The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor

Salvatore Attardo

An Overview of Humor Theory

Publication details

Cristina Larkin-Galiñanes

Published online on: 28 Feb 2017

How to cite :- Cristina Larkin-Galiñanes. 28 Feb 2017, An Overview of Humor Theory from: The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor Routledge
Accessed on: 08 Sep 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Perhaps the first thing to be said when giving a diachronic description of the field of humor studies is that the term “humor” in itself is a very modern one. In fact, taken in the broadly inclusive sense it has today, it dates no further back than the 20th century. Before this, its semantic charge was not only different, but also far more restricted than that which we currently give it. Derived from the classical use of the term to refer to those peculiar or dominant elements in a person that determine their character (choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic, or sanguine), it evolved through Ben Jonson’s early 17th-century adaptation of the concept as a basis for comic characterization in terms of which an extravagant or affected emphasis on personal peculiarities made an individual subject to ridicule. The word, as used in this sense, became increasingly popular during the 18th and early 19th centuries, when it came to refer to a Romantic concept of the comic based on individual eccentricity and completely devoid of the critical intent that we normally associate with this genre nowadays. Previous to the connection thus established between the comic and the “humorous,” texts on the subject refer to a variety of terms such as laughter, wit, comedy, raillery, jesting, scorn, ridicule, mirth, or the risible, which are used to refer to different manifestations of the phenomenon and, more importantly for our purposes, to different attitudes and approaches to it.

Much has been written on the subject of humor (or laughter, wit, etc.) over the ages, some of it in the form of lengthy essays, other as passing comments embedded in pieces on other subjects. But in all the maze of opinion, speculation, philosophizing, description, and prescription, some of it very repetitive, various lines of interest are visible. The first of these, predominant through the ages from Plato and Aristotle down to the end of the 19th century, is the question of the moral and social acceptability of comedy and the comic, encompassed, for reasons that we will see, in what is known as the Superiority Theory. Those writers concerned with this line of inquiry are interested in the object of laughter, in what, or rather who, we laugh at, in the attitudes of those who laugh, and in laughter’s good or evil, aristocratic or plebeian nature. Most seem to feel, though with varying degrees of intensity, that laughter is potentially disruptive, vulgar, and even sinful and that it is therefore necessary to restrain and control it.

Many philosophers and writers on laughter are forced to admit, however, that it does have its beneficial aspects, because it banishes sadness and boredom, puts the individual in an optimistic mood and, in general, lightens the load of everyday living. The positive physiological and
psychological effects of laughter are studied in the Release or Relief Theory of Humor, developed mainly from the 19th century onwards, but already insinuated in classical writers and, some time later, by such 16th- and 17th-century authors as Laurent Joubert and Descartes.

Very often complementary to these lines of thought is an interest in analyzing what types of laughter are socially and morally acceptable and in studying what sort of mechanisms, apart from ridicule and derision, may be used to cause amusement. This line of thinking, originally followed by classical writers in treatises on rhetoric and poetics designed to furnish the individual with elegant, tasteful ways of gaining the attention and good will of an audience by means of wit, is that which has been most fertile for contemporary theories of humor. This approach, known as the Incongruity Theory, shifts the perspective from the emotional angle of derision, envy and malice to a cognitive view of humor and its analysis.

The three streams of comment and theory about humor overlap into each other at many points and in the works of many authors, but, because each corresponds to a different angle of approach to the same object of study, it soon becomes obvious that they must be taken as essentially complementary. Furthermore, each historical period has its own predominant approach to the subject, though this does not necessarily mean that other approaches are completely ignored.

This chapter is divided into three sections, each dedicated to one of the three theories and organized internally following chronological criteria.

