

## CHAPTER FOUR

# SEMANTIC THEORY OF HUMOR

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the script-based semantic theory briefly outlined in Chapter 3 is applied to the analysis of verbal humor. After the **Main Hypothesis** is formulated in Section 1 and the joke-telling mode of communication is discussed in its relation to *bona-fide* communication in Section 2, the notion of script overlap, the crucial relation of script oppositeness and the triggers which produce the switch from the one script to the other are investigated in Sections 3, 4, and 5, respectively. In Section 6 a sample joke is analyzed as completely as possible in terms of the theory. Section 7 demonstrates how the script-based semantic theory of humor can accommodate the observations made in the informal theories of humor which were reviewed in Chapter 1. Some apparent counterexamples to the **Main Hypothesis** are discussed in Section 8. Section 9 deals with the principles of joke construction prompted by the theory.

### 1. MAIN HYPOTHESIS

The **Main Hypothesis** on which this approach is based can be formulated as (107):

- (107) A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the conditions in (108) are satisfied.
- (108) (i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts  
(ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite in a special sense defined in Section 4

The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to **overlap fully or in part on this text**.

According to (107), therefore, the set of two conditions in (108) is proposed as the **necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be funny**.

Thus, the simple joke in (109 = 21) is at least partially compatible with both of the scripts DOCTOR and LOVER (87), i.e., (87i) and (87ii) overlap

on (109) in part. The first sentence of (109) evokes and corroborates (87i). The second sentence loses some of the compatibility with (87i) and acquires the strong compatibility with (87ii) instead:

- (109) “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.”

The two overlapping scripts are perceived as opposite in a certain sense, and it is this oppositeness which creates the joke. Obviously, an overlap is not a sufficient condition for a text to be funny – in fact, any ambiguous text is compatible with two or more scripts but certainly not every ambiguous text is funny (cf. (46i-ii), (48), (53), (61)). According to the Main Hypothesis, a script overlap is only a necessary condition for a text to be funny, and any joke which can be demonstrated not to evoke two distinct scripts should be considered a counterexample to this approach to the analysis of verbal humor (see also Section 8).

The basic aspects of the Main Hypothesis are discussed in the subsequent sessions. This discussion is interrupted in what is hoped to be a helpful way by a detailed example of an application of the script-based semantic theory to the analysis of verbal humor.

## 2. JOKE TELLING AS A NON-*BONA-FIDE* COMMUNICATION

**Joke telling as a non-bona-fide communication** occurs in four different situations created by the combination of the two possibilities in (110) with the two possibilities in (111):

- (110)      (i) The speaker makes the joke unintentionally
- (ii) The speaker makes the joke intentionally
- (111)      (i) The hearer does not expect a joke
- (ii) The hearer expects a joke

In the case of (110i), the speaker is not aware of the full or partial ambiguity which is created. He is engaged in ***bona-fide communication***, i.e., in the earnest, serious, information-conveying mode of verbal communication (cf. Chapter 3, Section 5, and references there). His intention is to make an unambiguous statement, and the ambiguity which he does not control defeats him in this purpose.

*Bona-fide* communication is governed by the ‘co-operative principle’ introduced by Grice (1975). According to this principle, the speaker is

committed to the truth and relevance of his text, the hearer is aware of this commitment and perceives the uttered text as true and relevant by virtue of his recognition of the speaker's commitment to its truth and relevance. Whenever the hearer experiences difficulties at the receiving end in perceiving some text as true and relevant, in *bona-fide* communication he always gives the speaker the benefit of the doubt first, groping for some less obvious interpretations which will save the text by rendering it nevertheless true and relevant. If the hearer succeeds in that, a felicitous speech act occurs. This is how allusions and implicatures are made and successfully perceived in *bona-fide* communication (see (26-27) and (37-38); cf. Kempson, 1977, 143-46).

In the case of (110ii), the speaker is fully aware of the overlap and the resulting partial or full ambiguity and still proceeds with the text. This means that he is engaged not in *bona-fide* communication but in one of the much less explored and more interesting non-*bona-fide* modes of communication such as lying, play acting, or joke telling. The purpose of the mode he is engaged in, most likely joke telling, is not to convey any information contained in the text he is uttering but rather to create a special effect with the help of the text, namely to make the hearer laugh (cf. (40)).

In the case of (111i), the hearer does not expect a joke and will initially interpret the speaker's utterance as conforming to the requirements of *bona-fide* communication. After his attempts to interpret the utterances within this mode fail, he will have to look for an alternative way to interpret it, and this will bring him into the joke-telling mode because, in our culture, joke telling is a much more socially acceptable form of behavior than, for instance, lying and a more frequent form of behavior than, for instance, play acting.

In the case of (111ii), the hearer is somehow "attuned" to the joke (see Freud, 1905, 282-285; Fry, 1951, 55 – cf. Chapter 1, Section 3) and as a result, does not even attempt to interpret the perceived text within the mode of *bona-fide* communication. Instead, he either understands it as a joke effortlessly or makes an effort to understand it as such.

In the case of (110i-111i), there is still a possibility that an act of *bona-fide* communication can take place if some non-humorous interpretation of the speaker's utterance is possible. Since native speakers often fail to perceive ambiguity, and for a very good reason, too (see Chapter 3, Section 1), it is possible that both the speaker and the hearer fail to perceive the ambiguity of (112 = 37) which may render it funny. In this case, the joke does not take place and the unintended and unperceived ambiguity is suppressed. (It is

interesting to note here that apparently, besides regular ambiguity, we are dealing here with the unexplored phenomenon of mode ambiguity.)

- (112) "My wife used to play the violin a lot but after we had kids she has not had much time for that." "Children are a comfort, aren't they?"

Usually, however, just as in the case of any ambiguity, some features of the discourse or of the context tend to resolve the ambiguity. In (112) as well, for *bona-fide* communication, the transition between the two sentences is too sharp, and the non-*bona-fide* communication becomes preferable but certainly not inevitable.

In the case of (110i-111ii), the speaker may think that he is engaged in *bona-fide* communication but he is perceived as making a joke. If some mode ambiguity is indeed present, then the speaker intends the one serious reading of his utterance and fails to perceive the other humorous one, while the hearer perceives only the latter and fails to discern the other. This may happen if, for some reason, the hearer has been attuned by the speaker himself, deliberately or inadvertently, or by somebody else to the humorous mode or if, for any number of other reasons, the obvious context of the speaker's statement makes its non-serious reading more probable for the hearer. This phenomenon can be observed, for instance, sometimes in Johnny Carson's monologues when he tries to intersperse a serious note and the audience refuses to accept it as such, often causing some frustration on Carson's part. It is the perception of him as the funny man that creates the misunderstanding and attunes the audience to the joke-telling mode. On the other hand, this writer has been often misunderstood and believed to be making a capital joke when saying (113) and intending it seriously, simply because, according to the still prevailing stereotype, Mr. Nixon cannot be commended for anything seriously:

- (113) Richard Nixon was the best American president in this century with regard to foreign policy.

In the case of (110ii-111i), the speaker throws a joke on the hearer unexpectedly for the latter. "Leg pulling" as well as conundra (12-13) come under this category, along with many other situations.

And finally, in the case of (110ii-111ii), the speaker and the hearer are not only both attuned to humor but also to each other. They are both actively and consciously engaged in the joke-telling mode of communication. This clearly involves a cooperative principle which is quite distinct from Grice's

**cooperative principle for *bona-fide* communication.** The latter is based on four maxims (114):

- (114)     (i) Maxim of Quantity: Give exactly as much information as required
- (ii) Maxim of Quality: Say only what you believe to be true
- (iii) Maxim of Relation: Be relevant
- (iv) Maxim of Manner: Be succinct (cf. Grice, 1975, 45-47)

It is the hearer's belief that the speaker is conforming to these four maxims that makes *bona-fide* communication possible in the case of (110i-111i). The maxims on which the **cooperative principle for the non-*bona-fide*-communication mode of joke telling** is based must be different (115):

- (115)     (i) Maxim of Quantity: Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke
- (ii) Maxim of Quality: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke
- (iii) Maxim of Relation: Say only what is relevant to the joke
- (iv) Maxim of Manner: Tell the joke efficiently (see the discussion of conditions of humor in Chapter 1, Section 3, and especially references to Freud, 1905, and Eastman, 1936, there)

In accordance with this new cooperative principle, the hearer does not expect the speaker to tell the truth or to convey him any relevant information. Rather, he perceives the intention of the speaker as an attempt to make him, the hearer, laugh (again, cf. (40)). As a result, the hearer will look for the necessary ingredients of the joke in the speaker's utterance, and according to the Main Hypothesis, these ingredients include two overlapping and opposite scripts.

Just as *bona-fide* communication can fail if the speaker does not have full control of the maxims (114), humor fails if the maxims of (115) are not abided by. Similarly, the hearer can fail the speaker in *bona-fide* communication even if the speaker does everything right and the hearer of the joke can fail to get it even if the speaker provides all the necessary ingredients and follows all the maxims. The last important analogy between *bona-fide* communication and joke telling is that Grice's maxims do not explain the mechanisms which are involved in following them, and the maxims of (115), while shedding some light on the semantics of humor, do not really provide

an explicit account of the semantic mechanisms of humor. The latter are, of course, based on the scripts and combinatorial rules of the script-based semantic theory and on the relation of script oppositeness.

It is also interesting to note that if the hearer establishes beyond reasonable doubt that the speaker violates the cooperative principle for *bona-fide* communication, the hearer's next immediate hypothesis, in our culture, is that the speaker is engaged in humor. This happens frequently in such cases of (110i-111ii) when the speaker's information strikes the hearer as incredible. It seems easier and more natural for the hearer to check whether the speaker is joking ("Are you kidding?") than either to incorporate the information into the former's world or to assume that the latter is lying. Humor seems to be the next most socially acceptable form of communication in our society after *bona-fide* communication. In fact, it would be quite reasonable to postulate an extended form of *bona-fide* communication which would include humor since ordinary discourse abounds in facetiousness, and failure to combine the two modes might lead to the necessity of two separate kinds of analysis for various parts of the same text. The cooperative principle for this extended *bona-fide-cum-humor* mode of communication can be thought of in terms of a set of disjunctions of the maxims of (114) and (115) or a more compact presentation of the two sets.

The easy shift from *bona-fide* communication to joke telling as the most accessible and acceptable form of *non-bona-fide* communication may be underlaid by the basic concept of play, which is readily assumed by people as a natural form of behavior (see Huizinga, 1938; Bateson, 1955; Fry, 1963, 125-6 and 138; cf. Chapter 1, Section 5) and which conforms to a set of mutually agreeable rules. In other words, joke telling is a cooperative enterprise while lying is not and, as a result, the latter is considered by the hearer only after the joke-telling option has been explored and rejected. (Play acting is another cooperative activity but it is unlikely to compete with joke telling in the hearer's perception because of the artificial setting it requires – the hearer usually knows whether he is watching a play or not.)

### 3. SCRIPT OVERLAP

According to the Main Hypothesis (see Section 1), the text of a joke is partially or fully compatible with some two different scripts. Thus, (109) was described as involving an overlap of two scripts, DOCTOR and LOVER (87i-ii).

(109) is a typical example of an overlap of two scripts on a joke. The joke

begins innocuously by describing a standard situation which immediately evokes an easy and standard script DOCTOR from the native speaker's common sense. The script is repeatedly evoked by three words in the first sentence, *doctor*, *patient*, and *bronchial*. The question asked by the patient is the most natural question to ask in the situation (which is, of course, dated back to the times at which doctors saw patients at home when the patients needed them rather than according to an elaborate schedule made half a year in advance). The negative answer he receives is unfortunate but also natural. The fact that the doctor's wife turns out to be young and pretty does not seem to be relevant to the situation and to the script it unambiguously evokes but there is certainly no contradiction or incongruity between this fact and the situation. Her invitation to come in, however, while the doctor is not at home must strike the hearer as somewhat odd since she does not explain it by adding the usual, "He will be back soon," or "You can wait if you like." It will also be perceived as odd that she whispers back (cf. the preliminary analysis of the same joke in Chapter 1, Section 5, and its formal script analysis in Section 6). In Grice's terms, the woman's youth and good looks would be a violation of the maxim of quantity – too much unnecessary information, while her failure to explain why she is inviting the patient to come in is a violation of the same maxim in the opposite direction – too little information.

