

# Shifting from meaning to its carrier: A common denominator for three strains of humour

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## Abstract

*Incongruity theories maintain that the core of humour is in interplay between meanings. Two incompatible meanings – of situations, verbal utterances or actions – are juxtaposed, one replacing the other or colliding with it. In this paper, I suggest that often the game is not played between two meanings, but between meaning and its carrier. I provide as examples two families of jokes and one general type of humour sharing this mechanism. One of the two families comprises jokes of self-reference, and the other consists of jokes based on deflation of symbols, which means using them in a concrete sense. The general type of humour is the subject of Bergson's 1900 theory of the comic, mechanical behaviour where flexible human reaction is expected. The mechanism common to all three is a shift of weight from meaning to its carrier. This mechanism is then traced also in other jokes, suggesting possible universality.*

*Keywords: carriers of meaning, meanings of actions, hierarchy of symbols, incidental meaning vs. declared meaning.*

## 1. Meanings – declared and incidental

This paper has two protagonists: *meanings* and their *carriers*. In this introductory section, I want to clarify the way these terms are used. We refer to the carrier as a pointer, and to the meaning as what it points at. The carrier directs our thoughts to the meaning.

The carriers of meaning that first come to mind are words, or more generally verbal expressions. For example, the word “chair” points at the physical chair. Yet, not only words can carry meanings. Almost anything can. We ascribe meaning to objects (a watch inherited from my grandfather can have sentimental meaning for me), to situations (which demand interpretation, hence to be given meanings), and most importantly for the purposes of this paper – to actions. The meanings we attach to actions include the intentions behind them, their aims, motives, drives, the responsibility linked to them, and many more. Language agrees with this choice of terminology. We ask people for the meaning of their deeds, and “to intend” to do something is “to mean” to do it. The depth psychologist Fonagy uses this very term – he speaks about the meaning a baby ascribes to her mother's actions. Understanding the meanings of the actions of others enables us to predict their actions and prepare in accord.

Fonagy explains that “[e]xploring the meaning of actions of others is crucially linked to the child’s ability to label and find meaningful his or her own experience” (Fonagy 2001, p. 165).

There is an important distinction to be made here, between declared meanings and incidental ones. Words carry pre-assigned, and thus declared, meaning. The flag of a state is explicitly chosen and declared to symbolise its country. On the other hand, the grandfather’s watch was not constructed to evoke memories, so its meaning is incidental. Actions are usually not performed with a communicative purpose in mind, so the meaning they carry is incidental. By common use, when the meaning is declared, as in the case of the flag, we call the carrier a “symbol” for the meaning.

To avoid tedious repetition of the rather cumbersome “carrier of meaning”, I will sometimes use substitute terms. The most common will be “pointer”. Less frequent will be “signifier”. When appropriate, I will also use the term “symbol”. Sometimes, when dire need for variety arises, I will use the term “symbol” also when it is less than perfectly suitable.

## 2. A mechanism

“Good prose should be transparent, like a window pane”, wrote George Orwell in the concluding paragraph of *Why I Write* (1946). In prose, as in everyday usage, words are subservient to their meaning. We think through them, not about them. We understand them and act upon them, usually without relating to them as independent entities.

Probably without being aware of the Orwell quotation, Jean-Paul Sartre repeated the window pane metaphor, and added: “But for the poet, language is a mirror of the world” (Sartre 1948: 14). In poetry, words are not transparent. Their uncommon usage generates an effect of estrangement, drawing attention to them. Roman Jakobson (1960; see also Waugh 1980) claimed that this is a main characteristic of poetic language. In poetry, he argued, the means of expression is not merely a tool of communication, but stands on its own merit.

There are many points of contact between poetry and humour. To list but a few: brevity; word games; the license to break the rules of reality (*licentia poetica*); implicitness. These similarities, as well as the differences between the two, are the subject of Aharoni (2012). The special relationship between meaning and its carrier is one more point of affinity. In jokes too, there is sometimes a shift of weight from meaning to its pointer. The carrier of meaning suddenly gains a life of its own and moves to centre stage. A classic example is puns: a word is suddenly set free of the shackles of its regular meaning and is allowed to link to another meaning. The “two scripts” theory (Raskin 1985) can also be viewed this way, where the carrier of meaning is not necessarily a word, but possibly a situation. A situation (e.g. a person standing in front of a doctor’s door) is detached from its natural interpretation (the person being a patient) and is free to connect to another meaning (lover). This can be viewed as a “situational pun”.

Yet, verbal or situational puns are not the only ways the weight can be shifted towards the carrier. In this paper, I present three families of examples where the shift takes other forms. Two of these are families of jokes, and the third is a genre of humour.

- (A) One family of jokes consists of jokes based on the deflation of metaphors. More generally – on the flattening of symbolic meaning. Metaphorical expressions are taken at face value, and objects loaded with symbolic meaning return to their concrete role.
- (B) The second family consists of jokes of self-reference: a pointer turns out to point at itself. Here the shift of weight is explicit. The pointer, ordinarily a transparent entity serving the meaning, suddenly becomes the protagonist of the story.

