

Metaphor and Metonymy: The Cognitive Trump-Cards of Linguistic Humour

1. Introduction

Language is perhaps the dominant medium of humorous expression. Verbal humour is, of course, linguistic by definition, but even visual humour in the form of cartoons can often derive its meaning from an underlying linguistic expression such as a conventional metaphor or idiom. The language of humour ranges from the immediacy of bodily form and function, it all its sensory, sexual and scatological glory, to the sublime reaches of abstract thought. To adequately capture this range in a theory of humour, one needs a linguistic framework that recognizes these end-points and everything in between as forming a genuine spectrum of inter-related concepts, as opposed to a collection of arbitrary content domains that are each formally equivalent at an abstract level. Cognitive linguistics is one such framework, viewing language not as a separate mental module but as a highly-grounded and experiential facet of general human intelligence that is tightly and inseparably integrated with other key facets of behaviour, such as conceptual reasoning, spatial and temporal awareness, visual processing and motor-processing. This disdain for modularity means that cognitive linguistics cannot offer a clinical, autonomous theory of any one facet of linguistic cognition without necessarily drawing upon every other facet. But in this rejection of modularity lies great descriptive power: a theory of linguistic humour can draw upon every such facet with ease, crossing functional boundaries as needed and allowing the interpretation and generation processes to view each component of meaning (lexical, semantic and pragmatic) as re-entrant and available at every level of linguistic analysis.

Of course, not all linguistic humour needs this kind of flexibility of processing and integration of cognitive faculties. But the fact that some kinds do, and draw their humour directly from this power, suggests that to the extent that language is represented at all in a theory of humour, it should be considered from a cognitive vantage-point. In this paper we consider a kind of humour that is found most often in concise verbal witticisms as opposed to narrative jokes, which exploits conceptual

phenomena such as metaphor and metonymy at the deepest level. The relationship between humour and metaphor is not a controversial one: novel examples of each evoke a certain degree of tension in achieving striking comparisons or implications. Koestler (1964) makes the relationship explicit by positing each to be the result of a common psychological operation called bisociation, that combines two or more conceptual structures that in some key sense representationally orthogonal. Veale (1996) describes how a model of metaphoric interpretation can capture this bisociative operation in terms of a graph-theoretic process called analogical structure-mapping (Gentner, 1983), while additionally describing how the mathematical catastrophe-theoretic view of Paulos (1980) can be realized as a form of metaphoric tension within such a model. More recently, Attardo (2002) describes how structure-mapping can be used as the basis for a logical mechanism in the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), with such mappings providing a structured basis for recognizing the semantic or pragmatic oppositions needed to detect the points of tension in a joke and trigger the frame-switching underlying humorous narratives.

But metaphor can do more than provide cognitive insights into the working of humour; it can itself be part of the logical mechanism that makes humour work. We will consider here some examples of humour where the metaphor is so tightly integrated it cannot be handled by structural substitution alone. Rather, humorous interpretation will hinge crucially on engaging these metaphors at a conceptual level, and exploiting the salience gap that arises between a literal and figurative readings in the mind of each speaker (see Giora (1997) for a discussion of the graded salience hypothesis in cognitive models of language). Such examples will show that we cannot assume that linguistic knowledge is a resource that is used solely in arriving at the logical form of a humorous utterance or narrative, only to be discarded in favour of wholly logical and conceptual reasoning mechanisms from that level onward. Rather, metaphors and metonymies may need to be accommodated explicitly in the logical form, while the logical mechanism may need to use explicitly metaphoric and metonymic forms of inference to deal with them adequately. Furthermore, to the extent that these metaphors evoke idioms or other lexical associations that are salient to their interpretation, the logical mechanism may also need to incorporate lexico-semantic (i.e., linguistic) considerations into its reasoning. The lesson, and thus the motivation, of Cognitive Linguistics is that some jokes may involve language *all the*

way down, so that no level of analysis in these jokes may be entirely free of linguistic considerations.

2. Metaphoric Trumping

Metaphor is a wonderfully versatile conceptual tool, as adept at puncturing egos as it is at stroking them. Consider the following juxtaposition of book titles, the first naming a genuine book by German rocket scientist Werner von Braun, the second a response to the hubris of the first by a sarcastic critic.

(1) “I aim for the stars”

(a coffee-table book promoting space travel by NASA scientist and former-German rocket scientist Werner von Braun, designer of the V2 rocket that ravaged London in WWII).

