

What Makes Humor Humorous?: From the Viewpoint of Construction Grammar

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Abstract: This paper aims to illustrate the possibility of application of Construction Grammar (CxG) for the analysis of humor. In humor studies, according to Raskin's (1985) *Semantic Script Theory of Humor* (SSTH), the script oppositeness consisting of the word's lexical information creates "incongruity." The SSTH, however, does not capture the relation between the syntactic-semantic properties of a linguistic form (whether a word or a larger unit) and the relevant parts of the semantic frames. More specifically, it draws too much attention to the lexical information and the semantic content of the context (i.e., referential/content). Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2009) contend that verbal humor can be analyzed by properties of constructions such as *semi-substantive*, *semi-schematic*, *coercion*, etc. Based on their analysis, we attempt to clarify how humor is yielded from the viewpoint of CxG. Employing CxG, we provide a detailed account of incongruity by showing the relevant elements within a construction consisting of conventional forms and specific meanings (cf. pragmatics, discoursal property, etc.). To conclude, we predict that what makes humor humorous is the co-occurrence of two possible constructions by one linguistic form.

Keywords: Humorousness, Script Opposition, Construction Grammar, Semantic Incongruity, Form-Meaning Relationship

1. Introduction

Humor is a human characteristic. In our daily life, we often make our interlocuters laugh with utterances (e.g., joke, punning, etc.) and in turn laugh at theirs. Many studies have long discussed what humor is and the reason why we can construal interlocutor's utterances or texts as intending humor, in various fields such as philosophy, neuroscience, sociology, and so on.

In earlier humor studies, researchers focused mainly on psychological aspects of the speaker or the hearer. In other words, they investigated what causes a *laugh*, a characteristic of humor, from a psychological point of view, and thought that to investigate the participant's mind enables us to uncover the truth of humor as a phenomenon. This trend has constructed various theories of humor. For example, the "superiority theory" (cf. Gruner, 1978) assumes that people produce humorous stimuli to look down on others (or their old selves) to achieve superiority.

However, the theories based on psychological factors have several problems. One such problem is that previous theories rely too much on *intuition*; that is, it is difficult to clearly prove the participant's intention to achieve superiority. Therefore, those theories are not the mainstream of today's humor research. Moving away from this trend, many humor studies gradually adopted "incongruity theory" (cf. Suls, 1983) instead. This theory assumes that humor is attributed to the relation between *incongruity* and its *resolution*. Incongruity is yielded by a gap between what might be expected based on context or background knowledge and what actually occurs. As for the resolution, it is an interpretive, or to be more exact, a cognitive operation, of the incongruity. In order to maintain consistency in this theory, it is important to provide a coherent explanation for how incongruity is involved in humorous texts. Importantly, while the superiority theory focuses on abstract concepts such as the participant's psychology, the incongruity theory deals with a recipient's cognitive process of humorous stimuli. The cognitive process itself is invisible like a psychological factor, but many researchers assume that in many cases the process associated with humor can be clearly described. Based on this assumption, researchers attempted to obtain a clue to give a consistency to incongruity theory (e.g., Cook, 2000; Ritchie, 1999, etc.). Many humor studies today,

therefore, tend to adopt the linguistic approach to the incongruity in humor. In fact, various methodologies for analyzing the cognitive process of linguistic stimuli were proposed in the 1980s (cf. cognitive linguistics). Thus, it is not surprising that Raskin (1985) takes a linguistic point of view for the study and gives a more concrete and reasonable explanation, including some examples. This paper, following Raskin's (1985) analysis, shows a certain possibility of another linguistic method for analyzing humor; namely, *Construction Grammar*.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews Raskin (1985), who is considered the central researcher in today's humor studies. Section 3 introduces the humor research based on Construction Grammar (CxG), in which we provide a humorous example and argue that it is guaranteed by a specific linguistic form. Section 4 observes and analyzes some humorous texts from a viewpoint of CxG, and examines the relative advantage of application of CxG for the analysis of humor. Section 5 provides concluding remarks.

2. Previous Study

The most remarkable contribution to the linguistic analysis of humor is from Raskin (1985). He analyzes humor by introducing a cognitive linguistic perspective and proposes a theory called the *Semantic Script Theory of Humor* (henceforth, SSTH), which is the first formal theory for verbal humor. Raskin (1985) claims, in humorous texts, that the "script opposition" evoked by lexical information creates a semantic incongruity. This semantic incongruity is given to an interpreter of the text and s/he eventually interprets the humorous effect. Raskin defines the term "script" as a large chunk of semantic information evoked by words in a text. It is much the same as *frame* in cognitive linguistics. The script is stored by habitually repeating a similar experience and it contributes to the construal of various concepts we encounter (cf. Raskin, 1985, p. 81). The main hypothesis of SSTH is summarized in two points:

- (1) a. The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts.
- b. The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite.

