

## **Inference and Schema Resolution: A Relevance Theoretic Study of Humour in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy***

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### **Abstract**

*By adopting a relevance theoretic framework of inferential communication, this paper aims to highlight the role of inference in schema resolution in literary humour. Schema disruption is a cognitive tool used by writers to elicit humour that works by subverting the existing notions associated with objects, people, and entities. This process partakes a false causation mechanism that includes association of novel qualities and concepts to pre-existing schemata – known as schema disruption. Apart from disrupting existing notions, in some instances the writers of literary humour present entirely opposing concepts in relation to particular phenomenon thus presenting opposing schemata. In this study we have analysed instances from Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series to explicate the process of schema resolution on the part of readers; which plays a crucial part in understanding or getting humour. We argue that the writer creates cognitive dissonance by incorporating disrupted schemata in the text and in order to recognize and resolve this disruption and in some cases opposition, readers draw on false causality that leads them to arrive at the intended humorous interpretation of particular instances in the text and the novel in general.*

**Keywords:** *Schema disruption, humour, relevance theory, inference.*

### **1. Introduction**

Humorous texts and jokes are often compared to riddles due to their contradictory nature. The perlocutionary effect of humour – laughter – results from solving the underlying puzzles. These puzzles or riddles characterize many instances of humorous texts and require reasoning in order to be resolved. Most of the linguistic theories of humour adopt a semantic approach towards verbal humour including the Isotopy Disjunction model proposed by Gremias (Attardo, 1994), Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humour (Attardo, 1994, Raskin, 2008), and General Theory of Verbal Humour (Ruch, Attardo & Raskin, 1993). However, where linguistic resources like puns and wordplay play a crucial part in rendering any utterance humorous, understanding any form of communication is a largely inferential process and humour, being a communicative act, is also dependent on pragmatic processes that are predominantly inference driven.

Correspondingly, relevance theorists contend that inference plays a central role in communication and comprehension (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Relevance Theory builds its central propositions on Grice's assertion that the identification of speaker intentions plays a vital part in comprehension of utterances. However, in contrast to Grice's four maxims, that in his contention are essential for successful expression of intentions, Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue that 'relevance' is the single most important determining factor in any instance of communication. According to Wilson and Sperber (2006) the main proposition of relevance theory is that utterances raise expectations regarding relevance which "are precise and predictable enough to guide the hearer towards the speaker's meaning. The aim is to explain in cognitively realistic terms what these expectations amount to, and how they might contribute to an empirically plausible account of comprehension" (pp. 607-608). Relevance theorists contend that

human cognition has a natural tendency to maximize relevance of any input and any utterance raises expectation of being relevant – to the context in which they are spoken – not because the speakers are aware of a cooperative principle, but because of their inherent ability to maximize relevance.

Sperber and Wilson (1995) regard ‘inference’ as a ‘non-demonstrative’ process as the comprehension process is largely directed by assumptions. Assumptions regarding an utterance’s meaning can only be treated as hypotheses and not proof of the speaker/writer’s intended meaning. Moreover, as Wang (2011) asserts, inference is primarily a ‘cognitive process’ involving the deduction of conclusions on the basis of available evidence and reasoning. Hence, by virtue of being chiefly cognitive, inferential processes can draw on any conceptual representation (from knowledge or memory) available to the hearer/reader.

As Sperber and Wilson write “inference is the process by which an assumption is accepted as true or probably true on the strength of the truth or probable truth of other assumptions” leading to the “fixation of belief” (1995, p. 68). Because the faculty of reasoning possessed by humans is non-demonstrative (independent of empirical proof) in nature, the process of inferring meaning from any utterance is constrained by a hearer/reader’s cognitive abilities. Inference, then, should be taken as a process more akin to guesswork than a logical process. Drawing of implicatures, for instance, is driven not by deductive reasoning but by “an informal rational problem-solving strategy” (Leech, quoted in Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 69). Similarly, Wang (2011, p. 57) extrapolates that humour comprehension and enjoyment also involves “false causality on the basis of semantic ambiguities that causes an amusing surprise”.