(2) “I aim for the stars, but I keep hitting London”

(alternate title suggested by a critic of von Braun’s contribution to Nazi Germany’s rocket programme).

There is a striking semantic opposition inherent in von Braun’s work for NASA that carries over to the title of his book. The future-looking visionary that in (1) is evoking the progress of mankind toward celestial rocket-flight is also the atavistic scientist that designed similar rockets to bring ruin, rather than prosperity, to the residents of London in World War II. It is this latter knowledge that when added to (1) creates the humorous title of (2). But though the opposition is vital to the implied criticism of von Braun, it is merely a necessary rather than sufficient contributor to the humorous effect. The same criticism is achieved via the same opposition in the more earnest, and not at all funny, explanation in parentheses underneath (1) above. So what makes (2) so funny and the long-winded equivalent under (1) so dull?

Because “I” is metonymically used to denote both von Braun and his rockets, while his “Aim” is simultaneously an abstract research goal, a physical target to be launched at, and a geographic destination to be reached, we can think of (1) as concisely communicating a number of different propositions in parallel: von Braun wishes to visit the stars; von Braun wants his rockets to reach the stars; and von Braun wants mankind to reach the stars in his rockets. We can think of this sally of

propositions in game-theoretic terms as von Braun's opening gambit to communicate his point of view to the general public. However, the critical rejoinder of (2) undermines this gambit while still working within the conceptual space established by von Braun himself. By forcing the reader to see the rocket attacks of WWII as analogous to the rocket voyages of the space age, we see the destruction of London as a moral failure for von Braun and the technology with which he wishes to reach the stars. Though we know the strikes on London to have been a technological success in themselves, rather than the result of poor aim, the effect of the extended metaphor is to thwart the communication goals of von Braun while highlighting his lack of a "moral compass".

We can think of von Braun and his critic in (2) as players that indirectly partake in a linguistic game of wits: von Braun opens with a conventional metaphor (AIM IS ABSTRACT GOAL [Travel Capability to the Stars]) but is countered by a critic who exploits this metaphor literally (AIM IS PHYSICAL TARGET [Stars] with unintended secondary target [London]). Though von Braun is not aware of the specific critic in (2) when he makes his opening gambit in (1), his gambit nonetheless anticipates the need to persuade people as to the nobility of his goals in the face of all potential critics. For the game to work, it is thus not necessary that the second player, the critic, be known to the first, or that both occupy the same space or even time-frame. It is simply necessary that the second player has access to the opening gambit of the first. Here, the critic subverts von Braun's own metaphor in (2) by two means: firstly, by treating it literally; and secondly, by alluding to additional information that is available to all parties in the game but which is more conducive to the communicative goals of the critic than those of von Braun. This information represents a salience gap between both players – the information is damaging to von Braun and thus not salient to his title, while it is edifying to the critic and thus quite salient to his proposed alternate title. In game-playing terms, the second player's literal use of the "aim for the stars" metaphor *trumps* that of the first, by causing a communicative goal failure for the first player to occur within his own rhetorical device.

The opening gambit can be a metaphor or a metonymy or a integrated combination of each, and can itself be a joke of sorts. When the opening gambit is a joke, trumping takes the form of a snappy come-back as in (3):

- (3) A husband and wife are sulkily driving home after a bitter argument about family. As they drive past the zoo, the monkey cages are clearly visible from the road, and the wife draws the attention of her husband to a group of agitated apes with the remark “Your relatives, I suppose”. “Yes”, replies the husband, “my in-laws”.

The wife’s opening gambit in (3) employs both a metaphor (UNSOPHISTICATED PEOPLE ARE APES) and a metonymy (YOUR RELATIVES ARE SUGGESTIVE OF YOU). The implication of course is that if the husband’s relatives are apes, then so too is he. The challenge for the husband in trumping his wife’s gambit is to presuppose that he does metaphorically have simian relatives, but to extend this metaphor in a way that it has even more derogatory consequences for his wife. Extension in this scenario is not achieved by literal interpretation as in (2), but by further metaphoric extension: if one can have simian relatives, then one can also have simian in-laws, since in-laws are a kind of relative in an extended view of the family.

