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A new approach to the stylistic analysis of humour

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Abstract

This article presents a new model of humour that can be used in the successful analysis of how and why literature can be found humorous. It deconstructs the theory that the perception of incongruity leads to the recognition of humour, proposing instead that the relationship between humour and incongruity is, in fact, the reverse of that generally assumed. I propose that humour is a process through which the familiar is brought to attention. One way this can occur is by drawing attention to the unnoticed contrasts between objects, making the familiar appear incongruous. The process can be modelled as a subjective construal (Langacker, 2008) in which the participants, and the process itself, are made prominent. This draws attention to the relationship between participants and to their shared experience of the world. I present an illustrative case study of subtle literary humour with an analysis of a passage from the short story 'The Mouse' by Saki (1910), demonstrating that, by modelling humour in the way I propose, it can be successfully explained using frameworks already in use in stylistic investigation.

Keywords

Attention, Cognitive Grammar, humour, incongruity

1. The problem of humour

Humour is neither special nor sacred. The first problem is that some analysts of the language of humour tend to treat it as a special case, somehow different from language used in more serious texts. This possibly arises from the second problem, an attitude that humour is a somewhat fragile and mystical object and its analysis will destroy its essence. The quotation attributed variously to Mark Twain, E.B. White and most recently the

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comedian Barry Cryer, that ‘analysing a joke is like dissecting a frog: no-one laughs and the frog dies’, appears relatively frequently in popular discussion of humour, as well as in academic writing (Triezenberg, 2008). While, undoubtedly, analysing humour is less likely to result in the evocation of mirth than the initial reading of that text, firstly, the reading of a text has a very different aim to its analysis. The former is the enjoyment of its effects, the latter is the explanation of how the enjoyable effects came about. Secondly, the same apparent reluctance to analyse is not applied to the textual evocation of other emotional effects such as sadness (e.g. Stockwell, 2009) or horror (e.g. Stewart-Shaw, 2019), even though these emotional effects are as unlikely to be produced by the analysis of such a text as mirth is through the analysis of a humorous text.

Compared with other genres and texts evoking different responses, the relative paucity of stylistic analyses of humorous texts can perhaps be attributed to the common perception that humour might be special or sacred. In order to redress this, I propose that an understanding of our general cognitive and linguistic capacities is perfectly capable of accounting for humour without needing a discrete special theory of humour. Further, humour in texts is no more nor less than another discourse type amenable to stylistic exploration. In this article, I begin by presenting an extended discussion of existing theoretical accounts of humour. I argue that the main drawback of these theories is essentially that they focus on the symptoms of humour rather than its origins. My new approach explains why this is the case, and offers an analytical framework aligned with cognitive and linguistic principles. Finally, I offer an illustrative example to demonstrate how my proposal can be used in the stylistic analysis of humour and can explain even a subtle instance of literary humour.

2. Problematic theories of humour

While there are relatively few stylistic treatments of humour, there exists a large field of research devoted to the general study of humour – so called ‘humorology’ – which includes the study of the cognitive and linguistic conditions that lead to the recognition of humour. Here, again, though, there is a tendency for researchers to treat humour as a special case, proposing conditions that differentiate humour from other communicative propositions. Chief amongst these is the idea that humour ‘always requires’ the perception of some form of incongruity (Vandaele, 2010: 780). This concept can be thought of as the state of one object not being perceived as congruous in relation to other objects surrounding it. This approach encompasses the perception of incongruity either in the subject matter of a text or in its stylistic presentation (e.g. Simpson and Bousfield, 2017). Regardless of the origin of the incongruity, the implied temporal sequence is that ‘something incongruous’ leads to ‘something humorous’. One reason for my doubt that this is the case is that the perception of incongruity does not always lead to the recognition of a situation as humorous. For example, if I were to observe a snake in my kitchen, I would perceive the snake as incongruous but I doubt that I would find the situation amusing. For this reason, a plethora of additional conditions have emerged to attempt to distinguish humorous incongruity from non-humorous incongruity. These include the notions that incongruity must be resolved (i.e. an interpretation found that removes the perception of incongruity) for it to be found humorous (Shultz, 1972; Suls, 1972), and that there must be some form of diminishment of the subject of humour (Apter, 2007).

