The Dynamics of Humor

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Summary:

What is humor? The common definition "humor is something that makes a person laugh or smile" has created the misunderstanding that everything that causes laughter is humor. Kitazume (2010), by explaining the falsity of equating laughter with humor, proposes that the essence of humor is a twist. Among varied theories of humor, one of the most quoted theories is Raskin's (1979, 1985) *Semantic Script Theory of Humor*. This paper examines his famous joke of a doctor's wife by analyzing it into literal and utterance meanings. By pointing out the deficiency of this theory and the inappropriateness of Oring's (2010) definition of humor, this paper proposes *Twist Theory* based on the definition of twist argued in Kitazume (2010).

Introduction

What is humor? One common definition among humorists is that humor is "something that makes a person laugh or smile." Therefore, the next question arises: what causes laughter?

A great number of psychologists and philosophers, as well as

linguists, have attempted to explain what causes laughter, expressing varied views on the subject. These theories can be classified into three groups of theories of laughter: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief theory.

Humorists are now seeking a comprehensive theory of humor that explains the essence of humor which covers all the three categories. One of the most noted theories of humor is *Semantic Script Theory of Humor* (abbreviated as *SSTH*) proposed by Raskin (1979, 1985), which was later developed into *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (abbreviated as *GTVH*) by Attardo and Raskin (1991).

This paper reveals the insufficiency of Raskin's (1985) argument by using pragmatically important notions of literal and utterance meanings. It claims that the expression *overlapping scripts* cannot distinguish between metaphor, ambiguity and humor. In addition, this paper explains the vulnerability of Oring's (2010) argument in that what he presents as an example of humor is only an absurd statement and not an example of humor.
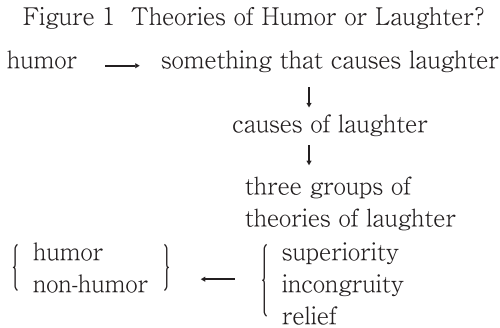
By pointing out that the essence of humor is a *twist*, as proposed by Kitazume (2010), this paper proposes *Twist Theory*, which explains in detail what causes laughter. It further clarifies the main effects of humor and the true intentions of humorists.

Humor and Laughter

Having explained the outline of humor studies, let us explore the problem with the three groups of theories: the tendency to equate laughter with humor. The definition "humor is something that makes a person laugh or smile" has misled many humorists into equating laughter with humor. It has created the misunderstanding that everything that causes laughter is

humor.

Let us illustrate how this problem occurs in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Theories of Humor or Laughter?

humor ⟶ something that causes laughter
↓
causes of laughter
↓
three groups of
theories of laughter

⎰ humor ⎱ ⟵ ⎰ superiority
⎱ non-humor ⎰   ⎱ incongruity
                              relief

The first line indicates the common definition among humorists: humor is something that causes laughter. It has led many humor theorists to figure out what causes laughter, as seen in the second line. A great number of theorists have proposed varied views on the subject. These theories can be classified into three groups of theories of laughter: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief theory. The mistake that many humorists tend to make is that they equate laughter with humor. This chart, however, clearly shows that the three groups of theories of laughter are theories of *laughter* and not theories of *humor*. Although the response is an important factor to count something as humor, we should not equate laughter with humor in that what causes laughter involves both humor and non-humor types, as shown in the bottom left of the figure. We must keep in mind that not all causes of laughter involve elements of humor.

Non-humor Cases that Cause Laughter

One can find various actions that do not necessarily involve humor. For example, humiliation and belittling others may cause laughter from the feeling of superiority over others, but these actions do not necessarily involve humor. In other words, we have occasionally seen cases in which purely aggressive remarks result in laughter.

There are other causes of laughter without elements of humor. When one is given a surprise birthday party, it is natural to be excited and pleased to find that which we did not expect. When we see a magician make an object appear or disappear, when we run into an old friend on the street, we will be pleasantly surprised. These examples do not normally involve elements of humor, yet they cause us to laugh from the incongruity between what we expect and what actually happens.

