholds** Considered in the perspective of phonemic distance (i.e., the number of phonemes or features of difference), puns based on homonymy (either homophony or homography) and puns based on paronymy are only different surface manifestations of the same phenomenon and so differ only quantitatively. In this light, homonyms are words that differ from their phonemic representation in zero phonemes, and paronyms can be classified on the basis of the number of different phonemes in the two words.<sup>7</sup> Consider the following examples:

- (46) 0 phonemes difference (homonyms)

club = stick (see example 19)

club = social institution

- (47) 1 phoneme difference /θ/ vs /t/

Edith

eat it (see example (65), below)

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<sup>7</sup>A potentially relevant issue left undiscussed here is whether examples such as *vatican* – *vaticancan* should count as two phonemes or one syllable as it seems that one syllable of difference would be perceived as less different than a difference of two random phonemes that are not part of any larger unit.

- (48) 2 phonemes difference: /kã/ vs 0  
*vatican* (the vatican)  
*vaticancan* (vatican + cancan)  
 (Hausmann 1974: 66)
- (49) 3 phonemes difference: /tűf/ vs 0  
*Tard*  
*Tartuffe*  
 /tar/ vs /tartűf/ (see *Mieux vaut Tartuffe que jamais*)  
 (Hausmann 1974:40)
- (50) 4 phonemes difference /rapa/ vs 0  
*Rapatriés sur le volet...*  
*Trié sur le volet*  
 (Hausmann 1974: 39).

**Some Issues with the Phonemic Similarity Taxonomy** There are some problems with this approach, however. Two words must be “similar” in order to be considered a possible pun. Hausmann’s discussion assumes this fact without questioning it, but if one were to continue the progression, and present two words that differ in four phonemes out of five, such as

- (51) schools /skuls/  
 kite /kayt/

the two would clearly not qualify as a “punning pair” such as those presented above. This issue was not considered by Hausmann, nor by any of the other authors quoted, whose concerns are mostly different. The remaining part of this subsection will be dedicated to investigating the consequences of the phonemic similarity taxonomy. The discussion will lead to the postulation of a “threshold” for phonemic difference between the two words (or other strings) involved in a pun. In other words, two words cannot differ in an arbitrarily high number of phonemes and still qualify as a possible pun. The highest distance presented by Hausmann is that of four phonemes, and thus one might be tempted to assume that as the highest limit.<sup>8</sup> There are a

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<sup>8</sup>The issues involved here are numerous. For instance, one would have to take into account the relative length of the words involved, when factoring a phonemic distance.

number of issues that need to be addressed, and the following subsections will discuss two of the major problematic issues.

**1) Corpus-Bound Data** So far, few authors have used a phonemic distance model to classify puns. The worst case scenario would be that the data are idiosyncratic, i.e., peculiar to the sources used. Hausmann's analysis is based on a corpus of puns published by the French newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné*. Lagerquist (1980), Zwicky and Zwicky's (1986) and Sobkowiak's data come from different sources, primarily collections of puns. Monnot's (1981) and Vittoz-Canuto's (1983) data come from puns in advertising. So far, all these studies present compatible and mutually supporting data. Only further research which would compare several corpora of data will establish beyond doubt whether their conclusions are extendable to all types of puns (for example, to naturally occurring conversational puns).

**2) How to Compute Phonemic Distance** Hausmann's classification of the distance between two words in terms of phonemes is not motivated theoretically. Phonology routinely analyzes phonemes in terms of features, so a more precise value can be calculated in terms of phonemic features (Chomsky and Halle 1968).<sup>9</sup> For example /bet/ differs in only one feature from /pet/ ([+voice]) and in two from /det/ ([+voice][+front]). Even a discussion in terms of phonemic features is not without its problems. The proposed "feature" distance should be calibrated to account for "feature geometry" (e.g. Clements 1985, Sagey 1986) (i.e., should not assume Chomsky and Halle's (1968) "flat" account of features) since homorganic features (i.e., with the same articulation place) will be "closer" than nonhomorganic ones.

The model should also account for the fact that two words differing in two features in two different phonemes will be perceived as more distant than two words differing by two features in the same phoneme, see:

(52) /bet/ vs. /det/ the initial consonants differ in [+voice][+coronal]

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Presumably, a two phonemes difference in a four phonemes word is more salient than a two phonemes difference in a fifteen phonemes word.

<sup>9</sup>For a proposal using phonemic distance in the treatment of paronyms, see Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977: 40) and van den Broecke and Goldstein (1980) for a similar treatment of speech errors. For a discussion of phonemic distance in general see Zwicky and Zwicky (1986) and Sobkowiak (1991) and references therein.

/bet/ vs. /pit/ the initial consonants differ in [+voice], the vowels in [+high]

The model should also account for the fact that certain positions in words (initial, final) are more “salient,” as are positions such as the beginning and the end of sentences. The consequence is the so-called “bathtub” effect (according to which speakers will recall with more ease the beginning and the end of words, see Brown and McNeill (1966)<sup>10</sup>). Rhyme is affected by these facts (see Aitchison (1987: 24)). Alliteration in English has been claimed to be the result of identical syllable onsets in word initial position, and not of mere sound repetition anywhere in the utterance (Kiparsky 1987: 192). In Kiparsky’s opinion, alliteration is structurally determined and has no timbric (or qualitative) counterpart. Independently of the correctness of this latter claim, the phonetic prominence of the “syllable initial, word initial” configuration is predictable on the basis of the bathtub effect.

The direct consequence of these facts is that sound differences located in initial or final positions should be weighted “heavier” than sound differences located in medial positions, however, it is a non-trivial task to find a mathematical function between position of the sound in the sequence of segments and “phonetic weight” expressed, for example, in features.

Finally, the model should also account for the fact that graphemic and phonemic systems are not completely independent. Consider the following example:

- (53) *Lagoçamilébou.* /The girl left/  
(Raymond Queneau, *Zazie dans le metro*. Paris: Gallimard. 1959.)

The phonological representation of the French sentence “La gosse a mis les bouts” is perfect (as far as the use of a non-IPA transcription allows), the unexpected graphic representation is perceived as odd, and is exploited by Queneau for humorous purposes (see Datain (1974: 546), and ch. 7). The best explanation of this phenomenon is that this is a visual pun between the usual graphemic representation (spelling) and the uncommon one used by Queneau. This practice is more common in the Anglo-Saxon world, where it is known as eye-dialect (see Krapp (1925: 228) and Hall (1950: 46)). From

<sup>10</sup>The fairly humorous name comes from the obvious visual analogy of someone lying in a bathtub with his/her head and feet sticking out.

this type of phenomenon follows the necessity of factoring in the “distance” between the graphemic renditions of two words. The interplay of spelling and pronunciation is not unknown to psycholinguists. For instance, the perception of rhyme has been found to be sensitive to spelling (e.g., Seidenberg and Tanenhaus (1979)). Žuravlev (1974) has proposed the introduction of “phonoletters” (i.e., the union of a sound and its graphemic representation) in his account of phonosymbolism (see below) in Russian.

**Research on Phonemic Distance** So far no work has come close to dealing with the full complexity of these issues, although some very promising studies have recently appeared.

The notion of Phonemic Distance (PD), i.e., the degree to which two strings differ phonetically, was introduced in American phonology by Vitz and Winkler (1973). Among the early studies that deal with the concept in the area of puns are Lagerquist (1980) and Zwicky and Zwicky (1986). Lagerquist presents some interesting results, such as the fact that 61% of the puns in her corpus do not change the number or location of sounds, but only their phonetic features, and the fact that more than half the changes in consonants involve one single feature (Lagerquist 1980: 186). Lagerquist’s conclusion is that puns tend to preserve homophony.

Zwicky and Zwicky’s approach is not concerned with the absolute difference between the two words (or strings) involved in punning (in their terminology, the “pun” and the “target”), but rather with the subphonemic distance between sounds: so for example, when considering a pun between “defecated” and “deprecated” instead of noting a difference of one phoneme (addition of /r/) plus the distance between /f/ and /p/, they record and analyze them as independent differences. Their approach of course invalidates the results from the point of view of the global distance issue, but their results are very interesting since they come to the conclusion that marked sounds tend to replace unmarked sounds in puns (Zwicky and Zwicky 1986: 495). In terms of features, substitutions based on voicing and position are most frequent in puns based on consonants, whereas height and tenseness seem to rule puns based on vowels.

An interesting conclusion is that a possible interpretation of these results seems to be inconsistent with the “error theory” (see ch. 4) since in errors one would expect unmarked sounds to substitute marked ones.

Recently a book-length study on the phonology of puns appeared (Sobkowiak 1991); see a review in Attardo (forthcoming)). Sobkowiak's approach is phonostatistical: by comparing regularities found in a corpus of puns to the figures available for "normal" non-punning phonological behavior, Sobkowiak is able to highlight any differences between the phonological and the meta-phonological judgments of the speakers.<sup>11</sup>

Sobkowiak's starting point is the notion of PD. Sobkowiak tests the differences between a corpus of puns and a corpus of malapropisms in terms of differences in features (e.g., [ $\pm$  voiced]) and not just of number of sounds. The results show that in significant numbers puns tend to be phonetically more similar to their targets than malapropisms (Sobkowiak 1991: 96).

Both puns and malapropisms are found to favor word-initial and (to a lesser extent) word final positions (p. 100-101), a fact which is consistent with the higher saliency of these positions ("bathtub effect").

Ousting is the term introduced by Zwicky and Zwicky (1986) for the fact that certain phonemes tend to replace other phonemes in puns. Sobkowiak, while critical on methodological grounds of the Zwicky and Zwicky study, also finds that some phonemes tend to occur more frequently among the ousting sounds of puns than in general English (Sobkowiak 1991: 108); however, where Zwicky and Zwicky had concluded that marked phonemes oust unmarked phonemes, Sobkowiak seems to find incompatible results (the first three sounds in the list are /p/, /k/, and /t/, three unmarked sounds).

Taking the analysis one step beyond Zwicky and Zwicky, Sobkowiak looks at how frequently each phoneme ousts and is ousted (the previous observations only tabulated how often a sound occurred in the pun and in the target). Here, Zwicky and Zwicky's hypothesis (marked ousts unmarked) is confirmed for stops since all voiced stops (marked) oust more than they are ousted, but not for other classes of sounds. Another interesting effect is that vowels are less stable than consonants (i.e., they both oust and are ousted more often), which can be explained by the necessity of keeping the consonantal skeleton stable (Sobkowiak 1991: 113). Yet another datum is that deletions (ousting

<sup>11</sup>Sobkowiak stresses the methodological importance of the "meta-" prefix in the title of his book (Sobkowiak 1991: 45-49). Meta-linguistics is a (new) branch of linguistics that concerns itself with the speaker's awareness of his/her use of the linguistic system (e.g., Vershueren 1989, Gombert 1992). Thus, the meta-phonology of puns concerns itself with the phonological facts and/or regularities affected by the speaker's intention of making a pun (and thus manipulating the linguistic system).

by “zero”) are much more frequent for consonants than for vowels, probably motivated by the need to preserve the integrity of the syllables involved.

Solving the problems outlined above in the phonemic distance model requires specific psycholinguistic and phonological/phonetic research which would be out of place in this context. Further interdisciplinary research must address these issues, which have been raised here only in order to outline the problematic aspects of the phonemic distance model. Despite the obvious problems outlined, a determination of the range of phonological similarity within which punning is allowed would be a worthwhile endeavor because this phonological limit could yield interesting information on what qualifies as “similar” sounds in the paradigmatic storage of the speakers, and so shed light on the storage organization of phonological representations of lexical items (see Sobkowiak 1991: 117-126).

### **Eclectic Taxonomies**

Most taxonomies show some degree of eclectism; that is, they incorporate, to a greater or lesser extent, elements that properly belong to other types of taxonomy. For example, both Guiraud and Milner base their taxonomies on the paradigmatic/syntagmatic opposition, only to introduce a third heterogeneous class. The reason for doing so is obviously to make the taxonomy match the data more precisely; so there is reason to expect that an eclectic approach would be most successful. In fact, Vittoz-Canuto’s (1983) taxonomy is possibly the most complete one in the field. As such, it also highlights the limitations inherent to this approach: however detailed and complex a taxonomy may be, it still remains at a low level of explanation.

Vittoz-Canuto’s (1983) work is based on a corpus of puns collected from advertisements from several French magazines. Most of the book is dedicated to a taxonomy of puns, based on five large categories related to linguistic phenomena. Vittoz-Canuto also uses the paradigmatic/syntagmatic opposition, and her taxonomy incorporates elements of the phonemic distance approach as well. In other words, Vittoz-Canuto’s is an extreme example of an eclectic taxonomy. Following is an outline of the taxonomy, without examples for reasons of space. Vittoz-Canuto’s section on paronyms has been included in all its detail, to give an idea of her degree of sophistication in the taxonomic process. Quoting the entire taxonomy would nearly require reproducing the table of contents of the book!

Table 3.3: Vittoz-Canuto's Taxonomy

1. exploitation of the signifier
  - (a) rhyme
  - (b) alliteration
2. exploitation of the signifier/signified
  - (a) paronyms
    - i. on the syntagmatic axis
      - A. paronyms based on one or several phonemes  

$$\begin{array}{c} -V- \\ -V- \\ C-[+V] \\ C[+C] \end{array}$$
      - B. paronyms based on addition of one or two phonemes
      - C. paronyms based on addition of more than two phonemes
      - D. paronyms based on the inversion of graphemes
    - ii. on the paradigmatic axis
      - A. substitution of a phoneme in word-initial position
      - B. substitution of one or more phonemes in word-internal position
      - C. substitution of two phonemes in word-initial position
      - D. substitution of several phonemes
      - E. addition of a phoneme
        - a) to the right of the segment
        - b) in the center
    - iii. loss of a phoneme
    - iv. inversion of phonemes
  - (b) neological paronyms
3. homonyms
4. others
5. exploitation of the signified (polysemy)
6. exploitation of connotations
7. neologisms (new signified added to the pre-existing ones)

### 3.2.2 The Two Senses in a Pun

Beyond the efforts at classification, the most important contribution of structuralist linguistics to the understanding of puns is probably the description of the relationship between the two senses involved in a pun. Though couched

in different theoretical frameworks, all linguistic (and non-linguistic) analyses agree on the fact that puns involve two senses (see Redfern (1984) *passim*) here labelled  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ . The presence of two senses in a text immediately poses the question of their mutual relationship and interaction. The most detailed description of the interplay between the two senses is due to Guiraud (1976); see also Todorov (1978: 289-291), who noted the presence of the two senses and introduced the issue of their hierarchical ordering (see below) independently of Guiraud. Guiraud's analysis will be presented below.

### 3.3 Linguistic Mechanisms of the Pun

This section is organized as follows: the first subsection presents an analysis of one sample pun, and each of the remaining sections deals with a problematic aspect of the analysis.

#### 3.3.1 Analysis of a Sample Pun

Consider the following example of a pun:

(54) Why did the cookie cry?

Its mother had been away for so long. [a wafer] <sup>12</sup>

Pepicello and Green (1983: 59).

The disambiguation (see ch. 2) process of the text follows a left-to-right procedure, standard for natural language processing or other formal analyses. It activates the scripts for COOKIE and for CRY.<sup>13</sup> The procedure

<sup>12</sup>It is irrelevant to the processing of the joke which of the conflicting strings (a wafer/away for) is present in the oral presentation of the text. In a written version, as the one in the text necessarily is, the effect of the joke would be altered if the text presented the graphemic string "wafer" first, since then the reader would have to access the alternative meaning for the string after failing to find the quasi-tautological statement that a cookie is a wafer. This does not affect the argument in the text. The only affected aspect of the textual processing is the order of actualization of the scripts.

<sup>13</sup>For the reasons discussed in ch. 2, although the general organization of the "isotopy disjunction" model is retained, a limited use of "scripts" and inferential mechanisms, borrowed from the SSTH and/or other text-oriented models (ch. 5-6) is made where necessary. A full discussion of the tools and the procedure of sense determination in the various models will be found in the relevant chapters. It should also be noted that for ease

immediately notes the impossible match [-animate] / [+animate] (one has to be animate, not to mention have lachrymal glands, to be able to cry). This puts the hearer in the situation of having to decide whether the text is a) semantically ill-formed, and hence to be discarded; or b) not fit to the speaker's representation of the world. For pragmatic reasons, the hearer gives the speaker the benefit of the doubt and assumes that the speaker is being cooperative. This entails that the hearer will have to revise his/her representation of the world.<sup>14</sup> The next step is to assimilate the incongruity (see Mc Ghee (1979: 57-60)), which is done by opening a possible world where cookies are [+animate] and have the physiological capacity to shed tears, (on opening possible worlds to assimilate incongruities, see Schmidt (1976) , Eco (1979) and ch. 5).

The interpretation process then proceeds to the second sentence. Again all the relevant scripts are activated and combined without major problems. Once a possible world in which cookies are [+animate] has been created, it becomes acceptable for a cookie to have a mother ([+animate] prototypically (Lakoff 1977, Rosch and Mervis 1975) <sup>15</sup> implies sexual reproduction and hence a set of parents) and that the mother be away (from the common domicile?) for an extended period of time. Through a complex series of inferences (which are not reproduced here for the sake of simplicity), the hearer reconstructs that the cause for the cookie's sadness is its mother's prolonged absence. In this way, the question in the first sentence is answered satisfactorily.

If the hearer's analysis stopped here, he/she would be missing the humorous nature of the text entirely. Note that it is irrelevant whether the pun has been announced, i.e., forecast, or not. There are three possible cases:

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of presentation, there will be no discussion of the morphological and syntactic analysis necessary for the processing of the text—for instance, the first sentence is a question, and this fact has to be gathered morphologically/syntactically.

<sup>14</sup>In other words, the issue is that of determining whether the speaker is abiding by Grice's (1975) principle of cooperation; see ch. 6 and 9)

<sup>15</sup>Prototypical implication is a concept which has not been the object of explicit discussion, as far as this writer knows, but it "follows naturally" from the prototype-based view of meaning. An example will explain best what is intended: if the prototypical bird has a beak, and it is known that X is a bird (however distant its relation with the prototype) it follows that X has a beak, even if in terms of inferential logic this inference is clearly faulty (if z holds true for some but not all As, the fact that B is an A does not imply that z holds true for B).

1. no announcement at all
2. non-specific announcement
3. specific announcement

If the announcement is not specific, e.g., the speaker tells the hearer that he/she is going to tell a joke (without specifying whether the joke is verbal or referential), the hearer does not know that a pun is forthcoming, as a non-punning joke may follow; the hearer must, somehow, understand that a pun has actually been uttered. If the pun is announced specifically, the hearer still does not know which of the utterances following the announcement will contain the pun, or which linguistic element will be ambiguous (and in fact not even if a linguistic element, as opposed to a random string of sounds, will be the target of the pun), and so he/she must engage in some type of heuristic to determine whether the text is a pun and which string is being used to create the pun. Finally, most improvised humor is not announced, in which case the hearer must engage in the heuristics *a fortiori*. As a result, regardless of whether the pun has been announced explicitly in the context or not, the hearer must engage in some inferential activity to determine, a) if a pun has been encountered, and b) which string is being punned upon. These heuristics will be described below.

Since the text of example (54) is most likely to have been presented in context as an unspecified humorous text, the hearer would have to conclude that the teller's attempt at eliciting humor has failed, either because the hearer him/herself was unable to process the joke or because the speaker failed to provide all the necessary elements for the text to be funny. The problem that the hearer faces is that nothing in the text explicitly points at the presence of humor in the text itself (implicitly, the low level of interest of the text, and its low level of relevance are give-away signs that "something is wrong with the text" and a switch to a humorous mode in which the rules of the "normal" world do not hold is necessary to make sense out of the text—see ch. 6 and 9 for a discussion of this mode, known as *non-bona-fide*). In other puns, different situations may occur, such as co-textual clues that a second sense is to be found in the text, etc. These differences, although interesting in their own merit, are not significant in this context. Either with or without co-textual clues, the hearer must infer that the text has a

second, humorous sense, and it matters little whether or not he/she may take advantage of co-textual clues.

In order to access the second meaning ("a wafer") the hearer must leave the casual interpretation. The hearer must reconsider the phonetic representation of a segment of the text, the crucial [əweyfər] and realize that it can be parsed differently than "away for" (i.e., "a wafer;" with a slight modification of the phonetic representation, see below).

From this point forward, the disambiguation is trivial: the text only remains to be re-parsed, taking into account the second meaning. At the end of the disambiguation process, the hearer is confronted with the fact of having two senses for the same text ("a wafer" / "away for"). Since the hearer has already decided that the text belongs to a non-bona-fide mode, he/she can finally decide that the text is in fact a joke, and that the two senses are supposed to coexist ("overlap" in Raskin's (1985) terminology).

Closer examination of the two senses now found to coexist reveals to the hearer that the two senses are local antonyms (see Raskin (1985: 108)), and that thus the two senses are opposed in the special sense required by Raskin's theory. Since all the conditions required for a joke obtain, the text has been successfully parsed as a joke, and the hearer can will react accordingly (smile, laugh, ...).

Now it is possible to address some of the many issues that emerge from the phenomena described.

### 3.3.2 Issues and Problems with the Analysis of the Pun

#### Two Phonemic Segments

The above analysis leads to the conclusion that the humor of (54) is based on the similarity between the two following phonemic strings:

/ə+weyfər/ = a wafer

/əwey+fər/ = away for (Pepicello and Green 1983: 59)

Apparently the hearer and the speaker are treating the two strings as interchangeable, while they are actually phonemically distinct because they have a different position for the morpheme boundary, according to Pepicello and Green,.

These facts are problematic because: a) there is no apparent reason to treat the two phonemic strings as interchangeable; b) the exchange is perceived as humorous, rather than erroneous; c) the exchange is deliberate; in other situations speakers successfully discriminate between even smaller phonemic differences; and d) the attention of the speakers is attracted by the phonemic string itself, and not just by its meaning. These issues will be addressed in the next chapter.

### **Puns Are Not Limited to Words**

It should be noted that puns involve arbitrarily large segments of utterances, and not just "words." The idea that puns would involve only words is easily proven wrong by a simple observation of, say, Duchàček's taxonomy (see above). Clearly the range of linguistic phenomena involved in puns exceeds the word both in the direction of smaller, simpler units (morphemes, phonemes) and in the direction of larger units (syntagms, frozen expressions, etc.; on humorous violation of idioms, see Coulmas (1981), Fónagy (1982), Read (1983), Gresillon and Maingueneau (1984).

Puns connect two strings of phonemes arbitrarily chosen in the utterance. The fact that the most frequent type of segment chosen happens to match the boundaries of lexical morphemes (Attardo et al. 1991, 1994) is revealing of psycholinguistic facts (speakers are more comfortable in manipulating meaningful units), but clearly not exhaustive of linguistic reality. The following examples (due to J. Morreall; see Attardo and Raskin (1991); see also Pepicello and Weisberg (1983: 66) for other examples of morphological ambiguity/reanalysis based puns) of "false segmentation" show that lexical morphemes are not the only possible context for puns:

(55) If it's feasible, let's fease it.

(56) He may not have been actually disgruntled, but he was certainly far from gruntled.

A related issue is known in traditional historical linguistics as "metanalysis." Metanalysis is the "erroneous" morphological segmentation of words by speakers; for example the word "napron" was metanalyzed (preceded by the article "a") in "an + apron." On metanalysis, see Knobloch (1968) and references therein; on the connection between metanalysis and humor see Nilsen (1987b).

### Ambiguity and Puns: Why Any Ambiguous Word Is Not a Pun

All words are ambiguous, vague, or unspecified if they are not taken in context (see 2.3.1). Even the least ambiguous words, those which have an unambiguous sound-referent connection (i.e., refer unambiguously to one and only one class of objects in the non-linguistic world)—for instance, “pterodactyl”—are still unspecified. Are we referring to a specific pterodactyl, or to “the pterodactyl” as a class? Cruse (1986: 50) calls this kind of ambiguity “unit-type ambiguity.”<sup>16</sup>

If all words are ambiguous, why do puns stand out? In what way are they different from other non-punning utterances? In the context of a sentence, the inherent ambiguity of linguistic units (words, morphemes) is reduced, and if all goes well — that is, the sentence is coherent and cohesive — the ambiguity is eliminated. Puns, however, preserve two senses of a linguistic unit; therefore, puns exist only as a byproduct of sentential and/or textual disambiguation.<sup>17</sup>

The first element of explanation of the difference between ambiguity and puns is that the two senses involved in a pun cannot be random, but have to be “opposed” (i.e., semantically incompatible in context). Obviously, the difference between the determinative and the non-determinative meaning of “pterodactyl” is not in general semantically incompatible. Ambiguity *per se* should be seen as an enabling, or necessary, feature rather than a sufficient condition for puns.

The other issue that should be mentioned in this respect is that puns are concocted. Both puns that play on an element of a text not produced with a punning effect in mind and puns that play on a text produced with the humorous effect as a goal (see ch. 10) need to have a context to build

<sup>16</sup>In this context, it is not necessary to distinguish between vagueness (or non-specificity) and ambiguity, as Lyons (1977: 409) does. As a working definition of ambiguity, it will be sufficient to assume that any string that can refer to more than one object is ambiguous.

<sup>17</sup>This claim has important ramifications, including the fact that puns can exist as such only in context (see ch. 10). Words can be ambiguous outside of any context (e.g., “bank”), but puns can only occur in a sentence in which two senses are in conflict. The paradigmatic relations of the lexicon are not an immense collection of puns. They are a collection of potential puns, insofar as any ambiguous expression may occur in a context which preserves two or more meanings, which can then be exploited as a pun. Mere ambiguity is not enough to create a pun; otherwise, how could one differentiate between a pun and an ambiguous utterance such as “Flying planes can be dangerous”?

upon (and to be opposed to). In sentences which are ambiguous but non-punning, the context is not sufficient to disambiguate as in puns, but the lack of complete disambiguation is not used for opposition by the text, and so does not create humor.

### **How the Two Senses are Brought Together**

In order for an utterance to have two different senses, both senses must be present at the same time. As has been shown, this is not a difficult requirement given the inherent ambiguity of linguistic units.

Two further requirements render the presence of a humorous ambiguity more complex. The maintenance of the ambiguity until the end of the processing of the text goes against the normal disambiguating function of the context of the utterance. In order for an utterance still to be ambiguous after contextualization, one cannot rely only on the inherent ambiguity of language, since this is usually eliminated by the disambiguating force of context. It has been shown (Dolitsky 1983, 1992; Dascal 1985: 98-99; Attardo 1990a: 358-359; Jodlowiec 1991) that jokes (and hence puns) are constrained in not mentioning (or in "leaving implicit") some information that would otherwise disambiguate the utterance. In "spontaneous" puns, the punster relies on the coincidental failure on the part of the speaker to disambiguate the sentence completely, or forces a patently inappropriate meaning on the same. "Rehearsed" puns have requirements that essentially match those of jokes. In addition, the presence of humorous ambiguity is made complex by the already mentioned fact that the two senses of the linguistic unit cannot be any two senses but must be antonymous or local antonyms of each other (Raskin 1985: 108).

Because of these two requirements, the occurrence of a case of ambiguity that can be exploited for humorous purposes is not as frequent as inherent ambiguity, and it often requires a certain degree of contrivance (see the discussion below on the qualitative evaluation of puns, in relation to Guiraud's work). The presence of humorous ambiguity is brought about and resolved (i.e. revealed, or made explicit) by two functional elements in the text. The structuralist analyses of the pun have described the first of these aspects of the pun (i.e., the "bringing together" of two senses), and have labelled it "*connecteur*" (Greimas 1966: 70-71), "*embrayeur*" (Charaudeau 1972: 63), etc. The *connecteur* is, of course, simply the ambiguous element of the

utterance which makes the presence of two senses possible<sup>18</sup> (see also ch. 2).

From a different perspective, the second sense of the utterance must be brought into the interpretation process if the hearer is to perceive the presence of both senses. The element that causes the passage from one sense, to one of the senses previously discarded by the disambiguation process, has been called *disjuncteur* (Greimas), "script-switch trigger" (Raskin), *désebrayeur* (Charaudeau) etc.

The function of this element is that of interrupting the disambiguation of the text up to the point of the occurrence of the disjuncteur and to cause revision of the disambiguation with the inclusion of the second sense. Usually this is attained by making the first interpretation of the sentence suddenly inappropriate, i.e., by presenting some contextual element that rules out or complicates the first disambiguation hypothesis.

### The Fate of the First Interpretation

What happens to the first hypothesis produced in the disambiguation process? Is it discarded and rejected, or does it coexist with the second, and if so, how? There are three possibilities. The first sense can a) become inadequate and consequently be abandoned; b) remain better than the second sense, and the latter be finally discarded; or c) be somewhere in between the above two cases—the two senses coexist and are both acceptable at the same time.

The three possibilities have also been discussed by Guiraud (1976). He begins by distinguishing between the first sense ( $S_1$ ) which he calls *ludant* (player), and the second sense ( $S_2$ ) which he calls *ludé* (played). His characterization of the two senses is weak, because he tries to establish an a priori

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<sup>18</sup>If one considers the kind of issues which were addressed by structural linguistics when the isotopy-model was formulated, i.e., the determination of a unitary sentential meaning, the presence of linguistic elements which resisted disambiguation was bound to attract attention.

As has been discussed in chapter 2, the notion of isotopy was introduced to account for the coherent selections among the paradigmatic options which output a meaning for the sentence. The drive in the direction of disambiguation is so strong that speakers are not normally aware of the meanings discarded by the disambiguation process.

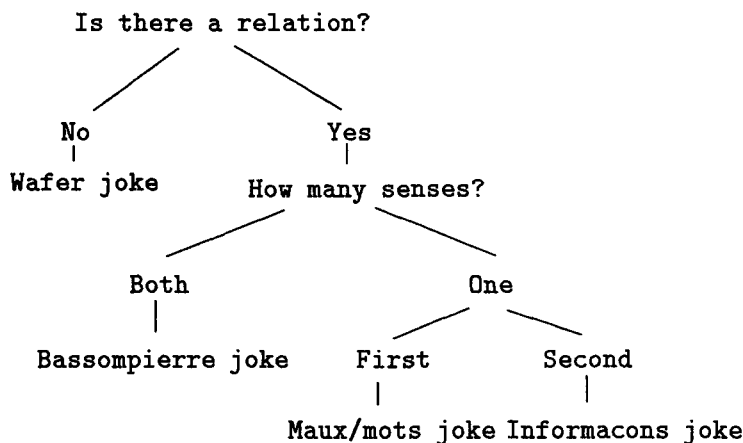
In other words, speakers are conditioned to disambiguate sentences as much as possible, and in general not to stop until a unique sense has been reached, or, failing that, to register the remaining ambiguity as problematic.

distinction between the expected, “normal” sense (*ludé*), and the unexpected, extraordinary sense (*ludant*) (Guiraud 1976: 105-106); however, Guiraud also presents a second definition of the two senses which has the *ludant* as the sense given in the text and the *ludé* as the “latent” text. Guiraud’s final definition is acceptable although the terminological innovation is unnecessary—any pun will first introduce one sense ( $S_1$ ) to the text, and then a second one ( $S_2$ ).

The reader will recall that two senses of the text come into contact in the ambiguous element which permits their copresence in the text itself, and that the nature of the semantic relations between the two senses must be that of antonymy (Raskin 1985). The issue that Guiraud investigates is: what happens to the two antonymic senses of the word (or string) when they are forced to coexist in the “connector”?

Guiraud’s answer is that their copresence forces some of the connotations of one of the two senses onto the other. There are four possible cases and they can be organized in a hierarchical structure (see figure 3.1 below).

Figure 3.1: The Organization of Senses in a Pun



**1) No Relation** The two senses do not have anything in common; there is no connotation possible. See example (54 = the wafer joke). These jokes lack “justification,” or, in other terms, are weak in “local logic” (see Attardo and Raskin (1991) for a discussion and references; cf. ch. 4).

**2) Both Senses Coexist** This is the case in which the text is readable under both interpretations.

- (57) Bassompierre was a prisoner at the Bastille. While reading, he flipped the pages of his book hastily. The warden asked him what he was looking for, and Bassompierre replied: "I am looking for a passage, but I cannot find it."

Both interpretations of Bassompierre's reply (passage in a book/in a wall) are perfectly meaningful and adequate in the situation. In this case, both senses are present at the same time.

**3)  $S_2$  Forces connotation on  $S_1$**  Guiraud's example is the famous aphorism by Paul Valéry:

- (58) *Entre deux mots il faut toujours choisir le moindre.*  
/Between two words/evils one must always choose the lesser./

In this case *mots* (words) is  $S_1$  and *maux* (evils) is  $S_2$ .  $S_2$  forces some of its connotations onto  $S_1$ , and the "meaning" of the pun emerges as "all words are evils."

**4)  $S_1$  Forces connotation on  $S_2$**  This is the opposite case than in the previous example. Here  $S_1$  forces its connotation onto  $S_2$ . Guiraud's example is a pun by San Antonio:

- (59) *Bulletin d'informacons.*  
/Information bulletin/stupid people bulletin/

which could be translated functionally<sup>19</sup> as "Newslitter." In *News — litter* the reader is faced first with the meaning "litter" ( $S_1$ ), and has to reconstruct  $S_2$  (letter); however, it is the latter which dominates, while  $S_1$  adds negative connotations to the idea: it is probably a poor newsletter, which belongs in the trash.

<sup>19</sup> On functional translation of puns, see Chambon (1984), Freidhof (1986), Delabastita (1987), Landheer (1989), Leclerc (1989), Laurian (1989, 1991).

The determinant of the dominating sense is probably the presence in the general knowledge of speakers of a ready-made phrase such as the proverb *Entre deux maux il faut choisir le moindre* or the lexeme “newsletter,” whereas there is no corresponding ready-made expression for “news litter” or *entre deux mots*.

Guiraud’s analysis of the interaction of  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  remains, after 15 years, the best attempt at dealing with such elusive notions as “the quality” or the “meaning” of puns. Raskin (1987) expressed a negative view on the possibility of tackling the issue of the quality of jokes, within linguistics. If one accepts Guiraud’s analysis of the interaction of the two senses, then a possible classification of the quality of puns does exist (although this application is foreign to Guiraud’s intentions): the best puns are those in which either the two senses coexist in a difficult balance, or in which the connotating sense brings a meaningful contribution to the global senses of the text. With these criteria, Valéry’s quote is an excellent pun because it is known that Valéry’s aesthetics prescribe precisely the kind of meticulous craft that will be “suspicious” of words. On the other hand, a pun like “a wafer/away for” has no “hidden meaning” and so is of low quality (see ch. 4 for further discussion).

### **Disjunctive/Connector Configuration**

The two functions which have been identified in puns (connection and disjunction) are performed in the humorous text by some linguistic entity. When a linguistic entity performs one of the two functions, it is said that the function is realized in that linguistic entity. The linguistic entity that realizes the function of connection is called the “connector,” while the linguistic entity that realizes the function of disjunction is called the “disjunctive” (see ch. 2).

There are two possibilities regarding the relative positions of connector and disjunctive: either the two are realized by the same linguistic entity or they are not. In the first case, the connector and disjunctive are said to be non-distinct; in the second case they are said to be distinct. The analysis of the disjunctive configuration was introduced in the analysis of puns in Attardo et al. (1991,1994).

### Diffused Disjunctors (Alliteration)

Puns based on alliteration do not fit in the connector/disjunctive and distinct/non-distinct dichotomies. The configuration of alliterative puns has been called “diffused” (Attardo et al. 1991, 1994) because it consists of the repetition of sounds, or groups of sounds, scattered in the text of the joke. Consider the following example:

- (60) Today’s tabloid biography: High chair, high school, high stool, high finance, high hat— hi, warden! (Meiers and Knapp 1980: 21)

Because of the diffused configuration of alliterative puns, it is impossible to identify a unique disjunctive. The connector is clearly the repetition of sounds, but when does the repetition of sounds become a context that makes the first sense of the text “inadequate”? Even admitting that the third repetition of a given sound is enough to establish that there is a pattern, what is the contribution of the repetition after the third one? The most likely answer is that the “inadequacy” of the text is perceived when considering the text as a whole, although sufficiently frequent repetitions may trigger the disjunctive effect before the end of the scanning of the text.

It remains to be explained why the repetition of sounds in a text is perceived as inadequate; after all, some forms of poetry are based precisely on the principle of sound repetition and are not perceived as inadequate or incongruous.

The incongruity of alliterative humor has, in fact, been denied (Ferro-Luzzi 1990). Careful analysis will reveal, however, that alliterative humor contains an incongruity. Casual language, as opposed to non-casual language, according to the distinction introduced previously, does not have identifiable patterns of sound repetition, i.e., sound occurrences are random. Poetic language (possibly the most sophisticated form of non-casual use of language) exploits sound repetitions to create effects of aesthetic value (Jakobson 1960). Regardless of the goals and causes of these effects, sound repetition has value (i.e. is associated by the speakers with some semantic or contextual entity, e.g., poetry). In alliterative puns, two cases are possible: either the alliterative sequence is associated with an effect which is incongruous to the content of the text in which the alliteration occurs, or the alliteration is not associated with any effect, and so the hearer is deceived in his/her expectations. Both cases fall under the current definitions of incongruity (see ch. 1).

## Backtracking

The above distinctions are interesting in the context of establishing the nature of the inferential work involved in “getting a joke.” When the hearer reaches the disjunctive, he/she realizes that the interpretation previously given to the text up to that point is either untenable or another previously unnoticed interpretation is also possible, and that the two are not compatible (i.e. they are incongruous). The hearer is forced to return to the beginning of the text (i.e., to backtrack) and parse it again in the light of the new contextual information provided by the occurrence of the disjunctive. An example of this backtracking has been given in the initial analysis of the “wafer” pun. The reasons that render this backtracking necessary are based on the assumption that the speaker is being cooperative, albeit in the “humor mode” and on the pragmatic inferences that are derived from this fact. This topic is examined in more detail in ch. 9.

The two configurations of the “connector/disjunctive” dyad offer two alternatives to the backtracking process. If the connector precedes the disjunctive (distinct connector configuration), the backtracking process will involve an actual re-analysis of the connector, a redistribution of the semantic weights associated with the element, and ultimately a reinterpretation of the element and its relationship with the context. If the connector and the disjunctive coincide (non-distinct configuration), no actual backtracking will occur, but the interpretation up to that point will be suspended and the alternate meaning of the disjunctive/connector will determine the second interpretation of the text.

### 3.3.3 Evaluation

Discussion of the problematic aspects of the textual organization (configuration) of puns has shown that attention to the linguistic phenomena involved in the processing of puns provides new and interesting perspectives on a subject upon which much has been said, but which remains rich in unexplored issues. Needless to say, these analyses are first approximations and are subject to revisions and reconsiderations when more research will have provided more data from which to generalize.

### 3.4 Why Study Puns? Puns as Linguistic Evidence

Finally, one last question remains to be addressed concerning the legitimacy of the entire discussion on puns, namely, are they worth the interest shown them in this book?

There seems to have been a distinct difference in the amount of attention paid to puns and to other linguistic phenomena such as speech errors. For instance, In a review of the different types of evidence available for phonology, Ohala (1986) mentions, among other things, poetry, speech errors and language games, but not puns. Linguistic errors, language games and aspects of poetry (such as rhyme) have been widely used as “external evidence” for the psychological reality of phenomena such as the analysis of linguistic sounds in terms of phonemes and features, syllabification, and morphemic analysis. For example, the fact that chiasitic reversals (a.k.a. “spoonerisms”) can involve either isolated phonemes, or syllables, or morphemes, but cannot involve an arbitrary segmentation of the utterance, is widely accepted as evidence for the psychological reality of the linguistic constructs involved (see Fromkin (ed.) (1973), and references therein). Much less attention has been paid to puns from this point of view despite optimistic claims such as Heller’s (1974: 271):

The structure of the pun holds implications basic to an understanding of many psychological problems, and a knowledge of its dynamic processes offers important insights into the nature of reasoning itself.

Puns can be, and have been, used as evidence in linguistic research. The use of puns as evidence of pronunciation in diachronic linguistics was mentioned above (3.2). The previous discussion of the mechanisms of puns and the comparison between puns and other linguistic phenomena in the next chapter will expand on the fact that puns are at least coextensive with speech errors (that is, they involve the same range of linguistic material), and so can be used as evidence in the same way errors are used. In addition, puns seem to have connections with other phenomena beyond speech errors and so may shed light on a broader variety of linguistic phenomena.

A possible drawback in the use of puns as linguistic evidence may be the

fact that, as has been stressed, puns are a “conscious” phenomenon, and so the data they present may be contaminated; however, the conscious nature of the use of puns should not be confused with an awareness of the mechanisms at play in the production and understanding of puns. Speakers are aware that if an utterance contains a pun it is not to be taken seriously,<sup>20</sup> however, they are not at all aware of the rules that govern the choice of appropriate strings for punning, of what qualifies as “similar” strings, or of how the two senses of the utterance are brought together. This allows the safe conclusion that puns do not present a worse quality of data than speech errors. As a matter of fact, they may provide a broader range of data (for instance, on pragmatic facts) and may not be subject in the same measure to the drawbacks that speech errors present when used as linguistic evidence (see Davis 1988: 143-146). For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Sobkowiak (1991: 24-32).

From a different point of view, puns have a practical advantage over speech errors: puns are easy to collect, whereas speech errors have to be gathered with painstaking patience. Anyone may acquire vast collections of puns in printed form with the expenditure of a few dollars, although the non-academic nature of these collections may introduce spurious issues. Collecting other sources of phonological evidence is much harder: Fromkin (1971: 216) reports that gathering a corpus of 600 errors took her three years. It would thus stand to reason that linguists have every reason to be more attentive to the phenomena involved in punning. As a matter of fact, in the only *bona-fide* phonological studies of puns (Lagerquist 1980, Zwicky and Zwicky 1986, Sobkowiak 1991), the availability of large quantities of examples is exploited to apply statistical methods to the data with interesting results (see above).

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<sup>20</sup>If one adopts the view that puns may be unintentional on the speaker’s part (see ch. 10), then obviously this is not necessarily the case.

# Chapter 4

## Resolution in Puns

A large debate in the psychologically-oriented research on humor has centered on the so-called “resolution” of the incongruity encountered in humor. The essence of the issue is summarized effectively in Forabosco (1992): “incongruity” theorists claim that incongruity alone is sufficient to generate humor, whereas the “incongruity-resolution” theorists claim that the incongruity in itself is necessary but not sufficient for the perception of humor, and that in order for humor to be perceived one has to “resolve” the incongruity. The latter position is accepted in this chapter.<sup>1</sup>

The term “resolution” is somewhat unfortunate insofar as it suggests a “dissolution” of the incongruity, its solution into congruous thought pro-

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<sup>1</sup>Without seriously addressing the complex issue of whether incongruity and resolution are necessary and sufficient conditions for all humor, it is possible to provide some evidence that puns involve (some) resolution. While young children (2-4 years) appreciate pure linguistic incongruity (e.g., Tessier (1988: 19-20)), they do not understand puns until later (McGhee (1979: 76-77); Bariaud (1990: 22); Gombert (1990: 116)). Since children can appreciate linguistic incongruity before they appreciate puns, it would seem that all puns have something beyond incongruity, i.e., an element of resolution, however small and marginal.

Consider also some pre-theoretical observations: even the worst type of puns, the so-called “groaners,” are perceived as (attempts at) being funny, and, however low their quality may be, the hearers do not discuss their status as puns but rather question their quality. It stands to reason to assume that all puns, independently of their quality, do not consist only of incongruity, since then they would be indistinguishable from incongruous statements, and so have some elements of resolution that identify them as (attempts at or bad) puns. It may be noted that humor deriving from incongruity alone is usually pretty basic, much simpler and less sophisticated than jokes.

cesses; in fact, the “resolution” of the incongruity is not supposed to get rid of the incongruity, but to coexist and accompany it.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the “resolution” aspect of the incongruity-resolution psychological models corresponds to the already mentioned “justification” (Aubouin 1948) and “local-logic” (Ziv 1984) (see ch. 3).

Consider the following example:

- (61) How does an elephant hide in a cherry tree?  
By painting its toenails red.

Clearly, the answer to the question and the question itself describe *impossibilia*: a cherry tree will not support the weight of an elephant, and the pachyderm would never be able to climb up to one, anyway. Thus, there are several incongruities in the text, but we also find an element of resolution: cherries are red, and, therefore, by painting its toenails red it might be possible, if an elephant were able to hide in a cherry tree, to improve its camouflage. Obviously, the resolution of the incongruity is not a “real” resolution: it does not get rid of the incongruity—it actually introduces more of the same—but because it has some distorted verisimilitude it is accepted playfully as a pseudo-resolution.

There are two important points to be highlighted here:

1. any humorous text will contain an element of incongruity *and* an element of resolution;
2. the resolution does *not* have to be complete and does not have to be realistic or plausible—it is a playful resolution.

Discussion of resolution/justification issues has been essentially limited to a few psychologists (Freud, Aubouin, Ziv, Forabosco). The linguistic research on humor has largely ignored the issue, with the exception of the GTVH (see ch. 6), which ostensibly deals with these issues under the label of Logical Mechanisms. In fact, the GTVH does little more than list a few common resolution mechanisms, such as the figure/ground reversal. The reason for this lack of analysis is that very little is known about this aspect of humor.

This chapter attempts to present an original approach to the justification of puns, claiming that all puns have a resolution element which comes from an

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<sup>2</sup>The persistence of incongruity is parallel to the persistence of both senses examined in the previous chapter.

implicit folk theory of the relationship between signifiers and signifieds held by speakers. This element of resolution is independent from the other element of resolution discussed in the previous chapter, namely the “viability” of both senses in the punning text and/or the contextual appropriateness of the pun itself.

The element of resolution in puns has been equated by some researchers with the process of making errors. The argument is that the likelihood of making a linguistic error is evidence enough of the possibility of the homonymic or paronymic confusion, and that puns can be therefore justified as “pseudo-errors.” Aubouin (1948) is probably the best example of this approach, recently revived by Garnes and Bond (1980) and, to a certain extent, Ulrich (1977). Kant (see ch. 1) had already anticipated the idea. While not entirely incompatible with the theory that will be presented in this chapter, the “error” explanation of pun’s resolution will not be retained for reasons that the next subsection explains.

### 4.0.1 Justification

The term “justification” is introduced by Aubouin (1948) as a technical term denoting one of the two basic aspects of a humorous fact. The two aspects are “incongruity” (*inconciliabilité*, ‘irreconciliability’) and “acceptance-justification” (*acceptation-justification*). Aubouin notes that two incongruous objects per se are not perceived as funny, and in order to be perceived as humorous, the two objects have to be “accepted” simultaneously. Acceptance describes the behavior of the hearer, and justification the “condition in which the object can elicit this acceptance” (Aubouin 1948: 95).

The nature of this process of acceptance, or justification, is defined by Aubouin as very brief, “superficial,” “masking for an instant the absurdity of the judgement” (1948: 95). This acceptance does not share the same status as the acceptance of a mathematical proof (Ibid. 94).

How can someone accept two incongruous ideas, even if briefly and superficially? According to Aubouin, only by incurring an “error of judgement,” or at least, in accepting the possibility of an error. Aubouin mentions explicitly the principle of non-contradiction: “an object cannot be and not be at the same time. At the roots of the joke [*mot d’esprit*], there is, thus, an error and a rectification” (Aubouin 1948: 157).

Aubouin divides the errors into two classes, the errors of judgement and

those connected with language (cf. 1.3.1). He lists a large number of possible causes for errors of judgement, including similarities, bad conditions for observation, lack of experience, prejudice, fatigue, hasty generalizations, etc. The errors "of language" are divided into two classes: the first is made up of similarities of sounds, which include homonyms and paronyms, and semantic and syntactic ambiguities, and literal interpretation of frozen metaphors. The second class is labeled "linguistic automatism" and tries to explain away various phenomena such as puns, alliterations, etc., claiming that linguistic production does not pass the threshold of consciousness (i.e., is automatic).

Disregarding Aubouin's naiveté in linguistic matters, which renders parts of his work useless from a linguistic viewpoint, there is a more serious criticism of his position: Aubouin seems to believe that it is necessary for the hearer to be really misled by the humorous text; Aubouin links humor to a factual error on the hearer's part. This is, however, unnecessary. In many cases, the hearer will be truly misled, such as in an example of false priming:

- (62) George Bush has a short one. Gorbachev has a longer one. The Pope has it, but does not use it, Madonna does not have it. What is it? A last name. (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 305-306)

But in other cases the hearer will be perfectly aware that he/she is violating a linguistic (or cognitive) rule in a "willing suspension of disbelief." The example of puns is a case in point. Consider example (63):

- (63) The first thing which strikes a stranger in New York is a big car. (Esar 1952: 77)

The hearer is aware that "strike" was first misleadingly used in the sense of "catch one's attention" and later in the sense of "hit." From the point of view of the incongruity of the joke, there are no problems: the two senses of "strike" belong to sufficiently disparate semantic fields to be clearly identifiable as incongruous. The "justification" of the joke is somewhat more problematic: how can the two ideas be "brought together" even if "momentarily"? This is possible only if the hearer accepts that the two meanings of "strike" are collapsed onto one by the fact that one occurred first, and then the other is superimposed on the first. Clearly, only a conditional acceptance is possible because the hearer is well aware that the two senses are distinct and mutually incompatible. Since this knowledge, which is brought into the

understanding of puns, is knowledge about language, it has been claimed that puns have a “metalinguistic” aspect (Hausmann 1974: 8-10)<sup>3</sup>. One of the useful aspects of metalanguage is that the rules of the object-language are “suspendable” in the meta-language; for instance, the sentence

- (64) The sentence ‘colorless green ideas sleep furiously’ was considered grammatical by Chomsky in 1957

is perfectly acceptable, even if it contains a semantically anomalous part. Thus, Aubouin’s claim that an actual error needs to occur in humor turns out to be unnecessary, besides being incorrect: if puns involve a metalinguistic reflection, the rules of language can be suspended and, for example, the two meanings of “strike” can be taken as one.

It should be noted that in the discussion above, we have retained the “spatial” analogy used by Aubouin, who compares ideas to physical objects which cannot occupy the same space at the same time. One can get rid of the metaphor and present the same discussion using a logical formalism, such as

$$(a = b) \& \neg(a = b)$$

which is a contradiction, but this would needlessly complicate the exposition.

From this discussion of Aubouin’s “error theory” of puns, it follows that it is both incorrect and unnecessary to claim that puns imply an error of judgement by the speaker. The speaker is well aware that he/she is violating the tenets of logic. In fact, it appears that special kinds of logic hold within humor.

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<sup>3</sup>The term “metalanguage,” borrowed from mathematical logic by linguistics, is used in the latter field essentially with the same meaning as in logic, i.e., a language<sup>2</sup> “above” another language<sup>1</sup> (a.k.a., object language), in which one can talk about language<sup>1</sup>, while one can only talk about things such as sticks and stones in language<sup>1</sup>. The only significant difference between the use of “metalanguage” in logic and in linguistics is that logic uses only explicit metalanguage, indicated by the use of special typographical devices, such as double quotes, etc., whereas linguistics has had to introduce the notion of “implicit metalanguage” in which the metalinguistic status of (part of) an utterance is not explicitly marked. The metalinguistic nature of puns is of the implicit kind. The claim that puns and jokes involve metalinguistic consciousness has been made from the perspective of psycholinguistics by MacLaren (1989) and Gombert (1990: 119).

### 4.0.2 Humorous Logics

Several scholars have attempted to define the types of playful logic that seems to operate in humor. A concept similar to Aubouin's justification was introduced independently by Ziv (1984), who calls "local logic" the "paralogical" logic used in jokes. "Local logic is appropriate only in certain places (...) because it brings some kind of explanation to the incongruity" (Ziv 1984: 90). Ziv notes also that the local logic explanation works "if we are willing to play along." The "partial suitability" of a joke's local logic is evidently parallel to the "momentary, superficial" justification. Related to these ideas are Arieti's (1967) "paleologic," Apter's (1989) "paretelic" mode, and the discussion on "resolution" of incongruity surveyed by Forabosco (1992) (see also Norrick (1987: 116-117), on Freud's "sense in nonsense").

### 4.0.3 What is the Local Logic of Puns?

As seen above, it has been assumed that puns should possess an element of local logic, or justification. It is simple to make this claim for puns that exploit homonymy or other ambiguity: the speaker/hearer may "confuse" the two senses, since the confusion "might" have happened in real life. This is, essentially, Aubouin's "error" theory. Yet, as example (1)(= the *toilettes* joke) shows, the context disambiguates quite well between the two senses, and cases in which both senses are equally plausible are quite rare. In other words, the possibility of a real error is quite remote. This approach has, however, a fatal weakness—namely that in the case of puns that exploit paronyms, the distance between the two strings is such that no speaker might seriously confuse the two strings under normal conditions. In technical terms, the phonetic difference between the strings in question is phonemic.

The above claim is based on the assumption that puns based on paronyms are not essentially different from those that play on homonyms. In fact, puns based on homonyms are seen as a special case of paronymic puns, with zero distance between the two strings of sounds involved. Beyond the obvious reasons of elegance and simplicity that favor this position (since it reduces all types of puns to one phenomenon: comparison of strings of sounds), it is not clear what arguments could be brought forth to support the position that homonymic puns and paronymic puns are radically different phenomena that are to be explained with the help of radically different theories.

## 4.1 Phonosymbolism as an Explanation for Puns

Ch. 3 has shown that speakers, in certain conditions, treat paronyms and (the different senses of) homonyms as interchangeable (i.e., as equally contextually appropriate). This is an intriguing fact because outside of these special cases, speakers are aware of the inconsistency of that behavior. No one would claim that “corrections” is similar to “connections” just because they share six out of seven phonemes in the same order. Consider the following example:

- (65) Context: on a birthday card there is a picture of a beautiful woman holding a birthday cake. The legend reads:  
 “You can’t have your cake and Edith [eat it] too.”

Speakers who accept that [iDiθ] is equivalent to [iDit] are willing to overlook that the two strings of phonemes differ in one final phoneme ([θ] vs. [t]); they are only pretending to be confusing the two strings [iDiθ] and [iDit]. If they were not pretending to confuse them, they would have to discard the text as ill-formed (not grammatically, but from a humorous point of view, that is, as not-funny). The card in (65) would only be the notification that the addressee has to choose between eating the cake or (presumably) having sexual intercourse with the woman carrying it.

In order for the pun to function, one has to grasp the intertextual allusion to the saying “You can’t have your cake and eat it, too.” Now, since the strings are different (paronyms), the speaker in a serious mode would have to say “This sounds like ‘eat it, too’ but it is different, so I cannot connect the two sentences.” The fact that the two sentences are connected is proof that the speaker finds it acceptable to relax his/her threshold of phonemic difference, and treat the two strings as equivalent.

The explanation proposed here for the deliberate confusion of paronyms and homonyms with their paronymic or homonymic pairs (that is, the word of which they are a paronym/homonym) is that in puns, speakers pretend to use linguistic signs as if they belonged to a semiotic system that would be characterized as non-arbitrary (i.e., motivated). It is generally assumed that the relationship between the sense of a linguistic expression and its phonological representation is arbitrary (i.e., non necessary, unmotivated, conventional). In other words, there is no good reason (besides convention)

for a dog to be called “dog” and we could agree to call it “chair.” Despite this fact, the speakers and hearers of puns behave as if they believed that their linguistic system is constituted of non-arbitrary signs, thus flying in the face of scientific linguistics.

The structure of the argument is somewhat complex, and so it is best summarized beforehand. The discussion will begin by establishing the fact that speakers do indeed have a motivated, non-arbitrary view of the linguistic sign, or, as this will be referred to, they have a Cratylistic theory of the sign. The implications of a non-arbitrary theory of the sign will be examined next, with particular emphasis on the facts that a) a Cratylistic theory does not admit of homonyms, which it must treat as synonyms, and b) sounds carry (connotative) semantic associations. As a further element of the preliminary discussion, a number of instances of phenomena that give evidence of the existence of sound-based relationships in the lexicon will be examined, puns being a subset of these. On the basis of the fact that puns imply a sound-based association and that sound-based associations carry meaning, it will be argued that puns carry connotative semantic associations between the two senses involved in the pun. These semantic associations are taken to be the element of resolution of the incongruity. To ward off possible confusions, it is not claimed that these semantic associations are “real,” or that the speakers are committed to their truth: these associations, and the corresponding resolutions, are playful, ludic ones, in keeping with the general nature of the resolution of incongruity in humor, as shown above.

### 4.1.1 Theoretical Foundations

A large amount of research has been accumulating on the issue of the non-arbitrary nature of the sign under various denominations (sound symbolism, iconicity, synesthesia, paralinguistics) and under different topics, often quite related (folk etymology, analogical reformation, metanalysis), but in some cases belonging to rather different areas (see below).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>It should be noted before the actual discussion begins that no attempt to be exhaustive has been made in the presentation of the various phenomena related to puns and/or the non-arbitrary view of language. The various subsections should be seen rather as providing evidence for the existence of the facts discussed and for their relevance to the issue at hand. Further studies of a technical nature will be necessary to assess the status of the matter in full.

