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How to Understand and Assess a Theory: The Evolution of the SSTH into the GTVH and Now into the OSTH

The main thrust of this paper is to present to an important adjacent scholarly community of literary scholars how humor can be treated by the current strand of contemporary linguistics, or – more specifically – by linguistic semantics. In the process, we will show how a major theory of humor, the Semantic Script-based Theory of Humor (Raskin 1979a, 1985; Attardo 1994) first evolved into the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo/Raskin 1991; Attardo 1994), and now into the Ontological Semantic Theory of Humor (Raskin/Triezenberg 2005; Raskin 2009; Hempelmann 2009; Taylor 2009, 2010).

The last theory is a work in (rapid) progress, and the last section of the paper will be devoted to a number of recent developments in blending the Ontological Semantic Technology our team is developing for Natural Language Processing applications with the improved and revised humor theory.

Before we get there, however, we will discuss three major areas that are necessary for understanding, especially by scholars outside of linguistic semantics, what we have been doing and why. First, we will explain our understanding of theory, so that it not be confused with a reader's own interpretations and expectations and not lead, again and again, to the most surprising readings of what our theory of humor has done. Second, we will restate – for those yet unexposed to either of them – what exactly the Semantic Script-based Theory of Humor and the General Theory of Verbal Humor claim, what premises they use, what their goals are, and how they justify and evaluate themselves.

In the last section of the paper on the Ontological Semantic Theory of Humor we will address a number of important issues, often subverting and revising the claims of its predecessors. The Semantic Script-based Theory of Humor claimed that the list of script oppositions was an extra piece of knowledge that it had to use along with regular semantic analysis, this making the Semantic Script-based Theory of Humor no longer a strict application of linguistic semantics to humor. We will demonstrate how the list actually folds onto Ontological Semantic Theory, so this disappears as an obstacle to the strict-application status of the Ontological Semantic Theory of Humor.

Second, we will show that Ontological Semantic Theory offers a procedure for discovering the main script opposition in a joke, an algorithm that the Semantic Script-based Theory of Humor and General Theory of Verbal Humor described rather rigorously for a competent linguist, but apparently incomprehensibly to other, often enthusiastic adherents of the theories.

We will also sketch out the contribution Ontological Semantic Theory can make to the still controversial Logical Mechanism Knowledge Resource of the General Theory of Verbal Humor. This will be an initial step, we hope, towards understanding how jokes are put together and what exactly their internal/false logics are.

One side product of this paper is intended to be a better understanding by the non-linguists and atheoretical linguists in the humor research community as well as by any scholar interested in humor, what the linguists of humor do and what they don't, what they can deliver to these communities and what they cannot, and what to expect from our work and what to do on their own rather than writing misdirected, even if majorly entertaining, things about our work. We do not intend this paper to kill off all the Hollywood-strength conspiracy theories, mostly of European vintage, of how a bunch of us have been trying to dominate humor research and claim the firstborns from everybody else. We do apologize for trying to remove the fun stuff from humor research: we realize we are acting as killjoys and killsports; instead of joining the fun and games of discovering the subverting humanity and inexhaustible complexity of humor, we boringly persist in discovering the truth about how humor works.

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