Furthermore, explicit sexual descriptions and obscene stories without humorous elements can please speakers and listeners, resulting in smile and laughter. The difference between these stories and sexual humor is whether they have elements of humor or not. These humorous elements enhance the laughter produced by the amusing topic of sex. At the same time, they have the effects of lessening harm caused by sexual talk, due to their clearly joking manner. Breaking inhibitions and taboos by touching upon major human fears, such as death or illness, and making offensive references to religion may arouse laughter among listeners by releasing tension. These actions can be done, however, without any elements of humor. The difference between actions that are humorous and not humorous is that those with humor are more likely to be accepted by society.

In addition to the causes of laughter proposed by the three groups of theories, entirely different cases of laughter can occasionally be observed.

Laughter and smiling can also be a sign of fear or embarrassment, as Ross (1998: 1) points out. For instance, the popular Japanese singer, Ayumi Hamasaki, confessed on her homepage that she burst into laughter when she was told by her doctor that her left ear can no longer function due to neglecting to have timely medical care. It may be assumed that her laughter came from her despair and embarrassment as a professional singer. Laughter is sometimes a manifestation of emotions that are extreme and overwhelming.

Kitazume (2010: 14) classifies the elements that cause laughter, as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2　Causes of Laughter

	Non-humor	Humor
Pleasant case	superiority	aggressive humor (superiority, humorous elements)
	incongruity	incongruous humor (incongruity, humorous elements)
	relief	relief humor (relief, humorous elements)
Unpleasant case	extreme emotions	

(Kitazume, 2010: 14)

The *non-humor* column in the middle signifies laughter that is not caused by elements of humor and is separated into *pleasant cases* and *unpleasant cases*. The feeling of superiority coming from being victorious by means of physical and verbal aggression, for example, would be listed in the cell *superiority*, the incongruity shown in magic, in the cell *incongruity*, and sexual talk, in the *relief* cell. *Non-humor* can include unpleasant cases, as in extreme emotions. These, however, are seldom made into humor.

The *humor* column shows causes of laughter produced by humor

as well as other causes of laughter. Aggressive humor, for instance, has *superiority* and *humorous elements*. Incongruous humor has *incongruity* as well as *humorous elements*. Sexual humor, for example, can be placed in the *relief humor* cell. It has elements of the relief theory as well as the elements of humor. This chart, which includes a column for causes of laughter that do not possess elements of humor, demonstrates how other humor theories that equate humor with laughter come up short.

Literal Meaning vs. Utterance Meaning

In the previous section we have analyzed the elements of humor in its various types. Before examining Raskin's argument by using pragmatically important notions of *literal meaning and utterance meaning*, we have to clarify what these linguistic terms mean.

Linguists have attempted to clarify how human beings communicate with one another. One of the most noted theories is what we call the *code model*. The *code model* explains that communication is achieved by encoding a message, transmitting it and being decoded by the hearer.

Pragmatic theorists, however, argue that human communication is not in many cases this simple. They insist that context as well as the mutual cognitive environment between the speaker and the hearer play an important role in recovering the speaker's intended meaning.

Grice (1975), arguing the importance of inference in interpretation, proposes the co-operative principle. He assumes that communication is a co-operative work between the speaker and the hearer. Communicator has certain general standards which he is trying to meet in communication. Those standards are the *Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner*. From these general standards, together with the context, it should be possible to infer the communicator's specific message. Examine

(1) to see how inference is made.

(1) Peter: Do you want some coffee?
     Mary: Coffee would keep me awake.

In (1), Mary does not directly answer Peter's question. However, if Peter knows that Mary does not want to stay awake, he would infer that she does not want any coffee. Peter makes this inference based on the assumption that Mary is obeying the maxim of *be relevant.*

Grice (1975) distinguishes two levels of meaning, namely *what is said* and *what is meant. What is said* is the proposition explicitly expressed by an utterance. *What is meant*, on the other hand, is the meaning the speaker intended to communicate in making a particular utterance.