## Arbitrariness of the Sign

Naturally, before discussing the non-arbitrariness of the sign, it is useful to examine the accepted definitions. The canonical treatment of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign is Saussure (1916). Saussure noted that in linguistic signs (as opposed to other types of signs), the relationship between the *signifiant* (=the phonological representation of the sign) and the *signifié* (=its meaning) is arbitrary, i.e., non-necessary, and hence conventional. It is not necessary to review here the discussion around the issue, since a short history of the debate with a large bibliography can be found in De Mauro (1970: 414-416)<sup>5</sup>. Saussure's wording of the principle of arbitrariness is unfortunate, because it seems to imply that the relationship between the *signifié* of a sign and its referent<sup>6</sup> is arbitrary (as Benveniste (1966: 51-52) notes). In the context of the rest of Saussure's thought, it appears that his point was that the relationship between the mental sound representation and the mental representation of the meaning (and not the referent) was arbitrary. This does not affect the fact that within a language, the relationship between a sign (the union of sound and sense) and its referent is also arbitrary, although socially given.<sup>7</sup>

In his discussion of the arbitrariness of the sign, Saussure deals with a possible counterexample, onomatopoetic words. Onomatopoetic words imitate natural sounds (and thus the relationship between their phonemic representations and their meanings is not arbitrary). Because onomatopoeias are non-arbitrary, they are similar across unrelated languages (a table with 11 examples can be found in Crabtree and Powers (1991)).

<sup>5</sup>On the issue of the arbitrariness of the sign see also Culler (1976[1986]: 28-33); Gadet (1987: 29-48); Harris (1987: 55-86; 1988: 47-60), and Holdcroft (1991: 47-68).

<sup>6</sup>The referent of a sign is not its meaning: the former is an "object" in the world, the latter a mental representation (of the former).

<sup>7</sup>According to Saussure all signs of a language are arbitrary, with one major exception, partial motivation. Partial motivation is best exemplified. Consider the morpheme "twenty," which is arbitrary, and the unit "three," which is also arbitrary. The lexeme "twenty three" is not entirely arbitrary because it is part of an internally "motivated" series "twenty two, twenty three, twenty four, etc." Obviously there still is no "reason" for the string [twentiθri] to mean the cardinal number after 22 and before 24, but it is part of a morphological series, and as such acquires secondary motivation. This type of language internal motivation is irrelevant from the point of view of the theoretical issue of the arbitrariness of the sign, although it may provide the psychological foundation of the "one meaning—one form" principle which seems to govern Cratylism.

Saussure discards onomatopoeias as counterexamples to the arbitrariness of the sign on the basis of their partial arbitrariness (as shown by the differences across languages of the imitations of different sounds) and the fact that once they are assimilated into the linguistic system, they are subject to sound change and may lose any sound similarity (see French *pigeon* from the Vulgar Latin *pīpiō* (Saussure 1916: 102)).

One of the arguments that Saussure uses to show that the sign is arbitrary is that identical *signifiés* have different *signifiants* in different languages. Although there are some problems with the formulation of this observation (see De Mauro (1970: 414), Benveniste (1966: 51-52)), its correctness is beyond doubt. If the relationship between the sound and the sense were necessary (or motivated) one would expect that this necessary relationship would hold for every language (assuming that human nature is uniform), and hence that all languages would use the same sound/sense combinations; however, a cow is called *vache* in French, for example, hence proving that there is no necessary sound/sense relationship.

The consequences of the arbitrariness of the relationship between the *signifiant* and the *signifié* (or more concisely, the arbitrariness of the sign) are far-reaching. For example, Saussure argues that language cannot be changed “willfully” by the speakers precisely because it is arbitrary, and thus unaffected by any rational motivation. In addition, because it is arbitrary, language is constantly changing (Saussure 1916: 104-112), since it is not within the realm of rationally determined facts, and hence any sound/sense relationship is at the mercy of the changes of the speakers’ community .

### 4.1.2 Cratylism and Motivation Theories

In spite of Saussure’s statements, the claim that language is, at least partially, a motivated system of signs is quite old, and there is an impressive quantity of scholarly evidence to bear.

The first and best known claim that sounds and senses were related by a natural law (*φύσει*) rather than by convention (*θέσει*) was Cratylus in the Platonic dialogue named after him (on Plato’s linguistic theory in the *Cratylus* see Manetti (1987: 86-99)). Because of their illustrious predecessor, theories that claim that the relationship between sounds and sense is motivated are sometimes called “cratylistic.”

Cratylistic theories have often embraced the claim of sound symbolism,

i.e., that certain sounds are related to certain meanings. A full history and bibliography of research on sound symbolism can be found in Dogana (1980); see also Lyons (1968: 4-5; 1977: 104-105), Žuravlev (1974: 7-28), Jakobson and Waugh (1979), Wescott (1980), Malkiel (1990), and Tsur (1992).

While a predominant part of the literature is concerned with the symbolic properties of “sound,” this is only due to the primacy of the spoken medium over others. One can observe examples of motivated signs in graphematic systems (e.g. using **bold** for emphasis, or CAPS for added “force,” or, as is common in cartoons, wavy lines to connote hesitation or fear, and broken jagged lines for anger). Thus, in fact, sound symbolism is just a case of “signifier symbolism.”

It is possible to isolate two distinct claims in the literature. They are usually referred to as “primary” and “secondary” sound symbolism. Primary sound symbolism is the claim that sounds in and of themselves are associated by the speakers with non-linguistic objects (feelings, concrete objects, etc.). Secondary sound symbolism is the claim that these associations are language internal and language specific: that is, the speakers would learn that a given language associates a given sound with a certain meaning. Although the two claims are distinct, they are not incompatible. Unless explicitly noted, no distinction will be made in this context.

Recently, new support for both claims has come from psycholinguistic research (e.g. Žuravlev (1974)). A well-known experiment (Köhler 1947, quoted in Aitchison 1987: 191) involved two differently shaped figures, one with curves, and the other with “spikes and angles.” German speakers were asked to choose between two names *Takete* and *Maluma*, and reliably chose the one with apicodental and velar stops for the drawing with spikes, and the one with liquids and labials for the one with curves. The results were later duplicated for other languages.

If one compares the conclusions reached by the proponents of sound symbolism and the doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign, one finds that the two are at odds. The speakers’ rationalizations on their use of language and their behavior based upon these (i.e., their folk theory) are different from the linguists’ theory. The following section will review phenomena in which the speakers are found to implicitly use an iconic, motivated, Cratylistic “folk theory” of language.

### 4.1.3 Evidence for a Motivated Theory of the Sign

This section presents instances of linguistic behavior that presuppose, or are compatible with, the presence of an implicit Cratylistic theory of the linguistic sign in the speakers' minds. As will appear from this survey, the evidence shows that, indeed, the sign is motivated in the mind of the speakers.

The presentation of each phenomenon is not meant, and should not be construed, as a complete discussion of the facts, but rather as establishing the existence of a phenomenon and its connection to the issue at hand. Similarly the references are provided only for the orientation of the reader and are not meant to be exhaustive.

#### Paretymology

There is a vast literature on paretymology (a.k.a. "folk etymology," "popular etymology,") see Paul (1880[1920]), Nyrop (1934), Orr (1954), Vendryes (1953), Guiraud (1955), Baldinger (1973; 1986), Zamboni (1976), Hock (1986: 202-203), Coates (1987), and references therein. It is commonly accepted that paretymology is a manifestation of the speakers' tendency to motivation, e.g., Baldinger (1973: 247): "Folk etymology originates from the antynomy between the arbitrariness of the sign and the latent necessity of the speakers to attribute a motivation [to the linguistic sign];" or Zamboni (1976: 104), who notes that this unconscious need may surface consciously (cf. Paul (1880[1920]: 220) and Duchàček's (1970) claim that puns differ from folk etymology because they are conscious).

Folk etymology can be described as unconscious attempts on the part of speakers to reduce unfamiliar strings of sounds to familiar ones,<sup>8</sup> by analyzing their morphemic status on the basis of phonetic or semantic similarity<sup>9</sup> to extant morphemes. An example may clarify this: the German *sauerkraut* (literally: "sour cabbage") has been transformed in French to *choucroute*, which can be analyzed in the two morphemes *chou* (cabbage) and *croute* (crust).<sup>10</sup> The phonemic similarity between /krawt/ and /krut/ is the only

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Anttila (1972: 92) "unfamiliar shapes are replaced by more familiar ones." Anttila consider paretymology an example of "iconic remodeling."

<sup>9</sup>In a stimulating essay, Coates (1987) argues for replacing the notion of similarity with that of "nearness."

<sup>10</sup>Baldinger (1973: 248) notes that the derivation involves the Alsatian dialectal word *surchrut* and an "etymological tautology" (i.e., the assumption of synonymy) between

reason for linking the two words (although the fact that both belong to the semantic field of food might have helped). The same basic situation holds for /sawr/ and /ʃu/. Both words are similar phonetically but they have different meanings ("sour" and "cabbage"). The French reinterpretation of /sawr/ as /ʃu/ was evidently prompted by the referent (cabbage), but is based on a (loose) similarity between the phonological representation of the German *sauer* and the French *chou*.

An important point is that folk etymology is usually found with foreign, technical, or archaic words, all linguistic categories with which speakers may be assumed to be relatively unfamiliar. Non-familiarity with the item subjected to folk etymology seems a strong requirement for the phenomenon to take place. The explanation for this lies in the fact that if the speakers are familiar with the meaning of a linguistic expression, or its parts, they use the linguistic unit without further problems, whereas if they are unfamiliar with its meaning, they try to establish it on the basis of the available information, i.e., the phonological pattern.

From the point of view of the arbitrariness of the sign, these widespread phenomena cannot be explained unless one admits that the speakers' behavior violates the principle of arbitrariness, and assumes instead that sound similarity is evidence enough of sense similarity; as, in the example above, in which if something in German sounds like the French word for cabbage it must mean the same thing.

### Taboo words

Taboo words are words of a language which are "not to be used" by the speakers because the words are considered obscene, offensive, defiling of sacred institutions, dangerous, or otherwise socially inappropriate.

The examples usually quoted are scatological language and phenomena such as tabooing the name of a deceased member of a royal family in Tahiti (Hock 1986: 295). Other examples are more interesting from the present perspective. Jordan and Orr (1937) mention Meillet's observations that the original Indo-European (IE) word for "bear" has disappeared from many Slavic, Baltic, and Germanic languages and has been replaced by periphrases or circumlocutions such as "the brown one" or "the honey eater." This fact

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*chou*-, *-kraut*, and *-crouste*.

and other similar ones (the IE roots for “snake” or “weasel”) can be explained only by assuming that a taboo was placed on the original word (Jordan and Orr 1937: 373-374). The source of the fear of referring to a dangerous animal by name is to be found in the “magical” belief that this will evoke the bearer of the name. This belief is crystallized in the Latin formula *nomen omen* (“the name is an omen [of its bearer]”). Similar to this is the prohibition of naming God in the Biblical religions, and the taboo over mentioning the “true” name of God in many languages. On taboo, see Guiraud (1955: 60-62), Anttila (1972: 139), Jakobson and Waugh (1979: 208-211), Hock (1986: 295-296, and 303-305) for an example of magical tabooing of the IE word for “tongue.”

These instances of tabooing for avoidance of the referent clearly imply not only a motivated sound/sense relationship, but even a magical one. If mentioning a name conjures up its bearer, surely the relationship between the name and the referent cannot be purely conventional—instead, not only is it motivated, but even necessary.

### Folk Linguistics

Speakers’ beliefs clearly tend towards a motivational theory of the sign. This is commonly assumed by linguists—consider, for example, the following passage from Benveniste

To posit the relationship [between signifier and signified] as arbitrary is for the linguist a way of defending him/herself against this question [the metaphysical issue of the relationship between the spirit and the world] and also against the solution that the speaker instinctively provides. For the speaker, there is a complete identity of language and reality: the sign covers and commands reality; better still it *is* this reality (*nomen omen*, verbal taboos, magical power of the word, etc.). Actually the point of view of the speaker and of the linguist are so different on this matter that the linguist’s claim concerning the arbitrariness of the designations does not refute the opposed feeling of the speaker. (Benveniste 1966: 52)

The following joke seems to embody the speakers’ attitude towards the issue of arbitrariness:

- (66) Somebody once asked Motke Chabad, the legendary wit: "Tell me, Motke, you're a smart fellow. Why is *kugel* called *kugel*?"

Motke lost no time in responding. "What kind of silly question is that? It's sweet like *kugel*, isn't it? It's thick like *kugel*, isn't it? And it tastes like *kugel*, doesn't it? So why *shouldn't* it be called *kugel*?"

Novak, William and Moshe Waldoks (eds.) 1981. *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*. New York: Harper and Row.

Clearly, for the character in the text, the reason why *kugel* is called "kugel" is because the name fits the referent—that is, an object may be called "kugel" if and only if it has the features of *kugel*.

### Sound Symbolism and Poetry

The linguistic literature on sound symbolism is so large that a review would require a monograph in and of itself. Ullmann (1951), Jakobson and Waugh (1979), and Dogana (1980) provide lengthy bibliographies. To this writer's mind, despite a tendency to attract low-quality contributions<sup>11</sup>, and despite Chomsky's (1957: 100) skepticism, the research is headed in the right direction. For example, simple "data gathering," however sophisticated, has been replaced, in some cases, by observations such as Žuravlev's (1974) that sound symbolism (or "phonetic meaning" in his terms) is a matter of statistical tendencies across the lexicon (and across languages as well), and that the type of meaning that the sounds carry is "connotative" in nature as opposed to "denotative," and so can be studied by means of tools such as Osgood *et al.*'s (1957) "semantic differential." Related to these issues is the research on the "phonesteme" (small morpheme-like clusters of sounds associated with a semantic field, e.g. "*gleam, glitter, glamour*") summarized in Anttila (1977: 118-119). Acknowledging the validity of these claims will inevitably relate theoretical studies of sound symbolism with psycholinguistic ones, in which the existence of sound symbolism is no longer questioned. A recent example of this type of research is Tsur (1992).

Sound symbolism, i.e., the fact that phonemes and combinations thereof carry some connotative meaning, is at the core of Jakobson's theory of poetry, which holds that poetic texts exploit these properties for aesthetic purposes (see Jakobson (1960), Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss (1962), Jakobson

<sup>11</sup>See Malkiel (1990: 1-2) for a discussion.

and Waugh (1979); on Jakobson's theory of synesthesia (a broader version of sound symbolism, encompassing all five senses) see Johnson (1982)). Clearly, both the existence of sound symbolism and its use in poetry are evidence of the motivated nature of the linguistic sign, although the connotative nature of the meaning associations must be emphasized.

## Iconicity

An even broader claim than the sound symbolism studies briefly presented above is made under the name of "linguistic iconicity." Recently made famous by Haiman's studies (Haiman 1985, Haiman (ed.) 1985, see also Haiman (1991)), the idea is essentially the same as the motivated theory of the sign with the difference that the motivation is found in the fact that the sign bears some similarity (i.e., is iconic) with the reality it represents. Jakobson's (1966) example of the comparative and the superlative which present both more linguistic material than the positive is justly considered a classic. Consider the following:

(67) big (3 phonemes), bigger (5 phonemes), biggest (6 phonemes)

In this progression from the unmarked low end of the scale of bigness to the superlative, the quantity of phonemic units used to represent the concept increases as the degree of "superlativity" increases, thus creating an isomorphism between the concept of "superlativity" and the linguistic material used to represent it.

Beyond the works already quoted, other studies on the iconicity of language include, *inter alia*, Samarin (1970), Wescott (1971, 1975, 1980), Anttila (1972: 12-18; 1977: 7-13), and Woolley (1976).

### 4.1.4 A Non-Arbitrary Linguistic System

The previous section has strongly suggested that the speakers hold a motivated theory of the sign. This section examines the consequences of this belief, which will play a role in the discussion of the resolution of the incongruity in puns.

Other semiotic systems have motivated signs (e.g., icons, in Peirce's terminology) or partially motivated ones. What would a motivated linguistic system look like? It is necessary to familiarize oneself with this notion in

order to fully appreciate the argument that is being put forth in this discussion.

The first characteristic that would emerge in a motivated linguistic system would be that all languages would be the same (or that only one language would exist). Consider again the discussion of *vache/cow*. Assume that the meaning that in English is associated with the phonemic string /kaw/ and said string were linked by necessity. The same necessity that links /kaw/ to the idea of a cow in English would hold in French, and so a cow would be called /kaw/ in French (rather than /vaf/). Hence, all languages would converge.

Another characteristic of a motivated system is its “proportionality,” which is implied by iconicity. Saussure does not mention this aspect, but it is inferable from his general discussion. Motivated signs are proportional. Consider an arrow.<sup>12</sup> A straight arrow is taken to stand for “straight ahead,” at least in Western culture. By bending the arrow 90 degrees to the left the meaning is changed to “turn left.” Bending the arrow 180 degrees means “invert your direction (do a U turn).” Bending the arrow 45 degrees will be interpreted as “turn to the left in a road roughly at a 45 degree angle.” Consider the signs that warn drivers of the inclination of a steep hill. The line representing the road on the sign is inclined in a manner similar to the inclination of the road (although not in any mathematically proportional way). Finally, consider using the distance between the hands to show the size of an object: the greater the distance between the hands, the bigger the object.

A motivated linguistic system would display its proportionality by using similar sounds for similar meanings—for example, in a motivated linguistic system, /koreksion/ and /koneksion/, which share all their phonemes but one in the same order, would have similar or minimally different meanings.

In a motivated linguistic system, no homonyms may exist: if a sound shape is associated necessarily with a meaning, then only one meaning may be associated with any sound. The very idea of homonymy is impossible in a motivated system. In other terms, one could say that a motivated system

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<sup>12</sup>Strictly speaking, an arrow is probably an index in Peirce’s terminology. Nevertheless, to the extent that a vertical arrow “means” “straight,” arrows are iconic, since they do not just point but have a degree of symbolic character while naturally retaining a high degree of “motivation.”

takes the old principle of “one meaning — one form”<sup>13</sup> and its converse, “one form — one meaning,” to be a strict law. A roughly comparable example of a homonym in an iconic (motivated) system would be a picture of someone which would represent two different people (excluding the case of identical twins, who are, genetically speaking, the same person). This important corollary follows from the postulation of a motivated system of signs and will be of considerable importance in what follows.

### 4.1.5 Sound-Based Lexical Associations

Having established that speakers believe linguistic signs to be motivated and the theoretical effects of this fact, the discussion may turn to another, different but not unrelated set of problems.

This section will review some examples of phenomena that clearly show the existence of sound-based associations in the lexicon, and in some cases throw some doubt as to the partially semantic nature of these associations. Although they cannot be held as direct evidence of the Cratylistic attitude of speakers, they are compatible with it.

## Rhyme

Rhyme is a complex semantic/phonological phenomenon. A common sense definition says that “rhyme is a sound repetition occurring at the end of the line” (Ducrot and Todorov 1972: 190). As a starting point for the discussion, it can be assumed that the speaker’s ability to recognize the repetition of sounds from the rightmost primary accent<sup>14</sup> rightwards is not problematic, and is entirely accounted for by his/her phonological competence.<sup>15</sup>

It appears that rhyme is not a purely phonological phenomenon: “sound correspondences [in rhyme, alliteration, and metrical parallelism] become evaluated with regard to the closeness or remoteness of meaning between

<sup>13</sup>See Anttila (1972: 107) and references therein.

<sup>14</sup>The repetition of sounds may begin to the left of the accent, but the repeated sounds coming before the accent are said to reinforce the rhyme and are not part of it.

<sup>15</sup>This discussion is based on Italian and French rhyme. This author’s intuition about what creates a rhyme and what does not, has not been considered reliable enough for a discussion on English rhyme. No claim is made, at this time, on the validity of the discussion for English, and the examples are presented with extreme caution. Cigada (1969) presents relevant examples for French and Italian.

the morphemes and richer entities to which the sounds belong" (Jakobson and Waugh 1979: 216). Two facts show that some semantic component is present in rhyming phenomena. First, a word cannot rhyme with itself<sup>16</sup> (see Wimsatt (1954: 156)), and second, the rhyme effect is stronger the more semantically distant the two rhyming words are (see Wimsatt (1954: 164): "the greater the difference in meaning between rhyme words the more marked [will be the rhyme]" and Cigada (1969: 53)). Consider the pair, *confess* - *IRS*; the rhyming effect is so strong that it becomes startling. Wimsatt (1954: 164-165) quotes an example from Byron in which the word "mahogany" rhymes with "philogyny" and "a dog any." Consider now *Essex* - *Wessex*, in which the rhyming effect is weaker. If semantic similarity can weaken the rhyming effect, it comes as no surprise that semantic identity can nullify it (explaining the fact that a word does not rhyme with itself).

How is it possible to account for the above facts from a linguistic viewpoint? The variations in rhyming effect are linked to sound-sense relationships in a way that conflicts with the arbitrary sound/sense link. Linking the forcefulness of rhyming effect to semantic distance implies that an inversely proportional relationship exists between sounds and senses and that the closer the meaning of two words is, the less their rhyming potential.

But establishing this link is tantamount to claiming that sounds and senses are necessarily linked. If two words which share a sound similarity rhyme in proportion to their semantic distance, that means that the "startling" effect of the rhyme comes from the realization that similar sounds do not correspond to similar senses. Wimsatt (1954: 164) speaks of a "surprise" effect which he attributes to unanticipated similarity. Even if the interpretation of rhyme as "startling" were to be ultimately rejected, the inversely proportional correlation between sense similarity and rhyme effect remains to be explained. Any explanation will necessarily have to take into consideration sound/sense linkages beyond the usual arbitrary union of *signifiant* and *signifié*.

## Clang Responses

Word association experiments (the subjects are presented with a word and must respond with another word) have highlighted an interesting fact. Under

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<sup>16</sup>With the exception of homonyms and polysemous lexemes.

normal conditions only a very small number of responses are based on assonance; these are known as “clang responses” (also “klanging associations”) (see Miller (1951: 180) and Hockett (1987: 109)). An example of a clang response would be replying “fine” to the stimulus “fight.”

Adverse conditions increase the frequency of clang responses. Under conditions of stress (Clark 1970: 273) induced by accelerating the presentation of the stimuli, the number of responses based on phonological similarity between stimulus and response increases significantly. The same results had been noted under conditions of distraction (Jung 1904: 184). In Jung’s experiment, the speakers were required to perform another unrelated task during the word association session.

Clang associations are frequent in schizophrenic patients, as is rhyming, which is a closely related phenomenon (see Herbert and Waltensperger (1982: 233) and below). Sacks (1973[1990]) reports that in one post-encephalitic (*Encephalitis Letargica*) patient under the effect of dopamine (L-DOPA, a nerve transmitter enhancing drug) the patient’s speech “became broken by sudden intrusions and cross associations of thought, and by repeated punning and clanging and rhyming” (Sacks 1973[1990]: 215).

Under normal conditions, the responses of word association experiments are taken to provide some evidence about the organization of the mental lexicon (see Aitchison (1987: 72-78); Fromkin (1987: 15-19)). Clang associations are direct evidence of the existence of sound-based associations in the mental lexicon of speakers.

## Language Pathology

Some pathological states that involve an impairment of the linguistic performance and/or capacity of speakers present effects which presuppose an exceptional reliance on phonemic factors. Glossolalia is a pathological state present in some cases of schizophrenia in which the speaker produces sequences of sounds without any discernible meaning. In some cases, the sounds maintain some connection to meaning, but in others completely lose any communicative/semantic function (Piro 1967) although they seem to be “meaningful” to those producing them. Piro and several others (1967: 256-259, and references therein) talk of a “ludic” (i.e., playful) use of language in schizophrenia based on alliteration and repetition.

A related phenomenon is known as “speaking in tongues” and is also re-

ferred to as “glossolalia” (see Samarin (1972) and Jakobson and Waugh (1979: 211-215)), i.e. the use of an incomprehensible “language” by the initiate to communicate with supernatural beings (cf. also “pseudolanguage” (Samarin 1969), i.e. nonsense utterances that imitate the phonological patterns of a language, often different from that of the speaker). Both phenomena show frequent uses of alliteration and other rhythmic devices.<sup>17</sup>

In general, language use based uniquely (or primarily) on sound, rather than meaning (although glossolalic productions are often meaningful for the utterer), shows that sound-based associations have independent psychological reality.

### Speech Errors

A large body of research (see Fromkin (ed.) 1973, 1980, and Fromkin 1988 and references therein) has shown that there is a consistent group of speech errors that are based on substitutions or deformations based on phonemic similarity. Freud’s studies of the “lapsus linguae” (a.k.a. “Freudian slip”; Freud 1901) came to the same conclusion, although his psychoanalytical interpretation tends to downplay, or outright ignore, the purely linguistic mechanisms at work (see Wells (1951), Timpanaro (1976), and Ellis (1980) for corrections to Freud’s perspective). Since linguistic errors are commonly taken to be evidence for the psychological reality of the linguistic elements and processes involved, the existence of phonetically-based errors can be taken as evidence for the existence of phonetic organization patterns in the mental lexicon.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4.1.6 Towards a Phonosymbolic Theory of Puns

The preceding sections have presented several examples of phenomena that show that speakers adopt, consciously or unconsciously, a motivational, Cra-

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<sup>17</sup>Ombredane (1951: 265) classifies a number of linguistic functions based on sound similarities among the “inferior functions” of language (they are inferior because they do not convey meaning). Significantly, among the “inferior functions,” he mentions glossolalia and puns, thus linking the two phenomena.

<sup>18</sup>See for instance the model of morphology presented by Bybee (1985; 1988). Bybee takes speech errors and puns (1988: 126) to be indicative of the fact that “we have a certain access to the lexicon via the phonological shape of words.” See also the model of the lexicon proposed in Fromkin (1987).

tylistic theory of the sign, or have beliefs that are compatible with such a theory.<sup>19</sup> It is now possible to make a further step. Since the existence of sound-symbolism and in general of a motivated Cratylistic theory of the sign has been established which can be summed up in the motto “if it sounds the same it means the same” and, independently from this latter, the existence of a number of sound-based associations in the lexicon have also been established, it follows that these sound associations must bear some sort of semantic association, however connotative and feeble it may be.

What does entertaining a “Cratylistic folk theory of language” mean, in terms of linguistic behavior? As the previous examples have shown, speakers in certain situations and contexts that affect their semantic processing of language data (pathology, stress, errors), in certain cultures and belief systems (taboos, folk etymology, folk linguistics), and in certain forms of verbal art (poetry, puns) show behavioral patterns that can be consistently explained by positing that the speakers are implicitly or explicitly acting *as if* the signs that make up their linguistic system were motivated, i.e., the relationships between sounds and senses were necessary. It should be stressed that the above data are not taken to be evidence of the empirical/factual reality of the speakers’ beliefs, but rather as verbal acts based on these beliefs.

It will be assumed that speakers manifest a Cratylist belief in some of their behavior. The next question is twofold: How can linguistics describe this fact? and, How can it be explained? The following sections will attempt to answer these questions.

## Theories of Sound Associations

Little attention has been paid to the phenomena surveyed above as a group<sup>20</sup>. This is one of the first times that an attempt has been made at finding a unifying perspective among all of them. Jakobson and Waugh (1979) found

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<sup>19</sup>It has been claimed above that the fact that all the phenomena presented have common characteristics, i.e. they share a Cratylistic “folk theory” of language, is an important step in the building of this theory; however, it should be noted that finding that one, or even several, of the phenomena described above can be explained independently of Cratylistism would weaken the descriptive power of the theory though it would not falsify it. A complete falsification could only come from proof that none of the phenomena above involves Cratylistism.

<sup>20</sup>As pointed out above, the amount of research, at least for some of them individually, such as paretymology, is remarkable.

sound symbolism to underlie a large number of phenomena, only some of which have been reviewed above: synesthesia, word affinities (ideophones, reduplications, etc.), ablaut,<sup>21</sup> verbal taboo, glossolalia, poetry, children's verbal art, and Saussure's research on the "anagrams" (see Starobinski 1971). Garnes and Bond (1980) found "misperceptions" to underlie misspellings, misunderstandings, folk-etymologies, jokes and cartoons, puns, some fiction, malapropisms and half-rhymes.

**a) Saussure** Little attention has been paid to these phenomena in spite of the fact that Saussure's *Cours*, widely recognized as a seminal work in linguistics, deals with the issue in some detail.

Sound associations are one of the various types of paradigmatic relationships that words have in the lexicon (Saussure 1916: 173-175).<sup>22</sup> Saussure's definition of "associative series" (i.e. the groups of words which are in paradigmatic relationship with a word) is clearly psychological ("mental association"). Saussure distinguishes four types of series: 1) series based on the root of a word, 2) series based on prefixes or suffixes, 3) series based on meaning, and 4) series based on sound associations. Consider the following example (Saussure 1916: 173-175): the French word *enseignement* has as associative series:<sup>23</sup>

1. *enseigner, enseignons, ...*
2. *changement, armement, ...*
3. *apprentissage, éducation, ...*
4. *clément, justement, ...*

Anttila (1977: 26-32) argues that Saussure's ideas have an exact counterpart in Paul's (1880) writing and notes that for both authors the basis of the associative series is analogy. Frei (1942) introduced the term "homonymic

<sup>21</sup>Sound-symbolic modifications within root morphemes, cf. Dakota /kpi/, /kpɛ/, /kpa/, respectively "light crackling, noise of a stick hitting a stick, and sharp noise like that of a firecracker" (Jakobson and Waugh 1979: 202)

<sup>22</sup>As a matter of fact, Saussure uses the term "associative" relationships; the term "paradigmatic" was introduced by Hjelmslev (1954).

<sup>23</sup>Italics mark common morphemes.

series" for type 4 associations (i.e., associations based exclusively on sound similarity and not sharing morphemes), only to reject their study as external to linguistics (Frei rejects types 3 and 4 as "not belonging to the science of language"). Ullmann (1957: 78n) rejects Frei's position as "somewhat arbitrary"; indeed, one has to agree that it does not seem profitable to define out of linguistics two sets of facts for which ample evidence of their psychological reality is easily available.

Little else of interest has been said about type 4 associative series within the Saussurian paradigm. The literature on paradigmatic relationships is small (see Frei (1942), Guiraud (1955: 74ff), De Mauro (1967), and references therein, to which can be added: Balázs (1979), Schogt (1968), Gordon (1979), and Gray (1977)) and not particularly helpful for this issue. This lack of interest, or skepticism, for sound-based associations on the part of Saussurian structural linguists<sup>24</sup> is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that in one of the few footnotes to the Saussurean text the editors of the *Cours* feel the need to explain this type of association and "apologize" for the apparently "unorthodox" doctrine. This is all the more surprising in light of the fact that sound-associations had been proposed by Wundt (1900-1920), a psychologist who had developed a psychology of language and who was rather well known in the German linguistic community (his views are discussed by Paul), and so may have been accessible to Saussure.

Regardless of the fact that Saussure's conception of paradigmatic relationships has been largely ignored (see Rigotti (1990)) by the development of theoretical linguistics, it remains an important step towards the description of the phenomena related with sound-associations.

**b) Psycholinguistics** Predictably, psycholinguistics has been more receptive to the issue of sound-based lexical associations. It is widely accepted that "words which have similar endings and similar rhythm are likely to be tightly bonded" (Aitchison 1987: 126). The evidence provided by linguistic errors seems to show that several words are activated during the speech production process, and that those used in the utterance are selected among all those activated (see Aitchison (1987: 169-175) and references therein; see also Luria's research on "semantic similarity" discussed in Raskin (1983:

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<sup>24</sup>As pointed out above, psycholinguists and psychologists have been aware of these relationships and have acknowledged their existence. See also below.

34)). This fact is represented by "spreading activation" models (Collins and Loftus 1975) in which the process of selecting a word activates a number of words, which in turn activate other words to which they are linked. Some activated words have a semantic proximity to the targeted word, but some are activated because of their phonemic similarity to the targeted word. Recent theories of "natural morphology" (e.g. Bybee 1985, 1988) put more emphasis on the sort of data reviewed, but there seems to be common consensus that the speakers' lexicon includes sound-based associations among its links (cf. Fromkin 1987). For example, Bybee acknowledges that there are phonological connections between words that are only phonological (i.e., that do not carry morphemic status), but these fall outside the realm of morphology, which deals with "semantic and phonological connections that run in parallel" (Bybee 1988: 127).

No attempt has been made, even within psycholinguistics, to link all the phenomena reviewed above (but see Jakobson and Waugh (1979: ch. 4) and Garnes and Bond 1980: 232-237) and introduce Cratyism as an explanatory principle. A partial attempt will be found in what follows.

### Explanation

All the phenomena reviewed above can be explained in terms of the psycholinguistic model of word retrieval known as "spreading activation." Because they claim that semantic and phonemic links coexist in the lexicon, spreading activation models, are fully compatible with the phenomena discussed in the previous section, as well as with the explanation of implied Cratyism that has been presented. What remains to be accounted for is the conscious nature of puns, as opposed to the unconscious nature of all the other phenomena.

Psycholinguistic models of mental representation and processing of the lexicon have drawn the conclusion that sound-based phenomena occurring in slips of the tongue, lapsus and linguistic errors in general can be explained by postulating a phonemic component of the lexicon which is active during lexical access. The semantic phenomena connected to rhyme can be easily attributed to this explanation (and in fact have been, see Aitchison (1987: 119-121) on the so-called "bathtub effect" and 3.2.1) since rhyme is a phonemic similarity with prosodic complications. Prosodic effects of similarity (number of syllables, stress patterns) have also been explained in terms of

the spreading activation model.

The above presentation of paretyymology and word tabooing should provide enough evidence of the sound/sense links presupposed by both phenomena, and consequently of their amenability to a spreading activation model. Pathological sound based associations, as well as clang responses can also be explained in terms of spreading activation models.

### **Puns are Metalinguistic**

Puns differ from all the above phenomena in that they are a conscious phenomenon; that is, speakers are aware of the fact that they are using the linguistic system in a "peculiar," Cratylistic way (see Duchàček (1970: 117), Noguez (1969: 42)). The only other phenomena which may also be conscious are speakers' beliefs about language.

The conscious nature of Cratylism in puns can be reduced to the unconscious phenomena listed above by emphasizing the metalinguistic status of puns. It has been frequently noted that humor has a self-reflexive quality, that it "implies its own self-consciousness" (Noguez 1969: 53). In more precise linguistic terms, Hausmann (1974: 8-10; 16ff.) qualifies the special type of linguistic function in puns as "metalinguistic" (see also Edeline 1963: 303, Covaci 1971:203).<sup>25</sup> Puns are metalinguistic because their decoding presupposes the presence of a metalinguistic assertion along the inferential processing involved in the decoding. The kind of metalinguistic information that is conveyed can be summarized as "this text is using a sign (i.e. any phonemic string) which, through some paradigmatic or syntagmatic association, evokes another sign; the meanings evoked by both signifiers are not mutually compatible in the context of the text."

Since puns are metalinguistic, the use of an implicit Cratylistic theory of signs becomes acceptable to the speaker consciously because metalanguage suspends the rules of the object language, and so the speakers can justify (if they are disturbed by it) their unusual behavior in terms of its being "not for real."

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<sup>25</sup>It should be noted that a self-reference to the text immediately qualifies puns (or any other text) for metalinguistic status.

### Justification of Puns in Local Logic Terms

The previous section suggested that a speaker can afford to use a Cratylistic theory of language consciously because puns are metalinguistic. Because the signifier (the sound) carries semantic associations, as was independently demonstrated above, and because puns belong to sound-based association phenomena, puns involve some semantic associations carried by the similarity of sounds. It remains to see what kind of meaning these sound associations carry. The answer proposed above is that the sound associations in a Cratylistic theory obey the old motto “one meaning — one form,” namely, “if these two strings have the same meaning they must sound the same” and vice versa. Thus, if two homonymic strings are encountered, the Cratylistic attitude of the speakers reduces them to the same meaning, and in the case of paronyms to similar, and then by extension identical, meanings. The speakers are aware of the unreality of this equation, and it is done in the same playful, make-believe spirit of jokes. So, in a pun, the speakers pretend that two homonyms or paronyms have the same meanings and can thus be exchanged and confused, with the same commitment to factual truth with which they pretend that an elephant can climb on a cherry tree, paint its toenails red, and as a result be camouflaged (see example (61)).

While still speculative to an extent this theory explains reasonably well where the speakers find the resolution of puns. As has been seen, humorous texts have been found to require a “justification,” i.e. a resolution of (or explanation of, or accounting for) the incongruity that they contain, not in terms of Aristotelian logic, but rather of a playful logic called “local logic” (Ziv 1984) or “paleo-logic” (Arieti 1967). The recourse to a Cratylistic theory of the sign is, thus, the justification that the speakers playfully adopt for the incongruous behavior of associating similar sounds with similar meanings and pretending that some two dissimilar meanings are similar in the safety provided by the metalinguistic status of their utterance.

Consider again (65): in the example the speaker affects to confuse [iDiθ] and [iDiʔ]. In a normal, non-humorous, non-metalinguistic situation, this confusion would be considered erroneous. But since the hearer recognizes the text as a joke, he/she can accept playfully that [iDiθ] and [iDiʔ] are equally appropriate for the context. The incongruity of this behavior is “masked” (in local logic terms) by the fact that “since the two sound the same they must mean sort of the same thing,” and so are indeed contextually interchangeable.

The preceding discussion is presented as an attempt at an explanation of some aspects of the resolution of the incongruity in puns. Given its preliminary and innovative nature, it is certainly subject to further revisions. If we drop the assumption of the incongruity-resolution hypothesis for puns, and puns were to turn out to lack resolution, any attempt at providing an explanation for the resolution of puns would be futile. Further, it could also be the case that while puns have an element of resolution, it does not come from the motivated theory of language that the speakers carry. Since these are, at least in part, psychological questions, they are best left unanswered at this time. Suffice to notice that the motivated-sign theory is certainly falsifiable.

The only, admittedly marginal, direct evidence for the correctness of the motivated-theory hypothesis is that speakers find (some) puns to be deep and meaningful. Large amounts of literature have been dedicated to analysis of Joyce's, Lacan's and Derrida's puns (see below). Phonoaesthetic effects in poetry are not felt to be incongruous or absurd, but rather as producing an impression of "beauty" and, again, meaningfulness. Puns are also used as advertising tools, where they are not perceived as aversive or absurd, but rather as corroborating and meaningful. Therefore, it seems unlikely that puns lack resolution entirely, and, further, it seems that some degree of "meaningfulness" should be present in puns. Certainly this kind of "evidence" may be anecdotal, and even worse, impressionistic, but at this point in the research of puns not much more can, apparently, be offered by way of evidence on their resolution and related issues beyond the materials discussed above.

## 4.2 Poststructuralism and Puns

The pseudo-semantic effect of puns is probably also at the root of an odd strand in research related to humor. Recently, interest towards puns has been displayed by scholars belonging to the post-structuralist paradigm (loosely identifiable with deconstructionist theories). Although their concerns differ drastically at times from those of the humor researcher/linguist, there is a certain amount of overlap—for instance, in the very choice of the pun as an object of analysis.

The post-structuralist interest in puns<sup>26</sup> is, unfortunately, fundamentally

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<sup>26</sup>See the essays in Culler (ed.) (1988), Mellard (1984), and Civita (1984: 102-114) on

misguided in that puns are taken to “reveal” senses not otherwise accessible in the text, or to be evidence of a “different” mode of producing signs, i.e., denying the arbitrary nature of the sign, which they see as a symptom of the tendency to privilege one meaning to the detriment of all others in a text.

Culler, introducing the articles collected in Culler (1988: 4), claims that the papers are “committed to the view that puns are not a marginal form of wit but an exemplary product of language or mind.” Culler (1988: 15) even more specifically claims that one of the essays shows that there is a “relationship between the pun and concept formation or the order of knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> This position is never substantiated and as the discussion in this chapter has shown, puns are a form of language game that exploits speakers’ beliefs in a Cratylistic relationship between sounds and senses, based on metalanguage.<sup>28</sup>

Puns are taken by Culler to be “foundational” (see the subtitle of the collection “The foundation of letters”) in the sense that “the exploitation of formal resemblance to establish connections of meaning seems the basic activity of literature” (Culler 1988: 4). The discussion of puns in this chapter so far has been kept separate from the issue of their literary status, mostly for practical reasons, as no commonly agreed-upon definition of literariness is readily available within linguistics.

The status of “formal resemblance” (phonemic similarity) in non-literary language has, however, been established quite safely in the previous discussion, and in terms that oppose Culler’s claim. The use of formal resemblance to establish semantic “interchangeability” is a “belief” entertained by speakers with no linguistic reality. It is manifested in many phenomena, all of which are evidence that speakers, consciously or unconsciously, believe that the sign is motivated and act accordingly, but which say nothing about what language in fact is in that respect.

As a result, it is irrelevant whether one wants to claim that because they are a literary phenomenon, puns are not subject to the rules to which

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Lacan.

<sup>27</sup>Not all of the authors in the collection seem to subscribe to Culler’s claim and make more prudent ones instead. Several of the papers in the book are solid and interesting contributions to various literary fields. The focus of this discussion is on the general relationship between sound and sense, and therefore other subjects are given less prominence.

<sup>28</sup>Some post-structuralists maintain, after Lacan, that there is no metalanguage. They would therefore be skeptical of the discussion in the text. Needless to say, they (and Lacan) are mistaken and misrepresent the nature and function of metalanguage.

other forms of language are. If such is the case, puns become a derivational, artificial type of language use, and as such cannot be used as evidence of what rules non-derivational uses follow. If one claims, instead, that literature is based on non-literary, casual (see 3.1.1) use of language, and only alters it to some extent (a quantitative difference, and not qualitative), then the issue is moot, as the status of puns in non-literary language has been already established.

In some cases, it is unclear how the metaphorical and allusive texts of the proponents of these ideas are to be read; witness the following quote: "The pun in Lacan reverberates repetitiously to its point of origin – grace, the leap of faith. The pun trembles like an orgasm throughout Lacan's writings (...)" (Meltzer 1988: 163). Frankly, this baffles the interpretive capacities of this writer, even if it engages his imagination.

In other cases it is clear that the authors agree with Culler's assessment of the importance of puns for critical/rhetorical/linguistic practice; for example Ulmer (1988: 166) claims that

what is at stake in such puns [Derrida's] is not simply a problem of style (...) but the generalization of this possibility [puns across languages] into a new relation between and among thought, language and writing, and hence a renegotiation of the functions of truth and history in a new paradigm

thus implying the centrality of punning in Derrida's thinking and methodology. A few lines below Ulmer notes that Derrida "practices" and "analyzes" the pun at the same time.

Attridge (1988: 151) seems to attribute the same foundational importance to portmanteau words (a type of pun):<sup>29</sup>

The portmanteau shatters any illusion that the system of difference in language are [sic] fixed and sharply drawn, and reminds us that signifiers are perpetually dissolving into one another: in the neverending diachronic development of language; in the blurred edges between languages, dialects, registers, idiolects; in the interchange between speech and writing; in errors and misunderstandings, unfortunate or fruitful; in riddles, jokes, games and

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<sup>29</sup>For example "shuit" (Attridge 1988: 148) which is the result of the blending of "suit," "shirt," "shoes," "shoot" and "shit."

dreams. *Finnegans Wake* insists that the strict boundaries and discreet elements in a linguist's 'grammar of competence' are a neoplatonic illusion.

While many will agree with Attridge that a strict definition of idealized competence is not a fruitful position even in language studies, let alone in their largely metaphorical extensions into literature, this hardly comes from the presence of puns in language.

Whatever the mechanisms by which the multiple meanings of puns would become manifest, the fact that puns are metalinguistic and humorous utterances puts them in a textual mode that is not committed to cooperative communication, nor for that matter to the transmission of information or even to the most elementary rules of linguistic communication.

As a result, it is a fundamentally confusing suggestion to take puns as literally conveying information (on the non-literal information potential of humor see ch. 9). Puns "fake" a Cratylistic semiotic system in which sound evokes unexpected sense associations, but these are only a by-product of the abandonment of all the "protective" devices used by speakers to make sure that communication will take place (e.g. Grice's principle of cooperation—see ch. 9). Puns are the ultimate example of what Guiraud (1976) has aptly termed "defunctionalization" of language—that is the use of language for play, not for communication (see also Piro 1967: 256).

Taking seriously the pretended Cratylistism of puns is as misleading as believing that doors and jars are the same object because of the following example:

- (68) When is a door not a door?  
When it's ajar.

# Chapter 5

## Semiotic and Text Theories

This chapter presents a number of theories that do not belong to a school of linguistics as clearly as the structuralist theories (ch. 2-3), the script-based theories (ch. 6), or the sociolinguistic theories (ch. 10). They all share, however, an interest in the global perception of the humorous text in its context. Another common feature of these theories is their interest in literary types of humor or their connections with literary phenomena. The organization of the chapter is as follows: some semiotic theories are reviewed, beginning with Koestler's cognitive bisociation model (a common source of inspiration for semiotic theories), and finally several theories at the boundary between linguistics and literary criticism.

### 5.1 Semiotic Theories

The relevance and safety of examining semiotic theories in a linguistic treatment of humor research may be questioned. This author believes that since the semiotic theories of humor model themselves to a large extent on linguistic theories and deal with linguistic issues, it would be an unnecessary limitation on the theoretical panorama of the research if those theories were left out.

The exposition of the section on semiotic theories of humor will begin by briefly discussing Koestler's model, an important source for further developments in the semiotics of humor, and will then deal with the Bologna and the Bochum semioticians, in that order.

### 5.1.1 Bisociation Theories

The bisociation theories have their origin in Koestler's book (1964) about creativity. Koestler's bisociation theory has been very influential. For example, Douglas (1968), Noguez (1969), Milner (1972), Johnson (1976), Manetti (1976), Schmidt (1976), Eco (1979), Fónagy (1982), Norrick (1986), and Wenzel (1989) have all been influenced, to varying degrees, by bisociation theory.

bisociation is defined by Koestler as

*the perceiving of a situation or idea (...) in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference (...) The event (...), in which the two intersect, is made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths, as it were. While this unusual situation lasts, [the event] is not merely linked to one associative context, but bisociated with two (1964: 35).*

Bisociation is a cognitive theory, and, clearly, a type of incongruity theory (see ch. 1). It should be noted that the definition of bisociation is speculative and psychological, and in terms of the phenomena that it covers, it is roughly coextensive with the notion of isotopy disjunction (cf. ch. 2) and of script opposition/ (cf. ch. 6). It is endowed, however, neither with the same degree of formal definition nor with the heuristic procedures for determining which script/isotopy is being activated that characterize linguistic theories. From a strict linguistic point of view, it has little to say, since in fact it is only a notational variant of the isotopy disjunction theory, or the script theory, but its applications to the linguistics of humor have been numerous and interesting (see below) and its terminology is widely used.

### 5.1.2 Towards a Semiotics of Humor

The first contribution to humor research by a semiotician is Dorflès (1968), who dedicated a chapter of one of his books to a semiotics of humor. Dorflès claims to be aiming only at a "structuralist analysis" and wanting to analyze "those mechanisms that are underlying every kind of humor" (1968: 88), but his examples, as Schmidt (1976) points out, are far too limited to grant a sufficient width to the grounds from which he generalizes, consequently, his conclusions should be taken with caution.

According to Dorflès, humor consists of a process of *ostranenie* (the Russian for, roughly, “alienation,” “detachment,” or “defamiliarization”) (Sklovskij 1917) realized by a “shifting [lit: putting out of phase] of a sign (a word, an action) from its context” (Dorflès 1968: 101). Humor will be considered “a particular kind of message (...) that operates when in a determined communicative circumstance a (...) change of relationships between the sign and its referent is given” (Dorflès 1968: 102). The fact that a sign no longer refers to its ‘natural’ referent but to another “paradoxical” (*παρά δόξα* “against the rule”) referent, gives a “negative,” “paradoxical” value to the sign, and so its humorous effect. Humor is seen as “a kind of language (...) characterized by the negative, or paradoxical, value assumed by the sign” (Dorflès 1968: 104).

The suggestion of the humorous “sign” as a “serious” sign undergoing a modification has been fruitful (see Manetti (1976) and Schmidt (1976)). It should be noted that this definition of humor is akin to the definitions of aesthetic use of language (such as the metaphor) as a deviation from a “norm” and as such is liable to the same criticism (for example, see Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) discussion of the interpretations of metaphors in the same paradigm). It should also be noted that the “negative/paradoxical” view of humor is yet another wording of the incongruity theory.

Independently from Dorflès (1968), Milner (1972) was one of the first to use semiotic methodologies. This fact is mirrored in the somewhat “naive” way in which Milner’s taxonomy of puns is constructed. Milner assumes that

within a single situation, and a single linguistic context, two universes collide, and it is this collision that makes many forms of humor possible (Milner 1972: 16)

This collision is achieved by a process of “reversal.” A pun, for instance,

is a paradigmatic reversal of two items: instead of the anticipated one it is a member of the same virtual series that is actually used and the other item is relegated to virtual status (Milner 1972: 17).

Milner’s taxonomy of puns can be summarized as a 3x5 matrix opposing three kinds of reversals and five levels at which reversal may occur. The types of reversals are paradigmatic, syntagmatic and paragrammatic (or chiasitic)

and are exemplified and discussed in ch. 3. The levels are phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and situational. Note that four levels out of five are linguistic, and it is the fifth level that accounts for the “semiotic” label of the taxonomy.

### 5.1.3 The Bologna School

This section deals with the ideas on humor put forward by Italian semioticians connected with the University of Bologna. The Bologna school of semiotics is very strongly influenced by generative linguistics and by current artificial intelligence (AI) research, much more so than the continental (Greimas’) or American (Sebeok’s) schools of semiotics.

#### Manetti’s Semiotics of humor

Manetti (1976) is part of a vast discussion about humor that arose in Italy during the 1970’s (see Attardo 1988). Manetti begins with the hypothesis that humorous language is marked in opposition to “serious” language. Following Dorfler’s hypothesis, Manetti identifies six mechanisms of *ostranenie*: metonymy, metaphor, changes in the subject of the enunciation (enunciative isotopy—Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1976: 19-20), see ch. 2), decontextualization, parallels, and deformation.

By analyzing a few jokes in terms of the theory of information (Wiener 1947), Manetti shows that the punch line is particularly rich in information (see ch. 2) and that it triggers a feedback effect that leads to a rereading of the text to identify its ambiguous part. Using Greimas’ double isotopy,<sup>1</sup> Manetti also finds an opposition between ordinary, univocal, unambiguous language and systematically ambiguous (two senses) humorous language. Manetti’s work is one of the main sources of the Isotopy Disjunction Model (IDM), discussed in ch. 2.

Manetti also introduces the metaphor of a “relational grid” which defines what kinds of contrasts between isotopies will be considered humorous. Greimas (1966) discussed, among other things, some crossword definitions

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<sup>1</sup>The only flaw in Manetti’s otherwise remarkable work is that in the use of Greimas’ methodological tools, he refers to the 1966 notion of isotopy, which renders some of his formulations somewhat problematic.

as particular types of contexts capable of establishing isotopies. In that context, Greimas noted that the grid of squares in which one solves the crossword puzzle provides some information—for example, some letters of a partially solved word, or the length of a specific word. Manetti's crossword metaphor applied to culture means that a set of cultural specifications preexists the joke and defines what counts as humorous in a culture.

The relational grid that Manetti proposes would provide one with the list of admissible oppositions in a given culture. The idea of a cultural grid is a common theme in semiotic humor research. Consider for instance Johnson's (1976: 221) claim that

it is not improbable (...) that the meaning of any given joke arises from the interplay of many layers of bisociation, deriving from the most specific utterances and social context to the most general principles of logical paradox and social ideology.

This conclusion is consistent with Johnson's preliminary statement that "the joke process is inextricably merged with the containing conceptual system in the total socio-economic situation which both generates and involves them" (Johnson 1976: 195). In Raskin (1985) (see ch. 6), a similar concept is described as the list of scripts available to speakers for humor purposes. Neither Manetti nor Johnson, however, provide an actual list of oppositions, as Raskin does.

It should be noted that Manetti's work is very earnest in its semiotic thrust. Whereas many authors label an almost entirely linguistic account as "semiotic" (e.g., Milner 1972), Manetti provides examples taken from different media and semiotic systems. Manetti (1980) and Manetti and Violi (1977) deal with other types of objects (surrealist art and a special type of riddle).

### **Eco's Pragmatic Account**

Eco has shown a constant interest in humor. His most important contribution to the field is Eco (1981[1986]).<sup>2</sup> His goal is not to provide a complete theory

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<sup>2</sup>See also Eco [no date], 1973 (on Huizinga's theory of play), 1975 (on Campanile, an Italian humorist), 1978 (on Pirandello's theory of humor), 1983 (on Queneau), 1984b (on carnival and Bakhtin), not to mention his 1980 fictional work *The Name of the Rose*, see ch. 1.

of humor, but only to analyze one of the technical means by which humor can be elicited. Eco's hypothesis is that "there exists a rhetorical device, which concerns the figures of thought, in which, given a social or intertextual "frame" or scenario already known to the audience, you display the variation [of the frame], without, however, making it explicit in discourse" (1986: 272). The "variation" is also defined as the "violation" of a rule. Eco's terms closely follow Koestler's: "two conventional rules (...), each of them self-consistent, collide in a given situation (...). But let us note that the conflicting rules were merely *implied* in the text; by making them explicit I have destroyed the story's comic effect" (Koestler 1964: 36).

Eco stresses, however, that this requisite of implying is not sufficient. His examples are of humor generated by infractions of conversational maxims (Grice 1975; see ch. 9 for a detailed discussion), for instance the "maxim of quantity" ("make your contribution as informative as required"):

- (69) "Excuse me, do you know what time is it?"  
 "Yes." (Eco 1986: 273)

or "the maxim of relation" ("be relevant"):

- (70) "Can you pilot a motor boat?"  
 "Certainly. I served in the army in Cuneo"<sup>3</sup> (Eco 1981: 5).

Eco states that also "obscurities" and "ambiguities" (violations of the maxim of manner, "be brief and succinct, not obscure") produce humorous texts, but he gives no examples. Todorov (1966: 122) had already noted that poetry and puns deliberately use ambiguity and obscurity to create aesthetic and humorous effects.

Another source of humor are the infractions and violations of narrative *topoi* (standard scenes). Eco draws examples from the magazine *Mad* which published some stories in which the *topos* is violated in an extremely coded situation (e.g. a young woman is tied to railroad tracks, the train is coming, a horseman is racing to rescue her, and the horseman arrives too late). The examples need not be limited to contemporary sources: a humorous infraction of the maxim of manner was coded in medieval French literature under the form *enumerations* (Garapon 1957: 22-25, 32-34, etc.). Eco should

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<sup>3</sup>Cuneo is a small town in Northern Italy, with no connection with water sports. An American rendition could be "Certainly, I grew up in Iowa."

be credited with a clear understanding that pragmatic competence such as conversational implicatures and intertextuality must be incorporated in an exhaustive theory of humor.

The relationship of humorous texts to the principle of cooperation will be elaborated upon further in chapters 9 and 10.

### **Mizzau and Paletta**

Mizzau (1982) and Paletta (1982) share the same methodological background as Eco's and are directly inspired by his approach to humor and to linguistics/semiotics.

Paletta (1982) analyzes several passages in Achille Campanile's humorous novels from the perspective of the processes by which the topic of the text is decided upon (see ch. 2.3.1). For the present purposes the notion of topic can be identified with the "aboutness" of the text. It is important to note that the topic of a text is found (or rather hypothesized) by the hearer/reader through a process of abduction (essentially, a probabilistic reasoning, but not defined, in this case, as a mathematical theory). In other words, the process of finding the topic of a text is simultaneous to its processing (Paletta 1982: 38).

The humorous text relies on "the acquired habit to execute abductions of a degenerate kind, in which the degree of risk is reduced to a minimum" (Paletta 1982: 42). The process of abduction is "risky" if compared to the more traditional methods of inductive or deductive reasoning: there is no guarantee of the accuracy of the conclusion beyond the degree of probability that given the two premises, the conclusion will follow,<sup>4</sup> however, the abductions performed during the process of finding the topic of a text are usually quite simple, for example: faced with a request of information about the location of the bathroom, the hearer will abduct that the speaker intends to make use of the facilities.

A humorous text can exploit this fact, by

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<sup>4</sup>A classical example of abduction is Peirce's bag of beans example:

The beans in this bag are white.

These beans are white.

Ergo: these beans are from this bag.

controlling its premises, predicting that the hearer will use them to find the topic following preestablished canons and conventions: bypassing all predictions, it [the humorous text] produces a surprise effect, because it provides new interpretations for the same discursive situation (Paletta 1982: 42).

As with Eco's work, on which it is based, Paletta's work is clearly connected with the Gricean analysis of humor (developed more in full in ch. 9).

Mizzau's work (1982, 1984) is also strongly influenced by Eco (1981). Mizzau's definition of the "joke" is pragmatic (in terms of perlocutionary effect (see 0.3.1)) and combines Koestler's bisociation theory with observations about the requirements of implicitness in jokes, which leads to the characteristic shortness of this text type (on the implicit in jokes, see ch. 9, on jokes as a text type, see Attardo and Chabanne (1992)).

