A Construction Discourse Approach to Humorous Incongruity:
Script Opposition Revisited

Yoji Igarashi and Takashi Ishida

1.   Introduction

Many studies have been discussing the reason why we can construe a text as intending humor, in various fields such as sociology, philosophy, neuroscience, and so on.   Suls (1983) maintains that most humor, particularly of verbal forms, is attributed to the *incongruity* and its *resolution*.   Incongruity is caused by a specific semantic interpretation or situation, which differs from the expected one based on the relevant context and background information.   Resolution does not mean eliminating incongruous elements completely but arriving at incongruity that makes sense by, for example, associating an expected interpretation with the one that has actually occurred. The incongruity-resolution theorists have taken a linguistic viewpoint to provide a coherent explanation for how incongruity is involved in humorous text and resolved (cf. Cook (2000), Ritchie (1999)).   In the field of linguistics, various methodologies for exploring the cognitive process of a linguistic stimulus were proposed in the 1980s (cf. *cognitive linguistics*).   Thus, it is hardly surprising that Raskin (1985) takes a linguistic point of view for analyzing humor.   His study is well known for the first application of *frame semantics* to humor analysis and serves as a basis for today's humor research. Many studies inherit Raskin's idea; in particular, Attardo (2001) develops his theory and is one of the most crucial humor studies.

On the other hand, some studies adopt other linguistic theories to analyze humorous text.   Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2009, 2011) adopt *Construction Grammar* (CxG), in which knowledge of language is a collection of grammatical patterns representing conventional form-meaning parings, namely, "constructions" (cf. Fillmore, Kay, and O'Conner (1988) and Goldberg (1995)).   Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2009) criticize Attardo's (2001:22) saying "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." According to them, this claim implies that Raskin's-theory-based studies, more precisely, many previous humor analyses have mainly focused on the semantic content evoked by the whole text rather than the linguistic forms actually used in the text.   In

fact, cognitive linguistics presupposes that any difference in linguistic expressions brings about a difference in construal (cf. Bolinger (1977)). Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2009) suggest that CxG can relate the syntactic-semantic properties of the linguistic encodings with the relevant part of the script it activates.

In this paper, we observe an example intending humorous effect based on both Raskin's (1985) frame semantic analysis and Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou's (2009) construction grammatical one. Furthermore, based on those observations, we argue for the validity of applicability of CxG's basic principle (i.e. conventionalized form-meaning pairings) to humor studies, not for discussing the advantage and disadvantage of the frame semantics approach and the construction grammar approach.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews Raskin (1985), which is the central theory in today's humor studies, and, based on his theory, observes an example extracted from a comedy film. Section 3 reanalyzes the example discussed in Section 2, based on Östman's (2005) study (i.e. *construction discourse*), which extends CxG to the analysis of larger-than-the-sentence patterns (i.e. discourse), following Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2011). Section 4 evaluates the validity of application of the approach presented in Section 3. Section 5 makes concluding remarks.

2. The Conventional Approach to Humor

In this section, we review Raskin (1985) which first analyzes humor linguistically. It is one of the basic ideas for today's humor analysis. We also, based on his theory, examine a concrete example.

2.1. Script Opposition

Raskin (1985) proposes *Semantic Script Theory of Humor* (henceforth, SSTH), which is the first formal theory of verbal humor. This theory introduces a cognitive linguistics perspective to humor and claims that humorous texts are attributed to "script opposition." "Script" is much the same as *frame* in cognitive linguistics. Raskin (1985:81) defines it as a large chunk of semantic information evoked by words in a text. It is stored by habitually repeating a similar experience and contributes to the construal of various concepts we encounter. SSTH says that, in humorous texts, two scripts are evoked by lexical information and their opposition creates a semantic incongruity. 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.

<div align="right">(Raskin (1985:99))</div>

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. Readers/hearers interpret a text as a joke by finding two scripts in it. In fact, even if readers know in advance that the relevant text intends humorous effect, they cannot interpret it meaningfully unless they discover two opposite scripts. One script is activated to make sense of the events described in the former part of the text. The latter part of the text, however, presents elements that are incompatible with the first script and this leads readers/hearers to switch from one script to another. Importantly, both scripts are consistent with the content of the relevant text. This switching of scripts results in bringing about humorous effect.

