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INCONGRUITY WITHOUT NOVELTY: PERFECT JOKE AND REINTERPRETATION

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the phenomenon of the* perfect joke *– a specific joke-form articulated within the stand-up comedy community, most notably by Norm Macdonald. The central aim is to assess whether and how perfect jokes can be explained within the framework of* incongruity theory of humor. *After outlining the historical background of incongruity theory and its contemporary neo-Gricean developments, the paper analyzes the structural features of perfect jokes, focusing on their defining characteristic: the identity or near-identity of setup and punchline. It is argued that perfect jokes constitute a peculiar case of incongruity-based humor, one in which incongruity is generated not by the introduction of new semantic content but by a* purely pragmatic trigger *that invites* reinterpretation. *On this basis, the paper suggests that perfect jokes support a resolution-centered understanding of incongruity theory, while also considering certain* methodological limits *of incongruity-based explanation of this humorous phenomenon.*

KEYWORDS: *philosophy of humor, incongruity theory, reinterpretation, anti-jokes, stand-up comedy, pragmatics*

1. Humor, Theoretical Ambitions, and Methodological Considerations

Humor is an extraordinarily rich and heterogeneous human phenomenon.[1] It is typically understood as *an elusive object* or *property* that can be manifested, as Ted Cohen put it, "both inside and outside art". So, we have humor in literature, everyday conversation, stage performance, film and television, digital culture, and even political discourse (Cohen 2001: 376).

In the cross section with this broad landscape, we also encounter a proliferation of distinct genres and subphenomena of humor (or closely tied to humor). Among other forms or genres, there are satirical imitations, puns and wordplay, memes, observational humor, sexual (or suggestive) humor, political satire, roasting and insult comedy, dark humor, anti-jokes, and so on. This diversity is part of what makes humor an endlessly fascinating topic for philosophical inquiry, and equally what makes it difficult to theorize about.

Yet despite all this, skepticism within the humor theory is not commonplace.[2] Quite contrary, philosophical theories of humor – both classical and contemporary – tend to be presented (especially in textbooks and review papers) with a tacit ideal of universality. They are typically understood as attempting to describe not merely certain types of humor but humor as such, or at least the entirety of verbal humor. Even theories constructed and extrapolated from fragmentary comments by disparate thinkers – such as superiority, relief, and early forms of incongruity – are treated as if they advanced general explanatory frameworks capable of accounting for all instances of comic experience.

1.1 Where humor theories meet practice

Philosophical debates about the plausibility of humor theories typically proceed along two main axes. The first is *internal*: philosophers assess the coherence of theoretical constructions, the reasons and justification behind its central notions, and the plausibility of its main suppositions. This type of inquiry is rather conceptual, and in some sense purely theoretic.

The second approach is *external*, involving *some* form of empirical considerations. Here, the central question becomes: how well does a theory in question account for some given instances of humor? Philosophers sometimes pose questions such as: how would this theory explain this particular joke or rather: does this type of humor fall within the explanatory reach of the theory? When the answer appears implausible, the theory loses this type of evidential support. So, one important, minimally empirical line of assessment lies in examining how well a theory handles different *genres of humor*. Some theories appear naturally suited to specific genres of humor (or even forms, or types of jokes). For example, relief theory has traditionally been invoked to explain *sexual humor*, where the comedic effect seems tied to taboo violation, tension, and the release of the "neural energy". Conversely, relief theory has little to say about

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2   Notable exception is Ted Cohen, according to whom it is very unlikely that an adequate theory of humor can be formulated (Cohen 2014). In his philosophical inquiry into humor, he does not intend "to present necessary and sufficient conditions for what counts as a joke—he suspects it can't be done—but rather, it seems, he is only committed to offering general observations about certain joke-prototypes, perhaps prototypes of the best jokes" (Carroll 2000: 435-6).

puns or wordplay (Morreall 2009: 20; 2024), which rely on linguistic ambiguity rather than emotional release.[3]

We have another, a bit more controversial methodological approach, that involves *incorporating insights from the practice* of humor-making, particularly from the stand-up comedy community. Although not explicitly adopted by philosophers of humor, this approach is – more or less enthusiastically – exploited by some well-known theorists. For example, while giving a brief presentation of a relief theory, John Morreall notes that Freudian assertion (about specific unconscious mechanism as central for the humorous effect) "seems falsified by professional humorists who approach the creation of jokes and cartoons with conscious strategies" (Morreall 2024).

