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Manipulating Components of Joke Construction and its Effect on Funniness.

An investigation of how variations on joke construction impact the comedic value of jokes thru the means of research and implementation.

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Under the Guidance of: **Dr. Regina Barreca**

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Abstract

This paper is an investigation of how manipulating components of joke construction can affect its funniness and seeks to find a heuristic method for maximizing the funniness of a joke. It is first argued that an additional Knowledge Resource exists: the relevant prior knowledge that an audience has when experiencing a joke (AS). This new Knowledge Resource is explained in the context of humor detection and appreciation. The theory put forth also finds that the original six Knowledge Resources, when paired in such a way, can help maximize the funniness of a joke. The theory stipulates that the Narrative Strategy drives Language, Target drives Situation, and that Script Opposition drives Logical Mechanism. A comedic sketch and stand-up bit are then devised while consciously implementing the theory. These works, and their implementations, are then explained in detail to demonstrate the effectiveness of the theory. Finally, some recommendations for further research are offered.

1. Introduction

Laughter is a strange phenomenon that all humans experience, although it can sometimes be difficult to determine *why* we are laughing. Studies have found that laughter is actually not always a result of experiencing some form of comedy, but rather can stem from things like nervous energy, confusion, or a release of tension. In fact, only about 20% of laughter is a result of humor. This is important, because if we want to study manipulating components of a joke in order to test for funniness, we want to ensure we are testing for humor and not simply for laughter.

Laughter, although silly, is actually a useful trait for people to have. The American Cancer Society has found that “the use of humor for the relief of physical or emotional pain or illness [is]...a complimentary method to promote health and cope with illness” (Horowitz 196). Comedy and laughter certainly has the ability to raise someone’s spirits and positively change their outlook, but it has also been found to be medically therapeutic (Moran 1055).

In addition to a medical effect, humor also plays a major role in social interactions (Provine 47). Understanding how to maximize the comedic effect of a joke could help someone accomplish a task as modest as making a new friend or as momentous as getting hired at a new job, for comedy instills a charisma in people that improves their self-confidence, while also reducing their stress (Monchuk 2001).

Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskins’ General Theory of Verbal Humor breaks a

joke into six distinct components, but the theory does not distinguish which variations of each aspect of a joke yield the most effective comedy, but rather only discusses their functions and how they can be changed. This project aims to extend this theory by determining how to manipulate the elements of a joke so that they combine to produce the maximum comedic effect. More specifically, the project attempts to find relationships between the components such that can help determine which combinations of components yield the funniest results.

2. SSTH, GTVH, and Knowledge Resources

The Semantic Script Theory of Humor put forth by Raskin explains the six components of a joke, which he deems “Knowledge Resources” (KRs). These components are broken down as follows: Language (LA), Narrative Strategy (NS), Target (TA), Situation (SI), Logical Mechanism (LM), and Script Opposition (SO). It is argued that each of these KRs, except TA, is present in every joke and collectively contribute to the humor produced by such (Oring 204).

LA refers to the word choice, syntactic composition, and other easily discernable characteristics of the joke. The NS refers to the form of the joke--that is, a question, a poem, or a story, and how many sentences the joke contains. The TA, which is the only KR that is not necessary in every joke, represents the person, or persons, who are the subject of the joke in a way that is demeaning. The SI of a joke is comprised of the characters, settings, and objects present. The LM refers to the underlying cause of humor in the joke such as surprise, incongruity, or superiority--all to be discussed later. The final KR discussed in Raskin’s theory is SO, which refers to the topic of the joke (Attardo and Raskin).

Language	=	LA	=	word choice, syntax
Narrative Structure	=	NS	=	number of sentences, form of the joke
Target (optional)	=	TA	=	person(s) who are maligned by the joke
Situation	=	SI	=	characters, setting, objects
Logical Mechanism	=	LM	=	underlying cause for humor in the joke
Script Opposition	=	SO	=	topic/subject of the joke

Figure 1. A summary of the Knowledge Resources and their meanings.

Raskin then worked with Attardo to revise said theory into the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), which postulated that the KRs had a specific hierarchal structure based on their relation to the specificity of the joke. Furthermore, the KRs range from high to low specificity as follows: LA → NS → TA → SI → LM → SO (Oring 206). It is supposed that jokes that share the highly specific KRs are more similar than if they only share lowly specific KRs. Additionally, the theorem states that the selection of a less specific KR has a large influence on which KR of a higher specificity should resultantly be chosen in order to maximize funniness. That is, a less specific KR can be used to determine the funniest available choice for a more specific KR, but the

process does not work well when reversed. This is discussed more thoroughly later in the paper.

