Hiding in Plain Sight[*]
Figure-Ground Reversals in Humour

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Introduction

The abstract to Reuven Tsur's paper promises a wide-ranging analysis of figure-ground organization in language and art by way of the great historical exponents of the phenomenon, and for the most part, this is precisely what Tsur delivers. By drawing on a wealth of examples, from Bach to Beckett, Tsur reminds us how deeply ingrained is the distinction between figure and ground in everything from wallpaper to Shakespearean sonnets. But Tsur's paper is more than a catalogue of pyrotechnical examples or an excuse for historical name-dropping, since he also surveys the underlying cognitive mechanisms to which the figure-ground distinction can apply itself, such as the system of embodied conceptual metaphors that cognitive linguists claim is central to human thought. Along the way, Tsur additionally reminds us, via Ehrenzweig (1965), that to understand the figure-ground phenomenon in terms of psychological gestalts, one must also consider the role of "gestalt-free" elements that lend complex compositions their peculiar character. By evoking Ehrenzweig's notion of "thing-destruction", Tsur nicely captures the often wrenching effect of figure-ground reversal, in which one is forced to do psychological violence to a cognitive representation to achieve a creative effect. This disturbing effect is perhaps nowhere better experienced than in the comprehension of a good joke, since jokes often forego the subtlety of art in favor of an altogether more visceral and aggressive language-delivered blow.

  In fact, Tsur begins his erudite tour of the figure-ground landscape with a joke. The tale is a classic one, amply demonstrating the use of figure-ground reversal as a production strategy in humour: a sly worker nightly pushes a wheelbarrow of straw past the watchful eye of a suspicious sentry, who believes the straw to be a convenient hiding place in which valuable products might be smuggled from his factory. Of course, it is the wheelbarrow itself that is smuggled through the factory gates; our refusal to focus on this artifact, and bring it into the conceptual foreground where it might be logically scrutinized, means that we readily assume the same wheelbarrow is in use, night after night. In the terminology of Fauconnier and Turner (2002), we "integrate" the successive events of the joke so that the wheelbarrows of different nights become one and the same,

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and we fail to see the cumulative value of the worker's hoard. Because we, like the sentry, only recognize the failure of our assumptions at the very end, the joke deftly makes the sentry our representative in the narrative (for this reason, I have always preferred the version in which the wheelbarrow is full of fresh cow manure, as this heightens the visceral punch delivered by the joke: the sentry is not just fooled, but physically degraded by his suspicions). Whenever we comprehend a narrative, our critical faculties constantly play the role of such a sentry, applying intuitions about what is salient and important and what is not. Sometimes, as in humour, these intuitions are subverted by a wily jokester, prompting us to comb through worthless straw for a pay-off that lies elsewhere.

Tsur's article does an excellent job of surveying the poetic and artistic usages of the figure-ground relationship, showing how the focal point of a structure is sometimes just a distraction from its intended meaning. But with the exception of the opening joke, which establishes the background for his exploration in cognitive poetics, Tsur chooses not to foreground the humorous role of figure-ground structuring. This is a shame, because with humour our end-point is not a mild aesthetic frisson, but an altogether more obvious and well-timed cognitive punch. Since one can more easily tell when this punch is lacking, humour is the ideal laboratory in which to study the subtle workings of mechanisms like figure-ground reversal (henceforth, FGR). So if I might be allowed to perform an FGR of my own, this topic will form the main substance of my response to Tsur's article.

2. Figure-Ground Reversal and Humour

The most obvious uses of figure-ground reversal in humour, such as the wheelbarrow joke cited by Tsur, can give the impression that FGR is just one of many possible tactical ploys that can be used to generate humour, by allowing a jokester to turn the tables on the hapless reader and his in-narrative correspondent (e.g., the sentry). For instance, Attardo, Hempelmann and Di Maio (2002) see FGR as just one of many (27 and counting) possible logical mechanisms that can be used to contrive a clash of interpretations. These logical mechanisms plug into a larger framework, called the GTVH (the General Theory of Verbal Humour), which serves as the vehicle through which each logical mechanism (or LM) is activated and textually deployed. To use the notions of wheelbarrow and straw from Tsur's Russian joke, Attardo *et al*. view the GTVH as the "cognitive wheelbarrow" in which humour is delivered from the initiator to the reader, and in which FGR becomes just one more kind of "logical straw" among many others. For example, another kind of logical straw for the GTVH wheelbarrow is the LM of False-Analogy, as evident in the joke: "my brother always dreamed of being a tree-surgeon, but it wasn't to be; he would always faint at the sight of sap". Humorous examples of false-analogy all start from a reasonable analogy (such as tree-surgeon = medical-surgeon, tree = patient) but stretch this analogy to draw unfounded conclusions (such as the idea that tree sap is as unsettling a sight as human blood). Resorting to an FGR on my own, one that I hope is not also a false-analogy, I will argue here that FGR is not the straw but the wheelbarrow itself. In other words, reorganization of the figure-ground profile of a narrative (or *re*-profiling) to alter its social dynamic is the general means whereby humorous effects are created.