Perhaps more unhelpful than the separation of humour from non-humorous communication, is the tendency to separate types of humour (such as puns, garden-path narratives, canonical joke-forms etc.) from each other. The result of this is that the explanation for humour found in one type may not be applicable to another type of humour – indeed, the explanation may only be applicable to self-contained jokes, specifically, rather than humour as it is found more widely in discourse.

One attempt to depart from this taxonomic approach is the Semantic-Script Theory of Humour (SSTH) (Raskin, 1985), which focuses specifically on the semantic commonalities of jokes. The theory is based on the idea that the lexis of a joke invokes semantic scripts, largely similar to those proposed by Schank and Abelson (1977). The claim of the SSTH is that if a text is to be humorous it must contain two scripts that overlap (i.e. the text is compatible with each script) and that these scripts must also be in some sense opposed. Raskin's framing of what constitutes *script opposition* is detailed, but somewhat vague on the specifics of what 'opposition' is. He claims that falsification of the SSTH has 'not yet been produced, it appears' (Raskin, 2017: 117), but, as his definition is imprecise, it would be difficult to find a joke that definitively did *not* contain a script opposition. However, as an extension to the SSTH, the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) (Attardo and Raskin, 1991), was formulated to incorporate a wider range of information contained in a joke. This maintains the script opposition requirement and adds several other *knowledge resources*, such as the *logical mechanism* of how the scripts are opposed, the *narrative strategy* (or format of the joke), and the optional *target* of the joke.

The GTVH has become a popular framework for humour analysis, almost to the point of orthodoxy, although there is some debate (even by its authors) as to whether it is applicable to humour more widely or only to jokes. Attardo, with colleagues, suggests that the GTVH was 'somewhat infelicitously' named, being 'meant only to apply to jokes' (Corduas et al., 2008: 254), but at other times he states (1994, 2017) that it was so named because it can account for 'any type of humorous text' (1994: 222). In spite of this apparent confusion, he and others have attempted to expand and develop the script opposition approach of the GTVH to enable its application to a wide variety of longer narrative texts (e.g. Attardo, 2001, 2002; Chłopicki, 1997, 2009; Ermida, 2008). However, these analyses seem unsatisfactory as they stop short of providing an explanation as to *why* the script oppositions found make the text humorous. This is a particular problem when the supposed key ingredient, the script opposition, is provided for sections of the text marked as humorous as well as apparently non-humorous sections, as with Attardo's (2001) analysis of Wilde's 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime'. If a script opposition can be found in a non-humorous part of a text, it is not clear what unique contribution script oppositions make to the humorous parts.

One possible reason for the difficulty in applying the GTVH to non-joke humour is in its fundamental proposal: that humour requires script opposition. It may be the case that, in jokes, the differences in possible interpretations and the scripts involved tend to be greater, to the extent that there are elements that are, in some way, in clear opposition. In humour more widely, the differences in scripts may be more subtle and opposition may not necessarily occur in a way that is relevant to the humour in the text. Triezenberg (2004) uses this reasoning to propose that the GTVH is not capable of explaining humour in literature, although she also claims that script opposition is the necessary component of textual humour. She proposes that narrative or literary humour is a different type of humour and so requires its own theory. This, to me, seems a very inelegant solution. I would suggest that the problem is not that the GTVH needs expansion or modification to explain humour in literature, but, rather, that a theory that relies on script opposition leading to humour will have difficulty in doing so. The application of a theory that requires script opposition to a text where any script oppositions present are not related to humour is bound to be inadequate for the task. Attardo (1997) claims that script opposition-based theories of humour are incongruity theories stated in semantic terms. However, whether framed in terms of incongruity or script opposition, current cognitive theories of humour struggle to account satisfactorily for humour in literary texts. I would suggest that this is in part because the approach of attempting to define in objective terms the necessary and sufficient factors for humour is a somewhat futile effort when humour recognition and appreciation is notoriously subjective. However, to my mind, it seems likely that there is something about humorous incongruity that is common to all humour, but it needs to be more rigorously understood. The subjectivity of humour is perhaps key to this understanding.