- (C) The third line of examples relates to the meaning of actions. A famous type of humour pointed out by Bergson (1900) is mechanical behaviour, where flexible human reactions are expected. We shall construe it as a shift of weight from the meaning of the action to the action itself. An action that turns out to be mechanical is robbed of its various meanings. Suddenly it is devoid of intentions, motives, will or drives, simply because machines, in our perception, do not have all these. The carrier of the meaning – the action – is then left to be observed as empty motions.

### 3. The structure of the paper

Section 4 presents the first of the three mechanisms of humour – “flattening” of metaphors. Section 5 contains some thoughts about the role of metaphors in humour, as compared with their role in poetry. Section 6 is devoted to the mechanism pointed out by Bergson, of actions emptied of their motives and intentions: mechanical actions replacing flexible, human reactions. In Section 7 I explain why automatism empties actions from meaning. Section 8 introduces the third strain of humour of the three discussed in the paper: circularity, or self-reference. Section 9 summarizes a main common feature to the three strains: the struggle between meaning and its carrier that occurs in them, that ends with the victory of the second. Weight is shifted from meaning to its carrier. Section 10 deals with an aspect of the shift from meaning to carrier: the meaning is usually outside us, namely the pointer points at an external object. The carrier is a symbol in our brains, so the shift towards it takes us inside. Section 11 includes jokes in which the emptying of the symbol of its meaning is declared and explicit. In Section 12 I try to examine what the incongruity theories have to say about the strains of humour discussed in the paper, and to show that they are basically irrelevant to these types. Section 13 deals with the intriguing question of “why”: what is the purpose of detaching the carrier from its meaning, and making it the hero of the day? What is the function of the shift, and in what way do we benefit from it?

### 4. Descending one level of symbolism: Deflated metaphors and symbols

(1) Girl: “I will never give you my heart”.  
Suitor: “I was not aiming that high”.

The joke uses two techniques. One is implicitness – the vulgar meaning is not said directly. But the main technique is taking the girl’s metaphor literally. This device is widely used not only in jokes, but also in poetry, where it is called *reification* or “realisation of a metaphor” (see, e.g., Hartley 1989).

Symbols can be ordered hierarchically:

- At level 0, there are concrete objects that do not serve as pointers. This is not to say they cannot serve as such, but that in the present context they do not.
- At level 1, there are pointers that are ordinary symbols – they point at 0-level objects. The word *cat* is a first order symbol, pointing at a particular cat, or at the species.
- Level 2 symbols are metaphors: they use first-order symbols to point at other first-order symbols. My beloved is “as the lily among thorns” (*Bible, Song of Solomon 2:2*) starts as a first-order symbol: the words point at a flower among thorns. This image is then used as a simile, to carry another meaning – the singularity of the beauty of the poet’s beloved.

Reification means descending one level. In the case of metaphors, from second to first order, taking the metaphor at face value. For example, taking the sentence above as referring to a real flower among real thorns. If it is an ordinary (first-order) symbol, then the reification treats it as a concrete object, devoid of meaning – thus descending to order 0. Psychologists claim that this mode of thinking characterises schizophrenics (McKinley 1964; Olson 2013). In both cases, there is a symbol A presumably pointing at B, only to rebound to A: it turns out that the message is A itself. The pointer, bared of its symbolic meaning, becomes the focus of attention.

In example (1), the girl uses “give my heart” as a second-order pointer, that points at the first-order content, namely “love you”. The guy relates to this as if it were first-order, ignoring the metaphorical meaning.

In the next joke this is the main technique:

- (2) What is the epitome of wastefulness?  
– Telling a hair-raising story to a bald man.

“Hair-raising” is a metaphor (second-order symbol), pointing at the first-order “frightening”. Here the concrete meaning of the metaphor, namely the first-order symbol “actual hair raising” prevails. The symbol is taken literally, being detached from the original meaning, and gaining a life of its own. We actually think of hair.

The two examples above went from order 2 to order 1. The next example goes from order 1 to order 0, namely taking a first-order symbol as a concrete object. In this case the symbol is not universal, but particular to the joke:

- (3) A Chinese couple makes a pact when they marry: each of them has a jar, and whenever one is unfaithful to the other, he or she should put one grain of rice in the jar. After fifty years of marriage they decide to open the jars. In the husband’s jar are three grains of rice. “What was the first?” asks the wife. – “You remember when your mother was ill, and you went to nurse her? I did it with the young school teacher”. And the second? – “Do you remember the nice maid we had some thirty years ago?” “And the third?” – “Do you remember the big flood, when I left for the big city?” Then they open the wife’s jar, and it is empty. “Have you never been unfaithful to me?” asks the husband. “Do you remember”, says the wife, “the big famine, when everybody starved and we had plenty to eat?”

The rice was given a symbolic meaning, but in final account, it is also food, plain and simple. Noting this conceptual move is necessary, since the nowadays popular “incongruity” terminology (see, e.g., Beattie 1776, Forabosco 2008) sheds little light on this type of jokes. For example, in joke (3), there is indeed incongruity: between treating rice as a symbol and as food. But “incongruity” by itself does not carry much information. It is too general to capture the very special way the joke was formed.