An adequate cognitive representation of the concept of family is crucial for humorous resolution to occur here, as this representation must support the inference that in-laws are not as conceptually or genetically close as blood relatives. This in turn calls for a more sophisticated *graded* interpretation of the metonymy at the core of the witticism, namely THE CLOSER YOUR RELATIVES, THE MORE SUGGESTIVE THEY ARE OF YOU. This allows the husband to trump his wife via the inference “I may be related to apes by marriage, but you are related by blood, thus you are more of an ape than I”. Trumping can thus subvert a speaker’s metaphor to the extent that it implies an unflattering categorization for the speaker, in effect causing the speaker to be wounded with his or her own weapon. Consider the following ninth-century exchange that is said to have occurred when Charles the Bald, the Holy Roman Emperor, first met John Scotus Erigena, his Irish court philosopher:

- (4) *Charles: (looking disdainfully)* I was expecting someone more imposing, someone who might be man enough to say boo to a goose.
John Scotus: (looking Charles up and down) Boo!

The obvious implication, of course, is that Charles is a goose, which in the context of his own idiom fills the role of a prototypical weakling, though “goose” also belongs to that category of insulting animal names, like “ass”, that can denote a silly person. The

subversion is facilitated by the fact that “goose” is indefinitely determined in the Charles’ idiom, and is available for mapping to any one of the players. This is not the case in (3), where “apes” is explicitly used to denote the husband’s relatives and is consequently limited in how it can be exploited in the reply. The fact that “goose” is a floating referent allows Scotus to easily map this reference to Charles, and signify the mapping by addressing him in the style of one addressing a goose. The ease with which “goose” can be mapped contributes to the feeling that (4) involves a less skilful come-back than (3). In general, any loose referents that are introduced in the opening gambit may be turned against the first player if not appropriately constrained. For instance, Scotus uses a similar strategy against Charles the Bald in (5):

(5) *Charles: (sitting at dinner table) What separates an Irishman from a fool?*

John Scotus: (looking across the table) Just this table.

Charles’ opening gambit is an attempt on a pun that does not thrive under translation (roughly: “What separates a *Scot* from a *Sot*?”, where Scot here refers to an Irishman). Seduced by his own play on words, he fails to suitably tie down the floating referents in his statement, “an Irishman” and “a fool”, which is careless since “Irishman” most appropriately applies to Scotus, leaves “fool” free to apply to Charles himself. One reason he fails to see this danger is that he is using “separates” in the very particular figurative sense of SEPARATION AS ABSTRACT CONCEPTUAL DISTANCE. When considering the notion of separation in conceptual rather than physical space, it is quite conceivable that “Irishman” and “fool” refer to different perspectives on the same logical entity, since for instance, IRISHMAN and FOOL are two compatible categories under which the same entity might simultaneously fall. Furthermore, in conceptual space, separation distance is inversely proportional to similarity, with zero distance implying identity. The CONCEPTUAL DISTANCE IS SIMILARITY metaphor thus gives rise to lexical metaphors where “close”, “near” and “the neighbourhood of” all denote a kind of similarity.

By needing to ask what it is that separates the two categories, Charles implies that the categories are already so close that the difference needs to be illuminated (for instance, one might ask for the difference between a hotel and a motel, but not between a hotel and a football, since questions of difference are most meaningful when a significant similarity is already presupposed). Charles’ abstract use of

separation creates a salience gap for Scotus to exploit. Since “Irishman” most naturally applies to himself, Scotus is free to place Charles in the role of “fool”, via the simple expedient of literally interpreting “separates” as “physical separation”.

It is important to note that the opening gambit of the first player need not be a particularly clever or humorous use of language, and may, in some cases, actually be intended to mollify or comfort the second player. Trumping by the second player in these cases may seem churlish, but humour is still apparent. Consider the exchange in (6) below, which occurred after Winston Churchill lost power in the British general election of 1945:

(6) *Mrs. Churchill:* Perhaps it is a blessing in disguise, dear.

Winston Churchill: Well, it’s a very effective disguise.

The opening gambit in (6) is a well-worn idiom which well-meaning people often employ as a platitude to comfort those in unfortunate circumstances. It is used to suggest that what on the surface appears to be a negative situation in the short term – here a bruising defeat after a successful war campaign – may in fact have a more significant positive outcome in the long-term. However, it is likely that Mr. and Mrs. Churchill disagree as to precisely how positive the outcome might be, as each has different goals against which to measure the benefits. In fact, it is likely that any blessing will accrue more to Mrs. Churchill than to her husband, since her concerns about his age, his declining health and his tendency to overwork were not shared by Winston himself.