Possibly the greatest problem with both script opposition- or incongruity-based cognitive approaches to humour is that they do not sufficiently take into account the fact that humour recognition takes place within a social context. While the cognitive approach to humour study tends to focus on the analysis of discrete instances of humour, such as scripted jokes and anecdotes, in everyday life most humour occurs in conversational interaction in forms such as irony, sarcasm, banter, or teasing (Norrick, 1993, 2003). If one does experience amusement by oneself, it tends to be either in a 'pseudo-social' environment (Martin, 2007: 5) such as reading or watching television, or through the recall of a social situation. Approaches to humour that do focus on the social context observe that the use of humour functions to bring group members together, aiding in group cohesion, while differentiating and separating this in-group from non-group members (Holmes, 2000). The feeling of superiority of in-group members over an out-group is sometimes assumed to be the basis of the mirth experienced with appreciation of humour (e.g. Gruner, 1997). However, superiority theories of humour also assume a hostile relationship between those engaging in humour and, as it is termed here, the target. However, not all humour operates on this basis. Schnurr (2009), for example, observes a bonding teasing style that reinforces the group membership of the so-called target rather than signalling their non-membership.

Regardless of the specifically vertical relationship between groups that is implied by superiority theories, it is striking how strongly the conceptual metaphor of space and distance is projected through these accounts of the social effects of humour. Humour can be used as a way of separating and distancing individuals and groups from one another by pointing out the ways in which they diverge from each other in terms of their behaviour. It can also be used to define a group and pull individual members of that group together by referring to the ways in which they are alike. Although research into the social context of humour tends to concentrate on the effects of humour, the social positioning of participants has implications for the recognition and appreciation of humour. A humour participant whose worldview is close to that of another participant may find it easier to understand what they find funny about a particular subject.

Even where the social context is taken into account, an approach that only considers the recognition of humour neglects the fact that recognised humour does not necessarily result in the affective humour appreciation state of amusement. When experimental participants experience amusement (as opposed to the recognition of humour without amusement) they show signs of physiological arousal, such as increases in heart rate, blood pressure, and electrodermal activity, with these indicators correlating positively with increased amusement (Godkewitsch, 1976; McGhee, 1983). These signs are the same as those observed in people experiencing emotions such as anxiety, fear, or anger in response to threatening situations.

The benign violation hypothesis (BVH) (McGraw et al., 2012) is based on the idea of something being perceived simultaneously as a violation and as being distant enough not to pose a threat. One advantage of the BVH is that, rather than relying on an objective incongruity (or violation) state, it allows for contextual interpretation of a violation. This brings into the cognitive account the distance element seen in social accounts of humour: an event that may seem like a violation in some way may seem less threatening if it is occurring in some place or time distant to the humour participant, or is affecting a group of people with whom they have little in common. The BVH was developed to address the observation that people are able to find humour in violent situations (McGraw and Warner, 2014) and, as such, the stimuli used to investigate this are exclusively threatening in nature. To me, the concept of violation (benign or otherwise) seems too narrow to explain a wider range of humour than that with which the BVH was developed. However, the dual-interpretation aspect has similarities with other accounts of humour, in particular Koestler's (1964) notion of *bisociation* and Apter's (2007) idea of *cognitive synergy*. There are substantial similarities in these accounts, with both proposing that humour depends, in part, on the interpretation of an object or situation in two contradictory ways. Apter goes further, however, in suggesting that cognitive synergy is the emergence of new or enhanced qualities through which the object or situation can be interpreted. In this there is a similarity with the idea of conceptual blending (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002), where the emergent structure containing new elements results from the cross-space mapping of two input spaces.

Apter includes in his account the idea that cognitive synergy results in an increase in conscious awareness and physiological arousal. He also proposes, as the mainstay of his Reversal Theory, the idea that people may be in either an arousal-avoiding (or *telic*) state or an arousal-seeking (or *paratelic*) state. In a telic state a person's focus is on the goal of an activity, but if their focus is on the process of an activity – as would be seen in playful behaviour such as humour participation – they would be in a paratelic state. The idea of paratelic and telic states therefore incorporates the fact that the physiological arousal observed in humour appreciation is identical to that seen in anxiety and fear, but proposes that it is the cognitive interpretation of that physiological state that results in the emotion experienced.

The idea that a person can be motivated either by the goal of an activity or by the process of doing the activity can be extended to incorporate the concept of figure/ground relations. This would mean that if a person were in a paratelic state the process of the activity would be figured; in a telic state, the goal would be figured. This has a parallel in Langacker's (2008: 55–89) idea of a viewing arrangement of a scene in which a construal may be objective (where the conceptual content is figured) or subjective (where the conceptualisers and the process of conceptualisation are figured). It is possible that the linguistic construction of verbal humour tends to encourage a subjective construal in this sense.