At this point, the hearer faces a dilemma: either he still accepts the text of (109) at face value, i.e., as evoking only the script DOCTOR, or he begins to look for another interpretation. He can hardly fail to notice that an entirely different situation has been surreptitiously created – a young and pretty woman invites a man other than her husband to come into her house while the husband is away. As soon as the appropriate script, LOVER, is evoked, all the previously odd pieces fall neatly into place: the "no" in response to whether the doctor is in, in conjunction with an unexplained invitation to come in; the woman's unexplained whisper (the patient does whisper as well but his whisper is explained – for us, though, not for the doctor's wife); even the woman's youth and good looks, which did not seem to be "working" with the first evoked script, DOCTOR.

The case of (109) is typical with regard to the script overlap in the sense that it is situated somewhere between the two extreme cases, that of a full overlap and that of a truly partial overlap.

In the case of a *full overlap*, the two involved scripts are both perfectly compatible with the text of a joke, and there is nothing in the text which can be perceived as odd, redundant or missing with regard to either script. Just

as equiprobable ambiguity, jokes involving a full overlap are not frequent. If not for the sharp transition between the two sentences, (112) above would perhaps come close to a full overlap. Because of the negation in (5), it is equally compatible with the SENATORS ARE GENTLEMEN and SENATORS ARE NOT GENTLEMEN scripts. (16), SEX vs. IMPOTENCE, and (26ii), BARKING vs. COMPLAINING, come very close too.

In many more cases, however, one script is more easily compatible with the entire text than the other. Thus, because of the scripts evoked by the clerical titles and terms the sexual script is somewhat less compatible with the text of (116) than the script CHURCH:

- (116) An English bishop received the following note from the vicar of a village in his diocese: "Milord, I regret to inform you of my wife's death. Can you possibly send me a substitute for the weekend?" (Pocheptzov, 1974, 41)

(6), involving the same two scripts, is perhaps somewhat more slanted towards the script CHURCH than is (116). (7) is also, technically speaking, compatible with two scripts, GOING OUT and GOING AWAY, but clearly prefers the latter. (13), ANIMAL vs. ABUSE, and (14 = 25ii), COLLISION vs. IMPRESSION, seem to be in the same category.

Many other jokes create a truly partial overlap in the sense that once both scripts are evoked, there are some parts of the text which are incompatible with one of them. Thus, in (117), the script COLOR is incompatible with the second sentence and the ethical script evoked by the second sentence is (almost entirely) incompatible with the first sentence.

- (117) There's only one trouble with watching TV in glorious color. You turn it off and the world's in black and white! (Orben, 1978, 50)

In (9) as well, the script DISEASE is incompatible with the patient's reply, while the script TRANSACTION evoked by his reply is incompatible with the nurse's inquiry. Jokes (4), EMPLOYEE vs. LOVER; (8), LIFE vs. DEATH; (12), HEAD vs. MIND; (17), AWARD vs. PUNISHMENT; (24i), JUSTICE vs. CORRUPTION; (26i), MATERIAL HEIGHT vs. HUMAN HEIGHT; (35), SEX vs. JUSTICE; and (39), REAL HUMAN ANATOMY vs. POSSIBLE WORLD HUMAN ANATOMY, are all in this category as well.

A partial overlap actually means that one or both of the evoked scripts

are not acceptable as part of the semantic interpretation of the text. In *bona-fide* communication that would mean that the text is characterized as meaningless, which is indeed what some of them should be characterized as within that mode. That such texts are not perceived as meaningless in the joke-telling mode of communication emphasizes still another significant difference between the two modes.

#### 4. SCRIPT OPPOSITENESS

According to the Main Hypothesis, the two distinct scripts which overlap, fully or in part, on the text of a joke, should be opposite in a specially defined sense (108ii). Let us first consider the script oppositions in the 32 examples of jokes we have had so far in the book. In (119) below, they are listed in the following format (118):

(118) Script 1 vs. Script 2 (Example number)

The scripts are denoted somewhat loosely, exclusively for the purpose of positive identification, and printed in lower case for the sake of easier legibility.

- (119) employee vs. lover (4)  
senators are gentlemen vs. senators are not gentlemen (5)  
church vs. sex (6)  
going out vs. going away (7)  
ordinary week (life) vs. death (8)  
disease vs. money (transaction) (9)  
hand with tool vs. bare hand (10)  
good joke vs. bad joke (11)  
head vs. mind (12)  
animal vs. abuse (13)  
collision vs. impression  
drug prescription vs. children as pests (15)  
sex vs. impotence (16)  
award vs. punishment (17)  
writer vs. postman (18)  
wise vs. foolish (19)  
dirty talk vs. nautical matters (20)  
doctor vs. lover (21)  
justice vs. corruption (24i)

doctor vs. nagging wife (24ii)  
 presence vs. absence (24iii)  
 stalemate vs. wife (25i)  
 collision vs. impression (25ii)  
 Ireland, Moscow vs. ireless, cowless (25iii)  
 material height vs. human height (26i)  
 barking vs. complaining (26ii)  
 Jaguar vs. calendar (26iii)  
 real world strength vs. possible world strength (28)  
 justice vs. sex (35)  
 good performance vs. bad performance (37)  
 sex, real world human anatomy vs. buying a commodity, possible  
     world human anatomy (39)  
 church vs. sex (116)  
 literal color vs. figurative color (117)

Some of the scripts within the oppositions are opposed in the usual sense of the one being the negation of the other (5) or an antonym of the other (8, 11, 17, 19, 24i, 24iii, 37). A few others reveal their antonymous nature if slightly paraphrased: 10 (tool vs. no tool), 16 (sexual activity vs. impotence), 39 (real world vs. unreal world). All the others are treated here as perfect examples of local antonyms, i.e., two linguistic entities whose meanings are opposite only within a particular discourse and solely for the purposes of this discourse (cf. Lyons, 1977, ·271-279).

Each of the jokes describes a certain “real” situation and evokes another “unreal” situation which does not take place and which is fully or partially incompatible with the former. In certain cases, this situation opposition is shadowed, as it were, by a complementary set of opposed situations (e.g., (6)). For the sake of clarity, we will take the trouble to list this once the real and unreal situations for each of the joke examples used so far, in the format of (120):

- (120)    Real situation vs. Unreal situation [Shadow opposition if any]  
       (Example number)
  - (121)    The lady calls the driver by his family name vs. The lady calls  
          the driver “darling” [A lover calls her lover “darling” vs. A lover  
          calls her lover by his family name] (4)
- Senators are gentlemen vs. Senators are not gentlemen (5)  
 The archdeacon was involved in debauchery vs. The archdeacon

was involved in honest toil [Saint Peter was involved in honest toil vs. Saint Peter was involved in debauchery] (6)

The man was going to be absent from home for many days vs. The man was going to come back home that night (and/or every night) (7)

The man was not going to live during the entire week vs. The man was going to live during the entire week (8)

The patient has an illness vs. The patient sells an illness (9)

The person stirs his coffee with a spoon vs. The person stirs his coffee with his bare hand (10)

A joke is good vs. A joke is bad (11)

A tooth is drawn from one's head vs. A tooth is drawn from one's mind [A thought is out of one's mind vs. A tooth is out of one's mind] (12)

A donkey cannot be a fool vs. A donkey is a fool (13)

The first thing that strikes a stranger in New York is some kind of sight or impression vs. The first thing that strikes a stranger in New York is a big car (which hits him) [In a physical collision, a car hits a person vs. In a physical collision, a car impresses a person] (14)

The medicine within the bottle cures headaches vs. The inscription on the bottle cures headaches (15)

In a whore-house, a client seeks a partner for sex vs. In a whore-house, a client seeks a partner for (almost?) no sex (16)

A prize for an achievement is something one wants to have vs. A prize for an achievement is something one does not want (hard labor, etc.) (17)

He is a writer vs. He is not a writer (18)

The wise man is wise vs. The wise man is not wise [The fool is foolish vs. The fool is not foolish] (19)

He did not talk dirty vs. He talked dirty (20)

The patient comes to the doctor's house to see the doctor vs. The patient comes to the doctor's house not to see the doctor [The doctor's wife entertains a lover vs. The doctor's wife entertains a patient] (21)

The judge wants more legal arguments vs. The judge wants more money (24i)

A doctor prescribes some medicine to the sick person vs. The doctor prescribes some medicine to the sick person's wife (24ii)

Identifying a child who is with his mother can help find her vs.

Identifying a child who is not with his mother can help find her (24iii)

Stalemate is a lull, a pause vs. Stalemate is a wife (25i)

(See (14) above for the analysis of this joke) (25ii)

Ireless has nothing to do with Ireland. Cowless has nothing to do with Moscow vs. Ireless has something to do with Ireland. Cowless has something to do with Moscow (25iii)

Two or more people cannot see taller objects than one person can vs. Two or more people can see taller objects than one person can (26i)

A dog can bark vs. A dog can complain (26ii)

Davey can tell January from Jaguar vs. Davey cannot tell January from Jaguar (26iii)

Samson could not lift himself by his hair, no matter how strong he was vs. Samson could lift himself by his hair (28)

Some people believe that this girl is chaste vs. Some people do not believe that this girl is chaste (35)

It is good that the woman used to play the violin vs. It is not good that the woman used to play the violin (37)

A client has intercourse with a prostitute in her vagina vs. A client has intercourse with a prostitute in her navel (39)

The vicar wants a substitute for himself vs. The vicar wants a substitute for his late wife (116)

The world is in color vs. The world is in black and white (117)

The analyzed examples exhibit **three basic types of opposition between the “real” and “unreal” situations** they describe or evoke.

The first type clearly distinguishes between the **actual situation** in which the hero of the joke finds himself or, somewhat more generally, in which the joke is **actually set**, and a **non-actual, non-existing situation** which is not compatible with the actual setting of the joke. Thus, in joke (6) the hero was involved in debauchery in real life, which is his actual situation in a very recent past, and he was not involved in honest toil as the comparison with Saint Peter suggests. One can say then that it is the case that the archdeacon was involved in debauchery and it is not the case that the archdeacon was involved in honest toil. The construction *It is the case that \_\_\_ and it is not the case that \_\_\_* is the *diagnostic construction* for this type of opposition if the blanks can be filled in by two opposing propositions involving the hero(es) and/or the actual setting of the joke. The other examples of the actual/non-actual opposition include jokes (7), (8), (18), (20), (21), (24i), (25i), (25iii), (35), (37), (116), and (117).

The second type introduces the **normal, expected state of affairs** and opposes it to the **abnormal, unexpected state of affairs**. Thus, in joke (5), the normal expectation is for a senator to be the best representative of the public and, therefore, at least according to the ethical norms of a certain period, a gentleman. The abnormal state of affairs introduced by the joke is that senators are not, in fact, gentlemen. The other examples of the normal/abnormal opposition include jokes (10), (11), (14), (16), (17), (19), and (24ii).

The third type distinguishes between a **possible, plausible situation** and a **fully or partially impossible or much less plausible situation**. Thus, in joke (4), it is very plausible that the lady should want to call her chauffeur by his last name and almost impossible for her to call him “darling” unless, of course, they are lovers (which adds another dimension to the joke – see below and Chapter 5). In joke (9), the opposed situation is outright impossible – one cannot sell an illness. The other examples of the possible/impossible opposition include jokes (12), (13), (15), (24iii), (26i-iii), (28), and (39).