3. Proposal of a New KR: Assumption of Knowledge (AS)

In Oring's own examination of the GTVH and KRs, he walks the reader the variations of a joke thru the single-stepped manipulation of each KR. The joke used for this slow examination of how changing a single KR can affect a joke is as follows:

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 he's standing on. (204) (Joke 1)

The target of this joke is clearly people of Polish descent, for the joke relies on the fact that there is a preconceived notion that Poles are unintelligent in American jokelore. Oring makes it clear that "a group that was stereotypically regarded [as anything other than stupid] would not serve as well in a variant" of the joke (205). That is, if a group that is not stereotypically stupid were to be inserted into the joke, the joke would lose meaning, and lose some humor. Similarly, if the audience is not aware that Poles are believed to have low intelligence in American jokelore, the joke would fail just as much as if a group with a different stereotype was inserted into the joke. Let the **audience** be defined as whoever is reading, hearing, or experiencing the joke. An audience's lack of awareness of the Polish stereotype has the same effect as the stereotype not even existing. The funniness of the joke is dependent upon the audience's knowledge of the Target, in this case, Poles. Without this knowledge, the joke loses comedic value, and the audience is left unimpressed. Therefore, a major aspect of the joke is how much information the audience is assumed to know.

This phenomenon of joke telling is not solely relevant to the KR of the Target of a joke however, but rather can be applied to any KR of the joke. For example, in the following joke told by Steven Wright in his 1985 comedy special, it is imperative for the audience to understand the LA component of the joke:

I had parked my car in a tow-away-zone.
When I came back the entire area was gone. (Stentorian) (Joke 2)

The audience must comprehend the LA of the phrase "tow-away-zone" in order to appreciate the LM of the joke, which happens to be a play-on-words (specifically a paronomasia). It is unlikely that anyone would conceptually misunderstand that a tow-away-zone refers to a parking spot where if any vehicle is found, it will be towed to an impound lot--yet, it is critical to the comedic value of the joke. For the idea of a whole section of the parking lot missing, as is illustrated in the punchline of Wright's joke, might seem to lack any incongruity, if the actual meaning of a "tow-away-zone" is unknown. It is apparent that a misunderstanding of one or more KRs could undermine the audience's comprehension of the joke, and therefore can retract from their ability to appreciate the funniness of the joke. Conversely, there is information in every joke that the audience must understand in order to enjoy the joke.

I therefore propose a new Knowledge Resource: Assumption of Knowledge (AS). This KR represents all of the information that the audience is assumed to know before experiencing the joke. It is also important to note that this assumed knowledge must be vital to the audience's ability to appreciate the humor in the joke. That is, AS only refers to any information that directly impacts the audience's comprehension of the joke, and therefore impacts the audience's appreciation of the joke. Not all the information in a joke contributes to the eventual comedy of the joke. The information that does contribute to the comedy of the joke, which is what AS refers to, can be found in any of the existing six KRs. Consequently, AS does not stand alone, but rather can be paired with any of the original KRs. For example, in Joke 1, the AS is that "poles are stereotyped as unintelligent", and therefore the AS is paired with the TA of the joke. Joke 2 is an example of the AS being paired with the LA, for the audience must understand the implied meaning of the phrase "tow-away-zone". Why must we be specific in our definition of which information constitutes AS? It is claimed that KRs must "identify the relevant components of the joke", and so AS must refer only to information that is pertinent to the joke's overall effect (Oring, 206). To be thorough, let's examine how we know that an audience's comprehension of a joke is related to an audience's appreciation of the joke.

A 2004 study examined the different parts of the brain that are activated during the process of laughter. While watching episodes of *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons*, subjects were scanned using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). The experiment successfully determined a biological difference between the processes of "humor detection" (or comprehension) and "humor appreciation" (Moran 1056-1057). The study ultimately determined three key points. First, it found that there was significantly less laughter observed during the phase of humor detection than during the phase of humor appreciation. Second, the fMRI readings showed that during the phase of humor detection there was increased activation in the "left inferior frontal and posterior temporal cortices", whereas the phase of humor appreciation caused increased activity in "bilateral regions of [the] insular cortex and the amygdala". Lastly, the study demonstrated that the processes of humor detection and appreciation occurred at different times, and more importantly, that the detection preceded the appreciation (Moran 1058-1059).

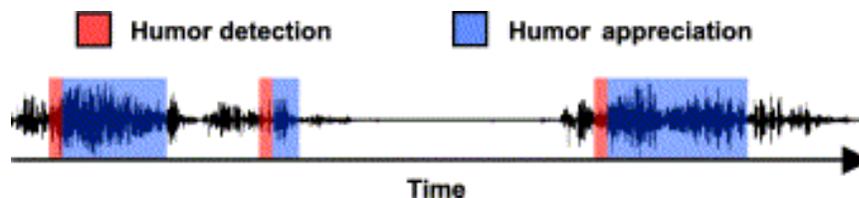


Figure 2. Humor detection draws less laughter than humor appreciation. (Moran 1057).

These conclusions make it clear that humor detection and humor appreciation are distinct processes, and therefore if an audience can not detect, or comprehend, the humor of a joke--possibly because of an unknown phrase or a misunderstood reference--the audience will not appreciate the humor of the joke. It is evident that the assumption of an audience's knowledge is extremely relevant to a joke and its effectiveness, and that it is a justified Knowledge Resource addition.

