

# Mechanisms of Verbal Humor

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**YoungEun Yoon. 2000. Mechanisms of Verbal Humor.** *Language and Information* 4.1, 1-20. This paper deals with the aspects of meaning of verbal humor that are responsible for eliciting laughs. It is generally accepted that the perception of incongruity is involved in the experience of humor, but few clear definitions or explanations have been given of the nature of this incongruity. Among the few, Curc6(1995, 1997, 1998), for example, tries to analyze verbal humor, specifically the relation between a stimulus and the hearer's interpretation of it, in line with the principle of relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995). However, as he admits, his account covers only a limited amount of cases. This paper will delve into the meaning of humor with extensive data and present a set of individual mechanisms involved in humor. It will also propose a new conceptual theory of humor that persuasively accounts for the mechanisms of humor as a whole. (**Ewha Womans University**)

## 1. Introduction

We often experience humor in our daily lives in various forms such as in conversations with other people, newspapers, magazines, books, movies, plays, and broadcasts. It can be observed that cases of verbal humor are more often intended than unintended. For example, comic books, comedy movies, comedy plays, and TV sitcoms are written or/and made under a carefully planned scheme to produce humor. We also often intentionally use humorous verbal expressions in our daily conversations, and there are always those humorous people that enjoy making other people laugh. In contrast to these cases of intentional humor, we also come across cases of unintentional humor and those people who often make others laugh without meaning to do so.

If we take into consideration the question of what elements of verbal humor are responsible for eliciting laughs, we can observe that elements other than verbal expressions themselves, such as certain facial expressions, body movements, tones of voice, and a variety of other contextual elements in given situations, also take a great part in generating humor, especially in the cases of our daily conversations, animation, plays, movies, and broadcasts. To take an extreme case, so-called slapstick is defined as a comedy characterized by boisterous action, and is mostly

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nonverbal humor.

However, even in cases where only verbal expressions seem to be involved, such as in books and magazines, those nonverbal elements mentioned above are also involved between the lines. Although this paper will focus on verbal humor, it should be admitted that it cannot totally exclude the influence of the nonverbal aspects of humor from its analysis.

Concerning the definition of humor, a great number of theories, including Plato (1908), Plato (1934), Plato (1937), Aristotle (1909), Aristotle (1910), Aristotle (1939), Freud (1976), Minsky (1984), Minsky (1996), Raskin (1985), Prado (1995), Morreall (1989) Forabosco (1992), and Curcó (1995, 1998) among others, have been put forth, and these theories define humor from a variety of different perspectives.

Currently, it is generally accepted that we experience humor when we perceive incongruity. However, not much has been said about the precise nature of the incongruity, except for a few theories such as those of Forabosco (1992) and Curcó (1995, 1998). On the one hand, Forabosco considers incongruity as a feature of the relation between an object and the subject who perceives it, and proposes that "a stimulus is incongruous when it differs from the cognitive model of reference" (Forabosco 1992: 54). Curcó proposes a similar theory based on the relation between the stimulus and the interpretation of it on the part of the hearer.

However, these theories of humor based on incongruity including Forabosco's and Curcó's theories provide an account of only a limited portion of the various data on humor, which will be discussed more in detail in the next section.

Given this, the purpose of this paper is to pursue the meaning of humor from a similar but new perspective and present a set of mechanisms involved in the perception of humor by analyzing an extensive amount of representative data. In addition, some global principles will be proposed that provide an explanation for a variety of humor data not only in a more inclusive but also persuasive way than the concept of incongruity. To meet the purpose of this paper, fourteen episodes of four popular American TV sitcom series will be analyzed. TV sitcom series were chosen as representative data, since American sitcoms are made with a clear intention to amuse the audience, mostly with verbal humor, under well-planned direction, and since they are situated in natural language-using environments. Accordingly, they provide some of the most appropriate data from which we can effectively derive a set of mechanisms involved in humor in closest-to-rel-language-using situations.

This paper is organized as follows: In section 2 some previous theories of humor will be reviewed, focusing on Curcó's (1995, 1998) theory. In section 3 a set of mechanisms of humor derived from the data from the fourteen episodes of four different popular American sitcom series will be discussed, and in section 4 a new conceptual theory of humor will be proposed.

## 2. Previous Theories of Humor

A number of philosophers and linguists have tried to define humor, whose importance in the daily life of both primitive societies and the highly-developed societies of today cannot be overlooked. We humans perceive and produce humor so naturally that one might think that its definition could also be easily given. However, in spite of an abundance of theories on humor, there doesn't seem to exist one well-defined theory of humor yet.

In this context, Curc3's (1995, 1998) theory provides an interesting perspective on the phenomenon of humor, based on the concept of incongruity. Curc3 sees the incongruity involved in humor as located in the relation between the stimulus and the interpretation of it. He explains humor "by a pattern of specific effects derived in processing the incongruity" (Curc3 1998: 309) rather than by the nature of the specific type of incongruity involved in humor.