In each of the jokes, however, there is an element which renders the unreal situation less unreal than it looks. If, in joke (6) again, the archdeacon was indeed involved in debauchery then he was not involved in honest toil. However, the expression *toiled all night* can describe both situations. It is the occurrence of this expression that triggers the switch from the one script to the other and from the real situation to the unreal situation. In joke (5), the normal situation is, of course, that a senator, an elected representative of the

people, is the best kind of person available and therefore a gentleman. The abnormal situation is that senators may be the opposite of that, and the switch is triggered by the word *gentleman* which means both 'man' and 'man of quality.' In joke (4), the impossible situation is triggered by the fact that the chauffeur's last name turns out to be Darling. The function and typology of these and other triggers will be discussed in the next section.

An additional list of 50 simple jokes in Appendix 1, numbered from A101 through A150, can be also easily reduced to the three types of the real-unreal dichotomy distinguished above. (The jokes are referred to as 'simple' more or less terminologically: they, as all the other jokes considered so far, can be plausibly analyzed as the result of a single opposition of just two opposed scripts. See Appendix 2 and Section 8 for examples and discussion of the 'sophisticated' jokes, where *sophisticated* is, of course, used as the local antonym of *simple*). Thus, jokes A102-05, A113, A115-17, A120-25, A127-30, A136-37, A139, and A146-50 exhibit the actual/non-actual type of script opposition; jokes A101, A106-10, A126, A131, A140, and A143 are of the normal/abnormal type; and, finally, jokes A111-12, A114, A118-19, A132-35, A138, A141-42, and A144 belong to the possible/impossible type. As can be expected, the boundaries between the three types are not watertight, and there is a certain amount of mutual penetration and diffusion. If, for instance, the non-actual script evoked by the joke is of a somewhat implausible nature, e.g., A139, A146 or (39), but not altogether impossible, the joke can be assigned either to the first or to the third type depending on its position on the scale of plausibility (A139 and A146 were assigned to the first type and (39) to the third). Similarly, to the extent that the actual script of a joke from the first type constitutes a norm or an expectation, the joke can tend to the second type as well, e.g., A126. In other words, just as in the case of any meaningful classification, there are clear-cut cases and marginal, or borderline, cases, and it is the clarity of the former and of the distinctions among the clear-cut cases of various types that determine the validity and feasibility of the taxonomy.

There are other marginal complications and deviations as well. The unreal script evoked by the joke can be related to the real script in additional ways, besides and beyond belonging to one of the three types of opposition. Thus, for instance, it can exist externally, parallel to the real script. In joke (18), the hero is a writer according to the one opposed script and is not a writer according to the other script. Similarly, in joke A136, the doctor is talking about the patient's anatomy according to the one script and about his place according to the other. Alternatively, the unreal script can also exist internally, i.e., to be brought about by the hero(es) of the joke as, for instance, in

jokes A124, A130 or (15). Transferred back to the mode of *bona-fide* communication, the speaker of such jokes would be perceived there as lying in the simplest sense of lying, viz., stating something which is not true (cf. (13) or A142). In somewhat more complicated cases, almost verging on the sophisticated kind of joke, one of the two opposed scripts can be not given or evoked directly but rather be present by implication. One way of implying a script is by allusion to a certain element of information which is available to the speaker and is supposed by him to be available to the hearer as well. Thus, joke A133 alludes to the familiarity with the genre of drama and its conventions (cf (26-27) and discussion around them). Somewhat more complicatedly, in joke A140 the allusion is to the non-actual script of polite behavior while the hero of the joke actually finds himself, much to his surprise and disdain, in the opposed situation of rude behavior. In joke A121, the implied opposed script is that of a real, normally expected meaningful explanation of the difference between a watchmaker and a jailer.

Another basis of comparison of the opposing scripts is the distance between them. Some scripts are simple negations of each other and therefore very closely related to each other, e.g., in joke (5) (see also above). Some others have relatively little to do with each other (and are actually brought together, in many cases, by an accidental polysemy, homonymy or phonetic similarity – see Section 5 for further discussion), e.g., joke (9). Most jokes can be found somewhere in between the two poles of this scale. Very close to the pole of the least distance, one can find such jokes as A108 or A115: in either case, the opposed pairs of scripts EVERYTHING IS GOOD vs. NOT EVERYTHING GOOD and CIVIL FREEDOM vs. ETHICAL LIBERTY, respectively, can, in fact, be easily treated as one, slightly more complicated script instead of each pair or, more precisely, as an easily compatible conjunction of simple scripts, namely EVERYTHING BUT MANNERS IS GOOD & MANNERS ARE BAD and MUCH FREEDOM IS GOOD & MUCH LIBERTY IS NOT GOOD, respectively. To the extent that a text evokes a conjoined script rather than an opposition of scripts it is not a joke, and, indeed, A108 and A115 verge much more on the unfunny than the other simple jokes we are considering.

Still another, and significantly more important dimension of script opposition is that many jokes evoke one of the **relatively few binary categories which are essential to human life**. Thus, obviously, many if not all of the examples involve the category of **real** vs. **unreal**, i.e., whether something exists or does not exist, or in other words, whether something is **true** or **false**, which is certainly important for human perception, catharsis, and ontology.

Besides that, some examples may involve the judgmental dichotomy of **good** vs. **bad**, e.g., jokes (5), (11), (37), A137, A143 and a few others. Still other examples involve **death** vs. **life**, which is not totally unrelated to the previous dichotomy, e.g., (14) or A118. Jokes related to age are of a similar kind, e.g., A102-03 or A113. The **obscene/non-obscene** dichotomy, very important and almost standard for a certain type of humor, e.g., jokes (16), (20), (21), A114 or A139, is analyzed in more detail in Chapter 5. Money is another sensitive matter, and the **money/no money** or **much money/little money** dichotomy is present in a number of examples, e.g., A105, A107 or A111.

To summarize this discussion of various aspects of script opposition, besides belonging to the three basic types of the real/unreal dichotomy, the opposed scripts can be introduced in various ways, can be more or less closely related to each other, and usually involve some basic, quintessential categories of human existence. Three groups of standard script oppositions constituting sexual, ethnic, and political humor are analyzed in three separate chapters (5, 6, and 7, respectively). A regular joke, involving a different kind of opposition, non-standard in the sense of the previous sentence, is analyzed in Section 6. The next section deals in more detail with the linguistic means of script switching.

##### 5. SEMANTIC SCRIPT-SWITCH TRIGGERS

As mentioned in the previous section, many jokes contain an element which triggers the switch from the one script evoked by the text of the joke to the opposed script, the switch which makes up the joke. This element, called here the **semantic script-switch trigger**, or simply the **trigger**, usually belongs, in simple jokes, to either of the two types: **ambiguity** or **contradiction**.

Thus, joke (5) /senator-gentleman/ has a typically ambiguous trigger *gentleman* which, as also mentioned before, may mean both 'man' and 'man of quality.' By virtue of this **regular ambiguity** the text switches from the script SENATOR IS MAN to the script SENATOR IS NOT GENTLEMAN. Retroactively, due to the ambiguity, the second script changes the interpretation of the first part of the text of the joke, viz., the first sentence, making believe – incorrectly – that the questioner was presupposing that the man he was interested in was indeed a man of quality. The usual effect of the trigger is exactly this: by introducing the second script it casts a shadow on the first script and the part of the text which introduced it, and imposes a different interpretation on it, which is different from the most obvious one.

The different interpretation, as was shown in the previous section, may involve a non-actual, abnormal or even impossible state of affairs. The role of the trigger, however, is, by its mere presence, to render this different interpretation more plausible and less non-actual, abnormal, or impossible.

In fact, we are dealing here again with an important aspect of joke-telling as a non-*bona-fide* mode of communication. In *bona-fide* communication as well, ambiguity is quite frequent and it may also be created by the occurrence of polysemous or homonymous words (see Chapter 3, Section 1). There, however, the process of disambiguation should, and usually does, take place immediately and, ideally, only one meaning of the utterance is intended by the speaker and perceived by the hearer. In many if not most jokes, however, ambiguity is deliberate and the intention of the speaker includes two interpretations which he wants the hearer to perceive. If both the speaker and the hearer are in the same mode of communication (see Section 2), the hearer knows the "rules of the game" and is not only ready to perceive the second interpretation along with the first obvious one but actually is willing to look for it. This cooperation, which was not really captured, along with other important features of the mode, by the maxims of (115), makes it possible for a somewhat forced and often overextended second interpretation to pass and thus to become less unreal. In joke (5), both the hearer and the speaker know quite well that the questioner in the joke was not at all meaning *gentleman* in the sense of 'man of quality,' but both are prepared to believe, not for real but rather "for the fun of it," that he was. If it is even barely possible, it goes.

The other cases of regular ambiguity in the corpus of quoted jokes include joke (7): *going* as 'going out' and 'going away'; and joke (24): *offer* as 'say' and 'give.' A very similar trigger *innocence* as 'justice' and 'chastity' creates joke (35); this trigger is supported by an **auxiliary trigger** *army*, which, being associated with debauchery, reinforces the sexual script. A few cases of **figurative ambiguity** are also very similar, and in fact, border on regular ambiguity – see, for instance, the triggers *toil* (with an auxiliary trigger *all night*) as 'work hard' and 'have much sex' and *catch* as 'catch' and 'become infected' in joke (6), *ass* as 'donkey' and 'fool' in joke (13), *strikes* as 'hit' and 'impress' in joke (14 = 25ii), and *bark* as 'bark' and 'complain' in joke (26ii). Still another slight variety of regular ambiguity is exemplified by joke (12) where the trigger *out of one's head* is of an idiomatic nature and incidentally, in this form, is better compatible with the physical than with the non-physical interpretation (*out of one's mind* is at least stylistically preferable for the latter).

Three different cases of what might be loosely referred to as **syntactic ambiguity** are exemplified by jokes (10), (15), and (116). The latter is perhaps the most obvious and closest to the syntactical surface: *substitute* may have either *vicar* or *vicar's wife* as antecedent, and this triggers the script switch. In (10), a case ambiguity is involved: *with* may introduce an agent or part thereof (*hand*) or an instrument (*spoon*). In (15), the ambiguity is even more of a deep-syntactical nature though not dissimilar to that in (116) – it is therefore also the closest to regular ambiguity: *directions* may be for taking the medicine or for keeping the medicine.

A somewhat more complicated case of **situational ambiguity** is exemplified by joke (37), where the trigger *comfort* introduces the second, ‘bad performance,’ script at the same time while the preceding text is almost neutral with regard to either.

Ambiguous triggers create all puns and similar simple jokes.

Somewhat less interesting though still rather productive cases of **quasi-ambiguity** based on purely phonetical and not semantical relations between words (which are often intentionally misused or garbled in the text for this purpose) is exemplified by jokes (20), (25i), (25iii), and (26iii) (cf. also A120-21 as well as A149-50 and practically all the other known – and potential – **knock-knock jokes**).

The other major type of trigger, the **contradiction triggers**, is of a slightly more complicated nature. Joke (8), the Monday execution, is a typical example: the trigger *beginning*, while perfectly compatible with *Monday* and *week*, contradicts the fact that a beginning implies an ending which is distinct from the beginning but, in the case of the man about to be executed, the beginning *is* the ending and, therefore, *beginning* does not make sense. The contradiction, while operating differently from ambiguity, creates exactly the same effect, namely, a second interpretation retroactively imposed on the whole text preceding the trigger as well as on the text following it, if any. Sometimes the second interpretation has been surreptitiously prepared for, and this makes the discovery of the second script easier (e.g., (21 = 109)). In other cases, no preparation work has been done and then the switch occurs to the script which is the exact opposite of the firstly evoked script (e.g., (8)). Besides joke (8), the contradiction triggers can be found in joke (11) (*usually*), (17) (*prize – hard labor*), (21 = 109) (*no – come in*), and (24ii) (*yourself*). Some contradiction triggers include whole sentences rather than individual words, and their relation to the ordinary contradiction triggers is similar to that between situational ambiguous triggers and regular ambiguous triggers mentioned above – see jokes (24iii), (26i), (28) and (39). An alternative analysis of the trigger in (37) as contradiction is possible.