The Dangers of Humor: Superiority and Disparagement Theories

The earliest surviving texts on what we now call humor belong to Classical (Greek) Antiquity and are seminal for later ideas on the subject. There is no surviving work from this time that deals exclusively, or even very extensively, with the topic, so the information that has come down to us derives from writings on other subjects, like Plato’s *Republic*, *Philebus*, and *Laws*, or Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, *Poetics*, and *Rhetoric*. From them we can see that one of the principal attitudes (though not the only one) towards laughter at that time was that of suspicion, wariness, and condemnation. Basing their comments on comedy as a theatrical genre, Greek thinkers seem to have been essentially distrustful of laughter, especially if it was excessive and derisive. In that case, they believed it became vulgar. They tended, therefore, from the evidence we can gather, to stress the dangers of laughter and preach for its restriction rather than to study it in any sort of detail. Both Plato and Aristotle condemned the ridicule and derision often implicit in it, and associated humor with vice, offense, vulgarity, and foolishness, so that they declared it unworthy of virtuous, free people, as well as of the elevated matters that should, ideally, concern the upper classes. Comic acting, therefore, should be left to the lower classes, because comedy is a genre related to socially and ethnically inferior characters involved in ignoble action (a concept that was perpetuated in classical theatre). According to Plato, laughter is an emotion, and therefore irrational, falling into the category of those elements that must be restrained by Reason. In his view, the laughable person thinks himself or herself superior (richer, better-looking, or cleverer) than s/he really is, which makes them ridiculous. Laughing at them, however, involves a certain malice and malice is harmful and thence wrong. Superiority, therefore, in this earliest of formulations, lies in the conceited and overestimated self-image of the object of laughter, which renders the latter ridiculous (*Philebus*, p. 48a–50b. 4th century BC). Later, Aristotle changed this, defining comedy as “an imitation of men worse than the average” and equating the ridiculous with the ugly, by which he meant “a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others” (*Poetics*, pg. 5. 4th century BC; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galiñanes, 2009, p. 77).

Both Aristotle himself and other classical authors like Demetrius (3rd century BC), Cicero (1st century BC), or Quintilian (1st century AD), though interested in the possibilities of wit as
a rhetorical device to win the attention and good will of an audience, were nevertheless highly critical of the excesses of certain types of laughter and extremely careful to make a distinction between the coarse sort of humor that raises laughs by buffoonery, coarse language and imperfection, physical or spiritual, and the more genteel type, based on wordplay, incongruity, surprise, etc., which raises a controlled smile and is suitable for a refined and cultivated elite. As was mentioned earlier with respect to comedy as a literary genre, therefore, those early thinkers interested in the subject saw in laughter and its appreciation a marker of social class.

Despite their condemnation of certain types of laughter, however, the attitude of these classical authors was relatively enlightened compared with that which comes across from the very scarce writings on the subject of early Christianity. As Figueroa-Dorrego says, the Christian religion had an important influence in the study of humor “not because the Scriptures or the early Christian Church promoted any systematic analysis of this phenomenon, but because they rejected it and held it back for centuries” (Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 49)—for about 1,000 years, in fact. The general attitude to humor of the Church echoed the most rotund condemnations of earlier writers. With its fundamentalist aspirations to control of its members and its insistence on the acceptance of earthly hardship in return for the promise of heavenly bliss, the Christian Church found laughter very dangerous. To quote Figueroa-Dorrego again,

for Christian thinkers laughter was too associated with the body, and the strict regulation of the body was a central issue in their ascetic approach to life on earth ... Moreover, humorous laughter was too allied to relativism, subversion, chaos and relax to fit into the agenda of the Church, fully committed to ensuring complete authority in society, very often through the discourse of fear.

(Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 50)

The key texts of Christianity contain very few references to laughter. Those in the Old Testament refer to derisive, scornful laughter. Ironically, in most of these instances it is God himself who laughs and this laughter shows His superiority and omnipotence over mankind, and is connected with punishment and wrath. In the New Testament, where references to laughter are even fewer, the phenomenon continues to be related to scorn, but also to “filthiness” and “foolish talking,” which are “not convenient” (Ephesians 5:4; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 151). Later comments, found in the works of the early theologians of Christianity known as the Church Fathers (Clement of Alexandria, 3rd century AD, Basil of Caesarea, 4th century AD, John Chrysostom and Jerome, in the 4th or 5th century AD), are equally damming and far more explicit: though laughter is natural to man, and moderate laughter (the smile) can be acceptable, immoderate laughter is related to insult and derision, to the ridiculous and foolish and must be kept in check, for it “gives birth to foul discourse, and foul discourse to actions still more foul” in a sequence that may even lead to laughter and murder (The Homilies on the Statues to the People of Antioch, XV; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 157). The general attitude of the Church, in fact, is well summarized in the following passage, also taken from Chrysostom:

Christ discourses to us much of mourning, and blesses them that mourn, and pronounces them that laugh wretched. For this is not the theatre for laughter, neither did we come together for this intent, that we may give way to immoderate mirth, but that we may groan, and by this groaning inherit a kingdom.

(Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 158)
The social and cultural life of Western Europe in the Middle Ages was dominated by the Church, as was, to some extent, its political life, so what little was written about laughter and humor in this period continued to be influenced by Church authorities, and its tenor was very similar to that already described. The rise of Monasticism brought with it a life in theory dominated by self-denial, obedience, silence, humility, reverence of God and hard work, and frivolity, foolishness, and vulgarity, and therefore laughter were totally banned. The connection between the laughable and the bodily was emphasized in a context in which monks and nuns were supposed to focus on spiritual matters, and one of the questions most debated in sermons, and even in academic contexts, was whether Jesus had ever laughed or not, the official line being, of course, the negative one. It was not, in fact, until the Renaissance that a renewed, more positive interest in laughter and humor arose, but this new period was marked, as we shall see, by a different emphasis that relegates the “dangers” and threats that beset the laugh to a secondary position.

Not until the Protestant Reformation did attitudes to laughter and humor become as negative as those we have seen thus far. In England, from the building of the first “play houses” in London in 1576 and 1577, a great deal of what was written on humor and laughter took the form, once more, of diatribes against the characteristics of comedy as a theatrical genre. “Comedy,” in this sense of the word, was seen as immoral, filthy, and sinful in itself, but it was also considered to provide occasion for sin and immorality, because it led youth into idleness and provided the locus and occasion for prostitution and a multitude of other sins. Representative of this line of thought are Philip Stubbes (The Anatomie of Abuses, 1583) and William Prynne (Histrio-Matrix: The Players’ Scourge or Actors Tragedie, 1633). More influential in terms of humor theory, however, are René Descartes and Thomas Hobbes. Descartes (The Passions of the Soul, 1649) is a good example of a complex, multilateral approach to laughter, because he was concerned with describing its physiological manifestations and analyzing its causes. However, he also laid some emphasis on the element of scorn present in laughter, and seemed conscious of the harm that can be done to an individual through derision if it is used maliciously, but he pointed out that when used with such moderation as to be merely “modest bantering,” it can be “useful in reproving vices by making them appear ridiculous” (Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 292), thus suggesting that laughter might act as a means of social control, an idea that would be taken up and developed in subsequent versions of the Superiority Theory.

It was Thomas Hobbes (Of Human Nature, 1650; Leviathan, 1651), however, who crystallized all the reasons for distrust of laughter into one potent statement that linked together all those comments that connected humor with the perception of obscenity or of other people’s misfortunes, and that was to cause much debate in subsequent discussions of laughter and humor. Although he recognized that there must be an element of incongruity and surprise present in humor, and linked these with the wit of “jests,” he concentrated on the elements of scorn and ridicule present in laughter when he said that:

*Sudden Glory,* is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men.

(1651; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 294)

The 18th and 19th centuries constituted, as Michael Billig says, a golden age for the philosophy of humor (2005, p. 57). This was a period marked by an increasing acceptance of the
connection of laughter with good humor and even benevolence, and a predominant interest in explanations of the phenomenon based on incongruity and manifested as socially acceptable “wit.” However, a consciousness of the dangers of coarse laughter and of its function as a marker of social status continued to exist, as we may see in the injunctions on the subject of Lord Chesterfield to his son:

Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners; it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things; and they call it being merry. . . . It is low buffoonery or silly accidents that always excite laughter; and that is what people of sense and breeding should show themselves above.

(1748; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 426)

Hobbes’s account of laughter, which became the classic statement of superiority theory, was widely discussed and frequently defended during the period. Hegel, for example, believed that laughter is little more than “an expression of self-satisfied shrewdness” (Aesthetics, 1835; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 498); Alexander Bain maintained that “not in physical defects alone, but in everything where a man can achieve a stroke of superiority, in surpassing or discomfiting a rival, is the disposition to laughter apparent” (The Emotions and the Will, 1859; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 522); and Hazlitt (Lectures on the Comic Writers of Great Britain, 1818) gave a lengthy list of objects liable to incite laughter, ranging from a “bottle nose in a caricature,” “a stuffed figure of an alderman in a pantomime, through the dress of foreigners” to someone “dressed in the height of fashion, or quite out of it,” and ended up by saying:

We laugh to show our satisfaction with ourselves, or our contempt for those around us, or to conceal our envy, or our ignorance. We laugh at fools, and at those who pretend to be wise, at extreme simplicity, awkwardness, hypocrisy and affectation.

(Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, pp. 475–476)

A short time later, Baudelaire took this attitude to laughter to an extreme, and amplified the moral concern with self-glorifying humor of Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes, by characterizing laughter as the most reliable indication of the satanic spirit in man (On the Essence of Laughter, 1855; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, pp. 508–514).