To see that the humour of (6) arises out of Winston’s subversive trumping of his wife’s idiom, contrast (6) with (7) below:

(7) *Mrs. Churchill:* Perhaps it is a blessing in disguise, dear.

Winston Churchill: I don’t see how.

For humour to arise, it is clearly not enough for the second player to disagree with the first, and thereby thwart the goals of the first by refusing to accept her presuppositions. To be sure, this disagreement does yield a script opposition of sorts, inasmuch as one is not expected to rudely reject a kindly remark, but again (as in 2) the opposition alone does not yield the humour. Rather, it is the opposition working

subversively within the conceptual space established by the opening player that leads to humour. It takes verbal skill and a quick mind to exploit the linguistic context created by the first speaker to achieve an inference that contradicts that of the speaker, to in effect turn the language of the first speaker against its user.

Trumping exploits the salience gap between the literal and figurative meaning of an expression. When the figurative meaning of a conventional expression is highly salient in a context, it is very likely that the speaker does not access or construct the literal meaning, but instead uses the pre-constructed meaning associated with the lexical definition of the expression. Similarly, if the context makes the figurative meaning more salient, the listener is also likely to go directly to this pre-stored meaning rather than construct one from first principles. In contrast, the creative player constructs the literal and figurative meanings in parallel, and has the ability to switch from one meaning to the other to achieve the inferences that best satisfy his goals.

Even though the idiom “blessing in disguise” is a rather tired figure of speech, (6) demonstrates that one must still analyse it in conceptual rather than lexico-semantic terms, as though it were a newly minted expression. To yield humour, Winston’s reasoning must go something like this: *This is a very bad situation indeed; if bad situations are disguises for unseen benefits, then a very bad situation is a very good disguise; if I cannot perceive the benefit to this situation, it may as well not exist at all, making this situation the perfect disguise.* Winston thus trumps his wife’s use of the BLESSING IN DISGUISE metaphor by revealing it to be a vacuous platitude via the extension: THE BETTER THE DISGUISE, THE LESSER THE BLESSING.

As can be seen, metaphoric trumping is a special case of the verbal one-upmanship that one finds in the traditional snappy comeback. It is special because it deconstructs the metaphor of the speaker in specific ways, e.g., through extension or literal interpretation, to use it against the speaker. However, the distinction between metaphoric trumping and the more general case of the snappy comeback is not always clear, and the linguistic criteria that distinguish the two can be very subtle indeed. Consider the somewhat rude but witty comeback in (8), which can sometimes be heard on the streets of Dublin:

- (8) *Aggressor:* What do you think you’re looking at?
 On-looker: I don’t know, they don’t put labels on shit.

The idiom of the aggressor is a very conventional one, so it is clear that it represents a direct challenge to the on-looker of the kind “why are you looking at *me*?”. On first consideration then, this seems like a very general and non-metaphoric use of trumping, since the word “looking” is used in its most basic literal sense of visual perception. Interestingly however, the idiom causes the aggressor to refer to himself as a “what” rather than a “who”, suggesting the accusation that the on-looker is in some sense objectifying the aggressor (i.e., “I am not some passive object for you to look at”). It is this subtle metaphorical use of “what” that the on-looker recognizes and exploits, for if one can presuppose that the aggressor is an inanimate object (as licensed by the aggressor via “what”), then he can certainly be construed as a sub-standard or unpleasant object. But to avoid the creation of a humourless non-sequitur, the on-looker must bind “what” to an object that also relates to the notion of “looking” that is central to the aggressor’s challenge. One such object is a man-made product, since one “looks” at products in a very particular way, to read their labels and thereby ascertain their purpose and ingredients. A scatological term like “shit” conveniently denotes such an object, since it is equally apt when describing people, events and objects, and conveys a potent sense of dysfunction or inadequacy when applied to products. It remains for the on-looker to formulate his reply in a form that incorporates the scatological product/person reference into the “looking” frame established by the aggressor, itself a substantial task.

3. Trumping as a Logical Mechanism

Generalizing from the examples of metaphoric trumping in the previous section, we arrive at the following schematic description of the process:

Player 1 Opens with an utterance containing a conventional figure of speech F

 (e.g., F = metaphor, metonymy, idiom, etc.)

F serves a communicative goal G

 (e.g., G = self-aggrandisement, insult, persuasion, etc.)