A slight variety of the contradiction trigger is the **dichotomizing trigger** usually created by a pair of antonyms built into the joke – e.g., joke (19): *wise man – fool*. In a *bona-fide* text involving a dichotomy of this kind, the wise man will remain wise and the fool a fool. In a joke, the roles are usually reversed, which, of course, creates the type of contradiction described above, and the switch is actually triggered by a combination of the trigger and the conventions of the mode of communication (see A101 and A111 for more examples of the type).

The analysis of the additional corpus of jokes in Appendix 1 reveals basically the same types of triggers with natural slight variations, and the readers are invited to verify, or challenge, this assertion for themselves.

In principle, it should be observed that the jokes with overtly expressed triggers are simpler than those with dissipated triggers or no triggers at all (see Section 8 for some further discussion and Appendix 2).

#### 6. ANALYSIS OF A SAMPLE JOKE

The sample joke chosen for a full though largely non-technical script analysis is joke (21), repeated as (109) in Section 1.

First, let us summarize the results of an informal analysis of the joke carried out in Sections 3-5 (and also in Chapter 1, Section 6).

The joke is created by a partial overlap of two opposed scripts tentatively labeled DOCTOR and LOVER (see (87i-ii) for a simplified schematic representation). The opposition between the real and unreal situations evoked by the text belongs to the actual/non-actual type. The non-actual situation exists externally as opposed to being conjectured by the hero(es) of the joke. There is a certain distance between the opposed scripts – they are neither the negations of each other nor compatible conjunctions of one another. They involve the obscene/non-obscene dichotomy. The joke contains a discontinuous contradiction trigger.

The choice of this particular joke for script analysis, while obviously not random in the technical sense of the term, was based on considerations of typicality and averageness. It is not an obvious pun nor an allusion and is, therefore, of a medium degree of complexity within the set of simple jokes. It is not terribly funny nor terribly unfunny. It is not too short nor too long. None of its parameters, in other words, is extreme, atypical, or extraordinary in any sense.

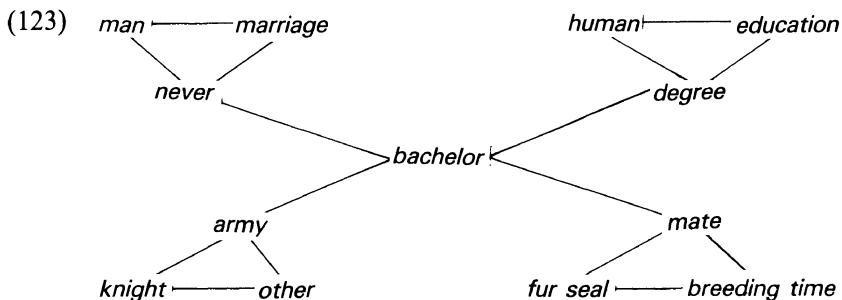
According to the research strategy outlined in Chapter 2, Section 4, the goals and format of semantic theory postulated in Chapter 3, and the Main Hypothesis formulated in Section 1, the purpose of the script analysis is to

provide a semantic interpretation of the text of the joke, complete with two scripts both of which are compatible with it and which are marked as opposite. If such an interpretation is indeed available the text is recognized as a joke.

The script analysis is therefore based on the following components (122):

- (122)      (i) A continuous lexical graph with domains corresponding to the lexical entries (i.e., words) of the text
- (ii) Combinatorial rules combining those domains (scripts) into one or more larger scripts compatible with the text
- (iii) A system for marking certain scripts as opposite

As stated in Chapter 3, Section 4, every word of the sentence evokes one or more scripts. **Each script is a limited domain of the single continuous multidimensional graph which is the lexicon of the language.** If a word is polysemous, as is often the case, the surrounding domain will consist of a number of subdomains, or areas of the graph, with close links inside each area and few links with the other areas. Thus, *bachelor* will be surrounded by a domain which can be presented, without any detailization or structuring used in (83), as (123):



Assuming the availability of such a script-based lexicon (cf. Raskin, 1981a), (124-128) list the scripts evoked by the text of joke (109) clause by clause using *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1976) as a source of reference. As in (92), the numbers of the scripts considered unmarked are, of course, marked, i.e., italicized.

- (124)      (i) IS = BE v 1. Equal or belong to a set  
                  2. Exist  
                  3. Spatial  
                  4. Must

- (ii) THE det 1. Definite
  - 2. Unique
  - 3. Generic
- (iii) DOCTOR n 1. Academic
  - 2. Medical
  - 3. Material
  - 4. Mechanical
  - 5. Insect
- (iv) AT prep 1. Spatial
  - 2. Target
  - 3. Occupation
  - 4. State
  - 5. Cause
  - 6. Measure
- (v) HOME n 1. Residence
  - 2. Social
  - 3. Habitat
  - 4. Origin
  - 5. Disabled
  - 6. Objective
- (125)    (i) THE (see (124ii))
  - (ii) PATIENT n 1. Medical
    - 2. Object
  - (iii) ASK v 1. Interrogative
    - 2. Request
    - 3. Selling
  - (iv) IN prep 1. Inclusion
    - 2. Instrument
    - 3. Circumstance
    - 4. Purpose
    - 5. Mathematical
  - (v) HIS pron 1. Belonging to *he*
  - (vi) BRONCHIAL adj 1. Bronchi or lungs
  - (vii) WHISPER n 1. Utter
    - 2. Communication
- (126) NO adv 1. Negation
  - 2. Surprise
- (127)    (i) THE (see (124ii))
  - (ii) DOCTOR (see (124iii))

- (iii) 'S pron 1. Belonging
- (iv) YOUNG adj 1. Age
  - 2. New
  - 3. Experience
- (v) AND conj 1. Connection
  - 2. Logical
- (vi) PRETTY adj 1. Beauty
  - 2. Terrible
  - 3. Considerable
- (vii) WIFE n 1. Marriage
- (viii) WHISPER v (see (125vii))
- (xi) IN (see (125iv))
- (x) REPLY n 1. Answer
  - 2. Legal
- (128)     (i) COME v 1. Move
  - 2. Arrive
  - 3. Sexual
  - 4. Become
- (ii) RIGHT adv 1. Propriety
  - 2. Direct
  - 3. Orientation
  - 4. Immediate
  - 5. Truth
- (iii) IN (see (125iv))

Just as in (92), the items numbered by Arabic numerals are loose shorthand for the scripts evoked by the words of the text. However, they are assumed, for the limited purposes of this analysis, to represent accurately the areas of the continuous graph potentially activated by the utterance of each word. Even this loose notation reveals the interconnected nature of various lexical items. Thus, items (124i-1), (125v), and (127iii) contain the same node *belong*, and a detailed presentation of them (as in (83), (86) or at least (87)) will also reveal this node within the domains evoked by (124v-1) and (125iii-3); (124iii-2) and (125ii-1) coincide; (125iii-1), (125iii-2), (125vii-1), and (127vii-1) share the same node *utter*. These and similar connections are very important for the proper functioning of combinatorial rules.

The combinatorial rules start out by calculating the meaning of the phrase and of the sentence on the basis of the available syntactic structure and the

scripts in (124-128). Leaving the syntax aside, along with other more or less obvious technicalities, let us follow the order of semantic operations performed by the combinatorial rules.

Within each clause, they will look for the script or scripts which are evoked by two or more words. (Actually, at the technical level, the rules will be looking inside the scripts and go for the ones which contain the common domains.) Thus, in the case of the first clause of the text, the combinatorial rules will notice the common script denoted as SPATIAL in (124i-3) and (124iv-1). They will consequently shift the feature of unmarkedness from (124i-1) to (124i-3) and adopt SPATIAL as a working hypothesis. Accordingly, they will reject (124v-2), (124v-3), (124v-4), and (124v-6) as not easily compatible with the script SPATIAL. Some additional syntactical and idiomatic information within the graph will select (124v-1) over (124v-5), i.e., *at home* will be correctly interpreted as ‘in the residence’ rather than as ‘in a home for the disabled.’ This choice will then lead to the selection of the two human scripts of *doctor* – (124iii-1,2) – over the other three possibilities. The selected meaning of *home*, (124v-1), will have a semantic recursion trigger within its script which will require information on the owner (see Chapter 3, Section 2, especially (71) and (72), as well as references there for further comments on semantic recursion). Both the medical and academic scripts for *doctor* (124iii-1,2) will be recognized as appropriate fillings for the node. Finally, in this clause, the unmarked script for *the* (124ii-1) will be rejected in favor of (124ii-2) because of a semantic recursion trigger within the script (124ii-1) requiring a filling from the previous discourse: since none is available, the combinatorial rules will reject the script. In other words, the combinatorial rules will thus accommodate the fact that *the* can only be understood as ‘definite’ if there is a preceding reference to its head (*doctor*) in the text – since there is no preceding text such an interpretation is unacceptable. As a result of this procedure, the first clause of (109) will be formally interpreted as two-way ambiguous. The two possible meanings can be roughly paraphrased as (129):

- (129)      (i) Question: The unique proprietor of a family residence who is a physician is physically present in the residence
- (ii) Question: The unique proprietor of a family residence who has the doctoral degree is physically present in the residence

At this stage, since the first sentence is not complete, the combinatorial rules will register the ambiguity and will go for the second clause of the

sentence. Following a similar path, they will pick out the script MEDICAL in *patient* (125ii-1) as well as within *bronchial* (125vi-1). The duly registered interrogative feature of the first clause (see (129)) will disambiguate *ask* as (125iii-1), which will, in its turn, disambiguate *whisper* as (125vii-1). *His* will be easily related to *patient* with the help of a semantic recursion trigger, and *the* will be interpreted in its unmarked meaning of ‘definite,’ with the semantic recursion trigger mentioned in the analysis of the first clause above filled in this case, somewhat non-trivially though quite simply, with ‘the questioner of the previous question.’ The doubly corroborated script MEDICAL will disambiguate the first clause and reject (129ii).

The entire first sentence of (109) will then be interpreted roughly as the paraphrase in (130):

- (130) Somebody who was previously treated for an illness wants to know whether the unique proprietor of a family residence is physically present in the residence

At this point, the combinatorial rules are ready to come up with the presuppositions, inferences and questions concerning the entire first sentence of (109) (see Chapter 3, Section 5, especially (95-99)).

The non-trivial presuppositions of the first sentence are listed in (131) and its probable presuppositions in (132):

- (131)     (i) The patient is human
- (ii) The doctor is human
- (iii) There is a hearer
- (132)     (i) The patient is at the door of the doctor's residence
- (ii) The patient does not know the answer to the question

Some inferences from (130) are listed in (133) and probable inferences in (134):

- (133)     (i) The patient is male
- (ii) The patient whispers because of a problem with his bronchi or lungs
- (iii) The patient is temporarily unable to speak normally
- (134)     (i) The patient is adult
- (ii) The patient has been treated by the doctor before
- (iii) The patient wants to see the doctor
- (iv) The patient wants to see the doctor about the problem with his bronchi or lungs
- (v) The patient wants the doctor to correct the problem

The question the combinatorial rules produce in relation to (130) is, of course, (135):

(135) Who is the hearer?

(131-135) go to the special component closely associated with the combinatorial rules and called WORLD INFORMATION (see Chapter 3, Section 5). The component may already contain some elements of information which the theory assumes at the outset of the analysis of any text. The newly obtained information supplements the previously contained information if it is compatible with it and signals a conflict if it is not. One important element of information the combinatorial rules are interested in from the very beginning is the mode of communication, and the usual path to take is to assume that it is *bona-fide* as the first default value. Then the maxims of (114) are contained in the WORLD INFORMATION component from the very beginning and are considered valid unless contradicted and superseded (see below).