Here is another case of order 1 turning into order 0, a concrete object:

- (4) An old lady tells her friend: “I changed my password to ‘incorrect’. This way the computer reminds me – ‘your password is incorrect’”.

A meaningful word turns into a string of letters.

- (5) A cartoon by Gary Larson: A monster-looking man knocks on the door of a house. Two frightened children look through the window, while the mother opens the door and says “Why, yes, we do have two children who won’t eat their vegetables”.

The not-eating-their-vegetables monster is a fiction – a metaphor for punishment. Here it assumes a real entity. It is the realisation of a metaphor. There is yet another detachment of meaning here: of motherly feelings. For the mother the main thing is that her threat materialised.

In the following children’s joke, the carrier of meaning is an action. It is given symbolic (communicative) meaning, and then turns out to be the “thing itself”, a concrete motion subject to physiological laws.

(6) After an arduous march, the commander orders the soldiers: “Whoever cannot continue, two steps forward”. Everybody steps forward, except for Tom. “Kudos”, says the commander, “you are the only man here”. “No”, says Tom, “I cannot take the two steps forward”.

In the next joke, it is not a metaphor that is reversed, but a metonymy (representing something by its part or something pertaining to it):

(7) “My wife is cheating on me with a carpenter”, complains a man to his friends. “How do you know?” – “I found sawdust in our bed”. “My wife is cheating on me with an electrician”, says the other. “How do you know?” – “I found electric wires in our bed”. “My wife is cheating on me with a boxer”, says the third. “How do you know?” – “I found him in our bed”.

Metonymy is a kind of pointer, and in this case it turns out to point at itself. The carpenter and the electrician needed such a pointer, the boxer did not. He himself is the pointer.

In the next joke, a metaphor is dismantled by exchanging the roles of tenor and vehicle (see next section for the definitions of these two). The result is, again, going one level lower – to the plain meaning:

(8) Johnny’s parents think it is time their son knew the facts of life and ask his older brother to illuminate him. The brother summons Johnny and asks: “Do you know what my girlfriend and I do every night?” – “Yes”, says Johnny. “So”, says the brother, “Mom and Dad want you to know that birds and bees also do this”.

## 5. Thoughts about metaphors in humour

I would like to muse here a bit about the role of metaphors, and the difference in their use in poetry and in jokes. The secret of the metaphor’s success in poetry lies in its double function: conveying information and veiling it at the same time. On the one hand, it is an extremely efficient means of transmitting information. It takes a familiar conceptual structure (*vehicle*) in one situation and transfers it *en bloc* to another situation (*tenor*). Since we know the vehicle well, we can use it as one unit, thus saving a lot of work – like moving a whole building in one piece, instead of brick by brick. Moreover, sometimes the tenor is abstract while the vehicle is more concrete and hence easier to grasp. This happens, for example, in the passage from handing material objects – “give my heart” – to abstract love.

Or take Shakespeare’s famous

(9) All the world is a stage (*As You Like It*).

The vehicle (*theatre*) is more concrete than the tenor (*life*), since it is more compact – a theatrical play is shorter than life. We know what theatre is, and the various aspects of behaviour of the actors. The analogy thus enables us to glean insights about life. On the other hand, the metaphor is used to veil the information, enabling both author and reader to pretend

(or believe) they are speaking about the vehicle, not the tenor. “Give my heart” is less direct than “love”. Exit from the stage is less frightening than death: “All men and women are merely players, they have their exits and entrances”. The metaphor allows indirect knowledge, thus distancing us from our immediate life, at least momentarily, which is a gateway to the artistic effect. Poetry is an inverse pickpocket – it stealthily puts messages into our pockets.

It is well known that metaphors also play a central role in humour (see, e.g., Müller 2015, who traces this observation to Aristotle; see also Piata (2016). Schopenhauer (1907) claimed that humour results from the application of inappropriate (“broken”) metaphors. For example:

(10) Visitor: Last year there were here 10 windmills, now only 5. What happened?  
Local: The wind was not sufficient for all.

This is based on a metaphor, whose vehicle is the situation of insufficient resources, so familiar to us in other contexts, but inappropriate in this one. Broken metaphors are different from flattened metaphors and are not within the direct scope of this paper.

A natural question is: if both the joke and the poem use reification of metaphors, what is the difference? What makes us feel that it is funny in one case, and poetic in the other? The difference is that in poetry the link between the carrier and the meaning is not severed. The carrier is open to other interpretations, but is still linked to the original meaning. In jokes, the link is terminally cut. The old meaning is mocked and removed – for example the suitor is not intent on giving the heart metaphor a deeper meaning. Rather, he ridicules it. This fits in with the Kantian view of the joke as going from high to low (Kant 1790). In the “I didn’t aim that high” joke, the “high to low” is even taken literally.

