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The demise of the joke

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1 Introduction

Over 40 years ago, a year after my immigration to the USA and 6 years after my emigration from the now defunct USSR to Israel, I published a short conference paper on a semantic theory of the joke at Berkeley Linguistic Society and then delivered a refreshed version of it at the second International Conference on Humor Research at Los Angeles (Raskin 1979a,b). The paper was received with polite indifference at Berkeley, which did not surprise me because no other paper was doing anything remotely similar there, and mine was no competition to Robin Lakoff's central contribution that strongly suggested that all males should be killed and castrated, mercifully in this order. There were no other linguistic, let alone semantic papers at the humor conference but, amazingly, mine was the sensation thanks, essentially, to Don Nilsen's unabashed enthusiasm. The paper was followed in 1985 by my book, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Raskin 1985), which has been widely cited ever since.

What was outlined in the paper and fully developed in the book was my Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH). Its main hypothesis was that each joke was compatible, in full or in part, with two distinct scripts and the two scripts were opposite. It was clearly a linguistic theory of humor and, hence, an application of linguistics to humor research. Much attention was paid to rules of application of a source field to a target field, primarily not to import the goals from the former to the latter, a seemingly obvious caveat and yet routinely violated in the history of applications, most notably recently in the so-called machine learning, with its numerous sexily named upgrades over the last 3 decades, when applied to the processing of texts in natural language.

Overall, mine was a good theory—certainly, the first ever theory of humor and probably of anything—that was fully and maturely established along the several parameters outlined along with it and more explicitly reiterated in my subsequent publications. It followed Popper's (1972) requirement of being a falsifiable but not yet falsified hypothesis, with a section devoted to a search for counterexamples that

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were clearly described and never found, then and now. It was much more specific both than general ideas stemming from philosophers and other thinkers in the past, on the one hand, and from an occasional modern idea of a very poorly defined nature and very narrow purview, like ‘benign violation.’

My theory came with a clearly defined purview: short verbal jokes. It was ignored and violated right away by enthusiastic supporters of the theory. I have never authored any paper expanding the purview but I did start referring to it, almost right away, as a theory of humor. For me, jokes were humor—and humor was jokes. It may have been this way but it is not so any more. The theory was flexible enough to describe these purview extensions reasonably well. All humor is describable in terms of a juxtaposition of two opposed scripts. But there are two disclaimers: first, the terms used by it lose their technicality, and second, the theory never expected the demise of the joke which we are facing now. What we have in SSTH is a quality theory of a fossil. I think I am in a unique position to explore this amazing development. (I am proud of my record of criticizing my theory more frequently and much more competently than anybody).

2 How it happened

For the first three decades of my almost twice as long teaching career, I used a great deal of humor in my classrooms and got great class evaluations where they were used (at Purdue rather than at Moscow State or Hebrew University). I teach subjects that are boring to a high percentage of undergraduates who have to take them. I am excited by semantics but not so by phonology, morphology, or syntax that I have to deal with in introductions to linguistics. Even there, I may impress the students by the quantity and quality of my knowledge but some tend to doze off, and my constant humor and the necessity to laugh with all kept them alert.

Things changed by mid-1990s. First, there was the major wave of political correctness, often masking as feminism, which I had always supported practically as a mentor and administrator. My humor in the classroom was strangely and unsuccessfully attacked by a truly dumb graduate student who saw it as evidence of my non-serious attitude to teaching. A little later, a female colleague briefly joined a frivolous attempt to attack me for telling her a joke that was minimally off-color preceded by my apology for it and a request for permission to continue. More importantly, my jokes, all clean and never misogynistic, were not as much appreciated. Undergraduates tended simply not to get them—one or two always did but they were usually the ones who did not doze off. The others were increasingly more indifferent and no longer worried about missing out on an opportunity to laugh. My experience was shared by other professors.

More importantly, there was a change in the humor research community. Our youthful romance with humor was fading. For decades before that, we praised humor as universally good. Even those of us who do not think or write in popular slogans did not protest when some colleagues presented humor as being good for physical and mental health. Norman Cousins' strange book from the 1970s about how he cured himself from an unspecified lethal illness by locking himself in a hotel room for 6 months with humor books was still quoted seriously. We recognized the humor-is-health seminar givers and had a section for them at the conferences. And then, there was the 1995 ISHS annual meeting in a heat-wave Birmingham, UK, where the university dorm where we were quartered shared one feature with the 5-star hotels there: no air conditioning.