The second sentence of (109) will be processed similarly, clause by clause, the one significant difference being that the combinatorial rules will keep relating the obtained results to the first sentence. Thus, the first clause will be disambiguated as negation (126-1) in view of the preceding question and will be interpreted accordingly as (136):

(136) The doctor is not at home

In the next clause, *doctor* will, of course, be disambiguated automatically as 'medical' and *the* as 'definite.' *Wife* will be related to *doctor* by 's. *Wife* will also disambiguate *young* and *pretty* in their unmarked scripts, i.e., as (127iv-1) and (127vi-1), respectively. *Whisper* and *reply* will pick out the compatible scripts within each other's domains, namely the ones which share the node *utter*, i.e., (127viii-1) and (127x-1), respectively. *Reply* will disambiguate *in* as 'instrumental' (127ix-2).

Finally, the third clause will be interpreted in the physical-motion sense of the three constituent words on the basis of the overlapping scripts (128i-1), (128ii-2) and (128iii-1).

The combinatorial rules will again come up with a (smaller) number of usual presuppositions and probable presuppositions. More importantly, they will make a few significant inferences (137), one of them (137i) being, of course, the answer to the question (135) asked by the combinatorial rules after having processed the first sentence.

- (137)     (i) The doctor's wife is the hearer  
              (ii) The doctor is male  
              (iii) The reply refers to the patient's question  
              (iv) The patient and the doctor's wife are talking to each other  
              (v) The doctor's wife wants the patient to come into her home  
              (vi) The doctor's home is the doctor's wife's home

A significant probable inference will be (138):

- (138)   The patient and the doctor's wife are alone

At this stage, a very important set of derivative inferences (139) will be produced by the combinatorial rules on the basis of all the inferences stored so far in the WORLD INFORMATION component, i.e., (133-134) and (137-138).

- (139)     (i) If the patient does come into the doctor's home he will not see the doctor  
              (ii) If the patient comes into the doctor's home he will not achieve his purpose  
              (iii) The patient does not need to come into the doctor's home

Technically, the crucial inferences in (139) are obtained as the result of a process triggered by *no* and *come in* (cf. Section 5).

Next, the combinatorial rules will come up with the crucial question (140):

- (140)   Why does the doctor's wife want the patient to come in?

The only answer the combinatorial rules will be able to come up on the basis of further inferencing is (141):

- (141)   The doctor's wife does not understand that (139iii)

Since one of the basic assumptions stored in the WORLD INFORMATION component will be that any human being, unless otherwise specified, has the same inferencing ability as the combinatorial rules, the only explanation which will be available to the theory is that the doctor's wife's interpretation of the situation is different from the one obtained by the combinatorial rules. In other words, the script analysis of the text obtained so far will be recognized as the patient's interpretation, and the theory will start the search for an alternative analysis.

An important decision will be made by the combinatorial rules at this stage. Since there is no further explanation of the situation in the text and

the registered misunderstanding is never resolved, the text can no longer be treated as a genuine sample of *bona-fide* communication. Therefore, the combinatorial rules will have to reject the first default value of the mode of communication adopted earlier and switch to the next default value, namely that of joke telling, which is, of course, non-*bona-fide*. This switch will reconfirm the command, already arrived at in the analysis by that time (see the preceding paragraph), to the combinatorial rules to start looking for a competing script analysis of the entire text or part thereof in view of the Main Hypothesis (Section 1) and a subsequent discussion of script overlap in Section 3. Another clue, following from the discussion of script oppositeness in Section 4, will be to look for a special kind of a competing script, namely a potentially opposed script.

The strategy of the search built into the combinatorial rules can be presented schematically as (142):

- (142)     (i) Go back to the text and, beginning from the end, look for another script or node evoked by more than one word; go to (ii)
- (ii) If such an additional common script is found go to (v); if not found, go to (iii)
- (iii) Go for the oppositeness instructions: if there are still directions there which have not been applied, apply the next direction; if there are no directions left, register defeat and go to (iv)
- (iv) Characterize the text as not belonging to the joke-telling mode of communication and switch to the next default value of non-*bona-fide* communication (probably lying)
- (v) Check the compatibility of the discovered additional common script with the text: if it is compatible with at least a part of the text, go to (vi); if it is not, register defeat and go to (iv)
- (vi) Go to the oppositeness instructions and check the suitability of one of them for the obtained pair of scripts, i.e., the one compatible with the first interpretation of the text and the script discovered in (ii): if a suitable type of oppositeness is discovered, go to (vii); if not, register defeat and go to (iv)
- (vii) Recognize the analyzed text as a joke characterized by the opposition of the type determined in (vi) between the two obtained scripts

In the case of joke (109), the first interpretation of the text established above puts forward the script MEDICAL, or DOCTOR. In general, the process of script analysis of a sentence leads to the recognition of such a macroscript characterizing the entire situation. There are at least two alternative ways of getting at the macroscript. The process of interpretation as described above suggests one of the alternatives, namely adopting the most frequently recurring script as the macroscript. This route implies a sequence of rather complicated trial-and-error checks. The other way is almost identical technically but more subtle conceptually. It is based on the recognition of a difference between those scripts which are regular "static" semantic descriptions of the kind which have been introduced and used so far, on the one hand, and those which describe a process stage by stage, on the other. The first kind of script can be referred to as **atemporal**, i.e., not incorporating the notion of time or chronological sequence, while the other will then be **temporal**. Basically the same distinction is captured by Schank's (1976) usage of the terms 'frame' and 'script.' In script-based semantics, the term 'scenario' is usually reserved for the temporal scripts. It is typical for a temporal script to be a chronologically (and perhaps otherwise as well) ordered sequence of atemporal scripts.

The script MEDICAL is then the scenario, or the temporal script, evoked by the text of joke (109). As has been demonstrated on this example, in script-based semantics, the semantic interpretation of the text is a function of the scenario discovered in its script analysis, and an ambiguous sentence will, of course, be associated with two or more scenarios. Beginning to look for another scenario, the combinatorial rules will be instructed first to go back to those words of the second sentence of the text which do not evoke the script or node MEDICAL. Those include at least *young*, *and*, *pretty*, *wife*, *whisper*, *come*, *right*, and *in*. The combinatorial rules will soon discover the concealed script of SEX, evoked much less obviously perhaps but no less persistently than the script MEDICAL is evoked by other words, by at least the words *pretty* and *wife* as well as the inferences and probable inferences of (133i) and (134i). *Whisper* in combination with the probable inference of (138) will then match the temporal script LOVER, or ADULTERY.

Since the search for a competing scenario is successful in the case of joke (109), the next step is to carry out (142v). The scenario will, in fact, turn out to be perfectly compatible with the second sentence and not contradicted by anything in the first sentence either.

The next step (142vi) requires a set of oppositeness instructions. On the basis of Section 4, two lists can be obtained and easily formalized for use

by the combinatorial rules. The first list (143) captures the three basic types of the real/unreal dichotomy; the second list contains a few essential features frequently evoked in jokes and mentioned at the end of Section 4.

(143)	If Script (Scenario) 1 is:	then Script (Scenario) 2 is:
	(i) actual	non-actual
	(ii) normal	possible
	(iii) possible	impossible
(144)	(i) goodness-related	badness-related
	(ii) life-related	death-related
	(iii) non-sex-related	sex-related
	(iv) non-money-related	money-related
	(v) high-stature-related	low-stature-related

The list in (144) is perhaps not exhaustive but representative and clearly sufficient for most, if not all, simple jokes analyzed in the book.

The two scenarios of joke (109) will then be associated with (143i) and (144iii), and the last step, (142vii), will then lead to the following result (145) of the entire script analysis of the joke:

- (145) Analysis of: Text (109)  
 Result: Joke  
 Script 1: MEDICAL (DOCTOR)  
 Script 2: ADULTERY (LOVER)  
 Type of oppositeness: Actual/Non-actual, Sex-related

There are some elements of joke (109) which the script analysis leaves out. They are discussed in Sections 8 and 9, after the next section deals with the relations between the semantic theory of humor proposed here and based on script analysis, on the one hand, and the major theories and ideas about humor surveyed in Chapter 1, on the other.

## 7. THEORIES OF HUMOR: SCRIPT-BASED INTERPRETATION

Hazlitt's long list of things "we laugh at" (1819, 8-9; see also Chapter 1, Section 1) becomes surprisingly congruent and homogeneous when interpreted in terms of the three basic types of the real/unreal script oppositeness (see Section 4). Thus, the actual/non-actual type is represented by his

“absurdity... a bottle nose in a caricature... a stuffed figure of an alderman.” The possible/impossible type is exemplified by “what we do not believe.” Practically all the other laughable things belong to the normal/abnormal type of opposition: most of the things people do not expect to see can make them laugh, and Hazlitt does seem to favor this type of opposition over the other two.

The script interpretation of the varying sense of humor with different people includes three basic factors (146):

(146)	People “with a sense of humor”:	People “without a sense of humor”:
(i)	switch easily and readily from the <i>bona-fide</i> mode of communication to the joke-telling mode;	refuse to switch from the <i>bona-fide</i> mode of communication to the joke-telling mode
(ii)	have more scripts available for oppositeness interaction	have fewer scripts available for oppositeness interaction
(iii)	have more oppositeness relations between scripts available	have fewer oppositeness relations between scripts available

(146i-iii) are also related to Freud’s conditions for humor (1905, 282-285; see also Chapter 1, Section 3). A “generally cheerful mood” which he considers “the most favorable condition for the production of comic pleasure” means also a certain degree of playfulness (cf. Fry, 1963; Huizinga, 1938; see also Chapter 1, Section 6), and the latter can actually be interpreted as the left part of (146i). Unless the switch can be made easily and willingly the person cannot be “attuned to comic pleasure” either. The “humorless” people are less prepared to make the switch also because they tend to interpret the deliberate and often not entirely meaningful ambiguity involved in humor (see Section 5) seriously, i.e., they tend to make an earnest and usually futile attempt to disambiguate the text. In other words, they behave according to the cooperative principle of *bona-fide* communication. In Freud’s terms, this kind of behavior is focusing “precisely on the comparison from which the comic may arise,” and apparently the effort can *bona-fide* what is intended as a non-*bona-fide* mode of communication.

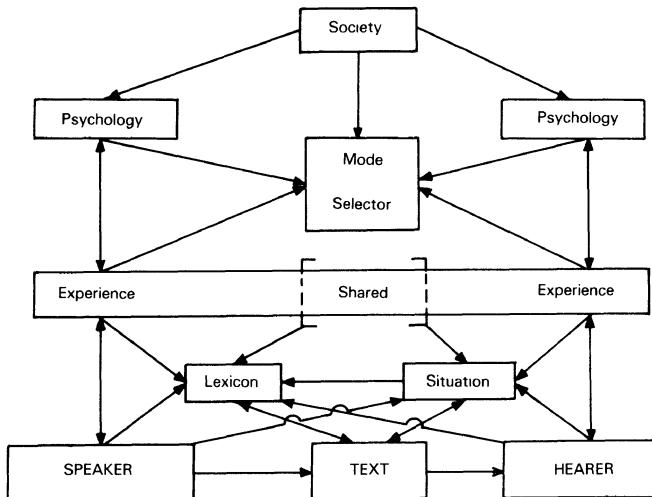
The unavailability of scripts for oppositeness interaction as well as of oppositeness relationships with those people can be explained either by their being preoccupied with the kinds of mental activity which are incompatible with non-*bona-fide* communication or by their placing strong emotions on various scripts and ways to oppose them in a joke. Obviously, a seriously tabooed subject is hardly unlikely to amuse the person who maintains the taboo. Religious, ethical, and other norms can preclude the availability of the necessary second interpretation for the humorous text (see Section 4).

It is clearly the factors in the right part of (146) which made Ludovici (1932) and other foes of humor so unreceptive and unsympathetic to it.

Scripts are involved in all the components of our definition of the verbal joke (3) (see Chapter 1, Section 1). The speaker and hearer interact with regard to modes of communication in the ways discussed in Section 2 according to the rules dictated to them in part by their psychologies and the society to which they belong. Each of them has a certain number of scripts and oppositeness relationships available to them. These are determined by their individual experiences and especially their shared experience (cf. Karttunen and Peters's "common ground," or "the common set of presumptions" (1979, 13) and Stalnaker's (1974) "presupposition set") and are selected from the larger set available again to their society. The text of the joke, along with the situation in which the speaker and hearer find themselves, evokes certain scripts from their repertoire(s).

