

## A Linguistic Analysis of Persian Online Jokes in Light of General Theory of Verbal Humor

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### Abstract

The present study sought to investigate Persian verbal humor in light of General Theory of Verbal Humor. To this aim, initially a corpus of Persian online jokes was built. The jokes were, then, analyzed based on the theory's six knowledge resources (KRs): (a) script opposition, (b) logical mechanism, (c) situation, (d) target, (e) narrative strategy, and (f) language. Through an in-depth analysis, 'normal/abnormal' and 'possible/impossible' were determined as two major types of script opposition in the corpus. 'Faulty reasoning', 'exaggeration' and 'false analogy' were also among the most common logical strategies to create humor in Persian jokes. Likewise, 'pun' and 'allusion' in language KR and 'dialogue' and 'descriptive monologue' in narrative strategy KR were mostly employed to convey humor. As for the target of Persian online jokes, no overarching theme was detected. These findings are discussed and major theoretical and practical implications are addressed in this study.

**Keywords:** Persian humor, Verbal humor, Online jokes, GTVH, Linguistic analysis

### INTRODUCTION

Humor is a multi-disciplinary field of study. Researchers have investigated humor in many fields of study such as psychology, philosophy, linguistics, sociology and literature (Attardo, 1994, 2008). Humor traces back to Plato and Aristotle, and Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan. Socrates was reported by Plato as saying that the ridiculous was characterized by a display of self-ignorance. For Aristotle, we laugh at inferior or ugly individuals, because we feel a joy at feeling superior to them. Laughter is regarded as a response to the perception of incongruity. The perceived incongruity is between a concept and the real object it represents. Hegel shared almost exactly the same view, but saw the concept as an "appearance" and believed that laughter then totally negates that appearance (Attardo, 2001).

Humor frequently contains an unexpected, often sudden, shift in perspective (Ghodsi & Heidari-Shahreza, 2016). This view has been defended by Boyd (2004). Boyd views the

shift as from seriousness to play. Nearly anything can be the object of this perspective twist; it is, however, in the areas of human creativity (science and art) that the shift results from "structure mapping" to create novel meanings. Humor results when two different frames of reference are set up and a collision is engineered between them.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Three major theories of laughter and humor are 'superiority' theory, 'relief' theory and 'incongruity' theory. These theories are briefly introduced below. Then, an account of Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) is presented to pave the way for General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) upon which the present research is conducted. SSTH is explained in more detail than its preceding theories because it is the basis of GTVH. Thus, it helps clarify how GTVH was born out of SSTH.

### **Superiority theory**

Simply speaking, superiority theory posits that we laugh at misfortunes of others to reflect our own superiority. This theory can be traced back in the work of Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes. "If people dislike being laughed at," Scruton (1986) says, "it is surely because laughter devalues its object in the subject's eyes" (in Morreall 1983, p. 168). Plato recommends that humor is somehow nasty towards others that have no power. Hobbes further clarifies that humans are in a continual struggle with each other, looking for the weaknesses of others.

### **Relief theory**

The Relief Theory has a clear physiological background (Ghodsi & Heidari-Shahreza, 2016). The theory reached its peak when Freud put forward his theory on how laughter could release feelings of nervousness and "psychic energy" (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002). Freud clarifies that this "psychic energy" in our body is built as a help for stopping expressing feelings in taboo situations, like sex or death. When this energy is freed we laugh.

### **Incongruity theory**

The Incongruity Theory states that humor is the result of something incompatible, something that contradicts with our mental patterns and anticipations (Ghodsi & Heidari-Shahreza, 2016). This approach was taken by James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, and many later philosophers and psychologists. The incongruity theory states that humor is realized at the onset of the understanding of incongruity between a concept concluded in a certain context and the real objects thought to be in some relation to the concept. Since the main aspect of the theory is not the incongruity *per se*, but its comprehension and resolution (i.e., putting the objects in question into the real relation), it is often called the incongruity-resolution theory (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002).