An even stronger stance (regarding this methodological issue) is advanced by Steven Gimbel. In his book *Isn't That Clever: A Philosophical Account of Humor and Comedy* – but even more so in the podcast (New Books in Philosophy 2018) and video interview (Second Scene with Michael, 2021) – Gimbel argues that philosophy of humor *not only may but must* take seriously the *reflective insights of comedy practitioners*. Disregarding this empirical input, according to him, leads to philosophical models insufficiently informed by the practices and intuition of those who actually produce humor professionally.

1.2 The aim of analysis

In line with this experience-sensitive methodological approach, the present paper examines a specific phenomenon in humor and investigates the extent to which it can be accounted for by one of the most influential theories in contemporary humor studies. More precisely, the paper focuses on the phenomenon of the *perfect joke* – an interesting joke-form, emerging from the stand-up comedy community – and explores how it may be understood and explained within the framework of *incongruity theory of humor* (broadly construed).

In order to prepare the ground for this analysis, the next part is devoted to a brief presentation of incongruity theory, after which (in section 3) we turn to the notion of *a perfect joke*, clarifying its structural features and emphasizing that it refers to a family of jokes rather than to a single or specific instance. The central part of the discussion is in the chapter 4, which aims to show *how* this humorous phenomenon can be plausibly explained within incongruity theory framework. The concluding paragraphs of this chapter outline certain limitations and residual questions associated with the

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3　Similar objection, regarding the word play, even more prominently holds for superiority theory of humor, since there is no sense of triumph or any salient kind of comparison with others involved in it (Morreall 2024). On the other hand, roasting can be seen as the perfect genre for plausible explanation using the superiority theory (Dynel & Poppi 2020). Insights of this kind, while methodologically straightforward, provide valuable pressure points for evaluating the ambitions and limits of each explanatory model.

proposed analysis, framing them as methodological and theoretical points that remain open for future work.

2. Incongruity Theory: Historical Background and the Gricean Turn

The most prominent approach in contemporary humor theory is undoubtedly the incongruity theory of humor. As Steven Gimbel notes, proponents of some version of incongruity theory form an impressively long list. Arranged alphabetically, Gimbel mentions authors such as Bergmann, Carroll, Clark, Davies, Giora, Hutcheson, Kant, Kramer, Martin, Oring, Richards, Roberts, Schopenhauer, Schultz (1976), and Suls, adding (humorously) in the end – "to name a few" (Gimbel 2020: 11).

It is important to emphasize that approaching humor through incongruity is better understood as a *research paradigm* – in Kuhn's sense of the term (2012) – rather than as a single, unified theory. Theories developed within this broad framework may differ significantly in their conceptual resources, explanatory targets, and underlying assumptions.[4]

2.1 Historical Perspective

According to many authors, the roots – or at least early anticipations – of incongruity theory of humor can be traced back to Aristotle's (lost) work on comedy, as well as to his occasional remarks on humor in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. More commonly, however, the first explicit and focused articulation of the idea that humor is intrinsically connected to incongruity is attributed to a famous passage in Cicero's *De Oratore*. In that passage, Cicero writes:

> "The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh." (Cicero 1942, as cited in Morreall 2009: 11)

This notion of *disappointed expectation* has remained a *leitmotif* of incongruity theory ever since. On this view, humor centrally involves a mismatch, incongruity, deviation, or breakdown in an anticipated sequence of events or, even, within the process of grasping a meaning – which is already present in Cicero's formulation with a clear orientation toward verbal humor and linguistic incongruity.