Of course, the figure-ground distinction is everywhere in language. Whenever one topicalizes a sentence, as in "with the gun she shot him down", or uses the passive voice, as in "the apple was eaten by Snow-white", one is subtly altering the figure-ground landscape to give more prominence to one idea over another. So at this point I must disagree with Tsur's assertion that "to such sentences [describing unitary events], I would say, the 'figure-ground' distinction is not applicable". The notion of figure and ground is inextricably bound into the linguistic notion of obliqueness, and one cannot linearize a set of ideas into a string of words without giving more precedence to some ideas over others. Since precedence is a relative notion, I simply cannot buy into Tsur's notion of a "figure without a ground". To my ear, this is much like claiming the existence of a hypotenuse without a triangle.

Nonetheless, in the context of a joke, trivial considerations such as obliqueness rarely make an appreciable difference. To be funny, FGR must be used to deliver the appropriate cognitive punch to our sense of social order. Consider, for instance, the following exchange between the boxer, Muhammad Ali at his pugilistic and linguistic prime, and a female flight attendant. Though physically mismatched, she easily proves his verbal equal:

Flight attendant: Buckle your seat-belt, Mr. Ali, we're about to take off.

Muhammad Ali: Superman don't need no seat-belt!

Flight attendant: Superman don't need no airplane neither.

This exchange is an example of a humour-producing strategy that I and my colleagues Kurt Feyaerts and Geert Brône call humorous "trumping" (e.g., see Veale, Feyaerts and Brône, 2006). Note how the stewardess does not actually disagree with Ali, but takes his assertion at face value and appears to accept it as true (as signaled by the dialectical use of "neither"). In doing so, she does not simply rebut Ali's assertion, but uses a corollary of his own argument to demonstrate the inherent stupidity underlying his egotistical posturing. The effect of the FGR is intensified by the mastery of its delivery, as demonstrated by the speed ("quick-wittedness") with which it is executed. By responding to a request concerning his seat-belt with an observation about Superman, Ali's conversational goal is clear: we are to understand Ali and Superman as being the same entity. This understanding is helped in large part by the reader's knowledge of Ali's public persona, and of his oft-trumpeted (though light-hearted) belief in his own superhuman prowess. The stewardess subverts this identification of Ali with Superman by taking the broader view, in effect saying "If you can fly like superman, why are you on my plane?". In other words, her understanding of the entity that Ali introduces into the dialogue (Superman), coupled with her understanding of the immediate context (airplanes and assisted flight) allows her to demonstrate what Feyaerts, Brône and myself (ibid) call "hyper-understanding" in humour. Hyper-understanding trumps plain understanding every time, just as knowledge trumps opinion and insight trumps assertion.

3. Hiding in Plain Sight

The FGR in the previous exchange is very subtle indeed, and occurs when the stewardess shifts the focus of the dialogue from the seat-belt (of the airplane) to the airplane itself. Indeed, this shift would hardly be noticeable if not for the dramatic social and inter-personal effect that it creates. This supports my earlier contention that humour is the ideal laboratory in which to study figure-ground distinctions, since, in a joke (as opposed to a poem, or a piece of music), such tiny movements can yield disproportionately large and obvious effects.

However, it is important to note what does *not* happen in the previous exchange: the stewardess's reply does not create an incongruity that must be resolved. Not only is her observation a logical extension of Ali's assertion, she overtly agrees with what he says (though not with the implication of what he says, namely, that he is superman). Her reply does not hinge on a misinterpretation of what has already been said; if anything, it represents a hyper-understanding, of both the Superman mythos and the context of being in an airplane. Neither does her reply require the listener to back-track and re-interpret an earlier utterance. Her reply does not introduce a new script, or conceptual frame, through which the preceding utterances must be re-interpreted. In fact, the stewardess does not introduce *any* new concepts with her response. The concept Superman is already an established referent in the dialogue, while the concept Airplane forms the very obvious (if unspoken) setting of the dialogue. Insofar as her response forms the "punch-line" of the humorous exchange, it is not markedly informative with respect to the previous utterances.

To summarize then, this exchange does not conform either to the incongruity-resolution view of humour (e.g., see Ritchie, 1999 for a review), the forced-reinterpretation view (Suls, 1972), the script-switching (Attardo *et al.,* 2002) or frame-shifting views (Coulson, 2000), or even the marked-informativeness view (Giora, 1991). The stewardess simply re-uses what is plainly available in the narrative context to subvert the opposing goals of her interlocutor. Both have conflicting goals in a zero-sum game (to buckle or not to buckle a seat-belt), so her verbal victory is also a tangible victory insofar as she achieves her goal but her opponent does not achieve his.