As mentioned, the basic concept of Curc3's theory has been borrowed from Forabosco's (1992) theory, which also characterizes incongruity as a feature of the relation between a stimulus and the hearer or reader who perceives it, not as a property of the stimulus itself. Forabosco proposes that a stimulus is incongruous when it differs from the hearer or reader's "cognitive model of reference," which means "a sort of preliminary representation and minitheory which the subject uses in his relation with reality" (Forabosco 1992: 54). However, as pointed out by Curc3, Forabosco provides neither a detailed description of the so-called cognitive model of reference nor an account for the nature of the deviation of a stimulus from the subject's cognitive model that leads to humor.

Resorting to the relationship of the stimulus to the hearer's cognitive model, Curc3 proposes that humor is often derived when the hearer entertains two contradictory propositional contents. Consider the following examples from Curc3 (1998):

- (1) Don't keep telling the lady you are unworthy of her. Let it be a complete surprise. (Dolitsky 1992:35)
  - (a) The addressee is worthy of the lady in question.
  - (b) The addressee is not worthy of the lady in question.
- (2) It is perfectly monstrous the way people go about nowadays saying things against one behind one's back that are absolutely and entirely true. (Oscar Wilde)
  - (a) The things people tell against one behind one's back are false.
  - (b) The things people tell against one behind one's back are not false.

According to him, the propositions listed under (a) in (1) and (2) are contextually derived assumptions while the ones under (b) are implicated assumptions

obtained by the hearer in search of an interpretation in line with the principle of relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995). In (1) and (2), if you process the first sentence or the first part of the sentence, normally you get the contextual assumption (a). But after the second sentence or the second part of the sentence is processed, you are supplied with the implicated premise (b), which contradicts (a). Curcó argues that this implicated premise is obtained in an effort to interpret the stimulus to be consistent with the principle of relevance.

Curcó proposes that in the type of humor such as (1) and (2), the speaker leads the hearer to perceive mental representations that are attributable to someone other than the speaker at the time of the utterance while the speaker expresses her dissociative attitude towards the representations.

To outline the pragmatic mechanisms Curcó proposes to be involved in the type of humor he analyzes in his paper, a stimulus is uttered that makes salient the implicated assumption, which is in overt contradiction with the contextual assumption. This overt contradiction in turn makes the contextual assumption highly salient; though it was previously not salient enough to be worth foregrounding, since it is taken for granted by most people. Furthermore, the speaker reveals her dissociative attitude towards the contextual assumption which is attributed to the hearer or someone other than herself. That dissociative attitude is also recognized and retained by the hearer. The recognition that the contextual assumption is attributed to someone other than the speaker and the retention of the speaker's dissociative attitude toward the contextual assumption are both essential to lead to an interpretation that the speaker's utterance is intended to be consistent with the principle of r

Curcó's theory of humor seems to provide a quite persuasive account for the type of humor he cites in his paper. However, as he admits himself, his theory does not cover various types of humor. The cases of humor he analyzes in his paper are quite limited not only in their number but also in their pattern. Furthermore, even for the type of cases of humor cited in his paper, there are cases that do not seem to be well accounted for by the pragmatic mechanisms of humor he proposes. Consider the following example from Curcó (1998):

- (3) Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends. (Woody Allen)

According to Curcó, the search for relevance leads the hearer to supply an implicated assumption that "there is some connection between the difficulty of proving the existence of God and the difficulty in getting a plumber on weekends" (Curcó 1998:316). This assumption makes highly salient the contextual assumption that there is no connection between the two, and the rest is pretty much the same as the processes described above for other examples.

The problem with (3), however, is that the contextual and the implicated assumptions do not seem to be easily derived by the hearer, while the humorous effect is still generated. The issue here doesn't seem to be whether the connection between the first proposition and the second proposition exists or not, but it could

be either the unfamiliarity of comparing the two propositions or the newness of the observation implicated by the second proposition in connection with the first proposition. That is, although Curcó's account is crucially dependent on the existence of two conflicting propositions, we can easily come up with cases like (3) in which two contradictory propositions are hard to be derived. In other words, even for the type of humor data to which he limits the scope of his paper, the identification of the two conflicting propositions or the incongruity in general on the part of the hearer is not guaranteed.

All in all, these theories of humor based on incongruity including Forabosco's and Curcó's theories are both too narrowly phrased and too dependent on complex definitions of technical criteria. Accordingly, they provide an account of only a limited portion of the various data on humor.

Given this, instead, I will propose a more conceptual definition based on a situational analysis of the humorous utterance or event combined with an acknowledgement of the diverse nature of the specific mechanisms involved in the creation of the humorous utterance or event itself.

First, in the next section, a variety of mechanisms of humor will be presented, not all of which can be accounted for by a theory based on incongruity, with the humor data from fourteen episodes of four different popular American sitcom series, namely, *Friends*, *Frasier*, *Mad about You*, and *Seinfeld*.<sup>1</sup>

The mechanisms presented below cannot be an exhaustive list in any way, but they will show that more general concepts other than incongruity are needed to give a persuasive as well as complete explanation of various types of verbal humor.