More developed positions, that can *properly* be described as theories of incongruity, are found in the works of Kant (2000) and Schopenhauer (2023). Although Kant's

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4   Although the present discussion will not devote extensive space to a systematic comparison of these differences, they will become relevant in the analysis of the perfect joke, where the question of how exactly incongruity is identified and explained turns out to be crucial.

reflections on humor occasionally intersect with ideas that resemble what would later be classified as relief theory, his discussion in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* emphasizes the central role of disappointed expectation and absurdity in humorous experience. Kant even offers specific examples of jokes and analyzes them in some detail.

An illustrative case – although often cited for another purpose (as a particularly neat counterexample to superiority theory of humor) – is the experiment involving a fake weight (Deckers 1993). Participants who lift a series of heavy weights and then encounter an apparently identical but hollow and lightweight object often respond with laughter. The moment of surprise, in which an expectation (of heavy weight, in this example) collapses "into nothing", exemplifies what Kant takes to be characteristic of humor across its various, and sometimes less obvious, manifestations.

Schopenhauer, while roughly following Kant here, offers a more systematically articulated version of incongruity theory. Assuming the similarities, Morreall instructively summarizes the main difference:

> "[W]hile Kant locates the lack of fit in humor between our expectations and our experience, Schopenhauer locates it between our sense perceptions of things and our abstract rational knowledge of those same things". (Morreall 2024)

In some cases, humor arises from a mismatch between a general principle and a particular instance that we attempt (but fail) to *subsume* under it. Schopenhauer himself illustrates this with the story of prison guards who expel a convicted prisoner from jail because he cheated at cards. The general principle – excluding cheaters from the group – conflicts comically with the consequent action of releasing a criminal, which appears surprising, if not outright absurd (Schopenhauer 2023, as cited in Morreall 2024).

Numerous other thinkers had historically developed closely related ideas, including Kant's contemporary James Beattie and, later, Søren Kierkegaard, to name just a few – though here, truly, only a few.

2.2 The Gricean Turn

A decisive figure in the development of contemporary, rather linguistic than purely philosophical, theories of humor was the highly influential analytic philosopher Paul Grice. In his seminal paper "Logic and Conversation" (1975), Grice introduces the notion of overt, intentional violation (flouting) of conversational maxims, that proved to be very potent for humor analysis. Conversation, according to Grice, is a joint, *cooperative endeavor*. It is aimed not merely at comprehending the literal meaning of explicitly said words – which would be strikingly impoverished with regards to our mutual understanding – but at grasping what Grice calls *speaker's meaning*, which involves the speaker's *communicative intentions* and guides the hearer toward an expected interpretation within a shared context.

This interpretive process is governed, largely automatically, by a set of conversational maxims. Grice distinguishes four such maxims: those of *quality*, *quantity*, *relation*,

and *manner*. Violations of these maxims typically lead to misunderstanding or communicative breakdown. In humor, however, something different occurs. The maxims are violated *deliberately* and *conspicuously*, in a way that signals to the hearer that the violation itself is meaningful, that it is there with a reason. So, the humorous effect arises from a very specific kind of incongruity: a tension between our habitual cognitive expectations about cooperative conversation and what is actually happening in the exchange, which prompts us to reinterpret the utterance. Consider the following lines:

> I love cats
> – they taste a lot like chicken. (Morreall 2009: 51)

In uttering the first line, relying on our tendency to assume conversational cooperativeness, the speaker leads us to adopt a benign interpretation: that he loves cats in the ordinary sense of enjoying their company, petting them, or at least taking pleasure in seeing them alive and well. The second line, however, immediately forces us to abandon this interpretation. Had the speaker been engaged in a serious, *bona fide* communicative exchange, aiming simply to convey information, he would likely have expressed himself differently – perhaps by stating outright that he enjoys *eating* cats, thereby *providing sufficient information*, *avoiding ambiguity*, hence preventing misunderstanding.