 Raskin (1985) introduces example (2) to illustrate the idea of the script opposition. This creates a humorous effect by showing the unexpected utterance in the last 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."

<div align="right">(Raskin (1985:100))</div>

The humorous effect in (2) is attributed to the opposition between the scripts DOCTOR and LOVER, whose overlap is visiting home. The first sentence, which contains the words *patient* and *bronchial*, evokes the script DOCTOR, but the last sentence loses some of the compatibility with it and obtains a stronger compatibility with the script LOVER (cf. Raskin (1985:100)). The two scripts are also linked via the component of whispering compatible with both. In what follows, we discuss another example based on Raskin's (1985) argument.

2.2. *An Examination Based on Script Opposition*

 This section, based on Raskin's (1985) script opposition, attempts to analyze example (3), which Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2011) quotes from the film *Life of*

Brian by Monty Python (cf. see Appendix for details). In Palestine under Roman occupation, Brian (B) is a Jewish man who joins a liberation front against the Roman conquerors. In the following scene, Brian has been writing slogans on the walls against the Romans, when a Roman centurion (R) turns up and catches him on the act.

(3) R: What's this then! "Romanes Eunt Domus".
People called "Romanes", "they went" "house" in the Nominative.

B: It says ''Romans go home"

R: No it doesn't.
What's Latin for Roman? [slaps him] Come on . . . come on. . .

B: Romanus!

R: Goes like?

B: Er . . . annus

R: Vocative plural of "annus" is . . . is . . .

B: Anni.

R: Romani […].

[…].

R: Now write it out a hundred times.

B: Yes sir.

As mentioned in the previous section, when consistency of the text is lost by the incongruity between scripts, readers/hearers attempt to shift to another script and link it with the first evoked script to resolve the incongruity. In (3), the script ARREST is already activated by the preceding context. Note that Jewish Brian is under the control of the Roman Empire. We know that, when ruled people act against their rulers, they are punished, based on the background information about the relationship between a conqueror and a resistant. Because of Brian's anti-Roman acts, hearers (comedy viewers) will predict that Brian (B) should be arrested by the centurion (R).

However, the centurion starts referring to the form, not the content, of the slogan and pushing Brian to rewrite it in proper Latin. There is an obvious clash here between the situationally established script (i.e. ARREST) and the new opposing one INSTRUCTION. What evokes the script INSTRUCTION is one-sided power balance (i.e. the centurion > Brian), the sequence of question-answer pairs, and so on. Moreover, because the topic

of instruction is about Latin grammar at school, instructional relationship between the centurion and Brian is interpreted as a more specific "teacher-student" one in class.

Recall that Raskin's (1985) theory requires that the text be compatible, fully or in part, with both opposite scripts. In (3), the scripts ARREST and INSTRUCTION are partially compatible in that the centurion dominates Brian consistently. Their situationally irrelevant conversation brings about the incongruity, but this compatibleness contributes to the fact that readers/hearers interpret the text as one intending humorous effect. We have shown that the humorous effect in the above text can be explained based on the concept *script*. In the following section, we will introduce Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou's (2011) analysis, which examines the same text by adopting another theory.

3. Construction Discourse Approach to Humor

In this section, we attempt to analyze a humorous text based on Construction Grammar and to examine the process of creating humorous effect, following Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2011), who adopt the idea of "Construction Discourse."

3.1. *Construction Discourse*

First of all, we introduce what "Construction Discourse" means. Östman (2005) starts to extend CxG to the analysis of larger-than-the-sentence patterns. He maintains that certain discourse patterns have specific linguistic properties. In other words, just like morphemes, words, and sentences, the conventionalized discourse patterns are stored as "constructions" in the grammar. According to Östman (2005), a discourse construction represents a conventionalized pairing of a particular *text type* (e.g. narrative, descriptive, argumentation) with a particular *genre* (e.g. headline, dinner-table conversation, fairy tales). This is equivalent to a pair of form and meaning in conventional Construction Grammar.