### 3. Mechanisms of Verbal Humor

In this section, the cases of humor identified in the data will be classified into a set of types, and then a mechanism utilized in each of these types of humor will be proposed. Furthermore, each mechanism will be illustrated with some examples from the data.

However, note that in many cases, the categories of humor seem to blend and exist in multiple forms, and an example could fit many categories.

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1. I have analyzed five episodes each of the sitcom series *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, and two episodes each of *Frasier* and *Mad about You*, which are all currently being aired on AFN (American Forces Network) TV. For some of the episodes of *Seinfeld* and all the episodes of *Friends*, I could find the scripts from the internet fan club resources for the recordings I made, but for the rest of the episodes I recorded and transcribed them myself. There may be some minor transcription errors, even in the transcriptions obtained from the internet resources, which won't influence the arguments in this paper in any major way.

As for the criteria for deciding on the humorous effect of the lines from the data, the judgment was based on whether the line was followed by laughs from the studio audience or a 'laugh track.' Obviously if the line was followed by laughs, it was regarded as being humorous.

### 3.1 Abnormality

The first mechanism of humor that is employed in the cases of humor in the data is so-called ‘abnormality.’ First, consider the following lines from an episode of *Seinfeld*:<sup>2</sup>

- (4) Jerry Seinfeld runs into his neighbor Bob.

Jerry: Hi, Bob.

Bob doesn’t answer. He looks upset.

Jerry: I’m sorry,  $\Delta$ maestro $\nabla$ .

- (5) Elaine: Well, I mean. Don’t you think that he was probably called maestro while he was conducting, not in social situations. I mean, his friends probably called him just Ley.

Bob:  $\Delta$ I happen to know for a fact that he was called maestro in social situations. I was once in a bar and somebody came up to him and said, “Oh, maestro. How about a beer?” O.K.? That’s a fact. $\nabla$

In the series, ‘Bob’ is a conductor for a small insignificant orchestra for the so-called Police Benevolence Association. But he always insists on being called ‘maestro.’ This kind of abnormal but harmless attitude leads to humor in (4) and (5). In (5) ‘Bob’ compares himself to Leonard Bernstein and insists that Bernstein was called maestro even in social situations.

Have a look at another example from the same episode:

- (6) George: (To the security guard in Ross’s)  $\Delta$ I’d like to walk in here one day and find you sitting down. That would give me a lot of pleasure. $\nabla$

‘George’, a friend of Seinfeld’s, one day goes to Ross’s to get a shirt and sympathizes with the security guard who has to keep standing the whole day. A normal shopper wouldn’t take time to think about the security guard in the store. However, ‘George’ later even offers a chair to the security guard, which causes him to doze off and the store to be robbed.

### 3.2 Unexpectedness

An unexpected remark quite often derives humor. The following two excerpts are from *Frasier*:

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2. The triangle-delimited parts, i.e. those utterances marked by a pair of straight and inverted triangles  $\Delta$  and  $\nabla$ , in all the following examples indicate the humorous lines that directly derive laughs from the studio audience or a laugh track.

- (7) Frasier: Sooooo. Tell me all about it. Come on.  
 Martin: . . .  $\Delta$ Suffice it to say, "it stunk." $\nabla$   
 Frasier: What?  
 Martin:  $\Delta$ That was the dullest evening in my life. The way she draws on and on and on $\nabla$ . . . .
- (8) Frasier: Besides, Dad would never deliberately hurt Joanna by standing her up. He is first and foremost a gentleman.  
 Martin:  $\Delta$ I saw Roz, so I hid outside in case her old gas-bag mother was with her $\nabla$ . . . .

Frasier and his colleague, Roz, set up a date for their widowed father and mother. Roz's mother Joanna is a retired attorney general and Frasier's father is a retired detective. Frasier and Roz never expect that Frasier's father, Martin, won't like Roz's attractive mother. However, in (7), to their surprise, Martin complains about his date with harsh words. Similarly, in (8), Martin's ungentlemanly behavior revealed by his remark is also well beyond Frasier's expectation, and contradicts his remark.

The following is an example from an episode of *Mad about You*:

- (9) Theresa: Honey, wait a second. You ought to check and make sure that he's O.K. After all, Paul was in the accident, too.  
 Jamie: Are you O.K.?  
 Paul: Fine.  
 Theresa: Good.  $\Delta$ Now tear into him. $\nabla$

The scene in (9) takes place in the hospital right after Theresa has been hit by Paul's car. Paul's foot slipped and stepped on the accelerator, and he ran his car into his mother-in-law, Theresa, who was on the sidewalk waving to him, and broke both of her arms. Naturally, Theresa must be really mad. But in (9) after a nice gesture, she changes into a revengeful mother-in-law, which is unexpected.