In the humorous context, however, the speaker *flouts* these maxims – most notably those of quantity and manner. This *intentional* and *overt violation* is not a communicative failure but a *signal*. Once the hearer recognizes the speaker's non-literal intention, the apparent breakdown of cooperativeness becomes the very source of the humorous effect.

2.3 The Script theory

Building further on this Gricean framework, contemporary neo-Gricean theories of humor, most notably those developed by Raskin and Attardo (Raskin 1985; Raskin & Attardo 1991; Attardo 2008), have become classics. Incongruity is here closely tied to the notion of *opposing scripts*. *A script* is a technical term referring to structured background knowledge used in interpretation and meaning construction. In ordinary cooperative conversation, hearers pursue what appears to be the most plausible, primary interpretation of an utterance, constructing a coherent scenario around it. In jokes, however, the linguistic material is typically compatible with at least one alternative, opposing scenario, that is initially less salient (or it is even unexpected).

Humor arises when this incompatibility becomes evident, usually at the punchline of the joke. At that moment, the hearer realizes that the initially constructed scenario fails to accommodate the punchline and must be replaced through *reinterpretation*. Consider this point through a well-known joke:

> One early morning, a mother went in to wake up her son.
> "Wake up, son. It's time to go to school!"
> Son: "But why, Mom? I don't want to go."
> Mom: "Give me two reasons why you don't want to go."
> Son: "Well, the kids hate me for one, and the teachers hate me too!"
> Mom: "Oh, that's no reason not to go to school. Come on now, get ready."
> Son: "Then give me two reasons why I should go to school."
> Mom: "Well, for one, you're fifty-two years old. And for another, you're the principal."

Up to the final line, narrative leads us to the primary interpretation according to which the joke presents a familiar scenario involving *a school-aged child* being woken up by his mother. The son's reluctance to go to school, along with the reasons he offers, fits neatly within a widely shared experiential script: children often resist school attendance and exaggerate their grievances in ways that are easily recognizable for most of us.

The punchline, however, reveals a radically different scenario: the "son" is in fact *an adult man*, and moreover *the principal of the school* in question. Importantly, this second scenario is itself *compatible* with the linguistic material of the joke taken as a whole. The setup of the joke deliberately guides the audience toward this "wrong" direction,[5] encouraging the construction of *script 1*, only for the punchline to force a reinterpretation of the entire preceding exchange and the adoption of *script 2* as the appropriate resolution of the conflict. Importantly, the two scripts are not merely different but *opposing*. In the first, the main character is represented as a young schoolchild whose complaints, though perhaps exaggerated, are somehow usual if not typical. In the second, we are asked to imagine a middle-aged man who, although maybe correct in claiming that colleagues and students dislike him, is arguing with his old mother about not wanting to go to work – which is deeply unexpected and normatively incongruous.

There is a broader worry (or rather: disagreement) within incongruity theory concerning the precise *locus* of the humorous moment. Should humor be located in the mere detection of *incongruity*, or rather in *its resolution* – that is, in the act of reinterpretation? In cases like the one discussed above, this question can be transposed as follows: what, exactly, constitutes the relevant incongruity? Is it the mismatch between the initial interpretation and the information supplied by the punchline? Or is it the incompatibility between two opposing scripts – where the second script emerges only through reinterpretation, once the first has been recognized as inadequate to the speaker's humorous intention? Subsequent analysis of perfect jokes will tell us something about this issue.

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5   What distinguishes the humorous context from an ordinary, *bona fide* conversation is that, in the latter case, a cooperative speaker would normally avoid leading the listener toward such a misleading interpretation. A competent speaker would be sensitive to the direction in which the audience's understanding is developing and would supply clarifying information to prevent confusion caused by underinformativeness or ambiguity.