Another way of viewing the difference is via the concept of *estrangement*, coined by the Russian literary critic Shklovsky (1998). Taking a metaphor literally is a means of estranging it, namely shedding a new light on it, and making it appear new and unfamiliar. We are accustomed to its metaphoric meaning, and do not pay attention to the concrete meaning. The reification breaks this habit and makes us view the metaphor freshly. This effect is obtained in both the joke and the poem. But there is a major difference: in poems this is only a first step towards a refreshing interpretation of the first-order meaning. In the joke there is no new meaning expected – the dismantling of the metaphor is terminal. There is full detachment of the metaphor from the metaphorical meaning.

## 6. Flattened meanings of actions – Bergson’s automatism

The “shift of weight” mechanism appears in a famous strain of humour. The carriers of meaning there are actions. It is the type broached by Bergson’s (1900) theory of “automatism”. Nowadays this theory has little support, and the analysis below shows that in fact it is well linked to the main body of humour.

Bergson was the philosopher best known to the general public in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only in France but in all of Europe. A book he published in 1907, *Creative Evolution* (Bergson 1907) became a best-seller, and contributed to his winning the 1927 Nobel Prize for literature. In this book he developed an earlier idea of his, the *thrust of life*, or *élan vital*. It speaks about the advantage of man over machine. Man creates himself, so claimed Bergson. He is not subject to mechanical rules. Any attempt to pin his will or thoughts to a board will meet rebellion: “I can choose otherwise”. Bergson even went a step further: Evolution itself is not subject to physical rules. It is generated by creative forces.

Bergson's theory of humour, enunciated in his 1900 book, *Laughter*, is a mirror image of this theory. We laugh, he claimed, when we discover automatic behaviour where a human one is expected. When the *élan vital* has a day off, and a person behaves like a machine.

In fact, Bergson was not the inventor of this theory. He was anteceded some eighty years earlier by the German philosopher Stephan Schuetze (1817). "Every laughter", claimed Schuetze, "is aroused by relating to a human being in terms of an inanimate object". He gives the example of a stream of people going out of the same door – they appear comic, he says, since they remind us of a wheel turned by water.

This idea explains the effect of the best known of all comic incidents – slipping on a banana peel. It is funny, he claims, because the person behaves like an automaton. We expect his/her behaviour to be subject to his/her will, and instead the will of the banana peel prevails. Matter triumphant over mind.

One swallow is no testimony that all birds are swallows. Bergson had more supporting instances. One is comedies of character. The protagonists of such comedies – the hypochondriac, the miserly, the distracted – do not act by their free will, so we perceive it. They are marionettes of their character, obeying the commands of their trait. Bergson also explained this way the funniness of repeated occurrences. If somebody treads on your toe in a party, you will be annoyed. If three different people, without coordination, tread on your toe one after the other, you will laugh. Why? – Automatism, says Bergson. Stiffness of behaviour of the world.

Bergson also succeeds where other theories of humour fail miserably: explaining jokes based on stereotypes. "Incongruity" is out of place here: when a Scot evinces miserliness, there is no incongruity. Quite the contrary, he behaves according to expectations. The Bergsonian theory offers an explanation: the Scot does not behave according to his free will. As in comedies of character, it is the stereotype that decides for him, not his personal intentions.

In spite of being rather neglected nowadays, Bergson's theory is often quoted and is well-known to humour researchers, an indication that it contains a grain of truth. Indeed, automatic, non-spontaneous behaviour is often funny. For example, children who ask their parents, on a day of outing:

(11) Are we having fun yet?

Old age is an excellent vehicle for detachment of spontaneity, and detachment of drives in general:

(12) Wife: "Do you remember how, when we were young, you used to nibble gently on my earlobe?"

Husband: "If you bring my glasses and false teeth, I can do it again".

Facial and body expressions are usually spontaneous, and not subject to conscious control. See what happens when an expression is delayed:

(13) A man approaches a passer-by holding a watermelon in his arms. "Could you tell me where the post office is?" he asks. The passer-by asks – "Could you please hold the watermelon for a moment?" The man does. "I have no idea", says the passer-by, shrugging and extending his arms to the sides.

Another example of delayed reaction:

(14) In the TV series “Modern family” a woman is mad at her husband. “I could have slapped you”, she tells him, turns around and walks away. After a second or two she returns, and tells him “As a matter of fact” – and slaps him on his face.

What is funny here (the hired audience, at least, laughed) is the detachment between the slap and the immediate anger, like syncope in music – a trick having its own humorous tinge.

## **7. Automatism as flattening of meaning**

How does this connect with flattened meaning? The secret is that when an action is mechanical, it is hollowed of intention. It is detached from drives and will, since machines do not have intentions. And since the intentions and motives are the meanings we ascribe to an action, the action is emptied of its meaning. It remains a concrete entity, having a separate life from its meanings. This is precisely what happens in the following joke:

(15) An old woman returns to her room and finds her husband with another woman from their retirement home, her hand on his pants. “What does she have that I don’t?” she is enraged. “Parkinson”, he answers.

An action that is assumed to be loaded with meaning, turns out to be involuntary contortions.