3. A new view of humour

As I have suggested above, the three main approaches to the study of humour (cognitive, social, and affective) do not sufficiently take any of the other approaches into account. This, I believe, is where the problem lies in finding a satisfactory account of verbal humour. My solution is a cognitive poetic approach that situates the cognitive phenomenon of humour within its social context and that also accounts for the relationship between humour recognition and the affective-arousal response that it produces. This takes the view that a reading of a text is dependent on the context in which it is read. The prior knowledge and experiences that a reader brings to their engagement with a humorous text are as much a part of the humour process as what is written on the page. This approach also starts from the basis that language is a manifestation of the mental processes involved in the understanding of interactions with the environment. Therefore, the interpretation of a text will involve the embodied cognitive response to it, part of which will be the felt affective aspect of that response.

In line with my approach to language generally, my thinking about how humour works draws on knowledge from cognitive science of how we interact with the physical world. My reasoning develops along lines of perceptual processing of objects. Everything that can be perceived as an object in its own right, and not belonging to another object, can only be perceived as such because it in some way contrasts with the objects it is against (Riddoch and Humphreys, 2001). In terms of visual sensation of its basic components, it may, for example, be a different shape, or a different colour, or a different texture. These cues are part of the process that allows an object to be figured and segregated from the ground (Peterson, 2003). Therefore, a lack of congruence is key to our general ability to differentiate between objects or, in other words, everything is incongruous to some extent.

The recognition of objects, however, does not rely simply on bottom-up processing using visual information; there is also a top-down process. One theory is that a familiar object's features are matched with structural descriptions, stored in long-term memory, based on previous experiences. This gives us the ability to recognise objects rapidly and without the need to attend to them (Hummel, 2013). For unfamiliar objects, or familiar objects presented in unaccustomed viewing conditions, the recognition process is necessarily attended and involves the effortful processing of the object's features. For example, a dining chair designed in such a way that its appearance differs considerably from a prototypical dining chair may require some moments' examination before the realisation that it is, in fact, a chair. A dining chair presented so that the ends of its legs and the underside of its seat are foregrounded may be recognisable as a dining chair but this recognition will require more effort than the recognition of a chair viewed in the usual way. Farah (2000: 100) suggests that this ‘might more aptly be called visual problem solving than visual recognition’.

There are other object recognition theories (see, for example, Clark, 2013; O’Regan and Noë, 2001) but for the purposes of discussing how humour occurs, the important thing these have in common is that object recognition (or, scaling up, concept recognition) is usually a process that involves minimal awareness of the object’s properties and minimal awareness of the process of recognition. It is only when something is presented in such a way that impedes its rapid recognition that its perceptual properties and, with them, the process of perception, are brought to awareness. The other important thing is that recognition cannot happen without objects also being discriminated from each other. This is the result of sensory contrasts between objects, or, in other words, the points at which objects become incongruous with each other.

Since incongruities form the basis of our perceptual and conceptual knowledge of the world, it is clearly not the case that incongruity is exclusive to humour. Neither is it the case that humour can be detected simply on the *presence* of incongruity since these incongruities will inevitably be present whether or not humour can be recognised. What is interesting about object processing is that the incongruities that allow objects to be differentiated from each other generally go unnoticed since the process of object recognition usually involves minimal awareness (Farah, 2000; Lupyan, 2015). However, when there is something about the incongruity that draws attention to itself, or if someone deliberately or accidentally points it out in some way, we become aware of our perception of the properties of objects. For example, a dining chair in a dining room is unlikely to be the object of a person’s attention unless they are interacting with it. A dining chair on a deserted beach contrasts its domestic properties with the uninhabited outdoor setting of the beach and is, thus, more likely to attract a person’s attention. Likewise, the less prototypical an object within a category, the more aware we are of the process of recognition. It is possible that the assumption that humour depends on incongruity has emerged because the incongruities that exist between elements of humorous instances are figured in jokes to the extent that their conspicuousness leads them to be misinterpreted as cause. I propose that humour does not depend on incongruity itself but, rather, the process of humorous communication draws attention to existing incongruities or contrasts that have the potential to be recognised by humour participants that are familiar with them as part of the make-up of their experience.