### 3.3 Stupidity

'Stupidity,' which could be regarded as a sub-class of 'abnormality,' is another important mechanism employed in humor. As an illustration, almost all of the Korean as well as American sitcom series include at least one character who plays a dumber than normal person. For example, a weird and a little dumb character named Kramer appears in *Seinfeld*. The following scene takes place after Kramer gets burned by some hot coffee that he bought outside of a theatre and put in his shirt to sneak into the movie theatre. He sues the coffee chain for selling too hot

coffee with a faulty cover. Two representatives from the coffee chain discuss the matter before Kramer and his attorney arrive and decide that they'd better give Kramer a quite large amount of settlement money to avoid bad publicity. But in (10), stupidly enough, Kramer falls for their trivial offer of free coffee even before they get to the main point, the settlement money:

- (10) Caffè latte's representative: We don't wanna take up too much of your time. Let's make it short and sweet. We are prepared to offer you all the free coffee you want at any of our stores throughout the North America and Europe and

Kramer: ΔI'll take it.▽

(11) is a scene that after Kramer's stupid transaction, the attorney is upset and criticizes him in a taxi on their way back. Nevertheless, Kramer doesn't seem to be bothered by his stupid mistake and quite composedly gets out of the taxi to get a free coffee:

- (11) Attorney: I'll take it? Who told you to take it? Did I tell you to take it? . . . 20 years of practice, and I've never experienced anything like this.

Kramer: ΔListen, I'm gonna get out of here. I'm gonna get myself a free Caffè latte.▽

Another stupid character named 'Joey' appears in the series *Friends*. Joey is a TV actor who plays a trivial role for a daytime drama, and one day a psychopathic stalker comes up to his apartment:

- (12) Joey: ΔO.K. We'll just leave, and when we pass her on the stairs, she won't know it's me 'cause we've never met.

Chandler: That's how radio stars escape stalkers.▽

Joey doesn't realize that the stalker has been watching him on TV, which is reminded by his friend, Chandler. *Frasier* is a series derived from the old series *Cheers*, which was situated in a bar with the main characters 'Sam' the bar owner, 'Woody' the bartender, and *Frasier* one of the customers, among others. Now in this episode of the series *Frasier*, 'Woody' visits the radio psychiatrist *Frasier*:

- (13) Frasier: Woody, here's that Seattle guide book I was telling you about.

Woody: Oh, thanks.

Frasier: You remember that?

Woody: Wow, look at the view. You can see the whole city.



Frasier: Ah, ha. You turn around. It's even better.

Woody:  $\Delta$ You are right. This is better. $\nabla$

What Frasier meant by 'You turn around' is that if you turn around and look out the window, you will get an even better view of the city. However, the stupid Woody just turns around still looking at the book and says 'This is better.'

After spending a day with Woody, Frasier realizes how different they are and how difficult it is to spend time together with Woody. Frasier decides not to spend another day with him and so he says good-bye to him. And yet, Woody doesn't get the message and asks him where to eat:<sup>3</sup>

- (14) Frasier: It's been great seeing you. Come on. Give me a good hug. Are you gonna promise me to give my love to everybody back at the bar. Oh, and give your beautiful wife and kids a big kiss from uncle Frasier. And don't be a stranger.

Woody: No, I won't.  $\Delta$ So where are we going for dinner tonight? $\nabla$

### 3.4 Contradiction

People's light-hearted contradictory attitudes or behaviors expressed in words feature another well-used mechanism of humor. First, in (15), Jerry Seinfeld, who prefers healthy food like salad to mutton with all the fat, pretends to like mutton after realizing that women including his girlfriend, Holly, don't respect salad-eaters:

- (15) Holly: Does everybody like mutton?

Jerry:  $\Delta$ Hum, mutton. Hope you didn't cut the fat off. $\nabla$

In (16), Frasier, who used to be the bartender Woody's customer, offers to wait on Woody by bringing a beer for him, but then he orders Daph to get the beer. Frasier's contradictory behavior is 'unexpected' at the same time:

- (16) Frasier: So, Woody. Can I get you a beer?

Woody: It's funny. All those years, I was waiting on you. And now you're getting me a beer.

Frasier: Yes, well. Life's like that sometimes, isn't it?  $\Delta$ Daph, get us a couple of beers, will you? $\nabla$

The following excerpt is from an episode from *Friends*. In an apartment right across from the apartments where the main characters of the series live, Ugly Naked Guy lives. They call him that because he is ugly and goes around the

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3. Examples (13) and (14) also seem to include strong elements of 'unexpectedness.'

house naked, and they abhor him. The following scene takes place when one day they hear that the guy will move out of his apartment and Ross gets interested in moving into the guy's apartment. Ross goes to the guy's apartment and makes contradictory remarks to butter him up to get the apartment:

- (17) Outside Ugly Naked Guy's apartment, Ross knocks on the door and Ugly Naked Guy answers it. He's ugly. He's naked. And he's holding a huge jumbo soda.

Ross: Good evening, sir. My name is Ross Geller. I'm one of the people who applied for the apartment. And I—I realize that the competition is fierce but?  $\Delta$ I'm sorry. I, I can't help but notice you're naked and (He claps his hands.) I applaud you. Man, I wish I was naked. I mean, this-this looks so great. That is how God intended it.  $\nabla$

Some time later a pathetic sight in which naked Ross and naked Ugly Guy are walking around the apartment together is caught by the friends through the window.