## **8. Boomerang**

The next family of jokes we consider comprises self-referential jokes. Something that appears to relate to the world turns out to point at itself. This way of thought is called “circularity”.<sup>1</sup>

(16) I always thought I was indecisive. But now I am not so sure.

(17) How come everybody complains all the time, and only I don’t?

(18) Non-conformists of the world – unite!

(19) I don’t understand women. Whenever they hear anything, they ascribe it to themselves. – I am not like that!

(20) Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question? – Why shouldn’t he?

In each of these instances, the sentence is subject to judgement by its own content. The pointer becomes its own object. As with all sentences, we direct our attention to the content. But then it turns out that the content applies to the pointer itself, making the pointer the protagonist, that draws our attention.

(21) He is such a hopeless loser, that if a contest of losers were held he would come out last.

We apply the criterion for “loser-ship” (coming out last) and find that this criterion refers to itself – coming out last means being the epitome of loser-ship, so it means coming out first – the famous vicious circle.

Circularity is responsible for some beautiful mathematics, and it plays a major role (perhaps even more than is usually admitted) also in philosophy (see, e.g., Aharoni 2016). But its most pleasing manifestation is in jokes. There is something amusing in an arrow shot

into the world, only to rebound at the archer. In self-referential jokes, the shift from meaning to its carrier is even more transparent than in flattened symbols. A pointer addresses some part of the world, and then turns out to be the subject of the information:

(22) There are two secrets to success in life. One is not telling all you know.

Again, the saying applies to itself. Circularity is one of the easiest ways of generating humour. Form a self-relating idea, and almost surely you will have a joke at hand:

(23) A man comes home, sits on the couch, turns on the TV, and calls out: “Woman, beer! It is soon coming”. His wife brings him beer, he finishes it and then calls: “Woman, beer! For it is coming.” After the third time the woman explodes: “You brute. All you know is to watch TV, drink and growl”. “Ah, it has come”, says the husband.

Self-fulfilling predictions are one form of circularity:

(24) A manager has a hundred CVs on his desk. He shuffles them well and throws half to the trash bin. Asked why he did it, he answers: “I don’t want losers”.

The manager speaks of misfortune, but it is his action that generates it.

(25) Three friends sit in a café, and as often happens in such cases, a fairy appears. She turns to one of the diners and offers him a wish of his choice: beauty, a million dollars, or wisdom. He thinks and thinks, and eventually chooses wisdom. The fairy waves her wand, and suddenly the man’s friends see that he is crestfallen. “What’s the matter?” they ask. “I should have chosen the million dollars”.

The notions of “incongruity” and “incompatible scripts” are too general to illuminate the self-reference mechanism. In joke (25), for example, one could speak of two ways of relating to the situation: one before the man became wiser, and one after. But this misses the main point, namely that the choice turns out to be very relevant to itself, in a self-negating way. The “shift of weight” notion, by contrast, puts self-referential jokes in a general context, and connects them to other families.

Let me conclude with some more examples.

(26) The following cartoon appeared when it became known that the FBI was spying on American citizens:

Obama goes to a branch of McDonald’s and strikes a conversation with a kid. “Dad says you are spying on us”, says the child. “He is not your dad”, answers Obama.

(27) What is worse, ignorance or apathy? – I don’t know. But who cares?

(28) A radio advertisement:

Saleswoman: We now have a special offer, two for the price of one.

Man on the other side of the phone: Wonderful! Why don’t you advertise it on the radio?

Saleswoman: We do. There was an ad just now, you just missed it.

## 9. Victory of the pointer

In all types of humour discussed so far, the carrier of meaning changes role, from servant to master. From a transparent entity whose sole *raison d’être* is conveying the meaning, to centre stage. This move is not restricted to the above families. It can be found in many jokes:

(29) The owner of a tail-docked Cocker Spaniel brings it to the vet and asks him to cut the tail even shorter. To the surprised vet he explains: “My mother-in-law is coming to visit, and I don’t want any sign of joy in the house.”

The manoeuvre is transparent: from meaning to signifier. The wagging of the tail is a sign of joy. The man is not interested in the meaning of the wagging, the joy only in the sign. The pointer is triumphant over its meaning.

This has two sides:

- The signifier is detached from its meaning.
- The weight shifts from meaning to signifier. The symbol, depleted from meaning, is left as sole victor in the battlefield.

These two steps are precisely what happens in the flattening of metaphors. Taking a metaphor at face value means that the external form wins over the internal meaning. The carrier of meaning turns out to be more important than the meaning itself. Here is a classic shift of this sort:

(30) A woman praises her friend’s baby for its beauty. “Wait till you see the pictures!” responds the mother.

A picture is a pointer: it points at the object itself. Here it is preferred to the object. Proud parents provided me with a metaphor for this state of affairs.

(31) They were trying to teach their baby the names of objects, by pointing at them while articulating their names. But instead of looking at the object, the baby clutched the finger.

This is what happens in the jokes we are considering: you look at the finger, instead of what it points at.