Mizzau sets off from Eco's requirement for humor (one that distinguishes humor from tragedy, according to Eco) that the "rule" that is violated in the joke is not to be made explicit in the text of the joke. Because of this requirement, the text must not tell the "entire story;" any joke is metaphorically elliptic and, in fact, is banking on the fact that the hearer will fill in the gaps in the text according to customary inferential patterns (cf. above the abductive nature of the establishment of topics, in Paletta's work), and will thus be misled (*tratto in inganno*).

Mizzau's emphasis is thus on the presence of the hearer in the text (Mizzau 1982: 33) or, less figuratively, on the amount of inferential processing necessary for the hearer to decode the text and the strategies of the joke text that anticipate and exploit this processing. Mizzau's (1984) is dedicated to irony, and so falls outside of the scope of this book.

#### 5.1.4 The Evolutionary Cultural Semiotic Model

This section examines the work of some followers of a "semiogenetic" model which is a combination of a particular type of semiotics (closer to the Jakobson/Eco/Sebeok style than to the Continental/French brand) with a genetic/evolutionist approach. The approach is deliberately multidisciplinary in that it purports to cover not only the semiotic phenomena involved in humor, but also their psychological and social aspects. All of these factors are

also considered to be factors in the evolution of humor.

### **Koch's "Semiogenetic" Approach**

The semiogenetic approach is based on the work of Koch (see Koch 1989 and references therein). Koch himself presents (1989: 48-51) some considerations on humor. Divested of its heavy formalism, Koch's theory is a reformulation of the aggression theories (ch. 1) with an overtone of "release." Koch (1989: 48) claims that in humor, "we are led from a state of high arousal (...) to one of relief," but also that "we laugh at a loser or 'defender' " and that "comic texts (among others: jokes) have a deep structure of 'aggression vs. defense'."

Koch's approach to semiotics has been applied to humor more specifically by some of his followers (among which is Vogel). Both Koch and his followers see humor as a part of "art." The Evolutionary Cultural Semiotics (ECS) that Koch propounds claims that art is the "cultural echo" of a displacement of the basic fight or flight pattern of territorial behavior. The displacement allows a third option which is neither fight or flight, or "its cultural variant -taboo vs. *noa* [non-taboo, culturally licit]" (Vogel 1989: 166).

### **Vogel's Theory**

In Vogel's view, the main point of the semiogenetic approach to humor is that it

argues that forms such as the joke do not arise from mere "aesthetic" exploitation of grammatical accidents or play with semantic ambiguity or "stylistic deviance" alone, but rather that they reflect deeper-lying "informational" concerns, polarities, and tensions (Vogel 1989: 160)

Vogel (1989) claims that one can properly comprehend humor only by viewing the humorous text (in a broad sense) in its social dimension, which involves three roles: the joke teller, the hearer, and the butt of the joke. A direct quote will give an idea of the quantity of material the author deals with:

the following variables have been considered: the participants, their roles in the situation, their individual processing potentials,

their social affiliations, their interest and/or engagement in text-mediated integration, and their basic interpretation of the intentions behind the text situation – as well as the various ways the actual channel of interactive communication can be regulated (Vogel 1989: 140).

More directly relevant to the linguistics of humor, Vogel bases her work on the Freudian typology, Pepicello and Green's (1983) classification, Raskin's (1985) script theory, and some semiotic approaches (Milner 1972, Johnson 1976, Wenzel 1988). Building on these and other's ideas, which include an evolutionary survey of the ontogenesis of smiling and laughter, Vogel develops the "ontogenesis of the humor situation," following the evolution of humor in children from the earliest onsets of smile and laughter to the first understanding of linguistic ambiguity.

Vogel notes that one specific type of incongruous behavior is particularly easily recognized: the violation of conventional behavior (taboos) (Vogel 1989: 232). This could account for the early onset in children of "humorous" manifestations revolving around this kind of incongruity. Vogel convincingly reduces the earliest manifestations of humor (or of humor-like situations) to the bisociation model. She presents an overall picture of joke telling as emerging from a progressive symbolic process of distancing from simple violation of taboos in a playful manner, to the mention of the violation and ultimately to a verbal "simple form" (the joke) already in the realm of "art."

These ideas are not without their problems. For instance, the above picture fits so-called "tendentious" humor (ch. 1) very well, but it seems much less convincing for "innocent" humor (which the author acknowledges exists). Another issue is the debatable utility of diachronic arguments for a synchronic description, which is one of Vogel's goals. It still remains to be proven that the synchronic explanation of humor can be extrapolated from its diachronic onset.

Her "genetic" approach also leaves some important issues underdeveloped. Vogel convincingly shows how the joke evolves from very basic "incongruous situations" into a complex form. She spends very little time, however, addressing the qualitative leap from a simple incongruity (enacted, mentioned, or represented) to the structured narrative of the joke. The incongruity in the joke is not simply "put there," it is "playfully" motivated (see Ziv's (1984) "local logic," and Aubouin's (1948) "justification"). By collaps-

ing incongruity and humor, or at least by not problematizing and discussing the conflation, Vogel weakens her thesis. It is not at all obvious that there is a continuum between enjoyment of incongruous events and humor. Vogel's continuum thesis is convincing and thought stimulating, but one would expect an explicit discussion of the issue at hand and a refutation of the claims to the contrary, rather than a few passing remarks. The same observation can be made about the relationship between laughter/smiling and humor. Vogel assumes, without further discussion, that the two are inextricably related, but it has been argued that laughter is not a reliable indicator of humor (see Introduction).

Vogel is often critical of what she perceives as an excessive limitation of the field of analysis by linguists and semioticians alike. Her reasons for this are connected to her claim for an "integrated" holistic model of humor. She seems to fail to realize that the linguistic and semiotic program are reductionist and essentialist, directed at identifying the smallest set of *conditiones-sine-qua-non* (the "essence," the "grammar," cf. Introduction) of the phenomena they examine. From a generative linguist's point of view, the "use" of humor by the speaker either for social criticism or for the of taboo instincts is irrelevant because it does not affect the "rules" upon which a humorous text is built (see, for instance, Raskin's (1985) characterization of his theory as "non-committal" with regard to the psychological and sociological theories of humor) (see ch. 6, but see also ch. 10 for a different approach, still within linguistics). For a more detailed discussion of Vogel's work, see Attardo (1990b).

### 5.1.5 Semiotics of Graphical and Visual humor

Although this type of semiotic study is more distant from verbal humor, and as such falls outside of the scope of this book, Lessard (1991) is particularly worthy of notice for his attempt to reduce some types of visual humor to verbal rhetorical figures, such as syllepsis ("the taking of words in two senses at once"; on syllepsis in humor see Noguez (1990)) and antanaclasis ("repeating the same word in a different sense"). Lessard's effort is a very significant contribution towards the unification of the semiotic and linguistic theories of humor because he establishes a correspondence between puns and a large part of visual humor; he treats visual humor as "visual puns" with the only difference being in the type of sign involved (iconic vs. linguistic).

## 5.2 Linguo-literary Approaches

This section deals with linguistics-based theories that show a particular interest in literary phenomena. Schmidt's text-theoretic approach is discussed first, followed by Fónagy's revisitation of Freud's theory, and its application to metaphors, Wenzel's literary research on the text-type of jokes and their connections with other genres, Norrick's frame-bisociation theory, and finally Nash and Redfern's literary surveys.

### 5.2.1 Schmidt's Text-Theory

Schmidt's (1976) starting point is Dorfler's contextual shift (see above), but Schmidt sets the entire question within a text theory which enables him to take problems of "pragmatics" into consideration.<sup>5</sup>

Schmidt's theory is couched in the terminology of his "theory of text" (*Texttheorie*), developed in Schmidt (1973). Simplifying a little, according to Schmidt, a text theory is a linguistic theory that takes into account pragmatic factors such as:

the global socio-cultural setting in the speech community, the participants to the communication with all the premises and presuppositions influencing them, a communicative situation functioning as a "frame," the texts uttered and the verbal, factual and relatable (con-)texts.

Schmidt calls the single communicative events "communication-action-games" (CAG) (*kommunikatives Handlungsspiel*). By using this terminology, borrowed from Wittgenstein (1953), Schmidt emphasizes the non-systematic nature of the relationships holding between settings, texts, participants, and communicative events. Although Schmidt does not use the term, his is a "polythetic" (i.e., non-essentialist) theory (see ch. 7).

Each CAG presupposes and determines a set of "presuppositions" (in the usual sense of the word: the statements that must be true in order for the sentence (here CAG) to be true or false). This set is called "complex of presuppositions" (CoP). A CoP corresponds to a possible world, and every participant in a CAG has his/her own CoP and his/her own possible

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<sup>5</sup>The trend towards a pragmatic analysis of humor in European research is analyzed in detail in Attardo (1988).

world. The details of Schmidt's theory and its justification, are worked out in Schmidt (1973).

Schmidt's purpose, as far as humor theory goes, is clearly stated: he does not want to define the structure of humor (which would entail the need to use an abstract, i.e. non-socio-temporally determined definition) but rather to show how humor can be analyzed in the model of CAGs; in other words, how specific individuals in a particular situation react to a stimulus (humor). Schmidt is interested in the actual utterance of a humor-text, rather than in the abstract type.

The definition Schmidt arrives at is that humor is elicited by the thematized simultaneous presence of distinct worlds in one situation of communication. Recalling that a (possible) "world" in Schmidt's theory is a CoP, such as the speaker, the hearer, or a character in a novel may have, it becomes obvious then that this definition is the enlarged version of Dorfles'. In fact, in "verbal humor" Schmidt writes, "this simultaneity is realized in purely linguistic constellations (humor stimulus) by the simultaneous possibility to put an expression in relation to different pragmatic-semantic fields" (Schmidt 1976: 187). Schmidt's widened version of the "contextual shift" theory, however, is not without relevance. By stretching the boundaries of the "context" to all the relevant pragmatic elements of the situation, Schmidt can take into consideration the socio-temporal determinations that, as has been shown above (see Manetti (1976) and Johnson (1976)), must be included in a theory of humor.

Only Schmidt (1976) and Raskin (1985), of all the authors that mention context in their theories, give an extensional definition of the potentially relevant contextual factors in a "humor act" (humorous constellation). Schmidt cites factors connected with socio-economic and socio-cultural conditionings, knowledge of the language, the text, and the world, experiences, projects, intentions, and biographical dispositions, while Raskin, in relation to the triad speaker/hearer/text, cites experience, psychology, situation, and society.

If one strips text theory of its definitional baggage, it emerges quite clearly as yet another restatement of the incongruity theory, in pragmatic terms. This is not to say that the formulation of the theory is a mere terminological operation, as the application to two literary examples show (Schmidt 1976). Text theory is clearly oriented to literary theory rather than to formal specification of algorithms. As such, despite the heavy formalism, the theory remains largely metaphorical: for instance, no formal procedure is given for

the determination of the CoPs.

From another point of view, anticipating the discussion of the script-theory in ch. 6, the “pragmatic-semantic fields” have some affinity with the notion of script, though the indeterminate nature of the former is not on par with the well-defined nature of the latter.

### 5.2.2 Fónagy’s Psycho-Pragmatic Account

Fónagy’s (1982a) lengthy essay is basically an elaboration in depth of Freud’s classic remarks about *Witz* and can be divided into two parts: the first deals with the technique of jokes while the second deals with the psychological motivation of jokes, namely the relationship between “joke techniques and verbal and cognitive behaviour of children” (Fónagy 1982a: 55).

Fónagy’s interest in Freud’s ideas (which extends beyond humor to other areas of linguistics as well) is a striking and unique (within the realm of linguistics) feature of his contribution to humor. Fónagy begins by noting that “a funny remark can be regarded as a verbal act immediately followed by its invalidation: ‘I didn’t mean it. I am only joking’” (Fónagy 1982a: 33). Invalidation of an assertion occurs when “it is contradicted by the *deictic field* i.e., the situation in which the utterance occurs and that would normally “serve to complete the message, and make it concrete, actual, and explicit” (Fónagy 1982a: 33). Fónagy notes that this auto-invalidation is an “implicit” joke mark, or in other words that the absurdity of the utterance in relation to the context is sufficient to determine of the humorous intent of the speaker (see ch. 9).

A necessary but not sufficient condition is thus found for the joke: “The conflict between the deictic field and verbal field which gives rise to absurdity is the basic component of all verbal humor” (34).

Fónagy’s goal is “to outline the most typical verbal and logical structures involved in jokes” (Fónagy 1982a: 36). According to Freud, jokes function by insuring the saving of “mental expenditure” in two ways:

“(a) condensation of two different, contrasting messages (“bisociation” according to Koestler (1964))(...); (b) prevalence of more primitive, less demanding manners of processing experiences” (Fónagy 1982a: 36)

In class (a), Fónagy lists thirteen ways to achieve “double meaning” verbally, among which are polysemy, homonymy, etymology (real and arbitrary; cf. ch. 3-4, folk etymology), syntactic ambiguities, pragmatic ambiguities (sentences that have a “general” (literal) meaning, and a “restricted” idiomatic meaning; in another context Fónagy defined these as *enoncés liés* (Fónagy 1982b).

In class (b), Fónagy considers two kinds of facts: “deviant semiotic strategies” (roughly conversational implicatures and pragmatic interaction rules) and “faulty thinking.” The latter is divided into automatic thinking and sophistic reasoning (cf. 4.0.1). Automatic thinking is defined as “controlled by a non-sufficiently specified program which has not been adapted to the concrete situation a person will have to face” (Fónagy 1982a: 44).

Fónagy’s handling of these two last categories is of great interest because he undertakes the task of giving a formulation of the contradiction implied in the joke, using formal logic. As far as this writer knows, this is one of the first attempts at such a task (cf. s (1977) and, in particular, Todorov (1978: 287-289)).

Consider for example the following example (a French *fabliau*):

- (71) The priest angrily burst into the peasant’s house.
- Have you no shame, in broad daylight, making love without even drawing the curtains?
- The peasant in vain explains that his wife and himself were sitting at the table having their dinner.
- Then the fault must be in the window, says the priest.
- The peasant wants to make sure how things stand, and following the priest’s advice he climbs the tree opposite the window. After a while he returns to the room much surprised.
- Looking through the window it really looks as if two people were making love. (Du prestre ki abevete) (Fónagy 1982a: 49)

Fónagy notes that, superficially, the *fabliau* is arranged in a chiastic structure: the priest looks at the peasant and his wife, the peasant looks at the priest and the peasant’s wife. But more deeply, the “underlying rule” is that “two lies make a truth”: the priest lies to the peasant pretending that he just saw him and his wife making love, while the peasant know this to be false, then the peasant looks at the priest making love to the peasant’s wife, but he still assumes this to be false, since postulating a “magical window” is

the only way to accomodate what he saw and the priest's report at the same time. The second lie has to be assumed implicitly (i.e., the priest and the wife will deny having made love while the peasant was watching from the tree). Numerous fabliaux were based on this kind of "double lie" (so much so that the concept was even lexicalized, *enfantômer*).

A more general overview of the contradictory aspects of reasoning involved in humor is to be found in Attardo and Raskin (1991) under the "Logical Mechanisms" knowledge resource (see ch. 6). This branch of reasoning deserves major attention since its obvious goal is to reduce humorous contradiction to a finite set of contradictory propositions. An additional important issue is whether all forms of humor necessarily involve contradiction, in one form or another (this issue, as well as the preceding one, will be developed more in full in Attardo and Raskin (forthcoming)). It is, of course, too early to say whether this attempt will be successful.

Fónagy subscribes to the "error" approach to puns, although he qualifies it by noting that the errors are "demotivated" (Fónagy 1982: 93), i.e. not "real." Demotivated errors and the "reviving of paleologic (Arieti 1971), infantile mental mechanism" is at the base of jokes and metaphors; for example Fónagy explains puns on the basis of the observation that "the phonetic and the semantic component, the significans and significatum, form an indivisible unit in the child's consciousness" (56), cf. ch. 4.

Fónagy develops an interesting parallel between jokes and metaphors, based on the fact that both involve a "violent and intentional contrast with common sense" (Fónagy 1982: 64), and both involve two "meanings." The obvious difference between jokes and metaphors is that the two "interpretations involved in jokes are contrasting, highly polarized," (65) whereas they are compatible in metaphors.

### 5.2.3 Norrick's Frame Bisociation

Norrick is responsible for one of the most sustained efforts combining bisociation with frame-theory and an interest for literary devices (1984, 1986, 1987, 1989). At least in the first phase of its elaboration Norrick's theory was developed independently from the script theory (ch. 6) and from Hörmann (1971). Norrick's theory is based on Koestler's "bisociation." Norrick changes Koestler's idea of bisociating "planes" (see above) to bisociating frames (a.k.a. "scripts," see ch. 6).

A comparison between the SSTH and Norrick's theory would be substantially unfair, if only for the difference in sheer mass between the two. The two theories have different goals and emphases: the SSTH's goal is formality, whereas Norrick's goals are more descriptive. Norrick leans much more towards a genre analysis of types of jokes (Norrick 1984), semiotic theory, and literary criticism (see his interest in Nash (1985) reviewed in Norrick (1987)), e.g., his important research on intertextuality in humor (Norrick 1989). This latter subject will be discussed in more detail in Attardo and Raskin (forthcoming).<sup>6</sup>

### 5.2.4 German Research on Narrative and Literature

From the seventies onward, German linguistics has seen a large body of literature in a cross-field area between literary study and linguistics.<sup>7</sup> Its most significant manifestation in linguistics was the so-called text linguistics, which boomed around the end of the seventies and incorporated strong influences from the most formally oriented trends of literary analysis, in some of its manifestations; for example, one of the most quoted texts in German linguistics research is the short booklet by Preisendanz (1970), a literary scholar. Another good example of a collection strongly oriented towards literature and philology is the book edited by Preisenzand and Warning (1976), in which Schmidt (1976), a typical example of a text-theory approach to humor, was first published.

One of the most interesting and well developed approaches is Wenzel's (1989), which falls in a broad narratological and literary framework; however, his analytical tools are very much influenced by linguistics. Predictably, Freud's typology of jokes is an important element of Wenzel's framework, but his review of the literature covers some of the more recent British and American scholarship and large parts of German research on humor (1989: 19-30), with emphasis on the semiotic theories (e.g. Koch, cf. 5.1.4).

Wenzel's approach to the punch line (*Pointe*) in jokes sees it as a type of narrative resolution (*dénouement*, the Greeks' "catastrophe") and as the

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<sup>6</sup>Norrick (1993) was not available at the time of writing.

<sup>7</sup>Good surveys of the German literary/linguistic research on humor is to be found in Rohrich (1977) and Renner (1984) in general, and Toschi Nabiloni (1984) and Lixfeld (1984: 208-212) on text linguistics, in particular. On the connections between the isotopy-disjunction theory and German linguists, see 2.1.4.

minimal form of the *Pointe*. This is taken as a broad literary device, applicable to texts that are not jokes, for example detective novels (Wenzel 1989: 12). The obvious point of reference is Jolles (1965), which Wenzel quotes, not without reservations. Wenzel's claim, inspired by Koch, is that the basic "bisociative" or "isotopy-disjunction" pun is the simple form (i.e., the prototypical case) of all jokes, and that more complex forms, such as the shaggy-dog story, for example, are derived from simpler forms by the introduction of elements that either differ in the delivery of the punch line or introduce complications in surface arrangements of linguistic items or of reasoning.

Before examining the role of the punch line in narrative, Wenzel, based on an observation by Preisendanz (1970: 18) that any punch line derives its humorous potential from its linguistic nature, engages in a linguistic analysis of the punch line, using a classical Morrisian subdivision (syntax, semantics, pragmatics). In the syntax of the punch line, Wenzel lists four principles of manipulation of elements of the text: addition, subtraction, permutation, and substitution, which add little to the taxonomies examined in ch. 3. In the semantics, he reviews the bisociation and isotopy disjunction models, as well as a frame-theory treatment, remarkable mostly in the absence of references either to Raskin (1985) or to Norrick (1986). In the pragmatics, Freud's distinction between harmless and tendentious jokes resurfaces (see Nilsen 1988).

An interesting aspect of Wenzel's approach to the semantics of the punch line is his distinction between the breaking of a frame of reference and the establishment of a frame of reference as humor-generating devices. The relevance of the distinction lies in the linear order of the procedure: the breaking of a frame of reference (script) presupposes that the part of the text up to the element that breaks the frame had been integrated into a coherent frame, whereas the establishment of a frame of reference, on the contrary, imposes an unexpected coherence on an apparently incoherent set of events/entities. Wenzel acknowledges that both approaches are ultimately subsumed by a broader "frame change" model (Wenzel 1989: 44), but his insistence on the distinction is typical of the narratological emphasis on the development of the action. Vogel (1989: 157-158) sees a difference in attitude between static models, such as isotopy disjunction (Greimas) or script (Raskin), on the one hand, and Wenzel's dynamic model of frame change, on the other. The issue is probably entirely terminological.

Wenzel emphasizes the interaction of the punch line and of the plot development (Wenzel 1989: 66). To do so, he draws heavily on Barthes' (1970) analysis of a narrative as the development of a puzzle (Wenzel 1989: 69-70). Barthes distinguishes five "codes" determining the narrative. Only two of them need to be considered: the hermeneutic code, and the proairetic code. The former is concerned with how a puzzle is centered, posed, formulated, delayed, and, finally, revealed (Barthes 1970: 26), the latter with the characters' actions. Thus, in fact, Wenzel's analysis is much less original than he himself seems to be aware of, since it is essentially a rewording in post-structuralist terms of the isotopy-disjunction model, with its division into functions.

### 5.2.5 The British School: Nash and Redfern

Redfern (1984) and Nash (1985) share the same intellectual and academic background: they are very pleasant reading, crammed with excellent often quite sophisticated examples and they cover a broad range of phenomena. Unfortunately, they lack a theoretical approach, and their generalizations are weak, non-committal, and often miss the significant issues and pursue trivial details. Neither is based in current linguistic research, and their interests lie rather towards the literary value of their examples. Most of the analyses lean in the same direction, as they are vague and often full of unsupported psychologizing.

When they leave the impressionistic anthologizing, the attempts at analysis are often unfortunate. Consider, for example, the following case: in the text of a joke, Nash (1985: 34) distinguishes a "pre-location" and a "locus." The locus is a "word of phrase which clinches or discharges the joke." So far, so good: Nash has rediscovered the functional analysis of the joke text debated in the sixties and seventies by the isotopy-disjunction theorists; however, a few pages below (Nash 1985: 37), one finds the following joke:

(72) Guy Fawkes where are you, now that we need you?

with the claim that the NP "Guy Fawkes" is the locus of the joke. Suddenly the equation between locus and punch line is lost, as well as the formal elegance of the technique for determining a punch line (Hockett 1977), namely cutting off phrases from the end of the text leftwards, until the joke is no longer a joke. If stripped of its formal nature, the definition of locus becomes

subjective and is uninteresting from a linguistic point of view (although it may be interesting psychologically—for instance in determining to what aspects of a joke the audience reacts, beyond its humorous value).

Nash's interest is primarily oriented at stylistic matters and texts that are richer and more complex than a joke. He introduces the idea of "root joke" to describe the "basic" incongruity in a humorous text, but the idea lacks any formal definition or even the necessary precision to test it against other examples outside of Nash's own (see Norrick (1987) for a more optimistic review of the root joke idea). The root joke, as well as Koleh's (1985) corresponding ideas, are essentially correct intuitions: jokes are elementary, primitive forms of humorous narratives, and many humorous texts can be fruitfully analyzed as elaborations and complications of an elementary joke (Wenzel (1988; 1989) "simple form"). What remains to be explained is both the mechanisms for the expansion and why not all humorous texts can be handled in that way.

The efforts of Nash and Redfern provide excellent catalogs of examples with a very broad span. On Redfern see Raskin (1987). Recently Chiaro (1992) has been (apparently) inspired by the same attitude (see Attardo 1993).

### 5.3 Summary

As theories of humor, the stylistic, semiotic and textual theories presented are at most interesting and stimulating programmatic statements rather than complete and detailed theories. With few exceptions (e.g., Manetti or Bally), they are based on few examples and would require serious revision for a full-fledged application to large corpora of texts. In other cases, such as the Bochum semioticians, the main interest of the theory seems to lay in concerns not directly relevant to a linguistic perspective (the evolutionary account).

They all share a common interest for types of humor that go beyond the joke (as a short, basic text) and encompass larger texts, such as short stories, novels, etc., or other types of "texts" in semiotics, such as paintings, cartoons, etc. Beyond a common subject, the theories reviewed in this chapter share some methodological tools which can be conveniently summarized by the label "pragmatic," i.e., they are context-oriented, sensitive to non-truth-conditional aspects of meaning, and broadminded in their definition of

what counts as a linguistic object.

Further developments of the most promising aspects of these ideas (the interest towards types of texts different than the joke, and register-humor) will be discussed below. In the meantime, it should be noted that all semiotic approaches are, often implicitly, based on the principle that all humor is at root a semantic phenomenon; thus, a semiotics of humor is in fact the analysis of the different types of signifiers that a common semantic mechanism (script opposition/isotopy disjunction/bisociation) can be transposed into. There are many problems confronting the establishment of a coherent semiotic theory, but insofar as it can parallel a linguistic theory, it is easy to match step by step the problems that are analyzed in the linguistics of humor with those of a semiotics of humor. To be sure, there are problems that are peculiar to the visual domain, to name only one. For instance, a visual presentation of, say, a cartoon, is not linear as a text is, and therefore there are obvious problems that will have to be addressed. Already some promising avenues are being explored in this direction.

# Chapter 6

## Script-based Theories

### 6.0.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the theories of humor proposed within the framework of generative grammar. Within generative grammar, in the late seventies an interest arose towards contextual semantics (pragmatics). A number of theories set out to analyze, among other things, the way in which the lexicon is organized and represented. Since one of the most important tools of these theories is the notion of “script,” they are often referred to as “script theories.” This chapter deals with the script theory of humor proposed by Raskin (1985) in some detail and with some of its follow-ups. As usual, not much previous knowledge is assumed; the reader not familiar with the mechanics of script theory, or the theoretical foundations of lexical semantics will be given enough background information in the first part of the chapter to navigate this chapter.

One of the most obvious characteristics of the works that will be discussed in this chapter is that they are all very recent (the earliest mention of scripts in the context of humor theory dates back to Raskin (1979)). Because of this all materials that will be discussed are readily available (with the exception of a few theses and other unpublished documents). As a result, the general presentation of the theories will be less detailed than in the other chapters since the reader may always resort to the sources if necessary. This will allow a more detailed and in-depth discussion as well as a mixture of direct renditions from the script theory of humor with the author’s later modifications. A major revision of Raskin’s theory was undertaken jointly by Attardo and

Raskin (1991).

## 6.1 The Semantic Script Theory of Humor

The Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) was first outlined in Raskin (1979), but the standard reference has become the book-length treatment of Raskin (1985).<sup>1</sup>

### 6.1.1 Humor Competence

The SSTH shares its ontological foundation with transformational generative grammar: the SSTH is meant to account for the native speaker's humor competence (see Chomsky 1965: 3). Because a speaker can tell if a sentence belongs to the set of grammatical sentences, argues Raskin, the speaker can tell if a text is funny or not. Obviously, neither Chomsky, who limited his notion of competence to grammaticality, nor Katz and Fodor, who expanded it to include some semantic phenomena, had humorous phenomena in mind when they canonized the idea of speaker's competence.

Is this extension of the concept of competence legitimate and valid? Linguistically speaking, there can be no doubt that the extension is legitimate: considering a text humorous is merely being aware of its perlocutionary goal and/or effect; once the illocutionary and perlocutionary (Austin 1962) aspects of utterances are acknowledged as legitimate objects of study for linguistics (or some of its branches), it follows that the perception of the humorousness of a text must be a legitimate linguistic concern. One may doubt, however, that the extension is legitimate on more practical grounds: one may expect a certain uniformity in the speaker's judgements about the grammaticality of a sentence (notwithstanding some discomfiting results, see McCawley (1976: 235)), whereas it is a common experience to disagree, often markedly, on appreciation of the funniness of a joke.

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<sup>1</sup>The book's colophon bears discordant information: the copyright notice dates 1984, while the publishing date is listed as 1985. In the literature, some authors refer to *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* as Raskin (1984), others as Raskin (1985). This author has sided with the latter usage, which has become prevalent, and includes Raskin's own references to it in his subsequent work.

This objection does not withstand closer scrutiny. It should be noted that the SSTH models the competence, and not the performance, of the speaker (or the “humorist”); hence, if the hearer is sad or has just dropped a heavy object on his/her foot, he/she may fail to laugh or otherwise show any sign of appreciation of the humorous stimulus. It would be a mistake, however, to take this as a sign that the hearer cannot reliably pass judgements on the humorous nature of a text, exactly as it would be mistaken to assume that the native speaker cannot pass grammaticality judgements on his/her disconnected speech patterns after ingesting copious amounts of alcohol.

The SSTH models the humorous competence of an idealized speaker/hearer who is unaffected by racial or gender biases, undisturbed by scatological, obscene or disgusting materials, not subject to boredom, and, most importantly, who has never “heard it before” when presented with a joke. All in all, this necessary idealization is equivalent to the introduction of the idea of “potential humor” (*pace* Olbrechts-Tyteca (1974: 39)), i.e., that the context of the telling of the joke (its “performance”) is irrelevant to its humorous nature (although, obviously, not to its perception as such; ch. 10 will discuss these issues in more detail). This idealization is similar to the one adopted by most of generative linguistics, which assumes an idealized homogeneous speaker-hearer community (Chomsky 1965: 3-4).

### 6.1.2 The SSTH’s Main Hypothesis

For ease of exposition, the main hypothesis of the SSTH will be presented immediately (73), and will be followed by three subsections, each introducing the relevant semantic tools used by the theory. A summary of Raskin’s analysis of a sample joke will follow.

- (73) A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying-text if both of the [following] conditions are satisfied:
- i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
  - ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite (...). The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to fully or in part in this text (Raskin 1985: 99)

It may be useful to recall that, in the meaning current in generative linguistics, a formal theory is an abstract device which manipulates abstract

objects on the basis of explicit rules and, given a set of primitives and a set of rules, will generate a set of objects distinct from the set of primitives. This generation is intended in a purely logical sense and is equivalent to analyzing the output of the manipulations and reconstructing how they have been generated from the primitives. Another way to conceptualize the working of a generative theory is for the theory to pass a judgement upon any object as to its generability on the basis of the theory's primitives and rules.

Consequently, providing a formal theory of humor may be seen as either of two tasks: generating a humorous text out of its elements, or recognizing a humorous text when presented with one. From the point of view of the first task, a formal theory of humor must describe how one can generate a funny text by manipulating objects that are not funny taken separately. From the point of view of recognition, the theory must provide the necessary and sufficient conditions that a text must meet for the text to be funny and an algorithm for checking whether a given text is funny or not. As explained above, the two tasks are logically equivalent, and the two procedures differ only in emphasis.

### **6.1.3 Scripts**

A script is an organized chunk of information about something (in the broadest sense). It is a cognitive structure internalized by the speaker which provides the speaker with information on how things are done, organized, etc. Figure (6.1) will clarify what type of information a script may contain.

Figure 6.1: The Lexical Script for DOCTOR

Subject: [+Human] [+Adult]  
 Activity: > Study medicine  
     = Receive patients: patient comes or doctor visits  
         doctor listens to complaints  
         doctor examines patient  
     = Cure disease: doctor diagnoses disease  
         doctor prescribes treatment  
     = (Take patient's money)  
 Place: > Medical School  
     = Hospital or doctor's office  
 Time: > Many years  
     = Every day  
     = Immediately  
 Condition: Physical contact

Raskin (1985: 85) Note that ">" stands for "in the past," and "=" for "in the present."

The notion of "script" (a.k.a. "frame"<sup>2</sup>) comes originally from psychology (Bartlett (1932), Bateson (1955: 186-189), Goffman (1974)), and was incorporated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Charniak (1972), Schank (1975), Schank and Abelson (1977)), and by linguistics (Fillmore (1975, 1985), Chafe (1977), Raskin (1981), etc.).

A thorough discussion of the issues in script/frame-based semantics is beyond the scope of this book. The papers collected in the 1985/86 roundtable edited by Raskin in *Quaderni di Semantica* (Raskin (ed.) 1985 and Raskin 1985d) and the references therein will provide a general introduction to script/frame semantics. Only a few of these issues will be briefly discussed when they are directly relevant to points addressed in the rest of the chapter.

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<sup>2</sup>A large number of terms have been used, often in combination with attempts to circumscribe and/or broaden the referent of the terms. A review of these terminological discussions can be found in Andor (1985: 212-213) and (Fillmore 1985: 223n). Raskin leaves aside the terminological issues and chooses "script" to designate the unmarked term for this type of cognitive structure. This author will follow this usage, noting that it does not imply any value judgement but is meant as a simplification of an otherwise exceedingly complex terminological issue.

### What is in a Script?

An important issue in script-theory is the format and content of the scripts (their psychological reality having been established, e.g., Andor (1985), or Tannen (1985)). Most definitions of "script" agree that it contains information which is typical, such as well-established routines and common ways to do things and to go about activities. Definitions tend to be much more erratic when it comes to defining the limits of scripts. In general, the various definitions try to establish hierarchical structures. Typical examples are Schank and Abelson's "scripts" which are more specific than "plans," which in turn are more specific than "goals."

Fillmore (1985) and Raskin (1985b) both refuse the idea of denoting the hierarchical organization of scripts by different terms, in the Schank and Abelson mode, but Raskin introduces the idea of "macroscript," clusters of scripts organized chronologically, and "complex script" i.e., scripts made of other scripts, but not organized chronologically. A good example of macro-script would be the famous RESTAURANT (macro)script (see Schank and Abelson (1977)), which consists of several other scripts linked chronologically (DRIVE UP TO THE RESTAURANT, BE SEATED, ORDER FOOD, etc.). An example of a complex script could be WAR, which presupposes other scripts such as ARMY, ENEMY, VICTORY, DEFEAT, WEAPON, etc..

It should be noted also that Raskin insists on the fact that scripts, in his definition, are immediately related to, and evoked by, lexical items. This is an important distinction because in the psychological literature, as well as in AI, there is a tendency to consider scripts as merely experiential/cognitive objects.<sup>3</sup>

### Encyclopedic Knowledge

Another related issue is that of the difference between "linguistic" and "encyclopedic" information. Simply put, many speakers know that the chemical formula for water is H<sub>2</sub>O, but many others don't. These latter are not hindered in their understanding or use of the word "water" at all; therefore, this seems to be grounds for excluding the fact that the chemical formula for water is H<sub>2</sub>O from the meaning (script) for the word "water." This knowledge

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<sup>3</sup>No discussion of the issue will be undertaken here, but this author plans to return to these issues (Attardo, in preparation).

is then said to be encyclopedic. Since Katz and Fodor's (1963) claim that encyclopedic knowledge falls outside of the boundaries of linguistic semantics, a heated argument has ensued on the issues of how much of the knowledge of speakers about a word/extralinguistic entity designated by that word should be represented in the lexicon. Raskin and other frame-semanticists convincingly demonstrate that a large amount of contextual information has to be stored in the lexicon to be accessed during the processing of sentences. Consider the following example:

(74) John stacked the beer in the fridge.

Unless the lexical item "beer" is capable of activating the knowledge that the given liquid comes packaged in containers of stackable shape and dimensions such as to fit in a refrigerator, the above sentence would be impossible to parse, given the semantic inconsistency between "beer" ([+LIQUID]) and "stack" which subcategorizes for a ([- LIQUID]) direct object.

This type of argument brings up the issue of distinguishing between the information pertaining to words (lexical knowledge) and pertaining to the world (encyclopedic knowledge). According to Raskin, the difference between lexical and encyclopedic knowledge is not so much qualitative, but rather quantitative in relation to the closeness of association of the scripts. Consider the information which this writer happens to have, and that presumably not many other speakers share, that Belgian brewers produce a special type of beer flavored with cherries, called *Kriek Lambic*. Where would this type of information appear? According to Raskin, it would not appear directly in the lexical script BEER, but it would appear in another type of script, a "restricted knowledge" script, linked to the lexical script, but distinct from this latter.<sup>4</sup>

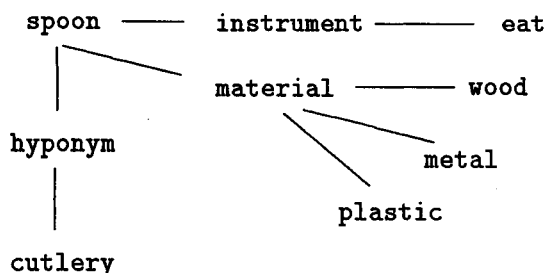
### Semantic Network

The issues above bring up a final concept that must be introduced in order to assess the script-based theory of semantics used by Raskin, namely that of "semantic network." Scripts, lexical and non-lexical, are connected by links. The links can be of different semantic natures (synonymy, hyponymy,

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<sup>4</sup>A more detailed discussion of the links between scripts and their relative lengths will be found in the next chapter in the context of proposing a script-based theory of register.

Figure 6.2: A Fragment of Semantic Network



[adapted from Raskin (1985:83)]

antonymy, etc.), and correspondingly labelled. The set of scripts in the lexicon, their links, plus all the non-lexical scripts, their links, and all the links between the two sets of scripts form the “semantic network” which contains all of the information a speaker has about his/her culture. The idea of a semantic network was prefigured by Peirce (1931-36) (see Eco 1979: 26-49) and introduced into AI by Quillian (1967). It should be noted that the global network of all scripts and their links is very large and multidimensional (i.e., not limited to the three dimensions customarily used in geometrical representations). Figure (6.2) represents a fragment of a semantic network.

### The Structure of a Semantic Theory

In Raskin’s view, a semantic theory must consist of the following (abstract) objects: the set of all scripts available to the speakers (along with their labeled links) and a set of combinatorial rules. The combinatorial rules correspond to Katz and Fodor’s (1963) “amalgamation rules” and to their current notational variant known as “unification” (e.g., Shieber 1986). Their function is to combine all the possible meanings of the scripts and discard those combinations that do not yield coherent readings. Those combinations that yield coherent readings are stored and incorporated with other successful combinations until all the elements in the text have been processed. If there is (at least) one coherent, well-formed interpretation, that interpretation of

the text is licensed as “the meaning” of the text, and the semantic theory classifies the sentence/text as “well-formed.”

The SSTH presupposes and incorporates a full-fledged semantic theory of this type outlined in Raskin (1986) and adapted to humor in Raskin (1985: ch. 4). It presupposes access to the complete semantic network of a language and the usage of the combinatorial rules to establish readings of the sentences of a text, and pass judgements on their “well-formedness.” The next sections will explain how a judgement on “funniness” is passed by the SSTH.

#### 6.1.4 Overlapping

During the process of combining scripts, the semantic theory will occasionally encounter stretches of text that are compatible with more than one “reading,” i.e., would fit more than one script; for instance, imagine a text describing someone getting up, fixing breakfast, leaving the house, etc. These events could fit the script for GO TO WORK but also for GO ON A FISHING TRIP—hence the stretch of text would be compatible with both scripts.

The “doctor’s wife joke” (see below) will provide a more detailed example. It should be noted that the between the two scripts may be partial or total. If the is total, the text in its entirety is compatible with both scripts; if the is partial, some parts of the text, or some details, will not be compatible with one or the other script. This distinction is essentially similar to Guiraud’s (1976) coexistence of senses (see ch. 3) in puns.

Raskin also introduces the “script-switch” trigger, i.e., the element of the text that causes the passage from the first to the second script actualized in the text. This element is the analog of the “disjunctive” in the IDM (ch. 2), although it is not exactly equivalent to it since the script-switch trigger is not opposed to a “connector” element.

#### 6.1.5 Oppositeness

The overlapping of two scripts is not necessarily a cause of humor *per se*. Ambiguous, metaphorical, figurative, allegorical, mythical, allusive and obscure texts present overlapping scripts, but they are not necessarily (if at all) funny (see table (6.1)).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Texts with non-overlapping scripts may be tragic if the various scripts that occur in them are opposed (e.g., good man vs. incestuous patricide, in Oedipus) but do not :

Table 6.1: Combinations of Script Overlap and Oppositeness

scripts	opposed	non-opposed
overlapping	humor	metaphor, allegory, figurative, mythical, allusive, obscure
non-overlapping	conflict (possibly tragic)	plain narrative

This is because the second necessary and sufficient condition in the SSTH is not fulfilled in these non-humorous texts. The second condition of the SSTH calls for the two scripts that in the text to be “opposed” in a technical sense to be defined below. Raskin analyzes about 32 jokes (Raskin 1985: 107-110) and finds that the pairs of scripts are all in a relationship of opposition.

The script oppositions fall into three classes: actual vs. non-actual, normal vs. abnormal, and possible vs. impossible. The three classes are all instances of a basic opposition between real and unreal situations in the texts.

These three classes of oppositions are then instantiated in more concrete oppositions. Raskin lists five of the most common oppositions: good/bad, life/death, obscene/non-obscene, money/no-money, and high/low stature (Raskin 1985: 113-114; 127). These oppositions are seen as “essential to human life” (Raskin 1985: 113); they certainly are very basic, but the difference in level of abstraction between the three basic types of opposition and the five instantiations should be noted. While it is unlikely that any culture would present a different list of three types of basic opposition, it is perfectly likely that different cultures would show quite a different type of lower-level instantiation. For instance, the opposition “excrement/non-excrement,” basic to much humor up to very recently and common in many non-western cultures (see Douglas 1968) is missing from the five oppositions. Chlopicki (1987) presents a list of low-level oppositions that is slightly different from Raskin’s

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instead the scripts follow each other. First Oedipus is a good man, then he is an incestuous patricide, and Aeschylus makes no attempt at having both scripts be confused in the mind of the spectators (cf. Eco (1981)). Texts in which scripts do not and are compatible with each other are “normal” uneventful narratives.

(see below).

Thus, if a text is compatible fully or in part with two scripts, and the two scripts happen to be opposed to each other, then, and only then, will the text be classified as “funny” by the SSTH. Ideally, the SSTH’s predictions will match the speakers’ and the theory will be confirmed. Alternatively, someone will come up with a text that either fulfills both requirements, and yet is not funny, or that is funny but does not meet either or both of the requirements; in this case the theory will have been falsified. This is a falsificationist view of the procedure for confirming or disproving a theory. It is a sound, if slightly old-fashioned, procedure. In real life, however, attempts at proving or disproving a theory are more complex (as Kuhn (1962) pointed out). Some apparent counterexamples will be discussed below; some “real” counterexamples will also be discussed, but it will be shown that there is no need to reject the theory in its entirety because some partial expansion of the theory can accommodate new facts.

### 6.1.6 Non-Bona-Fide Communication Mode

An important aspect of the SSTH is its “pragmatic” component. Raskin (1985) observed that jokes seem to violate Grice’s maxims (Grice 1975, 1990). A detailed description of how this is achieved and its consequences for communication will be found in ch. 9. The idea of humor as a violation of the maxims was not a novelty since Grice himself had used a humorous example (and see ch. 9). Raskin noted, however, that jokes seem to follow a different set of maxims—that is, humorous discourse is not a simple negation of serious communication, but presents a cooperative principle peculiar to itself. Raskin presented<sup>6</sup> four maxims of the *non-bona-fide* (NBF) communication mode of joke telling—the mode of communication of humor:

1. Maxim of Quantity: Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke;
2. Maxim of Quality: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke;

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<sup>6</sup>Raskin dismisses his own maxims for NBF communication as trivial; however, a positive application is sketched in ch. 9. Raskin himself reapprached the problem more seriously in the 1990s—see for instance Raskin 1992.

3. Maxim of Relation: Say only what is relevant to the joke;
4. Maxim of Manner: Tell the joke efficiently. (Raskin 1985: 103)

It is important to note that all jokes belong to the NBF communication mode without exception, although they may carry *bona-fide* (BF) information (see below). The most important consequence of this fact is that speakers are not committed to the truth of what they say in the NBF mode. Other consequences will be investigated in ch. 9.

### 6.1.7 The Doctor's Wife Joke

Although the following joke was analyzed in detail by Raskin (1985: 117-127) as a demonstration of the SSTH, it will be presented here as an aid in understanding how the SSTH works.

- (75) "Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper.  
 "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in."

The first step of the analysis is the listing of all the senses of the words in the text (in other words, of all the scripts activated by the text). The second step is the activation of the combinatorial rules that will combine the various scripts according to compatibility (i.e., they will look for words that evoke the same script) and to syntactic and subcategorization rules, ignored here for simplicity. For example, among the various scripts evoked by the word "is" (from the jokes's first sentence) there is a SPATIAL script; among the scripts evoked by "at" there is also a SPATIAL script. Because the two words have the SPATIAL script in common, the combinatorial rules will choose this script as their preferred reading and continue the analysis. The next logical step, which takes place at the same time as the combination of scripts, is the triggering of inferences. The reader infers that the second line is meant as an answer to the previous question, that the speaker of the first line does not know the answer to the question, and that he/she is interested in knowing the answer to the question. By recursively applying the combinatorial rules and the inferencing mechanisms, an interpretation of the entire text is arrived at.

A semantic reading of the joke can be loosely paraphrased as "Someone who was previously treated for some illness inquires about the presence of a

doctor at the doctor's place of residence, with the purpose of being treated for a disease which manifests itself by a whispering voice. The doctor's wife (who is young and pretty) answers (whispering, as the patient) that the doctor is not at home, and invites the inquirer to enter in the house."

The hearer is faced with a puzzle: if the purpose of the patient's inquiry is the desire to be treated for his disease, why is the doctor's wife asking him in anyway, since the doctor is not there and the script for DOCTOR requires physical proximity for examination and treatment of the illness? This situation leads the reader to switch to the NBF mode and to start looking for a "competing script" (Raskin 1985: 125), i.e., an alternative interpretation of the story.

The reader will then backtrack and reevaluate the text. The gender of the doctor's wife and her description will be taken into account, as well as the absence of the doctor/husband. This will allow the activation of the LOVER script, which prescribes that an adulterous relationship be acted upon without knowledge of the legitimate spouse. In the light of the LOVER script, the behavior of the doctor's wife becomes meaningful, i.e., she is taking advantage of her husband's absence to have a secret meeting with another man. The text is thus found to be compatible almost entirely with two scripts (DOCTOR, LOVER), and the scripts are opposed on the SEX/NO SEX basis. Hence, it fulfills both requirements of the SSTH and is evaluated as humorous.

### 6.1.8 Evaluation

An evaluation of the SSTH is both a simple and complex matter. On the one hand, since it is the first (and only) formal, full-fledged application of a coherent theory of semantics to humor, the SSTH has no term of comparison. The other theories considered in this book are all either partial elaborations or intuitions of a direction of research, and their analyses and proposals are little more than anecdotal. This is not to say that they are not interesting and valuable, but as in the case of the IDM (ch. 2), it is necessary to formalize the writers' intuitions before doing actual research within the framework. The SSTH is a formal theory that makes predictions and can be tested against "hard facts;" therefore, there is little contention that the SSTH is the most powerful epistemologically and promising theory available in the field of linguistic-based humor research.

On the other hand, this does not make the SSTH perfect. Its most evident limitation is that it was developed using jokes as its primary source of materials, and this limitation becomes evident when an attempt is made to apply it to other types of text. The issues concerning the application of the SSTH to humorous texts other than jokes will be taken up below in more detail. Another limitation comes from the fact that the SSTH is (only) a semantic theory, and this downplays any not-strictly-semantic phenomena of the joke. Again, the issues connected to this aspect of the SSTH will be taken up below.

It should also be borne in mind that the SSTH was not presented as the “final word” on linguistics-based humor research. Raskin was fully aware that more research was in order, and indeed since the publication of Raskin (1985) and the growing popularity of the SSTH, he has been much more critical of it than others. The next section will review other aspects of Raskin’s research on humor, post-SSTH.

## 6.2 The Reception of the SSTH

Since its earliest presentation (Raskin 1979), the SSTH has attracted steady interest from the academic community. A survey of the proceedings of the WHIMSY conferences, held at Arizona State U. from 1982 to 1987, reveals that a growing number of authors quote Raskin’s theory directly. Raskin (1985) has been reviewed in several journals (e.g., by Hudson 1985, Davies 1986, Marino 1987, Giora 1988), and is discussed in numerous articles and books. The SSTH seems to have been accepted within the fields of sociology-based humor research (e.g., Mulkay 1988, Davies 1990), linguistics-based humor research, and to a smaller extent in literary criticism. The international recognition of the SSTH, already good, as scholars from three continents have used it, is likely to increase, since the publication of Raskin (1991 and in press) in linguistic encyclopedias.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Graesser et al. (1989) present some experimental data that they claim “provide no support” for the SSTH (Graesser et al. 1989: 161). However, the significance of their experiments is invalidated by their apparent misunderstanding of the SSTH. Specifically, accessibility of scripts and funniness are not necessarily correlated (*contra* Graesser et al. (1989: 158), neither the number of scripts accessed is limited by the pragmatic success of a joke, or any other concern other than lexical or inferential activation (*contra* Graesser

In the following sections, some applications of the SSTH to various fields presented in thesis form (and hence relatively inaccessible) will be discussed; the SSTH has been used in the analysis of short stories (Chlopicki 1987), humorous metaphors (Morrisey 1989), the teaching of ESL (Vega 1989) and sociolinguistic approaches to bilingualism (Idar 1984). An application to humorous stereotypes figures prominently among the theses influenced by Raskin's theory, but the results have been published (Zhao 1988a, 1988b, 1989) and hence a detailed discussion is not necessary here.

### 6.2.1 Applications to Different Languages

Since its inception, the SSTH has been applied to various languages and cultures, always proving useful, thus reinforcing its universalist attitude, i.e., that the mechanisms of humor are universal and transcultural (see Attardo in press for a detailed discussion). Raskin (1985) applies the SSTH to some Russian texts; Chlopicki (1987) analyzes Polish short stories (see below), and Zhao (1988) Chinese cartoons. Schwerdtfeger (1986) applies the SSTH to Afrikaans humor and jokes, with emphasis on the role of ambiguity. Gallob (1987, 1988) studies humor in Mauritius.<sup>8</sup> Gallob (1988: 153-154) found that the SSTH could be applied to Mauritian texts without problems. Her interesting conclusion is however marred by some terminological problems and possibly by some misunderstanding of the SSTH itself. The claim that the SSTH is refuted by Tamil (a Dravidian language) (Ferro-Luzzi 1990) has been shown to be incorrect in ch. 3.

### 6.2.2 The First Expansion of the SSTH

Chlopicki's (1987) basic idea is very straightforward: the SSTH is a theory of jokes, but some of its wording presents it as a theory of all humorous texts. Chlopicki takes it to be a theory of any humorous text and proceeds to show how the SSTH can handle several Polish humorous short stories.

Chlopicki finds that a direct application of the SSTH to the short stories is possible; he sees the problem of applying the SSTH to other types of texts

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et al. (1989: 157).

<sup>8</sup>As an anthropological work, it falls outside of the boundaries of this book; however, it is considered here because it is a direct application of the SSTH to anthropological description.

as mainly an issue of length, thus, in a sense, begging the question of whether an application is possible. Chlopicki's stand is that his work is an extension of the SSTH, but the broadening of the SSTH is limited to a longer list of basic binary oppositions, emphasis on the "shadow opposition," and the introduction of the "dissipated trigger," which are discussed below.

Chlopicki's methodology is as follows. First, all the possible script oppositions in the text are identified. This is an important step, since ordinary jokes usually have only one opposition, but in some cases up to two or three. With short stories, the analyst is faced with many more script oppositions (66, in Chlopicki's first example). Analysis of the short stories reveals some scripts that extend through several sentences and even through the entire text (the "main scripts"). The "shadow oppositions" are the deeper script oppositions, whose scope encompasses the entire text and which are responsible for the overall perception of humor, rather than for the individual surface oppositions (Chlopicki 1987: 19). These scripts are found to with other scripts with which they bear relations of opposition. Hence, Chlopicki's claim that the SSTH has been successfully applied to short stories.

This methodology of analysis is powerful and yields insightful generalizations. Chlopicki (1987) shows that the short stories he analyzes can be reduced to a set of binary script-oppositions, just as the SSTH predicts. Moreover, the methodology also has heuristic potential: an interesting result that Chlopicki's analysis yields is that the list of basic types of script oppositions will have to be revised (as Raskin (1985) had already suggested) on the basis of the empirical findings of the analyses of texts. This is not a small feat in light of the declared universalist approach of the SSTH. The three new oppositions uncovered by Chlopicki are: ABSENCE/PRESENCE, NECESSARY/UNNECESSARY, and MUCH/LITTLE (Chlopicki 1987: 18).

The methodology adopted in Chlopicki (1987) is a paradigmatic textual analysis, i.e., a textual analysis that reduces the plot of a narrative to a set of (often binary) oppositions (see ch. 2), thereby "flattening" it into paradigmatic oppositions. As such, it has its drawbacks. Namely, it obliterates the differences among texts that can all be reduced to the same set of binary oppositions; for example, nobody would claim that a short story is equivalent in every way to a joke, yet, according to Chlopicki's extension of the SSTH, they can both be described in almost the same terms.

In Chlopicki's analysis, the differences between jokes and short stories are marginal. There are some quantitative differences (the number of script

oppositions in the text), but otherwise the same mechanisms are at play. The introduction of the dissipated trigger, i.e., “not any single word, but the formulation of the whole phrase or two, or even the whole text of the joke is responsible for causing the script ” (Chlopicki 1987: 14) does not introduce any significant difference, since alliterative puns also present “dissipated” disjunctors (cf. 3.3.2). Neither does the emphasis on the shadow oppositions, which were already present in Raskin’s formulation of the SSTH, confirm the postulated substantial identity between jokes and humorous short stories since they are both analyzed as reduced to oppositions between pairs of (shadow) scripts.

A more detailed discussion of these issues will be found in section 6.4.4 as well as in Attardo and Raskin (forthcoming).

### 6.2.3 Application of the SSTH to ESL

The connections between humor and teaching are numerous (e.g. Nilsen 1978). The use of humor in the classroom has been shown (e.g., Ziv 1979) to increase ease of learning and to be a good pedagogical resource overall (Gentilhomme 1992). The use of humorous texts for teaching foreign languages has been suggested, both for the positive associations that humor carries and for the linguistic materials it offers in itself (Monnot and Kite (1971), Trachtenberg (1979), Calvet (ed.) (1980)<sup>9</sup>, Alexander (1981), Mason (1981), Vittoz Canuto (1983: 131-139), Borgomano (1983), Brun and Brunet (1984), Martin (1988), Laurian (1992)). Deneire (forthcoming) has presented some of the problematic aspects of using humor in the classroom.

Vega (1989) provides a straightforward application of the SSTH to the field of the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL). Her main hypothesis is that the capacity of making and understanding humor in L2 is part of communicative competence (CC) at large, and so should be taught as such. In itself the claim is not controversial since by definition CC encompasses any and all forms of communication, and so humor. The issues involved will be examined below.

<sup>9</sup>A special issue of *Le français dans le monde* (a journal dedicated to the teaching of French) with several articles and a small bibliography of sources on the teaching of French with humor.

### **What Scripts Are Needed to Process a Joke?**

Given that humor processing is part of CC, it follows that the knowledge necessary to process humor in L2 should be taught; therefore it is necessary to define exactly what knowledge is necessary to a non-native speaker to process humor in L2. Consider a Watergate joke as an example. Clearly, in order to understand the references to Watergate, illegal taping, etc. one has to possess the correct scripts, and in general a good chunk of knowledge shared by a vast majority of Americans. Consider, further, a serious discussion of the influences of the Watergate affair on American politics. The same knowledge that was necessary to process the Watergate joke is necessary to process a serious reference to the issue. It follows that the knowledge necessary to process jokes is not necessarily limited to jokes themselves, and that as a result the student will obtain the knowledge eventually either by means of serious discussion or by hearing jokes about it (see Zhao (1988)), and so no specific effort seems to be necessary to acquire "humorous knowledge."

### **Is There Any Special Humorous Knowledge?**

One may argue that there are some special scripts that are used exclusively within humorous discourse—for example, the script that falsely associates stupidity with the Polish American ethnic group (see Raskin (1985: ch. 5)). An argument may be advanced then that the humor-specific knowledge of those mythical scripts must be taught for the speaker to achieve competence in humor processing in L2.

There appear to exist some mythical scripts that seem to be used exclusively in humor (the sexy French, the lazy and cowardly Italians, the militaristic Germans, the stingy and crafty Jews, etc.); however, sociological research (Davies (1990), and references therein) has shown that most of these scripts are not completely mythical. This does not mean that they are "real" but that they are produced by socio-economical situations that shape culture and are paralleled by similar non-humorous beliefs, at least in some strata of the population. Interestingly, some of these scripts "linger on" even after the situations that produced the scripts have disappeared (Davies 1991b). In other words, there are few if any scripts without a non-humorous counterpart, so it does not appear to be necessary to teach these scripts specifically because they will be acquired as part of CC at large, as in the Watergate

example above.