Player 2 Responds with an utterance that extends F into F'

 (e.g., F' is a literal reading of F , a metaphoric extension of F , etc.)

F' trumps F by modifying F to imply $\neg G$ rather than G

Viewed from the perspective of a humour theory such as Attardo and Raskin's GTVH (the General Theory of Verbal Humour), F and F' can be considered as scripts while G and $\neg G$ comprise the opposition that arises from switching from F to F' . Of course, F and F' are quite unlike the kinds of script envisaged by the GTVH, which are generally conceived as domain-specific and very literal, temporally-ordered sequences of interconnected events, as described in the work of Roger Schank. However, Schankian scripts and established metaphors are similar in the key respect that they encapsulate a highly conventionalised view of the world that can yield insight in particular situations. Scripts are triggered by an agent when certain high salience cues in the environment are recognized, but the script may prove to be inapplicable to the particular situation if the actions of the identified participants diverge significantly from what is predicted. For instance, a script describing a generalized visit to the doctor may be incorrectly triggered in a narrative in which a patient is having an affair with the doctor's wife (e.g., see Attardo 2002). Raskin and Attardo suggest that humour is predicated on such prematurely triggered scripts. Likewise, each conventional metaphor conforms to a script of sorts, and may be used when certain superficial features of a situation seem to match. However, like scripts, the metaphor may not engender the expected result if the intended recipient has contrary goals to the speaker or fails to see the metaphor's deeper applicability to the situation. For example, the conventional "blessing in disguise" metaphor is felicitously applied in situations in which a recipient needs to be comforted in the face of bad news, but only truly applies if there is indeed an aspect of the situation that represents a noteworthy boon to the recipient. If the recipient, as in (6), cannot perceive any such boon, he or she may react counter to the script's expectations, and may even seek to undermine the metaphor that drives the script.

It is worth considering the trumping process from the perspective of the three agents that participate: the first player, who proffers the opening gambit of a conventional metaphor; the second player, who trumps this metaphor by subverting it from within; and the observer, the optional audience by whom the humour inherent in the trumping is recognized and appreciated. Though each agent may share the same background knowledge, each may have different goals that make elements of this shared knowledge more or less salient to their comprehension processes.

We begin with the first player, who starting with a communicative goal G , constructs a meaning M to achieve this goal before then choosing a conventional figure of speech F to express M . Since F is chosen from the mental lexicon for its non-compositional (i.e., idiomatic) association with the meaning M , the first player is unlikely to consider the compositional meaning M' of F ; but even if he does, M' will still seem a less salient interpretation of F than M , since M is salient precisely because of its support for G . Now, on hearing F , player one expects that player two will unpack his intended meaning M . However, player two will have to decide whether it is M or M' that is conveyed by F . Since F will be communicated as a sequence of individual words that must be reconstituted into a complete utterance by player two, this increases the likelihood that player two will attempt to construct a compositional interpretation of F to yield M' as well as M . This likelihood is increased further if player two pursues the contrary goal $\neg G$, or simply believes G to be an inappropriate goal for player one. Having constructed M' , player two may see an opportunity to modify M' to support $\neg G$ and thwart G that is not (yet) seen by player one. The fact that both players attach different salience levels to M and M' as interpretations of F creates a salience gap that player two can exploit, since salience will dictate the interpretation that each chooses (see Giora, 1997). Player two's modification of M' may involve the specialization of some part of M , e.g., relatives into in-laws or disguises into impenetrable disguises, that causes a subsequent metaphoric inference to be more suggestive of $\neg G$ than G . The modified version of M' can then be literally expressed via the surface manifestation F' so that the language of F' clearly mirrors that of F .

Now let us consider the observer to this trumping game. If we assume the observer to be neutral with respect to G and $\neg G$, the observer should, like player one, consider the non-compositional meaning M to be a more salient reading of F than the compositional meaning M' . The reply F' of player two will thus present an interpretation problem for the observer, since it will explicitly reference a definite description (such as in-laws or disguises) that is not in the referent context for the dialogue. However, assuming the dialogue to be lexically cohesive, the observer must conclude that this concept described in F' refers to the related concept in F that is only available under a compositional reading of F . The observer thus reinterprets F as

M', leading him to recognize F' as a literal extension of F that thwarts the communication goal G of player one. Player two is subsequently recognized as the victor in this little game of linguistic swordplay. Note that if player one is to understand player two's reply, he must also follow the same interpretation path as the observer to arrive at the same conclusion, namely that he has been defeated. It is no coincidence that speakers are prompted to say "touché" in circumstances when their own words or presuppositions have been adroitly turned against them by another: words can be weapons, and victory almost always goes to those who wield them most skilfully.

