A Spectrum of Linguistic Humor:
Humor as Linguistic Design Space Construction
Based on Meta-Linguistic Constraints

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Abstract
Nearly all humor derives from some element of surprise, discrepancy, unexpectedness, pattern-breaking, or anomalous inference. This speculative paper will briefly discuss aspects of linguistic humor, from simple wordplay including shm-reduplication, punning, simple language games, simple humorous linguistic and textual genres (limericks, Pig Latin, “Name Game”), to more complex genres that go beyond humor into linguistic and textual artistic innovation such as modernism (Joyce’s Ulysses, Finnegans’s Wake), post-modernism (Theater of the Absurd, Beckett, John Barth’s Giles Goat Boy, Chimera), OuLiPo (Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle, “workshop for potential literature”) (constraint-based postmodernism), and science fiction (world creation). In many cases, both humor and linguistic and textual innovation can be considered to have notions of friction or pressure within a constrained communicative channel, and more generally as breaking a common linguistic pattern based on implicit or explicit meta-linguistic constraints. My speculative approach includes developing a linguistic spectrum (from phonomorphological to discourse components and beyond) to describe the range of techniques used for humor, but also a very early foray into a theoretical account of humor and creativity that focuses on creating an object-level design space (structure and model) that is guided by meta-linguistic constraints.

Introduction
Nearly all humor derives from some element of surprise, discrepancy, unexpectedness, pattern-breaking, or anomalous inference. The current main theories of humor (or their variants) are three (Attardo 2008): relief theory (humor is a psychophysical means to relieve tension), superiority theory (humor at another person’s circumstances allows one to feel superior), and incongruity theory (humor has its origin in the recognition of some situation’s incongruity and also involves a resolution of the incongruity). The incongruity theory is perhaps predominant, and is the basis of my discussions in this paper (Raskin 1985, 2008; Attardo 1994, 2008; Morreall 2008).

This speculative paper briefly discusses aspects of linguistic humor, from simple wordplay including shm-reduplication, punning, simple language games, simple humorous linguistic and textual genres (limericks, Pig Latin, “Name Game”), to more complex genres that go beyond humor into linguistic and textual artistic innovation such as modernism (Joyce’s Ulysses, Finnegans’s Wake), post-modernism (Theater of the Absurd, Beckett, John Barth’s Giles Goat Boy, Chimera), OuLiPo (Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle, “workshop for potential literature”) (Olipo; Mathews and Brotchie 1998) (constraint-based postmodernism), and science fiction (world creation). In many cases, both humor and linguistic and textual innovation can be considered to have notions of friction or pressure within a constrained communicative channel, and more generally as breaking a common linguistic pattern based on implicit or explicit meta-linguistic constraints.

My speculative approach here includes developing a linguistic spectrum (from phonomorphological to discourse components and beyond) to describe the range of techniques used for humor, but also a very brief and early foray into a theoretical account of humor and creativity that focuses on creating an object-level design space (structure and model) that is guided by meta-linguistic constraints.
The Components of Linguistic Humor

Linguistic humor uses components of the strata or levels typically posited by linguistic theory: phonology (and phonetics), morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. In addition, the constructs used in linguistic humor range from words (or parts of words) to sentences or utterances, to extended discourses. In addition, various genres of discourses (texts) constitute linguistic humor: puns, narrative jokes (with many sub-genres), poetry (e.g., limericks), word games or extended schemes (shn-reduplication, Pig Latin, rhyming games such as the Name Game, etc.), extended comedic or humorous discourses embedded in dramas, narratives, etc. Furthermore, in the case of more serious fiction, I would argue that some of the same mechanisms employed in humor are employed in such forms as modernist (Joyce’s Ulysses, Finnegans Wake), post-modernist (Theater of the Absurd plays such as Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, meta-fiction such as John Barth’s Giles Goat Boat, and Chimera), and even world-changing genres such as science fiction (e.g., Frank Herbert’s Dune series, Isaac Asimov’s Foundation series) and fantasy (Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, Robert Jordan’s Wheel of Time series).