### **Humor Techniques**

The mechanisms of humor are universal (see above). Obviously, then, it will not be necessary to teach non-native speakers how to process script oppositions and s. Different cultures may have different settings in which joking is considered appropriate, however. For example, American priests often use humor during their sermons, a practice almost completely unknown to Italian priests. Clearly, a non-native student will have to learn what social settings are considered appropriate for humor in the groups that speak L2, as well as what subject matter is considered appropriate for humor (sexual topics may be banned in mixed company, but acceptable among peers of the same sex, etc.).

Finally, the types of humorous texts that circulate may be different than those of L1; for example, “knock-knock” jokes are completely unknown in Italy and the francophone countries. The learner will have to become accustomed to the L2 “genres” of humor, if he/she is to achieve complete CC.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, it seems that there are some specific areas of “humor competence” that must be taught to non-native speakers. These will concern mostly what scripts are available in a given culture for humorous purposes, which scripts are unavailable (tabooed), and in which settings humor is considered appropriate.

From the above considerations, it follows that Vega’s idea of having humor as a fifth competence, besides the others that make up CC, may be slightly overstating the importance and the value of the problem at stake, but the main idea is sound and worth pursuing.

### **6.2.4 The Communicative Function of Jokes**

The main idea behind Zhao (1987a-b, 1988), perhaps the most often quoted work by a student of Raskin’s, is deceptively simple: jokes, notwithstanding their NBF quality can, under certain circumstances, convey BF information.

Jokes may convey BF information in two ways: either by presupposing the knowledge of some cultural script the hearer is unaware of and that he/she can reconstruct on the basis of the exposure to the joke, or by presupposing the knowledge of some stereotypical script (such as the association of dumbness and the Polish ethnic group), which is part of the mythical scripts of the teller but not of the hearer, and once more, can be reconstructed from exposure to the joke.

The importance of these observations will be more clear in the discussion of jokes in context in ch. 10.

### **6.3 Raskin's Follow-Ups (1985 – 1993)**

After the publication of Raskin (1985), he addressed some issues that the SSTH had neglected or not discussed thoroughly in more detail. This section will examine these follow-up studies, divided into six areas of interest:

1. the explanatory power of the SSTH;
2. sophisticated humor;
3. methodological issues of the application of linguistics to humor research;
4. computational linguistics and humor;
5. Jewish humor; and
6. historiography of humor research.

The revision of the SSTH in Attardo and Raskin (1991) is discussed separately in section 6.4.4. Raskin's latest research into the relations between the sense of humor and truth (1992-1993) is outside the scope of this book.

#### **6.3.1 On the Power of the SSTH**

The SSTH was explicit in stating that it could not account for quality differences in humor. For the SSTH, a good joke and a bad one were indistinguishable. Raskin (1985b) takes the argument further by claiming that not

only does linguistics not account for the differences between good and bad jokes, but that it cannot in principle do so.

The argument rests on an analogy with another application of linguistics, namely the teaching of composition. In Raskin and Weiser (1987), the former stresses repeatedly that linguistics cannot distinguish between a good and a bad sentence, but only between a well-formed and a non-well-formed one.

Naturally, the above claim is true, and the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive linguistics should never be too far from one's mind. Nevertheless, this author feels that Raskin may be shortchanging the resources of linguistics in this particular case, and there are indications that he is softening on this issue as well.

It may be possible to devise a metric for the evaluation of the quality of jokes, based on structural considerations rather than on social/personal taste. In chapters 2 and 3, the two functions of connection (justifying the passage from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ ) and disjunction (causing the passage from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ ) have been presented in some detail. Guiraud (1976) proposed four possible cases based on the distinction of whether one of the two senses is introduced arbitrarily (no justification), both senses can coexist in the text, or any of the two supersedes the other (see ch. 3). On the basis of this taxonomy, it is possible to hypothesize that jokes in which both senses can coexist are the best since the function of connection is maximally operative with the intermediate cases coming next (either sense superseding the other), and the unjustified jokes as the worst. In a joke such as the cookie pun (54), there is no reason given for the passage from the first to the second sense. In the Bassompierre joke (57) looking for a passage is perfectly logical in both scripts (READING and ESCAPING); thus, the Bassompierre pun is "better" than the cookie pun.

Clearly, this hypothesis would have to be validated with empirical research, even if it seems hard to design an experimental setting in which other, non-structural, issues in the text of the jokes would not bias the informants. Moreover, other aspects of jokes are involved in their evaluation, specifically their degree of sophistication (see below).

Marino (1988) reaches a conclusion similar to the hypothesis above on the possibility of passing value judgements on puns (a subtype of jokes, for SSTH) on the basis of the relationships between the scripts evoked by the puns and the context in which they occur.

In sum, this author's opinion is that the evaluation of the quality of jokes

is a realistic goal for the linguistic analysis of humor, albeit a distant one that will require extensive research.

### 6.3.2 Sophisticated Humor

One of the most important issues that the SSTH faces is the handling of sophisticated humor. Sophistication is a complex phenomenon. Raskin (1990a) distinguishes between two types of sophistication: limited-access, or allusive<sup>10</sup> knowledge, and complex processing. The SSTH can handle the limited-access type of sophistication in a straightforward manner. For instance, this author's individual scripts<sup>11</sup> specify that the computer terminal on which this text was written is a WYSE 75. A few people share this knowledge, and if anyone were to construct a joke (say, "He's been sitting in front of his terminal for days, but he hasn't gotten any wyser") this would undoubtedly be a sophisticated joke, although this type of sophistication is obviously uninteresting (and many would probably object to this being sophistication at all). For the SSTH, the above joke presents no problem whatsoever, provided that the combinatorial rules are fed the appropriately specific personal scripts for "terminal."

On the other hand, sophisticated humor that requires complex logical processing, even if the information processed is straightforward and common, such as second-degree jokes (Attardo 1988), jokes involving self-contradiction, or jokes that require the reconstruction of several inferential steps, are of much more interest for the SSTH.

### 6.3.3 Methodological Issues

The metatheoretical aspects of the SSTH have consistently been at the center of Raskin's attention, especially the theory of the application of linguistics to the field of humor (see Raskin (1985: 51-53; 1987: 14-16); etc.). Basically Raskin distinguishes between two types of applications of a discipline to a field: the application of a discipline to any given field is fruitful if it helps to

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<sup>10</sup>Allusive knowledge is perceived as a sign of sophistication when the knowledge is privileged or elitist, but the mechanisms it uses are the same for any kind of "private" information.

<sup>11</sup>A type of restricted script, limited to one speaker.

solve some of the problems of the field, whereas it is sterile if its only results are the demonstration of the applicability of the discipline to the field.

As an example, one may collect a corpus of jokes and analyze the frequencies of the various words that occur in it. The statistical and lexicographic tools to do so exist and are well-tested, and the application would certainly be successful. But what could the humor researcher learn from knowing that the article "the" would be the most frequent word occurring in the corpus? Even with a more sophisticated application that would reveal, say, that the words "Pole" and "light bulb" occur with higher than usual frequencies, interest from the point of view of humor theory would be very small. On the other hand, a fruitful application, such as the SSTH, starts from the question, central to humor research, but not to linguistics, "What is it that makes a text funny?" and tries to provide an answer using the methodologies and tools offered by linguistics.<sup>12</sup>

These metatheoretical issues found a direct application in the issue surrounding so-called "linguistic humor." Traditionally, the few applications of linguistics to humor had been limited to the often sophisticated analysis (see ch. 3) of puns and pun-like phenomena. On the basis of his metatheoretical positions on theory-application, Raskin (1987) convincingly argued, that limiting the attention of linguistics-based humor research to the category of "linguistic humor" is misleading. The argument is twofold: a) puns are not different from non-punning humor insofar that they come from the overlapping of two opposed scripts, and b) the SSTH can analyze non-punning humor fruitfully, and so it would be limiting (to say the least) to analyze only puns. Raskin's position is forcefully presented, perhaps too much so, because it may have led to the interpretation that he thought that there was no difference *at all* between punning and non-punning humor. Raskin (1991) corrected this impression by noting that punning humor is a legitimate category of linguistic humor research, just a very narrow one and perhaps not the most interesting or challenging for the theory.

Interestingly, the position that Raskin (1987) criticized was a case of "unsound" application of linguistics to humor research: the fact that linguistics has good tools for describing the sources of ambiguity used in punning humor

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<sup>12</sup>It should be noted that this does not mean that linguistics is better than lexicography, merely that the latter does not provide the type of answers that are interesting in humor research. If the application were different, say a program to check spelling, the roles would be inverted.

is not an automatic warranty that the results of such a classification will be interesting or will solve any problem in humor research, especially when no profound question about humor is explored in the process. Needless to say, this does not mean that one should not attempt such a classification, but simply that one should not expect solutions from this type of research, nor that one should think, as unfortunately has been the case, that this is the *only* type of linguistic humor research.

### 6.3.4 Computational Linguistics and Humor

In Raskin (1988) and in a few unpublished conference papers, Raskin has explored the feasibility of the synthesis and/or analysis of humor by computers. Given the state-of-the-art of both the linguistic analysis of humor and of computational linguistics, a direct application of the latter to the former which would yield a natural language processing system capable of understanding and producing humorous texts is currently impossible.

By using “templates” (Raskin 1985: 186-187), or the form

(76) How many ... does it take to ...? ..., one to ... and ... to ....

in which the reader will have recognized the standard light bulb joke and providing a reasonably complex dictionary of scripts for the specific purpose of generating jokes, it is possible to obtain machine-generated jokes. The drawbacks of this approach are obvious: first and foremost, it does not allow for the production of original joke types, nor does it provide any real “understanding” algorithm for the jokes. Recent research on the organization of the surface text of jokes (see ch. 2) may yield interesting suggestions for the generation of jokes, but the field is far from maturity. In principle, given that the SSTH is a formal theory, if one were to provide the computer with a sufficiently large database of scripts and of their relations (i.e., which scripts are available for humor, or in other words, are opposed), the implementation of a joke-producing system would be straightforward. Needless to say, the issues of appropriateness (deciding when to use a joke, rather than give a serious response) would have to be addressed, as well as many others. See Ephratt (1990) for an application of the SSTH in the context of algorithm building for joke resolution. A broader discussion of humor and computers in the GTVH’s framework (the SSTH’s revision, see below) will be found in

Raskin and Attardo (1993). On humor and computers see also Dyer et al. (1987).

### 6.3.5 Jewish Humor

The SSTH was applied to three large sets of materials: sexual, political and ethnic jokes, with a particular emphasis on Jewish jokes. Raskin defined a Jewish joke as a joke which used a specifically Jewish script to establish the script opposition, as opposed to a joke which did not specifically require a Jewish script to establish the script opposition, but presents in the text references to Jewish characters or customs. A more detailed presentation of what types of scripts qualify as Jewish will be found in Raskin (1989). This type of opposition between “real” ethnic humor (humor that employs a specifically ethnic script for the script opposition) and “false” ethnic humor (jokes built around a script opposition that could be applied to any group, and is then applied to a specific ethnic group), is further developed in the GTVH’s “target” knowledge resource (see below).

### 6.3.6 Historiography of Humor Research

In part due to Raskin’s prominent position in the field of humor research, and in part due to his role as editor of the journal *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, Raskin has more than once presented considerations of an historical and methodological nature on the current status and perspectives of interdisciplinary humor research. Raskin (1988b) and (1990) are considerations on the state of humor research at the beginning of the publication of *HUMOR* and at the beginning of its third year, respectively. Raskin (1987b, 50-52) discusses the interdisciplinary field in more detail. On the recent history of humor research see also Mintz (1988), Apte (1988), Ziv (1988: 211-213) and, in general, the proceedings of the WHIMSY conferences edited by Don Nilsen (Nilsen 1983-1988).

## 6.4 The Revision of the SSTH

A number of concerns left unanswered, or only partially answered, by the SSTH has led to its revision. The following sections will review these issues.

### 6.4.1 Is There Verbal Humor?

The SSTH is a semantic theory of humor, and as such, it is concerned exclusively with the opposition and overlapping of two scripts, which are purely semantic phenomena. Raskin (1985 and especially 1987) convincingly showed, as seen above, that for the SSTH, verbal (puns) and referential humor involve the same mechanisms; but, if one tries to distinguish between verbal and referential humor, one must come to the conclusion that, according to the SSTH, the two are indistinguishable, precisely because the two share the same mechanisms. Clearly, this is a problem since the two phenomena “behave” differently in certain situations (e.g., puns cannot be translated while non-punning humor can (see ch. 3)), and the SSTH cannot directly explain this fact.

### 6.4.2 Joke Similarity

According to the SSTH, all jokes are essentially the same since they are all based on oppositions between scripts, and all oppositions can be reduced to either the three first-level pairs of opposed scripts (e.g., REAL/UNREAL) or to the five second-level pairs (e.g., SEX/NO-SEX; see above); however, if one contrasts pairs of jokes such as:

- (77) How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five, one to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he’s standing on. (Freedman and Hoffman 1980)

and

- (78) The number of Pollacks needed to screw in a light bulb? Five – one holds the bulb and four turn the table. (Clements 1969: 22)

one immediately notices that (77) is considerably more similar to (78) than, say, (79):

- (79) How many Poles does it take to wash a car? Two. One to hold the sponge and one to move the car back and forth.

although (77) and (79) share the same script opposition (REAL/UNREAL), and activate the same DUMB script.

The SSTH had no direct way to account for these differences in perceived similarity across jokes.

### 6.4.3 Application to Types of Texts Other Than the Joke

As pointed out above, the SSTH was developed using jokes as material, and it is intended to apply to jokes. Jokes however are only a limited subset of the types of joke-carrying texts that exist. The application of the SSTH to text types other than jokes is not unproblematic. Basically, two possible approaches can be pursued. The first approach may be called the “expansionist” approach and is based on the idea of applying the SSTH “as is” to other types of texts. The other approach can be labelled “revisionist” and is based on the idea that the SSTH needs to be revised in order to apply to humorous text types other than jokes. The next two subsections will deal with each approach.

#### The Expansionist Approach

The expansionist attitude towards the SSTH has been so far the most appealing to scholars. Chlopicki (1987), Gaskill (1988), Kolek (1989), Dixon (1989), and Marino (1989) can all be linked to this tendency.

The expansionist approach is based on the postulation of an essential deep identity between jokes and other forms of humorous narrative.<sup>13</sup> This approach is not unprecedented in the literature (e.g., Jolles 1965). As seen above, Chlopicki’s (1987) analysis of short stories reveals sets of script oppositions that are organized according to pairs (which in part are those proposed by Raskin (1985) and in part are added to handle the new texts, a development explicitly contemplated by Raskin). Dixon (1989) shows how Garrison Keillor’s *Lake Woebegone Days* humor can be reduced to one script opposition. Gaskill analyses early American literary texts in the same way.

The longer texts (short stories) are then reduced to complex cases of jokes. Whereas the joke has one script opposition, short stories have several. To be specific, the oppositions that are found in short stories, given the size of the texts, will tend to be macro-scripts (see above), but this is not a problem for the SSTH in principle. Practically, there may be problems in handling these “larger” scripts since the idea of script originates within lexical analysis,

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<sup>13</sup>Marino (1988), a successful application of the SSTH to puns, can be taken as the demonstration that the expansion of the SSTH to other types of texts is possible, although it can be argued that puns already fell within the realm of the SSTH.

but it is reasonable to assume that these problems may be solved without important changes to the SSTH. An example of a text that can be handled by the expansionist approach (Poe's *The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fethers*) is included in ch. 8.

### The Revisionist Approach

The revisionist position consists of taking the SSTH as a theory of the text-type "joke" and devising the tools necessary to handle those features that characterize texts other than jokes. The drawbacks of this approach are obvious: the SSTH does not provide any indication as to how these tools should be constructed, and, for that matter, what these tools should consist of or even handle. The positive aspects of the revisionist approach is that the concept of script can be left unchanged because there is no need to broaden its scope to handle new phenomena. Another positive aspect of the revisionist approach is that it is open-ended, and so new tools may be added as the need arises.

This author first presented the revisionist approach in Attardo (1988d), but this approach has been the object of little debate until Attardo and Raskin (1991), see below. It should be noted that Raskin (1985) explicitly mentions the possibility of modifications, in the revisionist direction, to the SSTH.

#### 6.4.4 The GTVH

In response to the above issues, and in part also as a natural development of Raskin's and this author's own research (especially Attardo 1987, 1988) a "revision" of the SSTH was presented in Attardo and Raskin (1991). The revised version of the SSTH is called the "General Theory of Verbal Humor" (GTVH) to emphasize the fact that it is supposed to account, in principle, for any type of humorous text.

Revision of the SSTH consisted mostly of broadening its scope. Whereas the SSTH was a "semantic" theory of humor, the GTVH is a linguistic theory "at large"—that is, it includes other areas of linguistics as well, including, most notably, textual linguistics, the theory of narrativity, and pragmatics. These broadenings are achieved by the introduction of five other Knowledge Resources (KR), that must be tapped into when generating a joke, in addition

to the script opposition from the SSTH. The KRs are the script opposition (SO), the logical mechanism (LM), the target (TA), the narrative strategy (NS), the language (LA), and the situation (SI). The GTVH also incorporates the idea of “joke similarity” and dedicates a great deal of effort to establishing the concept formally.

The following sections will introduce the six KRs, and then the concept of joke similarity will be discussed in detail. A more complete exposition of the GTVH, still partially under development, especially concerning empirical verification of its claims, will be available in Attardo and Raskin (forthcoming) (see also Ruch *et al.* (1993)).

### The KRs: Language (LA)

This KR contains all the information necessary for the verbalization of a text. It is responsible for the exact wording of the text and for the placement of the functional elements that constitute it.

The concept of paraphrase is essential for understanding the type of variation that this KR accounts for: as any sentence can be recast in a different wording (that is, using synonyms, other syntactic constructions, etc.), any joke can be worded in a (very large) number of ways without changes in its semantic content; for example, a joke like (77) can be paraphrased as (78), or in any other way that will preserve the meaning intact.

The above claim applies also to interlingual translation (see 1.3.1 for a discussion of translation as a heuristic tool in humor). Jokes based on the *signifiant* (puns) are a (marginal) exception. A joke such as (1) (the “toilettes” joke) can be paraphrased, with the exception of the connector (ch. 3). As discussed in ch. 3, the exact wording of the punch line of verbal humor is extremely important because it is necessary for the verbal element to be ambiguous and to connect the two opposed senses in the text. Otherwise, verbal and referential jokes behave identically in respect to this KR.

Another important aspect of the LA KR is that it is responsible for the position of the punch line. The final position of the punch line is essential, both because of the functional organization of the information in the text (ch. 3) and because of the distribution of the implicit information of the text (ch. 9).

**The KRs: Narrative Strategy (NS)**

The information in the NS KR accounts for the fact that any joke has to be cast in some form of narrative organization, either as a simple (framed)<sup>14</sup> narrative, as a dialogue (question and answer), as a (pseudo-)riddle, as an aside in conversation, etc. An exhaustive list of all possible narrative presentations is outside the scope of this book and is probably premature in a broader perspective; see, however, Attardo and Chabanne (1992) for a first approximation. A related, and unresolved, issue is whether all jokes are narratives. Attardo and Chabanne (1992) weakly imply a positive answer, but research on this issue is just beginning.

It may be argued that the NS is in fact a rephrasing of what is known in literary theory under the name "genre." This claim is either true but trivial, or false. Genres can be determined in two basic ways: either inductively, starting from a corpus of texts and grouping the texts according to clusters of features until all texts have been divided in a suitably small number of classes, or deductively, starting with a predetermined number of classes decided upon on logical, or philosophical, or intuitive grounds, and then assigning the texts to the classes. Naturally, in practice, all theories of genres are a (healthy) mixture of both approaches. Inductive approaches (e.g., Frye, see ch. 1) have never reached the level of detail necessary to classify jokes, and so have little to offer in this context. Deductive approaches to classify jokes have been proposed, but have little in common with what are currently known as genres (see Attardo and Raskin forthcoming). Not all deductive theories of genre would accommodate the joke as a full-fledged genre, but some do (e.g., Jolles 1965). These approaches lack the detail necessary to distinguish among jokes, however.

**The KRs: Target (TA)**

The target KR selects who is the "butt" of the joke. The information in the KR contains the names of groups or individuals with (humorous) stereotypes attached to each. Jokes that are not aggressive (i.e., do not ridicule someone or something) have an empty value for this parameter. The choice of the groups or individuals that fill the parameter are regulated by the type of stereotype and mythical scripts studied by Zhao (1987, 1988); for example,

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<sup>14</sup>See ch. 10 for narrative framing of jokes.

current and recent stereotypical targets for “stupid” jokes in America are the Poles and former Vice President Dan Quayle. An exhaustive review of these issues is to be found in Davies (1990). Variation in this parameter accounts for the difference between true and false ethnic humor (true ethnic humor cannot change its target; Raskin (1985)).

### The KRs: Situation (SI)

Any joke must be “about something” (changing a light bulb, crossing the road, playing golf, etc.). The situation of a joke can be thought of as the “props” of the joke: the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc. Any joke must have some situation, although some jokes will rely more on it, while others will almost entirely ignore it. Consider the following:

- (80) (= 16) “Can you write shorthand?”  
 “Yes, but it takes me longer.”

which presupposes a “writing shorthand” situation, but leaves it almost completely in the background (the only thing that matters is its speed). Consider now the “toilettes joke” (=1), in which an elaborate set-up is created (the two guests at a party, talking outside about the party). The set-up makes the ambiguity between the two meanings of *toilettes* plausible. The “toilettes” joke relies on the situation much more directly than the “stenographer” joke.

### The KRs: Logical Mechanism (LM)

The logical mechanism is the parameter that accounts for the way in which the two senses (scripts, isotopies,...) in the joke are brought together. LMs can range from straightforward juxtapositions, as in the tee-shirt slogan reading:

- (81) Gobi Desert Canoe Club

to more complex errors in reasoning, such as false analogies, Garden-Path phenomena, as in

- (82) (= 62) Madonna does not have it, the Pope has it but doesn’t use it, Bush has it short, and Gorbachev long. What is it?  
 Answer: a last name.

or figure-ground reversals, as in:

- (83) How many poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? 5. One to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's standing on.  
(light bulb: figure; body: ground)

The LM parameter bears strong resemblance to Hofstadter and Gabora's (1989) *ur-joke*. The LM parameter presupposes and embodies a "local" logic, i.e., a distorted, playful logic, that does not hold outside of the world of the joke. This issue is strongly connected with the NBF character of the joke. See also connections with the playful Cratylism of the speakers investigated in ch. 4.

### **The KRs: Script Opposition (SO)**

This parameter deals with the script opposition/ requirement presented in the SSTH. It should be noted that the SO is the most abstract (perhaps sharing this degree of abstractness with the LM) of all KRs, which accounts for the fact that the SSTH could collapse all 6 KRs onto this one (while basically ignoring all other five, with some exceptions, such as TA and LA). This also accounts for the feasibility of attempts such as Chlopicki's, which obliterate the specific NS of the short story and then proceed to identify the SO operating in the text. Any humorous text will present a SO; the specifics of its narrative organization, its social and historical instantiation, etc. will vary according to the place and time of its production.

### **6.4.5 The Joke, According to the GTVH**

From the point of view of the GTVH each joke can be viewed as a 6-tuple, specifying the instantiation of each parameter:

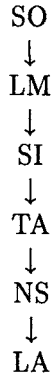
- (84) Joke: { LA, SI, NS, TA, SO, LM }

The GTVH presents itself as a mechanism capable of generating an infinite number of jokes by combining the various values that each parameter can take. It should be noted that these values are not binary. The values for the LM and the SO seem to be limited in number (see, respectively, Attardo (1988: 357), and Raskin (1985:127)), while the possibilities for the SI and LA are much more numerous.

Using this powerful mechanism, a taxonomy of jokes has been put forward (Raskin and Attardo (1991), Attardo and Raskin (forthcoming) which can assign a unique descriptor to any joke.

A highly technical aspect of the GTVH is the issue of the ordering of the KRs. Discussion would be out of place in this context; suffice it to say that various considerations of interdependence and/or independence among the KRs have allowed the determination of the hierarchical organization in table (6.2).

Table 6.2: Hierarchical Organization of the KRs



Parameters determine the parameters below themselves and are determined by those above themselves. “Determination” is to be intended as limiting or reducing the options available for the instantiation of the parameter; for example, the choice of the SO DUMB/SMART will reduce the options available to the generation in the choice of the TA (in North-America to Poles, etc.). A complete discussion of the issues surrounding the ordering of the KRs is to be found in Attardo and Raskin (1991).

#### 6.4.6 Advantages of the GTVH

This section will examine the solutions provided by the GTVH to the problematic aspects of the SSTH reviewed above.

## Verbal Humor

The GTVH does not run into the same problem about verbal humor (puns, and the like) as the SSTH does. Since it has a parameter for language, it can easily specify the required peculiarities of the text at this level (for a list, see ch. 3).

## Joke Similarity

The GTVH was developed in part as a direct response to the issues of establishing relationships of similarity among jokes; therefore, it comes as no surprise that the GTVH can handle the issues involved in determining the degree of similarity between any two jokes. Jokes are predicted to be more similar in direct proportion to the number of parameters they have in common, and conversely to differ more if the values of many parameters are different. The level of the parameter also comes into the picture because two jokes differing in only one parameter will be the more different, the higher the parameter is in the scale in table (6.2).

## Homology Between Jokes and Other Texts

Consider now the issue of the homology, or structural identity, between jokes and other types of humorous texts. For this purpose, only one of the parameters needs to be considered, i.e. NS (Narrative Strategy). The NS deals with the way in which the content of the text is organized. The introduction of this parameter in the GTVH is tantamount to a refusal of the hypothesis of the deep analogy of jokes and any humorous text. A joke is taken to be only one of the many narrative forms that a humorous text may assume; thus, the same humorous material can be presented as a joke, as an anecdote, as a short story, or as part of a novel. Each case will entail different formal requirements (for instance, it appears that jokes require a final position for the punch line whereas anecdotes do not (Oring 1989)).

Within the SSTH, the issue of handling types of texts other than the joke did not arise (or was not considered). The SSTH deals with one of the six parameters (SO) and downplays the other parameters. At the level of the parameter that the SSTH is concerned with, jokes and any other form of humor are indeed the same (that is, they require an overlapping and opposition of scripts). Seen from the point of view of the GTVH, the issue is

trivial since the NS parameter deals precisely with the narrative differences among texts, borrowing methodologies from narratology, folklore studies, and literary criticism.

The SSTH's claim that it is a theory of humor is correct because the SSTH does indeed deal with all forms of humor. It must be specified, however, that the SSTH is a *semantic* theory of humor. The GTVH instead is meant to account for the semantic aspect of humor as well as all its other linguistic (and non-linguistic) features.<sup>15</sup>

## Summary

While the GTVH is still under development, it is clear that some of the problematic issues that the SSTH was faced with have been resolved and some are in the process of being solved. Empirical evidence backing up the GTVH has begun to appear (Forabosco 1991), and further research in that direction is being actively pursued (Ruch et al., 1993). The first results show an overall confirmation of the hypotheses of the GTVH, although some KRs "do less well" than others. Obviously the GTVH is not the answer to all issues in the field; for instance, the problem of the analysis of longer texts remains largely unexplored. The introduction of the NS parameter is a step forward, but its instantiation remains to be studied in detail. A partial attempt in that direction will be presented in chapter 8.

The analysis of longer texts than jokes also entails some shifts in perspective on the objects of linguistic analysis in humor research. The following chapter will deal with the topic of register humor, quite important in view of the analysis of humorous non-joke texts.

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<sup>15</sup>This should not be confused with the true but uninteresting claim that all humor must be expressed in some semiotic system. The deep semantic core of jokes (and of any other type of humorous text) is determined by the fact that they can be defined in terms of semantic objects and functions (scripts, opposition, overlapping). To define the joke as a type of text, one has to resort to their perlocutionary goal to be perceived as funny by their audience. This is not the same as defining jokes as a genre. Genres are types of text that have received a critical/traditional sanction: they have been canonized. The situation is different with mere types of texts; a text-type can be defined for arbitrarily chosen purposes. This is not to say that jokes may not be considered a genre; just that the issue is different and somewhat unrelated to the one at hand.

## Chapter 7

# Register-based Humor

As discussed in the previous chapter, the SSTH is based on jokes and does not concern itself with other types of texts. This fact is limiting since jokes are obviously not the only type of humorous text. There are historical and even epistemological reasons for basing humor research on jokes (Attardo and Chabanne 1992), but when the progress in the field is such that this type of text has been analyzed in some detail and a sound understanding of the elementary mechanisms of a humorous text has been reached, it is possible to begin branching out and taking into account other forms of humorous texts.

Doing so entails two types of problems, humor specific and more generally linguistic. From the point of view of the linguistics of humor, very little is known about the mechanisms of texts more complex than a joke. From the point of view of general linguistics, after a promising start in the mid-seventies, text linguistics seems to be floundering. These factors encourage prudence; it is fair to say that linguistic approaches to humor-beyond-the-joke are in the infancy. The present chapter and the following one should be seen as tentative directions of development for humor-beyond-the-joke, rather than mature subfields.

Once attention shifts from the joke to other types of text, some humorous phenomena not previously considered come into focus. One such phenomenon, to which the present chapter is devoted, is "register humor," i.e., humor caused by an incongruity originating in the clash between two registers. Registers may be pre-theoretically defined as language varieties associated with a given situation, role, or social aspect of the speakers' experience. The phenomenon of register humor is certainly not unknown; literary humor,

for example, is often achieved by this means.

The linguistic research on register humor has been scarce, so it is necessary to outline the foundations of a script-based spreading activation model of register before actually showing how this model can be applied to humor. Thus, most of this chapter is in fact a discussion of register theory. The application of register theory to humor is developed both at the beginning of the chapter, in Bally's (1909) foregoing work on register, in some pre-theoretical observations culled from the literature, and at the end where the script-based register theory is applied to humor theory. Further practical applications are to be found in the next chapter.

## 7.1 Bally's Stylistics of Humor

Bally's stylistics of humor may be considered a precursor of the analysis of register humor, or, in other words, a proto-register theory of humor. Bally's theory has been largely neglected in the development of linguistic humor research.

### 7.1.1 Definition of Stylistics

This section deals with Bally's theory of stylistics and its applications to humor. Stylistics, in Bally's view, is a branch of psychology which studies the correlations between language, on the one hand, and thoughts and feelings (*sentiments*) on the other (Bally 1909: 5-7). According to Bally, stylistics has a social aspect as well (Bally 1909: 10-11).

The object of stylistics is the "affective value" (*valeur affective*) (Bally 1909: 1; 16) of the facts of language. The speaker can verbalize his/her thoughts "objectively"

The speaking subject sometimes gives to the movements of the spirit an objective, *intellectual* form as conforming to reality as possible (Bally 1909: 12)

or he/she can add affective elements, i.e., non-objective, evaluative and/or emotional elements, to the objective description of reality. The affective elements can be socially or individually determined:

more often, he[*/she*] adjoins, in extremely varying amounts, *affective* elements; sometimes these [the affective elements] reflect the *me*, in all its purity, sometimes they are modified *socially* by conditions pertaining to the real or represented presence of one or several other subjects. (Bally 1909: 12)

In this way, stylistics deals with the affective, emotional side of language rather than with the objective, factual aspect of communication.<sup>1</sup> Affectivity is measured against the “intellectual or logical expression mode,” a sort of “zero degree of writing” (Barthes 1972) *ante litteram*, an ideal, perfectly objective mode of expression that would not betray any emotional involvement on the part of the speaker. Contrast the following examples:

(85) A ten year old girl died

(86) A little girl passed away

(85) is closer to the objective mode of representation, whereas in (86), the evaluative adjective “little” and the euphemism of “passed away” involve emotional, affective values. Bally insists that no word has purely affective or purely intellectual value, but each word has both, in different proportions (1909: 158).

Bally sees the domain of stylistics within the boundaries of *langue* in the Saussurian sense:

The linguistic symbols only have *signification* and elicit *effect* only in virtue of a general and simultaneous reaction of the facts of language, which limit and define one another. (Bally 1909: 22)

In other words, the affective meanings are defined differentially, or relationally, i.e., not by their actual “content” but by the place that they occupy in a relational system. The affective values are defined by their *valeur*, as are semantic and phonemic *valeurs* (on Saussure’s theory of *valeur* see ch. 3); thus stylistics, even if it deals with “emotive” issues, remains within the domain of *langue* (see Richard (1986: 82)).

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<sup>1</sup>A survey of current research on affect is to be found in Besnier (1990). It will be noted that Bally’s theory presupposes a positivist metaphysics. No attempt will be made to discuss this issue in this context.

### 7.1.2 Natural and Evocative Affect

Bally distinguishes two types of affective meaning: a natural, and an evocative affect. The natural affect derives directly from the expression. In the example above, “little girl” evokes emotive connotations directly (“naturally,” in Bally’s terms) because it is its direct use that evokes the connotation. The evocative affective effect, on the contrary, is triggered by associations to the linguistic unit *per se* rather than its content. For example, the expression “groovy” evokes “sixties” connotations which are then indirectly associated to the expression. Bally’s claim is that there is an “unconscious thought” as part of the meaning in the speaker’s mind that Bally paraphrases as “Someone else than me would use this expression” (Bally 1909: 167). In different terms, one could say that the speaker is unconsciously aware of his/her “mention” rather than “use” of the term. The two types of affective expression (natural and evocative) are not mutually exclusive (Bally 1909: 168). These meaning effects are commonly referred to as “connotation.”

### 7.1.3 Natural Affect and Humor

Humor (*le comique*), according to Bally, is an aesthetic phenomenon (Bally 1909: 15), and as such tends to be artificial (non-casual, see ch. 3). There are intermediate cases between purely aesthetic expressions and casual, “spontaneous” expressions. Humor is such an intermediate case, so its “natural” (in the technical sense above) expression in language does not fall directly under the scope of Bally’s stylistics. In other words, humor is too much of an aesthetic phenomenon to be considered by Bally’s theory (see Bally 1909: 200-201).

Bally’s aesthetic definition of humor is reminiscent of Platonic theories (“the sentiment of humor is a sentiment of pleasure” (Bally 1909: 182)), and of contrast theories (“[humor] results in the failure of a contrary feeling” (Ibid.)).

### 7.1.4 Evocative Affect and Humor

Humor does not belong among the natural affective expressions of language, but the situation is very different in the case of evocative affects. Consider the following example, taken from Bally’s text:

- (87) (...) dans la conversation quelqu'un dis (...) sérieusement qu'un de ses parents vient de *trépasser*; bien que la chose soit triste en elle-même, on aura envie de rire. (Bally 1909: 208)  
 /in the conversation, someone says seriously that one of his parents has just *trépassé* [died]; although the thing is sad in itself, one will want to laugh./

It is impossible to translate the example literally because it is based on a mismatch between the degree of formality and familiarity of the term *trépasser*, which is very literary ("poetic," says Bally), and the rest of the conversation, which is presumably in unmarked French. In English, "die" and "pass away" share some, but not all, of the connotations of the French terms (in particular, it does not seem to be jarring to use the expression "passed away" in conversation). According to Bally, when there is a mismatch between the evocations of the words (or other linguistic unit), and the actual context of the utterance (as is the case above), contrast ensues, and hence humor (Bally 1909: 229-231; 240-241).

Bally's treatment of these cases fully anticipates the notion of "register" (see below). Bally claims that linguistic elements are associated with, and eventually evoke, typical contexts, such as professions, settings, activities (e.g., familiar conversation, in the example above), as well as stereotypes (for example, national stereotypes: the Italian, the German, etc.). Using a linguistic unit triggers the evocations of these contexts. For example, if someone says "*Mamma mia!*" he/she may only denote surprise or mild preoccupation, but also connotes "Italian."

Bally's proto-register theory of humor is not limited to lexical units. Phonological and phonetic traits alone can be used to create mismatches. A popular comedy character is that of the foreigner who mispronounces his/her non-native language (Bally 1909: 231-232). Even graphematic features (i.e. spelling conventions) may trigger a dissociation between the usual context<sup>2</sup> of a linguistic sign and the actual one of the utterance (and, hence, humor). Bally presents an example essentially similar to the Queneau example quoted in ch. 3 in which the contrast between the usual spelling and the unusual

<sup>2</sup>The graphematic conventions of a spelling system are a significant part of the context in which each written sentence is produced. Consider a student spelling "its" the contracted form of "it is" in a Freshman Composition course, and the importance and social relevance of the spelling system will emerge forcefully: the student will fail.

“phonetic” spelling generates humor:

- (88) I s pourè ptèt k’sfu vré  
 Il se pourrait peut-être que ce fût vrai. (Bally 1909: 232)  
 /It may be true/

Finally, still in the context of the evocative expressions of affectivity, one finds the most clearly “sociological” aspect of Bally’s considerations about humor. Bally notes that humor is often associated with “familiar” language (1909: 301); thus, humor both evokes and presupposes familiarity (it evokes it, because of the process of evocation described above, and presupposes it because evocation is based on prior cooccurrence).

Although Bally’s remarks on humor fall short of being a theory, it is clear that they are not only scattered thoughts, but are systematically related to his conception of stylistics within which they find a theoretically sound explanation.

## 7.2 Recent Studies on Register Humor

Alexander (1984: 58-62) presents several excellent examples of register humor and identifies the phenomenon clearly. Alexander notes that some cases of humor originate in the “comical confusion” of two registers. His definition of register is Hallidayan (see below). A technique to generate register-based humor “is that of selecting a lexeme or phraseological unit from a different style level than the context would predict” (Alexander 1984: 60). To illustrate the notion of register humor before defining it more formally consider, as an example, this short passage by Woody Allen, quoted in Alexander (1984: 60):

- (89) He was creating an Ethics, based on his theory that “good and just behavior is not only more moral but could be done by phone.” Also, he was halfway through a new study of semantics, proving (as he so violently insisted) that sentence structure is innate but that whining is acquired. (Woody Allen *Remembering Needleman In Side Effects*. New York: Ballantine. 1981.)

Alexander comments:

Allen builds up expectations of a particular level of style and even of field of discourse – *Ethics* (with a large E) and *good and just behavior* – only to deflate them by introducing *done by phone*. Similarly he introduces incongruity in following up *new study of semantics* and *phrase structure* with *whining* (Alexander 1984: 60)

Alexander's analysis is correct, but largely impressionistic; for example, it may be noted that the technical terms that select the register *linguistics* ("semantics," "phrase structure") are used exclusively for their connotation (see below), i.e., because they connote "linguistics talk" independently of their meaning (phrase structure is not part of semantics). As a matter of fact, the reader is not supposed to have access to the sophisticated knowledge of what phrase structure is to understand the joke. A vague association with "linguistics" or even just with "academic talk" is sufficient. These aspects of the problem are left unexplored, as are the specific mechanisms by which "evocation" of a register is achieved.

Fishman (1972) identified register humor, and its cause, i.e., incongruent elements in a situation. Holmes (1973: 5-6) also has some examples. They all stop short, however, of providing a theory of register humor, and their accounts are largely anecdotal.

Recently, Haiman (1990: 199-202) has examined the use of register clashes as indicators of the "sarcastic" nature of the text in some detail, and with much finesse. Much of the considerations that apply to sarcasm seem to be valid for humor as well.

### 7.2.1 Register Theory

In order to discuss the phenomenon of register humor in more detail, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the issues that have developed around register theory *per se*. This section will begin by discussing some influential definitions of register and the problems they present. Two main issues will be dealt with: the lack of unique formal definition of register, and variation in "register coverage." A meta-theoretical section will then present the advantages of a particular type of theory known as "polythetic," a.k.a. non-essentialist, to be defined below. A theory of register on a polythetic basis will then be outlined.

## Definitions of Register

A discussion of the theory of register should begin with a review of some of the definitions that have been given of this elusive concept. Most of the discussion around register has been in the fields of stylistics, sociolinguistics and, more broadly, in pragmatics (with excursions in natural language processing; cf. the notion of “sublanguage”). Interestingly a large amount of the discussion on register comes from language pedagogy, where register identification is quite important for successful mastery of a second language.

According to Ure (1982), the notion of register was introduced by Reid (1956), but it is commonly acknowledged that the principal development of the notion comes from, and around, the works of Halliday. The two following definitions state his position clearly (and see also Halliday and Hasan (1985: 24-43)):

A register can be defined as the configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type. Halliday (1978: 111)

A register is a cluster of associated features having a greater-than-random (...) tendency to co-occur; and like a dialect, it can be identified at any delicacy of focus. Halliday (1988: 162)

The notion of register is equated with a set of choices (“semantic” is used in the Firthian sense of “oppositional”) among features made by speakers in connection with a certain type of situation.

Also influenced by Firthian linguistics, but closer to a sociolinguistic view is Catford (1965: 89), who defines register as “a variety correlated with the performer’s social role on a given occasion.” Catford also introduced the notion of “specificity” of register, i.e., the possibility of identifying “subregisters” inside a register (Catford (1965:89-90); see also below).

Further research has made large use of these notions as well as of other contributions, such as Crystal and Davy’s (1969) notion of “province” (the activities speakers are engaged in), or Fishman’s “domain” (social situations and role relations), or Joos (1962) suggestion to identify five levels of formality in discourse. Influential definitions of register have also been proposed by Palmer (1981), Ure and Ellis (1977), Zwicky and Zwicky (1982), and others.

### Register Identification and Predictability

The definitions listed above show some interesting points of convergence. Defining a register as a set of choices among "linguistic features," as Halliday (1988) does, is uncontroversial. The set of features must be recognizable because the concept of register is a distinctive one, that is, a register is identifiable insofar as it opposes itself to another kind of register. For example, one can talk of "Motherese" only if one is willing to claim that it is possible to look at a text and tell whether the text is "in Motherese" or in, say, "standard English" (on Motherese, see Murphy and Alber (1985); on "simplified registers," see Ferguson (1982) and references therein).

The concept of register is often defined as "related" to contextual factors because among the various parameters that have been proposed as determining register are "subject matter" (i.e., what the text is about), "social roles/situations" (i.e., who the speaker is and what he/she does), and what Chiu (1972) calls the "field of discourse" (i.e., what the speaker is using the text for, like discussing, insulting, etc.). The use of the term "context" strongly suggests that a "pragmatic" look at register is the only viable solution, and much of research on register has been pursued in the frameworks of pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

There have been attempts to define register prevalently or even exclusively in terms of "linguistic features." An example of a purely linguistic definition can be the "language of instructions": recipes, and the like, present the so-called "object drop" as in the following example (Haegeman 1987:236):

(90) "Skin and bone chicken, and cut [ ] into slices."

where the [ ] marks the place where the object pronoun "it" would occur in "standard English." These observations are interesting, but their theoretical status is weak since they are basically atomistic and do not lend themselves to generalization (i.e., one cannot generally come up with a feature dividing all registers into classes, with regard to this feature). Biber (1988) is a sophisticated attempt in the same direction based on statistical analysis of texts.

Attempts have also been made to define register on the basis of "subject matter;" chemistry, for example, will have its own register, and so on (see Halliday 1988 on the register of physics). Halliday's (1978) definition is of this type. Simplifying a little, a "subject matter" definition of register is

equivalent to claiming that what speakers are talking about will determine, to a certain extent, their choices in the various paradigmatic domains: lexical, syntactic, etc. The problem with these criteria is that they are only “indicative;” in other words, given a context or a linguistic phenomenon, they cannot provide necessary and sufficient conditions to predict the occurrence of a given register (although they can identify a “range” within which it will occur, see Hasan (1981)).

This issue is similar in a sense to Chomsky’s “creative” aspect of language (see, for instance, Chomsky 1965: 6). In any given situation, the speakers always have a set of options available. Knowledge of the contextual factors involved may allow one to make a fairly good prediction of the register that will be chosen, but speakers can always subvert predictions, or the situation can be novel and unprecedented, which prevents predictive accuracy. Consider an example taken from Hasan (1981): two colleagues meeting on campus can choose a familiar register, or a “technical” one related to their fields. The context and the interpersonal relations do not provide enough information to predict which they will choose. Similarly, a lecturer can always decide whether to include some “informal” remarks to “lighten up” the audience of a formal academic lecture, but his/her choice is entirely dependent on his/her attitude, mood, and on circumstances which are utterly unpredictable (like that of having been told a good joke a few minutes before the talk).

These problems are keenly felt in the field, and attempts to combine various criteria have been made in the hope that a combination of several criteria might be able to capture the “essence” of register. (Chiu 1972, White 1974, Palmer 1981, Ure 1982, Zwicky and Zwicky 1982). Crystal and Davy (1969:62) summed up this issue very clearly:

the majority of linguistic features in English have little or no predictive power, that is, they are ambiguous indicators of the situational variables in the extralinguistic context in which they are used.

Crystal and Davy introduce the notion of the “range of appropriateness” which is a probabilistic function that connects linguistic features and situations.<sup>3</sup> From this it follows that, if registers have varying degrees of

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<sup>3</sup>See Halliday’s (1988:162) “tendency to co-occur”, Palmer (1981:64) “statistical trend,” and Biber (1988) and references therein.

probability in their predictive capacity, the concept of register is not really discrete and the various parameters that identify a register will be distributed along a continuum, which is basically correct, even if not particularly helpful.

### **Register Coverage of Reality**

Regardless of the quality and interest of the descriptions of various registers, no definition of register so far accounts for the lack of systematic coverage of the linguistic-experiential continuum. Consider a daily newspaper. It has been proposed to view the language of newspapers as a register ("Journalese," e.g., Weizman 1984). If we accept this suggestion (and there seem to be sufficient grounds for doing so since the audience and the purposes of the communication situation are rather clearly defined), it is immediately necessary to postulate the existence of a variety of subregisters (following Catford 1965: 89-90), since several studies have shown that, for example, sports stories belong to a different register than news stories (see Wallace 1977; Ferguson 1983; Ghadessy 1988). Inside the register of "Journalese" one can also find specific "types of discourse" that can be defined in terms of registers such as "headlines" (Zwicky and Zwicky 1982) or "personal advertisements." The former will in some cases intersect with other registers (for instance, we will have sports headlines, news headlines, human interest headlines, etc).

It is possible to make interesting statistical generalizations on the language of newspapers. Wallace (1977) showed that from the syntactic point of view, sports stories use significantly less passives than news stories; however, from the point of view of contents, the predictability (i.e., the specificity) of the sports news is much higher than the international news or the business pages. In other words, some of the parameters of the subregisters are rather well defined, but several others are almost completely open. The sports pages will, of course, deal with sports events and related issues, whereas the news may cover any event which happens to be regarded as newsworthy, including occasionally major sports events (and this can mean a rather broad gamut of options).

Consider another example: Motherese. The relevant parameters of Motherese are rather constrained: the adult-children interaction can revolve around a few biological functions and some displays of affection or repro-bation in a reasonably constrained set of settings (bedroom, playground,

bathroom...). Compare these to the parameters of sports news/broadcast. The locations of the games are rather well defined and the events themselves are rather predictable, but the order of magnitude of the number of events that may occur or not occur, as well as the number of the people involved, and the variety of activities that are classified as sports (golf, football, diving, free-climbing...), will necessarily force us to account for a much larger and more complex range of linguistic phenomena than in Motherese. The conclusion is that the specificity of the various registers which have been described, or are in principle describable, varies. This fact has been referred to as “delicacy of focus” (Halliday 1988:162; Hasan 1973).

This is, however, a problematic issue because in this range of specificity the higher cases will tend to be confused with “language at large” (that is, lose the power of identifying a register) while the lower will identify themselves with one particular text, and again lose significance. It is clear that the interesting cases lie somewhere in between these two extremes.

The difference in specificity among registers can also be described by noting that registers do not cover the range of experiences of the speakers equally: some parts of the world are better “mapped” in terms of register variation, while others are not. There exists a Motherese, but no “Uncleese,” even if a majority of the variables are the same. Inside Journalese the “sports register” is identified better than the rest of the “news registers,” which would seem to have an equal status theoretically.

### **Problematicity of Register Theory**

On the one hand, there is a “fuzzy” descriptive tool—register theory—and, on the other, there is an object—the registers of language—which covers certain areas of the linguistic-experiential reality quite finely and is much less identifiable in other areas. This could lead one to skepticism and to the claim that no formal theory of register is possible, and that only “impressionistic” or probabilistic accounts can be attempted. In fact, however, the “weakness” may not reside so much in the reality of registers, but in the theory that describes it; in other words, the essentialist theory that has been implicitly applied may turn out to be a poor instrument in this case.

## 7.2.2 What Theory of Register?

In what follows, a brief attempt will be made to sketch a theory of register couched in a polythetic framework. The discussion will begin by examining an essentialist theory and will then move on to a polythetic theory in order to show how the two theories behave differently in relation to a simplified example.

### Essentialist Theories

An essentialist theory depends on (a set of) tests. Consider this example: someone is faced with the task of picking all (and only) the red balls in a room full of toys. The subject needs a theory of “red balls” to help him/her identify such objects. What is the essence of a red ball, i.e., what makes a red ball a red ball? It is being a ball and at the same time being red. One can thus formally define the set of red balls as the intersection of the set of all balls with the set of all red objects. In order to apply the definition to reality, the subject must devise a test for “ball.” Simplifying a little, one can take “roundness” (sphericity) and certain size specifications (say, diameter larger than 1 inch and smaller than 2 feet). The test for red is simpler: a sample of the color and instructions to match the color of the object and the sample (the issue of fuzziness is being ignored here for the sake of simplicity). The next step is to examine each object in the room and submit it to the tests for redness and “ballness.” If an object passes both tests, it is a red ball.

It should be noted that in an essentialist theory like this, either an object passes a test or it fails it (i.e., an object is or is not a member of a set); in other words, the final decision on the membership of an object to a set is a yes/no decision. It should also be noted that the condition for membership can be summarized as one or more “features.” These are called “necessary and sufficient” conditions, and they allow one to predict that whenever these obtain, a given object belongs to a given class. In other words, if a red ball is defined by the necessary and sufficient conditions that it be a ball and red, then whatever is a ball and red must be a red ball.

But what if the next object the subject picks in his/her room is a football painted red? Unfortunately, the ball would not pass the “round” test. The theory turns out to be too restrictive (since it only allow round balls). This

would not necessarily be the case with a polythetic theory.

### Polythetic Theories

A good example of a polythetic (from the Greek “poly” many and “thetos” arrangements) model is Wittgenstein’s (1953) definition of “game.” As mentioned before, Wittgenstein concludes that it is impossible to find one common denominator to all the possible “games,” but solves the problem by using the notion of “family resemblance.” While there is no single feature common to all games, several groups (families) of games share some common features, so that some features are present in some of the games in such a combination that each game shares at least one feature with some of the other games. Wittgenstein uses another metaphor: in a rope there isn’t a single fiber that runs through the whole length of the rope, but the rope has nevertheless some kind of unity.

Needham (1975) provides a detailed discussion of polythetic classifications and the differences between them and monothetic (i.e., essentialist) classifications. Polythetic classifications have been applied to botany, zoology, biology, bacteriology, and anthropology as well as to linguistics (see Lakoff (1987), who uses the term “prototype,” borrowed from the psychological research of Rosch (Rosch and Mervis 1975)). An interesting consequence of polythetic theories is that one loses the “predictive” power of the presence of a “crucial,” essential feature. In the example of the red balls, if one decides to include the feature “filled with gas” and allow for the absence of some of the features in some cases, we will find ourselves with a polythetic theory of balls. The test for the feature “filled with gas” will recognize footballs and hot air balloons, but will fail with golf balls and hardballs, which would, however, pass the test for “roundness.” Thus, one will find oneself in the position of being unable to tell whether any given object is filled with gas or round, given the fact that it is a ball, whereas with the essentialist theory we could predict that any ball was a sphere. However, what has been gained is that now the subject can pick the red football in the room. Outside of the example, a polythetic theory frees us from the necessity to find a necessary and sufficient condition which defines a class.

Polythetic theories are often associated with “prototype” theories (see Lakoff (1987: 17-18)). A prototype theory claims that some members of the set are “better examples” of the set than other members. Consider the set

of all birds. Rosch has shown that speakers tend to characterize robins and sparrows as “best examples” of birds and rate penguins as worst (see Lakoff (1987)). If in the progressive degradation of the “quality” of the example, one allows for the membership of objects which share none of the necessary and sufficient features of the “central” examples (i.e., there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in a set), then the prototype theory becomes polythetic, or, as some would have it, the theory becomes “fully polythetic,” while if one can find at least one feature common to all members of the set, the theory is non-fully-polythetic (Needham 1975: 536).

It should be noted that a (fully) polythetic theory is not necessarily a prototype theory. A prototype theory does not necessarily challenge the essentialist claim that at least one common feature exists in all object members of a class. A prototype theory may have one common feature for all elements and then different, even if overlapping, clusters of features for different elements. It is necessary to emphasize that a theory is either only “prototype” or both “prototype and polythetic,” as will be the case of the proposed theory of register.

From the above discussion, two features of a polythetic/prototype theory seem to be particularly promising: the lack of predictive power of one (or more) feature on the membership status of an object, and the “clustering” of features around prototypes. In what follows, these ideas will be applied to the description of registers.

### **7.2.3 A Polythetic Theory of Register...**

A polythetic/prototype theory of register characterizes the various registers which can be identified in linguistic use as having family resemblances among them. This eliminates the search for one underlying common feature (or set of features), i.e., it is not necessary to try to identify a common denominator in all “register” situations, which has often caused vague definitions in the literature.

At the same time, a polythetic/prototype model accounts for the differences in specificity in register coverage of experience, because the groups of registers will tend to cluster in sets connected by some common feature, a particularly good (prototype) feature for a given register (for instance, a given syntactic construction). Clustering of registers around prototypical features will leave “empty” spaces around them, which are regions of linguistic use

that cannot easily be characterized in terms of registers and that require an extremely general definition (e.g., scientific, familiar). The polythetic theory of register also provides a conceptual framework for the fact that some registers are identified on the basis of their subject matter (sports-news, scientific registers), while others are identified on the basis of the social function they are associated with (commerce, administration), or on the basis of interpersonal relations (colloquial, slang, motherese, etc.). Each of these groupings will be seen as the clustering of features around prototypical axes (i.e., any significant group of features).

By adopting a polythetic theory of register, one can account for the simultaneous presence in the system of registers of a language of several unrelated criteria for register identification, such as subject matter, social function of the utterance, or interpersonal relationships among the speakers; moreover, the lack of a unique common denominator allows for the perceived connections of register theory with such disparate fields as stylistics, the theory of sublanguages, dialectology, etc., since each of these fields puts a different emphasis on one or another of the possible parameters of register definition.

#### **7.2.4 ... and its Application to Script-Theory**

The ultimate goal of this section is to analyze register humor. Recall the temporary definition of register humor, given earlier, as humor which is caused by incongruity due to or caused by register. The nature of the causation and/or interaction will be determined in what follows. Since the analysis builds on a theory of humor (the GTVH) and the theory of register presented in some detail above, the next step is to show how the two theories can interact.

The previous discussion of register theory is "atomistic" in the sense that it takes the various lexemes, syntactic constructions, intonation patterns, etc. as unanalyzed units. In order to obtain a polythetic theory of register-based humor, a good preliminary step seems to be to consider how some of the elements involved in register appear in script-theory. More specifically, since script-theory handles lexical items, those aspects of register variation that involve lexical choices directly or indirectly will be most centrally involved.

### 7.2.5 A Script-Based Theory of Register

No direct attempt to deal with the issue of register-based humor was made within script-theory; however, it may be shown that the GTVH (which incorporates the SSTH) implicitly subsumes those aspects of linguistic communication traditionally termed “register” in large part (and which have been listed in the section above).

In order to proceed it is necessary to focus briefly on one aspect of the SSTH which has been left in the background.

#### Variable-Length Links

As presented in some detail above, the SSTH is based primarily on a complex semantic graph. Within the graph each node (=a script) is connected to other nodes by links. The links “characterize the relations between the nodes” (Raskin 1985: 82), i.e., specify types of relation such as synonymy, hyponymy, agenthood, instrumenthood, etc.