### 3.5 Irrelevancy

In the following example, Jerry chooses to take the idiom 'blind date' literally:

- (18) Jerry: I don't know. Blind date?  
 Elaine: What? You want to go out on a date with my cousin Holly, but you've never met her.  
 Jerry: Yeah, but I've seen pictures of her.  
 Elaine: At least I've spoken to my guy. You're going out on a deaf date.  
 Jerry: . . .  $\Delta$ The question is 'Would you rather go out on a date with a blind or a deaf?'  $\nabla$   
 George: Yeah, you're up on a top.  
 Jerry:  $\Delta$ See. I think I'd rather date a deaf. Because I blind is a little messy around the house  $\nabla$ . . .

Having a blind date has nothing to do with having a date with a blind person and neither does having a so-called 'deaf' date have anything to do with dating a deaf person. Jerry smoothly drifts on to the topic of dating a blind or a deaf person from the topic of having a blind date or a deaf date, which is a case of a logical leap.<sup>4</sup>

4. The type of humor illustrated in (18) could also be regarded as a pun or a contradiction of signified meanings of a word.

In the previous scene of (19), Jerry had an argument with his girlfriend, Patty. Jerry now complains of his situation to Elaine, who is indifferent to his plight. Their conversation is not a conversation. It's more like they are each talking to themselves, since they are not obeying the conversational principle of relevance at all:<sup>5</sup>

(19) Jerry: Sit down, Elaine.

Elaine: Oh, no. Jerry, I can't take any more gentle sobbing.

Jerry: I've been thinking about what it means to be complete.

Elaine:  $\Delta$ Do you have an apple or anything? $\nabla$

Jerry: Look at us, hurtling through space on this big, blue marble.

Elaine: Or a nectarine? I would absolutely love a nectarine.

Jerry: Looking everywhere for some kind of meaning . . .

Elaine: Why am I in such a fruit mood? Ahh, banana!

Jerry: When all the while, the real secret to happiness has been right in front of us! $\nabla$

### 3.6 Irony

According to Grice's (1975) traditional definition, 'irony' involves deliberate flouting of the maxim of Quality to implicate the opposite of what was literally said. However, this classical definition of irony is criticized by Wilson and Sperber (1992) for having many counterexamples. To remedy these weaknesses of the traditional theory, Wilson and Sperber propose a more complicated theory of irony, which defines irony as 'echoic' interpretation. According to their theory, an echoic utterance expresses the speaker's attitude or reaction to what was said or thought, and verbal irony invariably involves the expression of an attitude of disapproval. They argue that "the speaker echoes a thought she attributes to someone else, while dissociating herself from it with anything from mild ridicule to savage scorn" (Wilson and Sperber 1992: 60).

Here we can observe that Curcó's theory of humor has something in common with Wilson and Sperber's theory of irony in that both theories account for humor and irony respectively using the concept 'echoic interpretation' and the mechanism of the speaker's dissociating herself from what was said, thought, or assumed.

All in all, however verbal irony is defined; it surely is a well-used mechanism of verbal humor. All the following examples conform to both of the above two

5. In (19) it seems that Elaine intentionally exploits or flouts the maxim of Relevance (Grice 1957, 1968, 1975) to avoid Jerry's complaint.

definitions of irony. First, conversation (20) takes place when Joanna and Martin have been set up to have a date by their daughter and son respectively, who pretend that the date has been made by chance. Martin is a retired detective and Joanna is an attorney general, and their occupations indicate that they are not likely to be fooled by their children's set-up. In (21), Jerry is echoing a thought he attributes to Elaine, while dissociating himself from it with mild ridicule. In (22), Ugly Naked Guy always goes around the house naked, so the fact that most of his boxes are filled with clothes is ironic. Rachel's remark is also ironic in that she used to abhor his ugly naked butt.

- (20) Joanna: Look at them. They think we don't know this is a set-up.  
 Martin:  $\Delta$ No. How would we figure it out? We are just a retired detective and an attorney general. $\nabla$
- (21) Elaine: (Showing fingernails) Toxic waste green.  
 Jerry: That is disgusting.  
 Elaine: You know, revulsion has now become a valid form of attraction.  
 Jerry:  $\Delta$ Well, then you're drivin' me wild. $\nabla$
- (22) Rachel: I'd say from the looks of it, our naked buddy is moving.  
 Ross:  $\Delta$ Ironically, most of the boxes seem to be labeled clothes.  
 Rachel: Ohh, I'm gonna miss that big old squishy butt. $\nabla$

### 3.7 Observation

A matter that is taken for granted by people is sometimes brought up afresh and it generates humor. A good example would be stand-up comics' humor. It is a trend that a stand-up comic talks about her observations just about anything including our daily facts of life such as eating habits, prejudices, hobbies, and so on. These observations create humor, sometimes because they are presented from a new perspective in a unique way, but sometimes just because they are brought up.