The above account accords well with the logical picture of humour presented in the GTVH, if one is willing to consider the conventional interpretation of an established figure of speech as a script that imposes certain conditions of use and which makes certain predictions about the concepts it is used to describe. The cost of this accord is the realization that every idiom in a language must be considered as a potential script in the appreciation of humour. Subsumed in this cost is the representational expense of describing even so-called *dead* metaphors on a conceptual level so that new life may be breathed into them for humorous effect via trumping. Thus, it is not enough for a mental lexicon to simply contain a direct mapping between "blessing in disguise" and the meaning UNSEEN-BENEFIT-OF-MISFORTUNE. The lexicon must be supported by a conceptual system that represents the metaphor on its own terms, linking DISGUISE to MISFORTUNE and DISGUISED-PARTY to BENEFIT, so that one can derive complex inferences from these mappings, for instance, that severe misfortunes can be effective disguises.

Trumping demonstrates that metaphors do not really die, but simply lose their ability to surprise and evoke tension as they fade into the woodwork of language. But trumping also shows that this loss of tension is not irrevocable. The role of tension in humour – in particular, the role of the build-up and subsequent release of tension – has long been appreciated (e.g., see Koestler 1964), and in humour based on figurative reasoning, it seems plausible that metaphoric tension and humorous tension are one and the same. At the very least, we should expect the former to contribute to the latter. By forcing an observer to rediscover the conceptual basis of a metaphor rendered moribund by convention, the metaphoric tension of the underlying mappings can be once again revived. This tension is dissipated by the humorous resolution that

follows, leading to an appreciation of the second player's subversive linguistic skill and perhaps even laughter.

3.1. Game Variations

We conceive of the trumping game as an activity involving three participants – two players and an observer – for reasons of descriptive clarity. However, each instance of trumping need not involve all three parties, and those parties that are involved need not be logically distinct. For instance, a metaphoric trumping need not involve an observer for humour to occur, as player one and player two are themselves observers to the process. Most interestingly, however, a trumping need not even require both players.

Self-defeating use of language is an example of trumping in which a speaker plays the role of player one *and* player two, since the speaker serves to trump his own figure of speech by his own over-reaching choice of words. The phenomenon of self-trumping is perhaps most apparent in utterances made by second-language users who do not fully appreciate the role of linguistic context in making the lesser reading of a figure more salient than the intended one. Consider the utterance in (9) from an English-language sign in a Japanese hotel bathroom:

(9) *Sign above sink:* All the water in this hotel has been passed by the staff.

In colloquial English, “passing water” is a quaint euphemism for urination, and it is this sense of “passing” (PASSING AS URINATION), rather than the intended metonymic/metaphoric sense (PASSING AS INSPECTING AND APPROVING), that is more salient to a native speaker in the lexical context of “water”. Speaker one thus undermines his own communicative goal, by choosing a figure of speech whose received meaning suggests the opposite inference (*hotel water = urine = polluted*) to that which is intended (*hotel water = unpolluted*). The salience gap in (9) is thus caused by a lack of familiarity with native-speaker lexical associations, but self-trumping can also be caused by a lack of familiarity with non-native cultural associations. For instance, consider (10) below (taken from a Turkish toilet):

(10) *Sign in Turkish toilet:* Please only put into the toilet what you have eaten.

In Turkish toilets, tissue paper and other items should not be flushed via the fragile plumbing system but rather disposed of in a special receptacle. The speaker in (10) is thus engaged in a linguistic balancing act, on one hand attempting to educate his patrons about the culture gap between Western and Turkish toilets while on the other avoiding any overt reference to indelicate bodily functions. A relatively common metonymy, RAW MATERIAL FOR PRODUCT, is thus used to delicately suggest the concept of bodily waste. However, this causes a metonymic tightening of the chain of causality from RAW MATERIAL (food) to PRODUCT (excrement) that only succeeds in establishing an even more immediate sense of contiguity between the concepts FOOD and EXCREMENT. The utterance is thus self-trumping since it achieves a delicacy of expression at the surface level only at the cost of altogether more disgusting association at the conceptual level.