Östman (2005) defines *recipe* as a conventional discourse pattern, for instance. In discourse pattern *recipe*, the name of a product is exhibited first, and next specifications about measures of the ingredients are presented, followed by the instructions for preparing the targeted dish. This flow of text (i.e. *Heading - Ingredients - Instructions*) is recognized as a text type and connected with *recipe* as a genre. Additionally, Östman (2005) shows a schematization of the recipe image

Figure 1, whose composing words are nonsense, and assumes that we can almost certainly recognize it as a recipe.   He argues that we might have an image of the prototypical shape of a recipe like Figure 2.

SDKJD JSJDKSJDD JDDSSK J
    2 tbl fdjkfjfd
    2½ dl lkfdlkjf sdjklfdsjkl
    30 g kjdfsjklfdiop
Asälkfj V-IMP oksd jfdkfjfj dsklfj dfjsd fjsdfjfjf
söä df kskflsdkfd V-IMP dsfkdsf kdfkd fkdfkdsfl
öls kd V-IMP flösd kfsdl kfsfksfk s dlfk IMP äd f
sö ldkfs dlkflösdkföl s fks dlfksd IMP sdl kfsd ui
lsdk fsdk flsd V-IMP dfksd k fsdfk dslfk lfkds fk.
Eighr ds oi hhre e mmmererp ppfde V-IMP-Neg.

Figure 1. A schematization of the recipe image

Heading
name of product-to-be
cultural information
Ingredients
list of ingredients
specific amounts
temperature
amount of final product; e.g., 'servers four'
Instructions
sequentially ordered
directive mode
alternative paths

Figure 2. The recipe pattern

(Östman (2005:132–133))

Although not all construction grammarians agree with the theoretical extension to the analysis of discourse patterns, Östman (2005) claims that this attempt can profitably develop a description of discourse patterns based on the basic insights of CxG. Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2011) also maintain that the theoretical extension to discourse is certainly consistent with the general trend of cognitive linguistics, which supports the idea that "any aspect of a usage event, or even a sequence of usage events in a discourse, is capable of emerging as a linguistic unit, should it be a recurrent commonality" (Langacker (2001:146)).

3.2.   *An Examination Based on Construction Discourse*

This section introduces the analysis which applies Construction Discourse to humor.   Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2011) claim that what makes humorous incongruity is that a conventionalized discourse as a "construction" is embedded in an incompatible situation.   In section 2.2, we have analyzed example (3) based on Raskin's (1985) script opposition (i.e., ARREST VS. INSTRUCTION).   Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2011), in a different way, discuss the reason why the teacher-student relationship between Brian and the centurion is evoked in the above context. According to them, it is because classroom discourse is established as a construction empirically.   The classroom discourse is schematized as follows:

(4) Classroom Discourse Construction

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┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ sem   ┌ frame      CLASSROOM                                             ┐      │
│       │      FE #1 [teacher]                                             │      │
│       └      FE #2 [student]                                             ┘      │
│                                                                                │
│ prag  ┌ d-frame   [TEACHER -STUDENT INTERACTION] inherit [CONVERSATION] ┐      │
│       │ coherence   ┌ discourse-role  initiation_i  (#1)      [speech act_1 directive] ┐ │
│       │             │ discourse-role  reply_j to _i  (#2)     [speech act_2 assertion] │ │
│       └             └ discourse-role  evaluation of _j (#1)   [speech act_3 _ _ _ _ _] ┘ ┘ │
│                                                                                │
│ syn   ┌  ┌ full interrogative   ┐                                        ┐      │
│       │  │ elliptic statement   │                                        │      │
│       │  └ elliptic question    ┘_1                                      │      │
│       │         declarative _2                                           │      │
│       └         _ _ _ _ _ _ _3                                           ┘      │
└──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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(Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2011:2601) with modifications)