Interpretation of humour, hence, is an inference-driven process primarily that relies on false causality. Correspondingly, this paper aims to elucidate the inferential aspects of humour comprehension in specific relation to schema disruption by presenting an analysis of excerpts from *The Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* – a globally acclaimed humorous science fiction series by Douglas Adams. Where a number of relevance theoretic studies on jokes have emerged over the last two decades, linguistics studies of humorous fiction are scarce and relevance theoretic accounts of schema opposition in humour texts few. This paper aims to fill this gap by analyzing humorous aspects that are distinct of a long narrative by providing a relevance theoretic analysis of schema opposition and resolution at play in the text. The main hypothesis in this regard is that for understanding humour, the readers have to rely on their reasoning faculties and humour comprehension can be regarded as a process akin to the problem solving strategies used by humans. This further supports the notion that humour has little in common with what is absurd and draws on a highly creative process. Secondary objectives for this paper include the explication of following questions:

- How is schema disruption/opposition created for humorous purposes?
- What are the inferential processes involved in resolving schema opposition/disruption?

## 2. Relevance Theory and Humour

Under the Gricean account of communication, humorous utterances and texts present cases of violation of the cooperative principle; entailing that these cannot be regarded as successful instances of communication (Yus, 2003). However, as we are aware humour, whether intentional or unintentional, serves communicative purposes in a myriad of ways. The principle of relevance applies to humorous utterance as well, though the mechanism of arriving at the humorous interpretation of any instance of communication differs from cases of non-humorous utterances.

Most of the linguistic studies on verbal humour and jokes hinge on the notion that humour arises out of the inherent incongruity of the utterance or text. Relevance theoretic studies of humorous texts and jokes, however, provide an insight into how we recognize and resolve this incongruity or “cognitive dissonance” to retrieve the intended humorous interpretation. Curcó (1995), for instance, argues that the process of humour comprehension involves an interaction between the identification of incongruous interpretations and the cognitive need to maximize relevance. One of the ways it is achieved is by guiding the hearer/reader to an incongruous interpretation through conflicting propositional forms. Speakers/writers exploit the hearer’s/ reader’s search for relevance by providing multiple premises at different stages of the discourse. Consider, for instance, the following example quoted by Curcó (1995, p. 33):

*There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is \*how far it is from midtown and how late it is open. (Woody Allen)*

In this example once the reader arrives at the contradictory element (marked by \*), the reader backtracks to retrieve a more relevant interpretation which includes the swapping of relevance search fields – reader’s initial hypothesis about a supernatural world is discarded in favor of a nightclub. The reader or a hearer first constructs a preliminary hypothesis about what the utterance means and once s/he reaches the contradictory point, the first assumption is dropped in favor of a more relevant interpretation. The first assumption is dropped in favor of a more initially irrelevant interpretation. This is why it was not initially selected as the one intended by the speaker. Precisely, the humour lies in foreground the fact that a more unlikely and irrelevant interpretation, which could not have been taken into account, is actually possible and intended. Another importance concept developed under the relevance theoretic studies of humour is the “echoic use of language”. Wilson (2006) argues that echoic use of language that relates to the interpretive as opposed to descriptive use of language can also shed light on the mechanism involved in understanding humour. Consider, for example, this quote by Oscar Wilde: “Punctuality is the thief of time”. Wilson (2006) espouses that utterances like these evoke the memory of another one which in this case is “procrastination is the thief of time”. This is a case of “echoic use”: Oscar Wilde is representing another saying in his own and simultaneously implying a disengaging attitude towards it. Furthermore, in order to arrive at the intended humorous interpretation of Oscar Wilde’s saying one has to be aware of the actual quote.

Likewise, Yus (1998, 2003) elaborates on the psychological aspects of humour comprehension. According to relevance theory an input is more relevant to a hearer/reader if its processing requires least amount of cognitive effort – in other words the relevance of an input is negatively related to its cognitive effects. This presents a problem for humorous utterances that require more cognitive effort on the part of the hearer/reader in order to be understood as humorous. Yus (2003) contends that in most cases of humorous utterances both the hearer/reader and the writer/speaker is aware of the amount of effort required to process the utterance but they choose to

discard the easily accessible interpretation in favor of the humorous one usually because the hearer is expecting a humorous input, and thus willing to put more cognitive effort to retrieve the intended humorous interpretation. The increased amount of cognitive effort required to process humour is reciprocated by the increase in positive cognitive effects achieved on successfully comprehending the humorous interpretation.