In order to express *what is said* and *what is meant*, linguists make use of various terms. For example, Lyons (1987: 157) uses both *literal meaning* and *context-independent meaning* to refer to *what is said*, while *non-literal meaning* and *context-dependent meaning* to express *what is meant.* Searle (1979: 84) uses the terms *word, or sentence meaning* and *speaker's utterance meaning*, as shown in (2).

(2) To have a brief way of distinguishing what a speaker means by uttering words, sentences, and expressions, on the one hand, and what the words, sentences, and expressions mean, on the other, I shall call the former *speaker's utterance meaning*, and the latter, *word, or sentence meaning.*

In this paper, by simplifying Seale's terms, the term *literal meaning* is used to express *what is said*, while *utterance meaning* is used to express *what is meant.*
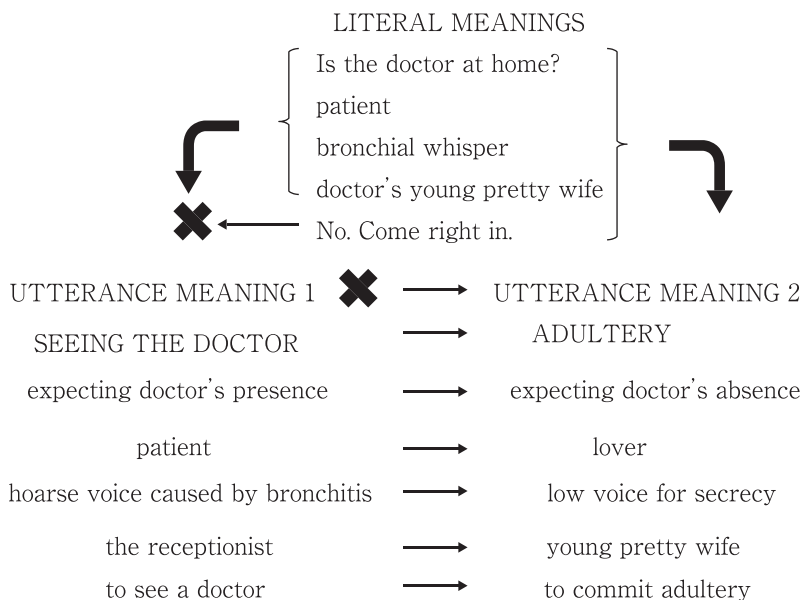
Humorous Elements

Having clarified the linguistic terms used in this paper, we will now look at what *humorous elements* actually are. The doctor's joke is a famous example of humor presented by Raskin (1985: 100) in explaining his *SSTH*, as seen in (3).

(3)　"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."

Raskin (1985: 105) describes this joke as involving an overlap of two scripts, DOCTOR and LOVER. The three words, *doctor*, *patient* and *bronchial* naturally evoke the script DOCTOR. Her invitation to *Come right in*, while the doctor is not at home, must strike the listener as somewhat odd and he begins to look for another interpretation. As soon as the appropriate script, LOVER, is evoked, all the previously odd pieces fall neatly into place. Raskin claims that these two overlapping scripts are perceived as opposite in a certain sense, and it is this oppositeness which creates the joke (Raskin, 1985: 100). This theory was developed into *GTVH* by Attardo and Raskin (1991).

　　I argue, however, that the expression of *overlap* in this explanation has a problem and should be clarified. Figure 3 illustrates how the joke is interpreted by analyzing the meanings of this joke into two levels: literal and utterance meanings.

Figure 3　Literal Meanings and Utterance Meanings

LITERAL MEANINGS

Is the doctor at home?
patient
bronchial whisper
doctor's young pretty wife
No. Come right in.