## SSTH theory

The Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) was developed by Raskin (1985). "While being a variant on the more general concepts of the Incongruity theory of humor: it is the first theory to identify its approach as exclusively linguistic. As such it concerns itself only with verbal humor: written and spoken words used in narrative or riddle jokes concluding with a punch line"(Raskin ,1985). A script is similar to the lexical meaning of a word. It should be mentioned that Raskin persists in the fact that scripts, in his description, are immediately related to, and provoked by, lexical items. Therefore, each script will have a lexematic "handle" which causes its activation. Humor is provoked when the result at the end of the joke, the punch line, causes the audience to shift its understanding from the primary or more obvious script to the secondary, opposing script. As an example Raskin uses the following joke:

"Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in" (Raskin, 1985).

In this example, the two scripts existing in the joke are DOCTOR and LOVER; the change from one to the other is precipitated by our realization of the "whispered" reply of the "young and pretty wife". This reply just makes sense in the script of LOVER, but makes no sense in the script of a bronchial patient going to see the DOCTOR at his (home) office.

## General Theory of Verbal Humor

The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) was proposed by Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo in the article "Script theory revised: joke similarity and joke representation model " (Raskin & Attardo (1991). It integrated Raskin's ideas of Script Opposition (SO), developed in his Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor [SSTH], into the GTVH as one of six levels of independent Knowledge Resources (KRs) "(Lew ,1996). "These KRs could be used to model individual verbal jokes as well as analyze the degree of similarity or difference between them. The Knowledge Resources proposed in this theory are:

### Script Opposition (SO)

It refers to two opposing scripts. This includes, among others, themes such as real (unreal), actual (non-actual), normal (abnormal), possible (impossible). This parameter is related to the script opposition, the overlapping requirement also present in SSTH. Script opposition exists in all humorous texts.

### Logical Mechanism (LM)

It refers to the mechanism which connects the different scripts in the joke. This can range from a simple verbal technique like a pun to more complex LMs such as faulty logic or false analogies. The logical mechanism is a complex parameter. Attardo (1997)

suggests that the LM embodies the resolution of the incongruity in the incongruity-resolution model. A result of this claim is that, since resolution is optional in humor it follows that the LM KR would also be optional. Table 1 shows a list of common logical strategies to create humor.

**Table 1.** A list of logical mechanism (LM) strategies

role-reversals	role exchanges	potency mappings
vacuous reversal	Juxtaposition	Chiasmus
garden-path	figure-ground reversal	faulty reasoning
almost situations	Analogy	self-undermining
inferring consequences	reas. from false prem.	missing link
coincidence	Parallelism	implicit parall.
proportion	ignoring the obvious	false analogy
exaggeration	field restriction	Cratylism
meta-humor	vicious circle	referential ambiguity

### ***Situation (SI)***

It can include objects, activities, instruments, props needed to tell the story. Any joke must be “about something” (changing a light bulb, crossing the road, playing golf, etc.). Although some jokes will rely more on it, while others would almost entirely ignore it. Consider the following example:

“Can you write shorthand?”  
 “Yes, but it takes me longer.”

This joke presupposes a “writing shorthand” situation, but leaves it almost completely in the background (the only thing that matters is its speed). The SI is not only for jokes at all, in the sense that this is a function shared by all humorous and non-humorous texts.

### ***Target (TA)***

It identifies the actor(s) who become the “butt” of the joke, the ones whom a joke ridicules. This labeling serves to develop and solidify stereotypes of ethnic groups, professions, etc.

### ***Narrative strategy (NS)***

It addresses the narrative format of a joke, as a simple narrative, a dialogue, or a riddle. It attempts to classify the different genres and subgenres of verbal humor. In a subsequent study Attardo expands the NS to include oral and printed humorous narratives of any length, not just jokes (Attardo, 2001).

### ***Language (LA)***

It “...contains all the information necessary for the verbalization of a text. It is responsible for the exact wording ...and for the placement of the functional elements”

(Attardo, 1994). The concept of paraphrase is essential for understanding the type of variation that this KR accounts for: as any sentence can be recasted in a different wording (that is, using synonyms, other syntactic constructions, etc.), any joke can be reworded in a (very large) number of ways without changes in its semantic content; for example, joke A below can be paraphrased as joke B:

A: How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five, one to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table.

B: The number of Pollacks needed to screw in a light bulb? Five — one to hold the bulb and four to turn the table.