In most cases, the hearer or the reader becomes aware of the humorous intention of the speaker/writer by various linguistic markers and conversation patterns that lead to the establishment of humorous frame: canned jokes, for example, that start by questions like ‘do you know’. In case of non-canned humorous texts or utterances “the hearer has to make *ex post facto* hypothesis based on assumptions about the intended humorous quality of the utterance [*italics in original text*]” (2003, p. 1299). Other relevance theoretic studies of humour include Jodlowiec’s analysis of verbal jokes (1991), Curcó’s study of metarepresentation and humorous interpretations (1996), Larkin Galiñanes’ work on humorous fiction (2000 & 2005), Yus’ classification of jokes (2008), and Higashimori’s account of metalinguistic elements in jokes (2011). These studies substantiate relevance theory’s claim that in order to comprehend humour, we rely on an extensively inference driven process.

### 3. Schema Disruption and Disambiguation

Schemata are defined as “chunks of information” relating to an object or event that a language user possesses (schema are also termed as ‘frames’ and ‘scripts’ signifying the same phenomena with some alternations). The basic idea behind the concept of schema is that information about various phenomena is stored in our encyclopaedic knowledge as bundles of associated ideas (Raskin, 2008). Schemata are characterized as cognitive structures that language users internalize, leading to certain assumptions relating to objects, people and entities/incidents. Constituted mostly by stereotypical assumptions, schemata also include knowledge about recurrent patterns in relation to objects and events. Subsequently, while processing any new communication relating to an object or incident schema come into play and aid the drawing of assumptions.

Regarding the role of schema opposition in humour elicitation, Raskin’s Semantic-Script Theory of Humour (SSTH hereafter) has been regarded as a huge development in humour theory. Raskin initially developed the theory in 1985 in his monograph *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour*. As Attardo explains, SSTH is based primarily on the notion of scripts which are also referred to as ‘frames’ and ‘schemata’ (Raskin, 2008). The concept of scripts can be understood in terms of all the relevant details attached to an object, an idea or a person amongst other things. Raskin gives the example of the word ‘car’ which does not only provoke the idea of a vehicle with tires, windows and doors but also other things including the facts that a car runs on fuel and roads, and is driven by licensed adults and so forth (2008, pp. 5-13). According to Attardo, SSTH can be summarized in the following two claims:

*that each joke text is interpretable according to (at least) two distinct scripts (i.e., the scripts overlap over the joke), and two that the scripts are opposed (i.e., they are local antonyms...).* (Raskin, 2008, p. 108)

However, as Kirkmann (2007) maintains, SSTH does not take into account instances of humour in general but focuses largely on verbal humour. For Raskin, an ideal linguistic theory of humour would explicate the essential linguistic elements required to make a text funny. In cases where the hearer is not expecting a joke, the text may be understood in what Kirkmann (2007) has called a “default *bona-fide* way”, failing which he/she could try for another interpretation (like it was a joke, a lie or nonsense). However, if the speaker has established the joke scenario from the beginning or after the “switch-over”,

the cooperative principle becomes operative again although in a manner specific to the joke situation and, of course with “modified maxims”. In case of the first maxim of quality, for example, it will be modified as “give as much information as necessary for the joke” (2007, pp. 31-32).