Particularly fertile for the development of 20th-century offshoots to superiority theory was Henri Bergson’s famous essay, “Le Rire” (1900). This work is of special interest because, like Descartes’s, it relates laughter with social factors, though in a new way. Bergson saw laughter as “always the laughter of a group” (Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 576). Its natural environment, he said, is society. Therefore, it has a social function, responds to certain exigencies of social life, and has a social meaning. Its main function is to keep people under control because, given the fact that nobody likes to be laughed at, it prevents them from deviating too radically from what is deemed socially to be normal, proper, and decent. According to Bergson, “we may . . . admit as a general rule that it is the faults of others that make us laugh, provided we add that they make us laugh by reason of their unsociability rather than of their immorality.” In his view, therefore, laughter is “a sort of social gesture. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity” (Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 582), its function being “to intimidate by humiliating” (Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 623).

Almost contemporary with “Le Rire” was Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious by Sigmund Freud (1905), who gave laughter and humor an important place in psychic life. Freud said that although most jokes are hostile, it is not simply a question of our laughing at the infirmities of
An Overview of Humor Theory

others, but rather that this laughter is a means of liberating those primary instincts of aggression that civilization and society have forced the human being to repress. Jokes allow us to exploit those weak and ridiculous aspects of our enemies that we could not otherwise bring forward openly or consciously; they help us to evade “restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible” (1991, p. 149). Through them we make our enemy small, inferior, despicable, or simply comic, and achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him.

These intuitions about the hostility present in many manifestations of humor have been amply elaborated on in more recent years. Humor researchers, now predominantly psychologists and sociologists rather than philosophers and men of letters as in the past, have accepted the basic premise that humor is a social mechanism with definite social functions such as consensus, conflict, and control, and have converged to study empirically joking, the specific circumstances in which it occurs, and its effects. A glance at the contents of HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research reveals an abundance of articles with titles such as “Humor’s Role in Married Life,” “Humor and Social Distance in Elementary School Children,” or “Group Differences in the Appreciation of Feminist Humor,” to name but a few at random. The hypothesis, initially stated by Plato and Aristotle, that we laugh at the infirmities and ridiculous aspects of our fellow beings was partially refuted in the 1960s and ’70s by several authors who demonstrated that this is not altogether true, but rather that “something is humorous to the extent that it enhances an object of affection and/or disparages an object of repulsion” and that “it is unhumorous to the extent that it does the opposite” (La Fave, 1972, p. 198).

Humor, then, according to Social-Behavioral theories, is largely a question of reference groups and “affective disposition,” as formulated by Zillmann:

Mirth, then, is said to vary proportionally with the negativeness of the affective disposition toward the disparaged party, and with the positiveness of the affective disposition toward the disparaging party, and jointly so.

(1983, p. 92)

This being so, humor and its appreciation are very largely judged to be a question of social allegiance and identification, because it is nowadays generally recognized that the scope and degree of mutual understanding in humor varies directly with the degree to which the participants share their social backgrounds. This is why laughter is often limited by national frontiers and the passage of time.

Psycho-physiological Approaches: Release Theory

A connection was first established between humor and health by the classical writers. Aristotle, Cicero and Pliny the Younger (ca. 100 AD) all considered that, if subordinated to the ideals of refined and moderate behavior, laughter can provide pleasure and relaxation. This line of thought was, of course, passed over completely by early Christianity, though Clement of Alexandria (Paedagogus, 3rd century AD) and Thomas Aquinas (Summa Theologica, 13th century AD) both attributed—albeit grudgingly—a certain positive psychological and physiological effect to laughter. This concession had very much to do with the theory of “humors,” established by Hippocrates in the 4th century bc, according to which the sanguine type was optimistic, cheerful and a lover of fun and pleasure, a notion that led many doctors of Antiquity and in the Middle Ages to believe that purified blood made people joyful and prone to laughter, thus reinforcing a relationship between laughter and purity of blood (in the purely physical sense, of course). Later on, in the 17th century, Ben Jonson, inspired by classical and neo-classical theories of comedy
as a literary genre, re-established the connection between the humors and laughter in a slightly different way by using the concept of humor as a peculiar or dominant quality that forms the basis of a person’s character. For Jonson, when a person’s humor is very exaggerated or extravagant, and especially if it is affected or artificial, it becomes a very appropriate subject for ridicule, constituting not a mere quirk, but an evil moral condition that occurs when the appetites gain ascendancy over the Reason. Thus Jonson saw comedy as a social corrective, because it exposes follies and vices to laughter and ridicule. The relation thus established between humor and personal eccentricity would be developed and elaborated on, both in theory and in practice, by Romanticism.