The interaction of all of these components is schematically represented in (147). The speaker and hearer's knowledge of their language makes a certain set of scripts available to them in the form of the internalized lexicon of their native language. Their experience, individual and especially shared, narrows this set of scripts to a somewhat narrower subset of scripts which are actually significant or relevant for the speaker and hearer. The text and the situation reduce the subset to the minimum subsubset of scripts which are actually used in interpreting the text. The society also contributes to the process of selection of scripts by making some scripts much more readily available to the speaker and hearer than some other scripts. Thus, in the establishment culture of the United States of America, the script for starting a car is much more readily available to the native speakers than the script for cooking the human tenderloin. More importantly, the society and the participants' psychologies affect their mode-switching mechanisms. The switch leads to the adoption of a different cooperative principle and, indirectly but importantly, influences the process of script selection again.

(147)



Script interpretations are easily available for various premises, ideas and hypotheses reviewed in Chapter 1. Thus, Bergson's insistence on the non-individual, impersonal nature of humor (1899, 159; see also Chapter 1, Section 3) is not only related to Freud's stipulation that there should be no strong emotion about anything mentioned in the joke but also to the fact that the individualization will necessarily lead to the evocation of more script material than is necessary for the joke. Thus, for instance, the joke (9) is impossible as a joke if you know the two people mentioned there personally – it becomes a real-life anecdote with the following two possibilities: either the story is true or it is false. In the latter case, the text is not funny. In the former case, either the patient means what he says literally or he does not. If he does, the text is not funny. If he does not, the text is a *bona-fide* report of the patient's joke and not a joke itself. The availability of the individual scripts, the knowledge of the people involved and the situation in which they find themselves makes one follow all those paths and “kills” the joke.

All the lists of funny things mentioned in Chapter 1 after Hazlitt's inventory (Sully, 1902, 87-118 – see also Chapter 1, Section 3; Monro, 1951, 40 – see also Chapter 1, Section 5; Monro, op.cit., 75 – see also Chapter 1, Section 6; Aubouin, 1948, 83-129 – see also Chapter 1, Sections 5 and 7) are readily and meaningfully interpretable in terms of the basic types of script oppositeness. This has the effect of invalidating the frequent complaints and lamentations of humor theorists and practitioners about the elusive nature of humor which escapes all generalization and definition (see, for instance,

Monro, 1951, 15-19 and Levine, 1969, 1-2 – see also Chapter 1, Section 1) – it is, of course, difficult to enumerate all the scripts and oppositeness relations which may create a joke but the principle of two scripts and an oppositeness relation, the principle captured in the Main Hypothesis (see Section 1), provides the desirable degree of unification to the complex phenomenon of humor.

It also makes it clear to what extent the various taxonomies of humor mentioned in Chapter 1 are inherently heterogeneous. Some of them are related to the nature of individual scripts evoked by the text of the joke, others to the nature of the oppositeness relation, still others to the nature of the trigger. One type of classification, the one pertaining to the method of presenting the text, to its length, word and sentence order, etc., is actually irrelevant from the point of view of the script-based semantic theory of humor to the extent that all of these factors do not influence the script analysis of the text of the joke. Does it mean that the theory is blind to the timing of the joke, the position and format of the punch line and other accompanying factors mentioned in Chapter 1, Section 3? This issue is addressed at length in Section 9.

The three major classes of theories of humor outlined in Chapter 1, Section 6, display the same heterogeneity of approach as the taxonomies of humor.

The **incongruity-based theories** seem to address the issue of the deliberate ambiguity of the text of the joke, the availability of two interpretations and, to a certain extent with some theorists, the unreal nature of one of the interpretations (see also Leacock, 1937, 212 and 215; Mindess, 1971, 86-87; Fry, 1963, 45, 147-152; and Chapter 1, Section 7). Bergson's special kind of incongruity depends on the opposition of the natural and mechanical scripts (1899, 84 – see also Chapter 1, Section 6).

The **disparagement-based theories** seem to attempt a reduction of all humor to one particular kind of script oppositeness, namely (144i), with the badness associated either with the hearer or with one of the heroes of the joke. They also derive the oppositeness inherent in every joke from the direct confrontation between two people in a battle.

The **release-based theories** concentrate on the switch from *bona-fide* communication to the joke-telling mode: the freedom “from the chains of our perceptual, conventional, logical, linguistic, and moral systems” (Mindess, 1971, 28 – see also Chapter 1, Section 6) means that the speaker and hearer undertake to go beyond the regular cooperative principle of *bona-fide* communication, which prohibits ambiguity, absurdity, etc., into a more

“relaxed” though also rule-governed mode of humor. The suppression/repression element which is often associated with this theory is easily interpreted in script terms as a preference for those oppositions relations in which one of the scripts pertains to a tabooed area, e.g., sex, violence, evacuation, etc.

It is clear from this brief “translation” of major theories and ideas about humor into the language of scripts that script analysis provides a simple, homogenous, and unifying basis for all of them. Everything that can be said about humor without scripts can be expressed in their terms but not vice versa. Being formally defined and based on an explicit semantic theory, the scripts allow for important generalizations which are unavailable without them. They also resolve the conflicts among the three reigning types of theories of humor by demonstrating quite unequivocally the partial nature of each of them and their emphasis on just one specific aspect of humor. The script-based theory of humor provides a universal framework which is completely neutral with regard to the major theories and non-committal as to the truth or falsity of their claims. Some reservations about the theory are discussed in the next two sections.

#### 8. APPARENT COUNTEREXAMPLES

It was demonstrated in Sections 4-6 how the script-based semantic theory is applied to the simple joke. According to the Main Hypothesis (see Section 1), each such joke is created by a (partial) overlap of two opposed scripts. Obviously, the theory can be falsified in two ways: if at least one example of a joke is produced which does not conform to the Main Hypothesis or if at least one example of a text is produced which conforms to the Main Hypothesis but is not funny. This section will deal with the former kind of counterexample. The latter kind of counterexample will be discussed somewhat indirectly in Section 9. It should be noted in passing that since the script-based semantic theory of humor is falsifiable in principle, according to Popper’s (1972, 13ff.) philosophy of science, it is a valid theory.

Not every joke is a simple joke. Does it mean that every joke which is more sophisticated may constitute a counterexample to the theory? (148) is an example of a non-simple joke:

- (148) Little Vova’s elder brother, a high school junior, started getting poor grades. He and his father had a little talk, and the father said, “I remember myself at your age and I understand very well

what is wrong with you. I wish my father had done what I am going to do for you. Here - take five rubles and get yourself a girl. She will take care of your problem."

The boy's sister overheard the conversation and stopped him on the way out, "Listen, give the money to me - I will take care of your problem, and the money will remain in the family." The boy agrees, and they go to her room. In a little while the girl exclaims, "Wow, your prick is much larger than Daddy's!" "Yes," he answers, "Mommy told me so too." And little Vova, who hears all that, says to himself, "What a whorish family I come from!" (Soviet, 1960's)

The two opposing scripts will be identified by the script analysis easily enough: FAMILY and SEX. They will also be assigned to the normal/abnormal basic type of script opposition. Informally, what is involved here is the opposition of the normal asexual relations between family members and the intense incestual activity in little Vova's family. What complicates the script analysis of (148), however, is the fact that the scripts are opposed more than once. In fact, (148) is not an unusual concatenation of a number of simple jokes. The first three sentences of the joke ending in "the money will remain in the family" constitute the first joke, a rather feeble one perhaps but with all the necessary components in place. The girl's mention of her father realizes another opposition of basically the same two scripts, and the boy's mention of his mother introduces a third opposition. It is all crowned by little Vova's pronouncement, which while quite seriously intended, constitutes a joke, very feeble again, on its own with a slight variation of the same theme: it is not simply FAMILY vs. SEX but, more specifically, CHILD vs. SEX; in other words, a young child is not expected to understand such things or to use such language (see also Chapter 5, Sections 2 and 4).

Joke A221 in Appendix 2 is another example of a multiple-opposition joke: the first joke consists of the first three sentences of the text, and the second joke is created by the last two. Here the constituent jokes are not equal - the first one can exist without the other; the second joke has to be built on top of the first one, which introduces the necessary material for it.

This is the case in (148) as well: the first joke is independent, the next two are perhaps somewhat less dependent on the first one and could, in principle, constitute independent jokes but some rewording would be necessary, probably along the lines of (149). However, they would be better together, and, besides, a significant factor which adds greatly to joke (148) will be

missing from the text. The factor, captured by a phrase like (150), would spoil the joke(s) if simply added to the text. The first joke introduces this element much more innocuously (see also Section 9).

- (149)      (i) “Wow,” a girl told her brother, “your prick is much larger than Daddy’s.”
- (ii) “Mommy also told me that my prick is larger than Daddy’s,” said the boy to her sister.
- (150)      when they were making love to each other for the first time

The last fragment of (148), involving little Vova, while containing a self-sufficient script opposition, would be very weak without the preceding text as well.

Jokes like (148) and A221 can be called **compound jokes**, and the only difference between them and the **simple jokes** is that the script analysis has to be applied to them more than once. An additional conceptually simple and technically accessible device combining the multiple opposition into one joke is necessary for their full analysis.

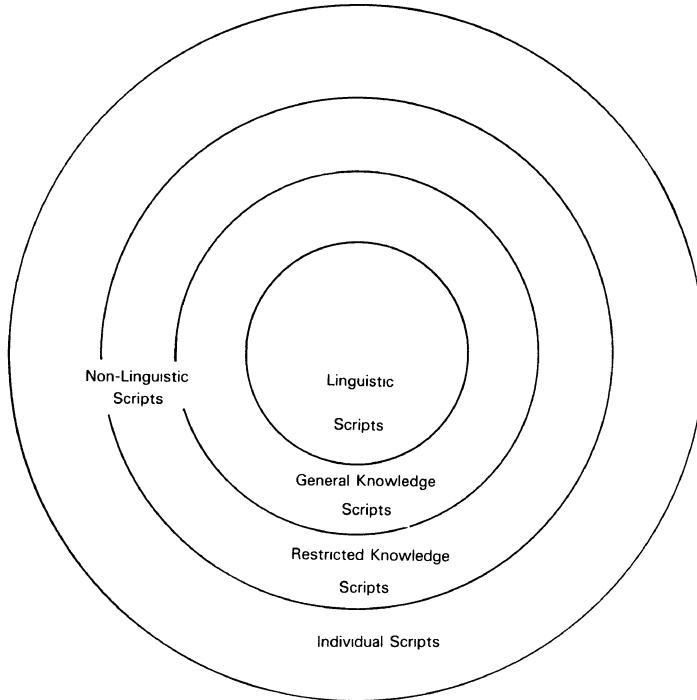
The compound jokes are the simplest type of apparent counterexamples to the Main Hypothesis, and, with minor adjustments to be made, they turn out to be not counterexamples.

The other type of apparent counterexamples involves non-elementary scripts of various degrees of complexity and sophistication.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Section 1, and demonstrated in part in Section 6, the semantic interpretation of many ordinary sentences in natural language requires the use of semantic information which is not contained in the sentence explicitly but is rather presupposed, entailed or implied by it. A significant part of this information is captured by the script-based lexicon of a natural language (see Chapter 3, Section 4), and it is this part which can be assumed to be immediately available to every proficient native speaker of the language (obviously, some individual and dialectal variation takes place here, just as in the case of slightly different vocabularies with different native speakers, but this variation will be ignored here in conformance with the principle of idealization of the material briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, Section 1, and restated in Chapter 2, Section 4). However, besides these linguistic scripts there are many other scripts which are part of the native speaker’s knowledge of the world, or encyclopedic knowledge. Some of it is immediately adjacent to the linguistic knowledge, i.e., accessible to a large number of speakers (cf. Chomsky, 1975, 30). Others are much more restricted. Schematically and simplistically, the entire script baggage of the native

speaker can be represented as a number of concentric circles, as shown in (151):

(151)



Thus, the script relating the auto industry to the prime rate may be thought of as belonging to General Knowledge for the native speakers of American English in the 1980's. The script relating the comedian George Burns to the Dean belongs in the Restricted Knowledge component for the faculty members of the School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education at Purdue University at the same time. The script relating magnetic tape to a personal career disaster is an individual script for Richard Nixon (and, possibly, for a few other similarly unfortunate individuals). Obviously, the semantic elements making up the restricted scripts are all contained in the continuous lexical graph of the language; what a restricted script does is to connect those elements with each other with direct and/or shorter paths than those which normally link them in the graph.