The honorary plenary sections were divided between Avner Ziv, the prominent psychologist of humor, now deceased, and myself. Avner was scheduled to have an opening plenary paper and I the final one. Avner's flight was delayed, and the papers were switched. So, overheated and reeling from my then recent teaching experiences, I shared, in the very first paper of the conference (Raskin 1995), my strong second thoughts on the usability of humor in college teaching. At the end of the conference, Avner confirmed his own reservations about humor in the classroom with impressive experimental data, complete with impressive statistics (Ziv 1995). I realized then that I had those as well: I had been allowed to add 70 questions to a massive 10,000-subject experiment here at Purdue by a Ph.D. advisee of mine in special education. Our small part of it confirmed Salvatore Attardo's and my General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH—see Attardo and Raskin 1991) empirically (Willibald Ruch, the leading psychologist of humor and the grandmaster of experimental design, guided us through it—see Ruch et al. 1993), but the whole experiment compared the graduate student's teaching of two sixth grade classes, one with lots of humor and the other without—and showed no significant differences in the results.

The community was shocked by this seeming attack on the goodness of humor by two prominent partisans of humor research, even though neither of us, fighting for the young colleagues' right to pursue the subject in their careers—and winning the fight—ever advocated the health benefits of humor. It was at the same conference also that my sense of humor was polemically praised as the best even though it was free of what Ruch translated from the original German as mirth (*Frohsinn*?) and postulated as a *sine-qua-non* of humor. I also heard the term 'the Raskin syndrome' for the first time there, standing for my then compulsory joking in public which I had first developed as an anti-antisemitic device as a child on Moscow streets—keep them laughing to avoid being beaten up as a 'dirty kike.'

The 1997 Oklahoma conference, hugely successful, was the last time we saw humor and health people around us. Also overheated outside, with record-high July temperatures, but superbly air-conditioned, with a short walk to the campus

cafeteria unprotected, it positioned that section as a post-conference symposium, probably to protect them from fierce attacks by serious psychologists on their unsubstantiated and often ignorant claims. But I remember that Elliott Oring and I agreed to present papers there, and his brilliant, as usual, contribution pretty much buried—sensationally—the overall goodness of humor thesis: on a small grant, he explored the early websites of fringe groups and discovered massive use of hostile humor in support of hate speech.

So, we closed the humor-is-all-good forever, and it coincided, for a number of reasons, with the end of using a great deal of it in the classroom. That was very much widespread—not just because the principals endorsed it. But there was another powerful force for that, at least in the States—humor stopped working: undergraduates were not getting it. I first shared it in the same opening address at Birmingham—just as a curious aside—and it was confirmed by others. It took a couple of years for that phenomenon to settle in before we realized its true nature: our humor was predominantly jokes—canned jokes, and the very young undergraduates had somehow grown up without that culture. Were they a humorless generation or had something else taken the place of the joke?

It took a few more years to figure it out. Somewhere around 2004, I was walking back from one of my offices to another with a senior Ph.D. student of mine and her undergraduate student, who was definitely interested in chatting up the just barely older attractive instructor and did not mind my 60-year-old presence. I asked him whether they ever laughed in his group of friends. He promptly assured us that they did a lot of it. His instructor then asked for an example, and he mentioned acting out a scene from a recent film comedy—I believe that was the amazingly low-quality and, to me, stupid Austin Powers franchise that he immediately enthusiastically but not very impressively reproduced, including the evil MiniMe.

In July 2006, I visited Yorick Wilks at Oxford, and he invited Limor Shifman to our lunch. Hugely pregnant with her second child, she was a very young and lively wife of a graduate math student there, also an Israeli, and she had a degree in Communication and a huge interest in humor research, especially in memes. I had run into the term a few times but the notion of a cartoon that was reminiscent of some other cartoon had not made much sense to me. I don't remember if I encouraged her to research memes but she did, including a small monograph (Shifman 2013), and a subsequent successful career at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where, at my time there in the 1970s, she would have been in double jeopardy of being female and a humor researcher.

Some 15 years later, actually last semester, Spring 2021, I was made to teach a humor and language class to juniors—I had regularly taught a Ph.D. seminar on humor research but at the lower level, I only taught a light-weight sophomore-level class twice in the Purdue Study Abroad Program in Oxford back in the 1990s; it was

almost exclusively on British humor, and I had fully expected my American students not to get it much—they mostly refused to acknowledge that the islanders spoke their language. Here at Purdue, actually on WebEx, a more technologically savvy form of Zoom, the undergraduates were a willing and pleasant group who read my stuff respectfully and did the perfunctory assignments well but I encouraged them, at the beginning of each class, to share their favorite piece of humor. Incredibly unfunny to all but the presenter, there were quite a few memes, undecipherable to me and to quite a few others, and, occasionally, a slightly ironic but normally moronic podcast. The jokes from my old publications were Icelandic Sagas to them, and like those, they were treated respectfully but without any recognition, let alone appropriation.