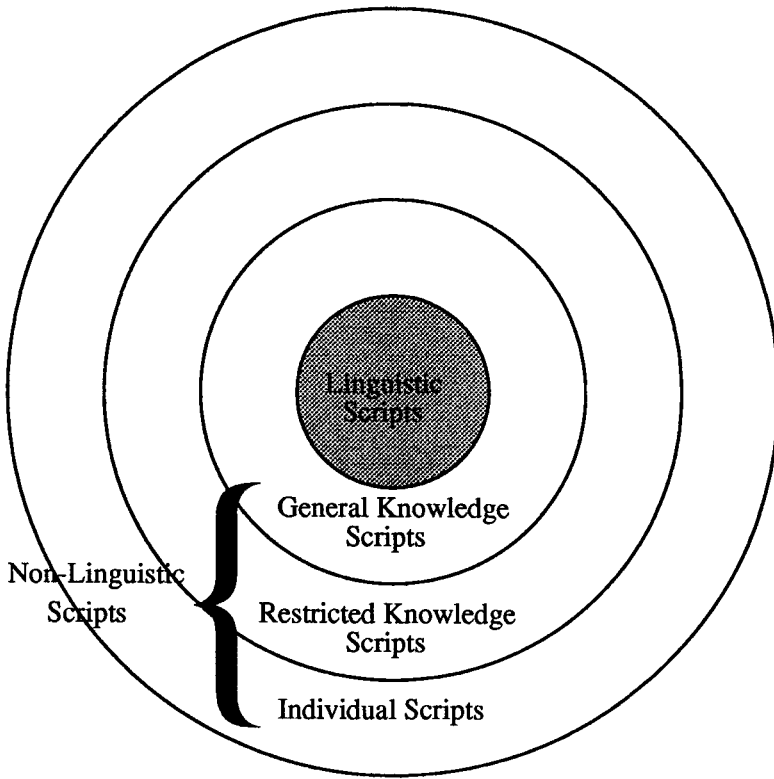
The links are not all of the same length (Raskin 1985: 84). This claim requires some explanation. To begin with, it presupposes a topological metaphor, i.e., the semantic connections between scripts are represented as points (nodes) on a map (network). AS a result, those scripts that are semantically more related to other scripts may be said to be closer to a given script or to have shorter links. It is important to keep in mind that this is a metaphorical representation and that the distance between scripts is not claimed to be empirically measurable in geometrical terms (it may be possible to measure it cognitively and to relate the cognitive items to linear dimensions, but that is another issue).

Raskin uses another image related to the issue of “distance” between scripts: concentric circles. Recall that Raskin distinguishes between linguistic and non-linguistic scripts representing the distinction with four concentric circles, the most internal one containing all linguistic scripts, while the external ones contain non-linguistic scripts in order of accessibility to the speakers in general. Immediately adjacent to the linguistic scripts are general-knowledge scripts, followed by restricted knowledge scripts and individual scripts. (Raskin 1985: 135) (see figure (7.1)).

Recall also that linguistic scripts are supposed to be known to any native speaker of a language *because of* his/her being a native speaker. General

knowledge scripts are generally known to speakers, but do not directly affect their use of the language (e.g., Scandinavia is in Europe). The same applies to restricted knowledge scripts (e.g., the conditions for c-command in English), and individual scripts (e.g., what this author thinks of the above two facts).

Figure 7.1: The Arrangement of Scripts



### An Attempt at Formalization

The notion of variable-length links between scripts is introduced informally in the SSTH; this does not cause problems for the formulation of the SSTH since nothing momentous rides on the concept in the original formulation. However, already in Morrissey (1989) and in the extension to the SSTH being proposed here, the notion of distance between scripts (or of length of links) acquires a much more prominent role. It is therefore important to attempt a partial formalization of the concept.

As seen above, the metaphor used by Raskin to introduce the notion of variable-length links is topological, i.e. it equates levels of conceptual activation (having a physiological correlate in neural activity) with spatial proximity; higher activation corresponds to greater closeness. Current knowledge of neural lexical storage and retrieval is still too primitive for any real empirical discussion of the data, and so the following discussion will be in large part speculative.

In keeping with Raskin's topological metaphor, the distance between scripts may be measured in absolute or relative terms. An absolute measurement would be the actual physiological phenomena involved with the storage and retrieval of knowledge—the time elapsed between the firing of synapses of a stimulus and the response it elicits. Not enough is known of the actual ways in which knowledge is stored and accessed for this to be practically feasible. A relative measure would be much simpler to set up (although not without its difficulties). Suppose that it is decided that the distance between the script for GOOD and the script for BAD is 1 unit. This would entail that all antonyms would be stored at the same distance of 1 unit from each other. Synonyms would have a distance  $>1$ , while other words belonging to the same lexical field would have a distance  $<1$ , but smaller than unrelated words, with a distance of, say, 10.

As Raskin has already pointed out, such a model presupposes a multi-dimensional space, but this is not a major problem for the SSTH (or its extension), except perhaps that it makes all attempts at visualization hopelessly inadequate. Feasibility requires that for the time being only relative models of inter-script distance be built; however, the above relative variable-length model accounts only for "linguistic" scripts, i.e., those scripts that belong to the inner circle in Raskin's model (see figure 7.1).

Clearly, positing concentric circles also presupposes a topological model,

albeit slightly different than the previous one. The difference is that some of the relative distances between scripts are predetermined. In other words, the distance between two scripts that belong to the same circle will always be smaller than the distance of any two scripts that do not belong to the same circle.

What are the consequences of this topological model of link length for the theory of register? Using this model, it is possible to show that the script theory can account for the concept of “connotation” and, by doing so, for register.

### Connotation

The concept of “connotation” is subsumed by the SSTH. More precisely, the notion of connotation is rendered superfluous for linguistic description and is retained only for ease of reference to traditional categories of linguistic analysis.

connotation is rather a vague term, and it covers a wide range of phenomena (see Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977) for a survey). Usually, it is taken as referring to two types of associative meaning: a) personal associations (for example, mention of the name of one’s childhood enemy evokes (connotes) strong negative feelings), and b) more general “cultural” associations (for example, “Florence” connotes “culture,” “art,” “Renaissance,” etc.).

Consider the example of the word “tabloid”: its lexical meaning, according to Webster’s dictionary is

a newspaper that is about half the page size of an ordinary newspaper and that contains news in condensed form and much photographic matter

the thesaurus provides the following adjectives as synonyms of “tabloid” used as an adjective:

sensational, livid, lurid, sensationalistic, sensationist, sultry

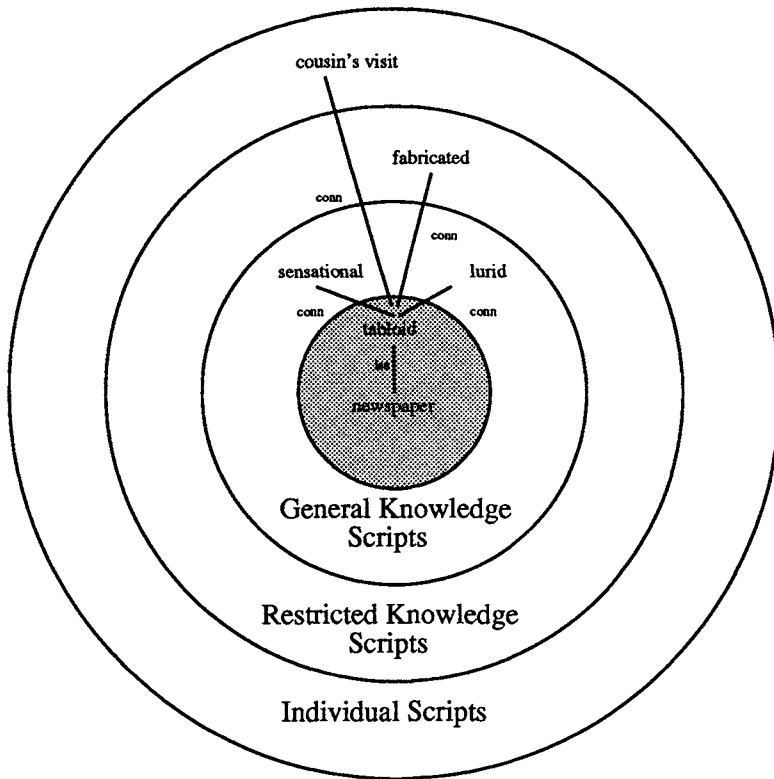
From the difference between the meaning of the word used as a name and the meaning of the word used as an adjective, it is possible to deduce that the word has a strong negative connotation, reflected in the list of synonyms.

The SSTH handles these facts elegantly: both personal associations and more general associations are accounted for by the presence or absence of the

relative scripts, while the greater distance from the center (linguistic scripts) accounts for the weaker nature of connotative associations, if compared to denotative associations (assuming an intuitive proportionality between length of the link and strength of the association).

In the case of “tabloid,” one can explain the connotation of the word by using either “general knowledge scripts” (many people know what type of newspapers are published in that format and what reputation they have) or even “individual” scripts, since each individual (who has that connotation of the word) has had experience with these magazines. See figure (7.2.5), which provides a fragment of this writer’s scripts for “tabloid.” Two types of links are represented: hypo-/hyperonymic links (“isa”) and connotative (“conn”). It is safe to assume that everybody knows that tabloids are sensational and lurid, but not all their readers are aware that most of their information is fabricated (hence the script is restricted). The reader may be justly puzzled by the association of “cousin’s visit” with “tabloid.” This is an individual script associated with “tabloid” that this writer possesses and that is probably unique to him.

Figure 7.2: Some Lexical Relationships of “tabloid” for this Author.



The shaded area represents linguistic scripts.

### **Situation-Based Connotation**

The existence of long-distance links between scripts also accounts for the establishment of connotative associations between a situation and the linguistic materials used to refer to it. It may be safely assumed that activation of a script will result in the activation of all closely related scripts and in the weaker activation of less-related scripts (spreading activation (Collins and Loftus 1975)); for example, use of “church-related” terminology will result in the weak-activation of the script for RELIGION, or in (94) below, the use of philosophical terms connotes/weakly activates the script for PHILOSOPHY.

### **Register and Connotation**

It can be shown that the mechanisms of connotation (weak-activation, or long-distance, of distant personal or cultural scripts) are at work in all cases of register variation. Script-theory explains connotation by showing that scripts weakly activate distant scripts. Register is explained with a generalization of this idea. Take the example of Motherese. The referent of the word “doggie” is essentially the same of “dog.” Through either personal experience, or cultural exposure, the speaker comes to associate the former lexeme with speech directed to children and the latter with speech directed to adults. From these associations, weak links to the scripts CHILD and ADULT, respectively, are formed (connotation). If a script may have a connotative relation with a another script (i.e., weakly activates another distant script), a script may also weakly activate a “situational script.” Thus, the lexeme “doggie” will evoke the script for DOGGIE and for DOG (denotation), will weakly activate scripts for CHILD (connotation), but also weakly activate scripts such as NURSING, BABYSITTING and in general the situations that are associated (are linked) with handling children: the sum of these activations will represent the register—in this case: Motherese.

These considerations permit the formulation of a definition of register humor in script-based terms: the concomitant (overlapping) activation of two or more scripts that weakly activate some scripts, among which there are at least two that are in a relationship of (local) antonymy. Suppose that a friend’s huge Doberman is growling at me. By saying “Could you call back your doggie?” I activate explicitly the script for DOG but also the connotative script CHILD. The situation itself will activate a number of connotative scripts

such as DANGER, DISMEMBERMENT, etc. which are all locally incompatible with CHILD and this will account for the (slight) humor of my remark.

The similarities with the SSTH's main hypothesis are clear (and deliberate). There is a major difference between this definition and the SSTH's, however: in the SSTH, the opposition must be between two scripts activated directly by the processing of the text; in the case of register humor, the actual processing of the text may proceed without glitches, producing a non-humorous sense while the weak activations produce the and opposition, and so generate register humor. Consider again Woody Allen's example (89) earlier in this chapter: the text makes sense superficially but is merely odd; it is only by activating the register associations that one can appreciate its humorous nature.

This section has developed an extension of the GTVH/SSTH, showing that by developing and formalizing some elements of the theory, and without adding significantly new constructs to the theory, it is possible to account for the phenomena of connotation and register within the GTVH/SSTH. The next sections will present some applications of this extended version of the GTVH/SSTH. The reader should remember that for ease of presentation, only lexical-choice-based register variation and connotation have been examined. This extension of the GTVH/SSTH does not incorporate syntax- and phonologically-based register variation, although nothing, in principle, opposes it.

## Chapter 8

# Non-joke Humor Texts

As indicated in the previous chapters, the application of the SSTH<sup>1</sup> outside of the realm of its original design presents some interesting issues. This section will explore how an application of the GTVH may proceed with texts other than jokes. The section will consist of the examination of four case-studies: a short-story by E. A. Poe, the beginning of Voltaire's *Candide*, some passages from the novels of T. L. Peacock, and a short passage from a French Medieval *menu propos* (a peculiar type of rhymed poetic form).

Roughly, an application of the GTVH to humorous texts larger and more complex than jokes presents two cases: some texts appear to be structurally identical to a joke and so they can be analyzed as a particularly enriched joke (this is the case with Poe's short story); other texts appear to have a substantially different narrative structure than a joke (the remaining three texts.) Since the SSTH did not account at all for differences in narrative form, this aspect will be left in the background, as it was dealt with in some detail in 6.4.4 . The passages from Peacock's novels and the passage from

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<sup>1</sup>It may be useful to recapitulate briefly the various versions of the SSTH that have been examined, before proceeding to the analysis of the four case-studies: 1) the SSTH, as defined by Raskin (1985), 2) the expanded SSTH as defined by Chlopicki (1987), 3) the SSTH expanded to account for register theory (as per ch. 7), 4) the GTVH, a major revision of the SSTH, as defined by Attardo and Raskin (1991). From the point of view of the present discussion, the difference between the SSTH and the GTVH is marginal (essentially limited to a greater awareness in the GTVH of the problems involved in handling other texts besides narrative jokes, with the introduction of the NA knowledge resource). For most practical purposes the SSTH and GTVH can be used interchangeably in this chapter.

*Candide* will be used to exemplify “register humor,” while the fragment of *menu propos* will be used to exemplify some genres of humor that require further expansions of the GTVH.

It should be noted that applying the GTVH to these texts is not an exercise of literary criticism (although it may overlap with it substantially). The choices have been made somewhat randomly on the basis of the author’s readings. A number of other texts could have been used with similar findings. It should also be noted that for the sake of brevity the following analyses are extremely informal, skipping almost entirely the procedure for uncovering the activated scripts, etc., which follows from the discussion of the SSTH above. A formal description of the mechanisms involved in determining the activation and overlapping of scripts is to be found in 6.1.4.

The four case studies are intended to present types of humorous texts which the SSTH would find problematic. Some of the texts involve register humor, while others involve narrative organizations that the SSTH is not prepared to handle. The GTVH can in principle handle these types of texts, but no direct explanation is yet available in it. The goal of this section is to develop some strategies that would allow the GTVH to cope with these types of texts. Because of this, all the following remarks should be taken as preliminary mappings of largely uncharted areas of humor research.

## 8.1 A Short Story by E. A. Poe

The purpose of this section is to analyze the short story (*The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fethers*) and to pursue the implications of this analysis.

It will be shown that Poe’s short story shares several of the structural characteristics of a joke as a text type.<sup>2</sup> This claim is based on two facts. The first is that the story is based on the opposition between two scripts: MAD vs. SANE which overlap through a large part of the text. In other words, Poe’s tale *The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fethers* (henceforth T& F) fits the definition of a joke, as per the SSTH. The second fact is that the story is based on the hesitation of the reader (as well as of the narrator) between two interpretations of the facts, and that this hesitation is made possible only by the systematic withholding of information on the part of the author of the story. Systematic withholding of information has been shown

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<sup>2</sup>On the joke as text type, see Attardo and Chabanne (1992).

(Dolitsky 1992, Attardo 1990a) to be another defining aspect of jokes. This emphasis on the “organization” or “distribution” of the information in the text is an extension of the SSTH, inspired indirectly by the IDM (ch. 2). A more detailed discussion of distribution of the information will be found in ch. 9 under the label of “implicit/explicit” dynamism.

The presentation will begin by the “plot” of the tale, in the order in which the reader encounters it. This is not just for simplicity’s sake, but because the narrative organization of the tale is relevant to its functioning as a “hoax,” and disturbing that organization would prevent us from uncovering Poe’s machinery at work. The narrative organization of the story is quite simple. The introduction relates the circumstances of the arrival of the narrator to a *maison de santé* (mental asylum) which he wants to visit to learn more about the famous “method” developed by its director, Mr. Maillard. Two fairly long scenes make up the entirety of the text: a long conversation with Mr. Maillard, and the dinner with the “guests.”

Once the narrator has arrived at the *maison* he meets Mr. Maillard. The description of Mr. Maillard is that of a “normal” gentleman:

He was a portly, fine-looking gentleman of the old school, with a polished manner, and a certain air of gravity, dignity, and authority, which was very impressive. (T&F, 76)

After his introduction to Mr. Maillard, the narrator is “ushered into a small and exceedingly neat parlor” (T&F, 76) in which he meets a girl. Her behavior overall is agreeable to the narrator, who, however, does not know whether she is sane or not because he knows that Maillard’s “system” allows inpatients to mingle freely with guardians. The only reason for the narrator’s suspicion is “a certain restless brilliancy about her eyes;” however, the girl “replied in a perfectly rational manner to all that I said” (T&F, 77).

The narrator’s hesitation (and the reader’s) is maintained until the girl leaves, and Mr. Maillard reassures the narrator that she is a perfectly sane relative of his.<sup>3</sup>

In the following conversation, Mr. Maillard informs the narrator that he has revised his famous “system,” having found it lacking. Poe describes in some detail the “vulgarly termed ‘system of soothing’ ” (T&F, 77) which

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<sup>3</sup>In this episode Poe is “toying” with the reader because up to this point in the tale the narrator’s error is also the reader’s.

consists in short in acting as if the patients were sane. The discussion is interrupted by the announcement of dinner, but not before Mr. Maillard has sententiously told the narrator:

“You are young yet, my friend (...) but the time will arrive when you will learn to judge for yourself of what is going on in the world, without trusting the gossip of others: — Believe nothing you hear, and only half that you see.” (T&F, 80)

The dinner scene is by far the largest section of the tale. At the beginning of the scene the narrator finds the dresses of the guests “extravagantly rich,” “by no means accoutered in (...) good taste,” and having “an air of oddity” (T&F, 81). He then doubts again of being in presence of the patients, but his “apprehensions were immediately and fully dispelled” (T&F, 82). Further oddities strike the narrator: the dining room has “nothing too much of elegance about it,” although there is a “prodigious glare of a multitude of wax candles” and the “profusion (of food) was absolutely barbaric.” (Ibid.). His overall conclusion is that “there was much of the *bizarre* about everything I saw” but he takes a philosophical stand, explains away the oddities with different “conventional customs” and eats with “an excellent appetite.” (T&F, 83).

The conversation at the dinner table turns onto lunacy, and in particular the *whims* of the patients. Each character in turn relates, in the third person, some odd behavior of a lunatic, accompanying the narrations with gestures and demonstrations of the lunatics’ behavior. The actions get more and more deranged until a woman, who unbeknownst to the narrator is Mme. Joyeuse, tells about a Mme. Joyeuse believing to be a chicken, shows how she does this, and is interrupted by Mr. Maillard who addresses her as Mme. Joyeuse (thus revealing that Mme. Joyeuse was talking about herself). At this point the narrator is “much astonished.” Immediately after this, the girl the narrator met in the parlour starts telling about Eugénie Salsafette, whose mania consists of “getting outside, instead of inside of her clothes,” upon which she undertakes to strip herself of her clothes. While the company is trying to stop her, loud screams are heard, which Mr. Maillard explains come from the patients. The narrator expresses some perplexities with the behavior of the guests at the dinner table, but Mr. Maillard dismisses them as eccentricities.

The dinner resumes, but soon becomes a *Pandemonium*. Regardless of the ruckus, the narrator and Mr. Maillard have a conversation in which Mr. Maillard explains that his new system is based on the works of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fethers. He further explains that it was necessary to adopt a new system because the patients had taken over the asylum. At this point, further noises are heard, and all the guests start behaving according to their particular type of madness. An “army of (...) chimpanzees, ourang-outangs, or big black baboons” breaks in the room, the narrator gets a “terrible beating” and finally realizes his mistake: the inmates had revolted, acquired control of the establishment, tarred and feathered the keepers (the “army of chimpanzees”), and locked them up in the basement. The keepers managed to free themselves and regain control of the situation.

In sum, the story is about the misjudgment of the narrator of the situation, which appears “normal” (the keepers control the patients) but is, in fact, “insane” (the patients control the keepers). Having reviewed the narrative organization of the tale, it is possible to develop the parallelism between Poe’s tale and the “joke” type of text.

In *The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fethers* there is an of the script MAD and SANE. The two scripts are organized in a web of smaller and larger scripts that condition their actualization. For example, the script for MENTAL ASYLUM prescribes that some sort of restraint be placed upon the patients; however, we are told by the narrator that Mr. Maillard’s system abolishes the distinction by allowing almost complete freedom to the patients. The scripts for HOSPITAL and for GUARD both prescribe that patients and guards alike wear uniforms, but, once more, we are told that Mr. Maillard’s system eliminates this distinguishing feature; Maillard’s system does without uniforms.<sup>4</sup>

In a “normal” situation, there would be a clearly distinguished axiological system, organized around the axis SANE vs MAD, which would look somewhat like this:

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<sup>4</sup>It is interesting to note that the first suspicion of the real nature of the dinner guests comes from their inappropriate clothes.

sane	mad
free normal clothes outside good food	prisoner patient's uniform inside bread and water

but Maillard's revolution has reversed the situation and has blurred the distinction between reason and madness within the boundaries of the asylum.

The whole point of the story lies in the difficulty of determining who is sane and who is not. As a matter of fact, the story is based in this polar reversal (of the type real/unreal, see above) and the hesitation between the two sides of the opposition. The narrator's hesitations, first with the girl in the parlor, then with the guests during the dinner scene, and finally with the entrance of the guardians, taken to be monkeys, are precisely a dramatization of the opposition between the two possible situations: either those locked up are insane, and so the people with whom the narrator is having dinner are sane (albeit eccentric) or those locked up are sane, and the dinner guests are insane.

Throughout the text, and until its resolution, the narrator (and the reader) hesitate to draw the boundaries between reason and madness because the situation described in the text is compatible both with the script MAD and its opposite. Hence the conclusion, anticipated above, that in this respect there is a structural homology between *The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fethers* and a joke text.

It is interesting to note that the narrator's hesitation is also the reader's hesitation, but only up to a certain point. At the beginning of the story, the reader is given very few clues of the reversal that has taken place. The title of the story, with the allusion to "tar and feathers" is possibly the only "give away" clue that something is wrong with the institution; however, as the story unfolds the reader accumulates enough information to start doubting the intelligence of the narrator, and by the time Mr. Maillard tells his own story, the reader has guessed what has happened whereas the narrator learns it only after the "terrible beating."

Poe is here clearly playing on the reader's sense of superiority towards the narrator, which enables the reader to grasp the double entendre of Mr. Maillard's remarks about not trusting delusory appearances and what one is told. In a sense, the reader and Mr. Maillard share the same vantage point towards the narrator, since they are aware of the real situation and the narrator is not. It is also interesting that the narrator concludes his tale by saying that he is still looking for the works of Tarr and Fethers, thus further revealing his lack of understanding of some of the hoax played upon him by Maillard. This fact further reinforces the distance between the narrator and the reader, who obviously will have understood the reference.

It should also be mentioned that the text of the tale is interspersed with minor "give away" clues, such as the misogynistic detail that a majority of insane people are women and the majority of the guests at the dinner table are women, whereas all the "inmates" in Maillard's tale are males.

If we return to the narrative organization of the tale, it will appear that Poe's playing with the hesitations of the narrator/reader towards the guests and Maillard is dependent on the narration not "giving away" that the guardians have been imprisoned and the tables effectively turned. Compare this fact to the text of the doctor's wife joke above (75). If the text began by "The lover of a doctor's wife..." the element of surprise, crucial to the joke, would be lost (see ch. 9 for a discussion in terms of "implicit" elements of the text). It can be concluded that in this respect also there is a perfect parallelism between *The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fethers* and the joke text type: in both cases, it is imperative that something in the text never be mentioned, because the text is based on its final element of surprise (the "punch line").

But this is only part of the picture. Certainly, *The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fethers* is about the problem of discriminating between reality and appearances and on the problem of drawing the boundaries between rationality and madness. But, although these metaphysical themes are certainly present and can be shown to be consistent with Poe's general philosophy, focusing on them is, in a way, not being true to the text. A detail in the final scene, right before the entrance of the tar and feathers covered guardians, reveals that Poe's intents are not precisely metaphysical. The dinner party of the lunatics has been enlivened by a small orchestra (of lunatics, as well). When it appears clear that the guardians have freed themselves and are trying to enter the room where the dinner party is set, they "sprang all at

once to their feet and to their instruments, and, scrambling upon their table, broke out with one accord into “Yankee Doodle,” which they performed, if not exactly in tune, at least with an energy superhuman, during the whole of the uproar” (T&F, 96).

This detail goes unnoticed in the rest of the text, and none of the characters, or Poe, addresses the incongruity of the musical choice of the orchestra. The only available explanation is that Poe is using the choice of the music to reveal that in fact the story is a parody of the North-American democracy, towards which he seems to have had unsympathetic feelings. This also explains the curious title and the names “Tarr” and “Fethers.” Evidently Poe’s perception of this typically American practice was that it was somewhat barbaric, and this explains his choice of referring to it to characterize the behavior of insane people who have arrived by cunning and deception to a ruling position.

Seen under this light of socio/political criticism, the tale reveals a layered structure. At face value, it is the narration of a hoax perpetrated by Maillard onto the narrator. It also is a hoax perpetrated by Poe onto his reader (insofar as it shares the same narrative organization and the script opposition of a joke), who is misled in the first part of the story, as the narrator is. But at a larger level it is a parody of a “grotesque” or humorous short story, which turns out to be a parable on contemporary politics.

It is interesting that neither the SSTH nor the GTVH has direct provisions for handling such multi-layered meanings as these. Hyper-determination<sup>5</sup> of the text is a common issue in literary criticism. Isotopy theory (cf. ch. 2) is often used to account for this multiplicity of readings. In principle, there does not seem to be any problem in providing a multilayered set of script activation to account for this phenomenon, especially in light of the discussion of weak activation in the previous chapter. The details of this proposal will have to be worked out in some detail, however. This text has been analyzed with the non-extended version of the SSTH (one script opposition/); however, an important extension has been introduced to the

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<sup>5</sup>The fact that the “value” of an element of the text comes from its belonging to several “systems” which invest each element of a signification; for example, a word in a rhyming position in a poem is hyperdetermined because it has a meaning that comes from its lexical meaning and its position in the sentences of which the text is made, but it also has a meaning as part of a system of rhyming and non-rhyming words, largely independent of the literal meaning of the text.

SSTH, namely the importance given to the organization of the information in the text (not “giving away” the fact that the inmates took over the asylum). In this perspective, it is important to note the difference between Chlopicki’s approach to short stories and the one exemplified above. Whereas Chlopicki only reduces the narrative text of the short stories he analyzes to script-oppositions and s, and thus recognizes the humor-generating conditions of the text, this approach endeavors to describe some of the mechanisms that make the text funny, including, but not limited to, the presence of script oppositions. As noted above, the approach works only for some texts which happen to share the structure of jokes. Other texts need to be analyzed using partially different tools.

## 8.2 Register Humor in T. L. Peacock

This section endeavors to analyze some selected passages from a novel (*Headlong Hall* (1815)) by Thomas Love Peacock, a little known 19th century humorist, who was a friend of Shelley.

Consider the description of Mr. Escot’s (a character in *Headlong Hall*) entrance in the room where breakfast is being eaten, carrying a human skull.<sup>6</sup>

- (91) Several of the ladies shrieked at the sight of the skull; and Miss Tenorina, starting up in great haste and terror, caused the subversion of a cup of chocolate, which a servant was handing to the Reverend Doctor Gaster, into the nape of the neck of Sir Patrick O’Prism. Sir Patrick, rising impetuously, *to clap an extinguisher*, as he expressed himself, *on the farthing rushlight of the rascal’s life*, pushed over the chair of Marmaduke Milestone, Esquire, who, catching for support at the first thing that came in his way, which happened unluckily to be the corner of the table-cloth, drew it instantaneously with him to the floor, involving plates, cups and saucers, in one promiscuous ruin ... Mr. Escot was a little surprised at the scene of confusion which signalled his entrance (*Headlong Hall*, 56).

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<sup>6</sup>The reader may be puzzled by the fact that anyone would want to go to breakfast carrying a human skull; the character’s behavior is justified by the fact that he is planning to lecture on phrenology.

The main problem with the analysis of complex passages such as (91) is that a fine-grained tool such as semantic analysis produces an excess of analysis; therefore, in order to keep the analysis within manageable limits, only a few informal comments will be provided.

This passage is an excellent example of physical comedy, but in this context it is particularly interesting how the humorous material is presented by Peacock.

The quoted passage consists of three sentences. The second one is 70 words long, a figure sensibly larger than the average sentence. The effect produced by such a long sentence may be impressionistically described as "accumulation." This effect is further reinforced by the presence of several embedded parenthetical sentences, which in turn have embedded parentheticals inside them. The overall effect is that of accumulation and confusion, which skillfully matches the events described in the text. The final sentence works in part as a "punch line," i.e., closes the scene with a sudden outburst of humor (in this case, an example of understatement).

Beyond these stylistic considerations, it should be noted that there is an incongruity of register between the trivial events described (dropping a cup, falling) and the "formal" style of the presentation. Consider the following lexical choices: "subversion" for "fall over," "rising impetuously" for "sprang up," and "promiscuous ruin" for "general fall." It may be argued that the substitutions proposed here are not semantically neutral and that they add or subtract meaning to the paraphrases, but the precision of the paraphrase is not the issue. What matters here is that the reader will recognize the lexical instances above as instantiating a "latinate," "flowery," "formal" style, while the subject matter is, as pointed out above, trivial. If the labels "high" and "low" are attached respectively to the register and the subject matter, a typical opposition is established. It should be noted that the opposition is between registers and not between lexical scripts. This is a significant broadening of the SSTH, in keeping with the discussion in ch. 7.

To show the procedure by which the instantiation of the "formal" register is achieved formally, one would have to show that the lexical items highlighted above all are linked with long-distance links to scripts such as *LATINATE*, *HIGH-BROW*, etc., which in turn would activate a register-script *FORMAL*. The length and syntactic complexity of the sentences in the passage would also be taken into account to determine the register. The next step would then be the activation of the synonyms and near-synonym scripts, and their

long-distance links to situational and general knowledge scripts that would reveal that the most common, typical, unmarked expression of the topic at hand is achieved through a “familiar” register.

An interesting aspect of (91) is the authorial digression which comments metalinguistically upon the way the characters are expressing themselves. Sir Patrick intends “*to clap an extinguisher*, as he expressed himself, *on the farthing rushlight of the rascal’s life*,” Peacock’s emphasis on the character’s way to express himself is indicative that this is a relevant issue. Indeed, the flowery expression quoted may be paraphrased as “kill.” This redundant and deliberately obscure way to word a simple thought violates several of Grice’s maxims (quantity, manner, perhaps quality, but, interestingly, see ch. 9, not relation) and is in fact a good example of “formal” register. Needless to say, “to kill” is usually expressed in this context (being scalded by hot chocolate) with much more succinct and colloquial expressions. Peacock is showcasing another example of register-based humor, to which he attracts the reader’s attention.

Consider another example of authorial digression

- (92) Mr. Escot passed a sleepless night, the ordinary effect of love, according to some amatory poets, who seem to have composed their whining ditties for the benevolent purpose of bestowing on others that gentle slumber of which they so pathetically lament the privation (*Headlong Hall*, 51).

which pokes fun at poets, accusing them of putting people to sleep. Consider in (92) the use of expressions such as “gentle slumber,” “benevolent purpose,” “bestow” “pathetically” which all connote gentleness and caring, with the expression “whining ditties” characterizing the works of the poets. “Whining” connotes “annoying, disturbing.” While “to bestow gentle slumber” is definitely a “formal” register, “to whine” is familiar and informal; moreover, to say that someone’s verses put people to sleep is, again, a familiar expression, here expressed in formal register.

Next, consider the following example:

- (93) the rage and impetuosity of the Squire continued fermenting to the highest degree of exasperation, which he signified, from time to time, by converting some newly unpacked article, such as a book, a bottle,

a ham, or a fiddle into a missile against the head of some unfortunate servant... (*Headlong Hall*, 6)

in which the use of a periphrasis for “throw” (“convert into a missile”) and the use of adjectives such as “unfortunate” and verbs such as “ferment” and “signify” impose repeated switches from formal to informal registers, and clash with the subject matter of the text (throwing objects at someone else’s head).

As pointed out above, these cases of “register” humor are mostly created by authorial intrusions and/or comments, since they involve an evaluation and a skillfully controlled contrast between the expected style and the stylistic choice made in the text.

An important point that should be made is that neither the “plot” of *Headlong Hall* nor the passages analyzed are particularly funny, beyond their wording. There is nothing inherently funny in someone throwing things at servants. The position of the humor in these texts is radically different from the short story by Poe. In Poe’s text, the entire *raison d’être* of the story is to build a humorous climax; in Peacock’s passages, the story moves on without much concern for its humorous aspects. Consider the fact that in Poe’s story the text actually ends shortly after the “punch line” has been reached. Peacock’s passage occurs at the beginning of the text. A way to distinguish between the two types of text would be to say that the first type is narratively an elaborate joke, while the second is a narrative text to which humorous elements have been applied, but to which there is a non-humorous narrative core.

This suggests distinguishing between a non-humorous narrative core that progresses the story and the humor-provoking parts of the text. This is a very preliminary concept that obviously needs further research.

So far, two types of issues have been raised: longer texts that share the structural organization of jokes (buildup/punch line) and longer texts that do not share the structural organization of jokes. There are other problematic aspects of the application of the SSTH (or the GTVH) to non-jokes. The two remaining parts of this section will examine humor hyperdetermination and a particular type of non-narrative text.

### 8.3 A Passage from Voltaire's *Candide*

Consider the following passage, taken from the beginning of Voltaire's *Candide*:

- (94) Un jour, Cunégonde en se promenant auprès du château, dans le petit bois qu'on appelait *parc*, vit entre des broussailles le docteur Pangloss qui donnait une leçon de physique expérimentale à la femme de chambre de sa mère, petite brune très jolie et très docile. Comme Mlle Cunégonde avait beaucoup de disposition pour les sciences, elle observa, sans souffler, les expériences réitérées dont elle fut témoin; elle vit clairement la raison suffisante du docteur, les effets et les causes, et s'en retourna tout agitée, toute pensive, toute remplie du désir d'être savante, songeant qu'elle pourrait bien être la raison suffisante du jeune Candide, qui pouvait être la sienne.

/One day, Cunegonde, taking a walk near the castle, in the little wood they called *parc*, saw among the bushes Doctor Pangloss giving a lesson in experimental physics to her mother's maid, a little brunette, very good looking and docile. As Miss Cunegonde had great dispositions for the sciences, she observed, without a breath, the repeated experiences she witnessed; she saw clearly the doctor's sufficient condition, the effects and the causes, and returned, agitated and thoughtful, filled with the desire of being knowledgeable, thinking that she might well be the sufficient condition for the young Candide, and he for her./

The humorous effect of the scene comes from the inadequacy of the register of philosophical discourse used to describe sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse is an interesting subject matter (linguistically speaking) because it greatly restrains the available registers. As a matter of fact, only two variants are possible; medical and obscene.<sup>7</sup> Either one uses words such as "copulate" or "intercourse" or one is forced to use shorter and more colorful synonyms. A third possibility is that of euphemism ("do it," "make love"), but that raises different issues (basically avoidance of the tabooed subject).

Therefore, when the text forces the activation of the register of philosophy ("experimental physics, disposition for sciences, repeated experiences,

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<sup>7</sup>D. H. Attardo (p.c.) points out that a "romantic" register is also available. This is perhaps so, but this author tends to believe that a romantic description of sexual intercourse will euphemize.

sufficient reason, effects, causes, knowledgeable") a clash arises between the subject matter, which would force the selection of either the medical or obscene register, and the register selected by the text itself.<sup>8</sup> As anticipated, the clash between register instantiated by the text, and register normally associated with the subject matter creates an opposition similar to that of a script opposition, thus creating a humorous effect.

It should be noted that the humorous nature of the text is not limited to the clash between the actual and implied registers; for example, there is a sexual/voyeuristic theme in the episode that may be perceived as humorous, as there is a satire of Leibnizian philosophy that was almost certainly the direct "butt of the joke." As a matter of fact, it is precisely the multiple determination (or hyperdetermination) of the humorous effect that makes the text interesting.

Although the components of the humorous text, opposite and overlapping scripts, are present, it is impossible to pinpoint a unique element causing the passage from the first to the second isotopy (i.e., a script-switch trigger). This fact would be a minor problem for the SSTH, which claims that script-switch triggers are "optional" (Raskin 1985: 117); however, the SSTH never addresses the issue of how the switch will occur if no trigger is present. It may be assumed that the accumulation of allusions (i.e., weak links to other scripts) would end up triggering the actualization of the second script. What would prove difficult to handle in the SSTH is the multiple determination of the text: the SSTH does not handle humorous texts that are funny for several reasons at the same time gracefully (see, however, Raskin (1985: 133-134)). In the SSTH, once the hearer has ascertained a script-opposition and the of the opposed scripts, he/she assumes that the text is funny, switches to NBF mode and "moves on." With sophisticated and complex texts such as (94), the hearer cannot simply assume that all the remainder of the text will be NBF and that the humor has been ascertained once and for all.

These texts present problems which are different than the apparent counter-examples discussed by Raskin (1985: 132-140). The problem of (94) is different from "compound jokes" (Raskin 1985: 134), which, as Raskin points

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<sup>8</sup>It may be argued that in different contexts and/or situations other registers than the two proposed above may be selected; this is true, but irrelevant: by no stretch of the imagination it is possible to use philosophical jargon as an unmarked register to discuss sexual intercourse, so it matters little to find which register Voltaire, or Voltaire's readers, or contemporary readers, would select.

out, only require a repeated application of the script-opposition mechanism. It is also different from “sophisticated jokes” which require the activation of sophisticated, allusive, non-linguistic scripts. In (94), not only are the sophisticated scripts activated, but some of the script oppositions that can be traced in the text are generated by their inferences (the reader may amuse him/herself in determining the inferential chain necessary to arrive at the conclusion that Voltaire is making fun of Leibniz; the clue is the use of the lexemes “sufficient condition”). Moreover, not one, but many script oppositions and *s* are activated in the text (SEX/NO SEX; PHILOSOPHY/SEX; CHASTE/LEWD), all of which contribute to the overall effect of the text. Consider for example the fact that Voltaire chooses to use SEX as the local antonym of PHILOSOPHY; Voltaire could have chosen GARDENING, with similar results in terms of script opposition, but would have failed to evoke the social stigma of illicit sex and/or inclination to passion on the philosopher Pangloss (who represents Leibniz).

This is not to say that the SSTH or GTVH could not handle cases such as the above; however, to do so, the relations between multiple oppositions within the same joke would have to be better defined. A new category of sophisticated texts would perhaps have to be introduced. In other words, the SSTH/GTVH would have to be amplified to account for the richness of the literary text.

## 8.4 An Example of Menu-Propos

Garapon (1957) presents numerous examples of medieval and Renaissance humorous texts belonging to textual genres that have since disappeared. According to Garapon, these *fatrasies*, *sotties*, *menus propos*, etc. are all characterized, by “verbal fantasy,” i.e., a completely defunctionalized (see ch. 3), non-communicative use of language based on sound associations, repetitions, and in general on a verbal “euphoria.” All of these genres were considered to be humorous by their audiences; the modern reader has to rely on philological testimony in order to accept their humorous nature.

Ostensibly, the *menus propos* are “conversations” between two or more, often unidentified, characters. These conversations are completely disjointed, and it appears impossible to identify a common thread which would unite the various remarks at a semantic level. The only requirement seems to be that

the first line uttered by a character rhyme with the last line of the previous character.<sup>9</sup> For several reasons, not the least being that the texts are almost impossible to understand without heavy glossing, no detailed account will be attempted in this context (see Garapon (1957) for a more detailed account). Instead, a very brief example of *menu propos* will be presented to show how problematic its account would be for the non-extended SSTH.

(95) Second speaker:

“On prent volentiers du convent  
le plus meschant pour estre abbé.”

Third speaker:

“Dy moi: que signifie gabbé?  
Il signifie deux fois menty.” (Garapon 1957: 54)  
/“Often from the convent is taken  
the meanest to be abbot”  
“Tell me: what does “fooled” mean?  
It means twice lied to.”/

The *menu propos* is organized around three unidentified characters who speak in turns. Their utterances are rhymed with the following schema: AB-BC-CD etc. The interesting issue is that their sentences “do not present any relationship among each other” (Garapon 1957: 53). In other words, they are completely incoherent, as the example above shows clearly, since there isn’t any connection between the first two and the second two lines.

No attempt will be made at an analysis of this genre, in this context. It is interesting to see that the SSTH would encounter some problems in accounting for their humorous nature: although one can identify a script opposition, between abbots and fooled people, there seems to be hardly any room for overlapping scripts; moreover, the strictly semantic part of the theory would discard these utterances as ill-formed (at the least because they lack coherence).

It is hard to see how an expansion of the SSTH could handle this type of texts since it violates both general semantic rules of the language and the main hypothesis of the SSTH. Clearly, revision of the SSTH along the lines of

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<sup>9</sup>In this regard, *menus propos* differ from both the limerick and the *chastushka* (Raskin 1985: 170-177) which have clear semantic cohesion—something the *menus propos* lack entirely.

the GTVH, where the narrative strategy module may comprise special rules for text-formation capable of handling distorted criteria of textuality such as (95), is a first step in the right direction, but much more needs to be done. These issues will be developed in full in Attardo and Raskin (forthcoming).

## Chapter 9

# The Cooperative Nature of Humor

This chapter discusses jokes and humor in the light of Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP). The chapter begins by establishing that jokes present a violation of one of the four maxims composing the CP. The nature of the violation of the CP is addressed, and it is shown that the violation of the CP is real, and not "mentioned" or otherwise metalinguistically salvaged. Having established that jokes are non-cooperative in Grice's sense, their observed communicative effect must be explained, and this is accomplished by postulating a hierarchy of CPs, each of which incorporates the inferential powers of the CPs it overlays. A CP for humor is established in this context. Finally, the chapter considers the importance of the implicit in jokes, which is found to be connected to the peculiar CP of humor. All the necessary terminology is introduced in the first section, but the reader may safely pass over the section on mention theory, which is essentially a methodological discussion.

### 9.1 Jokes as the Violation of Grice's Maxims

A basic assumption which underlies the following remarks is that a large number of jokes involve violations of one or more of Grice's maxims, as seen in chapters 4 and 5. The claim that jokes could be viewed in terms of violations of maxims dates back to Grice himself, who considers irony as an

example of implicature, as in:

- (96) Miss X produced a series of sounds that correspond closely with the score of "Home sweet home." (Grice 1989: 37)<sup>1</sup>

and a (complex) pun based on the name of the Indian province "Sind"

- (97) A British general cabled *Peccavi* to his HQ. (Grice 1989: 36) [*Peccavi* is the Latin translation of the sentence "I have sinned" phonetically similar to "I have Sind."] ]

The first direct application of Grice's CP to humor research are those of Violi and Manetti (1979: 132-133), Hancher (1980, 1981, 1982, 1983), Eco (1981), Martinich (1981), Morreall (1983: 79-82), Leech (1983: 98-99) and Hunter (1983).

The following examples will show how particular types of jokes violate Grice's maxims:

- (98) (= 69) Quantity

"Excuse me, do you know what time it is?"

"Yes."

- (99) Relation

"How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

"Fish!"

- (100) (= 19) Manner

"Do you believe in clubs for young people?"

"Only when kindness fails." (Attributed to W.C. Fields)

- (101) Quality

"Why did the Vice President fly to Panama?"

"Because the fighting is over." (Johnny Carson 1-19-90)

Example (98) violates the maxim of quantity by not providing enough information. Violation through providing excess information is also possible and, for instance, was codified in medieval French literature under the form

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<sup>1</sup>For an implicatural analysis of irony, not based explicitly on Grice's work, but compatible with it, see Booth (1974), see also 13.

of *énumération* (e.g., Garapon 1957: 22-25). Example (99) is an “absurd” joke, with a certain appropriateness from the well-known surrealist taste for bizarre associations. Another example of relevance violation is in section 5.1.3 (70). Example (100) violates the “submaxim” of manner, “avoid ambiguity,” as in general do all forms of verbal humor based on ambiguity, such as puns. Example (101) is a deliberate infraction of the maxim of quality, that is used to insinuate that the then Vice-President was a coward.

What is being claimed is that the above texts do not flout, or exploit, the maxims, but that they violate them, i.e., they fail to conform to their “recommendations.” In Grice’s discussion of the maxims, one of the possible cooperative uses of the maxims is their flouting, i.e., their patent (Grice has “blatant”) violation, which allows the hearer to infer that a given maxim is being violated only insofar as another maxim is being obeyed (Grice 1989: 30). Grice’s example is that of answering the question about how X has been doing on his new job, with “He likes his colleagues and he hasn’t been to prison yet.” On the face of it, the answer violates the maxim of relevance, but if one assumes that the speaker is still committed to the CP, one can infer that the maxim is being flouted in order to imply that X is (potentially) dishonest.

In the case of the jokes above, however, no ulterior interpretation of the text can salvage it from the violation of the maxim. Consider example (98): the first speaker is failing to provide the necessary amount of information (namely the time) because he/she misinterprets the indirect speech act of requesting the time as a literal request of information about his/her capacity of possessing the information. There is no way that the hearer can arrive to the fulfillment of his/her request by assuming that the speaker is following some other maxim. One may imagine somewhat unlikely situations in which the answer would be a normal flouting of the maxim of quantity; for instance, if it were a known fact that the speaker had broken his/her watch, and that it would be repaired at a fixed time in the afternoon, then the answer “yes” could be reinterpreted on the basis of the maxim of relevance as providing the necessary information. The inferential path would look somewhat like: the speaker knows the time, but I know that this is possible only after the moment his/her watch has been repaired, so it must be past that point in time. This example, however contrived, has the merit of emphasizing the

difference between flouting and violating a maxim.<sup>2</sup>

## 9.2 Violating the Maxims

The fact that the speaker does not follow the CP in parts of his/her utterances has momentous consequences. Because the CP defines the prerequisites of BF communication—that is the speaker's commitment to truth, relevance, clarity, and to providing the right quantity of information at any given time—when a speaker is being earnest in his/her effort to communicate, he/she will try to follow the CP.

The CP assumes a commitment to the truthfulness of the speaker's utterance. If the speaker has left the BF mode, the hearer has no warranty that the speaker is not lying about all or some of the aspects of his/her message, or even worse, that the message is not totally irrelevant. In other words, if the speaker is not committed to the CP, then the hearer may only infer from the utterance that the speaker has uttered a sentence of literal meaning M, plus all the usual existential presuppositions (e.g., the speaker exists), minus any inference deriving wholly or in part from M.

Consider the following situation:

- (102) A is told by B that "the cat is on the mat" but A does not know if B is CP compliant

Consider "the cat is on the mat" to be "M." The following violations of PC may have taken place: A knows that B has literally said M, but A does not know whether B was lying and the cat is *not* on the mat (the speaker is violating the maxim of quality); or whether the cat is sitting on the precious

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<sup>2</sup>The claim that jokes do not involve a violation of the PC has been put forth by Jodlowiec (1991: 251) within the framework of Relevance Theory. It is unclear what the status of the claim is particularly because it follows the claim that "no exhaustive generalizations about the mechanisms (...) of all verbal jokes can be put forward" (Ibid.). This latter claim is erroneous and explained by the fact that Jodlowiec relies on a purely pragmatic account of joke processing with insufficient attention to its semantics. It may well be that the claim that jokes do not violate the CP comes from the notion that humor *eventually* makes (some sort of) sense, but that misses the issue entirely. As discussed in some detail in the body of the text, that joke processing involves two moments: the perception of incongruity (CP violation) and its resolution (compliance with CP-for-humor).

antique handpainted silk mat a rich aunt just bequeathed A (quantity); or whether a killer is aiming a gun at A's head (relevance); whether any of A's six cats is sitting on any of A's numerous mats, and A has no way of knowing about which cat and/or mat B is talking about (manner).

But, from the point of view of communication, an even worse situation holds. Assuming that B is lying (violating CP), it does not follow from M that there are either a cat or a mat. Consider:

$$(\text{ON}(\text{cat}, \text{mat})) \supset (\exists \text{cat}) \& (\exists \text{mat})$$

but if the left member of the implication is false, the implication is always true, regardless of the truth of the right member,<sup>3</sup> hence we cannot pass any judgement as to whether there exists either a cat or a mat (outside of logic: B could have made this up, since he/she is lying anyway).

If B had not been violating the CP, then clearly all the usual implications would hold. A does not know, however, whether B is following the CP, and so the very ground for inferential work is missing. A could assume that B is following the CP, but by doing so, A would put him/herself at risk of being duped, made fun of, or otherwise deceived.

As a result, in a situation in which the hearer doubts the CP compliance of the speaker, either the hearer assumes CP violation and suspends all inferencing, or the hearer ignores the possibility of violation and takes the speaker's word for what is being said. Naturally, if the hearer has had reason to doubt the speaker's compliance in the CP, the second option is inadequate. The effect of this situation is clearly an invalidation of communication, since the only safe inference from M is that the speaker said M.<sup>4</sup>

How is it possible then that speakers do successfully engage in communicative practices that involve humorous exchanges? By claiming that the speaker in jokes violates Grice's maxims, it is being claimed that these texts constitute examples of non-cooperative behavior; nevertheless, the examples do "somehow" make sense, and are understood and recognized as jokes. The rest of this chapter will present and explain the solution to this apparent puzzle.

An important aspect of the processing of the joke text has been assumed implicitly in the discussion so far. It has been shown, for instance in ch. 3 and

<sup>3</sup>See for instance Reichenbach (1947: 27).

<sup>4</sup>In fact, the hearer does not reject the message entirely, but tries to extrapolate as much bona-fide information from it as possible, see Raskin (1992).

6, that the processing of a humorous text involves reaching an interpretive dead-end and backtracking in order to find another interpretation to the text. The decision to backtrack can be seen as a first hint at the solution of the problem outlined above: the hearer seems to assume the speaker's cooperative intent even *after* his/her failure to provide a text with a literal BF sense. After presenting the processing of the text again, from the point of view of the application of the CP, the next section will discuss an attempt at "skirting" the issue, and finally discuss the solution of the paradox, namely the hierarchy of CPs, including a CP for humor.

Grice notes that by violating one of the maxims the speaker "will be liable to mislead" (1989: 30); and this is exactly the case in the text of a joke in a literal reading. The processing of a joke can be described (in theory-neutral terms) as the discovery of a second "sense" in a text that had initially seemed to be headed in the direction of a "normal" disambiguation. The Raskin's SSTH (1985) (ch. 6) describes this phenomenon as the imposition of a second "script"; the structuralist-based theories (ch. 2 and 3) as the discovery of a second "isotopy". The speaker producing the text uses the violation of a maxim to mislead the hearer into believing that "normal" reliable information is being provided, while in effect the text, or the utterance, is rigged with the unexpected presence of the second sense (script, isotopy).

Consider example (100) again. The polysemous word "club" introduces a first (unnoticed) ambiguity, while "kindness fails" is the part of the sentence which redirects the interpretation of the text onto the second script/isotopy. During the process of disambiguation, the reader selects the "social activities" meaning of the polysemous lexeme "club." Nothing adverse occurs, up to the point when the VP "fails" forces the reader to correct his/her choice. When the word "fails" is reached, however, the disambiguation process is brought to a halt. It is impossible, at that point, to make sense of the sentence. The reader is then faced with an option: either discard the text as ill-formed, and thereby assume that the utterance did not convey any meaning (with the exception of its own ill-formedness and the inferences thereof), or backtrack and check for possible ambiguous or polysemous lexemes, constructions, etc., that might be given another reading. The option of declaring the text ill-formed is undesirable under the principle of cooperation (see below). While backtracking, the reader encounters the lexeme "clubs" once again. The sense "stick" offers itself to the reader, who can then reprocess the second part of the text as a (very) elliptical sentence having roughly the form "[I

would use clubs on young people] only when kindness fails.” A more detailed account of this process can be found in ch. 3.

### 9.3 The Mention Account

An attempt to resolve the problem of the apparent non-cooperative nature of jokes has been made within the “mention theory.” “Mention theory” comes from an explanation of irony presented by Sperber and Wilson (1981), which assumes that any ironical utterance is, in fact, the mention of another utterance. Mention is intended in the philosophical sense which distinguishes between the use of a word (e.g., “the dog runs”), and its mention (e.g., “the previous example included the word ‘dog’”). Before dealing in some details with the issues, it is interesting to consider the reasons for proposing a mention theory of jokes.

In this writer’s opinion, there are two reasons to propose the mention account of jokes: these are the essentially commonsensical observations that jokes “work” in interactions between people (see above) and that (at least some) jokes convey some information. The observer is faced with two sets of contradictory facts: on the one hand, joking is a successful interpersonal and/or communicative exchange, and, on the other hand, joking violates the principle of cooperation, which accounts precisely for successful interpersonal communication. Since the principle of cooperation regulates both interactions<sup>5</sup> and transmission of information, it stands to reason that one would want to claim that jokes do not violate the principle. If one acknowledges the presence of a violation of the principle of cooperation, accounting for the communicative aspects of jokes automatically becomes a problem.

The mention theory, by claiming that Grice’s maxims are not really violated, but that their violation is “enacted” by the narrator, explains the apparently paradoxical situation of a cooperative text that violates (at least one of) Grice’s maxims. The mention theory relieves the analyst from the task of having to justify the paradox of a successful interaction which violates the principles on which successful interactions are supposed to be based.

The motivation for the mention theory of jokes comes from a very real

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<sup>5</sup>Grice and his followers oscillate between the claim that the CP accounts only for the transmission of information and the much broader claim that it accounts for all interaction. This author will return to these issues in Attardo (in preparation, b)

and important problem. As will be shown below, however, a different account of the communicative aspect of jokes is available and is ultimately to be preferred to the mention account.

Another important issue concerns the actual nature of the "mention" claimed by the theory. A "mention theory" may take different forms. Obviously enough, any version of a mention theory will have to distinguish between two types of utterances: mentioned and non-mentioned ones. Further, it must account for the observable surface differences (if any) between the two types of utterances. Intuitively, this account will refer to the (meta)linguistic devices used for mentioning the utterances.

Sperber and Wilson's (1981) application to irony explicitly allows for "implicit mention," i.e., mention of an utterance without any overt trace of the mentioning. This will be referred to as "zero-mention." Yamaguchi (1988) on the contrary disallows zero-mention and requires that the mentioning be overt.

Thus, there are at least two possible versions of the mention theory. The Sperber and Wilson version is "stronger" in the sense that it allows greater leeway to the mentioning, since in principle any utterance can be seen as the (implicit) mention of another utterance. The Yamaguchi version is "weaker" since it constrains the realm of the admissible mentions to the utterances explicitly mentioned. Needless to say, no evaluative connotation of "strong" and "weak" should be read into the above formulations.

In what follows, the weak version and the strong version of the mention theory will be discussed.

### 9.3.1 The Weak Version of the Mention Theory

Yamaguchi (1988) sets out to present a "mention" account of the violation of the maxims in jokes, but his position is so well-edged and takes into account so many exceptions that it turns out to be a forceful statement as to the impossibility of a "weak" version of the mention theory.

Yamaguchi begins by showing how jokes violate Grice's conversational maxims. He then proposes the "Character-Did-It" hypothesis, which follows:

- (I) One of the characters in the joke is free to violate the maxims of conversation in order to produce the essential ambiguity of the joke.

(II) The narrator must avoid violation of the maxims. When for some reason the maxims are to be violated in the narrator's own report of the event, either the narrator needs to pass on the responsibility for the violation to one of the characters, or at least to minimize the narrator's own responsibility for the violation in one way or another. (Yamaguchi 1988: 327)

It should be noted that Yamaguchi's own formulation of the hypothesis already concedes its own refutation: if the narrator needs to *minimize* his/her *responsibility for the violation*, then this implies that the narrator has violated the maxims! Yet, Yamaguchi's analyses should not be rejected *in toto* because they are a fine argument *against* the weak mention hypothesis. As Yamaguchi perspicuously notes, the violation of the maxims is hidden away in the text in a paradoxical attempt at dissimulation bound to failure, since the joke will inevitably foreground the violation so laboriously dissimulated in the text (on this aspect see Dolitsky (1983, 1992) and Dascal (1985)).

Yamaguchi lists three types of mention/dissimulation frames: direct speech, indirect speech, and narrative report.

### Direct Speech

When a speaker (A) reports the utterance of another speaker (B), speaker (A) cannot be held responsible for the locutionary, illocutionary, and (perhaps) perlocutionary contents of the other speaker's utterance. Consider the following example: Johnny tells his mother that he did not eat the jam. He is in fact lying, and the punishment for that violation of the corresponding Gricean maxim is a spanking. Suppose now that Mary, Johnny's sister, tells to her father: "Johnny said 'I did not eat the jam'." Clearly she will not get spanked. This author hesitates to claim that repetition of a speaker's utterance is devoid of any indirect endorsement of its perlocutionary effects. If one were to say at the Republican convention "My neighbor, John Smith, thinks Republicans are untrustworthy," that would probably not go without consequences. The matter is complex, but does not pertain much to this discussion.<sup>6</sup>

Based on the fact that a report of someone else's speech act does not imply its endorsement and is not subject to the same rules, Yamaguchi quite

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<sup>6</sup>It may be noted in passing that Sperber and Wilson seem to be making a more restricted claim:

correctly claims that when the teller of a joke quotes verbatim a statement uttered by one of the characters of the joke, the speaker is not violating the CP him/herself. It is worth clarifying that Yamaguchi does not claim that no violation has occurred, but only that the joke teller cannot be blamed directly for the violation. In other words, the weak mention hypothesis seems to hold perfectly in the case of explicit direct speech report.