A non-elementary script may be based on a number of elementary scripts and still remain within the realm of linguistic scripts. The script analysis of a joke involving one or more non-elementary script may require a little more effort, for instance, in inferencing, but it will remain firmly within the sphere of application of the proposed theory, and no apparent counterexamples are created. In fact, quite a few of the jokes analysed in Sections 3-5 do involve non-elementary scripts. Thus, in (8), the actual scripts involved in the opposition are not immediately LIFE and DEATH but rather ORDINARY WEEK and EXECUTION, which are derived from LIFE and DEATH, respectively, and are less basic or elementary than LIFE and DEATH.

The difficulties for script analysis arise when a script evoked by the joke is of a restricted nature. The simplest case of such humor is a joke based on allusion. Some examples of allusion have, in fact, been included in the corpus of examples and discussed briefly earlier (see (26-28) and Chapter 2, Section 1). A typical straightforward allusion underlies also (152):

- (152) Nancy Reagan insisted on the free distribution of the Government butter surplus to the truly needy. She said, 'Even these poor people must have something to dip their lobster tails into.' (Johnny Carson's monologue, NBC, February 1982)

In order to understand the joke the hearer must have internalized a number of scripts corresponding to the knowledge informally described in (153):

- (153) (i) The Government is, indeed, distributing surplus butter to the poor  
(ii) The Reagans are frequently described as rich and friends of the rich  
(iii) Lobster tails are expensive, and the poor cannot afford them

It is clear that if any one of the elements in (153) turned out to be false, the joke would be seriously affected. It would lose much of its effectiveness if (153i) were false, i.e., if Carson were simply fantasizing, but it would collapse entirely if either of (153ii-iii) were falsified. (153iii) seems to be of a more general nature than (153i-ii). In fact, many of Carson's political, local and *ad hominem* jokes, almost all of which are allusive, fall flat because his audience does not possess the necessary

knowledge to which the jokes allude (and/or is too "relaxed" to watch the "Laugh" sign closely enough).

A few jokes in Appendix 2 are relatively simple allusions as well. Thus, A213 alludes to the fact that everybody in Russia knows that *Eugene Onegin* was written by Pushkin; A214 to the widespread belief in Israel that David Levy, now a Deputy Prime Minister, is so dumb and ignorant that he mixes up even elementary foreign words and expressions; A215 to the fact that many inhabitants of Boston are Pope-loving Catholics; A223 to the fact that it is very far from Vancouver to Japan and it is impossible for a human being to swim over (the particular opposition of scripts here, involving DEATH, assigns the joke to the rich class of *humour noir* – cf. Breton, 1966).

In many jokes the allusion is further complicated by the presence of another phenomenon. Thus, in (154), the allusion is clearly to something like (155); however, in addition to that, the opposed scripts are of rather a sophisticated variety (156) and have themselves to be based on a further allusion to something like (157) in order to convey the message (158).

- (154) A man sitting in his living room in front of a TV set turns to his wife and says, "Funding for the 'Dick Cavett Show' has been provided by this station and other public television stations, and by a grant from the Chubb Group of Insurance Companies, with additional funding from Allen Services Corporation." (Verbalization of Stan Hunt's cartoon, *The New Yorker*, Vol.LIV, No.52, February 12, 1979, 31)
- (155) The content of the man's statement is displayed and voiced verbatim before and after each installment of the program is broadcast
- (156) Informative communication vs. uninformative (redundant, vacuous, trivial, self-obvious) communication
- (157)
  - (i) It is widely believed that watching TV adversely affects people's mental capacities
  - (ii) Long, official-sounding, and grammatically complex sentences are unlikely to occur in casual conversation
  - (iii) Husbands and wives usually have informal, casual conversation
- (158) In spite of the fact that the man watches an "intellectual" program on PBS he has become as dumb and uninteresting as any "Laverne and Shirley" fan

("Laverne and Shirley" is not, of course, mentioned or alluded to in (154) and is thrown in by this writer to vent malice and to emphasize the point of (158) even further.)

In many sophisticated jokes, allusion takes the form of parody. Thus, (159) presupposes the hearer's familiarity with the libretto of "The Swan Lake" or some other "typical ballet" as well as with the genre of ballet libretto, and makes fun of it. Besides that, some knowledge of mermaids, frogs turned princes or princesses, etc., is necessary, along with a good notion of human and bird anatomy as well as of sexual intercourse among humans, to get the obscene nature of the joke:

- (159) Sigmund is astounded to see that she is part swan and part woman - unfortunately, divided lengthwise. (Allen, 1976, 21)

The most restricted script alluded to by the joke is, of course, the specific ballet libretto, and this is exactly what the joke is designed to parody. In this case, some primitive sexual joke remains even if the parody element is unavailable to the hearer. In many other parodies, nothing remains of the joke if the parodied script is not accessible. This seems to be true, for instance, of A201 parodying a typical "last word" story and also feeding on an ethnic stereotype of the "overlogical" Jew (cf. Chapter 6). A few more jokes in Appendix 2 are typical parodies: A202 (ritual of self-introduction); A203 (typical medical advice); A204 (race relations); A205 and A208 (psychoanalysis); A206 (religious ritual); A207 (a racist cliché); A209 (dirty talk and official jargon); A210 and A211 (heroic memoirs); A212 (Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*); A217 (standing in line for commodities); A218 (thought about death and complains about jobs); A219 (diary); A220 (thoughts about the essence of life); A221 (gynecological examination); A222 (Dorothy Parker's poem); A224 (philosophical discussion about the universe and (ethnic?) fear of involvement); A225 (a cliché about meeting a particular person about whom one heard before). Some of the parodies are further structured: they may reverse the parodied situation, e.g., jokes A203, A206, A208; double the parody, e.g., A209, A221, or A224; combine it with non-elementary scripts, e.g., A218, and with allusions of a non-parodical nature, e.g., A202, A204, A209-11, A217. The parodied material may be a particular work of art, a genre, a ritual or a typical situation, a literary or everyday cliché.

A special though not unusual type of joke is created by parodying familiar jokes. In a recent example (160), a joke is made by refusing to

make it and thus alluding to a primitive joke concerning something obscene, e.g., masturbation, and assumed to be immediately available to the hearer (it was, judging by their response):

(160) Suzanne Somers: In my childhood I was sort of "out of it." I spent most of the time in the closet.

Johnny Carson: (Pause) Not I, folks. You supply the punch line yourselves. (*The "Tonight" Show, NBC, February 19, 1982*)

Every time an allusion of any kind is made, the involved script is a **metascript**, i.e., a script evoking another script assumed to be available to the hearer.

The successful application of the script analysis demonstrated in Section 6 to the material of all the apparent counterexamples is contingent on the availability of the involved scripts to the hearer, including, of course, the metascripts. A strictly linguistical theory of humor would have to rely only on the linguistic scripts and ignore all the other scripts in (151). However, a conceptually obvious extension of such a theory is created immediately by adding scripts from the external circles in (151) to the available lexicon, and the straightforward extension of the Main Hypothesis to this material will still hold true. The feasibility of such an extension is an issue which does not have to be addressed here simply because it belongs in linguistic theory, where, at least for some researchers (see Chapter 3, Sections 1-2), the difference between semantics and pragmatics and the feasibility of both and especially of the latter hinges on the solution of this problem. A number of extensions of this sort are carried out practically and briefly noted in Chapters 5-7.

A few less significant reservations about the Main Hypothesis are dealt with in the next section.

#### 9. JOKE CONSTRUCTION

The Main Hypothesis and the script analysis of verbal humor determine to a great extent the general strategy involved in joke making, and this section is devoted to some elements of this general strategy. In the course of the discussion, some "accompanying factors" of verbal humor mentioned in Chapter 1, Section 3, and ignored so far in this chapter will be discussed in script-related terms, and the question whether the script-based semantic theory of humor is blind to them, brought up in Section 7, will be addressed.

Joke construction is interesting to discuss in application to what Fry called the ‘situation jokes’ rather than the ‘canned jokes.’ To repeat in part the quotation in Chapter 1, Section 5, the former “are *spontaneous* and have, to a major extent, their origin in the ongoing interpersonal (or intrapersonal) process” (Fry, 1963, 43). It is also more revealing to discuss the strategy utilized by the speaker in the case of an intended rather than an unintended joke (see Chapter 1, Section 5, for further discussion and references). Both the canned and unintended jokes will, in fact, be also covered in the following discussion, and brief comments to this effect will be made in the appropriate places.

All intended humor begins with an **impulse to make a joke**. What creates the impulse goes beyond the proposed theory though it was discussed in detail in Chapter 1. The reasons for wanting to make a joke have to do with the general acceptability or desirability of humor from the physiological, psychological, or sociological point of view. Somewhat more specifically, the speaker may be interested in establishing a bond with the hearer, to relieve some tensions, anxieties or affects which are believed to interfere with humor, or to make believe that the relief is achieved. It is known, for instance, that especially in contemporary American custom, the public speaker tends to begin his or her address to an unfamiliar audience with a joke.

The speaker enters the domain for which the proposed theory is responsible at the moment when the impulse to make a joke is there for whatever reason. According to the proposed theory of humor, at this stage if the speaker wants to make a joke he is responsible for the following five factors (161):

- (161)      (i) A switch from the *bona-fide* mode of communication to the *non-bona-fide* mode of joke telling
- (ii) The text of an intended joke
- (iii) Two (partially) overlapping scripts compatible with the text
- (iv) An oppositeness relation between the two scripts
- (v) A trigger, obvious or implied, realizing the oppositeness relation

Some of the factors in (161) may already be in place at this stage (in fact, even prior to this stage, the impulse to make a joke may already be given or imposed on the speaker – if, for instance, he is a professional comedian), and then the speaker has to provide the remaining elements.

(161i), a **switch to the joke-telling mode of communication**, may have already taken place if a playful, mirthful, or humorous mood prevails between the speaker and hearer(s). This can occur as a result of the preceding humorous behavior which attuned the participants, especially the hearer(s), to the joke-telling mode. If the hearer is not in the joke-telling mode of communication, the speaker has the choice of putting the hearer in that mode explicitly or implicitly. The former way includes various forms of non-verbal behavior such as clowning, horseplay, grimacing, practical jokes, etc., as well as some standard mode-switching clues of the kind discussed in Chapter 1, Section 3 (e.g., "Did you hear this one?" or "A funny thing happened to me on the way to..."). The latter includes various ways of signalling to the hearer that a joke is being told, for instance, by building in an obvious exaggeration, implausibility, etc.

The **text of the joke** should contain all the elements of (161) missing from the situation the speaker is in, either overtly or through inferences, while the elements which are in place already should be presupposed by the text. Thus, if the joke-telling mode has already been achieved there is no need to include an implicit or explicit mode-switching clue if, of course, it does not serve any other purpose in the joke (e.g., an obvious exaggeration such as "I made my usual million and a half typos in the proposal" can both signal a joke and introduce the unreal script for opposition).

The presence of an **obvious trigger** in the situation starts perhaps more jokes than anything else. The popularity, accessibility and frequency of the simple puns can be explained by this factor. For many speakers, the mere exposure to a homonymous or polysemous word or phrase constitutes an irresistible temptation to make a joke. If the hostess at a dinner party mentions breasts or legs distributing the chicken, compulsive punners may be a menace and an embarrassment, and the attempt to avoid this situation by using such euphemisms as *dark meat* and *light meat* may provoke a reference to the blondes and brunettes in the company or at least to the time of day. It is the easy availability of puns which makes them a cheap and somewhat despicable type of humor for many individuals and social groups. However, the same factor prevents them from disappearing, and every new generation goes through many cycles of discovering the puns, getting tired of them, rejecting them and eventually rediscovering them again.