UTTERANCE MEANING 1　　　　　　　UTTERANCE MEANING 2
SEEING THE DOCTOR　　　　　　　　　ADULTERY

expecting doctor's presence	→	expecting doctor's absence
patient	→	lover
hoarse voice caused by bronchitis	→	low voice for secrecy
the receptionist	→	young pretty wife
to see a doctor	→	to commit adultery

The upper half shows literal meanings of five key expressions. The lower half illustrates utterance meanings; the left shows utterance meaning 1, while the right, utterance meaning 2. When a hearer listens to the first four expressions, utterance meaning 1 of SEEING THE DOCTOR on the left can be easily evoked based on the DOCTOR frame. However, the addition of the last sentence, *No. Come right in*, negates the originally expected utterance meaning 1, necessitating its change to a completely opposite utterance meaning 2 of ADULTERY on the right. Each utterance meaning in the SEEING THE DOCTOR scenario should be shifted to the ADULTERY scenario, as shown by arrows: from the *doctor's presence* to *his absence*, from a *patient* to a *lover*, from a *bronchial whisper* to *not to be heard*, from a *receptionist* to a *young pretty wife* and from *to see a doctor* to *to commit adultery*. There is no overlapping between the

utterance meanings of 1 and 2. The most notable action to be taken in the interpretation is a quick and sudden change that is similar to a reaction when something twisted is released from the suppression.

Although the four out of five literal meanings are overlapping, it does not mean that utterance meanings 1 and 2 are overlapping. It is clear that Raskin's *overlap of two scripts* is confusing literal meanings and utterance meanings. This joke involves two utterance meanings: one to be negated at the end and another one of the opposite meaning.

In order to clarify the difference more clearly, let us look into an example of metaphor.

(4)　Candle in the Wind: A Tribute to Princess Diana by Elton John
　　　Goodbye England's rose
　　　May you ever grow in our hearts
　　　You were the grace that placed itself
　　　Where lives were torn apart
　　　You called out to our country
　　　And you whispered to those in pain
　　　Now you belong to heaven
　　　And the stars spell out your name

　　　And it seems to me you lived your life
　　　Like a candle in the wind
　　　Never fading with the sunset
　　　When the rain set in
　　　And your footsteps will always fall here
　　　Along England's greenest hills
　　　Your candles burned out long before
　　　Your legend ever will

These are famous lyrics sung by Elton John as a tribute to Princess Diana. Diana is metaphorically expressed as *England's rose*, which has special connotations to British people. Michelle J. Hoppe (1999) writes that "England has always been known for its beautiful gardens. Whether it is the soil, the weather or the loving attention of the gardeners, flowers flourish. The best known of these is the rose, for not only is it a part of everyday life in England, it is a symbol of its royalty."

In this tribute, Princess Diana's life is described as a *candle in the wind*. The expression *a candle* describes her affectionate attitude to the vulnerable and people in pain, while *in the wind* shows that she herself is suffering and struggling in a heartless environment. The expression *your candles burned out* euphemistically denotes her death.

Figure 4 represents the structure of the first half of this eulogy by analyzing it into two meanings: literal and utterance meanings.

Figure 4   Princess Diana and England's Rose

LITERAL MEANINGS

Goodbye England's rose
May you ever grow in our hearts
You were the grace that placed itself
Where lives were torn apart

UTTERANCE MEANING 1
PRINCESS DIANA

Princess Diana
grace
live
national symbol
beautiful lady

UTTERANCE MEANING 2
ENGLAND'S ROSE

England's rose
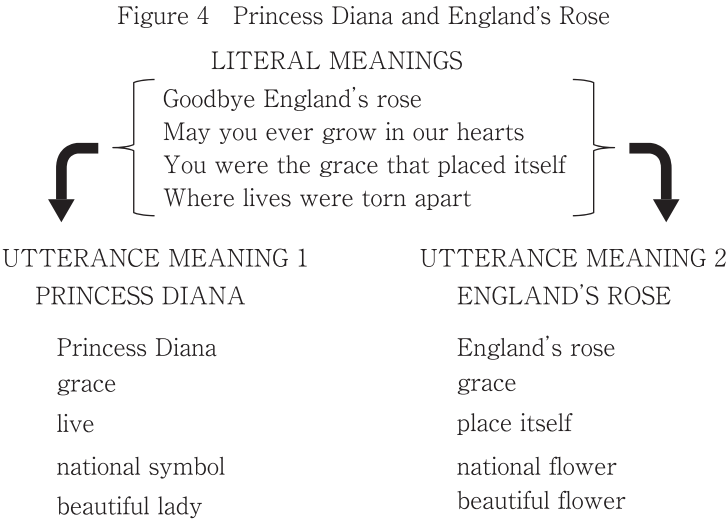grace
place itself
national flower
beautiful flower