I felt reduced from a modern messiah of humor as a vital part of the students' lives, offering a mature and informative theory to guide them in handling, appreciating, and even creating humor to a banal ivory tower inhabitant studying an anachronistic and marginal phenomenon like the left leg of a brontosaurus. I may have studied it well and taught it successfully but the joke, the foundation of my generation's humor culture, was dead, as many in the generation already are or soon will follow. Rather than waxing nostalgic or berating the new generation of humor consumers, as the 'altkakers' (Yiddish for very old ever-kvetching/grumbling Jewish men) tend to do, let us—deliberately benignly—compare my dead culture of humor with what goes for it today.

3 The other culture of humor

How was the culture of the joke acquired? First, you were exposed to it in verbal communication from peers: your peers told you jokes, and you shared them with other peers. In my case, and typically, it happened pretty early, though, in my case, early exposure was with adults, when my parents' college friends visited in the one room we had in a Moscow communal apartment. The jokes were political and, therefore, dangerous, many targeting Stalin, so I was trained not to share them with anybody.

Some 15 years later, on the first night of the obligatory ROTC Soviet Army camp, lying in tents on mattresses filled with wet grass, some 20–30 of us started telling the jokes that we heard no later than our fist grade. They were primitive, scatological, not quite sexual, and it was hilarious. There was no difference between Russian and American ones. It was hilarious and quite therapeutic.

My exposure continued and intensified, mostly from adult sources. Serious esthetic considerations developed. Unlike in American humor at the time and now, puns were despised and rejected, and so were the tall tales—brevity was appreciated. Stylistic requirements were maintained. British absurd intellectual humor made it in

somehow (Giselinde Kuipers told me in 1997, when we met at the Oklahoma conference, that she grew up without humor in Holland upper class family because all jokes were told by truckers and were about sex, so British import was not universal). The American little Doris and elephant jokes made it through a bit later. German fecal evacuation jokes were mentioned only pejoratively.

By college time, I had been exposed to thousands of jokes, and I remembered them all. It served me well at the humor conferences in the 1980s–2010s, when people tried to tell me a joke I had not heard, and I finished them to prove that I had. I stopped doing it after having forgotten a couple of jokes; people stopped challenging me simultaneously because there were no new jokes.

Initially, it was blamed on the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990 and the rapid decrease of its political humor production—incidentally, in the country itself, it had been rumored that there was a special section of the US Embassy that manufactured anti-Soviet jokes at the time of plenty. ‘Alivay!’ the Hebrew for “I wish it were so!” It took me over a decade to realize that the new generation, a couple of them by then, did not have nor appreciate the joke culture. In that decade, the formerly oral culture, a modern folklore, had a chance of becoming written: just about every known joke was put on the emerging Internet in various, often defective form: factual imprecision, bad style, often misspelled. Christie Davies noticed, in the 1990s, that Soviet jokes were being published and sold reasonably well in Great Britain at the time but were never told, in public or in private. He did not offer an explanation for this phenomenon but the death of the joke culture would have fit.

Lamenting the loss of the culture of yesteryear, the older generation charges the youngsters with being illiterate, uneducated, “uncultured.” Internet is often seen as the culprit. What people do on the Internet, however, is reading the screens and often writing on them. They have given up the oral-folklore basis of humor by not retelling jokes to each other nor listening to them much but they do get their humor from reading. This is not illiteracy. What does appear to have been lost is the elitist aspect of joke culture that considered the joke to be a literary text and developed stylistic preferences. But along with the elite, there coexisted a large democratic base where people exchanged uncensored and often deficient jokes. Now, we are surrounded by crowds of smart-phone users, and they are the large democratic base of the new culture.

It is hard to identify the Internet difference in an irrefutable way. Is it that the number of providers is in the millions? No, the jokes were also told by masses of people. That they are now local? No, in fact, the oral transmission of the jokes was much more literally local: you heard the jokes from somebody who was contiguous to you in space and time. That the quality of humor is low? But many joke tellers were not good, and the jokes they told you were very poorly styled.