First, in (23), which is from *Seinfeld*, whose main character is real-life stand-up comic 'Jerry Seinfeld' himself, Jerry brings up an observation about a matter that seemingly nobody has ever even bothered to think about. In (24), from *Mad about You*, one day Paul and Jamie are shocked by their mailman's sudden death and they decide to tell their loved ones that they love them, since they could die just like their mailman without having their loved ones know that they really care about them. So they invite their loved ones one by one and tell them how much they love them out of the blue, to which their loved ones' reactions are all the same, as can be expected. In (25) from *Friends*, another interesting aspect of human nature can be observed. In the middle of the conversation with Dr.

Ledbetter, Ross notices through the window that his sister Monica and his friend Chandler are kissing each other and he's shocked by the scene. It's a human nature that a brother is protective of his sister even when her boyfriend is his best friend.

(23) Jerry:  $\Delta$ Why would anybody eat canned fruit? Can anybody answer that? I can see the canned food in the army. But fresh fruit, it's available. It's there. $\nabla$

(24) Jamie: It's the truth, pure genuine love.

Ned:  $\Delta$ You need money? Are you in trouble? $\nabla$

(25)Dr. Ledbetter: I wonder if it's time for you to rejoin our team at the museum?

Ross: Oh, Donald that-that would be great. I am totally ready to come back to work. I? What? (He notices something through the window.)  $\Delta$ No! Wh... What are you doing?!! (Dr. Ledbetter is slowly backing away.) GET OFF MY SISTER!!!!!!!!!!!! $\nabla$

### 3.8 Witty Wording

To use witty wording is a pretty common way of generating humor. For example, in (26), Jerry is teasing 'Bob the maestro,' who is a snob, by inviting Elaine to call him 'Jerry the great.' To take another example from *Seinfeld*, in (27) Jerry is making fun of Elaine, who is going out on a date with a wake-up call guy to whom she was attracted by his voice on a wake-up call given to her the other day. In (28), getting on the internet is equated with getting updated on mundane affairs:

(26) Jerry: So what about the maestro stuff? Did he make you call him maestro?

Elaine: Yes, I called him maestro.

Jerry: You didn't mind?

Elaine: Well, I did at first. But actually I think I got used to it.

Jerry:  $\Delta$ O.K. From now on, why don't you call me Jerry the Great? $\nabla$

Elaine: I'm not calling you Jerry the Great.

Jerry: Why not? You call him maestro.

Elaine: He is a maestro.

Jerry:  $\Delta$ I'm great. $\nabla$

- (27) Jerry: I still can't believe you're going out on a blind date.  
 Elaine: I'm not worried. He sounds like he's really good-looking.  
 Jerry: △You're going by sounds. What are we whales?▽
- (28) Jerry: Ooh. Beth Lookner, still waiting out that marriage.  
 Elaine: What are you talking about? That marriage ended six months ago. She's already remarried.  
 Jerry: △I gotta get on that internet. I'm late on everything.▽

In (29) from an episode of *Friends*, Ross influenced by his new British girlfriend Emily has his ear pierced. Though Emily has a job in England, he decides to have a serious relationship with her, which worries his friends since long-distance relationships normally don't last long. Chandler is trying to discourage Ross from pursuing the relationship, by taking as an example the case of the popular musical duo 'Wham,' which was composed of one British man and one American man and ended up breaking up:

- (29) Ross: (entering) Hey, guys! (Chandler and Joey both notice his new earring.)  
 Joey: Hey!  
 Chandler: Oh my God!  
 Joey: We don't make enough fun of you already?  
 Ross: Oh yeah, Emily convinced me to do it.  
 Chandler: △You do know that Wham broke up?▽

### 3.9 Embarrassment

It is a general practice that we avoid creating embarrassing situations or offending other people. Notwithstanding, we sometimes run into embarrassing situations generated unintentionally, which could lead to humor.

In (30), Martin complains about his date, Joanna, to his son, Frasier, when she walks into his apartment and overhears Martin's criticism towards herself. Frasier's remark expresses his embarrassment in an 'ironic' way:

- (30) Martin: (grunting) △It's amazing that her voice is still echoing in my head.  
 Frasier: Yes, it's like a fairy tale over here too.▽

In another example (31), the first triangle-delimited utterance made by the delivery man is an example of 'unexpectedness.' The second triangle-delimited utterance by Paul creates an embarrassing situation.

(31) Jamie: . . . What happened?

Delivery Man(DM): Don't know.

Paul: Don't know? You don't know? Or like the cause of death unknown?

DM: Don't know. One day he was delivering packages, and the next day . . .

Paul: Dead?

DM:  $\Delta$ No, still delivering packages. $\nabla$ But that night . . .

Paul: Dead?

DM: Dead.

Jamie: Horrible. Life is so fragile.

Paul:  $\Delta$ What a way to spend your last day. Bringing boxes and stuff to the people you don't even know. What kind of life is . . . Tom? $\nabla$

DM:  $\Delta$ Tom with the drinking problem. $\nabla$

The situation is embarrassing since the delivery man is also bringing boxes to people he doesn't even know. Jamie sends Paul a signal to stop and he realizes what he's doing. He abruptly stops and awkwardly asks the delivery man's name, who answers 'Tom with the drinking problem,' which is analogous with the expression Jamie uses to refer to the dead delivery man, namely, 'Steve with the legs,' since Steve had nice-looking legs. That is, the last triangle-delimited utterance is an example of 'witty wording.'