The fact of the matter is that the quality of the pun depends not so much on the trigger itself as on the other four components of the joke from (161). If the trigger is there but the scripts and the oppositeness relation are not, the pun remains an artificial low-quality product. Thus, in the case of dark

and light meat and the color of people's hair, the two scripts are not opposed in any meaningful way, and the vaguely sex-related connotations of the words *blonde* and *brunette* are unlikely to save the situation dramatically. In the right frame, however, with all the necessary components in place, the pun may trigger an excellent joke, and many hearers will not even realize that the trigger of the joke is a trivial pun because their attention will be drawn to the evoked scripts and their opposition.

Most frequently, the speaker is likely to discover a **potential trigger and one script** already in position. The success of the joke depends on the speaker's ability to construct a text evoking another script which will be opposed to the given script in a humorously significant way. Often the other script is prompted by the other meaning(s) of the homonymous or polysemous trigger. If the other script is not obvious to the hearer as well, the mere evocation of it may make a joke. Thus, for instance, if at the presentation by a visiting professor a colleague utters *Visiting professors can be boring*, the sentence, similarly to (61), is syntactically ambiguous. This ambiguity, illustrated by (62), turns out to be not immediately discernible by all the native speakers exposed to it. It is possible to make the ambiguity into a(n admittedly feeble) joke by making the concealed interpretation evoke a script which would be opposed to the one the utterance evoked initially in some standard way, for instance, by way of the sex-related opposition. *Not if the visiting professor is a gorgeous blonde and you visit her in her apartment* uttered in response to the first sentence will constitute a joke based on that opposition. The realization of the presence of the other script requires an effort, the trigger – the syntactic ambiguity – is not of the most obvious kind, and therefore the second utterance has to be straightforward, self-explanatory and not too snappy. A mere *Not if she is a gorgeous blonde* would not quite do perhaps because for most speakers it will be too far removed from the first interpretation and will, therefore, fail to evoke the second interpretation.

On the other hand, if the **other script is obvious** and easily accessible and the trigger is simple, a more sophisticated textualization of the joke is possible and even preferable. Thus, if somebody says *She cannot bear children* in the sense of giving birth, *She cannot bear me either* may be too cheap though it is a legitimate joke (letting aside its tastefulness: the issue is sensitive for many people and therefore, according to Freud, their sense of humor will not be activated by the first sentence while the second may offend them – see Chapter 1, Section 3). *She cannot stand me either* is a little better because it is a step away from the previous version and less obvious. A slightly better joke can be made by evoking still another, less obvious

meaning of *bear*: if the lady in question is sly and catty and a disparaging remark is permissible, the response might be *No, but she could perhaps fox them*. Alternatively, if the lady is big, it could be *No, but she could perhaps elephant them*. (None of the above are great jokes, but their obvious home-made features help illustrate the construction principles better than any seamless finished product.)

In other words, if the **second script and the resulting opposition** are too obvious, more emphasis is placed on the speaker's joke-presenting techniques (Fry, 1963, 32-33 – see also Chapter 1, Section 3), which will be discussed in some more detail below.

Another possibility is for the speaker to observe **two scripts** in the discourse-cum-situation but **no trigger**. In this case, the speaker must provide the trigger himself. If he can think of an ambiguous word, phrase or construction, it will do the job. If not, there are some standard and more obvious triggers which he can use such as *This reminds me of....* Thus, if a lively conversation becomes a shouting match, the neutral observer can say something like *Bob, why don't you go for a field goal and leave Jill alone?* or say *This reminds me of last night's game: they wouldn't score but wouldn't let go of the ball, either.*

There are situations when the speaker has options concerning the second opposed scripts. While a list like (144) is always available to a proficient joker, in some cases the most readily available oppositeness relation is not permissible for ethical reasons – for instance, sex is ruled out because of a mixed and not intimate company, life and death cannot be used for religious or superstitious reasons, goodness and badness are ruled out because the audience may vary widely in their values, etc. In this case, there are two safe techniques which are widely used by public speakers and stand-up comedians: direct negation (see Section 5) and self-disparagement (see Chapter 1, Section 5).

The former provides a simple non-value-related oppositeness, usually of the actual/non-actual kind and is mildly humorous without the risk of offending anybody. Thus, entering a semi-empty lecture hall the scheduled lecturer can say something like *I knew the talk would be crowded* or any variation of it, stating explicitly or implying that there are too many people there while, in fact, there are not. In a similar situation, the instructor entering his classroom waits for a few moments for the students to stop chattering, and when it does not happen, announces, "I am here!" The announcement has a (proven) humorous effect because it implies something which is directly contrary to what is actually taking place: it implies that the

students cannot see the instructor while, in fact, they can and do. (Bergson would remark that humor is used here as a “social corrective” – see (1899, 187) and Chapter 1, Section 3.)

The self-disparagement humor is based on (144i), i.e., the goodness/badness opposition; it is inoffensive, however, at least technically because the speaker is the purported target of it. The opposed scripts are variations of I AM GOOD vs. I AM BAD theme, and, of course, many comedians use this kind of humor for camouflaged messages about other people (some, like Joan Rivers, combine self-disparagement directed, in fact, against other people, e.g., the flat-chested, the Jews, etc., with a more than healthy dose of straight disparagement jokes directed against other people, e.g., the well-endowed, the Jews, etc.). Rodney Dangerfield’s “no respect” jokes are almost pure examples of self-disparagement though his hearers manage to identify themselves even with the most implausible misfortunes which befall him such as having his “Preparation H” replaced by glue – his jokes are also very heavily allusive.

When **no elements of (161) are in position** but the impulse to make a joke is there, the speaker will often resort to a canned joke. The canned jokes work best when they are somehow associated with the situation. If, however, the situation has not yet begun to unfold, i.e., the speaker and the hearer have no common experience whatsoever, the speaker has the choice of telling a canned joke on a general subject assuming the availability of the necessary scripts to the hearer simply because they belong to either of the two inner circles in (151) or simulating a common ground by using a standard clue such as *A funny thing happened to me...,* commenting on the weather, the room, etc. (e.g., *Do you know what this room reminds me of?*). Another technique used by professional and amateur comedians alike is repetition: an innocuous and not humorous remark may become increasingly funny when repeated many times in a row appropriately or inappropriately. The opposed scripts of this kind are of a pretty non-elementary kind: the real world, in which many repetitions of the same thing do not occur very often, is opposed to the artificial world of mechanical repetitions (cf. Bergson, 1899, 118 – see also Chapter 1, Section 7).

In the opposite situation when, **all the elements are there** already and the speaker does not have to provide any of them, what happens is basically an unintended joke though the speaker may turn it into an intended joke by noticing it first. If he fails to do it, a mode discrepancy of the kind discussed in Section 2 can occur between him and the hearer (see (110-111) and the following discussion).

Besides (161), they are other elements which make jokes better or worse, namely the **joke-presenting techniques**. The length of a joke, the degree of its comprehensibility, the amount of detail, the timing and positioning of the punch line are perhaps the most important of them (cf. Chapter 1, Section 3). However, to the degree that these techniques do not interfere with any element in (161) they cannot make or break the joke on their own. Thus, a somewhat lengthy version of a good joke will still remain a joke if the redundant material does not interfere with the process of script evocation and does not make it impossible or difficult to capture the intended oppositeness relation.

If the joke is too trivial, the oppositeness relation may be not perceived by the hearer as a new element of information and may not be treated as an oppositeness relation at all (cf. the discussion of the somewhat trivial oppositeness relations involved in jokes A108 and A115 in Section 4). If the joke is not easily comprehensible, the necessary scripts may not be evoked and the oppositeness relation not obtained. The more effort is required for script evocation, the more time the hearer should be given to work on it. For this reason, many jokes are told as serials, with the same situation recurring a couple of times before the punch line is delivered (see, for instance, A128 or A133). This helps establish the first script very firmly before it is "disestablished." In any case, many jokes have a great deal of redundancy corroborating both scripts built into them for the same purpose (see Section 6).

Too much or too little detail may affect the process of script evocation in the same ways as the length and degree of comprehensibility.

The punch line can affect the joke very seriously largely because if it is worded or positioned wrongly or omitted, the switch from the *bona-fide* mode of communication to the joke-telling mode can be blocked and the joke will be killed entirely. This is what happens, for instance, in (162), which is, of course, a botched version of (109):

- (162) A funny thing happened to a friend of mine. He had bronchitis and went to see his doctor. The doctor's wife, who is young and pretty, opened the door. He asked her whether the doctor was in, and naturally, he had to whisper because he had lost his voice. The woman misunderstood him entirely and decided that he was whispering because he did not want to be overheard. She thought therefore that he had amorous designs on her and happily invited him to come in because, of course, her spouse was conveniently away and the two of them were alone.

While (162) may have still preserved some entertainment value for the frivolously minded, it is not a joke simply because the entire discourse remains within the domain of *bona-fide* communication and conforms entirely to the cooperative principle governing that mode. Deliberate ambiguity is excluded by that principle, and there is none whatsoever in (162).

Less serious misuses of the punch line may lower the quality of the joke significantly without killing it. In general, the less innocuous the punch line, the better the joke. In script-based terms, the punch line contains, or at least implies, the trigger, and the trigger is most effective when it effectuates the switch after the first script is firmly established. This creates the element of surprise valued by so many researchers of humor, and it explains why so many punch lines come at the very end of the text.

It should be emphasized once again, however, that to the extent that the joke-presenting techniques do not affect the elements of (161) and thus do not interfere with the script processing of the joke by the hearer, they are optional embellishments. In their optimum combination they lead to the best possible and most effective version of the joke. In their worst combination, they may spoil the joke considerably. But even a badly distorted joke remains a joke if the right scripts are evoked and the oppositeness relation is established.

The techniques, even if they do not interfere with the scripts, can be easily explained in terms of script analysis, possibly with the exception of the proverbial sound [k] (see Fry, 1963, 33). Thus, one of the most popular techniques is skipping a logical link and making the hearer reconstruct it. This is only effective if the procedure does not interfere with the degree of comprehensibility of the joke. Joke A131 is a simple example: the missing logical link is the image of a long, warm, and comfortable nightgown with full sleeves, the opposite of the strapless evening dress, and it is never mentioned explicitly. In this particular case, it could be mentioned by name without killing the joke but spoiling it somewhat. In some other cases, supplying the missing link renders the joke too trivial and thus kills it by interfering with its script processing. Thus, in joke A134 adding a clause like , who was so excited that he mixed his words, after the word *driver* would trivialize the joke back to the *bona-fide* mode. A similar sophistication-raising technique is used when instead of the regular riddle/conundrum format (see, for instance, (10-13) as well as the discussion in Chapter 1, Section 4), Carson reverses the procedure by giving the answer first and asking to guess the question which leads to it.

To summarize this section and the entire chapter, the script analysis of verbal humor provides a unifying **theoretical and formal basis** for various intuitions people share about humor as well as a conceptually simple and an intuitively appealing explanation of the human ability to produce and understand jokes. Even more importantly, the script-based semantic theory of humor helps formulate the **necessary and sufficient conditions** for a text to be funny, i.e., a joke. In fact, the script analysis as demonstrated in Section 6 can be presented in terms of a **construction algorithm** which, given a script and a dictionary of potential triggers (or any other combination of given factors from (161)), will synthesize a joke automatically. Such an algorithm can, of course, be computerized, and a research project in this direction is underway. The point of the research is not so much to construct jokes artificially as to verify the proposed theory with the help of the ultimately formalized tool.

The next three chapters will be devoted to a script analysis of three specific kinds of humor, sexual, ethnic, and political, each of which involves a standard and easily accessible type of script oppositeness.