Frame-shifting and script-switching occur whenever a narrative is viewed through a different conceptual prism, to yield a very different interpretation, such as when seduction is viewed as assault (or vice versa), rescue is viewed as unwanted interference, or drowning is viewed as a pleasure swim (as in the joke in which an Irishman falls into, and drowns in, a vat of Guinness beer, yet gets out twice before dying to use the toilet). No change of script or frame is discernible in the Ali dialogue: we never leave the frame of assisted-flight or shift to a different meaning of the term "Superman". Nonetheless, some *re-profiling* of the internal structure of the assisted-flight frame does take place, to temporally give more emphasis to the big picture ("airplane") than to the little details ("seatbelts"). In addition, a simple reformulation of known facts concerning Superman also takes place, but this reformulation also amounts to a simple FGR-based re-profiling of the Superman mythos rather than a jump to an alternate concept. The consensus fact that "Superman is capable of unassisted flight" is reformulated as "Superman does not need an airplane to fly". The latter is an obvious element of the Superman mythos, though one that is rarely foregrounded. But in doing so, we obtain one further

reformulation, "Someone who needs assisted flight cannot be Superman". Of course, the stewardess states neither of these facts explicitly. To do so would be as unfunny as to say "but you're not superman". Rather, because these facts are hiding in plain sight, much like the clues in a whodunit story, we are left to work out the conclusion – that Ali is no Superman – for ourselves.

4. The Social Dimension of FGR

Tsur concludes his discussion by noting that "what is important here is not the 'message' that is conveyed, but the insight resulting from the shift of mental sets". He thus takes the sensible position of (implicitly) dividing figure-ground-reversals into those that yield cognitively interesting insights, and those that do not. In Tsur's wheelbarrow joke, for example, the message concerns the actions of a specific sentry, but the insight is a more general one, namely "things are not always as they seem". One can argue, as I have in Veale (2005), that readers seek out insights in what they read, actively and opportunistically seeking to make their readings yield the most interesting results. For instance, in the Ali dialogue one can interpret the stewardess's reply as a simple message about Superman and leave it at that. Because Superman does not "need" to fly in an airplane, it does not necessarily follow that Superman should not "want" to fly in an airplane. Nonetheless, we gain a deeper insight if we push the interpretation further and opportunistically assume her reply to contain an implicit challenge to Ali's egotistical identification of himself as superhuman. Ali could rebut this challenge with the rejoinder "But I love to go first-class", further reinforcing the heroic identification of himself by using "I" to respond to a claim about "Superman" (as noted in Veale, Feyaerts and Brône, 2006, trumping can always invite counter-trumping). But he does not, and the challenge holds. The resulting insight of the joke might thus be summarized: "people are more likely to believe in an inconsistent state of affairs if it flatters their ego to do so".

In poetic, artistic and musical uses of FGR, there are good aesthetic reasons to assume the purposeful use of FGR, and Tsur's paper provides an interesting tour of this aesthetic landscape. In humour, furthermore, there is a strong social dimension to why certain uses of FGR yield a cognitive punch and others do not. The wheelbarrow joke uses FGR to execute a triumph of common-sense (the workman) over authoritarianism (the sentry), while the Ali exchange demonstrates how simple common-sense can puncture the pomposity of a self-aggrandizing protagonist. Ali, a world-champion heavyweight boxer, is convincingly counter-punched and KO'ed by a woman! Note how the joke has more social resonance if we imagine, as I have here, that the flight attendant is female. In each case, the FGR itself is insufficient to generate humour, rather, it is the social resonance that the FGR is used to generate that makes the end-result appear witty. This shouldn't be surprising, of course. One could not imagine a cognitive theory of gossip, say, that did not attempt to model the social dimension of the information that gossip trades upon, and the same should be true of humour. Without this social dimension, which plays on our entrenched beliefs about status, ego and acceptable behavior, FGR is just an empty "cognitive wheelbarrow".

Nonetheless, by recognizing that FGR is a general purpose vehicle for carrying meaning and generating insights, some aesthetic and some humorous, we have made an

excellent start. But it is important that we do not make the same mistake as the sentry in Tsur's joke, and over-value what are often the most foregrounded aspects of humour – such as incongruity, forced-reinterpretation, script-switching and frame-shifting – at the expense of what lies beneath. FGR is not just one of many possible strategies for creative thought, but may well be the master principle at work in each. If we allow ourselves to too enamored of the most foregrounded aspects of creative thinking, a truly productive account may well escape through the front gate, all the while hiding in plain sight.

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