Figure 4 shows that from four literal meanings, the utterance meaning 1 of PRINCESS DIANA and the utterance meaning 2 of ENGLAND'S ROSE can be interpreted. Princess Diana is metaphorically called *England's rose*. A graceful lady and graceful flower have an overlapping image of grace. The fact that Diana lived in England is expressed as *placed itself*. A national symbol and a national flower have an overlapping image, and so do a beautiful lady and a beautiful flower. To sum it up, both utterance meanings of PRINCESS DIANA and ENGLAND'S ROSE are overlapping in this lyric. Consequently we can say that metaphor has two overlapping images.

Figure 5 shows the structure of the latter half of the lyric.

Figure 5   Princess Diana and a Candle in the Wind

LITERAL MEANINGS

you lived your life
Like a candle in the wind
Never fading with the sunset
Your candles are burned out

UTTERANCE MEANING 1   UTTERANCE MEANING 2
PRINCESS DIANA'S LIFE   CANDLE IN THE WIND

Princess Diana   a candle
lived a beautifully shining life   never fading with the sunset
in adverse circumstances   in the wind
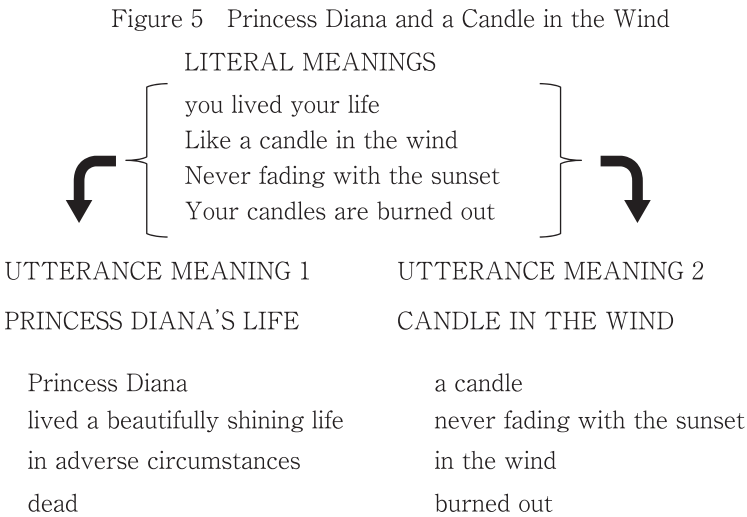dead   burned out

Figure 5 shows that from four literal meanings, a hearer can arrive at two utterance meanings: PRINCESS DIANA'S LIFE and CANDLE IN THE WIND. Diana, who lived a beautifully shining life, is described as a candle *never fading with the sunset*. The fact that she had to live in adverse

circumstances is expressed as *in the wind*. Her death is metaphorically expressed as *burnt out candles*. In this lyric you can see overlapping scenarios of both PRINCESS DIANA'S LIFE and CANDLE IN THE WIND.

Comparison between Figure 3 (humor) and Figures 4 and 5 (metaphor) illustrates the difference between humor and metaphor clearly. While humor has a quick change in utterance meaning from 1 to 2, and consequently, there's no overlapping between two utterance meanings, metaphor involves overlapping of two utterance meanings.

It is clear that Raskin's *overlap of two scripts* is confusing literal meanings and utterance meanings. The doctor's joke involves two utterance meanings: one to be negated at the end and another one with the opposite meaning. The most notable difference that distinguishes humor from metaphor is that humor interpretation requires quick reinterpretation from an expected utterance meaning to the opposite utterance meaning.

Having explained the problem with the expression *overlap*, the explanation of the doctor's joke can be amended as follows.

(5) The joke overlapping fully or in part at the literal meaning level involves two scripts which are perceived as opposite at the utterance meaning level, and it is this oppositeness which creates the joke.

The problem with this definition is that it cannot distinguish between humor and ambiguity which is shown in (6).