Consider the following example:

(103) Arthur: "Today on the school bus a little boy fell off his seat and everybody laughed except me."

Teacher: "Who was the little boy?"

Arthur: "Me." (Yamaguchi 1988: 326)

(103) is a very weak joke, apparently told by or meant for children. It is particularly adequate here for its simplicity and the clarity of the phenomena involved. In his first utterance, Arthur is violating the maxim of quantity by withholding information (namely, by using the generic "boy" when the much more specific "me" was available). Because of the verbatim nature of the report, emphasized by the quotation marks in the written text, the teller cannot be blamed for the violation of the maxim. As Yamaguchi puts it, "the character did it!" This claim will be discussed further below.

## Indirect Speech

The case of indirect speech is somewhat less clear-cut. While the speaker (A) is still reporting some other speaker's (B) words, and so he/she cannot be held responsible for any violation of the CP that occurs in the reported

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When an expression mentioned is a complete sentence, it does not have the illocutionary force it would standardly have in the context where it was used.  
Sperber and Wilson (1981: 303)

However, this is only an imprecise formulation (an *ignoratio elenchi*, to be specific). Certainly Sperber and Wilson do not want to claim that the mentioning speaker is committed to the locutionary content of the utterance he/she mentions. Consider the following example:

The linguist said that in 1957 Chomsky believed that 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously' was grammatical.

The linguist doing the mentioning is not committed to the claim that 'Colorless...' is grammatical.

speech act, A is responsible for the actual wording of the indirect speech act. This is the crux of the matter. Consider example (104):

- (104) The boss finally agreed to give Ken the afternoon off because he said his girlfriend was going to have a baby. Next morning, the boss said, "Was it a boy or a girl?"  
 "Too soon to tell," replied Ken. "We won't know for another nine months." (Yamaguchi 1988: 329)

The violation of the maxim of quality (at the moment of the utterance Ken does not know with certitude that his girlfriend will have a baby)<sup>7</sup> and perhaps of quantity (Ken should have added "If we are lucky and she gets pregnant as a result of our sexual intercourse this afternoon") is "rightly ascribed to the character" (Yamaguchi 1988: 329); however, the fact that the character has violated one or several maxims does not exempt the narrator from the same "fault." Yamaguchi claims that "the narrator has nothing to do with the violation in indirect speech." (Yamaguchi 1988: 329). But is it so? Consider again the example. The character's violation of the maxims is encased in the narrator's narrative frame "he [Ken] said..." The characters have obviously nothing to do with the narrator's choice of the narrative frame. The narrator's apparently innocent statement "he said" is in fact a violation of the maxim of quantity. At that point, the narrator knows that Ken is lying and deliberately withholds this crucial information from the reader. This is done knowingly, because if the narrator were to word cooperatively his narration as "Ken lied to the boss" the joke would lose its characteristics as a joke (and would become a humorous anecdote—see Oring (1989)).

As a result, it is necessary to reach the conclusion that the narrator is an accomplice in the violation of the cooperative principle in (104). By not exposing the character's violation of the CP, the narrator violates it as well, albeit differently and less directly.

### **Narrative Reports**

Yamaguchi begins his discussion of this third class of contexts of violation by acknowledging that "violations of Grice's maxims in narrative reports,

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<sup>7</sup>Not a violation of the maxim of relation as Yamaguchi (1988: 329) claims.

though rarely found, should be ascribed to the narrator" (1988: 329), which amounts to an explicit admission of the inadequacy of the weak mention hypothesis. He also notes that, although the narrator violates the maxims, he/she tries to hide the violation, either by taking the viewpoint of one of the characters in the narration (and so claiming a partial unaccountability), by skillfully avoiding the mention of crucial information, or by backgrounding it. Yamaguchi's highlighting of this fact and the typology of the strategies employed by the speakers are a fine piece of scholarship, but they fall outside the scope of the present discussion; therefore, these issues will not be pursued further.

### 9.3.2 Evaluation of the Weak Mention Hypothesis

As discussed in the previous sections, the weak mention hypothesis is found to be inadequate in two out of three cases. This section will attempt to deal the weak mention hypothesis the final blow. If it can be shown that an hypothesis which does not rely on mention ("non-mention") can account for the remaining case, as well as for those that the weak mention hypothesis could not account for, the weak mention hypothesis will have to be abandoned in favor of the new hypothesis because the latter is descriptively adequate, whereas the former is not.

The non-mention hypothesis would ascribe the violation of at least one maxim to the narrator. It has been shown above that in the case of maxim violations that occur in direct speech reports, no accountability can be claimed for the narrator, but, as seen in the indirect speech reports, the narrator is responsible for the narrative frame in which the reports are made. Precisely as the narrator is guilty in the indirect speech report of failing to mention the fact that the utterer of the reported speech act was violating the CP, the invisible narrator of a direct speech act report is guilty of not making him/herself present in the story to expose the violation of which he/she was aware at the time of the narration (since obviously the narrator has heard the joke before, or has thought of it). It turns out that even in the "best case" scenario for the weak mention theory, things do not work out the way the theory predicts.

A conclusion can be reached: the narrator is always guilty of violation of the CP: either because he/she directly violates one of the maxims or because he/she indirectly does so by not exposing the violation of which he/she is

aware.<sup>8</sup>

### 9.3.3 A “Strong Mention” Account of Jokes

In Sperber and Wilson’s (1981) view, an ironic utterance would involve a speaker “mentioning” an utterance, rather than uttering it and thereby endorsing its veracity. Accepting their thesis<sup>9</sup> for the sake of argument, it could be similarly argued that jokes are not maxim-violating texts and that the violation of the maxim(s) is only “represented” (i.e., mentioned) and does not actually take place.

An adherent to this position would describe jokes as texts in which the speaker represents (mentions) one or several violations of Grice’s maxims, while maintaining him/herself in the safety of a metalinguistic status. In other words, a mention theory of jokes would claim that the violation does not take place at the same level at which the speaker places him/herself, as in the case of metalinguistic sentences containing semantically anomalous or ungrammatical sentences (e.g. “‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’ is not a sentence of English”). A normally unacceptable sentence becomes “acceptable” when put inside a metalinguistic statement about that sentence.

The theoretical advantage of this position is obvious: it allows the theorist to limit the scope of the violations of the maxims (i.e., non-cooperative behavior) to fictional accounts. This in turn, takes care of the paradox of jokes outlined above, because the acceptability of ungrammatical sentences within metalinguistic utterances does not threaten to destroy the grammar, and at the same level, the acceptability of maxim violations within mentioned sentences would not threaten the universal status of the inferential strategies in Grice.

Unfortunately, the position is problematic. Consider an example such as:

- (105) How can you fit 4 elephants in a car? Two on the front seat, and two on the back seat.

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<sup>8</sup>As any Catholic priest will tell you, sins of omission are as bad as the others, although they may be less entertaining.

<sup>9</sup>Irony remains outside of the scope of this book; however, the mention theory has been successfully applied to sarcasm (Haiman 1990), as well as other areas. It seems logical that a strong mention attempt at explaining away the paradox of jokes seen above could be pursued.

Taken literally, the text violates the maxim of quality since the answer to the riddle suggests the absurd idea of fitting the elephants in the car following a human pattern. The mention theory may still be salvaged by the claim that the text of the riddle is not used as a full-fledged utterance by the speaker, but that he/she is only mentioning it; however, this defense is awkward: there is no trace in the text of any "detachment" between the speaker and his/her utterance. Thus, the claim that the speaker is mentioning the utterance has to be introduced for the sole purpose of salvaging the theory.

Moreover, if the mention theory admits zero-mention (that is, mention without any surface trace of the operation), there is an immediate danger of an infinite regression: consider the sentence

(106) Honey, can you pass the salt?

Denoting by "S" sentence (106) and by "M" the "mention operator" the following example would be denoted by "M(S)"<sup>10</sup>

(107) "John said: 'Honey, can you pass the salt?' "

Quite obviously if sentences can be zero-mentioned, any mentioned sentence can be zero-mentioned, including any zero-mentioned sentence, thus producing

$$(M_n(\dots(M_3(M_2(M_1(S)))))) \text{ where } n = \infty$$

Infinite regression is not a problem *per se*, although it may lead to questionable interpretations, as see above. Even if the mention theory could resolve the problem of zero-mention and infinite regression, it can still be shown to be ultimately untenable.

Consider the example of puns. E.g.:

(108) (=54)

Why did the cookie cry?

Because his mother had been away for so long.

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<sup>10</sup>We ignore the fact that the mentioning is done by John in (107). Since mention theory admits zero mention, it doesn't matter if a sentence is mentioned openly as in (107) or covertly, i.e., when there is no surface trace of the fact that the sentence is mentioned. In other words, sentence (106) could be zero-mentioned.

When a speaker makes a pun, he/she pretends to behave as if two unrelated senses of a word (or of a paronym) are equivalent and interchangeable. This is a clear violation of the submaxim of manner "Avoid ambiguity." Guiraud (1976) introduced the notion of "defunctionalization" of the utterance to describe the kind of linguistic behavior involved in punning (see ch. 3), and in verbal humor in general. If the speaker is diverting the linguistic system from its normal function, he/she can hardly be believed to be "mentioning" utterances. The "metalinguistic" option could still be available for cases of "a-contextual" puns like the one mentioned above, since it could be claimed that they are narratives, and as such are "repeated." Conversational witticisms are much harder to take as "mentions" of utterances, from this point of view.

The decisive argument against the mention account of the violation of the maxims comes from another direction: second degree humor.

Eco (1979) analyzes a short story by the great French humorist Alphonse Allais entitled *Un Drame Bien Parisien*. The author constructs the story in a way that brings the reader to the conclusion that two masked characters are the two main characters of the story, only to be told in the end that the two masked individuals are not the two main characters, and moreover have nothing to do with the story. This text, which can only be described as a "practical joke" on the reader, is far from being atypical. So-called "second-degree" humor (see Attardo (1988), Lefort (1992)) consists of humorous texts which "fail to deliver" the expected punch line and become funny precisely because of the failure to do so. A famous example is

- (109) "Have you heard the latest?"  
 "No? Well, neither have I."

It is clear that in these texts the speaker can hardly be said to be "mentioning" the utterances, if he/she intends to "fool" his/her reader into believing that a "normal" BF text will follow, only to deceive his/her audience and deliver instead the unexpected punch line.

It follows that violations of Grice's maxims are responsible for at least some types of humorous texts, and even a strong mention account of jokes does not account for some of the data. On the basis of Occam's razor, the mention theory will therefore have to be rejected: both the mention theory and the non-mention theory can account naturally for a large part of

the data, but the mention theory has both theory internal problems (infinite regression) and descriptive weaknesses (second-degree humor). Since a satisfactory account of the phenomena at hand can be achieved without the mention theory, there is no need to postulate a mention theory of jokes.

It remains to be seen how speakers handle non-cooperative texts, such as jokes. Some issues raised by this apparently non-cooperative behavior are: 1) the nature of the communicative status of humorous texts, 2) the implicit/explicit balance, 3) the relative status of the maxims. These issues will be studied in the following sections.

## 9.4 The Communicative Status of Humorous Texts

The first step towards solving of the apparent puzzle of the processing of non-cooperative texts such as jokes will be to look at an alternative set of maxims proposed to account for the “non-cooperative” behavior of jokes. Next, attention will be given to socially-accepted activities performed “using” jokes. Finally, we will consider the status of the communicative mode of jokes.

### 9.4.1 A Hierarchy of CPs

If humorous texts violate the maxims, one would expect them to become non-cooperative and/or to lose meaningfulness; nevertheless, jokes are (usually) “understood” and are not perceived as lies (lying is non-cooperative) or as ill-formed or cryptic texts. To account for this fact, Raskin (1985) suggested that joking involves a different kind of communication mode, governed by a different set of maxims (see ch. 6). The apparent paradox is solved: after realizing he/she has been misled, the hearer will backtrack and will reinterpret the information provided in the text on the basis of the “humor” maxims, switch to the NBF mode of humor, and react accordingly (i.e., laughing, smiling, etc.).

This claim, of remarkable theoretical importance, opened the way to the study of NBF modes of communication (see Raskin (1992)). In practice, it establishes a hierarchy of CPs. The lowest common denominator is the original CP, but then a humor-CP is introduced which can accommodate the original CP, but can also allow violations of the CP as long as they are

eventually redeemed by an ulterior humorous intent. Other CPs seem to exist, as well as a "meta-CP" which regulates violations to the CP. Further discussion of these issues will be pursued elsewhere (Attardo forthcoming, b). It should be emphasized that this claim is different from Grice's "flouting" of the maxims: one flouts a maxim when one follows another maxim; here one violates a maxim because one follows a different CP.

It is necessary, then, to distinguish between a first reading of the joke, in which the reader notices the violation of Grice's maxims, and a second reading in which the reader, having switched to the NBF mode of humor, reinterprets the text as a joke, and so accepts strange and unrealistic events ("suspension of disbelief"), activates particular stereotypes, and in general "tunes in" to the idiosyncrasies of the NBF mode of humor.

Raskin hypothesized an "extended form of bona fide communication" incorporating humor (and governed by both Grice's maxims and the "humor maxims"). It has been noted (Raskin 1985) that after a hearer experiences an apparent failure to reconcile utterances with his/her own belief system, he/she engages the default communicative mode of "joking." If the speaker is faced with an utterance whose contents he/she cannot reconcile with his/her knowledge of the world, the speaker will try to assimilate it, either by including the new information in his/her world representation or by refusing the conflicting information status of "reliable" knowledge. The joking mode ("Are you kidding?") seems to be the first option, which reflects the premise that joking is more socially acceptable than lying or not making sense (see Raskin 1985:104). From the foregoing discussion, it should be clear that 1) speakers use humorous texts cooperatively (thus corroborating Raskin's thesis), but also 2) they rely on the "subversion" of the maxims to achieve socially desirable effects. Consider, for instance, the possibility of "backing out" of an utterance, by claiming that one "did not really mean it" (i.e., that one was infringing the quality maxim).

It seems also that a radical dichotomy between "serious" BF use of language and "humorous" NBF cannot be maintained in reality. Grice's hypothesized speaker, totally committed to the truth and relevance of his/her utterances, is a useful abstraction, but should be considered only as such. In reality, speakers engaged in everyday communication use humorous remarks that the hearers decode, interpret as such, and use along with other information to build their vision of the communicative context.

The consequences of this recognition—that communication which vio-

lates the maxims can still be “cooperative”—are far ranging. Any attempt to characterize linguistic interaction will have to incorporate rules and inferential mechanisms to handle humorous violations of the CP.

### 9.4.2 Jokes Convey Information

What is then the communicative status of jokes? As has been shown, jokes involve the violation of one (or more) maxims in the first reading. Jokes have, however, been shown to perform various communicative functions; for example, Drew (1987) analyzed reactions to humorous teasing and found that many speakers take teasing seriously, at face value, clearly showing that they assume that the utterer of the tease is communicating effectively (a more detailed discussion will be found in 10.4.1). Mulkay (1988) discusses several “uses” of joking (including sociological accounts of the use of humor among the members of a staff hospital and in a restaurant as a method of “picking up” members of the opposite sex); he concludes that by using humorous utterances, the speakers can avoid committing themselves too strongly to what they say. Jefferson (1984) analyzes narratives relating problematic situations and finds that speakers intersperse humorous remarks in their narratives to show that “they can take it.” These issues will be discussed more at length in ch. 10.

Zhao (1988) has shown that jokes can convey relevant “BF” information as, for example, in the case of jokes about an unfamiliar situation/culture. They do so not by virtue of what they state, but by virtue of their presuppositional basis. Consider the following non-humorous example:

(110) Kennedy’s killer was not part of a CIA plot.

Assume for the sake of the argument that (110) is literally false—that is, Oswald did not act alone and was part of a CIA plot. Even if false, and thus violating the maxim of quality, (110) conveys information beyond the existential presupposition of all participants, namely that a) Kennedy died, b) his death was not accidental, c) his death was materially caused by (at least) one person, d) that someone has made or might make the claim that he was part of a CIA plot, e) that the CIA may “plot” under certain circumstances. On the basis of this fact, it is easy to see how a joke such as (111) could inform the readers about the actual situation in the Soviet Union while still violating the principle of cooperation:

- (111) "Excuse me! Where did you get the toilet tissue?" "Oh, this is used, my own —I'm simply taking it home from the cleaners." (Raskin 1985: 243)

The behavior of the second speaker is absurd, as it is impossible to have one's toilet tissue cleaned. Yet, the text presupposes that toilet tissue was scarce in the USSR, and the reader who was not aware of this fact can add it to his/her knowledge base.

Now that the communicative status of jokes and other humorous types of texts has been assessed, it is possible to consider the "implicit" dimension of jokes in more detail.

## 9.5 The Importance of the Implicit in Jokes

It has been frequently noted that some part of the information in jokes must be left implicit. Explication of the mechanisms involved in the humorous effect of the text results in the destruction of the humorous effect: i.e., a joke loses its humor when the joke teller explains the punch line. After claiming that all jokes involve, among other mechanisms, the violation of a "rule," (see ch. 5), Eco (1981) notes that the rule must be left implicit. Mizzau (1982; see 5.1.3, Dolitsky (1983, 1992) and Jablonski (1991) mention that the way in which the information in a joke is organized is relevant to the "structure" of the joke—that is, not every formulation of the information contained in the joke text (and inferrable from it) will be considered a successful joke. It is precisely because part of the information is present only in the implicit part of the text that the joke acquires one of its characteristics. In other words, for the joke to "function" as such, some information must be left unsaid: i.e., Grice's maxim of quantity must be violated.

The modality of this delicate explicit/implicit equilibrium has yet to be explored fully. A few preliminary remarks will serve the purpose of delimiting the range of the problems involved.

It has been noted that the resolution of incongruity in humor involves mental expenditure (see, for instance, Freud (1905)), so it is clear that the hearer of a joke must infer some implicit information, or perform some cognitive task.

Another well-known requirement of the punch line of a joke is that it should come "unexpectedly" (this is commonly referred to as the "surprise"

theory of humor). Once one takes into consideration such notions as surprise or expectedness, it becomes necessary to refer to the linear aspect of the text of the joke (see ch. 2). Since the decoding of the text of the joke is a temporally structured activity in which the various elements are necessarily introduced in a linear order, it is necessary to avoid the introduction of the "second script" in a text engaged in actualizing the first one and give away the punch line early, thus violating the need for surprise. This fact seems to account for the often noted but scarcely explored fact that the punch line of the joke comes towards the end of the text.<sup>11</sup>

The requirement that the presence of the second sense not be introduced early in the text applies not only to explicit mentions of elements of the second script, but also to any related element which could enable the hearer's actualization of the script via inferential channels. This is clearly connected to the concept of "manifestness" introduced by Sperber and Wilson (1986) for all the contextual information which can be brought into the focus of the speaker's attention. In this terminology, the text of the joke must render non-manifest the presence (or the future presence) of an alternative script.

Consider the following example:

- (112) A young lady was talking to the doctor who had operated her. "Do you think the scar will show?" she asked. "That will be entirely up to you," he said.

The joke depends on the passage from the MEDICAL script to the NUDITY script. The allusion to nudity cannot be topicalized before the end of the text; otherwise, the joke would lose its effectiveness. If the first sentence were substituted by "A young nudist lady..." the punch line would not only lose its suddenness, but would probably lose its evocative side (nudity implies sex).

The quantity maxim for jokes (see ch. 6): "Give as much information as is necessary for the joke" can now be viewed as an informal algorithm for the computation of the quantity of information to be left implicit.

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<sup>11</sup>The reader will recall the demonstration, in ch. 2, that the punch line must occur finally in the text, and that the exceptions can be predicted fairly accurately.

## 9.6 Relative Position of the Maxims

In this section, evidence for a hierarchical organization of the maxims will be presented, first from an empirical analysis, and then on theoretical grounds.

In an analysis of some 243 jokes extracted from a corpus of 6500, Van Raemdonck (1986, 1991) found that all the jokes violated the maxim of relevance while only some violated another maxim as well (Van Raemdonck 1986: 62-63); furthermore, the violations were interdependent. Although the figures are not claimed to be statistically reliable, they still retain interest as a well-grounded example.

These results seem to suggest that when any of the other three maxims is violated in a joke, the maxim of relevance is necessarily violated as well. If the speaker does not believe in the truth of what he/she is saying, the content of the utterance can hardly be expected to be relevant (though the speaker could be lying, thus producing a relevant but non-cooperative utterance; but, then, this would not qualify as a joke). If the speaker does not provide enough information (or provides too much information), what he/she says will not be relevant, either because his/her information will fail to cover some of the relevant issues or because the information will cover issues which are not relevant. If the speaker is obscure or ambiguous, his/her contribution will not be relevant since the hearer will not be able to evaluate whether the information provided is "to the point." Thus, it seems that the maxim of relevance subsumes the other three; in order to be relevant, one must first be sincere, orderly, and exhaustive.

It should be recalled now that the "obligatory violation of the maxim of quantity" was shown to be the underlying motivation for the presence of implicit information in the text of a joke. If all jokes must abide by the NBF quantity maxim (i.e., must violate Grice's maxim of quantity by not giving enough information), there seems to be evidence for a maxim of quantity at the same level of the super-maxim of relevance. The speaker is required, per Grice's maxims, to provide "enough" information for the text to be processed without problematic falls into ambiguity (cf. (100)). Similarly, the speaker is supposed to provide collateral information that would prevent the sudden introduction of an unexpected second sense or, in other words, to set communication on a "safe" base of information which will clearly delimit the "topic" of the interaction and thus prevent a premature switch in the topic of a text like (101) where the topic switches from politics to a "Dan

Quayle" slur.

We are thus faced with two claims for "underlying" maxims: relevance and quantity. It is interesting to note that both positions have been claimed by independent research. Sperber and Wilson (1986) propose an underlying super-maxim of relevance, while Horn (1984) proposes two "principles" "Q" and "R" to "evoke," *à la* Chomsky, Grice's maxims of quantity and relevance. This is not the place to go into the details of an evaluation of both proposals, but it may be noted that since both quantity and relevance have been noted to be necessarily infringed upon in a joke, Horn's dualism seems to be better supported by the facts about joke-texts.

This discussion suggests that the violation of maxims in jokes provides an independently-motivated external element of confirmation to the so-called "relevance" theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986) and to the "revised" maxims proposed by Horn (1984), both of which grant to the maxim of relevance (and of quantity) a higher status than the original Gricean text.<sup>12</sup>

## 9.7 Summary

The cooperative aspects of humor as a NBF mode of communication have been explored, as well as the need for a revision and extension of the idealized "BF" mode of communication. It has also been shown that jokes and other kinds of humorous texts can yield information both on the principles of construction of texts which violate the maxims to exploit the deception of the hearer's expectations, and on the hierarchical organization of the maxims.

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<sup>12</sup>This should not be construed as acceptance *in toto* of the relevance theory, or of Horn's claims. See Attardo (forthcoming b) for further discussion.

# Chapter 10

## Humor in Context

This chapter presents and discusses the relationship between jokes<sup>1</sup> and the contexts in which they occur. While the linguistic models dealt with in the previous chapters are primarily essentialist and pay little attention to the context in which jokes occur, the present chapter will focus on the contextual aspects of linguistic humor. Conversation analysis is the field of linguistics best suited for investigating humor in its spontaneous setting—conversation—and for studying its functions and relevance in the process of communication. The review of the literature/discussion in the first section of the chapter introduces all the necessary background information for the reader unfamiliar with conversation analysis.

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<sup>1</sup>It will not deal with other types of narratives with humorous aspects, such as those presented in Bauman (1986). The texts discussed by Bauman (1986: 33-53) share some of the characteristics of jokes, but differ in other aspects. A comparison between jokes and other (humorous) narratives is an important issue, but an extremely complex one. For a first approach to the issue, which shows that it is necessary to distinguish between jokes and funny anecdotes, see Gardner and Spielman (1980) and Oring (1989).

Some elements of the differences between jokes and other types of humorous texts are sketched in chapter 8. A basic issue revolves around the position of the punch line. Both Gardner and Spielman and Oring concur that non-joke humorous narratives are built somewhat like jokes (buildup and punch line); however, while they both note that the punch line is not necessarily the last item in the text, Gardner and Spielman explain this fact by noting that tellers are not necessarily “good” story tellers (Gardner and Spielman (1980: 197). While this is an interesting suggestion, it fails to address the complexity of the issue as the “moral” following the punch lines shows in the examples analyzed by Oring.

## 10.1 Introduction

This chapter is roughly divided in two parts: the first part deals with the organization of jokes in conversation, and, after a discussion of the distinction between canned and conversational jokes (10.2), focuses on the “preface-telling-response” conversational model of joke telling (10.3.1) introduced by Sacks, and around which most of the relevant literature gravitates. As it will appear in the discussion, while details of Sacks’ analyses are often wrong, his influence has been profound and ultimately beneficial, since the general directions of the discussion of the tripartite model of joke telling are fruitful. The first part of the chapter is concluded by Sacks’ and Sherzer’s account of puns (10.3.2). The second part of the chapter deals with the communicative function of humor and is much more influenced by sociological and psychological work.

Before proceeding to the actual analysis, it will be useful to define both the terms “conversation analysis,” “context,” and “conversational sequence.” Generally defined as the study of conversation (see Levinson (1983: 284-294)), the term “conversation analysis” (CA) will be used here as a synonym of “discourse analysis,” and, in general, for the kind of research associated in linguistics with ethnomethodology. The terms will be used interchangeably, according to Bauman and Sherzer’s (1989) and Schiffrin (1990) claim that it is not profitable to draw strict disciplinary boundaries in the context of a field of study such as CA. The term “context” is ambiguous. “Context” can be intended in at least two ways: the non-linguistic environment of an utterance<sup>2</sup> and the other utterances that precede and/or follow a given utter-

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<sup>2</sup>The definition of context is left intentionally vague. Strictly speaking, any relevant entity in the universe can be part of the context of an utterance, including non-existent, imaginary, or abstract entities. To be exhaustive, a definition of context should be Bloomfieldian and include the nature, position, and relations of all the atoms in the universe (including all socio-cultural relations). Intuitively, this is an unwieldy (and useless) definition. The keyword in the above definition of context is “relevant.” When talking about where to go for dinner, the speakers may safely ignore the position of Alpha Centauri because it is not (usually) relevant to the perlocutionary goals of the communicative exchange. In a situation where the choice of the restaurant is based on a bet between the speakers, which revolves around the position of Alpha Centauri, the position of the star becomes suddenly relevant to the decision of where to go to dinner. These issues must be handled by a theory of what can be relevant and how the relevance of something in relation to something else can be assessed. Sperber and Wilson’s (1986) theory of relevance

ance. Following Halliday (1978) and Petöfi (1973), the former will be called “con-text” and the latter “co-text”. The non-hyphenated form “context” will be used as a general term to refer to both. “Conversational sequences” refers to the ordering of discursive elements in such pairs as “question/answer” “greeting/greeting” (a.k.a., adjacency pairs), or in more complex sequences such as the fact that narratives are first announced, then told, and finally concluded. Conversation sequences are of great importance in CA, since they are taken to inform the structure of conversation.

The primary goal of this chapter is to discuss the interaction of the text of a joke (or shorter witticism) with its context. To do so, it will be necessary to rely heavily upon and critically evaluate the analyses available in the CA framework. One of the conclusions that will be reached in the text is that conversation analysis is the ideal discipline for investigating the contextual aspects of humor.<sup>3</sup>

The second goal of this chapter is to review the available literature in CA and organize its conclusions and insights so as to make them conveniently and systematically available both to humor researchers and to linguists interested in CA. This is far from being a trivial task. As will be shown below, the literature is scattered and rather fragmentary. The exposition will start with a discussion of the distinction between canned and conversational jokes.

## 10.2 Canned Jokes and Conversational Jokes

The important distinction between canned jokes and conversational jokes (a.k.a., situational) is commonly adopted, in part because of the commonsensical appeal of its clear-cut division. The following section will attempt a more formal definition.

### 10.2.1 A First Definition

The discussion may well start by summing up some current approaches. A canned joke is a joke which has been used before the time of utterance in a

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is a first step in this direction. These issues will be addressed in more detail in Attardo (forthcoming, b).

<sup>3</sup>So is rhetorics, which has been very much absent from the field, with the exception of Olbrechts-Tyteca (1974), but see now Carrell (1992; 1993).

form similar to that used by the speaker, such as those which are found in books, collections of jokes, etc.; its text does not depend on contextual factors (it bears “little obvious relationship to the ongoing human interaction” (Fry 1963: 43)) and is quite interchangeable with respect to context. A conversational joke is improvised during a conversation draws heavily on contextual information for its setup (“[they] have (...) their origin in the ongoing interpersonal process” (Fry 1963: 43)), as well as for the “*à propos*” of the punch line; it is almost impossible to transfer it from one situation to another. The distinction between canned jokes and conversational jokes is discussed more at length in Fry (1963: 43), Raskin (1985: 16, 27), Long and Graesser (1988: 37-38), Attardo and Raskin (1991), and Attardo and Chabanne (1992). Attempts have been made to capture the distinction by calling conversational jokes “Witz,” after Freud (see Rutelli 1982, Segre 1982) or “wit” (Long and Graesser 1988) and using “jokes” for canned jokes. Another such attempt was made by Mulkay (1988: 57), who refers to canned jokes as “standardized humorous packages” and to conversational jokes as “situational” or “spontaneous” jokes. Let us note that all the definitions stress that the distinction is not absolute. In other words, it appears that the distinction between canned and conversational jokes is polythetic (see ch. 7).

### 10.2.2 Jokes and Their Context

The distinction presents some problematic aspects—it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between conversational and canned jokes. For example, Freud quotes several conversational jokes, such as witty repartees, in the canonical form of canned jokes. Is a conversational joke retold outside of its setting still a conversational joke, or does it become a canned joke? It is hard, and perhaps impossible, to answer this question scientifically. The question is rendered complex by a number of issues, not the least being that canned jokes are not structurally different in any way from conversational jokes (Mulkay 1988: 57). They can be analyzed in exactly the same way—for instance in terms of bisociation (Koestler (1964), see ch. 5), script-opposition (Raskin (1985), see ch. 6), bi-isotopy (Greimas (1966), see ch. 2), etc.

It is necessary to bear in mind that all jokes, canned or not, will obviously appear in context by the very fact that they are told. The distinction between canned and conversational jokes that Fry, Raskin, and others have tried to capture is pertinent to the relationship of the joke with its context. A canned

joke such as those used as examples in earlier chapters of this book can be recycled any time the situation permits the occurrence of a joke. Consider the most prototypical case of a canned joke: a short text taken from a joke book entitled, for instance, "5000 jokes." There is no doubt that the text is not improvised, and that it bears no relationship at all to the situation in which the reader happens to read it (because it is in written form). Now, consider the case in which a speaker, after having read the text, memorizes it verbatim and repeats it to someone else. Clearly, the joke remains a canned joke, but this time because it is told to someone in a given situation (at a given time, place, etc.), it becomes part of the context, as one may wonder why the speaker chose that specific time to retell the canned joke, and so on. The range of possible relationships between a canned joke and its context has been discussed by Zajdman (1991)—see below.

On the other hand, a situational joke that hinges on a very situation-specific element will be (nearly) impossible to use outside of that situation. The only strategy available to the speaker is to try and reconstruct the situation verbally, i.e., to try to relate to the hearer the relevant aspects of the situation so as to make the situational joke exportable to another context. Everyone is familiar with the difficulties and frustrations of this endeavor, as the proverbial expression, "You had to be there" attests.

To recapitulate, canned jokes are used in a context and so develop "secondary" contextual links, although almost acontextual originally. Situational jokes originate in highly idiosyncratic contexts, but the joke tellers may sever the contextual ties, integrate the relevant aspects of the context in the text, and reuse them as canned jokes.

A formal definition of canned jokes as opposed to conversational jokes may be based on the consideration of the dimensions of the set of all possible contexts in which in a given society, at a given time, in a given situation, a joke may occur. Define the set of contexts in which a conversational joke may occur ( $C_{conv}$ ) and the set of all contexts in which canned jokes can occur ( $C_{cann}$ ). Since wherever a canned joke may occur a conversational joke may occur but not vice versa, it will always be true that  $C_{conv} > C_{cann}$ .

Consider a highly formal setting, such as a funeral, for example. In our society, joking is considered inappropriate in such a setting, and so this is not a suitable context for jokes (canned or situational). Consider a slightly less formal situation, such as a political or administrative debate. Some room for situational jokes may be found, but it is very unlikely that one may start

telling canned jokes (unless, for example, they are used to make a point or are in some other way contextually relevant). Finally, consider an informal situation, such as a chat among friends. Here, it is acceptable both to make situational jokes and to tell canned jokes.

### 10.2.3 Differences Between Canned and Situational Jokes

The above definition merely states the fact that canned jokes cannot occur as freely as conversational jokes. Canned jokes often require an introduction which is often missing from conversational jokes, before the telling itself, although conversational jokes may exploit a part of the previous discourse as a “preface.” This fact would explain (at least in part) the relative greater ease of collocation of conversational jokes.

As anticipated above, conversational jokes are often non-narrative. If the narrative aspect of canned jokes is taken into consideration, it appears that canned jokes may be defined as “reused jokes,” whereas conversational jokes are “original” jokes. Obviously, one may reuse a conversational joke (as shown above), or may skip the introductory part of a canned joke sequence, and blur the distinction between the two classes.

Canned jokes can be almost completely decontextualized; that is, they can reduce the co-textual information to zero and the con-textual information almost to zero. For example, contextual information is minimized in a collection of jokes, in which co-textual information is suspended (there is usually no relationship between the jokes, unless they are organized by subject matter) and con-textual information is greatly reduced. The only contextual information in a collection of jokes will be that the book has been written by an author who may happen to be a well-known humorist or that the book is entitled, “5000 jokes.” This kind of contextual information creates some expectations—for example that the texts found in the book are meant to be humorous. This “extreme” acontextual situation generally occurs in printed collections of jokes. A comedian’s monologue, even if it is ultimately composed of a string of jokes, will attempt to connect jokes by their theme or with some sort of narrative connection.

When a joke occurs within a conversation, by the very fact of its occurrence in that conversation it becomes immediately charged with con-textual

and co-textual links. The quantity and relevance of the con- and co-textual relationships will be distributed along a continuum whose scope will range from (an almost) complete lack of connection with the context, in one direction, to a high involvement with the textual goal in the other direction. Zajdman (1991) proposes to segment the conceptual continuum into four parts according to whether the joke is introduced as a digression (minimal contextual relevance), as a parable (function of example), merged in the discourse (a joke is quoted), or is completely indistinguishable from the rest of the discourse (the speaker does not signal that a joke will be uttered). While Zajdman's interest is limited to the reuse of canned jokes in conversation, the same typology of relations is applicable to conversational jokes.

Another difference between conversational jokes and canned jokes is that conversational jokes often build on previous jokes and seem to acquire an extra degree of funniness by doing so, whereas canned jokes seldom can build on a previous joke, although the pattern is not unheard of—consider the following pair of jokes:

(113) Joke 1. Bored construction workers on top of a new 40-story building decided to throw bricks down to see whose brick would reach the ground faster. They threw 12 bricks but only 11 reached the ground.

Joke 2. A man and a woman find themselves seated to each other on board a plane. The woman has a pet duck which quacks very annoyingly each time the mistress strokes it lovingly. The man counters the annoyance by starting on a fat, smelly cigar. Finally, they reach an agreement. They take the duck and the cigar and throw them out. As they settle down to a drink and an amiable chat, the woman looks out the window and cries out, "Here is my duck, flying along!" The man looks out too, and sure enough, there is the duck, and what do you think it is carrying in its beak? That 12th brick.

In conclusion, while it is clear that there is a distinction between canned jokes and conversational/situational jokes, the distinction cannot be strictly drawn. The reason is twofold: 1) canned and conversational jokes do not differ structurally, and 2) canned jokes may be reused and adapted to the situation so as to become virtually indistinguishable from situational jokes, and situational jokes may be reused outside of the original setting of the jokes.

## 10.3 Literature Review

The literature review is organized around the difference between canned and conversational jokes. First, the approaches to canned jokes will be reviewed, and then the approaches to conversational forms of humor.

### 10.3.1 Canned Jokes in Conversation

The most influential analyses of canned jokes in conversational settings have been done by Sacks.<sup>4</sup> The inclusion of Sacks' 1974 paper in the groundbreaking anthology of Bauman and Sherzer (1974) attests to its importance, even outside of humor. Since Sacks' texts contributed to the establishment of CA methodologies, it will be necessary to follow Sacks' original discussion, to understand the methodology of analysis that Sacks is following and his influential conception of the role of the joke in conversation.

Sacks' general organization of the CA analysis of canned jokes remains the paradigm in CA, and hence in this chapter, regardless of the reservations that will emerge about some aspects of his work. His research on the sequential organization of the joke-telling event is schematized in table (10.1).

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<sup>4</sup>Sacks seems to have been the first to have applied discourse analysis to humorous texts in four lectures given in November 1971. These were made available in printed form in his 1974 and 1978 papers (see Sacks (1978: 249n)). Schenkein (1972) is another early presentation of the relevance of the analysis of laughter and of its meaning in conversation (for instance, signalling the non-seriousness of an utterance). Another early contribution to the analysis of jokes in conversation, directly influenced by Sacks, is Hall (1974).

Table 10.1: Sequential Organization of Joke Telling

Canned Joke	Teller	Hearer
Introduction	disclaimers, secure floor, introduce NBF	accept or refuse joke, set NBF
Text	text performance	interrupt
Reaction	signal end, incite laughter	laughter, silence, evaluative comment, other joke
<b>Conversational Joke</b>		
Introduction	pretext, joke situation	N/A
Text	text performance	interrupt
Reaction	signal end, incite laughter	laughter, silence, evaluative comment, other joke

### The Canned Joke: Sequential Organization

Sacks describes the conversational context of the occurrence of a canned joke as a three part structure. The “preface” introduces the canned joke. The “telling” of the joke is the second step. Finally the “reactions” to the text conclude the conversation sequence. This organization is referred to as “sequential organization” (Sacks 1974: 337).

**1) The Preface** Jokes share the division of the sequential organization in three parts with stories (Sacks 1974: 337). This is entirely predictable from the fact that canned jokes are necessarily narratives (on the reduction of other types of jokes, such as question and answer jokes, to a narrative invariant see Attardo and Chabanne (1992)). This fact accounts for a difference from conversational jokes, which do not need to be introduced by a special “preface” and similarly are not necessarily narrative.

The presence of a “preface” introducing the canned joke is due to the fact that story-telling requires a specific conversational situation, such that all the participants to the conversation relinquish the floor to one speaker, the narrator.

The preface of the joke-telling situation has three main functions: securing the acceptance of joke telling from the audience, negotiating the acceptability of the jokes and of the joke-telling situation, and orienting the audience to the correct mode of interpretation of the text to follow. The preface may have a minimum length of two conversational turns, "the first involving talk by the intended teller and the second by the intended recipient" (Sacks 1974: 340). Relevant components of the would-be teller's first turn can be "an offer to tell or a request for a chance to tell the joke or story; an initial characterization of it; some reference to the time of the story events' occurrence or of the joke reception; and (...) a reference to whom it was received from if its prior teller is known or known by the recipients" (Ibid.).

The functions of the various components of the preface are different. An offer to tell the story is made by the story-teller in order to make sure that the "next turn should be occupied with one of the methodic responses to an offer, e.g. an acceptance" (Sacks 1974: 341)—in other words the would-be teller tries to secure the assent of the audience to the telling. The description of the joke and its source are provided so that the audience may check whether they already know the joke. Though Sacks does not particularly stress this circumstance, this aspect seems to differentiate jokes from other forms of (folk) narrative, since a strong aversion to the fact that the text be already known to the audience is clearly connected with the element of surprise that is often mentioned as a basic component of the humorous effect of jokes (see Fry (1963) and Ch. 1); moreover, the description of the joke serves the purpose of "motivating" an acceptance from the audience on the grounds of interest in the subject matter, novelty, a high prestige source, etc.

Cashion et al. (1986: 304) note, beyond these, a "face<sup>5</sup> maintenance" function in which the speaker "is aware of possible situational inappropriateness" and "possible discrediting" and attempts to ward off any loss of face with disclaimers. Cashion et al. also list three other types of introductions: jokes that are "a relevant contribution to the conversation" (304) (see also Zajdman (1991) and Gardiner and Spielman's (1980: 193) "thematic relevance."); disjunctive jokes (lacking a preface); and forewarnings, in which the teller, is aware of the "bad taste" of his/her text, but proceeds with the

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<sup>5</sup>Brown and Levinson (1978: 61-61) define "face" as "the public self-image that every member [of a society] wants to claim for him[/her]self." This definition is further elaborated upon, and a positive and negative face are distinguished. For the present discussion a generic, intuitive concept of "face" (as in "losing face") is sufficient.

telling anyway. Edwards (1984) propose a much more sophisticated view of disclaimers, which she takes to be "metacommunications," i.e., she sees the teller as dissociating him/herself from the text he/she is about to deliver. On disclaimers, see the references in Edwards (1984: 214n).

From the hearer's perspective, the preface can also be the appropriate time to turn down the offer of joke telling. Interestingly, Sacks notes that the description will inform the "recipients about the sort of response (the) teller seeks after his telling" (Sacks 1974: 341). This has the function of orienting the interpretation of the text by the hearers so that they will be more likely to identify the elements that will produce the effect announced by the speaker (cf. the function of the mother character in (114), below).

The preface also has the function of informing the hearers that they should switch to the "NBF" communication mode (Raskin (1985); see ch. 9) and that they should activate a set of narrative expectations pertaining to the "text-type" joke. This switch entails the recognition of the possible metalinguistic status of parts of the narrative (see chapter 2), the presence of "local logic" mechanisms (see Attardo and Raskin (1991) and references therein), and in general the switch to a "paratelic" (Apter 1989: 134) or "playful" mode (see below).

The preface may be altogether missing and the teller may rely on contextual clues for the hearer(s) to identify the joke as such. This case is obviously more frequent in conversational jokes and is required in irony (that is, one does not normally "warn" someone that he/she is going to be ironical because it will spoil the effect).

**2) The Telling** The "telling" is the most significant phenomenon in joke telling from the point of view of CA because it consists of only one speaker turn. The fact that a story is being told authorizes the teller to avoid providing places for the hearer's speech; thus, any speaking done during the telling will be interruptive (for example, if the hearer does not understand parts of the text, he/she may ask for explanations).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Tannen's research (1984) has shown that the interpretation of overlapping utterances as interruptive is culture- and even sub-culture-bound. This issue will not be pursued further here. Another issue concerns "interactive" jokes, such as "knock-knock jokes" where the hearer is prompted for a turn. However, the entirely predictable nature of the turn, and the fact that in most jokes the speaker may provide the hearer's turn him/herself, seem to show that Sacks' claim that the telling of the text consists of only one turn may

**The Joke Text.** Sacks (1978) is the only discussion of the internal organization of jokes in CA research. Although it is not as successful and detailed as the humor-specific approaches examined in previous chapters, it has had an important influence on CA. Sacks (1978) is based on the analysis of one joke:

- (114) Three sisters marry three young men on the same day and the mother of the young women talks them into spending their first night at their home, each in a room. The mother, after everyone has retired to their respective rooms, listens at the closed doors. At the first one she hears an “Uoo-ooo,” at the second door an “Yaaa,” but at the third door she hears nothing. The following morning she asks the first daughter why she went “Uoo-ooo” and the daughter says “It tickled.” She then asks the second daughter why she went “Yaa” and she replies “It hurt.” Finally she asks the third daughter why she did not say anything. The daughter says “Well, you told me it was always impolite to talk with my mouth full.” (Sacks 1978: 251)

Sacks’ analysis revolves around the idea that the joke sets up a puzzle for the hearer. He begins his analysis by distinguishing between “temporal” and “sequential” organization. The temporal organization is the order in which the events in the joke happen, and the sequential organization is the way in which the plot of the story presents them. This distinction matches the Russian formalists’ description of “fabula” and “plot” (*sjuzhet*); see Eichenbaum (1925).

Sacks notes that the sequential organization is used to establish a puzzling situation in the above joke: why is there no sound behind the third door? The succession of three parallel events, the third one breaking the parallelism, is the “minimal but sufficient” condition for a puzzle of this sort to be established (Sacks 1978: 224). The two positive occurrences of sounds at the door establish a pattern which is then violated in the third case. It may be noted that the three-event formula is very common in jokes. The idea of “puzzle construction” is applied to humorous narrative by Gardiner and Spielman (1980).

Sacks points out that the mother character directs the interpretation of the story by her non-reaction to the unusualness of the events, and since for  


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 be maintained, even if some further specification may be necessary.

her it is only puzzling that she hears no sound at the third door, the audience is interested only in this specific puzzle, while other aspects of the story could as well be puzzling or interesting. For instance, it is highly artificial that each time she reaches a door she immediately hears a sound, and then she moves on to the next door. Sacks examines other inconsistencies in the text to conclude with the discussion of the willing suspension of disbelief necessary to let these inconsistencies pass unnoticed. If the inconsistencies were challenged, or even acknowledged, the joke would be destroyed because the audience would refuse it on the grounds of its implausibility. His conclusion is that:

both the temporal/sequential organization of the joke and the behavior of its characters, guide a recipient to see a particular puzzle as the joke's puzzle, and to take on as a task the solving of that puzzle. In the course of the joke, one is never in a position to assess the complex of its components, but is fully occupied in understanding it, piece by piece, so that, arriving at its end, one can solve the punch line as fast as possible (Sacks 1978: 258).

As in the 1974 article, Sacks sees the problem-solving involved in the understanding of the implied meaning of the joke's punch line as a kind of "understanding test" with laughter as the sign of understanding put forth by the hearers. Sacks insists on the implausibility of the events in the joke and correctly points out that the construction of the joke masks the implausibilities of the text.

Sacks goes on, however, to affirm that "without this implausible concatenation of events, the joke collapses" (Sacks 1978: 259). It is unclear whether Sacks intended the above remark to refer to jokes in general or whether he meant to limit his observation to the joke under analysis. The latter hypothesis is more likely since many jokes have perfectly plausible build-ups, but even in the restricted application to the joke at hand, the claim is found to be questionable: the joke could be rephrased to make the build-up plausible, and would still "work" as a joke.

As an example, both Mulkay (1988: 131) and Wilde (1978: 86) have alternative versions of joke (114) in which the incongruities are downplayed or eliminated.

- (115) The three Gagliardi girls were all married on the same day, and that night their parents listened at the bedroom doors. They heard the first

daughter laughing and the second one crying and the third one silent. The next morning their mother took them aside and asked them to explain.

"Well," said the first, "you always told me to laugh when something tickled me."

"Mama," said the second, "you always told me to cry when something hurt me."

"Well," said the third, "you always told me not to speak when I had my mouth full." (Wilde 1978: 86.)

In this version of the joke, the implausibility of the mother's arriving at the door and promptly hearing the appropriate sounds is removed by a vaguer wording which allows the reader to imagine the parents listening for a while, hearing the sound, etc. Consequently, the claim that the joke would "collapse" without those implausibilities is found to lack empirical foundation.

In addition, it is always possible for a researcher to create a new version of the joke involving different participants and without the incongruities noted by Sacks; for instance, one of Sacks' points is that the three women are sisters, and that it is unlikely that they all get married at the same time. It is possible to construct a "revision" of the joke which has three friends getting married the same day or even three unrelated couples meeting in a motel. The questions can be asked by anybody who can plausibly have heard the noises, such as a groom or a doorman, thus removing another problematic aspect pointed out by Sacks. The answers do not even have to come from the women, as the punch line could be delivered by the third husband in a form like "Her mother taught her never to speak with her mouth full." In short, it is possible to produce a variant of the joke which will not present those features that Sacks deemed "essential" and which would still be recognized as "the same joke."<sup>7</sup> Obviously, this conclusion invalidates Sacks' claims.

The problems involved in assessing Sacks' analysis are, however, of a different nature than simply being able or not able to produce a version of the joke that is plausible. In his discussion of Sack's claim, Mulkay (1988: 10-21) shows that the requisite of the "suspension of disbelief" is neither needed nor tenable. Mulkay shows that, in many cases, readers accept elements in

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<sup>7</sup>On the theoretical implications of similarity issues, see Attardo and Raskin (1991) and ch. 6.

the text of a joke that are clearly incongruous and which are not concealed or dissimulated in any way. This fact brings Mulkey to take a position which Mulkey calls the "humorous mode" which is similar to that of Raskin's "NBF" mode of communication for humor.

What is important to note here is that Sacks seems to have come to the erroneous conclusion discussed above because of a lack of adequate sampling. Presumably, if Sacks had been faced with several variants of the joke, like the examples provided above Sacks' generalization would have been made based on a level of phenomena abstract enough to warrant explanatory power to the conclusions drawn.<sup>8</sup>

**3) The Response** The most complex of the three phases of the conversational turn seems to be the "response." Three classes of responses have been proposed: a) laughter, b) delayed laughter, and c) silence.

**Laughter** The "minimal response sequence" (i.e., the smallest and simplest response to the "telling") of a joke consists only of laughter. Laughter has been the object of considerable attention in conversation analysis (see a review in Glenn (1989: 129-131)). Though laughter is not a direct concern of humor research *per se*, there are obvious connections which acquire particular significance because of the interest that CA has in behavioral patterns. Jefferson has devoted various articles to the issues connected with laughter in conversation; for instance, in Jefferson (1972), she notices that occurrences of laughter are "regularly associated with termination of talk" (300) and that laughter can be used to "signal or attempt closure of interchanges" (449n), but that it also functions as a signal of appreciation of the humorous intention of the speaker, or even serves to "make fun of" the speaker.

Laughter is found to consist of smaller units on the boundaries of which speakers can join in, or take a spoken conversational turn. Sacks (1974) had noted that laughter is an exception to the non-overlapping rule that generally governs conversation. Jefferson et al. (1976) subsequently analyzed multi-party laughter, and its combinations: synchronous ("unisons") and/or turn-taking ("relay"). The use of laughter is further observed as part of "repairs,"

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<sup>8</sup>The complex issue of how to identify the correct levels of abstraction to permit meaningful generalizations is developed in Attardo and Raskin (1991).

i.e. in the "offense-remedial cycle," or, in other words, as a way used by speakers to hedge in an uncomfortable conversational situation.

Jefferson (1979) is focused on a specific technique of how speakers may "invite" laughter from the hearer, i.e., a "post-utterance completion laugh particle," or in other words, laughter by the joke tellers at the end of what they say.

By showing that laughter is an appropriate response to what he/she has just said, the speaker implicitly validates that response. Another technique involves "within speech laughter," which is the delivery of the utterance interspersed with laughter.

The picture that emerges from Jefferson's transcripts is that of an active speaker negotiating the humorous interpretation of his/her utterance with the hearer and actively prompting a "humorous" decoding of the utterance. It is interesting to note that in the literature on humor research (with the notable exception of Jefferson), the speaker of a humorous text is seen as passive upon completion of the humorous utterance. Rutelli (1982) even theorizes about the necessary presence of a pause on the speaker's part; thus, Jefferson's analyses impose a serious revision on accepted opinions.

Connected to this "negotiating" aspect of humor is the fact that laughter is not necessarily an uncontrolled reaction. Jefferson (1985) shows clearly that not only that can laughter be voluntary, but that, in addition to signalling the humorous intention of the speaker, it can be used for a variety of communicative functions, from "covering" delicate passages in conversation to showing understanding.<sup>9</sup>

Analyses of laughter will necessarily result in the revision of the role of the speaker in initiating laughter; for instance, Glenn (1989) shows that in general in dyadic interactions, the teller initiates laughter, whereas in multi-party interactions, it is another person. The fact that laughter is not an uncontrolled reflex will also lead to substantial reconsideration of the issues connected with the use of laughter as an indicator of the humorous nature of a text or where laughter is associated more closely with humor (see Morreal (1983)).

Other analyses of laughter have focussed more on a "description" of laughter as a paralinguistic phenomenon. Some attempts have been made in this

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<sup>9</sup>Müller (1983), Werner (1983) and Kotthoff (1986) apply Jefferson's methodology to German examples.

context to describe laughter in terms of the sounds used (mostly vowels, glottal stops [ʔ], and glottal fricatives [h]) (Apte 1985: 251). Edmonson's (1987) analysis of laughter styles is a good example of this type of research. Edmonson points out that every individual has a "laughter style" distinct from other speakers; Apte (1985: 250-256) concurs, and notes that people from different cultures can laugh similarly and so that laughter style is not determined by culture. A broader approach is taken by Lafrance (1983) who presents a paradigm for the description of laughter and smiling in a kinesics formalism.<sup>10</sup>

**b) Delayed Laughter** Immediate laughter is not the only possible response to the telling of a joke: delayed laughter may also occur. The hearer(s) of a joke is/are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, their reaction (either positive or negative, i.e., laughter or silence, or other marks of disapprobation) may be socially unacceptable because, for example, the situation is such that laughter is inappropriate (e.g., formal occasions) or the content of the joke is inappropriate (e.g., an obscene or otherwise offensive joke). On the other hand, they may be "accused" of not getting the joke if they don't react promptly.

The fear of incurring social sanctions may lead the hearers to wait before they laugh in order to match their reaction with the other listeners. This phenomenon is well-known to performers. In some cases, it is solved by the presence of hired individuals who will start the laugh. On the other hand, Sacks argues that jokes are used as "understanding tests," i.e., to evaluate the hearers' capacities in understanding the jokes, and establishing a positive drive to be the first hearer to start laughing, thereby establishing a "race" in understanding the text (Sacks (1974: 350); on understanding as winning "status points," see Graesser et al. (1989)).

To sum up, the response phase is characterized by the presence of two conflicting tendencies: laughing immediately to display understanding of the joke, and waiting to see how the rest of the audience reacts. This conflict accounts for the presence of "gaps" (interruptions in the conversation) which will arise with the hearers' hesitations between the two choices in their reaction turn.

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<sup>10</sup>On kinesics, and related issues, see Trager (1961).

c) **Silence** Silences—meaningful interruptions of the conversation—are distinct from “gaps” in conversation because they carry meaning. The most obvious case discussed by Sacks is that of “reprobation.” Voluntary refusal to laugh following the utterance of a joke by a speaker implies that one rates the joke, or the teller’s performance, as very poor or distasteful. Refusal to laugh after a joke implies loss of face for the teller.

Silence is an option for the audience, but it is almost required for the teller. Upon completion of the joke (i.e., functionally, when the teller reaches the punch line), he/she must relinquish the floor to the audience. But, the picture is actually somewhat more complex. Recall the discussion, based on the “isotopy disjunction” theories (ch. 2), of a model of the joke which predicts that punch lines occur in a terminal position in the text and should thus be followed by silence on the part of the speaker (or, in CA terminology, by the yielding of the floor).

Based upon a study of the position of the punch line in large corpora of jokes, the discussion (see ch. 2) came to the conclusion that the punch line occurs in a terminal position in the text of the joke, as predicted, in more than 95% of the jokes. These findings support the claim that the teller “is done” when the punch line has been uttered and thus has no need to prolong the story; however, they also open the question of how to account for the remaining 5%.

Rutelli (1982) formulates the interesting suggestion that the speaker is supposed to remain silent for a small interval of time after the telling of a joke in conversation and not laugh immediately to avoid the destruction of the narrative convention in which the speaker pretends to believe what he/she is saying in the text of the joke (i.e., pretends to be in the BF mode). This claim is not incompatible with Jefferson’s claims about the teller “negotiating” the occurrence of laughter after his/her turn (see above). Maintaining silence after a turn which involves incongruous elements without attempting to justify them can be seen as a sophisticated way to incite laughter.

This author advances the hypothesis that these occurrences of linguistic material are manifestations of the zero syntagm postulated by Rutelli (i.e., the silence occurring at the end of the text). Support for this hypothesis came from the observation (see ch. 2) that the material after the punch line, if any, could be reduced to a number of classes like expletives, repetitions of the punch line, explanations of the punch line, identification of the character to whom the punch line is attributed, partial ellipses, etc. In other words, the

joke teller can “fill in” the moment of silence which follows the joke with irrelevant information, perhaps to avoid an awkward situation if the hearer(s) do not react with laughter quickly enough. This hypothesis is not incompatible with Jefferson’s findings (see above) of the active role of the teller in negotiating the response to the joke, as these semantically empty (or nearly so) fillers may be seen, for instance, as allowing the hearers enough time to process the text and decide how to react, avoiding embarrassing conversational gaps.

Rutelli’s hypothesis is consistent with Sacks’ model because they both predict that a joke will be followed by silence on the part of the teller. If one compares Sacks’ analyses to Rutelli’s and this author’s, it is remarkable that the completion of the joke is a crucial Transition Relevance Place (Sacks 1974). A TRP requires that the speaker relinquish the floor and thus that he/she stop speaking. The recipients of the joke are also supposed to respond with appropriate signs of appreciation (or, as in Sacks’ example, withholding these signs, and thus showing displeasure) in the TRP at the end of a joke.