With reference to the semantics of humorous texts, scripts either operate through ‘script overlap’ or ‘script opposition’. In some cases, the semantic features of the text are applicable to both scripts whereas in other cases only partially which gives rise to ‘script overlap’. Of particular importance, in this scenario, is the phenomena of ‘script opposition’ that can be explained better in terms of the notion of ‘local antonyms’ introduced by John Lyons (Kirkmann, 2007). This term is also employed frequently by Attardo while explaining the SSTH (1994, 2003, 2008). ‘Local antonyms’ can be described as linguistic elements (words, phrases or as such) which can only be taken to mean opposite with reference to a specific discourse and only for the purpose of that discourse. This can be explained further through analyzing the subject matter of jokes that involves the following process:

*Each joke describes some “real” situation and evokes another, “unreal” situation. They can be manifested as oppositions between the 1) actual and non-actual, non-existing situation, 2) expected and abnormal, unexpected states of affairs, 3) possible, plausible and impossible, less plausible situation... And the scripts evoked by jokes often involve some binary categories which are essential to human life, like real/unreal, true/false, good/bad, death/life, obscene/decent, rich/poor, etc... Many jokes contain special semantic script-switch triggers that highlight the need for substituting scripts, the two main types of such triggers are ambiguity and contradiction. (Lyon quoted by Kirkmann, 2007, p. 32)*

While evaluating the SSTH, Attardo (1994, 2003, & 2008) argues that SSTH gives a far reaching and encompassing account for the semantics of humour, as compared to other theories which only provide partial insights to the phenomena. However, it also remains that SSTH has limited application due to its explicit attention to jokes and neglect of other humorous texts.

#### 4. Analysis

In the relevance theoretic framework, the notion of schema is taken as “assumption schema” that are part of the encyclopaedic information available to a hearer/reader (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). It is also argued that schema disambiguation is chiefly an inferential process. Schema opposition/overlap is merely a phenomenon observable in many humorous texts; it does not make texts humorous. However, humour mostly invokes the reader to reconsider existing schema in one way or another (henceforth, the term ‘schema disruption’ is used to refer to this process). The element of surprise and subsequent enjoyment of humour comes from the identification of some alternation in the established patterns or characteristics. Consider the following examples:

- (1) *A towel, it [The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy] says, is about the most massively useful thing an interstellar hitchhiker can have... You can wrap it around you for warmth as you bound across the cold moons of Jaglan Beta... you can sleep under it beneath the stars which shine so redly on the desert world of Kakrafoon; use it to sail a miniraft down the slow heavy River Moth; wet it for use in hand-to-hand combat... you can wave your towel in emergencies as a distress signal, and of course dry yourself off with it if it still seems to be clean enough [italics in original]. (pp. 26-27)*
- (2) *Marvin regarded it with cold loathing while his logic circuits chattered with disgust and tinkered with the concept of directing physical violence against it. Further circuits cut in*

*saying, Why bother? What's the point? Nothing is worth getting involved in... "Let's build robots with Genuine People Personalities," they said. So they tried it out with me. I'm a personality prototype. You can tell, can't you? [italics in original] (pp. 85-86)*

The description of towels given in (1) is perhaps the most frequently quoted example from the series and is one of the hallmark jokes of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In the fictional world of the series where the readers come across the most ridiculous of incidents, the description of different uses of towels in (1) sets the tone of the whole series: transverseness of the generally known uses of towels, which would account for the schema related to towels as objects, with a variety of unconventional scenarios. The opposing schemata found can be: i. towel usage as conceived in real life for drying and ii. towel usage for the variety of purposes entailed in (1). However, as in Raskin's SSTH, both of these schemata are evoked by (1) which does not merely explain ridiculous uses for towels but evokes many animated Disney films (especially the comic ones) that presented one of the same scenarios. For readers familiar with any film or motion picture for that matter, depicting one of these scenarios of towels used as sails, for instance, this extract would be funnier as compared to others.

Humour, it can be argued, carries with it a certain degree of conspicuousness –understanding humour and enjoying it is an act of humorous interpretation *per se*. The second extract quoted above is from the introductory description of Marvin the Paranoid Android, a robot and one of the most famous characters from the series that embodies a “genuine personality prototype”. Yet, at this point where the reader encounters Marvin for the first time, the juxtaposition of a robot's script with the genuine personality features clashes with the idea of robots as well as ‘genuine personality’. A Robot by definition is characterized as a machine capable of mimicking mechanical human actions. Even the metaphorical use of the term ‘robot’ refers to mechanical abilities devoid of any emotions. A genuine personality, on the other hand, would bring the idea of an honest (and compassionate in some cases) person.