Breaking this down further, in comparison to the relationship between humour and incongruity implied by previous scholarship, I am proposing three essential differences. Firstly, I propose that humour is not a thing that results from a process of perception, but is the process itself that involves people engaging in this type of communication. Secondly, in the process of humour, one participant (that I term the *relay*) relays their perception of incongruity to another participant (that I term the *receiver*) in some way that brings it to their attention. This relaying process may or may not be intentional, of course. Therefore, to return to my earlier suggestion that there is something about humorous incongruity that is common to all humour, the ‘something’ is that, through the process of humorous communication bringing an object or concept to attention, that object or concept has been made to appear incongruous. I have used the term *incongruity* in setting out these proposals for the sake of clarity in showing how they fit with existing scholarship, but I prefer to use the term *contrast* to refer to the way in which an object or concept is figured against the ground. The term *incongruity* implies that something is inherently out of place. However, it is not necessarily the case that the subject of humour is incongruous. It is not necessarily even the case that it is made to appear incongruous, which is why incongruity theories have struggled to explain subtle humour. For this reason, I prefer to use the term *contrast*.

I propose a third difference related to the social aspect of humour. Rather than assuming, as is often the case (e.g. Attardo and Raskin, 1991; Gruner, 1997), that humour is directed, much in the way of a weapon, towards a so-called target, I term the object or concept that is the subject of humour the *source* of humour. The term fits more logically with my proposal that it is observations about the source that are relayed to the receiver in such a way as to bring it to their attention by figuring it against the ground.

Although the underlying cause – the figuring of contrast – is something in common to instances of humour, the way in which contrast can be figured can happen through different means. These have their cognitive roots in the ways in which the visual object perception and recognition processes can be brought to awareness. As I explained above, an object or concept can be juxtaposed with another, bringing the perceptual or conceptual properties of those objects or concepts to attention, and with it the objects or concepts themselves. Alternatively, an object or concept can be presented in a way that differs from its usual presentation. The unfamiliarity imposed on this object or concept will mean that the process of recognition, and the object or concept, is brought to awareness. Even within these two broad categories of juxtaposition and unfamiliar presentation, there are multiple ways in which the attentional effect can be achieved. Rather than resort to the taxonomic approach favoured by some humour research, categorising jokes and non-joke humour into different types with different explanatory mechanisms, this approach uses the commonality of the attentional effect resulting from the presentation of the source of humour.

4. A case of mild amusement

The extract below is from a short story by Saki, ‘The Mouse’ (1910). Saki (H.H. Munro, 1870–1916) was a well-known writer of gently humorous short stories. I use a passage from the story, in which a gentleman discovers a mouse in his clothing while travelling by train, to demonstrate how my analytical approach can explain why a text can be found amusing. This brief, illustrative case study has been chosen deliberately because, although I do find it amusing, the effect is subtle. It seems to me that a subtle humour effect will be harder to explain because its textual origins may be less obvious. It is therefore a better test of my model.

> … And yet the train had scarcely attained its normal speed before he became reluctantly but vividly aware that he was not alone with the slumbering lady; he was not even alone in his own clothes.
>
> A warm, creeping movement over his flesh betrayed the unwelcome and highly resented presence, unseen but poignant, of a strayed mouse, that had evidently dashed into its present

> retreat during the episode of the pony harnessing. Furtive stamps and shakes and wildly directed pinches failed to dislodge the intruder, whose motto, indeed, seemed to be Excelsior; and the lawful occupant of the clothes lay back against the cushions and endeavoured rapidly to evolve some means for putting an end to the dual ownership. It was unthinkable that he should continue for the space of a whole hour in the horrible position of a Rowton House for vagrant mice (already his imagination had at least doubled the numbers of the alien invasion). On the other hand, nothing less drastic than partial disrobing would ease him of his tormentor, and to undress in the presence of a lady, even for so laudable a purpose, was an idea that made his ear tips tingle in a blush of abject shame. He had never been able to bring himself even to the mild exposure of open-work socks in the presence of the fair sex. And yet – the lady in this case was to all appearances soundly and securely asleep; the mouse, on the other hand, seemed to be trying to crowd a wanderjahr into a few strenuous minutes. If there is any truth in the theory of transmigration, this particular mouse must certainly have been in a former state a member of the Alpine Club. Sometimes in its eagerness it lost its footing and slipped for half an inch or so; and then, in fright, or more probably temper, it bit.
>
> (Saki, 1910: 118–119)