(Raskin, 1985, p. 99)

According to Raskin (1985), the script opposition involves different sets of possible categories: real/unreal, actual/non-actual, normal/abnormal, possible/impossible, and so on. When readers/hearers attempt to understand a joke, one script is activated to make sense of the events described in the former part of the text (i.e., joke setup). The latter part of the text (i.e., the punch line of joke), however, presents elements that are incompatible with the first script and this leads readers/hearers to switch from one script to another.

To illustrate the idea of script opposition, Raskin (1985) introduces the following example (2), which creates a humorous effect by showing the unexpected situation in the latter part of the text.

- (2) "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, p. 100)

This is a famous example in humor studies and largely discussed by recent researchers (e.g., Giora, 1991; Morreall, 2004, etc.). Raskin (1985) analyzes this example as a humorous text created by the opposition between the scripts DOCTOR and LOVER, whose overlap is visiting home. In (2), the first sentence, which contains the words *patient* and *bronchial*, evokes the script DOCTOR, but the second sentence loses some of the compatibility with it and obtains a stronger compatibility with the script LOVER (cf. Raskin, 1985, p. 100). The two scripts are also linked via the component of whispering compatible with both.

Many researchers have identified various issues of SSTH (e.g., a high degree of abstractness in script opposition, analysis specific to only jokes, etc.), but many theories of verbal humor have originally evolved from SSTH (e.g., Attardo's (2001) *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (GTVH)). It is undoubtedly clear that the idea of the script opposition and the theory of SSTH make a great contribution to humor studies in that they enable us to analyze humor in a more linguistic way.

3. Application of Construction Grammar to Humor Study

As discussed in the previous section, Raskin's (1985) script opposition underlies many studies of humor. Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2009), however, show some examples that cannot be explained within the SSTH and its offshoot, such as the GTVH proposed by Attardo (2001). They look critically at Attardo's (2001, p. 22) claim "as any sentence can be recast in a different wording (using synonyms, other syntactic constructions, etc.) any joke can be worded in a (very large) number of ways without changes in its semantic content." This claim implies that SSTH and GTVH mainly focus on semantic content evoked by the whole text rather than the linguistic forms actually used in the text. From a cognitive linguistic point of view, however, any difference in linguistic expressions brings about a difference in construal. In fact, when a discursal property of text (e.g., register, which is one of the varieties of language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting) is different from another, each activated script, more particularly, pragmatic meaning or background knowledge associated with text, also differs. To give a detailed account of the relation between the syntactic-semantic properties of the linguistic encodings and the relevant part of the script it activates, Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2009) adopt CxG for humor analysis. In CxG, knowledge of a language is a collection of "constructions," which are grammatical patterns representing conventional form-meaning pairings (cf. Fillmore, Kay, & O'Conner, 1988; Goldberg, 1995; Kay & Fillmore 1999). Moreover, CxG recognizes every linguistic form as a construction, ranging from morphemes and monomorphemic words, to compound words (e.g., *greenhouse*), to completely lexically-filled idioms (e.g., *kick the bucket*), to completely schematic patterns (e.g., the subject-predicate construction), even to discourse (cf. *Construction Discourse* (Östman, 2005)). CxG integrates the insights of frame semantics with grammatical theory, so that alone it allows us to analyze humorous text focusing not only on the semantic content of it, but on its syntactic, morphological, or phonological properties.

Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2009) explain the humorous example in (3), which depends largely on linguistic expression itself. It appears in a scene of a strange family's story, in which the son *Keith* struggles with fitting his unusually fat mother into a car.

- (3) Keith squats forward and fights his mother's thigh up into the car, while Frank leans sideways
[...]
(Martin Amis, *Dead Babies*, p. 163)

Example (3) indicates that *Keith* has the difficulty of lifting his mother's thigh because of her obesity. The verb *fight* primarily takes two thematic roles (i.e., agent and theme), but the verb *fights* in (3) takes three thematic roles (i.e., cause, theme, and goal). What licenses this is the "caused-motion" construction, in which the causer argument directly causes the theme argument to move along a path designated by the directional complement (cf. Goldberg, 1995, p. 152). According to Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2009), in (3), the original meaning of *fight* (i.e., acting against an opponent) maintains only part of its background frame such as the difficulty or effort in facing something. At the same time, everything else is cancelled out by the caused-motion construction imposing a "moving object" interpretation on the theme argument, in other words, *semantic coercion*.

With respect to humorous effect, (3) gives rise to an incongruity in human motion: *getting one's leg in a car on one's own* vs. *getting one's leg in a car as a result of an external force*. The latter makes readers/hearers interpret *thigh* as an object distinct from *his mother* as its owner. This construal of *thigh* contributes to humorous coherence in (3). Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2009) claim that this incongruity is attributed to the construction, not to the verb *fight* and its associated frame.

With Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou's (2009) approach, we think that CxG seems to enable us to analyze humor more linguistically, by highlighting the relationship between semantic content and linguistic encodings. To examine the possibility of the application of CxG to humor, in the next section, we attempt to analyze some humorous texts based on CxG.