In Athens there was a philosophical school called the Cynics, meaning ‘dog-like’. Like dogs, they lived in the street, some say that like dogs they even made love there, defying conventional morality. The most famous was Diogenes (412-323 BC), whose only possession was a bowl to drink water. When one day he saw a boy drinking from the stream by cupping his hands, he decided he didn’t need the bowl, and broke it. The symbol behaves similarly in jokes. Its most precious possession is its meaning. But it happily forsakes it, to become liberated of worldly possessions. Relieving itself of the burden of meaning, it is free and jubilant.

This victory is often subtle:

(32) An engineer is stranded on a desert island and leads a miserable Robinson Crusoe existence. After a few months, he goes on an excursion to the other side of the island and discovers a beautiful woman who is also stranded. He finds that she has managed to provide herself with the comforts of civilisation – a cabin with running water, kitchen and furniture. She invites him to a lavish dinner, wine included. After dinner she says: “You have been stranded here for so long, you must feel lonely. Is there anything else I can do for you?” His eyes light up – “Do you have e-mail?”

Is it the absurdity of the request that is funny? Partly. But there is something subtler going on. E-mail is a means of communication, and as such it is a carrier of meaning, pointing as it does to the addressee. The woman offers the thing itself – the engineer prefers the pointer. Is

it legitimate to ascribe such sophistication to a joke? Most definitely. As Freud taught us, non-assuming products of thought like dreams, jokes and slips of tongue, are often deeper than meets the eye. General terms, like “incongruity”, are unlikely to explain these deeper processes.

(33) A gregarious woman studies the restaurant menu and eventually says to the waiter – “yes”.

A menu is a carrier of meaning, in that it points at possible choices. Here it becomes the thing itself. The woman chooses its entirety.

Mindess (1971) speaks about the joy of liberation in laughter. This can be viewed in two ways. One is the (metaphorical) joy of the carrier of meaning, of triumph over meaning. Then there is the joy of the listeners, who find they are not bound to the ordinary meaning of the pointer – this is the joy of freedom from commitment.

As already mentioned, the classical examples of the victory are word games. The words rebel against their meaning: “We are not committed to the meaning ordinarily assigned to us”.

(34) What is the difference between in-laws and outlaws? – Outlaws are wanted.

The external appearance of the words takes precedence over their meaning. This is another characteristic shared with poetry. Rhyme and meter are cases of form over meaning. Their purpose is to divert the attention of the reader away from the meaning. The aim, just like in the use of metaphors, is to slip the message beneath the notice of the watch dogs of consciousness – again, the inverse pickpocket effect. They lull our consciousness, enabling dream-like interpretations of the words. The difference from jokes is that the diversion does not annihilate the meaning, but enriches it. In jokes, the connection between form and content is manifestly accidental, and is used to mock the meaning.

The following joke forms a symbol, only to materialise it as “the thing itself” at the end.

(35) Two nonagenarians marry. On the first night he gropes for her hand, they hold hands and fall asleep. On the second night he gropes for her hand, they hold hands and fall asleep. On the third night when he gropes for her hand she says: “No, darling, not tonight. I have a headache”.

The holding of hands is a pointer, arousing anticipation of what is expected to follow. But it then transpires that it carries no meaning beyond itself – this is it.

In the next joke, the words (in fact, the action of hearing them) are exulted over their meaning:

(36) A violist arrives at his orchestra’s rehearsal and finds the hall empty but for a janitor sweeping the floor. “Where is everybody?” he asks. “Didn’t you hear? The conductor died. The rehearsal is cancelled”. “OK”, he says, and walks away. After a few minutes he returns. “Where is everybody?” – “I just told you, the conductor died, and the rehearsal is cancelled”. “OK”, he says, and walks away. After a few minutes he returns, and asks “Where is everybody?” – “I told you, the conductor died. Are you deaf?” – “No, I just enjoy hearing you say it”.

And the same idea again – the action of saying is what matters:

(37) A man in a train car keeps moaning – “Wow, am I hungry. Am I hungry”. The man on the opposite seat gets annoyed, and eventually pulls a sandwich out of his bag and offers it to him. The guy devours the sandwich and then says “Wow, was I hungry, was I hungry”.

The hungry passenger, his impatient travelling companion, as well as the reader of the joke, are all more interested in the words uttered than in the hunger itself. Another example in which the action of saying is what matters:

(38) An old man goes to confession and tells the priest: “I am 80 years old, and yesterday I met two 18-year-old beauties and wow, what a night we had”. “Say three Hail Marys and you will be forgiven”, says the priest. “But I am Jewish”, says the man. “So why did you tell me?” – “I am telling everybody”.

The carrier of meaning – telling it – is having a victory parade.

## 10. Inside or outside?

There is a special family of self-reference jokes, in which the listener suddenly finds him/herself to be part of the joke. A quick transition occurs from the position of an observer to that of participant:

(39) To qualify for the Ku-Klux-Klan you have to kill a Negro and a dog. – Why the dog? – You are in.

The listener becomes a candidate himself, and a successful one at that:

(40) Want to hear a joke from end to beginning? –Yes! – Then laugh first.

(41) Would you like to hear a joke? – Yes! – OK. Once there were two jokes. One fell ill. The other sat by its bed, consoled it, fed it soup. Isn't it a good joke?