(6) a. I buried $100 in the bank. (Lexical ambiguity)
     b. The girl hit the boy with a book. (Structural ambiguity)

For example, bank in (6a) is ambiguous in that it can be interpreted as

either a *financial institution* or *an edge of a river*. Two utterance meanings, which are perceived as opposites, are overlapping fully at the literal level. (6b) is structurally ambiguous in that two opposite interpretations are possible: *with a book* can be an adverb modifying the verb *hit* or it can modify *the boy* as an adjective. This sentence involves two utterance meanings, which are opposite in meaning.

　　Another problem with this explanation is that it does not fully explain the most notable elements shown in Figure 3 (humor) and not found in Figures 4 and 5 (metaphor). One is the negation of the first utterance shown by a cross and another is a quick and sudden change into another completely opposite meaning. The dynamic of this instant change resembles that of a return action when something twisted is released from the suppression.

A Visual Study of Humor (Kitazume, 2008, 2010a, 2010b)

It is not easy to define abstract concepts such as *humor* or *humorous elements*, because we cannot actually see them. On the other hand, we can recognize something when it fits into the pattern of *humor* or *humorous elements*. In defining these abstract concepts, we must make evident what is in our collective cognition.

　　In an attempt to visually show the *humorous elements of our cognition*, Kitazume (2010a: 17-28, 2010b: 63-71) resorts to visual aids. In order to distinguish characteristics found in humorous paintings, two paintings by the same artist are compared.

Figure 6　Dance in the City
Renoir（1885/56）

Figure 7　Dance in the Country
Renoir（1883）

Figure 6 is a famous painting by Pierre-Auguste Renoir entitled *Dance in the City*, while the humorous painting in Figure 7, also by Renoir, is *Dance in the Country*. Although *Dance in the Country* has a similar structural outline to that of *Dance in the City*, in that a man in a black suit and a woman in a gown are dancing, *Dance in the Country* has elements that are comical. What are the most discernible characteristics in the *humorous painting*?

　　A notable difference is that while the lady in *Dance in the City* is in a glittering white, formal sleeveless dance gown with fancy white gloves, representing a prototypical scenario of an *elegant* dance scene, the country woman's long-sleeved dress and inappropriately big hat are *funny* or *out of the norm*. The Japanese fan in her hand and the straw hat on the floor

have a certain effect, twisting the *elegant* dance scene into a *comical* dance scene. Kitazume（2010a: 18-19, 2010b: 64-65）concludes that such trivial items, when inserted in the normal scene, produce humorous effects.
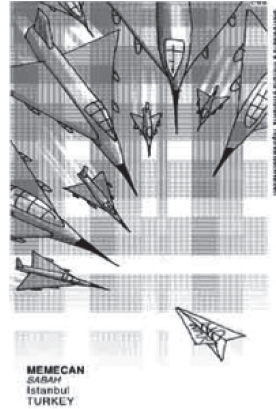
　　　Kitazume（2008: 135-138, 2010a: 77-79）presents another example of visual humor.

Figure 8

2003 Invasion of Iraq
Wikipedia（2003）

Figure 9

Memecan, Sabah（2003）

Figure 8 is a scene of a broadcast of US aircrafts flying over the desert of Iraq in March, 2003. And Figure 9 is a satirical cartoon by Sabah Memecan in Istanbul, Turkey. The picture showing imbalanced military forces, expresses criticism of the Coalition Force's attack on Iraq without a UN endorsement. If you look carefully at the airplane at the bottom, however, you will find that the Iraqi plane is made of paper. The paper airplane twists the *serious* scene we have seen on television into the *humorous* scene.

　　　Based on the analysis of these figures, Kitazume（2012: 23）defines the essence of humor as a *twist*.

(7) The definition of a twist

  The essence of humor is a *twist*. The *twist* is a minor alteration, which in turn, transforms a *prototypical* scenario into a *ludicrous* one. This special incongruity between the two scenarios produces laughter.

Dynamics of Humor

Oring (2010: 20) made a presentation at the 22nd International Conference of International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS) held in Hong Kong in 2010. He opposed the idea of blending when interpreting humor, asserting that the blending theory does not distinguish between metaphor (8) and humor (9).