4. Analysis

In this section, we analyze how humorous incongruity arises from linguistic expressions in texts based on CxG. As discussed in the previous section, CxG defines any linguistic forms, such as words, phrases, or sentences, as a construction in which there are various elements, including semantics,

syntactic properties, pragmatic information, and so on. The following examples show the incongruity that guarantees the coherence of humor is attributed to any linguistic units as a construction. In humorous examples, we recognize two constructions in one specific form, and a clash between them giving rise to a humorous incongruity.

Firstly, we observe a semantic incongruity brought by a specific *word* as a construction. The following example in (4) is a humorous conversation between the speakers. In this context, linguistic forms of *ball* are identified in two constructions: (i) *ball*₁ paired with the meaning of “a formal party with dancing,” associated with the word *Cinderella*; (ii) *ball*₂ paired with the meaning “a round object used for throwing or hitting in sports,” associated with the word *the baseball team*.

- (4) Q: Why was Cinderella thrown off the baseball team?
A: She ran away from the ball.

(Oaks, 1994, p. 378)

Comparing elements in two clashing constructions (i.e., *ball*₁ vs. *ball*₂), the forms of *ball* share the part of speech (i.e., noun) and the phonetic sound [bɔ:l], while their semantic components are completely different.

Secondly, the humorous text is attributed to a conventional *phrase* (i.e., idiom). In the conversation text in (5), we conventionally recognize the phrase *can't find words* as an idiom, that is, a construction that idiomatically means that the speaker does not know what to say. However, clerk's reply makes us notice that this phrase can be construed as another construction that literally describes speaker's inability to find words in order to express his/her annoyance. This example depends more on the conventionality of the phrase *can't find words*₁ as a default construction, in which its components are highly fixed, rather than the literal meaning of the phrase *can't find words*₂.

- (5) Customer: I can't find words to express my annoyance.
Store clerk: May I sell you a dictionary?

(Keller, 1998, p. 21)

In (5), the two clashing constructions share a syntactic aspect, but do not share their semantic aspects.

Thirdly, the two argument structure constructions contribute to the humorous coherence of the text. In the conversation between a lady and a doorman in (6), the lady's utterance *will you call me a taxi?* intends to ask the doorman to arrange a taxi for her, but his reply implies that he interprets lady's utterance as a request to refer to her as *a taxi*. The sentence form *will you call me a taxi?* is construed as the following two possible constructions with a specific meaning, respectively: (i) the lady's intention vs. (ii) the doorman's interpretation.

- (6) Lady: Young man, will you call me a taxi?
Doorman: Certainly, Madam. You are a taxi.

(Driscoll, 1990, p. 99)

Comparing elements in each construction, the two constructions have the same syntactic structure and illocutionary force (i.e., request, which is guaranteed by the auxiliary *will*). However, the two elements in the relevant constructions differ not only in the meaning as a whole, but also in the meaning of the phrase *a taxi*: an object in the lady's utterance vs. a complement in doorman's interpretation. In other words, the humorous incongruity in (6) is brought about by the constructional opposition between the *ditransitive construction* and the *object-complement construction*.

Finally, the following example is concerned with a pragmatic level, that is, an illocutionary force associated with a construction. Given that Mary's question with *can you* is about the current time, it is conventionally construed as a request to give information. John, however, thinks that Mary merely asks whether or not he has the capacity to tell her the time. In fact, John overlooks Mary's intention (i.e., request). Thus, this gives rise to humorous incongruity. Moreover, example (7) illustrates “a metonymy inheritance link” (Cappelle, 2017, p. 137). According to Goldberg (1995), constructions that share formal and functional aspects are linked to each other in inheritance hierarchy.

- (7) Mary: Hi, John. Can you tell me what time it is?
John: Yes.

(Soloway, 1986, p. 857)

The more general and schematic *Can* construction expresses one's ability because the modal verb *can* carries the semantics BE-ABLE. The *Can* construction metonymically passes on its semantic and syntactic properties to the *Can you X?* construction. It expresses a request for the hearer because the modal verb *can* takes on the illocutionary force *request*, while *can* itself does not have semantic value. Moreover, while *Can* construction does not assign a person and a thematic role of the subject and the semantics of the complement of the modal verb, *Can you X?* construction assigns the thematic role of Agent expressed syntactically by the second person subject *you* and designates the semantics of the complement of the modal as an action.

Based on the above four examples, we posit that incongruity in humorous texts may be attributed to one specific form which is construed as two possible constructions, and that there may be both the shared and unshared properties concurrently in the relevant constructions.

5. Concluding Remarks

We have reviewed Raskin's (1985) argument, which claims that the "script opposition" gives rise to humorous incongruity. We have also examined the possibility of application of CxG to humor research based on Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2009). Based on our analysis, the validity of employing CxG for humor study can be confirmed; namely, concerning incongruity, a linguistic form, in fact, evokes the two possible constructions.

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