Marvin's character, being the only extensively mentioned robot in the series, subverts the notions associated with robots as well as genuine personalities. However, on a second level, Marvin literally conforms to the idea of being robotic on one side and genuine on the other: he is indifferent to the point of being sullen without exception and secondly he is as honest about everything as an unyielding existentialist would. Some further examples involving schema disruption are reproduced here:

- (3) *Brockian Ultra Cricket (a curious game which involved suddenly hitting people for no readily apparent reason and then running away). (p. 144)*
- (4) *“All right,” said Deep Thought. “The Answer to the Great Question ...”  
... “Of Life, the Universe and Everything ...” said Deep Thought.  
... “Is ...”  
... “Forty-two,” said Deep Thought, with infinite majesty and calm. (p. 156)*
- (5) *For thousands more years, the mighty ships tore across the empty wastes of space and finally dived screaming on to the first planet they came across—which happened to be the Earth—where due to a terrible miscalculation of scale the entire battle fleet was accidentally swallowed by a small dog. (p. 167)*

All three of these excerpts represent de-normalised versions of some real life events and the commonly held notions associated with them. However, exaggeration or subversion of reality is what makes these

instances humorous. Where there are no opposing schemata present in these cases they present another form of schema disruption: opposition between what we know about say “cricket” in (3) and what is depicted as “cricket”. Similarly, 42 as an answer to a fairly complicated and thorny question presents a clash between the schemata that account for philosophical inquiries and on the other hand possible questions that would include numerical number as answers – which is never the case in actual life.

Excerpt (4) depicts one of the most widely debated incidents from the series and a wide variety of interpretations have been offered by many critics including the binary equivalent of 42 as 101010 amongst others. Douglas Adams, however, when asked about the number, explained that he just had to choose a ridiculous number and 42 seemed good enough (for details see Hartston, 2013, who also illustrates that 42 is a recurrent number in Lewis Carroll’s works as well and hence presents a mystery for literary critics). Yet, disregarding the mystery attached to the number 42, Deep Thought’s answer is humorous because it defies the norms associated with question-answer sequences – there are certain questions that cannot logically have numerical answers like “how are you doing”. Moreover, as Schulze (in Radden, 2007) contends questions as a cognitive phenomena result from gaps in internal/external stimuli and memory (Schulze calls it ‘memory mismatch’). Thus, most of the jokes, especially canned ones, are narrated in question-answer forms allowing the manipulation of this ‘experiential deficiency’. Due to these gaps the element of surprise is also much more in humorous texts incorporating questions.

In (4) it is also apparent that the interrogative form is interpreted not only as a device for information seeking, in which case 42 is an adequate enough answer considering the fictional nature of the series, but it also represents a certain type of ‘reactional pattern’. This phenomenon becomes even more relevant with reference to the incident depicted in (4) which is followed by a startled response from the audience who have been waiting for millions of years for Deep Thought (a super computer built solely to find answer to this question). Schema disruption in this case occurs, both for the readers and the audience in the novel, because of this clash between expectations (that conform to established and normalized patterns) and a totally unforeseen response from Deep Thought. Contrastingly, (5) presents an opposition of schema related to “mighty ships” which does not involve these ships being “swallowed by a dog” (even if one is familiar with Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and the fictional world of Lilliput). See this example for instance:

- (6) *R is a velocity measure, defined as a reasonable speed of travel that is consistent with health, mental well-being and not being more than, say, five minutes late. It is therefore clearly an almost infinitely variable figure according to circumstances, since the first two factors vary not only with speed taken as an absolute, but also with awareness of the third factor. Unless handled with tranquility this equation can result in considerable stress, ulcers and even death. (p. 181)*

Where Yus (2003) identifies the process of extracting (and in some cases building) a logical form as part of the decoding phase of the interpretation, it is also central to the identification of underlying disruption. Apart from being humorous, the element of surprise in (4), (5) and even (6) come from the realization that some norm has been overturned. The process of disambiguation in all three of these cases comprises largely of the realization of this transposition: of real life expectations associated with ships and space travel in (5) and velocity as a physical quantity in (6) with an unexpected account of ‘miscalculation’ and satirical rendering of ‘the definition of velocity’ respectively.