#### 4. A New Conceptual Theory of Humor

In the previous section, a set of mechanisms of humor have been discussed. Although these are not an exhaustive list of mechanisms involved in humor in any way, it could be argued that they well represent the mechanisms of humor in general, since I believe that an extensive amount of data have been dealt with which were created by professional writers utilizing all possible means of generating humor. Moreover, these mechanisms of humor seem to be rooted in some common global principles.

The first global principle, which works as a precondition, is that any mechanism for eliciting humor works only in situations where any seriousness or intensity is excluded or relieved. Sometimes it also happens that an instance of humor breaks the ice, that is, momentarily eliminates the seriousness from the situation. In situation comedies, just like in real-life situations of humor, gravity doesn't

exist. The characters of sitcom series are more or less light-hearted and exaggerated. They live in a fabricated world which is close to the real world, which has a double structure in that the comedy takes place in a situation which is observed by the viewers in another situation from an omniscient point of view.

Without this first condition satisfied, any attempt to generate humor is unlikely to succeed. As pointed out above, in most cases this condition can be either satisfied in a danger-free background situation or, in some cases, satisfied by momentarily relieving the seriousness of the current situation.

Secondly, 'audience omniscience' also works as a condition that allows certain techniques to create humor. In real-life as well as in sitcom situations, it sometimes happens that the speaker makes a remark which generates laughs because she is not aware of a certain matter that the other observers are well aware of. Without this precondition of 'omniscience' satisfied on the part of the audience, the following humorous events do not work.

In (32) from the series *Mad about You*, Jamie makes the first triangle-delimited remark without being aware of the fact that her mother was hit by her husband Paul's car to end up being hospitalized. The omniscient audience who know everything find the triangle-delimited Jamie and Paul's utterances 'unexpected,' 'embarrassing,' or 'contradictory':

(32) Paul: She's all right. She broke one rib and two arms.

Jamie: She broke both of her arms?

Paul: Yes, but just one rib. The bright side.

Jamie:  $\Delta$ Thank God! You were right there.

Paul: Yes, that's the blessing.  $\nabla$

Jamie: Did you see the actual accident?

Paul:  $\Delta$ Yes. Yes, I did.  $\nabla$

In a previous scene before (33), at a restaurant Jerry accidentally splashed the juice of his grapefruit right into George's eye while poking it with a fork. Since then George developed a habit of winking his eye without being aware of it, which constantly causes other people to misunderstand what he says. George isn't aware of it, but the audience does know what is going on.

In (33) an (34), George's winking causes Morgan's wife to falsely believe that there is something more than just a sports massage involved in her husband's massage, though neither George nor Morgan realizes why:

(33) George: Is that the lovely Mrs. Morgan?

Morgan's Wife: Hello.

Morgan: By the way, you got that birthday card?



George: Birthday card?

Morgan: Mr. Seiburn's birthday card. Mr. Wilhelm said you have it for me to sign.

George: Yeah. I'll have that for you right after lunch.

Morgan: Yeah. I'll be back right after my massage.

George: Of course, your massage.  $\Delta$ Enjoy your massage. (winking) $\nabla$

(34) (Morgan gets back to George's office after lunch break.)

George: Hey, Mr. Morgan. How was your massage?

Morgan:  $\Delta$ Huh, I had to cancel it. For some reason, my wife got it into her head that there was more to it than just a massage. $\nabla$

Due to a 'knowledge gap' on the part of the speaker, in example (32), the speaker's remark is off the point while in example (33), the speaker's remark means something other than what he intends.

Thirdly, if we closely examine the mechanisms of humor, we can observe that humor arises from something that deviates from standards. That is, there are a set of certain standard principles and norms in our daily verbal activities. Grice's (1957, 1968, 1975) conversational maxims are one example, and we have seen above that mechanisms such as 'irrelevancy' and 'irony' involve deviations from these conversational principles. The former is an example of flouting the maxim of relevance while the latter exploits the maxim of quality.

Well-used mechanisms of humor such as 'abnormality' and 'unexpectedness' are also obvious examples that represent deviations from the standard. First, the examples of humor involving 'abnormality,' as the term already indicates, deviate from our normal thoughts and behaviors, common sense, or tacit agreement or knowledge. 'Abnormal' humor could be perceived as being 'quaint' or 'strange,' in addition to being 'funny.' Second, the mechanism of 'unexpectedness' involves a deviation from our normal standards in various aspects. 'Unexpected' humor could be perceived as being 'surprising' or 'different.'

As for the mechanism of 'stupidity,' it could be considered a subclass of the mechanism of 'abnormality,' since, in a broad sense, the concept 'stupidity' can be included in the concept of 'abnormality.' A person who speaks and behaves stupidly is abnormal from the viewpoint of a normal average person. Given this, the rationale for separating 'stupidity' from 'abnormality' is that in our daily verbal activities, and even more so in sitcom series situations, 'stupidity' is such a frequently used mechanism that it can be considered an independent mechanism. In our daily conversations, even a normal person can sometimes utter something stupid and make people laugh.