3. A Perfect joke

Let us now turn to the phenomenon of the perfect joke. One of the methodological commitments announced earlier in this paper was the willingness to take seriously reflective insights originating from stand-up comedy practice. The *phenomenon of the perfect joke* represents precisely such an insight. It is not a technical term introduced by philosophers, nor a theoretical concept constructed within humor theory, but rather a notion circulating within the stand-up community itself, most notably articulated and exemplified by Norm Macdonald – actor, TV personality and a stand-up comedian.[6] As such, this notion, we maintain, still provides an interesting and relevant case for examining the plausibility and boundaries of the humor theories.

Norm Macdonald is widely regarded as a comedian with an unusually reflective attitude toward joke structure, comedic timing, and audience expectations. His work is frequently cited - both by comedians and by philosophers of humor[7] - as exemplifying a form of comedy that is acutely self-aware, often minimalist, and resistant to typical punchline-based gratification. For this reason, he was sometimes labeled as *meta-comedian*, or even *anti-comedian*.[8]

In several interviews and performances, Macdonald explicitly refers to what he calls perfect jokes, presenting them not merely as amusing instances but as exemplars of *comedic craftsmanship*.[9] The reverence with which he speaks about them, and the admiration they command within the stand-up community, suggest that the label "perfect" is not merely rhetorical but marks a perceived structural and aesthetic achievement.

3.1 The structure of a Perfect joke

At first approximation, a perfect joke is characterized by an unusual structural feature: the setup and the punchline are identical, or *nearly identical*, at the level of linguistic content.[10] The joke appears to "go nowhere", offering no new information

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6   His TV career included, most notably, being a cast member on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL), where he anchored *Weekend Update* segment for many years. He was also a frequent guest on late-night talk shows.

7   See, for example: Iannarino 2018, Fried 2020, Day and Thompson 2013, Mattocks 2025.

8   Although, he himself was strongly against that label, insisting (on his social media and in his public appearances) that he is *a comedian*, and all that (for which he is being praised) is just what comedians do, it is not meta, anti or some special kind of comedy, but comedy itself.

9   Probably the best example of that would be his appearance on *Howard Stern Show*, in 2018. A short YouTube clip from that appearance can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/BG8u1EIqC-I

10   Again, and importantly, it is not *the* perfect joke, but rather perfect jokes – a family of jokes sharing this structural feature.

in the punchline and no obvious semantic twist. And yet, when successfully performed, it produces a distinct and often delayed humorous effect.

In some cases, the setup and punchline are literally the same sentence repeated *verbatim*. In others, the wording is only minimally altered, with the punchline offering information already given (or assumed) within the setup. So, syntactic identity aside, what remains constant is that the punchline does not add any *new* propositional content that would straightforwardly force a reinterpretation in the way familiar from standard incongruity-based jokes. Let's illustrate this with some examples:

> (1) This week it was revealed that in his first interview with the police, OJ Simpson had refused to take a lie detector test.
> His reason? It detects lies. (*SNL*, *Weekend update*)
> (2) Julia Roberts told reporters this week that her marriage to Lyle Lovett has been over for some time.
> The key moment, she said, came when she realized that she was Julia Roberts and that she was married to Lyle Lovett. (*SNL*, *Weekend update*)
> (3) A three-year-old Texas boy remains in fair condition after being assaulted by the family's pet cougar. No one knows why the attack occurred…
> But, uh… hey how about, uh how about: because their pet is a cougar. (*SNL*, *Weekend update*)[11]

In the first example, the punchline reiterates the fact – which is not only assumed in the setup but is rather analytical and tautological in a sense – that lie detectors detect lies. Although, that "piece of information" is now moved towards the modality of *giving a reason* for his somebody's action, it is hardly a "new moment in the story", it is not something incompatible with our interpretation of the earlier given linguistic material. The same also holds for the second example given. Punchline here crucially depends on the same information given in the setup. It should be noted, however, that again, that information is now presented (similar to the previous joke) in *a causal mood* – as establishing a reason for the given action.[12]