In spite of being a children's joke, this joke is quite sophisticated. There is a quick transition from being outside to being inside the joke – you realise that “a good joke” relates to the one you are presently hearing, and you have to admit that indeed, it is a good joke.

The Monty Python group cultivated this type of humour. In a famous skit, *The Arguments Clinic* (Monty Python 1989: 86), a person enters an office, and the man sitting there attacks him viciously: “You vacuous, toffee-nosed, malodorous, pervert! Your type makes me puke!” and so on. The visitor says – “I came in for an argument!” At which his attacker becomes excessively sweet: “Ah, sorry, this is Abuse”. So far, we witnessed a case of “detachment of intention”, or actually of emotions. The man in the office does it as a job, not driven by real emotions – Bergson may glee. Now comes the self-referential part: the visitor finds the right room, asks “Is this Arguments?” and the man inside tells him “I told you once”, the guy says “No you haven't”, and so on. The client remonstrates – “Contradiction is not an argument!” to which the arguer answers of course “Yes it is”. After about a minute the arguer says “Your time is up”, and the visitor protests – “It should have been five minutes!” and an argument ensues on this matter. At any given moment the man may wonder whether he is having an argument or arguing his right to have one.

And speaking of Monty Python, there is the classic self-reference in *Life of Brian* (Monty Python 2007). Brian (read “Jesus”) opens the window of his room in Jerusalem, and sees a multitude gathering in the street below, calling “A grace, a grace!” “You don't have to follow me”, he calls, “you are all individuals!” “Yes, we are all individuals”, they shout back in unison. “You are all different”, he tells them, and they all call together “We are all different!” A sole dissenting voice is heard: “I am not!”

The move we are describing in this paper is like that – from external to internal. From the meaning, which is outside, to the carrier, which is inside our thoughts. This is another facet of the “victory of the carrier”. It was possibly first pointed out by Freud (1905), who called it “victory of the phantasy over reality” (Freud 1905: 101-102). He gave as example (ibid.) the story of the followers of the rabbi from Krakow, who boasted of the prophetic powers of their rabbi: he sensed that the rabbi from Lemberg (Lviv), hundreds of kilometres away, just died. When it turned out a few weeks later that the rabbi from Lemberg is alive and well, the followers still boasted: “Yes, but consider what wonderful jump of sight it is, from Krakow to Lemberg!”

Here are two more examples:

(42) Twice I failed in my marriage. My first wife left me, the second didn't.

From the external events – the wives leaving or not, the joke moves to the internal – how the person relates to this. It is not the outside event that matters, but its perception. This is a classic victory of the pointer – it is the speaker's attitude to reality that matters. Similar is Mark Twain's famous quip:

(43) When I was 14 my father was such a fool that I couldn't bear having him around me. When I met him again at 21 I was surprised to see how much the old chap learnt during the seven years.

## **11. Carriers explicitly depleted of meaning**

Some jokes go to an extreme and explicitly declare: “there is no need for the meaning to be linked to its carrier”. The signifier can be free of commitments:

(44) The commander to the recruits: “I will call you ‘Sir’, and you will call me ‘Sir’. You will mean it”.

As in joke (1), besides the detachment of meaning there is another technique, of implicitness: “I will not mean it” is said only indirectly.

(45) Patient: “I am 70, and in bed it is not what it used to be. My next-door neighbour in the old age home is 74, and he tells me he does it every night. What should I do?”

Doctor: “What should you do? Tell him, too”.

Something significant to note here is that the victory of the carrier is not achieved by negation. Had the doctor said “Your friend is lying”, the joke would have been lost. Negation still relates to the meaning. The doctor relates not to the meaning, but to its carrier – the act of saying. To enhance confusion, he speaks of it as something that should be “done”.

Actions, too, can be depleted of meaning:

(46) Old man A: Do you remember how we used to chase girls?

Old man B: Yes, but I don't remember why.

Here it is not a word that is emptied of meaning, but an act – that of chasing girls. Had Old man B said “Yes, but I no longer have the drive”, it would not be funny. It would not constitute detachment of meaning, since it would still relate to the meaning of the chase, the sex drive. What makes it a joke is that the old guy still addresses the carrier, namely the action of chasing, independently of its purpose – which is its meaning.

(47) An e-mail message from a Jewish mother to her son: “Start worrying. Details will follow”.

Worrying is a pointer: it points at the cause for concern. Here it precedes its referent.

## **12. What do incongruity theories have to say on the shift of weight?**

How much light do incongruity theories shed on the mechanism discussed here? As I tried to show in various examples above, very little. The incongruity formula misses the point, or at least blurs it. In jokes of flattened metaphors or flattened symbolic meaning, the incongruity that can be found is between the two ways of understanding the message: the abstract and the concrete. But saying “incongruity” does not capture the essence of the two ways. As Latta (2009) pointed out, the “incongruity” formula is too wide and too vague to really shed light on the mechanisms of humour. (In Forabosco 2008 there is an analysis of the present-day relevance of the formula.)