In 1579, Laurent Joubert (Treatise on Laughter, Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galíñanes, 2009, pp. 258–277), while subscribing to both Disparagement and Incongruity theories of laughter, described the physical action of laughing in a fashion very reminiscent of certain later authors:

Laughter is a movement caused by the jubilant mind and the unequal agitation of the heart, which draws back the mouth and the lips, and shakes the diaphragm and the pectoral parts with impetuosity and broken-up sound, though all of which is expressed a feeling over an ugly thing unworthy of pity. . . . This is caused principally by an effusion of humors, but also aided by other accidents, all depending on the agitation of the diaphragm and chest. These parts are agitated by the unequal movement of the heart, which dilates and contracts in turn, but more the former than the latter.

(Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galíñanes, 2009, p. 276)

In The Passions of the Soul (1649; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galíñanes, 2009, p. 290), René Descartes gave a very similar description of the physical aspects of laughter, and more than a century later Immanuel Kant (Critique of Judgement, 1790), subscribing fully to the Incongruity theory of laughter, wrote that this expression of amusement begins as the play of ideas in the mind and results in “the furtherance of the vital bodily processes, the affection that moves the intestines and the diaphragm, in a word, the feeling of health (which without such inducements one does not feel) that makes up the gratification felt by us” (Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galíñanes, 2009, p. 433). As the mind is caught up in the deceptions of a jest, it is put through “a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation,” which is then repeated by the body in movements that are “beneficial to health” (Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galíñanes, 2009, p. 435). And Kant came to a conclusion that is seminal for Release theory when he wrote that “laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galíñanes, 2009, p. 433).

Kant’s definition was taken up by Herbert Spencer (The Physiology of Laughter, 1860; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galíñanes, 2009, pp. 523–529). Stating his premises in a more “scientific” manner, Spencer said that our emotions are, or at least in our nervous system take the form of, nervous energy. There is an intimate connection between nervous energy and our motor system, in such a way that nervous energy tends to produce muscular motion, and, indeed, when it rises to a certain intensity, does so, producing action. In this way, fear produces movements of escape, anger produces physical aggression, and so on. In the case of laughter, what happens is that feelings are built up that are then seen to be inappropriate, so that emotion is changed from strong to weak, and the excess energy thus produced is liberated in a series of muscular movements (laughter) which do not lead to any sort of action, but that serve only to release nervous energy, in much the same way as the opening of a safety valve does in a steam pipe. Thus for Spencer, as for Kant, laughter is a benevolent force that always produces equilibrium within an individual by allowing for the overflow of excess energy.
The idea of laughter as a release of excess energy, and the notion that this energy is created by the building up of an emotion that is then seen to be unwarranted, was taken up by many authors after Spencer and treated in different ways. Freud, among others, used it in the last part of his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* to analyze the nature of humor, as distinct from that of jokes and comedy:

The conditions for [humor’s] appearance are given if there is a situation in which, according to our usual habits, we should be tempted to release a distressing affect and if motives then operate upon us which suppress that affect *in statu nascendi*. . . . The pleasure of humor, if this is so, comes about . . . at the cost of a release of affect that does not occur; it arises from an *economy in the expenditure of affect*.

*(1991, p. 293)*

This Relief Theory, in a form very similar to that described by Spencer and Freud, was adopted and adapted in the 20th century by many humanistically inclined students of humor and comedy. Many of them were strongly influenced by the criticism applied to tragedy, and therefore employed classical versions of catharsis as seen through the prism of Spencerean and Freudian theory, to come up with notions such as Elder Olson’s “*katastasis*,” by which the emotion of laughter is defined as:

>a relaxation, or, as Aristotle would say, a *katastasis* of concern due to a manifest absurdity of the grounds for concern. And we may distinguish three things involved: (1) the apparent or anticipated sequence of circumstances (agent, act, etc.); (2) the factors of apparent seriousness (good or evil of a certain magnitude, etc. . . .); and (3) a real circumstance manifesting the absurdity of attributing (2) to (1).

*(1968, p. 16)*

Other authors have defended various slightly different forms of the theory, combining Spencer’s views with the Freudian concept of laughter as relief from specific inhibitions or repressions as applied by him to aggressive jokes. Among them was Arthur Koestler (1964/1989), who spoke about “*safety-valve theory*,” which assumed some excess of emotions, such as anger, sexual desire, apprehension, pride and so on, needing an outlet to keep them under control. These passions, which might have driven the individual to take action to satisfy them, are deflated and deflected through laughter, which incapacitates a person for action and at the same time leaves him/her pleasurably relieved.