No, the Internet did not kill the joke. In fact, early on, most jokes were written up in collections, and yet, the joke stopped being synonymous with humor. They are still stand-up comedians, some with a following, but the late-night talk show hosts do not tell jokes, and they are not as popular as Johnny Carson. Instead of the one (or very few) prominent national figures as humor suppliers there are masses of “influencers” on the web, and many users remain as faithful followers of those providers, and the Internet has ensured their easy availability to masses. The quality control has weakened or disappeared with this decentralization of supply. Before the Internet, people may have accessed such providers locally on a much more limited scale. All of these changes are statistical, and like all statistics, they characterize an aftereffect of a phenomenon—they cannot explain why the joke culture has withered.

4 How have I lost the joke culture?

It is easier for me to trace how it happened in my life but I am not sure it can be generalized for a common case. My active exposure to and participation in the joke culture discontinued with my emigration from the Soviet Union in 1973. Christie Davies, an avid collector and researcher of Soviet humor, was convinced that this was the epicenter of humor production—even as his other research confirmed that humor was international and was developing similarly in diverse cultures.

The intensity of joke production in the USSR was definitely related to the suppression of public opinion. The dissenting nature of Soviet humor varied from very mild to extremely aggressive, regulated by relative risks. In the late 1930s, people were executed for anti-regime jokes both in Nazi Germany and Communist Russia; in the 1940s, they were incarcerated for 5–10 years in the Soviet GULAG camps; in the late 1950s–mid-1960s, after Stalin’s death, they were left alone, and so the production and distribution increased. There was a short-term scare when two Soviet writers were incarcerated for publishing each an “anti-Soviet” book abroad but joke production was not affected.

After I mercifully lost touch with Soviet reality in 1973, the joke feed pretty much disappeared. I regained access to some on the early Internet in the States already after 1978. 10 jokes were posted daily on *anekdot.ru*. First, increasingly many were retreads, but also, I stopped getting many referring to events and personalities I knew nothing about. Some jokes were retreads for new targets. The lack of familiarity with events or personalities is what made a Dutch psychologist in England in the 1940s falsely conclude that subjects could not get foreign humor (Eysenck 1944).

This feed cessation to me did not have to indicate a more general phenomenon but, eventually, it did. One can speculate that as the Soviet reality was shifting towards perestroika of the 1980s, the obligatory dissident (even if minimally) nature

of the joke was missing. With the freedom of the press and media of the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, it almost stopped. So, it looks like what happened to me—losing the feed for my joke culture—coincidentally, happened to others, and as I already mentioned, it happened to my American undergraduates who had already not inherited the jokes from their parents.

5 Are memes new jokes?

The old jokes were a folklore form of art. There were collectively curated and eventually reached their peak elitist form. The anonymous quality authority was respected by the users, and voluntarily followed by those in the know. An active user could easily tell the peak form of the joke from the inferior ones, even though public discussions of the quality were uncommon.

Memes are also curated, mostly by their creators. Memes are allusive pictures, spoofs of the original picture which was or was not intended as funny. All the spoofs are intended as funny and perceived along and against the background of the original picture. Memes are forcefully allusive—one should have seen the original to get the meme, which is why I normally do not get them.

Memes also require a skill, a technique. Jokes tested the tellers' senses of style, of literary tastes. Memes require an original drawing technique, a mastery of workshop or a comparable computer application. Unlike jokes, memes exist online and are consumed on the screens.

The meme authorship is not necessarily anonymous. They share the humorous intent but are not loaded with dissent—just the standard easy irony of the podcasts. Irony is built into all forms of humor that my undergraduates have brought me as examples of what makes them laugh.

The jokes described a situation, real or imaginary, and offered a punch line as the humorous charge. The memes present a situation in the original picture, and instead of a punch line, replace the central part, say, by putting a cat's face instead of the human one, and the humor is in that substitution, which may be not funny as such.

6 So ... what's with the theory?

Oh, it stays unchanged. The main thesis still holds true: a juxtaposition of two opposing scripts. But it does diffuse somewhat in the memes because there is no text corresponding to at least one script, as in the jokes, and there is no punchline triggering the transition to the other script, just pointed out in it.

For four decades, I preached and practiced the purely formal, technical theory. Its purview was short textual jokes. But the rest of the world cited it for a much wider purview of humor in general and did not concern itself with its technicality, materiality, formality or the lack thereof. This will probably continue because, even if diffused, the theory was not falsified. and it remains universal.

My narrow formal theory has been upgraded by ontological semantics, a new theory in computational semantics based on an explicit conceptual structure of human cognition representing our shared knowledge of the world, an important component of linguistic meaning (Nirenburg and Raskin 2004; Raskin and Taylor 2013). The non-linguists among humor researchers have other concerns. Bless them all!

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Bionote

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