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11 There is also a YouTube video compilation of Norm Macdonald's perfect jokes: https://youtu.be/Eoa9zXFgDQM

12 Although all three examples discussed above share the feature that the punchline appears to offer reasons for, or in some way justify or explain, what the setup places at the center of attention, this *should not be taken to be* a necessary characteristic of perfect jokes. At the same time, the importance of this feature should not be underestimated. There is clearly a convenient sub-type of perfect jokes in which the punchline retrospectively *accounts for* the situation introduced in the setup by locating the source or explanation of that situation *within* the very scenario that has already been presented. This internal justificatory structure seems to be an effective and recurrent realization of the perfect-joke mechanism. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that it is not the only one. The Jerry Rubin joke, Princess Anne joke, joke about Bruce Jenner (featured in the perfect-joke compilation referenced above) all lack this element entirely, as do several other examples from the same set.

As we've seen, in a standard joke, the punchline typically introduces a piece of information that *conflicts* with the hearer's initial interpretation, thereby triggering reinterpretation. In perfect jokes, by contrast, the linguistic material itself remains relatively "stable". Whatever reinterpretation occurs must therefore be triggered by something other than new semantic input.

3.2 Theoretical questions regarding Perfect jokes

This brings us to the central theoretical questions that motivate the remainder of this paper. First, can perfect jokes be plausibly convincingly explained within the framework of incongruity theory at all? Given that no new information is introduced in the punchline, it is not immediately clear what the relevant incongruity would be, or how it is detected.

Second – and equally important – even if incongruity theory can indeed account for perfect jokes, can it also explain their *distinctive* status? Can it illuminate why these jokes are experienced as "perfect", as special on the positive side, rather than merely odd or confusing?[13] Theoretical options are rich here, but we need a committed and plausible explanation of what is *theoretically perfect* about the perfect joke. What, exactly, is maximized in a perfect joke – or what is here superior to regular jokes?

In the following chapter, we turn directly to these questions. The aim is to present a potentially convincing account of the phenomenon of perfect jokes from within the (broadly construed) framework of incongruity theory. As part of this account, it will be sketched how the distinctive character and perceived excellence of perfect jokes might be explained. In other words, next section will briefly present how a proponent of incongruity theory *could* answer affirmatively the question of whether incongruity theory can explain perfect jokes, and how the same theoretical framework might be used to address the further challenge identified above.

4. Incongruity, reinterpretation and Perfect joke

As we have seen, perfect jokes lack the standard structure of jokes, and applying the theoretical tools discussed above therefore requires additional adjustments.

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13   In a video segment in which Norm Macdonald explains the idea behind the perfect joke, How-
　　ard Stern introduces the topic by remarking: "You are *so good at stand-up that you've gotten
　　to the point* where you look for jokes that have the same setup as the punchline" (cursive
　　added). This framing implicitly presents the perfect joke as a highly desirable and difficult-to-
　　achieve mode of comedy, leaving little room for doubt that it is understood as a positive and
　　highly valued comedic ideal.

4.1 First approximation – Ciceronian analysis

If we approach perfect jokes from the most basic Ciceronian perspective, however, a promising entry point for the incongruity theorist does emerge. Perfect jokes can be understood as involving a *very specific form* of disappointed expectation. After the setup, we have somewhat peculiar punchline: the joke *does not* proceed by offering an additional twist, revelation, or narrative turn characteristic of standard joke forms. Crucially, this disappointment of expectation is not generated by the introduction of new facts that force a reinterpretation of the previously given material. Rather, no such new information is provided at all. In some sense, the surprise concerns the structure of the joke itself: what is violated is the expected form of joke-telling.