Yet, where the discussion above has focussed on the interpretive aspect of the schema, success of any humorous texts whether a two-liner joke or a novel series like the one in question depends on the writer's ability to recognize and make right estimation of reader's expectations and the subsequent, albeit successful, disruption of related schemata. Consider the following examples:

- (7) *"The History of every major Galactic Civilization tends to pass through three distinct and recognizable phases, those of Survival, Inquiry and Sophistication, otherwise known as the How, Why and Where phases.*  
*"For instance, the first phase is characterized by the question. How can we eat? the second by the question Why do we eat? and the third by the question Where shall we have lunch?" (p. 184)*
- (8) *Their songs are on the whole very simple and mostly follow the familiar theme of boy-being meets girl-being beneath a silvery moon, which then explodes for no adequately explored reason.*  
*Many worlds have now banned their act altogether, sometimes for artistic reasons, but most commonly because the band's public address system contravenes local strategic arms limitations treaties. (p. 280)*

Aside from the juxtaposition of the serious with the ridiculous, these instances are also marked in terms of their reliance on stereotypical notions and their overturning. Just like the examples analysed earlier in this section, these excerpts (even if regarded in isolation from the series' text) are humorous because the reader is able to identify the underlying schemata they disrupt. However, on the writer's part this process involves the identification of the unexpected for certain preformed ideas relating to the phenomena in question. History, for instance, is taken to be a serious subject concerning the rise and fall of nations, and deals but little with the subject of 'lunch' as depicted in (7).

Similarly, two schemata are at play in (8), on the one side all the romantic elements accounting for the 'romantic songs' schema and the violence schema on the other. This is perhaps the most prototypical example of schema overlap: the explosion of moon, which is part of the romantic setting, recounts the repeated sequence of a malady falling a couple, right in the middle of a happy meeting in most of the romantic novels. But, the ultimate affect in this case is achieved by the extension of this metaphorical sequence to a literal level (by referring to "strategic arms") which serves to produce humour effects. A significant feature of this affect can be attributed to the paradigmatic inversion of 'word classes' where notions associated with words are overturned in such a way that the entities or objects in question have to be perceived in a different way than their established schemata would dictate.

Schemata play a crucial role in the processing of utterances – schemata help us to interpret information according to our world view. But, in the case of humour interpretation, the disruption of schemata invokes the reader to reconsider the existing notions of how the world works and how certain things should be. The element of surprise and enjoyment in humour is dependent not only on the subversion of what is considered the normal or what is usually expected but also on imaginative exploitation of these schemata.

Thus, it can be argued that a humorous novel or a series, as is the present case, is a world in itself with its own linguistic norms. The poetic license allows the writer to topple the existing knowledge repertoire of the reader for eliciting humour. This process, however, is successful only because the writer is able to provide a point of reference to the reader that tells him/her to expect the unexpected and



indulge in resolving the underlying puzzle. Readers that fail to grasp these points of reference are not likely to enjoy the series and localized humorous instances within the series.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper aimed to elucidate the role of inference in humour comprehension and its contribution in resolving incongruity. The analysis indicates that reconsidering the existing schema is an essential part of understanding humour and inference plays a central role in this process: the disambiguation of incongruity relies largely on inferring how some sort of disruption has taken place. Additionally, the element of surprise is an essential feature of humorous texts and the reversal of expectations, regarding the meaning, comes largely from this identification – the realization that the ‘chunk of information’ associated with a particular schema has been disturbed in some way. Schema opposition works by challenging the commonly held beliefs about an entity/object and thus contributes in creating humour by associating unexpected attributes to already existing schemata about an object/entity. But, for realizing the disruption created by the writer, the readers have to rely largely on inference – reasoning guided by false causality mostly to understand the humorous intentions of the writer. The readers also have to expect that the writer’s intended meaning is funny; otherwise the text will fail to elicit laughter (or enjoyment) although the reader might still identify the satirical and ironic intentions of the writer.

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