Scientific psychological research slightly altered the tendency descending from Spencer and Freud and, under the auspices of Daniel E. Berlyne, focused on the concept of arousal rather than release. Freud and Spencer spoke about the building up of tension, but were chiefly interested in how it was released on seeing itself unjustified. Berlyne, on the other hand, was more interested in how and in what conditions tension may be built up for laughter to be produced. *(1960)* According to him “*slight and transitory jumps in arousal [excitement or activation] become pleasurable as a consequence of the drop in arousal that quickly terminate them*” (1960, p. 199). He concluded that positive hedonic value can arise either from some condition that raises arousal only moderately (an “*arousal boost*”), or from a sequence of conditions generating an uncomfortable state of heightened arousal that is subsequently reversed (an “*arousal jag*”). Speaking of jokes, he says that there are many that fit the latter, producing a phase of discomfiture, puzzlement, “*tension,*” or even fright, which is then rapidly resolved *(1972, pp. 56–57)*. Berlyne’s position was later modified by M. K. Rothbart et al. *(1977)*, who argued that arousal
increases of any size will be accompanied by pleasurable affect only when they are associated with the subject’s judgment that the situation is a “safe” or non-threatening one, because the experience of high-intensity stimulation may lead to immediate avoidance; indeed, if the conditions are very pressing, a person does not remain in a threatening situation long enough to make a judgment anyway as to whether it is safe or not. This led other researchers to point out that, for humor to be taken as such, a specific frame of mind must exist. Freud had already established that one of the conditions necessary for humorous laughter is “a generally cheerful mood, in which one is inclined to laugh,” and an “expectation of the comic” (1991, p. 282). Elder Olson also talked about the need to be in an appropriate frame of mind in order to appreciate humor, and more modern, psychological lines of research (McGhee, 1972; Rothbart et al., 1977; Suls, 1977) emphasized the importance of a playful or non-serious mood in most humor situations.

It has been argued that Relief Theory is a theory of laughter rather than specifically a theory of humor or comedy, because all this talk of the building up and release of tension, “arousal jags,” and so on, suggests the hysterical laughter often attendant on the happy outcome of a difficult situation. However, though its application to verbal humor is not always apparent, it does account for the intuition, taken up by later theorists, that humor appreciation requires the pre-existence of a propitious frame of mind.

Cognitive-Perceptual Approaches: Incongruity Theory

As I said earlier, the way in which we laugh and what we laugh at was, until fairly recently, considered an indicator of education, sensibility, and, in short, social class, and from as far back as Aristotle, thinkers have made an effort to analyze and define what other factors, apart from ridicule and derision, contribute to amusement. And I use the term “amusement” here, as distinct from laughter, quite deliberately, for the cognitive approach of Incongruity Theory deals with contrived “wit” rather than with the more accidental or incidental laughter occasioned by situation or personal characteristics; it deals (according to many past theorists) with the smile rather than with laughter. And it does so initially from the essentially pragmatic perspective of using amusement with specific aims, as is indicated by the type of works in which we first find this angle: Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, Demetrius’s *De Elocutione* (ca. 3rd century BC), Cicero’s *De Oratore* and *De Officiis*, or Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*. Indeed, Aristotle, whose comments were seminal for later developments in the field, considered that making one’s listeners laugh is a good way to gain their attention and good will (positive identification) and is useful in controversy as a way of disarming one’s opponent.

Aristotle, therefore, and those later classical writers mentioned, went to considerable lengths to study the mechanisms and define those (linguistic) devices that can be used to produce laughter: homonyms, synonyms, an unconventional use of language, impossible hyperboles and exaggeration in general, punning, irony, ambiguity, unexpected turns, drawing strange resemblances or dissimilarities, comparisons and metaphors, etc. Some of them (Aristotle, Cicero) referred to the importance of surprise, or of deceiving expectations and also, more specifically, to incongruity (Demetrius, Cicero) and the importance of brevity (Quintilian). All of them, however, though aware of the rhetorical usefulness of wit and of the social and psychological uses of conviviality, drew a line between the boorish humor of buffoons and the low comedy that attracted the rabble and the acceptable, tactful, polished wit of the educated, urbane elite.

This elitist concept of “high” culture as opposed to the “popular” one was taken up again by the Renaissance, which re-discovered classical culture and turned it not only into a fundamental reference, but also, in itself, into one of the most important means of attaining that sophisticated elitist cultural status sought after by the aristocracy and the clergy. In this context Renaissance
humanists interested in laughter returned to Cicero and Quintilian’s writings on rhetoric and oratory. Thus Baldesar Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) and Thomas Wilson’s *Art of Rhetoric* (1553) concentrated on analyzing what things may cause laughter different from the derisive sort, and they hit, in fact, on many characteristics that would be repeatedly mentioned and analyzed in subsequent literature on the subject.