The sem(antics) attribute serves as evoking the conceptual background of the CLASSROOM frame containing the relevant roles (frame elements (FE) *teacher* and *student*).   It also contains knowledge about the relative status of each role, address and politeness conventions, and so on.   The prag(matics) attribute defines the specific d(iscourse)-frame of TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION, which inherits the more general CONVERSATION d-frame.   The coherence attribute relies on the tripartite sequence of *initiation-reply-evaluation*.   Each of these can be seen as a specific type of speech act mapped onto each of the elements associated with the classroom frame (teacher → student → teacher).   The syn(tax) attribute specifies the syntactic realization of each speech act assigned at the coherence attribute.   The realization of the first speech act (i.e. *directive*) can take the form of a drop-list (marked with the { }) comprising three possible realizations.   The second speech act (i.e. *assertion*) is typically realized as a declarative by a student.   The third is more open, in other words, it could also take the form of a declarative, another interrogative, a single evaluative expression, etc.   The classroom discourse is conventionalized in this way, so that, even though it is incorporated into an incompatible situation like (3), hearers can evoke the teacher-student relationship.

Let us return to linguistic representation of the conversation between Brian and the centurion.   In their conversation, there are features and expressions which characterize their conversation as a classroom discourse.   Example (3) is repeated below as (5).

(5) R: What's this then! "Romanes Eunt Domus".

People called "Romanes", "they went" "house" in the Nominative.

B: It says "Romans go home"

R: No it doesn't.

What's Latin for Roman? [slaps him] Come on . . . come on. . .

B: Romanus!

R: Goes like?

B: Er . . . annus

R: Vocative plural of "annus" is . . . is . . .

B: Anni.

R: Romani […].

[…].

R: Now write it out a hundred times.

B: Yes sir.

(= (3))

First, the turn-taking sequence in (5) corresponds to a schematization of the classroom discourse (4).   The centurion consistently takes teacher's *initiation* turns, while Brian takes student's *reply* turns.   Brian is totally intimidated and physically punished for grammar mistakes by the centurion as a teacher.   This power balance is partially compatible with the situationally consistent expectation that Brian should be punished for terrorist activities.   Additionally, Brian is called *boy* (See Appendix) while he respectfully addresses the centurion as *sir*, which would be in accordance with the teacher-student relationship as well as the situationally established scenario.

Elliptic questions such as *Goes like?* are frequently used in classroom.   When teachers, in a class, ask students questions in this form, he does not always demand to provide his unknown information.   Rather, in order to activate students' knowledge, the teachers actually attempt to elicit from students information the teacher already has. Unfinished sentences (e.g. *Vocative plural of "annus" is…is…*) are also conventionally used by teachers to confirm students' comprehension by making them fill in the missing information.

We can find in (5) some phrases or expressions which are characteristic of the genre "classroom."   The expressions *vocative plural of "annus," conjugate* (cf. see

Appendix), and *write it out a hundred times* are hardly been encountered in situations other than the (language) class.

Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2011), following Östman's (2005) idea, claim that the specific expressions and elements in (4) are included in the relevant discourse construction as information characterizing it.   The next section evaluates the validity of application of Construction Discourse to the analysis of humor.

4.   The Validity of the Construction Discourse Approach to Humor

Although we have analyzed the specific humorous text in the previous two sections, respectively, based on frame semantics and CxG, the latter approach to humor is not necessarily incompatible with the former approach like Raskin (1985), because CxG integrates the insights of frame semantics with grammatical theory.   Just for this reason, application of CxG enables us to give a more detailed account of the relation between the syntactic-semantic properties of the linguistic encodings and the relevant part of the script it activates.   In CxG, knowledge of a language is a collection of "constructions," which are grammatical patterns representing conventional form-meaning pairings.   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), and even to discourse patterns as discussed in Section 3.   Construction Discourse thus allows us to analyze humorous text focusing not only on the semantic content of it, but on its syntactic and phonological properties, or pragmatic information.