However, this meta-level surprise *is not* exclusive to perfect jokes. It can also be found in jokes commonly grouped under the umbrella term *anti-jokes*. One familiar subtype consists of what might be called "anti-climactic jokes", in which a well-established expectation regarding the type of punchline to follow is deliberately disappointed. Consider, for example:

A priest, a rabbi, and an imam walk into a bar.
They have a pleasant time discussing a variety of topics because they are friends.

The setup prepares the audience for yet another episode in the familiar series involving competition of religious miracles or clever resolutions to moral dilemmas (by these three holy men), only for this expectation to be dissolved by a deliberately mundane continuation.

Another variant of anti-humor is the so-called "shaggy dog story", characterized by an *excessively long setup* filled with unnecessary, repetitive, or otherwise irrelevant information, culminating in the *absence* of any punchline at all. In both cases, the humorous effect arises from the violation of a meta-expectation concerning the narrative trajectory of the joke, that is, from the disruption of the conventions governing joke-telling itself.

Although this (Ciceronian) analysis captures something important about the perfect joke, the explanation it provides remains insufficiently expressive. On this view, the perfect joke is accounted for in essentially the same way as any other anti-joke, thereby failing to single out the specific features that call for a more refined explanation.[14]

4.2 The explanation – from the Gricean point of view (generally)

Gricean perspective looks more promising for this kind of analysis, since it is more subtle and expressive when it comes to anti-jokes. An overly long setup violates

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14 This limitation is, to some extent, unsurprising, given that the position involves minimal theoretical commitments and lacks a robust operational component – both of which are required for an analysis of a phenomenon as subtle as the perfect joke.

implicit conversational norms concerning *quantity* and *relevance*. Furthermore, in a *bona fide* communicative exchange, one would normally expect signals indicating that, although the beginning may appear familiar, the continuation will deviate from the expected course – precisely in order to avoid *ambiguity* or *misleading* the listener. So, this position is more fine-grained and can offer more informative and subgenre-specific explanation for those types of anti-jokes.

Perfect jokes, however, still differ in important respects. The audience's attention is not exploited through an unjustifiably long setup, nor does the joke rely on a schematic or predictable narrative trajectory that is then simply abandoned. The difference lies in a distinctive subtlety: the listener is directed back to the earlier lines of the joke, but now under a different interpretive light.

This *repetition* itself plays an important role here. Pragmatically, repetition signals that the utterance must be understood differently – that within the same or nearly identical words, *another* meaning is to be found – assuming, of course, the maxims of quantity and manner. But the crucial part of the specific humorous effect stems from the listener's sense that the punchline was, in a way, *already there* – even previously allocated and available to the listener – yet nonetheless surprising.

In an important sense, the perfect joke involves a *pure* or ideal form of reinterpretation. Its trigger is not a new piece of information revealing an ambiguity in what was previously said. The punchline does not introduce new elements, expand the listener's horizon, or rely on content that lay outside the audience's prior conceptual reach in order to generate incongruity and thereby force reinterpretation. Instead, incongruity is produced without the introduction of any new elements – without expanding the interpretive field – by issuing a contextual and pragmatic signal that *there is more to grasp*, even though everything necessary was already present. In this sense, the listener is surprised without being "cheated"; she or he was given a fair chance to "foresee" the punchline and not be surprised. There is no appeal to an external novelty that *could excuse the failure* to anticipate the punchline. The key lies entirely in what has just been said; it was all there to be grasped.

Two dimensions of excellence therefore seem to be at work in perfect jokes. First, the invitation to reinterpretation is issued purely pragmatically and contextually, without the addition of new information. The trigger here is the repetition. Second – closely related, though conceptually distinguishable – the resolution of that reinterpretation is already *coded* within the setup itself, rather than being supplied through an extended, metaphorical, or transferred meaning of what was said.