Though preceded by a new period of predominantly negative attitudes to laughter, as we saw earlier, this interest in the social aspects and possibilities of wit was renewed in the 18th century, when the subject was frequently dealt with in parallel to contemporary discussions on taste and politeness. Writers and thinkers like the Earl of Shaftesbury or Lord Chesterfield were again interested in defining relatively refined forms of laughter and a “polite” concept of humor in line with the “justness of thought and style, refinement in manners, good breeding and politeness of every kind” that the Earl of Shaftesbury (*A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm to My Lord Sommers*, 1708; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 371) saw as the mark of the individual that lives in a free society. Malicious laughter was increasingly rejected and, in view of this, a great many writers made a real effort to define the various aspects of the laughable or “ludicrous” and what causes it, tending in general to attribute the laughable to incongruity, seen under various guises.

Some authors, such as Joseph Addison (*The Spectator*, 1711), Alexander Bain (*The Emotions and the Will*, 1859), Jean Paul Richter (*School for Aesthetics*, 1813), and George Eliot (*German Wit*, 1856), among others, saw incongruity as the perception and discovery of relations between ideas or things that at first sight appear totally unconnected, but always on condition, as Sydney Smith pointed out, that “it must be … things which are never brought together in the common events of life, and in which the mind has discovered relations by its own subtlety and quickness” (1804; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 439). For others, such as Francis Hutcheson (*Reflections Upon Laughter*, 1725) and William Hazlitt (*Lectures on the Comic Writers of Great Britain*, 1818), incongruity implied finding differences in apparently similar concepts, or between expectations and outcomes, while yet other writers—Corbyn Morris (*An Essay on Wit*, etc., 1744), Coleridge (*A Lecture on Wit and Humor*, 1818), or James Sully (*Ridicule and Truth*, 1877)—accepted both possibilities. Some writers formulated their concept of incongruity in terms very similar to those accepted today. Richter, for example, defined the ridiculous as based on incongruity, but said that the latter lies in the fact that we attribute to another person a knowledge and motivation that seem logical from our point of view, but that are contradictory to what that other person actually does, so that his acts seem nonsensical and ludicrous and cause our laughter (1813; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes 2009, p. 450). Arthur Schopenhauer (*The World as Will and Idea*, 1883)—and later Freud (1991, pp. 49–51)—anticipated Victor Raskin’s script-switch theory (1985) by saying that we organize our perceptions under what he called “abstract concepts” which frequently lump different things under the same label, so that we often refer to very diverse objects by the same word. The ludicrous arises, according to him, when we are struck by a clash between our initial conceptual interpretation of a word and our perception of another “real” interpretation as activated by the context in which we find it (1883; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 487). Bergson said a situation was comic “when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time” (1900; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 600), and gave the notion of incongruity a social dimension by defining it, in the context of his view of the “wideawake adaptability and the living pliability” (Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 578) necessary in social life as “something mechanical encrusted on the living” (Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 585).
Whatever the version of incongruity given, this factor was usually recognized as necessary but not sufficient to cause laughter. In the early 18th century, in fact, the connection between incongruity-based wit and laughter was not necessarily at all clear. Indeed, wit is sometimes described as similar to simile and metaphor, though the two latter are “slower” in their effect than wit because they are more accurate and complete (Corbyn Morris, 1744; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 413). We also find in the literature of the period frequent references to “grave wit.” So, what other ingredients are necessary to make incongruity funny? Some authors, such as Sidney Smith (1804), emphasized the idea that the incongruity must be a novel one; others, following the same line of thought, stressed that an element of suddenness or surprise is indispensable (Kant, Smith, Schopenhauer, Coleridge) and that the new conjunction of ideas cannot be useful, beautiful or sublime, nor can it excite “high passions” such as anger or pity (Sidney Smith), or any sense of danger or pain (Coleridge), and Herbert Spencer said that only “descending” incongruity can cause laughter, because “laughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small”; “ascending” incongruity, produced “when after something very insignificant there arises without anticipation something very great” (1860; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 529), causes wonder, as happens in the case of poetic metaphor or simile. Charles Darwin (The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals, 1872; Figueroa-Dorrego & Larkin-Galinanes, 2009, p. 532), like Freud, specified that “the mind must be in a pleasurable condition” for incongruity to be perceived as funny, and the latter also mentioned brevity as a necessary condition for the success of jokes.