I proposed above that the basis of the humorous process is for a receiver's attention to be drawn to objects and concepts that are familiar parts of their experience. However, since cognitive resources are limited, attentional cognition operates on a principle of inhibition of return (Posner and Cohen, 1984). In other words, since they are unlikely to constitute a threat, things that are familiar and part of everyday experience tend not to be attended to unless a person is interacting directly with them. Therefore, if one person is attempting to draw another's attention towards a source of humour, one of the ways they could do so is to make the source appear to have qualities that could be associated with a potential threat so that it becomes figure rather than ground. In the case of literary reading, elements of the text world will not present a potential real-world threat to a reader. However, the cognitive processes that allow them to experience the text world are the same as those used to experience the real world. Stockwell (2009) argues that elements of a text that involve features that would attract a receiver's real-world attention (such as newness, large size, closeness, brightness, or noisiness) will also tend to attract a reader's attention towards them. Analysis of these *textual attractors* can therefore be used to explain how a receiver's attention is drawn to a source of humour.

The passage above contains a number of descriptors relating to movement, either of the mouse or of the protagonist's attempts to remove it from his clothing. These are good textual attractors in themselves. However, in most cases the attractiveness is increased in some way, for example, through the speed or energy of the movement ('dashed', 'stamps and shakes and wildly directed pinches'). I term this technique of directing a receiver's attention to the source *amplification*. The upward movement of the mouse, given in 'whose motto, indeed, seemed to be Excelsior', is amplified through the archaic term with its grand associations, and typographically through the capitalisation. There are other amplifications in the passage such as the information that the protagonist's imagination 'had at least doubled the numbers' of mice. Since there is only one mouse, a doubling of this would only be two mice but the construction produces an amplification of the number of mice, seeming to suggest that he is imagining them swarming through his clothing. Likewise, describing the wearing of open-work socks as involving 'mild exposure' suggests a far greater amount of visible skin than would be the case. In addition to these amplifications of the number and size of physical objects and movements in the passage, there is a conceptual amplification of the man's activity: this is described as 'laudable' suggesting that removing the mouse is a moral and praise-worthy pursuit.

Apart from drawing attention to an object by amplifying it, attention can also be drawn to an object by placing it alongside a contrasting object. I term this technique *juxta-position*. There are several conceptual juxtapositions in this sense in the passage. Much of the passage is devoted to descriptions of the wearing of clothing. In some instances, the wearing of clothing is likened to being in a room. The man is 'not alone with the slumbering lady; he was not even alone in his own clothes' directly bringing together the concepts of being in a room (or railway carriage compartment, in this case) and being in one's clothes. The difference in these two states of being in something, that one might expect to be sharing the space of a room but one would not expect to be sharing clothing at the same time as someone else, brings to attention the unexpectedness and unwantedness of the presence of the mouse. The physical space inside clothing is also contrasted with the physical space in a building in the man's failure to 'dislodge the intruder' and in likening the man's clothing to a working men's hostel in describing them as a 'Rowton House for vagrant mice'. Describing the mouse as an 'intruder' and as a 'vagrant' contrasts the mouse's behaviour with that of a human. The mouse presumably entered the man's clothing simply seeking warmth; a human intruder would often be assumed to be trespassing with malicious intent. This contrast between human ideas of legal possession of space and the behaviour of a mouse is also projected in the description of the man as the 'lawful occupant of the clothes' and in his desire to 'put an end to the dual ownership'.

There is an amplification effect within these juxtapositions. The small mouse and its relatively small movements are described in terms of much bigger human concepts. It is described as a property-owner, an Alpine climber, and a traveller on a year-long itinerary as well as being given human properties of a temper and an ethos with its 'motto [seeming] to be Excelsior'. Indeed, in suggesting that the mouse was once a human Alpine climber and came to be a mouse through transmigration, it is given spiritual properties beyond those of a human. These juxtapositions are metaphoric mappings and the emergent properties of the mouse are the result of blending the mouse input space with various others. In doing so, the contrast between them, the metaphoricality itself, is brought to attention.