These explanations find support from “non-academic” observations by comedians. Allen (1987: 228) presents a list of “activities” stand-up comedians engage in while waiting for the audience to “get the joke” and quotes the case of Bob Hope, who is in the habit of not waiting for the laughter but will follow each punch line immediately with “But I wanna tell ya, folks...” In technical terms, Hope is purposely skipping the TRP, and not respecting the normal development of the adjacency pair of joke—response (laughter).

## Evaluation

The main interest of CA’s presentation of the context of a “joke telling” lies in its detail. None of the proponents of sociologically-oriented theories of humor (the so-called “superiority theories”— see 1.5.1) has performed this kind of micro-analysis. The three-phase description of the occurrence of canned jokes in conversation is an important contribution to the fields of humor and CA.

### 10.3.2 Puns in Conversation

Conversational (situational) jokes are improvised and so occur in less predictable and less organized ways. Sacks (1972) and Sherzer (1978, 1985)

have each provided an analysis of conversational puns (to be distinguished from conversational jokes, of which they are a subset). A broader approach to conversational humor has been taken by Tannen (1984). Their ideas will be examined below.

### **Sacks on Puns**

Sacks (1972) is concerned with puns, and more precisely with their distribution in conversation, i.e., in which positions puns are likely to occur in a conversation. To determine the distribution of puns, Sacks must establish what elements a conversation is built from and how these elements relate to puns. His interest in puns is tangential, as he himself notes, and the real focus of the paper is the possibility of formulating a more general rule that would account for the relationship between an utterance and the discourse it is part of.

In order to follow the argument, it is necessary to introduce the concept of "proverbials" (Sacks 1972: 137) which are standardized expressions, also known as "formulaic expressions" (such as "A rolling stone gathers no moss," "Way to go!" "Give me a break!" etc.).

Sacks' claim is that by mapping the occurrences of proverbials inside conversation sequences, one would derive a map of possible "pun positions," if not for all types of puns, at least for puns based on lexical morphemes (see ch. 3). Being able to map the "pun potential" locations of a text would yield great insights on the structure of both narratives and puns.

In Sacks' example (114), the proverbial occurs in a position of "story completion" (the end). Story completion is used, among other things, to "exhibit understanding" (i.e., show that one got the point of the story). According to Sacks, proverbials are particularly apt at this function. He thus refocuses his original hypothesis, presented above: "(sometimes) proverbials occur on story completions. When uttered there by a story recipient, they are at least partially occupied interactionally with exhibiting understanding of the story they succeed" (Sacks 1972: 138; parenthesis in the original).

The revised hypothesis yields a definition of "pun-potential positions," which is as follows: "in proverbials, produced on story completion, by a story recipient" (Sacks 1972: 138). Sacks notes that since proverbials are usually understood idiomatically, this gives grounds for the production of puns when the literal sense of the proverbial is in relation to the content of

the story that it follows (see example (116) below).

In this way, Sacks' goal is achieved, since the above definition links puns (of one kind) to a specific position in conversation. Another consequence of Sacks' approach is that if proverbialexhibit understanding of a story, then it is likely that the "punned-upon" (i.e. the subject of the pun) will be contained in the story. The concept of a "subject of the pun" is not elaborated further although it is a very important issue (see ch. 3).

A problem with Sacks' argument is that not all puns occur in "proverbials" or for that matter in a final position in a story. Often puns are used inside a text or interrupt the progression of the text (see ch. 3).

Because they come from a handful of examples, Sacks' generalizations are questionable; for example, when discussing the relative positions of a pun and the subject of the pun, he notes "If the punned-on is in that story we might have a rule" (Sacks 1972: 140). Note that the rule is introduced with two hedges in its wording ("if ... we might have"). Later in the paper, however, Sacks seems to assume that the rule is operative and further generalizable.

### More on Puns in CA

Sacks' analyses of puns and jokes have been espoused by Sherzer (1978; 1985). Sherzer's intent is to enlarge Sacks' original scope of investigation and broaden the interdisciplinary approach to the phenomena. From this point of view, it is noteworthy that Sherzer (1985) appeared in a "programmatic" handbook of "discourse analysis" which emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of the analysis of discourse.

From a broad interdisciplinary viewpoint, puns and jokes are "both speech play and verbal art" (Sherzer 1985: 219). Accordingly, Sherzer gives a general overview of the interrelations of puns and jokes with the sociological, ethnological, psychological, and general cultural environment of the texts. A similar broad approach is championed by Vogel (1989).<sup>11</sup> Like Sacks, Sherzer stresses the importance of the study of the "performance" of jokes from the point of view of CA.

Sherzer uses a broad definition of pun. Puns can be produced intentionally or unintentionally by the speaker. Sherzer takes puns to include also unnoticed plays on words, i.e., the hearer may, or may not, be aware of the

<sup>11</sup>On its problematic aspects see Attardo (1990b) and ch. 5.

pun produced by the speaker. Nichols (1991) takes a similar stand. Thus, Sherzer's definition comes close to the phenomena commonly known as the "slip of the tongue" and helps to connect to Freudian analysis, which Sherzer favors (see Sherzer (1978: 346), (1985: 216)), to CA.

This author has presented a different position in ch. 3, which requires an element of intentionality (either in the speaker or in the hearer) for a pun to be one. Clearly, the question is definitional, and, as such, cannot be decided either way. It can be noted, however, that if puns can be unintentional and unnoticed, all ambiguous sentences are puns. This may, or may not, be a desirable effect of the definition. If one is willing to claim that "Flying planes can be dangerous" is, regardless of context, a pun, then Sherzer's position is to be preferred. If one believes that the above sentence is a pun only if it was uttered with the intent, or was perceived with the intent, of amusing, then the position presented by this author is to be preferred.

While Sherzer's 1985 article is a general position paper on the opportunity of studying puns and jokes, the 1978 article has a specific goal, i.e., that of continuing Sacks' analysis and methodology. Following Sacks, Sherzer notes that puns "play a role in discourse cohesion" (1978: 337). This cohesive function derives from the fact that puns often occur in "proverbials" (see above) which sum up or conclude a topic.

Sherzer argues that unlike pronouns, which establish anaphoric coreference and so insure textual cohesiveness, the linguistic elements used in puns are "doubly anaphoric," i.e., their referent is ambiguous. His example is the following:

- (116) (A college professor is talking to friends about his students in a summer school class): ... and this girl comes into my class looking real sour. I knew she was gonna be a lemon.

Lemon, claims Sherzer, "relates back to both girl (metaphorically) and sour (concretely or literally)" (1978: 338); therefore, he claims that the linguistic elements used in puns "refer" (i.e., are referring anaphorically) to two (or possibly more) referents.

Sherzer also presents other examples in which the pun does not occur in a proverbial (like "be a lemon") and in which the ambiguity is not generated by literal interpretation of a metaphor, but by sound repetition, as in 117

- (117) George Wallace's trip was a first for him and a first for the press. They pressed him about... (Sherzer 1978: 338).

Sherzer's claim is that "cohesion is achieved through repetition of phonetic features" (1978: 338). It is indubitable that some cohesion must be established through similarity of phonetic features, if only because the pun is perceived as such and so implies that two incongruous senses have been brought together (see ch. 3). It would be difficult, however, to conclude that "cohesion through phonemic similarity" is the same kind of cohesion that anaphoric coreference establishes between linguistic units. From a somewhat different perspective, Sherzer (1978: 340-341) tries to establish a distinction between disjunctive and cohesive puns on the grounds of manipulation of the linguistic system. Manipulations consist of any non-standard use of the system. It is difficult to define more exactly what qualifies as a "manipulation" because Sherzer does not define the term formally.

According to Sherzer, unconscious, cohesive puns would not imply linguistic manipulation, whereas disjunctive, conscious puns would practice linguistic manipulation. This distinction is dubious, however, because the phenomenon of the literal interpretation of a metaphor is clearly a manipulative device that distorts the "casual" unmarked reading. This is especially true of the so-called "dead metaphors." Consider again the "lemon" example (116). A literal use of "lemon" never mentions its possible metaphorical extension to human beings or its other meaning referring to cars. Using "lemon" to refer to an unpleasant human being requires a manipulation of the basic meaning of "lemon," such as the suspension of semantic features such as FRUIT, YELLOW, WITH SEEDS, WITH RIND, USED AS A CONDIMENT and a focus on the feature SOUR TASTE used synesthetically; therefore, since to understand cohesive puns such as (116) one must resort to "manipulative" use of the linguistic system, the distinction between manipulative (non-cohesive) and non-manipulative (cohesive) disappears.

Sherzer is right, however, when he points out that the topic of a conversation or of a text will direct hearers towards interpreting as puns linguistic elements that in another context would not be perceived as capable of producing a pun. Sherzer's example is particularly good:

- (118) In a course on human sexuality there's a lot to cover.  
vs.

In a course on linguistics there's a lot to cover.  
(Sherzer 1978: 344)

In a "neutral" context, the expression "there's a lot to cover" is not perceived as related to sex, but the presence of the topic of sex in the first sentence prompts a literal reading of "cover" with the complex implicature that what is to be covered is a naked body.<sup>12</sup>

Sherzer emphasizes that while the speaker may decide to make a pun, the hearer will decide whether to interpret a text allusively according to the topic of the discourse and the cultural factors that regulate humorous interaction. Attardo and Raskin (1991) deal with the interplay of the various factors which can be part of the decision to make a joke about a given subject or in a given situation (see also Raskin (1985: 139-146)).

Sherzer's work broadens CA's perspective on humor and brings it close to anthropological research (see, for instance, Apte (1985)). The difference in attitude between speaker and hearer in intentional and unintentional puns (as well as in humorous utterances at large) is an interesting issue which deserves to be pursued further. Sherzer's work on language play (e.g., Sherzer (1982) and cf. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (1976)) is related but distinct from humor. Humor is a playful linguistic mode, but play is not humorous *per se*. On the linguistic aspects of language play, see Nilsen and Nilsen (1978).

## Humor and Speaker's Style

While Sacks' and Sherzer's analyses of puns in conversation were explicitly limited to this type of humorous phenomenon, Tannen (1984) presents a brief but more comprehensive discussion of conversational humor. Tannen deals with humor and irony in conversation regardless of their nature (i.e. canned or not). Her working definition of irony is that of statements not "meant literally" and "intended to amuse."<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to Sacks' analysis of one single occurrence of a joke in a conversation, Tannen records and analyzes all the humorous occurrences in the

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<sup>12</sup>This kind of complex implicature is made possible by the fact that a "sexual" inference seems to be the default implicature if no other is readily available in a joke (Raskin 1985: 150).

<sup>13</sup>On irony, see Booth (1974) Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1976), (1980), Muecke (1978), Sperber and Wilson (1981), Jardon (1988) and references therein.

conversations held at a Thanksgiving dinner. The conversations span several hours and include hundreds of humorous occurrences. Tannen's analysis is less minute than Sacks, but has a broader range, which allows for several interesting findings.

**Speaking Style and Humor** Tannen opens her discussion with what could be used as a humor researcher's manifesto in conversational analysis: "One of the most distinctive aspects of any person's style is the use of humor" (Tannen 1984: 130).

She focuses her attention on what she terms "irony aimed at style" (1984: 132)—in other words, the exaggeration of some stylistic feature created by the speaker in order to dissociate him/herself from the locutor role. What is meant can be grasped best by an example:

In his role as host, Steve is frequently in the position of giving orders to people and offering them food. He frequently mocks his own behavior in this role by affecting a stereotypical Jewish speech pattern. For example, when someone offers to help him serve, he replies, 'You should sit and relax, dahlink!' His use of the modal 'should,' exaggerated intonation, and stylized voice quality and pronunciation are all patterned on the speech of Steve's grandmother, who immigrated to the United States from Poland. Thus, he is mocking his own impulse to pattern his hosting behavior on her model. (Tannen 1984: 132-133).

By affecting a style (or register, see ch. 7) different from one's own, and/or inappropriate to the situation, one may successfully convey the implication that one "disagrees" with what one is saying, or in other words, that one does not endorse the literal interpretation of his/her utterance. This possibility of dissociating oneself from what one is saying is connected to the "deniability" of humor, on which see below.

Tannen provides a detailed analysis of the style of humor of each of the participants at the Thanksgiving dinner on which her book is based. It is not necessary to follow each analysis here in detail, but it is clear that she has highlighted an important realm of humorous interaction.

### **How Bona-Fide is Bona-Fide?**

It has been claimed (Raskin 1985a; Attardo 1990a) that real BF communication is actually a blend of BF communication and other NBF modes, such as joking (see ch. 9). Tannen's analyses strongly support this claim. The conversation at the Thanksgiving dinner is punctuated by humor, and an important part of the general impression created by each speaker is due to his/her use of humor.

As a matter of fact, the use of humor in conversation is found to enhance its "memorability" and in general to "stand out." Tannen sums up by saying that "humor makes one's presence felt" (1984: 132). For example, one of the participants in the dinner had left the others (and Tannen) with the impression of having had a very important role in the conversation; however, the number of his conversational turns was much lower than expected. "It seems likely"—concludes Tannen—"that the impression that David had participated more than he had, came from the fact that he had cracked a lot of jokes (and perhaps that he told long stories)" (1984: 132).

Needless to say, this claim could have interesting implications in the study of interactive behavior, if verified by further research; for instance, if a consistent "boost" of one's prominence in a conversation were reliably associated with the use of humorous remarks, people in social positions requiring the establishment of impressions of "predominance" (such as political candidates) would profit from adopting this kind of behavior.

### **Quantitative Analyses**

Tannen also introduces another device which is too often underestimated in humor research: quantitative analysis. Quantitative analyses of the Thanksgiving conversation reveals that humor has a larger role than expected in conversation. From her analysis of the transcripts, it appears that two speakers had 11% of their turns included in the range of humorous turns, out of the total number of conversational turns for each speaker. The lowest figure, i.e., the speaker with the least humorous conversational turns, was 2%. It comes as somewhat of a surprise that in a normal conversation people spend 10% of their time joking.

It is possible, from this kind of data, to think of a classification of conversational situations on the basis of the count of humorous turns. For instance,

Mulkay (1988: 158-165) reports that Nobel prize ceremonies had an average of three humorous occurrences per event. Downs et al. (1988) reports that in an average 50 minutes lecture in an US university there were 13.33 attempts at humor on the part of the teacher, or roughly one humorous remark every 3.75 minutes. Both figures are significantly different from Tannen's; obviously, the difference is related to the formal setting of the Nobel prize ceremonies and to a lesser extent of a classroom lecture as opposed to the relaxed atmosphere of a conversation among friends.

Raskin (p. c.) reports his first-hand experience of attending a 1978 lecture by Carl Popper for University of Michigan undergraduates, which was marred by the audience's visible unease at the lecturer's total humorlessness, and led to a burst of laughter at his innocuous slip of the tongue some 25 minutes into the talk. Accustomed to the American habit of opening a formal talk with some humorous remark, the audience had been waiting for some sort of joke and had been frustrated, up to the slip of the tongue, in their expectation of some degree of humor in the talk; hence, they interpreted the slip of the tongue as something to laugh about. Clearly, social and cultural norms have great significance in deciding where and when it is appropriate to joke.

The issue is also connected to that of register. Recall that Bally (1909) had already noted that humor connotes and presupposes familiarity (see 7.1). The choice of a familiar register will involve, among other things, the availability of considerably more options for humorous conversational turns.<sup>14</sup>

### 10.3.3 Evaluation

Tannen's research concludes the critical review of the available literature in CA on humor. Considering jokes in conversation is clearly one of the most promising directions that has emerged in CA humor research. It can shed light on the style of the speakers, and on the functions of the jokes in their speech. The limited amount of research conducted so far is not attributable to the methodology, which may be sound and fruitful, but rather to the novelty of the application of CA to the field of humor.

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<sup>14</sup>It can be also mentioned that in the Classical and Neoclassical theories of humor the characters of comedy (as opposed to tragedy) were supposed to speak in a "lowly" "humble" style (*sermo humilis*), typical of the lower classes, but also of familiar interaction (see ch. 1).

## 10.4 The Communicative Function of Humor

Having discussed the interaction between jokes and their context, the next step of the exposition will be discussion of the communicative function of jokes. The second part of the next section will consist of analysis of the functions of humor in communication.

### 10.4.1 Types of Humorous Interaction

Jokes may occur in a variety of contexts and, predictably, have different communicative functions connected to a certain extent to these different contexts. A review of the possible types of humorous interactions will follow. Two of them, “joke telling” (canned jokes) and “conversational jokes,” have been discussed in some detail in the previous sections, and thus are only briefly touched upon.

#### Joke Telling

Joke telling is the simplest and most common humorous interaction. It is the prototypical situation of linguistic humor (at least in view of the importance it has acquired in humor research). It is the kind of context analyzed by Sacks (as discussed above). The participants in the conversation either explicitly or implicitly announce that they will engage in a story telling session. Such expressions as “Have you heard the latest?” or “Do you know the one...” are often used by speakers to explicitly declare that the narrative following the sentence is a joke, although, of course, jokes can also be introduced in conversation without explicit markers.

A joke-telling session can be unstructured, i.e., after the “reaction turn” each speaker may take the floor and tell another unrelated joke. In that case, jokes are very context independent. This is, however, a rather uncommon picture. Frequently, the speaker’s choice will be directed by similarities among jokes (see Attardo and Raskin (1991)), by situational factors (for instance the news, local events, the weather, etc.), or by social or interpersonal factors (see Chiaro (1992)). In this case, some contextual determination of which jokes are told, with which wording, etc. must occur, since speakers will be influenced in their choices by what they know or imagine about

the other participants in the joke-telling session; nevertheless, joke telling remains the least structured and the most contextually independent of the humorous interaction types.

### Conversational Jokes

Conversational witticisms or jokes are humorous utterances that occur in conversation and which have strong contextual ties. This is the type of text Tannen analyzed and which was described in detail above.

### Teasing

Teasing differs from other types of humorous interaction because of the presence of an element of "criticism" in the interaction. This has led Mulkay to define teasing as "a device for reformulating others' speech and actions, and thereby proposing an alternative reality, without seriously doing so" (Mulkay 1988: 79). The most detailed and interesting analysis of teasing is Drew (1987), who analyzes a corpus of "teasing" collected in conversations.<sup>15</sup>

According to Drew, teasing is a way of correcting the behavior of the interlocutor, and so fits in the Bergsonian perspective of humor as a social corrective. Teasing can occur only in a conversational setting. It does not occur freely in conversation, but must be "sequentially 'second(...)' to some prior utterance(s) of the one who is teased" (Drew 1987: 233). The principal characteristic of this prior turn is that the teased person is "overdoing something" (Drew 1987: 242).

Teasing is recognized as a segment of a conversational interaction performed by speakers on the basis of lexical selection (usually a clearly exaggerated term chosen for the description of a rather normal event or object) and signalled by the formulaic character of a conversational turn (in other words, the speaker uses a stereotyped expression) as well as the "contrastiveness" of the turn, i.e., the fact that the teaser's conversational turn clearly contrasts with what the teased person has just said.

Reactions to teasing (i.e., the conversational turn following the tease) are ordered on a continuum ranging from a completely serious response to an acceptance of the humorous situation described by the teaser (i.e., the

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<sup>15</sup>On teasing as a form of humorous communication, see also Philips (1975), Schieffelin (1986), Eisenberg (1986), and Miller (1986).

teased person “plays along.”) According to Drew’s data, a strong majority of recipients chose to “correct” the teaser in one way or another by reaffirming the serious state of affairs. From the point of view of humor research, the most relevant issue seems to be that some of the recipients choose to treat teasing, a partly humorous mode, seriously. This issue will be addressed in more detail below.<sup>16</sup>

## Ritual Joking

Anthropology has dealt with ritual joking in detail, but this topic is outside the boundaries of this book. From the present point of view, it is only relevant to know that in some cultures certain ritualized situations call for the utterances of jokes, either canned or not. Specific ethnographic research is necessary to deal with the different manifestations of a culture’s choices of what contexts are appropriate for humor (see Apte 1985: 155ff).

Each culture defines which situations are appropriate for joking, and which are inappropriate. In several cultures, it is common to have “jokers” disturb sacred ceremonies. The habit of disturbing marriage ceremonies with practical jokes is a related ritual, known in America as “shivaree.”

## 10.4.2 The Social Functions of Humor

The issues related to the discussion of the communicative functions of humor are numerous and complex. In order to avoid confusion, it is helpful to distinguish between primary and secondary functions, with the caveat that the terminology refers only to logical primacy and does not reflect any value judgement. Primary functions of humor in conversation are effects that the speaker may (wish to) achieve directly by using humorous segments or

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<sup>16</sup>It is tempting to draw a parallel between Drew’s description of teasing and Raskin’s (1985) SSTH (see ch. 5). There is a strong similarity between the “contrasting” conversational turn described by Drew and Raskin’s “opposition” between scripts. Drew claims that exaggeration is a frequent procedure used to contrast two conversational turns. Exaggeration can be easily described as an opposition between “normal” and “abnormal” in terms of SSTH. The list of oppositions between the teasing description of reality and its serious description (Drew 1987: 246-247) can be described as an opposition between normal and abnormal situations. This matches the “normal vs abnormal” type of script opposition postulated by Raskin perfectly; however, since Raskin’s SSTH was not meant to account for teasing, the issue will not be pursued further here.

texts in his/her discourse. Secondary functions of humor are effects that are achieved either indirectly or without the knowledge or intent of the user. Needless to say, the distinction is purely operational and a certain overlapping of the categories is to be expected.

Tannen's research has shown that the use of humor by a speaker affects the perception of his/her overall communicative "image" by the other participants. The question which presents itself is, then, how does humor affect the communicative interaction of the speakers? Or, in other words, what are the social goals of humor?

The literature on the social aspects of humor is large (see Martineau (1972), Goodchilds (1972), Giles et al. (1976), Chapman (1976), Kane et al. (1977), Long and Graesser (1988), and Graham et al. (1992). The last two sources provide lists of "social functions" performed by humor). The effects of humor on the communicative process can be grouped into four classes:

1. social management,
2. decommitment,
3. mediation, and
4. defunctionalization.

They will be reviewed in the following sections. Needless to say, the distinctions are merely operative, and large degrees of overlapping are to be expected.

### **Social Management**

The social management function of humor covers all the cases in which humor is used as a tool to facilitate in-group interaction and strengthen in-group bonding or out-group rejection. Instances of social management are:

1. *social control*: the speaker uses humor as a social corrective (Bergson 1901) by "embarrass[ing](...) or (...) intimidat[ing]" (Long and Graesser 1988: 53) members of the group;
2. *conveying social norms*: the speaker uses humor to attract attention on taboos, unacceptable behavior, etc. A.Nilsen (1983: 446) notes that

“white, middle-class, suburban women (...) aim wit or sarcasm at each other to control sexual behavior”;

3. *ingratiation*: the speaker tries to “garner attention and foster liking” (Long and Graesser 1988: 54). Adelswärd (1989) shows how mutual laughter shows and builds consensus;
4. *discourse management*: humor can be used for “initiation, termination, passing (exchange of control), topic shift, checking” (Ibid.: 55);
5. *establish common ground*: a speaker can use the hearer’s reaction to humor to establish his/her “attention, understanding, (...) degree of involvement.” (Ibid.: 57; see also Norrick (1984: 206-207);
6. *cleverness*: humor requires extra processing, so producing and understanding it connote cleverness. In general, humor has positive connotations in our society;
7. *social play*: “the comraderie generated through such play may function to strenghten social bonds and foster group cohesiveness” (Long and Graesser 1988: 57). Humor is “a means of managing communality and intimacy” for women (Kotthoff 1986: 22), or as aggression and domination for men;
8. *repair*: unpleasant situations may be defused by humorous comments, connoting positive attitude, in-group bonding, and levity.

Directly related to these social managemen goals are the uses of humor as a political tool (e.g., Nilsen 1990), in advertisement (e.g., Allen 1988), and in general to “political” (in the Greek sense) activities. Of particular interest for linguists are the uses of humor involving multilingual situations in which the sociolinguistic situation can be exploited by the speakers (e.g., Schwartzman (1984), Leeds (1992)).

It is clear that humor can greatly influence the speakers’ attitudes towards each other. This is emphasized by sociologically-based theories of humor which have distinguished between laughter of “inclusion” and of “exclusion” (see Ch. 1). This is another way to look at the social management function of humor. If two speakers laugh together about some subject, they share a certain degree of “affinity” (since humor connotes familiarity, as discussed

above) or share the knowledge of some scripts upon which the humor is based ("mutual shared background"—Brown and Levinson (1978: 124)), and so their reciprocal attitude will tend to be more familiar. In short, this type of humor has a "bonding" effect. This is also the case for the use of jokes as repairs for face threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1978: 104, 111).

On the other hand, if one speaker laughs about something and the second speaker does not, this will tend to underscore their belonging to two different groups (those who are laughing and those who are not). In this case, no shared familiarity or common script knowledge will be experienced, and thus the two speakers will not share a bonding effect. Even worse, if the humor is aggressive and the second speaker is the target of the aggressiveness, the humor will be perceived as insulting with reactions ranging from mild annoyance to open aggression, in response.

To sum up, the use of bonding, inclusive humor will have a positive effect on the overall perception of the speaker by the hearer, whereas exclusive humor will predictably have opposite effects. This topic is best handled by sociological, psychological, and anthropological theories of humor, and so will not be pursued here any further.

## Decommitment

To be precise, the decommitment function should be a subclass of the social management function of humor since its effects are ultimately that of facilitating the speakers' social interaction. From a different perspective, one might argue that the social function of humor is based on the ambiguity (and ultimately, retractability) of humor. Kane et al. (1977: 13) "[because] humour can be interpreted in several different ways it allows the source [speaker], target [hearer] or audience substantial flexibility of behaviour." Consequently, they define "decommitment" as "denying any harmful intention for an action" (14-15) and for the speaker to declare "that he/[she] did not have any intention of maintaining or carrying out or treating seriously an action that had been initially started" (15).

The basis of the decommitment function is that humorous communication is retractable, i.e., the speaker may back off from his/her utterance without loss of face (Brown and Levinson (1978: 229)). Decommitment tactics include "probing" and "salvaging," i.e., the speaker may probe the hearer(s) reactions to a behavior that he/she is uncertain will be met with approval by

engaging in the behavior with overt signs of non-seriousness (see below, for an example in the “diner” situation) or the speaker may salvage a situation that is becoming socially unpleasant by decommitting him/herself.

**Probing** Kane *et al.* present the following scenario while reporting on sociological research on the social function of humor:

Standards of propriety may prohibit a person from directly asking others about [the value system of the group]. A less direct approach would be to make a humorous remark that communicates the source’s interest: presumably, if the target laughs and later reciprocates with a similar form of humour, the social relationship has moved toward more intimacy without committing either party in such a way that he or she could be called to account for their actions. (Kane *et al.* 1977: 14)

Emerson (1969) and Sacks (1978) have suggested that humor is used to convey implicit “serious” contents, and this point also characterized Bergson’s (1901) social corrective theory. In this context, these claims acquire new value because humor can be seen as a tool for negotiating—in the emotional “no man’s land” of humor—issues that might be too threatening to be handled overtly. On the other hand, humor can be used to carry a very explicit message of agreement or dissent towards an individual or a group overtly in the case of aggressive humor.

**Salvaging** On the basis of their definition of decommitment above, Kane *et al.* (1977: 14-15) describe another scenario in which someone about to experience an unpleasant social situation “may attempt to save the situation by indicating that the proposed or past action was not serious, but was instead meant as a joke” (14) this not only puts the burden of initiating an unpleasant social exchange on the audience, but gives the speaker a ready-made excuse (“I did not mean it seriously”).

### **Humor as a Mediation Tool: an Empirical Approach**

This aspect of humorous discourse has been investigated in some detail by Mulkay (1988). Mulkay’s work is strictly sociological; thus, it is predictable

that his interest is focused on the intersubjective aspects of humor and only partially relevant for a linguistic perspective.

In a chapter significantly entitled "Putting Humor to Work" Mulkay (1988: 73-92) discusses three articles: one is Drew's article on teasing (see above), and the second and third are two sociological studies. One of these deals with the use of humor by patients and staff of a hospital, and the other with the use of humor in a "sexual marketplace" (actually a diner, where male customers try to pick up waitresses).<sup>17</sup>

These three studies are examples of a broader interpretation of the functionality of humor in communication. All three studies are concerned with situations in which humor is used either to introduce or carry out potentially embarrassing or aggressive interactions. In short, humor is seen as a mediating device, while teasing is seen as a device for criticizing a person without an overt attack (Mulkay 1988: 79). The study on humor in a hospital is interpreted as suggesting that humorous discourse is a "transitional device" which allows the introduction of topics otherwise felt to be "dangerous," such as death. Finally, in the diner study, humor "provides a means of exchanging coded messages about sexual availability" (Mulkay 1988: 87) and allows for transitions to intimate subjects without "personal risk."

As seen above, the reason for this mediating use of humorous discourse is to be found in the deniability (or retractability) of the humorous mode. Not being bound to the maxim of quality, the speaker can deny the responsibility for what he/she is saying, at least in part. If the speaker's assertions are found to be socially unacceptable, he/she has the option of denying their truthfulness by claiming that the assertions belonged to the humorous, NBF mode, and so are false, strictly speaking. Therefore, the speaker does not have to face the consequences of his/her assertions (loss of face, or worse) since "joking" is an accepted mode of communication. In other words, the speaker may claim that he/she was "only" kidding.

Mulkay points out, however, that contextual jokes are often received completely seriously by the hearer and interpreted at face value.<sup>18</sup> This fact can be accounted for in at least two ways. The first one is to assume that through shared world knowledge the hearer and the speaker know that an otherwise

<sup>17</sup>The reader is referred to the sources (Emerson 1973, Walle 1976) for the details of the respective analyses.

<sup>18</sup>This is especially true of teasing, but Walle provides some examples of "canned jokes" which are interpreted seriously too.

NBF text can be used to convey a serious meaning, so the NBF status of the joke is bypassed by a metareading of the text (see Zhao (1988)). The second alternative is to assume that NBF and BF are not discrete values, but that they are better represented on a continuum on which the hearer and the speaker negotiate the level of factual information conveyed by the humorous text on the basis of contextual evidence. Ch. 9 shows that the presuppositional basis of the text of a joke is unaffected by the ludic nature of the NBF mode and so is operational from the communicative point of view.

Mulkay concludes with a middle position in which he claims that it is impossible to identify the boundary between serious communication and humorous communication. He stresses the fact that humorous discourse carries less "responsibility" for the speaker, in the sense that its eventual serious content can always be denied.

In fact, Mulkay's claim is too strong since not everything in a humorous statement can be denied. For example, making aggressive jokes will inevitably be interpreted as an expression of covert aggression unless there is a preexisting reason to exclude this interpretation. It would probably be unwise to make an anti-Republican joke at the party's convention unless one is a well-known supporter of the party.

These remarks do not undermine the substantial correctness of the claim that an important property of humorous discourse is that it entails less status investment than its serious counterpart (see Brown and Levinson (1978)). Precisely because of this smaller investment of status in humorous discourse, joking is used to test behavior which is potentially socially unacceptable and to deal with emotionally charged issues.

### **Defunctionalization: Loss of Meaning**

The last primary function of humor has not been the object of specific research in CA, but it clearly belongs in this discussion. Humor, especially nonsense humor or puns, can in some cases be seen as a "defunctionalization" (Guiraud 1976: 112) of language. Defunctionalized language is language that is not used for transmission of information (its principal function), but for playful (ludic) purposes (cf. Long and Graesser (1988: 57) "social play").

The ludic aspect of linguistic humor has been pointed out by Freud's remark (borrowed from Groos) that humorous use of language is close to children's pleasure in playing with words (Freud 1905). The non-functional

nature of humor has been stressed in various theories of humor; for example, it plays an important role in Apter's theory (1989: 134) which defines humor as a paratelic activity, in opposition to "telic" (goal-oriented) activities.

Seeing humor as "play with language" (see Fry (1963)) has the effect of shifting the focus from language as a mean of communication to language as ritual and ultimately to language as art.<sup>19</sup> The fact that linguistic humor will be governed by the rules of the humorous game, rather than by those of language, is consistent with the metalinguistic status of puns and of humor in general (see ch. 3). As is generally acknowledged, metalanguage suspends the rules of language. Therefore, the suspension of the rules of language in humor is explained by the metalinguistic status of humorous communication. The speakers are aware of the ludic possibilities of language and of the metalinguistic freedom from its rules that humor allows; they may choose to take advantage of these possibilities for entertainment purposes.

### 10.4.3 The Secondary Functions

It has been claimed that jokes have an informative aspect and can be used by the hearers to extract information about real life (Zhao 1988). The process is seen as follows: the hearer is presented with information during the telling of the joke that he/she did not previously know. The hearer somehow discriminates between NBF information and BF information in the text and incorporates the latter in his/her knowledge.

This function is in no way limited to humorous narrative. Any story about unknown events or objects will increase the amount of information available to the hearer about that particular topic. The amount of information conveyed will be proportional to the novelty of the subject matter of the narrative in relation to the knowledge and experience of the hearer. The acquisition of new information (new scripts) can happen either explicitly (i.e., when the text introduces new information as such) or implicitly (the text is based on certain scripts that are never explicitly mentioned in the text, but are arrived at by the hearer inferentially and added to his/her knowledge).

From this point of view, the humorous nature of the text may be relevant only as a facilitating device along the patterns of retractability, as seen above. Given that any text can increase the amount of information available to a

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<sup>19</sup>On the connection of play and ritual, see Huizinga (1934).

speaker, the fact that the text of the joke is funny will only be significant insofar as it allows an easier, more pleasant acquisition of the contents of the text.

It has been claimed (Sacks 1978) that this function of jokes is also used to transmit taboo information. Sacks' article analyzes what kind of information is conveyed ("packaged," in his terminology) in the "sisters" joke (114). Sacks' argument goes as follows: the original teller of the joke was a twelve-year-old girl (the joke is retold by her older brother). In this perspective, when originally heard by a twelve-year-old, the joke had the function of informing her and her friends about adult sexual practices.

Although the amount of information transmitted may be low and probably unreliable, it is reasonable to assume that if a twelve-year-old girl has never heard of oral sex, exposure to the joke will inform her of the existence of this practice. But Sacks overgeneralizes in claiming that all jokes convey taboo information. Indirect proof of the claim that any kind of information may be transmitted through a joke comes from the analysis of the transmission of information about various social aspects of Chinese daily life (Zhao 1988). These subjects have few socially embarrassing aspects, if any, at least for Western readers.

Another secondary function of humor, discussed marginally by Zhao, can be identified as the revelation of some information about the speaker to the hearer(s)—for instance that he/she is in a mood appropriate for joking, that he/she considers his/her choice of subject matter appropriate for the situation, etc. In a sense, this kind of information has "meta-" status.

## 10.5 Summary: Humor Research and CA

What relevance does CA have for the field of humor? CA is interested in the co-text and the con-text of jokes, but not, or perhaps only marginally, in the structure or the nature of the joke itself. On these grounds, it could be argued that conversation analysis can be of little use in the analysis of jokes.

The study of conversational jokes and the ways they interact with the rest of the conversation (providing the speakers with diversions, or reinforcing the bonding among the participants, etc.) yields a great deal of information both to the humor researcher and to the linguist. Consequently, the silent gap at the end of the text of a joke (10.3.1) shows that the conversational structure

in which the canned joke text occurs can be reflected inside the text itself, since the linguistic material following the punch line is semantically empty, as per the restrictions imposed upon it by the contextual requirements of silence.

It is a fact, unfortunately, that little communication has taken place between the fields of CA and humor research,<sup>20</sup> and that most of conversation analysis research is only tangentially interested in humor as an object of study and is not well informed by state-of-the-art humor research, despite some interesting ideas. It is regrettable that CA has not focused more of its attention on humor since it is ideally equipped to capture some important aspects of humor, such as its importance and organization in conversation and more broadly in communication. For example, on the basis of Raskin's (1985: 104) remark that an "extended form of BF communication" might be postulated, including serious and humorous discourse, one could claim that serious verbal interaction includes some fragments of humorous discourse, and that a completely serious discourse would be perceived as odd outside of a very formal setting. CA appears to be the ideal discipline to undertake verification of this claim, which might have far-ranging implications in the way communicative effectiveness is perceived.

CA seems to be able to provide some methodological tools to capture the phenomena connected with the usage of humor in a social setting, particularly of conversation, and the interrelation of humor and communication. It is only logical to conclude that closer collaboration between linguists interested in CA and humor researchers would yield a significant amount of information on the conversational dynamics of humor.

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<sup>20</sup>There has not been much contact between CA and linguistics proper, either, although this has been changing for the better in recent years, largely due to the contacts between pragmatics and CA; see Schiffrin (1990).

# Chapter 11

## Directions in Humor Research

The first important general result of the analyses presented in the previous chapters is that the three major linguistic/semiotic models of humor (IDM, SSTH/GTVH, and bisociation) are conceptually close insofar as they are variants of the broader psychological model of incongruity-resolution, currently the main model in humor research. The linguistic models differ from the incongruity-resolution ones because the linguistic models are limited to humor conveyed by signs, because of their attention to conceptual clarity and constructive methodology that are put on the backburner in the traditional formulations of the incongruity-resolution model; moreover, the linguistic models make no claims as to the nature of the mental mechanisms involved, while the incongruity-resolution model is often associated with arousal-jag models (Berlyne 1972).

Despite being related and reducible to the incongruity-resolution model, the three main linguistic models are not equivalent: while they all describe roughly the same phenomena in terms of formalization, procedural explicitness, stability of definitions, and—after the GTVH's expansion—breadth of coverage, the SSTH is clearly to be preferred. An increasing number of publications use or mention Raskin (1985), thus implicitly making it a benchmark for humor research. Further elaboration of the GTVH is in the planning along several directions, including, but not limited to, its applications to joke-cycles (e.g., the lightbulb jokes) and other types of texts, as well as its empirical verification.

The IDM's most significant characteristic is probably its attention to the linear aspect of the organization of the text of the joke. The hypothesis of the

correlation between FSP (the theme/rheme articulation), on the one hand, and the communicative importance of the punch line, on the other, offer a new and heretofore untapped resource for humor research and linguistics. Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies will be of particular interest in this setting.

The oldest approach to linguistics and humor, the study of puns, receives a new stimulus from the present review of the taxonomic efforts that have been accumulating, especially after the semantic nature of the humorous mechanisms has been established and accepted, but more significantly from the new interest in paronymic puns which generates interesting research in "phonemic distance" and in the phonetic mechanisms of puns in general.

A new approach to puns has also been presented, which tries to find an explanation for the resolution of the incongruity, and by accounting for it in terms of a motivated theory of the sign, opens new perspectives for its functions and analysis.

Another exciting direction for further research is what has been termed the "larger texts" issue: the SSTH, as well as most other approaches, have been designed primarily for jokes, a particularly useful but nevertheless limited text type or genre. Looking in the direction of texts that exceed both the size limits of jokes and the battery of mechanisms used by jokes will eventually take linguistic researchers some way into literary criticism. For the time being, a more realistic and limited approach is to try and map out an increasing number of genres and techniques from the humor research perspective. The four sample analyses provided in ch. 8, and the more elaborated analysis of register humor are complementary to each other. A further, more complex step will involve the complete analysis of one entire short story. Clearly, such an enterprise requires a book-length monograph, which is in the planning.

Yet another prospect emerges from the literature on the discourse analysis of humorous interactions. The basic three-step model of the humorous interaction (introduction, text, reaction), while correct, is badly in need of development. A catalog of introductory devices and reactions is probably premature, but there is a need for several good descriptive studies with an eye for breadth (for example, describing a large number of introductory routines for joke-telling). Not only has the distinction between canned and conversational jokes proven useful, but its revision in terms of recycling offers a number of potentially fruitful conceptual tools that might explain how jokes are born, transmitted, and reused. Finally, the social aspect of humor

has proven to be not only a vastly interesting field, but also related to the more theoretical aspects of the linguistic inquiry (e.g., the politeness and cooperation issues). The interaction of the pragmatic analysis and of the discourse analysis of humorous exchanges will also prove fruitful, e.g., the decommitment tactics in humorous utterances and their obvious ties to the NBF, maxim-violating status of humor.

The neo-Gricean analysis of humor is one of the fields most likely to become increasingly important in the process of translating results of linguistic investigation in the field of humor into applications to mainstream linguistics. The recognition of the violation of the maxims and the postulation of a hierarchy of CPs are the mainstays of this approach. Further research, some of which is already on the way, will have to address both the exact nature of the inferential mechanisms exploited in humor, and the position of humor among the other NBF modes.

An area that might reveal itself a new prominent issue is the application of relevance theory to humor analysis. While so far the mention theory has proven unviable for the analysis of jokes, new publications are appearing linking relevance theory and humor. Irony is a very old and respectable field, with some connections to humor. Within irony research, the mention theory is a respectable player, and although this author has some perplexities on the application of mention theory to irony as well, it might well be that further research might change this.

Finally, on a broader scale, the global position that has implicitly guided this book is that linguistic humor can be understood exhaustively only by a general linguistic account of humor. An approach confined to one of the sub-fields of linguistics will always be necessarily limited. This is not to say that such work is not important or is not essential to our understanding of humor. Indeed, these studies are the foundation of our knowledge. But only an overall comprehensive linguistic outlook will eventually yield an understanding of why language is, at times, funny.

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# Appendix A

## Humorous Examples

(1)

C'est une brillante soirée mondaine, très chic, avec des invités triés sur le volet. A un moment, deux convives vont prendre un peu d'air sur la terrasse:

— Ah! fait l'un d'un ton satisfait, belle soirée, hein? Repas magnifique... et puis jolies toilettes, hein?

— Ça, dit l'autre, je n'en sais rien.

— Comment ça?

— Non, je n'y suis pas allé! (Greimas 1966: 70)

/At a sophisticated party two guests are talking outside. "Ah, says the first, in a satisfied tone, nice evening, isn't it? Magnificent meal, and beautiful *toilettes* (=lavatories/dresses), aren't they?" "I wouldn't know," answers the second. "What do you mean?" "I did not have to go."/

(16)

"Can you write shorthand?"

"Yes, but it takes me longer." (Lieberman 1957: 19)

(Footnote 28, pp. 93-94)

Numérobis (an architect from Alexandria, Egypt): "Je suis mon cher ami, très heureux de te voir." Panoramix (to the others): "C'est un alexandrin." /"I am, dear friend, very happy to see

you” “It’s an ‘alexandrin”” (12 syllable classical French meter) or “He’s from Alexandria.”/ Goscinny and Uderzo, *Astérix et Cléopâtre* Qt. in Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977: 143n)

(18)

Taxi crashes in Glasgow. 15 injured. (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974:89)

(19)

Q: Do you believe in clubs for young people?

A: Only when kindness fails (Pepicello and Weisberg 1983: 79)

(21)

Do you believe in clubs for young people?

Only when kindness fails, my friend.

(22)

“Do you believe in clubs for young people?” Someone asked W. C. Fields.

“Only when kindness fails” replied Fields.

(23)

Diplomacy: The noble duty of lying for one’s country. (Milner 1972: 17)

(24)

Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. (Ibid.)

(25)

All teachers of children who are mentally retarded. (Ibid.)

(26)

His sins were scarlet but his books were read. (Ibid.)

(27)

Traffic warden giving a ticket to her own son. (Ibid.)

(28)

You’ve had tee many martoonis. (Milner 1972: 18)

(29)

(British voter signing his letter): I assure you that you are, Sir, my obedient servant. (Ibid.)

(30)

(Comment about exchange rates): A giant leap for the International Monetary Fund, a small step for mankind. (Milner 1972: 19)

(31)

(Definition of 'hangover'): The wrath of grapes. (Ibid.)

(32)

A dog taking his master for a walk. (Ibid.)

(33)

Yesterday the dear old queen gave an audience to the queer old dean. (Milner 1972: 20).

(34)

Girls who do not repulse men's advances are often girls who advance men's pulses. (Ibid.)

(35)

The fair sex: Yes. The sex fair: No. (Ibid.)

(36)

Mind your till and till your mind. (Ibid.)

(37)

The house in the garden, the garden in the house. (Ibid.)

(38)

He left the house and a good impression.

(39)

*De grand vins et des petits vains* /Great wines and small proud persons/ (gHausmann 1974: 76)

- (40)  
*Un alibi pour la Lybie* /Alibi for Lybia/ (Ibid.)
- (41)  
*Lard militaire* /military fat—military art/ (Ibid.)
- (42)  
*Du fric pour les flic.* (Money for the police) (Ibid.)
- (43)  
*Marché coma (commun)* /Comatose market/Common market/ (Ibid.)
- (44)  
*Incon/Incompatible.* /Member of an unconstitutional party—Incompatible/(Ibid.)
- (45)  
*été tory /torride.* /Tory summer—torrid summer/. (ibid.)
- (48)  
*vatican* (the vatican)  
*vaticancan* (vatican + cancan)  
(Hausmann 1974: 66)
- (49)  
*Mieux vaut Tartuffe que jamais*  
*Tard/late/ Tartuffe* /name of a Molière character/ (Hausmann 1974:40)
- (50)  
*Rapatriés sur le volet... Trié sur le volet*  
(Hausmann 1974: 39).
- (53)  
*Lagoçamilébou.* (Raymond Queneau, *Zazie dans le metro*. Paris: Gallimard. 1959.)

(54)

Why did the cookie cry?  
Its mother had been away for so long. [a wafer]  
Pepicello and Green (1983: 59).

(55)

If it's feasible, let's fease it.

(56)

He may not have been actually disgruntled, but he was certainly far from gruntled.

(57)

Bassompierre was a prisoner at the Bastille. While reading he flipped the pages of his book hastily. The warden asked him what he was looking for, and Bassompierre replied: "I am looking for a passage, but I cannot find it." (Guiraud 1976: 11)

(58)

*Entre deux mots il faut toujours choisir le moindre.*  
/Between two words/evils one must always choose the lesser./  
(Paul Valéry, qt. in Guiraud 1976: 12)

(59)

*Bulletin d'informacons.* /Information bulletin—stupid people bulletin/ Translated functionally as "Newslitter"

(60)

Today's tabloid biography: High chair, high school, high stool, high finance, high hat— hi, warden! (Meiers and Knapp 1980: 21)

(61)

How does an elephant hide in a cherry tree?  
By painting its toenails red.

(62)

George Bush has a short one. Gorbachev has a longer one. The Pope has it, but does not use it, Madonna does not have it. What is it? A last name. (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 305-306)

(63)

The first thing which strikes a stranger in New York is a big car.  
(Esar 1952: 77)

(65)

Context: on a birthday card there is a picture of a beautiful woman holding a birthday cake. The legend reads:  
You can't have your cake and Edith [eat it] too.

(66)

Somebody once asked Motke Chabad, the legendary wit: "Tell me, Motke, you're a smart fellow. Why is *Kugel* called *kugel*?"

Motke lost no time in responding. "What kind of silly question is that? It's sweet like *kugel*, isn't it? It's thick like *kugel*, isn't it? And it tastes like *kugel*, doesn't it? So why *shouldn't* it be called *kugel*?"

Novak, William and Moshe Waldoks (eds.) 1981. *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*. New York: Harper and Row.

(68)

When is a door not a door?  
When it's ajar.

(69)

"Excuse me, do you know what time is it?"  
"Yes." (Eco 1986: 273)

(70)

"Can you pilot a motor boat?"  
"Certainly. I served in the army in Cuneo" (Eco 1981: 5).

(71)

The priest angrily burst into the peasant's house.  
– Have you no shame, in broad daylight, making love without even drawing the curtains?  
The peasant in vain explains that his wife and himself were sitting at the table having their dinner.  
– Then the fault must be in the window, says the priest.

The peasant wants to make sure how things stand, and following the priest's advice he climbs the tree opposite the window. After a while he returns to the room much surprised.

– Looking through the window it really looks as if two people were making love. (Du prestre ki abevete) (Fónagy 1982a: 49)

(72)

Guy Fawkes where are you, now that we need you? (Nash 1985: 37)

(75)

"Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in." (Raskin 1985: 32)

(77)

How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five, one to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's standing on. (Freedman and Hoffman 1980)

(78)

The number of Pollacks needed to screw in a light bulb? Five – one holds the bulb and four turn the table. (Clements 1969: 22)

(79)

How many Poles does it take to wash a car? Two. One to hold the sponge and one to move the car back and forth.

(81)

Gobi Desert Canoe Club

(82) = (62)

Madonna does not have it, the Pope has it but doesn't use it, Bush has it short, and Gorbachev long. What is it?

Answer: a last name.

(83)

How many poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? 5. One to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's standing on.

(89)

He was creating an Ethics, based on his theory that "good and just behavior is not only more moral but could be done by phone." Also, he was halfway through a new study of semantics, proving (as he so violently insisted) that sentence structure is innate but that whining is acquired. (Woody Allen *Remembering Needleman* In *Side Effects*. New York: Ballantine. 1981.)

(91)

Several of the ladies shrieked at the sight of the skull; and Miss Tenorina, starting up in great haste and terror, caused the subversion of a cup of chocolate, which a servant was handing to the Reverend Doctor Gaster, into the nape of the neck of Sir Patrick O'Prism. Sir Patrick, rising impetuously, *to clap an extinguisher*, as he expressed himself, *on the farthing rushlight of the rascal's life*, pushed over the chair of Marmaduke Milestone, Esquire, who, catching for support at the first thing that came in his way, which happened unluckily to be the corner of the tablecloth, drew it instantaneously with him to the floor, involving plates, cups and saucers, in one promiscuous ruin ... Mr. Escot was a little surprised at the scene of confusion which signalled his entrance (*Headlong Hall*, 56).

(92)

Mr. Escot passed a sleepless night, the ordinary effect of love, according to some amatory poets, who seem to have composed their whining ditties for the benevolent purpose of bestowing on others that gentle slumber of which they so pathetically lament the privation (*Headlong Hall*, 51).

(93)

The rage and impetuosity of the Squire continued fermenting to the highest degree of exasperation, which he signified, from time to time, by converting some newly unpacked article, such as a book, a bottle, a ham, or a fiddle into a missile against the head of some unfortunate servant... (*Headlong Hall*, 6)

(94)

Un jour, Cunégonde en se promenant auprès du château, dans le petit bois qu'on appelait *parc*, vit entre des broussailles le docteur Pangloss qui donnait une leçon de physique expérimentale à la femme de chambre de sa mère, petite brune très jolie et très docile. Comme Mlle Cunégonde avait beaucoup de disposition pour les sciences, elle observa, sans souffler, les expériences répétées dont elle fut témoin; elle vit clairement la raison suffisante du docteur, les effets et les causes, et s'en retourna tout agitée, toute pensive, toute remplie du désir d'être savante, songeant qu'elle pourrait bien être la raison suffisante du jeune Candide, qui pouvait être la sienne.

/One day, Cunegonde taking a walk near the castle, in the little wood they called *parc*, saw among the bushes Doctor Pangloss giving a lesson in experimental physics to her mother's maid, a little brunette, very good looking and docile. As Miss Cunegonde had great dispositions for the sciences, she observed, without a breath, the repeated experiences she witnessed; she saw clearly the doctor's sufficient condition, the effects and the causes, and returned, agitated and thoughtful, filled with the desire of being knowledgeable, thinking that she might well be the sufficient condition for the young Candide, and he for her./

(95)

Second speaker:

"On prend volontiers du convent  
le plus meschant pour estre abbé."

Third speaker:

"Dy moi: que signifie gabbé?

Il signifie deux fois menty." (Garapon 1957: 54)

/“Often from the convent is taken  
the meanest to be abbot”

“Tell me: what does “fooled” mean?

It means twice lied to.”/

(96)

Miss X produced a series of sounds that correspond closely with the score of “Home sweet home.” (Grice 1989: 37)

(97)

A British general cabled *Peccavi* to his HQ. (Grice 1989: 36)  
*Peccavi* is the Latin translation of the sentence "I have sinned"  
phonetically similar to "I have Sind."

(69) = (98)

"Excuse me, do you know what time it is?" "Yes."

(99)

"How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light bulb?"  
"Fish!"

(19) = (100)

"Do you believe in clubs for young people?" "Only when kindness  
fails." (Attributed to W.C. Fields)

(101)

"Why did the Vice President fly to Panama?" "Because the  
fighting is over." (Johnny Carson 1-19-90)

(103)

Arthur: "Today on the school bus a little boy fell off his seat and  
everybody laughed except me."

Teacher: "Who was the little boy?"

Arthur: "Me." (Yamaguchi 1988: 326)

(104)

The boss finally agreed to give Ken the afternoon off because he  
said his girlfriend was going to have a baby. Next morning, the  
boss said, "Was it a boy or a girl?"

"Too soon to tell," replied Ken. "We won't know for another nine  
months." (Yamaguchi 1988: 329)

(105)

How can you fit 4 elephants in a car? Two on the front seat, and  
two on the back seat.

(108) = (54)

Why did the cookie cry?

Because his mother had been away for so long.

(109)

Have you heard the latest?

No? Well, neither have I.

(111)

"Excuse me! Where did you get the toilet tissue?" "Oh, this is used, my own —I'm simply taking it home from the cleaners." (Raskin 1985: 243)

(112)

A young lady was talking to the doctor who had operated upon her. "Do you think the scar will show?" she asked. "That will be entirely up to you," he said.

(113)

Joke 1. Bored construction workers on top of a new 40-story building decided to throw bricks down to see whose brick would reach the ground faster. They threw 12 bricks but only 11 reached the ground.

Joke 2. A man and a woman find themselves seated to each other on board a plane. The woman has a pet duck which quacks very annoyingly each time the mistress strokes it lovingly. The man counters the annoyance by starting on a fat, smelly cigar. Finally, they reach an agreement. They take the duck and the cigar and throw them out. As they settle down to a drink and an amiable chat, the woman looks out the window and cries out, "Here is my duck, flying along!" The man looks out too, and sure enough, there is the duck, and what do you think it is carrying in its beak? That 12th brick.

(114)

Three sisters marry three young men on the same day and the mother of the young women talks them into spending their first night at their home, each in a room. The mother, after everyone

has retired to their respective rooms, listens at the closed doors. At the first one she hears an "Uoo-ooo," at the second door an "Yaaa," but at the third door she hears nothing. The following morning she asks the first daughter why she went "Uoo-ooo" and the daughter says "It tickled." She then asks the second daughter why she went "Yaa" and she replies "It hurt." Finally she asks the third daughter why she did not say anything. The daughter says "Well, you told me it was always impolite to talk with my mouth full." (Sacks 1978: 251)

(115)

The three Gagliardi girls were all married on the same day, and that night their parents listened at the bedroom doors. They heard the first daughter laughing and the second one crying and the third one silent. The next morning their mother took them aside and asked them to explain. "Well," said the first, "you always told me to laugh when something tickled me." "Mama," said the second, "you always told me to cry when something hurt me." "Well," said the third, "you always told me not to speak when I had my mouth full." (Wilde 1978: 86.)

(116)

(A college professor is talking to friends about his students in a summer school class): ... and this girl comes into my class looking real sour. I knew she was gonna be a lemon.

(117)

George Wallace's trip was a first for him and a first for the press. They pressed him about... (Sherzer 1978: 338).

(118)

In a course on human sexuality there's a lot to cover.  
vs.

In a course on linguistics there's a lot to cover.  
(Sherzer 1978: 344)

# Appendix B

## List of Acronyms

The following acronyms are used in the book; all are introduced before the first usage, with the exception of well known ones, which are listed here for the benefit of the reader.