Thinking and research on the role of incongruity in what we find humorous was one of the main lines taken up in the 20th century, and certainly that which has proved most fertile for contemporary linguistic theories. Pursued by thinkers such as Arthur Koestler (1964/1989), Paul Jerry Suls (1972; 1977), McGhee (1972; 1977), and Thomas Shultz (1976), among others, the theory changed slightly, and incongruity alone was no longer considered sufficient to make something funny. Instead, humor appreciation was conceptualized as a two-stage process involving the discovery of an incongruity followed by the resolution of that incongruity by the application of a different cognitive rule. This resolution is what separates humor from what otherwise would be simply nonsense. Suls (1972) compared the information-processing strategies used in dealing with a joke or cartoon to those used in the process of reading normal, non-humorous material. The chain of input, prediction, confirmation/disconfirmation, readjustment to new input, etc., is the same, but what happens in a joke, which is normally a simple narrative structure, requiring little readjustment on the part of the receiver, is that there comes a point, usually at the end, where the listener’s expectations are abruptly disconfirmed without the possibility, because this is the termination of the joke, that later text will be read in to reconcile the incongruity. At this point, the receiver engages in what Suls called “problem solving” to find how the ending (i.e., the “punch line”) follows from the main body of the joke.

In explaining how this task is carried out, Koestler coined the term “bisociation,” which became pivotal to the theory. The pattern underlying the appreciation of jokes, he explained, is the perception of an entity (either a situation or an idea) in two “frames of reference” or “wave-lengths” or “associative contexts.” When the idea or situation is perceived in two frames, it is “bisociated,” i.e., linked to two associative contexts, which normally are incompatible (Koestler, 1964/1989, p. 35).

This explanation was taken up in various ways by other authors such as Keith–Spiegel (1972), or Avner Ziv (1984) who emphasized, once more, the importance of the element of surprise in a joke. Indeed, the unexpected, located in the “punch line,” was established as a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for the humor experience. The punch line itself, thus defined as a
high-powered selection factor that distinguishes humor from non-humor, because it contains a shift from one level of abstraction to another, was also given considerable attention. Avner Ziv stressed that it should be short, and should constitute “a point of climax that is quickly over,” no matter how lengthy the lead-up (1984, pp. 90–91), and John Morreall described the effects of the punch line as a sudden psychological change that takes place too fast for us to assimilate into our experience in the way we can assimilate other psychological changes and that is a function of the amount of change (“the difference between the earlier stage and the latter”) and the time over which the change takes place (1983, pp. 48–49). For a sudden change, therefore, there must be a relatively large difference between the two states, and the time separating them must be relatively short.

Conclusion: Victor Raskin

As may be appreciated from what I have written, each new version of humor theory tends to be layered on and over-reach previous ones; each historical period builds on, but also adds new insights to the theories received from previous ones. This is particularly so in the 20th century, when interest in the subject became “scientific” in the hands of psychologists, sociologists, and ultimately, linguists. Indeed, one of the most interesting accounts of incongruity and its resolution, both because it encompasses many aspects of past theory in a way that is both satisfactory and convincing and because it has turned out to be seminal for the linguistic theories set out and explored in the rest of this volume, is that given by Victor Raskin (1985). Founded on script-based semantics, it sets out to “determine and formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions for [a] text to be funny” (1985, p. 47) and establishes that

A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the following conditions are justified:

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.

(1985, p. 99)

Raskin’s formulation subsumes many previous theories: by virtue of its reference to scripts (culturally/socially acquired), the theory embraces the social basis of humor appreciation pointed to by social-behavioral theorists. We are also reminded of superiority theory by some of the “script-oppositeness relations” listed by Raskin to develop his formulation (goodness-related scripts/badness-related scripts, high-stature-related scripts/low-stature-related scripts, etc.), while the notion of “scripts” in itself ties in with the formulations of incongruity given by Richter and Schopenhauer in the 19th century. Like many proponents of Relief Theory, Raskin lays stress on the fact that the appreciation of jokes necessitates a frame of mind receptive to humor. Also, what he calls the “script-switch trigger,” which causes the receiver of a joke to become aware of the opposite scripts involved (creating “arousal boost” and “arousal jag”) is, of course, the “punch line” of 20th-century incongruity theory, while the “trigger” and its effects remind us of Suls’s “problem solving” and Koestler’s “bisociation.”

Because of all these (and more) parallelisms and connections, therefore, and in spite of its new linguistic orientation, Raskin’s script-based theory is particularly interesting to the historian of humor theory, who will surely find equally rich material for thought and research in tracing the sources that underlie the recent linguistic theories set out in this volume.
References