Juxtapositions such as these could be termed script oppositions or incongruities – indeed, the mouse itself contrasts to the point of incongruity in its location in the man's clothing. However, neither of these explanations can get to the root of why the passage can be recognised as humorous and found amusing. What I propose is that the newness of the presentation of the concept, either through juxtaposition or amplification here, requires the receiver to attend to the interpretation in a way analogous to how the recognition of an object in an unfamiliar view requires the viewer's attention. This effortful processing (Farah's (2000: 100) suggested 'visual problem solving') is accompanied by increased awareness of the process. I would argue that the unfamiliar presentation is a subjective construal (Langacker, 2008), bringing the relay and their attitude towards the source more on-stage as part of its construal. Increased awareness of the relay, as the party who has brought the properties of the concept to the attention of the receiver, also draws the receiver's attention to the fact that this concept is part of their shared experience, which helps encourage the social cohesion of the two parties. The increased attention and awareness of source and relay brought about by the effortful processing could have the effect of increasing the receiver's level of physiological arousal. In this process-figured subjective construal, the receiver is encouraged to adopt or maintain a paratelic state in which the sense of physiological arousal can be interpreted positively and appreciated.

5. Accounting for subjectivity and social effects of humour

Rather than the traditional suggestion that incongruity leads to humour, I propose that humour brings existing contrasts to attention. However, this is just one aspect of an account of humour. It is clear that not all contrasts are perceived as humorous and neither can it be expected that drawing attention to a contrast between objects or concepts will necessarily lead to a humorous response. Indeed, the process of drawing attention to a contrast may not be motivated by a person's intention to amuse. In terms of accounting for humour, one of the differences between the idea that incongruity leads to humour and the idea that humour draws attention to contrasts that can be recognised by participants is that the latter incorporates the concept of a cognitive distance. If the cognitive distance between a humour participant and the source of humour is too great they may not recognise it as part of their experiences. Conversely, if the distance between the source and a humour participant is too small, the receiver may recognise humour but not appreciate it because they identify with the source. Therefore, there will need to be sufficient distance between humour participant and source. This distance could be the vertical distance between source and participant alluded to by superiority theories, although I would suggest that this distance need not only be vertical. The relationship between source, relay, and receiver could be modelled as a triangular arrangement (respectively here the man with the mouse in his clothes, the Saki-narrator, and the reader). In this model, humour will lead to a receiver's perception of convergence with the relay through the attention drawn to their shared communication, which strengthens their social bond, and to a perception of relative divergence of the source from the receiver.

It may seem at odds with my analysis above to suggest that humour leads to a divergence of the source from the receiver when the amplification effect would appear to be in direct opposition: something made bigger will tend to be perceived as nearer. However, in the passage above many of the human-framed behaviours of the mouse are modalised: its motto 'seemed to be Excelsior', it 'seemed to be trying to crowd a Wanderjahr...', it 'must certainly have been in a former state a member of the Alpine Club', and 'more probably in temper' it bit the man. Using a Text World Theory model of modalisation (Gavins, 2007), the modal worlds in which the mouse's human-framed activities occur are conceptualised at a remove from the matrix text world in which the man is trying to rid himself of the mouse. A larger object seen from a distance will have, in terms of visual sensation, the size of a smaller object, so the increase in conceptual distance created between receiver and source could account for a diminishment effect through spatial means.

However, even without this spatial diminishment, comparing the amplification effect with the juxtaposition of concepts to bring them to awareness, what they have in common is that they are both ways of bringing about defamiliarisation of a source. For example, the contrasting juxtapositions represent semantic deviation and amplification is a literal foregrounding of the source. The term 'defamiliarisation' is apt because, in terms of a receiver's recognition of the source, it is presented in an unfamiliar way. Mukařovský (1964 [1932]: 19) states that 'Foregrounding is the opposite of automatization', which has parallels with my earlier discussion of object recognition. If a familiar object is presented in an unfamiliar way, its recognition ceases to be automatic and becomes effortful, necessarily attended, and accompanied by greater awareness of the recognition process. The presentation of the object, therefore, makes the object a less familiar, less prototypical example of its category. If decreased prototypicality can be seen as increased radial distance from a prototypical centre, then, although a source that has been amplified is made bigger, it has also been made more distant. The distance between source and receiver can account for the attenuation of threat and could increase the receiver's ability to appreciate humour in the source.

What I have demonstrated here is that the stylistic analysis of humour does not require a special humour framework such as the GTVH proposed by Attardo and Raskin, and that searching for special conditions, such as incongruity, does not necessarily lead to an understanding of why humour can be recognised or appreciated. By giving consideration to what humour is, and by acknowledging that there are parallels between humour theories and frameworks and concepts used in stylistics, I have shown that the stylistic toolkit already contains the means to analyse humour successfully. In fact, using this approach, it is possible to arrive at a better explanation of how humour can be both recognised and appreciated than it is possible to achieve using an approach that singles out humour as a special case.

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