## **THE STUDY**

The primary purpose of the present research was to examine Persian verbal humor in general and Persian online jokes in particular. To this aim, General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), as the most accredited linguistic theory of humor, was employed to look into a corpus of Persian jokes.

### **The corpus**

Persian online jokes were regarded as an appropriate representative of Persian verbal humor for both theoretical and practical reasons; they were short pieces of humorous texts, almost entirely based on verbal mechanism of humor. In addition, jokes were prevalent on various online apps and Internet websites. That is, it was relatively much more feasible to collect and conduct research on jokes. Thus, 300 Persian online jokes were randomly chosen to explore Persian verbal humor.

### **Corpus analysis**

The sample of Persian online jokes was, then, analyzed based on GTVH. This theory encompasses six knowledge resources (KRs) to account for different components of humor from a linguistic perspective. Each joke in the corpus was individually analyzed to discern what types of KRs it relied on. Afterwards, through mainly descriptive statistics, the most recurrent KR categories (and subcategories) were identified. In the next step, appropriate examples for these major types were extracted from the corpus for further qualitative analysis and interpretation.

## **FINDINGS**

In the following, the components of GTVH (the KRs), along with their most frequent types in Persian verbal humor are presented. Additionally, each KR and its subcategories are accompanied by examples from the corpus.

### **Script opposition**

Script Opposition (SO) involves themes like real and unreal, actual and non-actual, normal and abnormal, possible and impossible. Based on the corpus analysis, the

following are among the most frequent subcategories of this KR in Persian verbal humor:

### ***Normal vs. abnormal:***

In this joke the characters are humans, assumed as a beetroot leaf. It is abnormal to consider that if someone does not press the 'like' button, s/he acts like a beetroot leaf.

میدونید برگ چغندر به کی میگن؟؟  
به اونی که میاد اینجا جوک ها رو میخونه کلی میخنده اونوقت به لایک کوچولو نمیکنه.  
جزوه برگ چغندر ها نباشید اگه نیستید بزید لایکو.

Do you know who the leaf of beetroot is?

Someone who reads the jokes and laughs a lot but does not say that I like them.

Do not be like a leaf of beetroot! If you are not like that, say I like the joke.

### ***Possible vs. impossible***

In this joke, carrot is assumed to improve the eyesight but not because no rabbit wears eyeglasses, it is just because of vitamin A. It is impossible to see a rabbit wearing eyeglasses.

اولی: آیا به نظر تو هویج باعث تقویت قوه ی بینایی می شود؟ دومی: بله، قطعاً! چون تا به حال خرگوش ندیده ام  
که عینک بزند!!!

A: Does carrot improve the eyesight in your opinion?

B: yep..., absolutely; because I have not ever seen any rabbits wearing glasses!!!

### **Logical mechanism**

Below are the common logical strategies to create humor in Persian online jokes:

#### ***Faulty reasoning***

The same joke can be looked at from the perspective of logical mechanism. It is reasoned in this joke that a rabbit wears glasses for its weak eyesight unless it eats carrots. But it is a faulty reasoning. Eating carrots may improve the eyesight, but it cannot be concluded from a rabbit not wearing eyeglasses.

اولی: آیا به نظر تو هویج باعث تقویت قوه ی بینایی می شود؟ دومی: بله، قطعاً؛ چون تا به حال خرگوش ندیده ام  
که عینک بزند!!!

A: Does carrot improve the eyesight in your opinion?

B: yep..., absolutely; because I have not ever seen any rabbits wearing glasses!!!

#### ***Exaggeration***

In this joke, the use of a single word (i.e., 'Qolam') is exaggerated in an Iranian game, ridiculing Iranians' overuse of something or their overwhelming persistence.

Iranian 'name and family name' game:

Name: Qolam

Family name: Qolamy

City: Qolam Abad

Animal: Wild Qolam

Fruit: little Qolam

Objects: Plastic Qolam

Only Iranians are so masterful.

اسم فامیل بازی کردن ایرانیها

اسم : غلام

فامیلی : غلامی

شهر : غلام آباد

حیوان : غلام وحشی

میوه : غلامچه

اشیا : غلام پلاستیکی

هنر نزد ایرانیان است و بس

### ***False analogy***

In this joke a person is compared to a beetroot leaf. There is no similarity between these two characters, though. Therefore, the humor relies on a false analogy between a human being and a beetroot leaf.