I am not proposing an entirely new approach here, but assuming the basic tenets of the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (Raskin, 1985), especially as generalized by Attardo’s extension: General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo 1994, 2008, etc.), which I will not go into in this short paper. Instead, I suggest a spectrum such as in Figure 1.

Object-Level Design Space for Humor

This section describes my conjectures about the object-level design space for generating and understanding humor that is guided by meta-linguistic constraints, i.e., possible world navigation.

What the spectrum in Figure 1, and its way-stations on both sides (the linguistic → ontology → meta-ontology range, and the structural range from word → world), is meant to graphically depict is my view that humor under the incongruity theory is the result of misinterpretation at a range of linguistic “semantic” levels, where the linguistic structural level focused on (sound or word or syntactic attachment, sentence, discourse, etc.) is given an incongruous generation (by the humor provider) which is then possibly understood (by the humor consumer) as permitting anomalous interpretations, one or more of which gets resolved to (the important point is that the “normal” interpretation is rejected). This may not even be a completely new point, as previous humor theorists may have raised the issue of “interpretation” at a specific structural point, but which research I am not aware of. This does mean that there could be multiple misinterpretations, i.e., at different structural points: e.g., a pun or puns at the “sound” level when embedded in a larger text/utterance could establish coherence at a higher level in the discourse, much like a so-called motif (Motif 2012). Except of course, here the motif is a misinterpretation motif. However, one might see this humorous “scaffolding” as a way to create a very elaborate misinterpretation structure up many levels and across many dimensions.

And so, I arrive at the generalization of this approach (or set of techniques, since the theory is still very young and needs to be fleshed out), which is to generalize it to narrative and poetic forms and genres larger than humor, but which might also incorporate humorous sub-parts.

Meta-Linguistic Constraint-based Design

This section describes my conjectures about the meta-level, i.e., the meta-linguistic and meta-ontological levels, where, I conjecture, humor and in fact other creative efforts, are designed and then generated as object-level artifacts.

The main point of my approach is that the humor-generator (provider) is working at a meta-linguistic level when he/she creates the humorous item, knows that at least at one level in the spectrum a misinterpretation exists, and given common knowledge of humans and their semantic interpretation capabilities, that the humor audience (consumer) will probably recognize the misinterpretation, understand the proposed resolution of the incongruity, and laugh. As with all things human, of course, there may be degrees of humor expertise on both the generation and understanding sides, and so one’s joke or extended joke or aberrant world fiction may not find an expected response.

Figure 1. Linguistic Humor Structural Spectrum
Conclusion

My conclusion is a bit peremptory, unfortunately, but I hope that discussion will clarify and refine many of these issues, and in fact, push this approach forward. Although time and space constraints truly have precluded elaboration, I anticipate some future progress along the lines I have sketched. Here, I am reminded of some quotes that have guided me:

In this idea originated the plan of the "Lyrical Ballads"; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. (Coleridge, 1817)

A joke is like building a mousetrap from scratch. You have to work pretty hard to make the thing snap when it is supposed to snap. (Vonnegut, 2005)

Werner Heisenberg, Kurt Gödel, and Noam Chomsky walk into a bar. Heisenberg turns to the other two and says, "Clearly this is a joke, but how can we figure out if it's funny or not?" Gödel replies, "We can't know that because we're inside the joke." Chomsky says, "Of course it's funny. You're just telling it wrong." (http://ask.metafilter.com/72202/Do-you-know-jokes-which-presuppose-obscure-knowledge)

My main conclusion is that humor is the result of an understood (at the meta-level) ambiguity of semantic interpretation, but that the interpretation arises at multiple levels, which indeed can combine to enable more complex misinterpretations but with directed incongruous interpretations and resolutions at the object-level that actually may enable more than humor, i.e., creativity. How? By actively reacting against the spaces of misinterpretations that are seen at the meta-level in order to create humor at the object-level. Or to create possibly more than humor. Perhaps humor is a vector for us into the machinery of creativity? Personally, I think so.

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