<b>AI</b> Artificial Intelligence	<b>ECS</b> Evolutionary Cultural Semiotics
<b>ASL</b> American Sign Language	<b>ESL</b> English as a Second Language
<b>BF</b> Bona Fide	<b>FSP</b> Functional Sentence Perspective
<b>CA</b> Conversation Analysis	<b>FTA</b> Face Threatening Act
<b>CAG</b> Communication Action Game	<b>GTVH</b> General Theory of Verbal Humor
<b>CC</b> Communicative Competence	<b>IDM</b> Isotopy Disjunction Model
<b>CoP</b> Complex of Presuppositions	<b>IE</b> IndoEuropean
<b>CP</b> Cooperative Principle	

<b>IPA</b> International Phonetic Association	<b>SSTH</b> Semantic Script Theory of Humor
<b>IR</b> Incongruity and Resolution	<b>TA</b> Target (one of the KRs)
<b>KR</b> Knowledge Resources	<b>TRP</b> Transition Relevance Place
<b>L1</b> Native Language	
<b>L2</b> Second Language	
<b>LA</b> Language (one of the KRs)	
<b>LM</b> Logical Mechanism (one of the KRs)	
<b>NBF</b> Non-Bona Fide	
<b>NS</b> Narrative Strategy (one of the KRs)	
<b>PD</b> Phonemic Distance	
<b>SI</b> Situation (one of the KRs)	
<b>SO</b> Script Opposition (one of the KRs)	
<b>SPE</b> Sound Patterns of English (Chomsky and Halle 1968)	

# Index of Names

- Abelson, 199, 200  
Acevedo, 58  
Adelswärd, 324  
Aeschylus, 204  
Aitchison, 123, 153, 162, 166, 167  
Alexander, 29, 114, 211, 235, 236  
Allais, 285  
Allen, N., 324  
Allen, S., 311  
Allen, W., 235, 236, 253  
Alleton, 28, 109  
Andor, 199, 200  
Angenot, 114  
Anttila, 154, 156-158, 160, 165  
Apte, vii, viii, 4, 9, 219, 309, 316, 322  
Apter, 148, 303, 329  
Arabs, 34  
Arieti, 22, 23, 148, 169, 189  
Aristides, 37  
Aristophanes, 23, 25, 35  
Aristotelian, 22, 25, 28, 33, 35, 45, 169  
Aristotle, 19-25, 27, 29, 31, 34-45, 48, 49, 109  
Arlotto, 42, 52  
Ars Poetica, 33  
Astérix, 93  
Attardo, 6, 9, 13, 28, 49, 51, 57, 60, 71, 81, 87-89, 91, 92, 97-99, 101, 106, 125, 132, 134, 136, 138, 139, 146, 177, 181, 195, 200, 209, 211, 214, 216, 219, 222-224, 226, 227, 230, 254-256, 270, 277, 285, 287, 292, 295, 296, 301, 303, 306, 307, 313, 316, 318, 320  
Attridge, 172, 173  
Aubouin, 4, 5, 11, 20, 56, 58, 97, 144-148, 183  
Austin, 196  
Averroes, 34  
Böttger, 6  
Bakhtin, 2, 51, 178  
Balázs, 166  
Baldinger, 154  
Baldwin, 39, 44, 52  
Bally, 193, 231-235, 319  
Baltes, vii, 106  
Bamgbose, 111  
Barber, 51  
Bariaud, 51, 58, 143  
Barthes, 192, 232  
Bartlett, 199  
Bassompierre, 137, 215  
Bateson, 49, 199  
Baudin, 21, 57, 85  
Bauman, 293, 294, 300

Bayer, 58  
 Bellert, 81  
 Benveniste, 55, 88, 151, 152, 156  
 Bergler, 15, 37, 45, 54, 56  
 Bergson, 5, 8, 10, 17, 21, 27, 46,  
     47, 50, 51, 57-59, 321, 323,  
     326  
 Berlyne, 53, 332  
 Bermel, 4  
 Berns, vii  
 Besnier, 232  
 Bever, 103  
 Biber, 238, 239  
 Bloomfield, 294  
 Boileau, 44  
 Bond, 145, 165, 167  
 Booth, 272, 316  
 Borgomano, 84, 85, 211  
 Borsellino, 17  
 Bossuet, 72  
 Bourhis, 44, 52  
 Bowen, 52  
 Boyer, 114  
 Brémond, 61, 86, 90  
 Bracciolini, 41  
 Broden, vii, 64  
 Broecke, van den, 122  
 Brown, 93, 94, 123, 302, 325, 328  
 Bruch, 87  
 Brugman, 93  
 Brun, 211  
 Brunet, 211  
 Brémond, 64, 90  
 Bush, 146, 225  
 Bybee, 163, 167  
 Byrd, 51  
 Byron, 161

Cagli, 36, 43  
 Calstevetro, 36  
 Calvet, 211  
 Campanile, 178, 180  
 Candide, 254, 255, 266  
 Cappello, 17  
 Carrell, vii  
 Caserta, 7, 17  
 Cashion, 302  
 Castelvetro, 42  
 Cataudella, 26, 52  
 Catford, 237, 240  
 Chabanne, vii, 13, 88, 89, 92, 181,  
     224, 230, 255, 296, 301  
 Chafe, 199  
 Chambon, 137  
 Chapman, 15, 323  
 Charaudeau, vii, 82, 95, 97, 134,  
     135  
 Charniak, 199  
 Chateau, 3, 21  
 Chaucer, 8  
 Chelm, 52  
 Chevalier, 64  
 Chiaro, 193  
 Chiu, 238, 239  
 Chlopicki, 204, 209-211, 221, 226,  
     254, 262  
 Chomsky, 12, 67, 122, 147, 157,  
     196, 197, 239, 280, 292  
 Cicero, 23-33, 36-38, 40, 43-45, 54,  
     55  
 Cigada, 160, 161  
 Civita, vii, 57, 170  
 Clark, 162  
 Clements, 122, 220  
 Coates, 154

- Collins, 167, 252  
 Cometa, 3, 21  
 Cooper, 23-25, 34, 35, 51  
 Coquet, 64  
 Corneille, 44  
 Coseriu, 74, 75, 83  
 Coulmas, 132  
 Courtés, 78  
 Cousins, 53  
 Covaci, 168  
 Crabtree, 151  
 Croce, 7  
 Cruse, 133  
 Crystal, 65, 66, 100, 237, 239  
 Culler, 69, 151, 170-172  
 Curti, 56  
  
 Dübner, 25  
 Dahl, 100  
 Dante, 34  
 Darwin, 38, 53  
 Dascal, 134  
 Datain, 123  
 David, 21  
 Davies, 15, 52, 208, 212, 225  
 Davis, 142  
 Davy, 237, 239  
 De Beaugrande, 93  
 De Marchi, vii, 17  
 De Mauro, 152  
 Debaisieux, 4  
 Decartes, 52  
 Delabastita, 137  
 Demetrius Falerus, 26  
 Democritus, 26  
 Deneire, vii, 211  
 Derrida, 170, 172  
  
 Di Francia, 41  
 Dijk, van, 80  
 Dinh Hoa, 111  
 Dion of Prusa, 26  
 Dixon, 221  
 Dogana, 153, 157  
 Dolitsky, 134, 256, 279, 289  
 Dombroski, 17  
 Domitius Martius, 26  
 Donatus, 33, 35, 37  
 Dorfler, 175-177, 185, 186  
 Douglas, 175, 204  
 Downs, 319  
 Dressler, 93  
 Drew, 288, 321, 322, 327  
 Duchàček, 113, 114, 119, 132, 154, 168  
 Ducrot, 3, 65, 160  
 Dyer, 219  
  
 Eastman, 89, 90  
 Eco, 5, 7, 23, 27, 66, 73, 79-81, 93, 129, 175, 178-181, 202, 204, 272, 285, 289  
 Edeline, 168  
 Edmonson, 309  
 Edwards, 303  
 Eichenbaum, 304  
 Einarson, 29  
 Eisenberg, 321  
 Elgozy, 21  
 Ellis, 163, 237  
 Emeneau, 111  
 Emerson, 326, 327  
 Encrevé, 64  
 Ephratt, 218  
 Esar, 52, 146

- Escarpit, 3, 6, 83  
 Evans, 51  
 Fónagy, 57, 132, 175, 185, 187–189  
 Fara, 48, 57  
 Fausto, 36  
 Ferguson, 238, 240  
 Ferro-Luzzi, 9, 139, 209  
 Ferroni, 51, 54–56  
 Fields, 99, 272  
 Fillmore, 199, 200  
 Firbas, 100  
 Firth, 237  
 Fishman, 236, 237  
 Fodor, 65, 68, 74, 75, 80, 94, 196,  
     201, 202  
 Foot, 15  
 Forabosco, vii, 4, 48, 97, 109, 143,  
     144, 148, 229  
 Foy, 109  
 Freedman, 220  
 Frei, 165, 166  
 Freidhof, 137  
 Freud, 5, 10, 17, 27, 42, 46, 47,  
     49–51, 53–59, 63, 64, 73,  
     84, 114, 144, 148, 163, 183,  
     185, 187, 190, 191, 289, 296,  
     314, 328  
 Fromkin, 141, 142, 162, 163, 167  
 Fry, 50, 53, 296, 302, 329  
 Frye, 51, 224  
 Gabora, 48, 226  
 Gadet, 151  
 Gallob, 209  
 Garapon, vii, 5, 52, 58, 179, 268,  
     269, 273  
 Gardiner, 302, 304  
 Gardner, 293  
 Garnes, 145, 165, 167  
 Garrison, 221  
 Gaskill, 221  
 Geckeler, 74  
 Geerts, 17  
 Gentilhomme, 211  
 German, 3, 6, 21, 56, 57, 84, 153–  
     155, 166, 190, 212, 234, 308  
 Gervais, 114  
 Ghadessy, 240  
 Giles, 323  
 Giora, 208  
 Glenn, 307, 308  
 Goffman, 199  
 Goldstein, 122  
 Gombert, 125, 143, 147  
 Goodchilds, 323  
 Gorbachev, 146, 225  
 Gordon, 166  
 Goscinnny, 93  
 Gourévitch, 4, 51  
 Graesser, 50, 208, 296, 309, 323,  
     324, 328  
 Gray, 166  
 Green, 27, 108, 128, 131, 183  
 Gregory, 19, 20, 56  
 Greimas, 60–78, 81–84, 86, 87, 97,  
     98, 134, 135, 177, 178, 191,  
     296  
 Gresillon, 132  
 Grice, 50, 129, 173, 179, 181, 205,  
     264, 271–273, 275–279, 281,  
     283, 285, 287, 289, 291, 292,  
     334  
 Groos, 49, 57, 328

- Grotjahn, 57  
 Groupe  $\mu$ , 69, 77, 79, 80, 94  
 Gruner, 50  
 Guglielmino, 17  
 Guiraud, 27, 50, 83, 84, 114, 115,  
     117–119, 126, 128, 134–138,  
     154, 156, 166, 173, 203, 215,  
     285, 328  
 Gundel, 100  
 Hörmann, 189  
 Haegeman, 238  
 Haiman, 158, 236, 283  
 Hall, 53, 123, 300  
 Halle, 122  
 Halliday, 100, 235, 237–239, 241,  
     295  
 Hancher, vii, 272  
 Harris, vii, 109, 151  
 Hasan, 237, 239, 241  
 Hausmann, 83, 84, 111, 114, 118–  
     122, 147, 168  
 Heller, 141  
 Hempel, 6  
 Herbert, 162  
 Hermannus Alemanus, 34  
 Hermogenes, 24  
 Hernandez, 58  
 Herrick, 5, 33–41, 44  
 Hertzler, 50  
 Hill, 111  
 Hjeltslev, 64, 65, 114, 165  
 Hobbes, 2, 44, 49, 50  
 Hock, 154–156  
 Hockett, 27, 96, 100, 162, 192  
 Hoffman, 220  
 Hofstadter, vii, 48, 226  
 Holdcroft, 151  
 Holmes, 114, 236  
 Hope, 311  
 Horace, 26, 33, 34, 36, 37, 39, 43–  
     45  
 Horn, 292  
 Huber, 114  
 Hudson, 208  
 Huerta-Macias, 114  
 Hughes, vii  
 Huizinga, 49, 51, 52, 178, 329  
 Hunter, 272  
 Idar, 209  
 Iordan, 155, 156  
 Isidore of Seville, 34  
 Jablonski, 289  
 Jakobson, 77, 95, 110, 119, 139,  
     153, 156–158, 161, 163–165,  
     167, 181  
 Janko, 22–26, 34  
 Jardon, 4, 5, 51, 316  
 Jefferson, 12, 288, 307, 308, 310,  
     311  
 Jodlowiec, 134, 274  
 Johnson, 175, 176, 186  
 Johnson, Ben, 44  
 Jolles, 91, 191, 221, 224  
 Joos, 237  
 Joubert, 44, 53  
 Joyce, 170  
 Jung, 51, 162  
 Köhler, 153  
 Kane, 323, 325, 326  
 Kant, 47, 48, 53, 145  
 Karttunen, 80

- Katz, 65, 68, 74, 75, 80, 94, 196,  
201, 202  
Keith-Spiegel, 3, 11, 12, 15, 19, 46,  
50, 53  
Kemeny, 84  
Kennedy, 288  
Kerbrat-Orecchioni, vii, 13, 70, 74,  
75, 77–80, 93, 122, 177, 249,  
316  
Kiparsky, 123  
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 49, 316  
Kite, 211  
Kittredge, 93  
Kline, 56, 57  
Klinkenberg, 117  
Knapp, 139  
Knobloch, 132  
Koch, 182, 190, 191  
Koestler, 48, 84, 174, 175, 179, 181,  
187, 189, 296  
Kofman, 57  
Kolek, 193, 221  
Kotthoff, 308, 324  
Kraemer, 33  
Krapp, 123  
Kris, 57  
Kuhn, 205  
Kundera, 8  
Lévi-Strauss, 77, 157  
Lacan, 171  
Lafrance, 309  
Lagerquist, 120, 122, 124, 142  
Lakoff, 129, 176, 243, 244  
Lalo, 58  
Lambruschi, 48, 57  
Landheer, 84, 137  
Lanza, vii, 20, 23–25  
Laurian, 29, 96, 137, 211  
Leclerc, 137  
Leech, 12  
Leeds, 324  
Lefort, 285  
Lehrberger, 93  
Leibniz, 267, 268  
Lessard, 109, 184  
Levin, 8, 9, 51  
Levinson, 100, 294, 302, 325, 328  
Lewicka, 52  
Lewis, 5, 9, 10, 51, 52  
Lieberman, 88  
Lixfeld, 50, 57, 84, 87, 190  
Loftus, 167, 252  
Long, 323, 324, 328  
Longinus, 22  
Luria, 166  
Lycophron, 26  
Lyons, 100, 133, 153  
Macaulay, vii  
MacKay, 103  
MacLaren, 147  
Madius, 36–39, 48, 53  
Madonna, 146, 225  
Maggi, 37, *see* Madius  
Magli, 73  
Maillard, 256–261  
Maingueneau, 132  
Malkiel, 153, 157  
Manetti, 11, 53–55, 83, 85, 98, 152,  
175–178, 186, 193, 272  
Marfurt, 84, 87, 88  
Marino, vii, 208, 215, 221  
Markov, 98

- Martin, 211  
 Martineau, 323  
 Martinich, 272  
 Mason, 211  
 McCawley, 196  
 McDowell, 69  
 McGhee, 15, 48, 53, 57, 129, 143  
 McNeill, 123  
 Meiers, 139  
 Meillet, 155  
 Mel'čuk, 75  
 Mellard, 170  
 Meltzer, 172  
 Menn, 110  
 Meredith, 51, 53  
 Mervis, 129, 243  
 Miller, 162, 321  
 Milner, 5, 10, 11, 15, 27, 48, 56,  
     114-117, 119, 126, 175, 176,  
     178, 183  
 Mindess, 50  
 Mintz, 219  
 Mio, 50  
 Mizzau, 180, 181  
 Monaco, 29  
 Monnot, 120, 122, 211  
 Montes Giraldo, 114  
 Morin, 27, 61, 63, 82-88, 90, 96-98  
 Morreall, 15, 18, 20, 47, 48, 50, 53,  
     57, 132, 272  
 Morris, 191  
 Morrissey, vii, 209, 248  
 Mounin, 70, 71, 74  
 Muecke, 316  
 Mulkay, 208, 288, 296, 305, 307,  
     319, 321, 326-328  
 Murphy, 238  
 Muzio, 36, 39  
 Muller, 308  
 Nash, 185, 190, 192, 193  
 Needham, 243, 244  
 Nelson, 51  
 Neve, 57  
 Niculescu, 82, 85, 88, 89  
 Nilsen A., 316, 323  
 Nilsen, D., vii, 29, 51, 55, 132, 191,  
     211, 219, 316, 324  
 Nirenburg, 93  
 Noguez, 57, 113, 118, 168, 175, 184  
 Noomen, 4  
 Norrick, 148, 175, 185, 189-191, 193,  
     324  
 Novak, 157  
 Numérobis, 93  
 Nyrop, 154  
 Obler, 110  
 Occam, 285  
 Olbrechts-Tyteca, 5, 11, 12, 96, 197  
 Ombredane, 163  
 Oring, vii, 57, 98, 228, 281, 293  
 Orlando, 5  
 Orr, 154-156  
 Osgood, 157  
 Oswald, 288  
 Paletta, 180, 181  
 Palmer, 51, 237, 239  
 Pangloss, 266, 268  
 Panoramix, 94  
 Paul, 154, 166  
 Paulos, 48  
 Peacock, 254, 262-265  
 Peirce, 158, 159, 180, 202

- Pepicello, 27, 97, 108, 114, 128, 131,  
132, 183
- Petőfi, 295
- Philips, 321
- Piddington, 10, 14, 15, 18, 20, 27,  
31, 37, 45, 56
- Pievano Arlotto, 41, 42, 52
- Pike, 84
- Pino, 36, 43, 44
- Pirandello, 17, 178
- Piro, 162, 173
- Planalp, 94
- Plato, 18–22, 40, 45, 49, 152, 233
- Plebe, 19–25, 33
- Poe, 222, 254–256, 258–261, 265
- Poggio, 41, 52
- Pope, 146, 225
- Popper, 319
- Porteous, 53
- Postal, 74
- Pottier, 65, 74
- Powers, 151
- Preisendanz, 57, 84, 190, 191
- Prince, 86, 100
- Propp, 21, 61, 82, 85–88, 90, 91
- Quayle, 292
- Queneau, 123, 178, 234
- Quillian, 202
- Quintilian, 23, 26, 29–32, 36, 40
- Radcliff-Umstead, 36
- Rapp, 50
- Raskin, viii, 4, 9, 10, 12, 15, 16, 27,  
32, 46–51, 75, 91–93, 95–  
97, 100, 103, 108, 110, 131,  
132, 134–136, 138, 146, 166,  
178, 183, 184, 186, 189–191,  
193, 195–197, 199–224, 226,  
227, 246, 248, 254, 267, 269,  
270, 275, 276, 286, 287, 289,  
296, 303, 306, 307, 316, 318–  
320, 322, 331, 332
- Rastier, 74–77, 79
- Raynaud, 114
- Read, 132
- Redfern, 128, 185, 192, 193
- Reger, 84
- Reichenbach, 110, 275
- Reid, 237
- Reinhart, 80
- Renner, 6, 84, 190
- Richard, 232
- Ricoeur, 98
- Rigotti, vii, 166
- Robinson, 53
- Robortello, 36 *see* Robortellus
- Robortellus, 36, 37
- Rohrich, 190
- Roić, 17
- Rosch, 129, 243, 244
- Roventa-Frumusani, 13
- Ruch, vii, 12, 223, 229
- Rutelli, 84, 85, 87, 88, 296, 308,  
310, 311
- Sacks, 162, 294, 300–307, 309–314,  
316, 317, 320, 326, 330
- Sagey, 122
- Samarin, 158, 163
- Sapir, 111
- Saussure, 64, 79, 109, 111, 114, 151,  
152, 159, 165, 166, 232
- Savin, 53

- Scaliger, 39, 44, 45  
 Scaligero, 36, *see* Scaliger  
 Schütz, 6  
 Schank, 199, 200  
 Schenkein, 300  
 Schieffelin, 321  
 Schleifer, 65, 66, 69  
 Schmidt, 129, 175, 176, 185, 186,  
     190  
 Schmidt-Hidding, 6  
 Schogt, 166  
 Schopenhauer, 47, 48  
 Schulz-Buschhaus, 17  
 Schwartzman, 324  
 Schwerdtfeger, 209  
 Sebeok, 177, 181  
 Segal, 51  
 Segre, 84, 296  
 Seidenberg, 124  
 Serper, 34  
 Shelley, 262  
 Sherzer, 114, 294, 300, 312–316  
 Shieber, 202  
 Shopenhauer, 48  
 Sidney, 44  
 Simon, 57  
 Simpson, 93  
 Sinicropi, 4  
 Sklovskij, 176  
 Sobkowiak, vii, 110, 120, 122, 125,  
     126, 142  
 Socrates, 18  
 Sozzi, 52  
 Spencer, 53  
 Spengel, 24, 26  
 Sperber, 277–280, 283, 290, 292,  
     294, 316  
 Spielman, 293, 302, 304  
 Spingarn, 35, 39, 44  
 Starobinski, 165  
 Strabo, 26  
 Sully, 49, 53  
 Suls, 20, 48  
 Sypher, 51  
 Tanenhaus, 124  
 Tannen, 200, 303, 312, 316–319, 321,  
     323  
 Tarr, 258, 260  
 Tartuffe, 121  
 Tateo, 52  
 Tessier, 143  
 Tetel, 58  
 Theophrastus, 22  
 Tiberius, 26  
 Timpanaro, 163  
 Todorov, 3, 27, 54, 55, 57, 65, 128,  
     160, 179, 188  
 Torode, vii  
 Toschi Nobile, 54, 55, 190  
 Trachtenberg, 211  
 Trager, 309  
 Trié, 121  
 Trissino, 36, 39–41, 43–45, 48  
 Tsur, 153, 157  
 Twain, 8  
 Tyteca, 295  
 Tzetzes, 25, 33  
 Uderzo, 93  
 Ullmann, 111, 157, 166  
 Ulmer, 172  
 Ulrich, 84, 87, 145  
 Ure, 237, 239

- Valery, 137, 138  
Valla, 34  
Van Raemdonck, 291  
Vaudeville, 58  
Vega, vii, 209, 211, 213  
Vendryes, 154  
Vershueren, 125  
Vettore Fausto, 36  
Victoroff, 58  
Violi, 83, 178, 272  
Vittoz-Canuto, 84, 114, 120, 122,  
126, 127  
Vitz, 124  
Voegelin, 110  
Vogel, 182-184, 191, 313  
Volkelt, 21  
Voltaire, 254, 266-268  
Vântu, 73  
  
Wallace, 240, 315  
Walle, 327  
Waltensperger, 162  
Warning, 57, 84, 190  
Waugh, 8, 153, 156-158, 161, 163-  
165, 167  
Weber, 57, 58  
Webster, 68, 71, 93, 117, 249  
Weinberg, 34-36, 39-44  
Weisberg, 114  
Weiser, 215  
Weizman, 240  
Wells, 163  
Wenzel, 54, 55, 84, 87, 175, 183,  
185, 190-193  
Werner, 308  
Wescott, 153, 158  
White, 239  
  
Wiener, 177  
Wilde, 305, 306  
Wilson, 277-280, 283, 290, 292, 294,  
316  
Wimsatt, 35, 161  
Winkeler, 124  
Wittgenstein, 8, 185, 243  
Woolley, 158  
Wundt, 166  
  
Yamaguchi, 278-282  
Yule, 93, 94, 109  
  
Zajdman, 297, 299, 302  
Zamboni, 154  
Zhao, vii, 209, 212, 213, 224, 288,  
328-330  
Zillman, 50  
Ziv, 20, 53, 58, 97, 144, 148, 169,  
211, 219  
Žuravlev, 124, 153, 157  
Zwicky, C., vii, 120, 122, 124, 125,  
142, 237, 239, 240  
Zwicky, E., vii, 120, 122, 124, 125,  
142, 237, 239, 240

# Index of Subjects

- abduction, 180, 181
- ablaut, 165
- accent, 160
- adjacency pair, 311
- adjacency pairs, 295
- advertising, 170
- aesthetic, 77, 139, 157, 176, 179
- aesthetics, 57, 84, 233
- affect, 232
- affective elements, 231
- affective value, 231
- agenthood, 246
- aggression, 50, 182, 324, 326
- AI, 177, 199, 202
- allegory, 27, 204
- alliteration, 9, 78, 101, 104, 117,  
123, 127, 139, 146, 160, 162,  
163, 211
- allusion, 203, 267, 316
- Alsatian, 154
- amalgamation, 80, 94, 202
- ambiguity, xviii, 27, 32, 69, 73, 84,  
93, 94, 103, 104, 112, 130,  
133–136, 148, 177, 179, 183,  
203, 209, 217, 223, 239, 273,  
278, 285, 291, 314, 315, 325  
lexical, 93, 101, 103, 104, 133,  
225, 276  
morphological, 132  
pragmatic, 104, 188  
semantic, 146, 182  
syntactic, 103, 104, 146, 188  
unit-type, 133
- America, 51, 322
- American, 101, 102, 177, 179, 319
- American Psychological Association,  
53
- anagrams, 165
- analogy, 165
- anaphora, 80, 93, 314, 315
- anatomy, 44
- Anglo-Saxon, 58, 123
- antanaclasis, 184
- anthropology, 4, 15, 111, 209, 243,  
322
- antonym, 134  
local, 131, 134
- antonymy, 113, 114, 136, 202
- aphasia, 119
- application, 94
- arbitrariness, 152–156
- arbitrary, 149–151
- arousal, 53
- art, 29, 42, 57, 110, 118, 164, 165,  
178, 182, 183, 249, 313, 329
- aspect, 93
- associative series, 165
- assonance, 162

- ἀ στείλα*, 20, 31
- automatic, 188
- automatism, 146
- backtracking, 140, 177, 276
- bathtub effect, 123, 125, 167
- BF, 206, 213, 214, 274, 287, 288, 292, 310, 318
- bisociation, 84, 174, 175, 178, 187, 189, 194, 296, 332
- Bochum, 174, 193
- Bologna, 174, 177
- βωμολοχία*, 20
- bonding, 325
- Breve considerazione..., 43
- British, 6, 116, 190, 192, 272
- British Psychological Association, 53
- CA, 293–295, 300, 303, 304, 307, 310, 311, 313, 314, 316, 319, 328, 330, 331
- CAG, 185
- canned joke, 294–301, 311, 316, 320, 322, 327, 331
- caricature, 27, 57
- cartoon, 8, 93, 153, 165, 193, 194, 209
- casual, 139
- catastrophe, 190
- CC, 211–213
- chastushka, 269
- chiasmus, 116, 117, 119, 141, 176, 188
- clang responses, 162, 168
- classeme, 64, 66–78
- coherence, 80, 83
- Coislin, 23
- combinatorial rules, 202, 203, 206, 216
- comedy, 3–5, 19–27, 29, 33–36, 39, 40, 43–45, 51, 58, 92, 234, 263, 319
- comic, 3
- communicative dynamism, 100, 101
- comparative, 158
- competence, 1, 3, 12, 13, 160, 173, 180, 196, 197, 212, 213
  - communicative, see CC.
- compound joke, 267
- computational linguistics, 218
- con-text, 295, 298, 330
- concatenation, 67
- condensation, 55, 56, 64, 71, 72, 187
- connecteur, 134
- connecting term, 63, 82
- connection, 138, 215
- connector, 89, 95–97, 99, 102–105, 136, 138–140, 203, 223
  - distinct, 140
  - non-distinct, 140
- connotation, 78, 127, 136, 137, 150, 233, 234, 236, 249, 250, 252, 253, 278, 324
- connotative, 157, 164
- consonant, 125, 126
- consonants, 124
- context, 66–70, 72–75, 80, 82, 88, 91, 93, 94, 107, 112, 119, 130, 133–135, 139, 140, 145, 148, 149, 164, 168, 169, 174–176, 178, 185–187, 193, 195, 197, 201, 214, 215, 234, 235,

- 238, 239, 267, 280, 281, 285,  
 287, 290, 293–299, 301, 303,  
 309, 311, 314–316, 320–322,  
 327, 328, 331  
 contradiction, 189, 216  
 contrast, 24, 56, 58, 177, 187, 189,  
 234, 265, 322  
 conversational joke, 294–301, 303,  
 312, 320, 330  
 conversational maxim, 179 *see* maxim.  
 conversational sequence, 294  
 conversational turn, 302, 307, 318,  
 319, 321, 322  
 CoP, 185–187  
 co-text, 70, 130, 131, 295, 298, 299,  
 330  
 Cours de linguistique générale, 165  
 CP, 50, 180, 271, 273–277, 280, 282,  
 286, 287, 334  
     humor, 286  
     meta, 287  
 Cratylism, 152, 153, 160, 164, 167,  
 168, 173, 226  
 Cratylus, 152  
 Critique of Judgement, 48  
 crossword, 177, 178  
 Cuneo, 179  
 Dakota, 165  
 decommitment, 323, 325, 326, 334  
 De Comoedia, 33  
 decontextualization, 177  
 deductive, 180  
 defunctionalization, 50, 173, 268,  
 285, 323, 328  
 deictic field, 187  
 deixis, 78  
 delicacy of focus, 241  
 Dell'arte poetica, 39  
 Delphic Oracle, 19  
 deniability, 317  
 denotation, 252  
 denotative, 157  
 De Oratore, 26, 29  
 De Poetica, 20  
 De Ridiculis, 37  
 derision, 30  
 derivational, 65  
 dèsembrayeur, 97, 135  
 determinedness, 93  
 dialectology, 245  
 dialogical, 88  
 direct speech, 279  
 disambiguation, 69, 70, 73, 75, 80,  
 92–95, 112, 128, 131, 133–  
 135, 148, 276  
 disclaimers, 303  
 discourse, 25, 37, 39, 69, 72, 76–78,  
 81, 88, 179, 205, 212, 236,  
 237, 240, 266, 298–300, 312–  
 314, 316, 323, 324, 326–328,  
 331, 333, 334  
     field of, 238  
 discourse analysis, 294, 313  
 disjunction, 16, 60, 61, 82, 84, 87,  
 91, 92, 95–98, 104, 128, 138,  
 139, 175, 191, 194, 215, 310  
 disjunctive, 82, 83, 89, 92, 95–102,  
 104–107, 135, 138–140, 203,  
 211  
     diffused, 139  
     distinct, 104, 105, 140  
     final, 99, 102, 105  
     non-distinct, 104, 105, 140

- non-final, 99, 101
- prefinal, 99, 101
- displacement, 55, 56, 63, 64, 182
- distance, 124, 246, 248–250, 252
- distinguisher, 65, 74, 75
- domain, 237
- drama, 22
- dramatization, 88
- Dravidian, 209
- economy, 55, 56
- ECS, 181, 182
- education, 15
- Elizabethan, 22, 44
- ellipsis, 99, 101, 181
- embrayeur, 97, 134
- emic, 109
- emotions, 12, 19, 27, 58
- encyclopedic, 200, 201
- encyclopedic knowledge, 72
- England, 35, 44, 45
- English, 6, 16, 18, 31, 36, 62, 71, 93, 100, 106, 123, 125, 159, 160, 211, 234, 238, 239, 247, 283
- Enlightenment, 45
- enoncés liés, 188
- enumerations, 179
- Epistula ad Pisones, 33
- Erofilomachia, 43
- error, 141, 142, 145, 146, 163
  - demotivated, 189
  - pseudo, 145
- error theory, 124
- ESL, 209, 211
- ethnic, 52, 212, 214, 219, 225
- ethnography, 49, 322
- ethnology, 313
- ethnomethodology, 294
- etymology, 27, 113, 154, 188
  - folk, 154, 155, 164, 188, *see* par-etymology
- euphemism, 266
- Europe, xviii, 44, 51, 60, 62, 70, 185, 247
- exclusive humor, 50
- explicit, 179, 181
- eye-dialect, 123
- Fabliau, 4, 34, 188, 189
- Fabula, 304
- face, 302, 310, 325, 327
  - threatening act, *see* FTA
- facetiae, 27
- facezia, 41
- facilitating, 329
- familiarity, 235, 324
- family resemblance, 243, 244
- farce, 4, 35
- fatrasie, 268
- feature
  - phonemic, 141
  - semantic, *see* semantic feature
- fiction, 22, 23, 165, 178, 283
- fight or flight, 182
- figurative, 27, 65, 71, 72, 203, 204
- figure, 55, 78, 116, 153, 179, 184
- figure of speech, 24, 29, 32
- figure/ground, 144, 226
- folklore, 5, 49, 61, 84, 229
- fooltown, 52
- formant*, 63
- formulaic expressions, 312

- frame, 73, 88, 179, 185, 189, 199,  
     201, 224, 279, 281, 282  
 France, 4, 45, 57, 64, 65, 83  
 French, 6, 39, 44, 58, 61, 62, 65, 71,  
     83, 84, 94, 114, 122, 123,  
     126, 152, 154, 155, 159, 160,  
     165, 179, 181, 188, 211, 212,  
     234, 254, 272, 285  
 Freudian slip, 163  
 FSP, 92, 100, 101, 333  
 FTA, 325  
 functional sentence perspective, *see*  
     FSP  
  
 garden-path, 225  
 gender, 93  
 generation, 198  
 generative, 111, 177, 184, 195–198  
 genre, xviii, 3–5, 26, 39, 45, 51, 52,  
     92, 185, 190, 213, 224, 229,  
     255, 268, 269, 333  
 Glasgow, 96  
 glossolalia, 162, 163, 165  
 goals, 200  
 grammaticality, 196, 197  
 graphematic, 234  
 grapheme, 27, 111, 127, 153  
 graphemic, 124  
 Greece, 18, 21, 26  
 Greek, 14, 18, 21, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29,  
     32, 34, 52, 116, 190, 243,  
     324  
 GTVH, 144, 218, 219, 222, 223, 226–  
     229, 245, 246, 253–255, 261,  
     265, 268, 270, 332  
  
 Headlong Hall, 262, 264, 265  
  
 Hebrew, 34  
 height, 124  
 Hellenistic, 22, 26, 28  
 hermeneutic, 192  
 history, 45  
 homograph, 110, 111, 113  
 homonym, 110, 111, 113, 114, 119,  
     120, 127, 145, 146, 148–150,  
     159, 161, 169, 188  
 homonymic series, 165  
 homonymy, 148  
 homophone, 110, 111  
 homophony, 113, 118–120, 124  
 HUMOR, 15, 219  
 Hungarian, 82  
 hyperdetermination, 261, 265, 267  
 hyponymy, 201, 246  
  
 iconicity, 150, 158, 159  
 idealized speaker, 197  
 ideophones, 165  
 idiom, 83, 132, 188, 313  
 IDM, 60, 62, 81, 84, 85, 92, 93,  
     98, 100–105, 175, 177, 190,  
     192, 203, 207, 256, 332  
 IE, 9, 111, 155, 156  
 illocutionary, 13, 82, 196, 279, 280  
 implication, 179  
 implicit, 134, 181, 187, 256, 286,  
     289, 290  
 inclusive humor, 50  
 incongruity, 4, 9, 39, 48, 49, 91,  
     97, 129, 139, 140, 143–146,  
     148, 150, 158, 169, 170, 183,  
     184, 193, 230, 236, 245, 261,  
     263, 274, 289, 305, 306, 315,  
     333

- indicateur, 95
- indirect speech, 279–282
- indirect speech act, 273, 281
- inductive, 180
- inference, 181, 206, 275, 329
- infinite regression, 284
- inflectional, 65
- initial situation, 86, 88, 91
- instrumenthood, 246
- insults, 21
- intentional humor, 31
- interdisciplinary, xvii, 9, 14–16, 46, 108, 126, 219, 313
- intersubjectivity, 12
- intertextual, 149, 179, 180, 190
- intonation, 245, 317
- introspection, 12
- inversion, 58, 116, 127
- involuntary humor, 31
- Iowa, 179
- IPA, 123
- irony, xviii, 4, 27, 32, 92, 181, 271, 272, 277, 278, 303, 316, 317, 334
- isotopy, xviii, 16, 60–64, 69–85, 92, 94, 95, 128, 135, 175, 177, 191, 194, 225, 261, 267, 276, 296, 310
- Italian, 35, 44, 82, 101, 102, 160, 177, 234
- Italy, 52, 177, 179
- Jewish, 8, 52, 157, 214, 219, 317
- joke-cycles, 332
- Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, 54
- Journalese, 240
- justification, 4, 20, 48, 58, 92, 97, 136, 144–146, 148, 169, 183, 215
- kinesics, 309
- klanging associations, 162
- knock-knock joke, 303
- KR, 222–227, 229
- LA, 223, 226, 227
- Lake Wobegone Days, 221
- language game, 141
- language of instructions, 238
- language pedagogy, 237
- language play, 316
- langue, 232
- lapsus linguae, 163
- Latin, 14, 16, 26, 31–34, 39, 152, 156, 272
- laughter, 3, 4, 8, 10–13, 18–20, 24, 26, 30, 37–40, 42, 48, 49, 53, 58, 183, 184, 286, 300, 301, 305, 307–311, 319
  - delayed, 309
  - exclusive, 324
  - inclusive, 324
  - multi-party, 308
  - post-utterance, 308
  - style, 309
  - synchronous, 308
  - turn-taking, 308
  - within speech, 308
- L-DOPA, 162
- Le Canard Enchaîné, 122
- Le Français dans le monde, 211
- lexeme, 65–69, 71, 72, 74, 93, 94, 138, 151, 161, 235, 245, 252, 268, 276

- lexical, 5, 56, 65, 81, 93–96, 101, 103, 104, 110, 113–119, 126, 166, 167, 195, 199–202, 208, 221, 234, 239, 245, 248, 249, 251, 253, 261, 263, 312, 321
  - associations, 160
  - function, 75
  - knowledge, 201
  - solidarity, 75
- lexicography, 217
- lexicon, 150, 160, 162, 163, 167
- liberation, 50
- Liber Facetiarum*, 41
- limerick, 269
- linear, 92, 94, 100, 105
- linear organization, 85
- linearity, 194
- literary, 2–5, 8, 9, 22, 34, 35, 42, 45, 46, 51–53, 57, 58, 73, 111, 171, 172, 174, 185, 186, 189–192, 208, 221, 224, 230, 234, 255, 261, 268, 333
- literary criticism, 229
- literature, 5, 15, 17, 18, 34, 45, 52, 57, 58, 84, 171–173, 179, 190, 272
- LM, 144, 189, 223, 225–227
- local logic, 20, 136, 144, 148, 169, 183, 226, 303
- locus, 192
- locutionary, 280
- logic, 57, 58, 65, 80, 110, 129, 147, 148, 178, 188, 198, 216, 224, 226, 232, 275, 322
- ludant, 135, 136
- ludé, 136
- ludic, 52, 162, 328, 329
- lying, 286, 287, 291
- Mad, 179
- malapropism, 125, 165
- Maluma, 153
- manifestness, 290
- marker, 74
- Marxist, 57
- mathematics, 15
- Mauritius, 209
- maxim, 179, 205, 291
  - flouting, 273, 274, 287
  - manner, 179, 206, 264, 272–275, 285
  - quality, 205, 264, 272–274, 281, 284, 287, 288, 327
  - quantity, 179, 205, 264, 272–275, 280, 281, 289–292
  - relation, 179, 206, 264, 272, 281
  - relevance, 273–275, 291, 292
  - violation, 273–292, 334
- meaning, 10–12, 18, 29, 31, 32, 43, 48, 54, 55, 61, 64–66, 68, 69, 71, 72, 80, 81, 93–96, 106, 110, 128, 129, 131–135, 137, 138, 140, 146, 147, 150, 151, 153, 155, 157–163, 165, 168–171, 173, 178, 188, 189, 193, 197, 200, 202, 203, 207, 223, 225, 232, 233, 236, 249, 261, 263, 274, 276, 286, 300, 305, 310, 315, 328
- mediating, 327
- mediation, 323
- medicine, 15
- Medieval, 6, 35, 45, 73, 179, 254, 268, 272

memorability, 318  
 mental expenditure, 289  
 mention, 183, 233, 278, 280, 282, 283  
     implicit, 278  
     overt, 278  
     zero, 278, 284  
 menu propos, 254, 255, 268, 269  
*μεταβολή*, 19  
 metacommunication, 303  
 metalanguage, 110, 147, 168, 171, 329  
 metalinguistic, xix, 147, 168, 169, 173, 264, 271, 283, 285, 303, 329  
 metalinguistics, 125  
 metanalysis, 132, 150  
 metaphonology, 125  
 metaphor, 20, 21, 27, 31, 55, 57, 72, 75, 76, 79, 119, 146, 147, 172, 173, 176–178, 185, 189, 203, 204, 209, 243, 246, 248, 315  
 metonymy, 55, 72, 177  
 Middle Ages, 25, 33, 34  
 Milesian tales, 8  
 Mind, 53  
 monothetic, 243  
 morpheme, xviii, 65, 104, 110, 113, 114, 131–133, 141, 151, 154, 157, 161, 165, 166, 312  
     lexical, 132  
 morphology, 54, 80, 93, 114, 116, 117, 129, 132, 151, 163, 167, 177  
     natural, 167  
 Motherese, 238, 240, 241, 252

NA, 255  
 narration, 63  
 narrative, 8, 60, 78, 85, 88, 89, 91, 92, 98, 183, 190–193, 204, 210, 221, 223, 224, 226, 228, 229, 254–256, 258, 260–262, 265, 270, 279, 281, 282, 285, 288, 293, 298, 301–304, 310, 312, 320, 329  
     elementary sequence, 90, 91  
     function, xviii, 61, 63, 82, 85–92, 98  
     disjunction, 86  
     interlocking, 86  
     normalization, 86  
     virtual, 90, 91  
 morphology, 86  
 strategy, see NS  
 topos, 179  
     virtual sequence, 90, 91  
 narrative function, 61  
 narrativity, 222  
 narratology, 190, 191  
 natural language processing, 237  
 NBF, 130, 131, 205–207, 213, 226, 267, 286, 287, 291, 292, 301, 303, 307, 318, 327–329, 334  
 neologism, 127  
 neutral joke, 55  
 Nichomachean Ethics, 20, 29  
 non-casual, 110, 139  
 non-contradiction, 145  
 non-cooperative, 275, 277, 283, 286, 291  
 nonsense, 91, 163  
 NS, 223, 224, 226–229  
 number, 93

- onomatopoea, 151, 152  
 On the Sublime, 22  
 ostranenie, 176, 177  
 ousting, 125  
  
 paleo logic, 148, 169  
 paleologic, 189  
 para-logic, 148  
 paradigm, 21, 45, 55, 79, 93, 98,  
     114–119, 126, 127, 133, 135,  
     165, 166, 168, 170, 172, 176,  
     210, 239, 309  
 paradoxical, 176  
 paragraph, 70  
 paralinguistics, 150, 309  
 paratelic, 303, 329  
 pareymology, 113, 150, 154, 164,  
     165, 168  
 Paris, 23, 75  
 parody, 4, 32, 92, 261  
 paronomasia, 27, 77, 78  
 paronym, 24, 110, 112–115, 118,  
     120, 122, 126, 127, 145, 146,  
     148, 149, 169, 285, 333  
 paronymy, 113  
 πάθος, 20, 23  
 Peripatetic, 22, 23  
 perlocutionary, 13, 21, 181, 196, 229,  
     279, 294  
 permutation, 191  
 Philebus, 18, 19  
 Philoghelos, 52  
 philology, 15  
 philosophy, 5, 9, 15, 45–47, 51, 57,  
     224, 252, 260, 266–268  
 phoneme, xviii, 27, 77, 78, 104, 110,  
     111, 115, 120–122, 124, 125,  
     127, 131, 132, 141, 149, 157–  
     159  
 phonemic, 162, 163, 167, 171, 232  
 phonemic distance, 112, 113, 120–  
     122, 124, 126, 148, 333  
 phonemic feature, 122–124, 141  
     homorganic, 122  
 phonesteme, 157  
 phonetic, 78, 117, 131, 154, 163,  
     234  
 phonetic meaning, 157  
 phonoletters, 124  
 phonology, 28, 63, 65, 77, 95, 109,  
     110, 112, 115–117, 122–126,  
     142, 149, 151, 155, 160, 162,  
     163, 167, 177, 234, 253  
 phonosymbolism, 124  
 phrase, 99  
 phrastic, 69  
 phrenology, 262  
 physiology, 44, 45  
 plans, 200  
 play, 49  
 pleasure, 18, 40–42, 56, 84, 233,  
     328  
 Pléiade, 44  
 plot, 304  
 poetic, 77  
 Poetices libri VII, 39  
 Poetics, 19, 23, 27, 34–37, 39, 40,  
     42, 44  
 poetry, 110, 139, 141, 157, 164, 165,  
     179  
 Pointe, 87, 190, 191  
 Pole, 217, 220, 225  
 Polish, 209, 212, 214, 227  
 politeness, 334

- polysemy, 32, 113, 114, 127, 188, 276
- polythetic, 8, 51, 236, 242–245, 296
- πονηρία*, 19
- portmanteau words, 172
- possible world, 129, 185, 186
- potential humor, 197
- pragmatic, xviii, 13, 21, 70, 94, 129, 142, 178, 180, 181, 185–188, 193, 205, 208, 238, 274, 334
- pragmatics, xviii, 81, 185, 191, 195, 222, 237, 238, 331
- pre-location, 192
- prefix, 165
- presentation, 69
- presentation*, 63
- presupposition, 66, 78, 81, 185, 235, 274, 288, 328
- principle of commutation, 65
- proaïretic, 192
- probing, 325
- pronoun, 314
- proportionality, 159
- prosody, 78, 167
- prototype, 243
- prototypical, 8, 129, 191, 244, 245, 297, 320
- proverb, 27, 138, 297, 312–315
- province, 237
- pseudolanguage, 163
- psycholinguistic, 126, 157
- psycholinguistics, 103, 124, 132, 147, 153, 166, 167
- psychology, 2, 4, 5, 9, 12, 15, 30, 35, 37, 38, 45, 48, 49, 51, 53, 57, 95, 97, 114, 141, 143, 144, 151, 163, 165, 166, 170, 175, 181, 184, 186, 187, 192, 193, 199, 200, 231, 243, 294, 313, 325, 332
- pun, xviii, 16, 20, 21, 24, 27–29, 46, 50, 63, 83, 84, 102, 108–117, 119–134, 136–150, 154, 158, 162–165, 167–173, 176, 179, 184, 189, 191, 217, 220, 223, 272, 273, 279, 284, 285, 294, 312–316, 318, 328, 329, 333
  - horizontal, 118
  - vertical, 118
- punch line, xviii, 87, 98–101, 106, 177, 190–192, 223, 228, 260, 263, 265, 285, 289, 290, 293, 296, 305, 306, 310, 311, 331, 333
- Quaderni di Semantica, 199
- quality, 214, 215
- reanalysis, 132
- reduction, 54
- redundancy, 70
- redundant, 76
- reduplications, 165
- referential, 24, 25, 27, 28, 31, 36, 54, 55, 58, 92, 95, 96, 101–104, 106, 130, 220, 223
- register, xviii, 78, 172, 194, 201, 229–231, 234–242, 244–246, 249, 252–255, 262–267, 317, 319, 333
  - humor, 235, 236, 255
  - simplified, 238
- relational grid, 177, 178

- release, 50, 184
- relevance, 8, 61, 62, 76, 111, 130, 186, 191, 287, 291, 292, 294, 299, 300, 302, 334
- Renaissance, 14, 33-37, 39, 42, 44-46, 48, 51, 52, 249, 268
- repairs, 308
- repetition, 24, 58, 76-78, 106, 279, 311
  - of semes, 69-74, 78-81
  - of sounds, 77, 78, 104, 123, 139, 160, 162, 268, 315
- Republic, 19
- Republican, 279, 328
- resolution, 4, 20, 88, 97, 143-145, 148, 150, 158, 169, 170, 274, 289, 333
- retractability, 325, 329
- Revue d'esthétique, 58
- rheme, 100, 101, 106, 333
- Rhetores Graeci, 26
- Rhetoric, 20, 37
- rhetoric, 16, 20, 24, 26, 27, 29, 33, 37, 45, 55, 78, 172, 179
- rhetorical, 184
- rhyme, 78, 123, 124, 127, 141, 160, 161, 165, 167, 254, 261, 269
- rhyming, 162
- riddle, xviii, 172, 178, 224, 284
- ridiculous, 3-5, 18-20, 31, 37, 40, 44
- Romanticism, 51
- Rome, 26
- root joke, 193
- Russia, 21, 124, 176, 304
- Russian, 209
- salvaging, 325, 326
- sarcasm, 236
- satire, xviii, 4, 92, 267
- Scandinavia, 247
- schizophrenia, 162
- Scholia, 25
- script, xviii, xix, 49, 51, 73, 94, 128, 129, 135, 175, 178, 183, 187, 189, 191, 195, 197-208, 210-227, 229, 231, 246-253, 255, 258, 259, 261-264, 267-269, 276, 290, 296, 322, 325, 329
  - competing, 207
  - complex, 200
  - general-knowledge, 246, 250
  - individual, 216, 246, 250
  - macro, 200, 221
  - main, 210
  - opposition, 194, 204, 205, 210, 221, 226, 228, 322
  - shadow, 210
  - overlap, 131, 175, 191, 197, 203, 204, 210, 211, 213, 217, 220, 226, 228, 229, 252, 253, 255, 258, 261, 262, 267-269
  - restricted, 216
  - restricted knowledge, 201, 246
  - switch trigger, 203, 267
    - dissipated, 210, 211
- script switch trigger, 95
- second degree humor, 285
- selection restriction, 68, 80
- semantic, xviii, 4, 6, 12, 16, 27, 28, 32, 49, 60, 61, 63-65, 69, 72, 73, 75-81, 84, 86, 87, 92-95, 113, 114, 129, 133, 136, 139, 140, 146, 147, 150,

- 154, 155, 160–162, 164, 167,  
169–171, 182, 189, 191, 194–  
197, 199, 201–203, 206–208,  
220, 222, 223, 229, 232, 235–  
237, 246, 263, 268, 269, 274,  
283, 311, 315, 331, 333
- differential, 157
- distance, 161
- domain, 72
- feature, 65
- field, 6, 157, 186, 187
- marker, 65, 74, 75
- network, 201, 203
- similarity, 166
- link
  - hyperonymic, 250
  - hyponymic, 250
- Sémantique structurale, 62, 64, 76
- Semantic Mechanisms of Humor, 196
- seme, 61, 64–69, 72–81, 94
- sememe, 64, 66–68, 72, 76
- semic figure, 70
- semic nucleus, 66
- semiogenetic, 181, 182
- semiotic, xviii, 10, 15, 60, 109, 149,  
158, 173–178, 180–184, 188,  
190, 193, 194, 229, 332
- semiotics, 83
- sequential organization, 304
- seriousness, 3, 300, 326
- sermo humilis, 319
- shaggy-dog, 191
- shivaree, 322
- SI, 223, 225–227
- Side Effects, 235
- signifié, 152, 161
- signifiant, 152, 161, *see* signifier
- signifié, *see* signified
- signified, 29, 109, 127, 145, 156
- signifier, 29, 55, 109, 127, 145, 153,  
156, 168, 169, 172, 194, 223
- silence, 301, 307, 309–311, 331
- simple forms, 91, 183, 191, 193
- situational joke, 295
- slapstick, 21
- Slavic, 155
- smile, 286
- smiling, 183, 184
- SO, 223, 226–228
- social, 182, 183
- social management, 323, 325
- sociolinguistic, 174
- sociolinguistics, 50, 237, 324
- sociology, 15, 45, 49, 50, 58, 186,  
208, 235, 294, 313, 324–326,  
333
- sophisticated joke, 268
- sophistication, 103, 216
- sottie, 268
- sound symbolism, 152, 153, 157, 158,  
165
  - primary, 153
  - secondary, 153
- Soviet Union, 288
- Spanish, 6, 58
- Sparta, 21
- speaking in tongues, 162
- spelling, 124
- spoonerism, 119, 141
- spreading activation, 167, 168, 231,  
252
- statistics, 217
- stereotype, 224, 234, 287
- stops, 125

- stress, 167  
 structural, xviii, 4, 16, 21, 49, 56,  
     57, 60, 61, 64, 70, 108, 111,  
     112, 123, 127, 134, 135, 166,  
     170, 174, 175, 192, 215, 228,  
     254, 255, 259, 265, 276, 296,  
     299  
 structure, 62, 85, 90, 91, 109, 110,  
     112, 136, 141, 150, 182, 183,  
     186-188, 198-200, 235, 236,  
     254, 261, 262, 289, 290, 295,  
     301, 312, 320, 321, 330  
 style, 34, 37, 55, 96, 110, 172, 181,  
     235, 236, 263, 265, 309, 317,  
     319  
 stylistic, 78, 193  
 stylistics, 231-233, 235, 237, 245  
 SSTH, 49, 128, 175, 190, 195-197,  
     203-211, 214-223, 226-230,  
     246, 248, 249, 253-256, 261-  
     263, 265, 267-269, 276, 322,  
     332, 333  
 Stoic, 109  
 subcategorization, 80, 206  
 sublanguage, 93, 237, 245  
 Sublime, 23  
 subregister, 237, 240  
 substitution, 191  
 suffix, 165  
 superiority, 49  
 superlative, 158  
 suprasegmental, 93, 94  
 surprise, 20, 37-39, 42, 161, 181,  
     260, 290, 302  
 surrealism, 178  
 Swahili, 89  
 Swiss, 49  
 Sybaris, 52  
 syllable, 94, 120, 123, 126, 141, 167  
 syllepsis, 118, 119, 184  
 synesthesia, 150, 158, 165, 315  
 synonym, 150, 263  
 synonymy, 201, 223, 246  
 syntactic, 12, 93, 101, 103, 104, 116,  
     129, 177, 206, 223, 239, 240,  
     244, 245, 263  
 syntagm, 98, 115-119, 126, 127, 132,  
     168, 176  
 syntagmatic, 79, 114  
 syntax, 78, 104, 116, 117, 253  
 Syriac, 34  
 TA, 223, 224, 226, 227  
 taboo, 155, 156, 164, 165, 168, 182-  
     184, 213, 266, 323, 330  
 tagmemics, 84  
 Tahiti, 155  
 Takete, 153  
 tall tale, 5  
 Tamil, 209  
 taxonomies, 21, 28, 32, 45, 75, 111-  
     114, 119, 126, 191  
 taxonomy, 27, 28, 84, 108, 112-115,  
     120, 121, 126, 132, 176, 177,  
     333  
 teaching, 84, 209, 211, 215  
 teasing, 288, 321, 322, 327  
 Technical Iambs on Comedy, 34  
 telic, 329  
 temporal organization, 304  
 tendentious, 183, 191  
 tendentious joke, 55  
 tenseness, 124  
 theme, 100, 101

The Name of the Rose, 178

theory

- aggression, 19, 30, 47, 182
- aggressiveness, 2
- ambivalence, 19
- arousal, 53
- arousal-jag, 332
- bisociation, 48, 85, 175, 181, 183, 185, 191
- catastrophe, 48
- characters, 22
- cognitive, 48, 175
- cognitivist, 48
- contrast, 47, 56, 57, 64, 85, 233
- correction, 31
- Cratylistic, 150, 151, 154
- deconstructionist, 170
- derision, 47
- disparagement, 47, 50
- economy, 47, 56, 57
- error, 145, 147, 148, 189
- essentialist, 1-3, 5, 8-10, 49, 111, 184, 185, 236, 241-244, 293
- evolutionary cultural semiotic, see ECS
- explanatory, 2, 108, 112, 167, 214, 307
- frame, 189, 191
- frustrated expectations, 31
- General Theory of Verbal Humor, see GTVH
- genre, 51
- Harvard, of comedy, 51
- hostility, 47, 49, 50
- humors, 22
- incongruity, 2, 17, 20, 45, 47-

- 50, 53, 56-58, 175, 176, 186
- incongruity-resolution, 9, 143, 144, 170, 332
- inferiority, 2
- information, 177
- Isotopy Disjunction Model, see IDM
- liberation, 47, 57
- literary, 47
- mechanical, 58
- mention, 277, 278, 282, 284, 334
- of humors, 6
- phonostatistical, 125
- physiological, 47, 52, 53
- play, 49
- polythetic, 185, 242, 243, 245
- polythetic-prototype, 244
- prototype, 8, 243, 244
- psychological, 5
- reductionist, 184
- reductive, 2
- release, 47, 49, 50, 53, 57, 182
- relevance, 274, 292, 294, 334
- script, 200, 201, 245, 246, see SSTH
- script-based, 174
- Semantic Script Theory of Humor, see SSTH
- social corrective, 50, 58, 321, 323, 326
- sociological, 5
- sublimation, 47
- substantialist, 1, 2, 4
- sudden glory, 49
- superiority, 2, 20, 31, 47, 50, 311
- surprise, 37, 289

- teleological, 1, 2, 5
- text, 185, 190, 193, 222
- three-function, 61
- triumph, 47
- The World as Will and Idea, 48
- tickling, 8, 30, 38
- timbre, 123
- topic, 80, 81, 96, 180, 181, 229, 264, 290, 291, 314–316, 324, 327, 329
- Tractatus Coislinianus, 23–25, 27, 35, 38
- tragedy, 3, 21, 181, 319
- tragic, 3, 21, 23, 33, 203, 204
- Traité du ris, 44
- trans-phrastic, 69, 70, 76
- transition relevance place, *see* TRP
- transitional device, 327
- translation, 5, 28, 29, 34, 36, 54, 55, 62, 71, 84, 95, 223, 272
  - endolinguistic, 28
  - functional, 29, 137
  - interlinguistic, 28, 95
  - intersemiotic, 28, 95
- trope, 32, 55
- TRP, 311
- Un Drame Bien Parisien, 285
- unification, 80, 94, 202
- union, 67, 80
- ur-joke, 226
- USSR, 289
- valeur, 64, 232
- verbal, 24, 27, 28, 31, 36, 54, 55, 58, 92, 95, 96, 102, 103, 106, 130, 156, 164, 165, 183–187, 220, 223, 228, 231, 268, 273, 274, 285, 297, 313, 331
- verbal fantasy, 268
- verisimilitude, 22, 144
- virtueme, 74
- visual humor, 184
- voicing, 124
- vowel, 124–126
- Watergate, 212
- WHIMSY, 208, 219
- Witz, 56, 187, 296
- word association, 162
- Zazie dans le metro, 123
- zero degree of writing, 232
- zeugma, 117