میدونید برگ چغندر به کی میگن؟؟

به اونی که میاد اینجا جوک ها رو میخونه کلی میخنده اونوقت یه لایک کوچولو نمیکنه.

جزوه برگ چغندر ها نباشید آگه نیستید بزنی لایکو.

Do you know who the leaf of beetroot is?

Someone who reads the jokes and laughs a lot but does not say that I like them.

Do not be like a leaf of beetroot, If you are not like that say I like the joke.

### **Situation & target**

In this joke we get involved into family matters. The target here is someone's wife. The situation is a trip to the north of Iran and whether the wife is saved or not in the sea.

پسر از باباش میپرسه بابا فرق حادثه با بدبختی چیه؟

باباش میگه پسرم فکر کن ما رفتیم شمال یه موج بزرگ میاد و مادرتو میبره تو دریا، به این میگن حادثه.

حالا آگه یکی پیدا بشه مادرتو نجات بده بهش میگن بدبختی.

"What is the difference between an event and disaster?" The son asked his father.

"Imagine we have travelled to the north of Iran, suddenly a huge wave comes and takes your mother to the sea, this is an event. Now if someone finds your mother and saves her we can call this a disaster" the father said.

### **Narrative strategy**

Two narrative strategies, that is, dialogue and descriptive monologue were mostly employed in Persian online jokes.

### ***Dialogue***

In this joke, the narrative strategy is very clear. It is a dialogue between two persons (A and B) talking about the effect of eating carrots on eyesight.



"Artillery, Tank, Chiki Chiki, Boom Boom" Pishro says.

"I am not such a person who feels pain because of these bullets. Who is responsible for these wounds?" Yas says.

"Where are the grenades? They look for short skirts" Sasi Mankan says.

## **DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

This study considered humor through some characteristics in jokes, like script oppositions, logical mechanism (e.g., faulty reasoning, exaggerations, and false analogy), situation and target. The first joke was based on the normal vs. abnormal script opposition without which the joke could not be funny; the person that has no reaction to the joke is like beetroot leaf. Here, there was an odd relationship between beetroot leaf and someone's linking a joke. The next joke employed possible vs. impossible script opposition. In this joke carrots are associated with the improvement of eyesight while at the same time the joke reasons upon rabbits not wearing eyeglasses. The fact that it is not possible for a rabbit to wear eyeglasses makes joke reader laugh. The same joke also employs false reasoning as a logical mechanism to induce humor. The next joke mainly relied on verbal exaggeration in the use of a key word in the joke. Finally, the 'son and the father' joke was based on a false analogy. Also, some jokes were descriptive monologues and some dialogues.

The research on humor has lots of practical usage on every individual subject. The use of GTVH theory can be very beneficial on public speaking, both for the audience and the presenter. Conveying messages through humor is an invaluable way that everyone can use in business, public or private speaking (Ghodsi & Heidari-Shahreza, 2016). By the use of this theory the teachers can spread the comfortable environment in the classroom for the students and relieve their minds through learning processes. Sitcoms and jokes are good examples of using humor in educational settings. In this regard, humor can be integrated with the learners' culture to facilitate second culture/language acquisition. This could be particularly beneficial for culturally-loaded words as a significant area of problem for many EFL learners (Heidari-Shahreza, 2014 a; Heidari-Shahreza, Moinzadeh & Barati, 2014).

Like any other piece of research, this study also had a number of limitations, some of which could influence the findings and restrict the generalization of the results. For instance, this study only examined a limited number of online jokes to shed light on Persian verbal humor. Furthermore, it was largely qualitative in nature. Future studies may embark on investigating other genres of Persian humor. Moreover, employing a larger corpus of jokes facilitates quantitative studies on Persian verbal humor. Finally other factors such as gender may be explored within the Islamic-Iranian culture of humor (See Heidari-Shahreza, 2014b; Heidari-Shahreza, Vahid-Dastjerdi & Marvi, 2011, for some gender studies in such context).

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