The second dimension of excellence discussed above is akin to a magician's gesture of rolling up his sleeves and showing empty hands while performing a magic trick. Nothing has been concealed, and yet the audience is still "deceived" – or at least genuinely surprised. Understood in this way, the perfect joke foregrounds the comedian's skill in a particularly vivid manner, thereby helping to explain the distinctive kind of excellence that such jokes are taken to exemplify.

4.3 Limitations

Nevertheless, several limitations of the proposed analysis should be acknowledged. First, the account developed in the central part of this section inherits some of the well-known difficulties that arise in attempts to explain anti-jokes within an incongruity-based framework. It could be claimed that accounting for that joke-type by insisting on incongruity – but now on the meta-level, incongruity within the joke-telling narrative, is a case of *ad hoc* reasoning. As Robert Latta objects:

> An extended definition of incongruity is radically ambiguous in that under it the term 'incongruity' does not really have one meaning, but various quite different ones. On one occasion it is to be taken to mean, say, 'unexpected', on another occasion to mean 'ambiguous', on another 'superior', on yet another 'incongruous' in the dictionary sense, and so on. (Latta 1999: 114-5)

Even in more operationally refined versions of incongruity theory, the notion of incongruity itself tends to remain broad and weakly constrained. This in turn make these theories – although interpretatively flexible and widely applicable – non-falsifiable and methodologically problematic.

This worry is also salient with regards to perfect jokes, where the explanatory burden rests almost entirely on subtle shifts in interpretation rather than on clearly identifiable structural conflicts. In this respect, even early versions of script theory – when interpreted strictly and understood as grounding incongruity primarily in semantic opposition between scripts – are not fully compatible with the account proposed here.[15]

Finally, precisely because of these methodological considerations, one might reasonably argue, following Gimbel, that an alternative theoretical framework should be brought into play here. The hypothesis would be that Gimbel's humor theory, centered around *playful cleverness* (2020: 34-56), can offer a better explanation when analyzing jokes that requires this "stretching of incongruity", which is actually, sometimes, flat-out – *congruity*. Perfect joke might exactly be the type of joke that illustrates competitive advantage of *cleverness theory* against incongruity accounts.

These remarks are not intended as decisive objections to the analysis developed here, but rather as a sketch of its most evident limitations. A more systematic comparison between incongruity-based approaches and alternative theories of humor, as applied to perfect jokes, is left for future work.

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15 It is probably apparent that the analysis offered in this paper relies on a notion of incongruity that is *fundamentally pragmatic* and contextual in nature.

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Milan Z. Jovanović

Nesklad bez novine: Savršeni vicevi i reinterpretacija
(*Apstrakt*)

Ovaj rad ispituje fenomen savršenog vica (*perfect joke*) – specifičnog oblika šale koji je artikulisan unutar zajednice stendap (stand-up) komičara, posebno od strane Norma Makdonalda (Norm Macdonald). Glavni cilj rada jeste da se ispita da li i na koji način se savršeni vicevi mogu objasniti iz okvira teorije nesklada. Nakon prikaza istorijskog razvoja teorije nesklada i njenih savremenih neo-grajsovskih varijanti, rad analizira strukturne odlike savršenog vica, sa posebnim naglaskom na njihovu ključnu karakteristiku: postavka vica i njegov pančlajn (*punchline*) su u ovim šalama identični ili gotovo identični. U radu se brani teza da savršeni vicevi predstavljaju poseban slučaj humora, u kojem se nesklad ne generiše uvođenjem novog semantičkog sadržaja, već isključivo pragmatičkim okidačem koji podstiče reinterpretaciju. Zbog ovoga, u radu se sugeriše da ova analiza savršenih viceva ide u prilog varijantama teorije nesklada u kojima je razrešenje nesklada centralni momenat. Rad se završava razmatranjem određenih metodoloških ograničenja pružene analize ovog humorističkog fenomena.

KLJUČNE REČI: filozofija humora, teorija nesklada, reinterpretacija, anti-humor, stand-up komedija, pragmatika