Consider, for example, joke 42 (“Twice I failed in my marriage”). An analysis in terms of incongruity is, say, that there is incongruity between being unhappy about your wife leaving you and being unhappy with her staying. But this completely misses the deeper point of the joke, which is that it is not the external event that matters, but its perception.

The insufficiency of “incongruity” is also conspicuous in jokes of self-reference. Take, for example, joke 16 (“I always thought I was indecisive”). Here is a possible attempt at putting it into the mould of incongruity: there is a clash between understanding the content of the sentence – “indecisiveness” and judging the sentence as evidence for this indecisiveness. If all this means is construing the sentence on two levels, then the entire point is missed. The particular nature of these levels is critical: the sentence as carrier of meaning, and as an object of this meaning.

Let us note the way Oring (2003), an adherent of a particular variant of the incongruity theory, analyses a self-reference joke:

(48) Patient: “Nobody takes me seriously”.  
Psychiatrist: “You are kidding!”

Among other comments, Oring (2003: 1) writes: “The doctor’s denial is incongruous in that it confirms the very problem about which the patient complains”. In fact, this is hardly “incongruity”. The doctor’s reaction is a good match to the complaint. It is only incongruous with the doctor’s duty, but this is not the point. Had he said “I don’t care”, it wouldn’t be funny. The “incongruity” interpretation misses the essence of the joke – that “you are kidding” relates to the message “people think I am kidding” – and thus points at itself. Here is a very similar joke:

(49) The pig complains to God: “People ascribe to me all bad things – dirtiness, greed, gluttony”.  
God scratches His head, and says “Indeed, piggishness”.

The difficulty is even more pronounced in the case of the SSTH (Raskin 1985) and GTVH (Attardo & Raskin 1991) theories, that speak about “two incongruous scripts”. Commitment to this terminology moves the analysis still further from the real process going on in the joke. Take, for example, joke 1. Script 1 is the metaphorical interpretation of “give one’s heart”, and Script 2 the concrete meaning of “high” and “low”. But these are hardly scripts (even in the sense used in linguistic research), and again – it misses the main point. There is a very

special type of transition here, that should be pronounced explicitly, and which the “scripts” formulation does not address at all.

### **13. The purpose of the shift**

Humour plays too important a role in our life to be considered a mere diversion. Clearly, it serves some important purpose. Edward de Bono (1990) went to the extreme of declaring it to be “by far the most important activity of the brain”. What is its function? The “shift of weight” notion provides a plausible answer. The magic word is “change”, that aim so coveted and so hard to achieve. “This I conceive to be the chemical function of humor: to change the character of our thought”, said the Chinese-American writer Lin Yutang (see *Brainy Quote* 2018). The shift of weight is a first step in this direction. Change of thought patterns demand, before all, dismantling the old frameworks. In order to form a new conceptual bond, you first have to unhook the old bonds or, in our terminology, to detach the carrier of meaning from its object, the meaning. Detaching concepts from their objects enables the construction of new conceptual or emotional links. Once on its own, the carrier of meaning can form new connections. This is also why humour is so often associated with creativity.

### **14. Concluding remarks**

Is “humour” a tight concept, with well delineated borders? Or is it loose, like the proverbial way Wittgenstein (1953: §66) viewed the concept of “game”? Namely, does humour have a basic underlying single mechanism (“essence”, in the philosophical terminology used in this context), or has the use of the word “humour” evolved by fortuitous jumps according to superficial similarities? A comprehensive survey of this debate can be found in Morreall (2008). One indication in favour of a single mechanism is that people usually recognise humour with confidence and no hesitation. On the other hand, two and a half millennia of unsuccessful attempts at pinning down the essence of humour testify that the common denominator, if there is one, is not to be found on the surface. It may be there, but it is not easily accessible to verbal description.

A less ambitious approach is to temporarily renounce the search for a general common denominator, and instead try to connect islands. This means finding a common mechanism for specific types of humour. This is what I tried to do in this paper. The main ingredient in the mechanism we found is the one that stars in most theories of humour, even if sometimes implicitly – “meaning”. The aspect particular to the mechanism we found is that the play is not between two meanings, but between a meaning and its carrier. The carrier is detached from the meaning and gains a life of its own. This entails a shift of weight, namely of attention, from meaning to its carrier. Even Bergson’s theory, which, on its surface, relates to a type of behaviour, actually revolves around meanings, in this case of actions, and involves such a shift.

Should we pursue this direction further, and look for shifts of weight in other types of humour as well? It may be worth trying. A very preliminary step in this direction is taken in the paper itself, in the form of sporadic examples of jokes following this pattern. It is worthwhile examining whether the shift from meaning to its carrier is the significant part also in incongruity. Namely, that the clash between meanings is funny precisely because the carrier of one meaning is suddenly free to connect to another meaning, thus gaining a life of its own. Whether this is indeed the case, it is safer to withhold judgement. The aim of this paper is not to offer a general theory of humour, but to present a direction and stimulate discussion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am not aware of academic studies of this type of humor, apart from my own (Aharoni 2016), which contains a more extensive discussion than the present one. But there are internet sites on such jokes.

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