A second player is not needed for such utterances because no explicit prompting is needed for a native observer to recognize the inherent salience gap between what the speaker (player one) intends and what is actually suggested. Nor is it necessary that player one produces the trumping effect accidentally or through ignorance. Witty speakers often subvert their own utterances to achieve a humorous trumping of the listener's expectations. Consider the following from Dorothy Parker:

(11) *Parker*: If all the girls at the Yale prom were laid end to end ...
... I wouldn't be at all surprised.

The humour in (11) works on several different levels simultaneously. On one level it can be seen as an example of the linguistic phenomenon of zeugma, whereby a word is used in two related by different senses in the same utterance (Parker uses the same zeugmatic strategy in "My apartment is so small I barely have enough room to lay my hat and a few friends"). So from a zeugmatic perspective, (11) is a double-entendre, with "lay" denoting both the literal act of placing on the ground and the figurative act of sexual intercourse. However, there is a non-sexual reading that is equally humorous: the idea that Yale girls would allow themselves to be literally laid end to end suggests a pathological willingness to please that is funny in itself.

Finally, in some cases trumping can actually support rather than undermine the goals of the speaker, if the extension is thematically similar. Consider the political jibe of (12):

(12) *Commentator 1*: George W. Bush was born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

Commentator 2: More like a silver foot.

The interaction in (12) represents a particular complex example of trumping, in which a metaphor is treated literally, creatively modified, and then converted back into a thematically similar metaphor with a similar goal. A silver spoon figuratively implies wealth, while to have one in one's mouth at birth implies wealth inherited from parents. In contrast, to have a foot in one's mouth suggests verbal clumsiness and an inability to speak clearly. Since both figures revolve around the notion of having something in one's mouth, one can serve as a reminder for the other, especially if the meaning of one is considered compositionally so as to make the concept Mouth more salient to the context. Blending both interpretations, one can state that Bush has both a silver spoon and a foot in his mouth, but more humour results when we blend them into a single object. A silver foot suggests that Bush's verbal clumsiness is not unrelated to his wealth, and because "silver spoon" signifies inherited wealth, a "silver foot" also suggests that this clumsiness is perhaps inherited.

4. Metonymy

In many instances of metaphoric language, whether humorous or otherwise, metonymy serves as the unseen handmaiden to metaphor. When attempting to construct a creative correspondence between two domains, it is often necessary to slide one of the domain representations into position, and it is metonymy that provides a principled means of allowing representations to slide over one another. Without metonymy, there would be far fewer opportunities to appropriately juxtapose concepts in a metaphor while respecting structural constraints, and far fewer opportunities to derive the semantic and conceptual oppositions from these juxtapositions that are essential to humour.

Consider the trumping in (11):

- (11) *Player 1*: Don't worry, there's a light at the end of the tunnel?
(a) *Player 2*: Yes, a "no-exit" sign ...
(b) *Player 2*: ... or an on-coming train.

Trumping operates in (11) via literal extension of the “light” in player one’s idiomatic rendering of the metaphor pair DARKNESS IS FEAR and LIGHT IS HOPE. However, a “no-exit” sign is not an example of a light, rather it is an example of a light-*source*. The metonymic relationship between light and light-sources is very prevalent in English, causing the word “light” to polysemously assume the additional meaning of a conventional light-source such as a light bulb or a lamp. The trumping in (11a) relies on this subtle metonymy as much as on the metaphor of player one’s idiom. The metonymy in (11b) is easier to appreciate. Trains are not lights, nor do we conventionally think of them as light-sources, but they do contain light sources which become visible and salient in dark places like a railway tunnel.

The metonymies of (11a) and (11b) play a crucial back-stage role that is almost completely transparent to the comprehender, who does not need to be consciously aware of the metonymy to appreciate its effect. However, metonymy is not always this transparent in humour; consider the song lyric of (12):

(12) *Tom Waits (singly drunkenly)*: The piano has been drinking ...

Pianos obviously do not consume alcohol, but pianists sometimes do, and the conceptual contiguity of PERFORMERS to INSTRUMENTS is a standard pathway for metonymy. But while it is clear then that “piano” is a metonym for “pianist” in (12), so that the awful music that is produced should be blamed on the performer rather than on the instrument, the metonymy is not transparent or the utterance would lack humorous force. It is important that the comprehender is consciously aware of the metonymy so as to see (12) for what it is: an ironic attempt to transfer blame to an inanimate object based on a metonymic relationship to its culpably animate operator.

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