When it comes to the mechanism of 'contradiction,' it can be considered quite similar to 'irrelevancy' and 'irony' discussed above, in the sense that it also

involves a deviation from one of Grice's conversational principles, namely, the maxim of 'quality.' 'Contradiction' and 'irony' are similar in that both of them exploit the maxim of quality, but different in that the former results from a character's unintentionally revealing a contradictory aspect of human nature while the latter is employed to intentionally expose a sarcastic dissociative attitude toward something given.

The mechanism of 'observation' could also be accounted for by the concept of a deviation from the standard. As discussed above, it is a trend, especially among stand-up comics as well as in other kinds of entertainments including our daily conversation and situations where people talk about something that is easily observed in our daily lives to create humor. There is nothing new in the contents of the observations themselves, but they are brought up in a unique and creative way so that the addressees have a chance to think about them afresh and laugh at them. The speaker analyzes a certain state or event in a new way and provides a unique and insightful perspective on it, which could be considered a deviation from the standard.

Concerning the mechanism of 'witty wording,' a humorous person is typically regarded as someone who has a knack for witty wording. An ordinary plain expression can be replaced by a humorous one depending on what words are used and how wittily these words are combined without changing the literal meaning of the original expression. This ability to express something wittily can be regarded as an unusual ability which is a deviation from the standard.

Furthermore, in normal conversation, we tend to use language in a plain style instead of in an elaborated style. However, depending on the situation, most people also sometimes use language in various styles not just to inform others, but to amuse others or to bring a relief into the situation. Accordingly, the use of witty wording could be also considered a deviation from the standard way of using language.

Lastly, 'embarrassment' is another mechanism of creating humor. In our daily conversations, it sometimes happens that we unintentionally create an embarrassing situation, for example, by saying something that mortifies other people. We sometimes do this without realizing that the person whom our denunciation is pointed to is near by, overhearing it, nor realizing that what we say could hurt the person's feelings. This kind of embarrassment does not always lead to humor. But, in a non-critical situation like those found in sitcoms, this kind of embarrassment created by the speaker's insensibility or sloppiness usually leads to humor. This mechanism could be also accounted for by the concept of a deviation from the standard, in the sense that it is a deviation from our normal practice in our daily conversations to utter something that embarrasses other people.

To summarize, I propose that the humorous utterance is a speech act whose purpose or function is to amuse people, often eliciting laughs. Although the humorous utterance may have overlapping functions, its main function is to amuse people. To fulfil this function, the speaker utilizes a suitable mechanism of humor given a certain conversational situation. She utters, for example, an abnormal,

unexpected, stupid, or contradictory remark in a gravity-free situation to amuse people, or temporarily relieves a given situation from gravity and amuses people by uttering a remark utilizing a mechanism of humor.

All the mechanisms of humor are based on the principle of 'deviation from the standard,' and the utterance works only when it deviates from the standard not in any serious way but in a non-serious superficial way. For example, too abnormal, unexpected, stupid, or contradictory an utterance leads to non-interpretability or a shock on the part of the hearer, but not to humor. Furthermore, the utterance intended to produce humor works only when it doesn't cause any serious offense or harm to anybody, since its function is not to offend people but to amuse people.

One interesting aspect of this speech act is that the speaker sometimes fulfils its function without meaning to do so, which are cases of unintentional humor. She could make use of a mechanism of humor unintentionally in a crisis-free situation, or her remark deviated from standards in a non-serious way relieves a situation from seriousness with no intention to do so.

## 5. Conclusions

In the previous sections, a set of mechanisms of humor have been proposed. A new conceptual theory of humor has been also proposed based on three global principles, one is what I have termed 'relief from seriousness,' another is 'omniscience,' and the other is a 'deviation from the standard.'

We have also seen that a considerable number of theories of humor agree that humor is derived from 'incongruity.' Forabosco's (1992) and Curcó's (1995, 1998) theories, which have been presented above, also base their accounts on the concept of 'incongruity.'

However, as pointed out earlier, Forabosco and Curcó's accounts are limited in that they are both so narrowly phrased and so dependent on complex definitions of technical criteria that they cannot account for various kinds of humor data.

Given this, it has been shown that we need a more general principle to account for a variety of mechanisms of humor presented above, and it has been proposed above that the principles of absence of danger or gravity, audience omniscience, and deviation from standards account for humor in general in a persuasive way. Humor tends to be created by and perceived in something that strays from the norm in a crisis-free situation. It has been also proposed that the humorous utterance is a speech act whose function is to amuse people.

All in all, this paper is not a critique of theories of humor based on the concept of incongruity, but it is rather an extension of the theories based on incongruity.

To provide more evidence for my proposal, more research on humor with an extensive amount of representative data from various sources needs to be done. Furthermore, cross-cultural analyses could also provide an interesting insight into the meaning of humor.

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