However, some constructional grammarians consider it problematic that a certain discourse pattern is defined as a "construction."   In the first place, it has been discussed whether pragmatics is part of constructions or falls outside of a construction (cf. Cappelle (2017)).   Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2011) point out that, in all constructional approaches, the meaning (i.e. the semantic pole of any constructions) is defined in terms of *frames*; in this sense, CxG incorporates valuable insights from frame semantic theory, not rejecting a strict dichotomy between semantics and pragmatics. Therefore, information about pragmatic, discoursal, textual, and register properties associated with a particular form can be represented in the meaning pole alongside purely semantic information.

We must also consider the criterion of defining a certain discourse as an established pattern. Of course, the degree of fixedness or entrenchment (i.e. conventionality) is different depending on each discourse pattern, but any discourse constructions have typical lexical elements and more productive features, which may be either grammatical or thematic. For example, the classroom discourse construction introduced in Section 3 is characterized by the sequence of the particular speech acts (i.e. *initiation-reply-evaluation*) and phrases or expressions which are still characteristic of the genre "classroom." Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2011) argue that all data they examine are sufficiently entrenched to be considered conventional linguistic units, and it is precisely evidenced by their ability to trigger humorous incongruity. This high degree of entrenchment, more specifically, the salience in the contexts in which they prototypically occur contributes to humorous effect.

Although there are many points to be discussed, the idea of construction discourse enables us to explicate how incongruity occurs in the relevant text in a more systematic manner. It can uniformly account for the cognitive mechanisms underlying humor interpretation, focusing on different factors such as semantic content, the specific linguistic encodings used in it, its formal characteristics, and pragmatic information.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper has examined the possibility of applying "Construction Discourse" to humor research based on Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2011). Östman (2005) argues that certain discourse patterns are defined as a construction and that each pattern is characterized by specific features and expressions. The conventional approach to humor proposed by Raskin (1985) based on frame semantics, which claims that the "script opposition" gives rise to humorous incongruity, mainly focuses on semantic content evoked by the whole text. On the other hand, because CxG integrates the insights of frame semantics with grammatical theory, the construction discourse approach allows us to analyze humorous text systematically, focusing not only on the semantic content of it, but on its syntactic properties, or pragmatic information.

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(Yoji Igarashi)

Doctoral Program in Literature and Linguistics

University of Tsukuba

e-mail: tsukubaske13@gmail.com

(Takashi Ishida)

Doctoral Program in Literature and Linguistics

University of Tsukuba

e-mail: takashi.ishida1990@gmail.com

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Appendix

R: What's this then! ''Romanes Eunt Domus''.
       People called "Romanes", "they went" "house" in the Nominative.
B: It says "Romans go home"
R: No it doesn't.
       What's Latin for Roman? [slaps him] Come on . . . come on. . .
B: Romanus!
R: Goes like?
B: Er . . . annus
R: Vocative plural of "annus" is . . . is . . .
B: Anni.
R: Romani. "Eunt"?   What is "eunt"?
B: "Go". Let--
R: Conjugate the verb "to go".
B: Uh. "Ire".   Uh, "eo".   "Is".   "It".   "Imus".   "It is".   "Eunt".
R: So "eunt" is...?
B: Ah, huh, third person plural, uh, present indicative.   Uh, "they go".
R: But "Romans, go home" is an order, so you must use the...?
B: The... imperative!
R: Which is...?
B: Umm!   Oh. Oh. Um, "I". "I"!
R: How many Romans?
B: Ah!   "I"-- Plural. Plural.   "Ite". "Ite".
R: "Ite".
B: Ah. Eh.
R: "Domus"?
B: Eh.
R: Nominative?
B: Oh.
R: "Go home"?   This is motion towards.   Isn't it, boy?
B: Ah. Ah, dative, sir! Ahh!   No, not dative!   Not the dative, sir!   No! Ah! Oh, the...
       accusative! Accusative!   Ah! "Domum," sir!   "Ad domum"!   Ah! Oooh! Ah!
R: Except that "domus" takes the...?
B: The locative, sir!
R: Which is...?!
B: "Domum".
R: "Domum".
B: Aaah! Ah.
R: "Um".   Do you understand?
B: Yes, sir.
R: Now write it out a hundred times.
B: Yes sir.
R: And if it isn't done by sunset, I'll cut your balls off.