(8) My lawyer is a shark. (metaphor)
(9) A shark is my lawyer. (humor)

Conceding Oring's argument that the blending theory does not distinguish between metaphor and humor, I would propose that Oring's interpretation of (9) as an example of humor is inappropriate.

  While (8) is clearly an example of metaphor, meaning that the lawyer is greedy, (9) in isolation is nonsensical, considering that it is common sense that a shark cannot become a lawyer. It only becomes humorous when it follows (8), that is, they are humorous when together. I argue that this pair provides good insight into the essence of humor.

  By changing the word order of *lawyer* and *shark*, a prototypical scenario of a greedy lawyer in (8) becomes an unthinkable scenario in (9). The change in word order works as a *twist* to create this humor.

  A close look at this pair clarifies why humor causes laughter. Incongruity theorists have maintained that laughter is produced by the

incongruity between two scenarios. However, the pair above demonstrates that *incongruity* is not enough to explain why this humor produces laughter. Laughter occurs when listeners recognize that a minor alteration at the end drastically changes the context-based scenario. The dynamic change triggered by this minor alteration contributes to producing laughter. This observation necessitates the revision of ⑺ into ⑽, which explains more clearly why humor causes laughter.

⑽　Twist Theory
　　　　The essence of humor is a *twist*. The twist is a minor alteration, which, in effect, transforms a *prototypical* scenario into a *ludicrous* one. The dynamics of this drastic change triggered by a minor alteration produce laughter.

Intention of Humorists

When interpreting utterance meanings, we usually resort to background knowledge about life called a *frame*, and the context in which the utterance is made. In other words, human beings are constantly trying to interpret various utterances based on the stereotypical knowledge and the context in which the sentences are uttered.

　　　A twist, which often appears at the end, surprisingly turns over the context-based interpretation, suddenly creating a scenario which is perceived as *ludicrous* from a stereotypical knowledge we have about the world. It is, therefore, safe to assume that the message of a humorist is a recommendation to be temporarily free from the norms to which we are bounded. Humor shows us that a prototypical concept we have about something can easily be transformed into a ludicrous one with minor alterations.

Conclusion

What is humor? What causes laughter? This paper has attempted to provide some answers to these perennial questions amongst humor theorists.

This paper reviews Kitazume's (2010) claim of pointing out the falsity of equating humor and laughter. Kitazume explains that the common definition "humor is something that makes a person laugh or smile" has created the misunderstanding that everything that causes laughter is humor. By classifying the causes of laughter into two types: humor and non-humor types, and then attempting to clarify a common element found in all examples of humor, Kitazume (2010) proposes that the essence of humor is a *twist*.

Many humor theorists, in attempting to find out the essence of humor and causes of laughter, have proposed various views. Among varied theories of humor, one of the most quoted theories is Raskin's (1979, 1985) *Semantic Script Theory of Humor*. This paper examines his famous joke of a doctor's wife by analyzing it into literal and utterance meanings. This analysis reveals that the expression *overlap of two scripts* in Raskin's *SSTH* is confusing literal meanings and utterance meanings. The doctor's joke involves two utterance meanings: one to be negated at the end and another one of an opposite meaning and there is no overlap at the utterance level. It also reveals that the most notable feature in humor that lacks in metaphor is a quick and sudden change that is similar to a reaction when something twisted is released from the suppression.

This paper has made a further investigation on the causes of laughter. Oring's (2010) examples of humor and metaphor shown in (8) and (9) have given a clear insight into the causes of laughter produced by humor. By pointing out the inappropriateness of Oring's argument, this

paper proposes *Twist Theory* based on the definition of *twist* argued in Kitazume (2010), as seen below.

Twist Theory

The essence of humor is a *twist*. The twist is a minor alteration, which, in effect, transforms a *prototypical* scenario into a *ludicrous* one. The dynamics of this drastic change triggered by a minor alteration produce laughter.

The Twist Theory leads to the question of why we overturn context and a stereotypical knowledge about something. It is assumed that human beings are constantly trying to interpret utterances based on the stereotypical knowledge and context in which the sentences are uttered. The intention of a humorist is to offer temporary freedom from these set boundaries, because humor shows us that a prototypical assumption we have about something can easily be transformed into a ludicrous one with minor alterations.

Acknowledgement

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