4. Manipulating Components of Jokes to Maximize Funniness

Another claim that GTVH makes is that the selection of a less-specific KR is likely to influence the selection of a more-specific KR. That is, the best way to maximize funniness is to first determine the less-specific KRs of the joke, and then choose appropriate more-specific KRs. Using Joke 1 as an example, since the SO is “stupidity”, it consequently makes sense to pick a TA that has a stereotype of being stupid (Oring 204). It thus makes sense for Poles to be chosen as the target of the joke. The less-specific KR, Script Opposition, helps determine the more-specific KR, Target, in a way that allows the joke to fulfill its potential comedic value.

I agree with this idea that different KRs can help the joke construction process. Some KR combinations certainly work better to achieve hilarity, and the selection of one KR can then determine the choosing of another. However, I believe that will careful analysis of this process, a more solidified method for determining which KRs work well together can be produced.

Instead of merely less-specific KRs helping to determine the more-specific KRs, I have grouped the KRs in pairs such that they are associated with a related KR. The pairs are as follows:

Narrative Structure	<i>and</i>	Language
Target	<i>and</i>	Situation
Script Opposition	<i>and</i>	Logical Mechanism

More specifically, these pairs drive one another in terms of the decision-making process of joke construction. In the same way that in GTVH a less-specific KR will determine what a more-specific KR should be, this theory specifies the KRs that determine corresponding KRs. The KRs on the right are chosen based on the KRs to their left. A visual representation might replace the “*and*” comparison with “ \rightarrow ” which represents the driving nature of the pairs of KRs.

Narrative Structure	\rightarrow	Language
Target	\rightarrow	Situation
Script Opposition	\rightarrow	Logical Mechanism

It is not enough to say that these components drive one another in said pairs, for it is also necessary to show the ways they drive one another with real examples of each KR. This exercise will serve to further elucidate the theory as well as justify it, for it will become clear how closely related each pair of KRs are.

4.1 Script Opposition Drives Logical Mechanism

We will start with the Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism pairing because they are the most prominent part of most jokes: the topic and the funny “thing” in the joke. Unfortunately, it is quite impossible to compile an exhaustive list of potential joke topics and LMs, for many humor scholars still argue what is and isn’t a Logical Mechanism. We have created a list with six Logical Mechanisms and matched them with the ten most joked about topics that work best when used together (Helitzer 36-57).

Table 1 shows the each Logical Mechanism we used as well as every joke topic that fits best with the corresponding LM in order to maximize the potential humor of the joke. This means that a joke with a pre-determined topic could be constructed in such a way that its matching LM, should be used in order to set the joke up to reach its potential. A few caveats regarding the findings should be noted. It is possible, and even likely, that any joke could combine multiple LMs, for they are not mutually exclusive, and can work well when used together. However, there is typically a single LM that stands out as the main contributor to the joke, and so we will regard the “main LM” as the only LM. The same goes for every other Knowledge Resource. It is worthwhile to recall what the Knowledge Resources of LM and SO refer to:

Logical Mechanism	=	LM	=	underlying cause for humor in the joke
Script Opposition	=	SO	=	topic/subject of the joke

Figure 3. The Script Opposition helps determine the Logical Mechanism to be chosen.

The following shows the Logical Mechanisms we will examine, summaries of their meanings, the Script Oppositions that work best when used with their corresponding LMs, an explanation of why the pairing works, and examples of specific topics.

SUPERIORITY

Humans enjoy feeling better than someone else, and one way to accomplish this is to, instead of raising oneself up, to push others down (Helitzer 43). These jokes almost always have a Target, and typically point out a flaw or disliked characteristic of said Target. It is important to note that these jokes give a feeling of superiority to the audience, not the comedian.

Authority

People of authority are usually disliked because they can tell everyone else what to do, they sometimes take advantage of their power, and subordinates think they can do their job better. We have all had a person in an authoritative position that we didn't like, and so a joke that employs superiority works excellently, for it feels good to finally have the tables turned on them (Helitzer 43).

- Examples: teachers on administrators, minorities on police officers, citizens on politicians.

Inferiority/Self Deprication

It is common to make fun of someone or something that is already regarded as sub-par. The audience is already on your side, and so you don't need to accomplish the difficult task of winning them over (Dixon). This also works well with jokes involving self-deprecating humor. Humility is well-received and a comedian, the Target in this case, giving permission for an audience to laugh makes the comedy personal (Dixon), and eliminates distance between the audience and the comedian (Distefano).

- Examples: Celebrities after major scandals, insecurities about appearance, teenagers.

PLAY ON WORDS

More than 50 percent of all jokes are based on the Logical Mechanism of Play on Words (POWs) (Helitzer 61). Although not every topic works best with POW, it is widely applicable, and is therefore used abundantly. A POW can take the form of a pun, a double entendre, a malaprop, etc. POWs dissect the language we use daily and find unique ways of employing it.

Sexual Relations

Sexual Relations are typically met with nervous energy, one of the main contributors to laughter (Helitzer 29). This natural uneasiness regarding sex is a reason to keep jokes about the topic light, and not too aggressive. Are some comedians able to be explicit and overt with the topic? Yes, but this must be true to the comedian (Barnett), for trying to force vulgarity or controversy is apparent, and is completely unfunny (Kohen 281). POW is perfect for the topic of Sexual Relations because it keeps the focus on the linguistic playfulness, and away from the potentially embarrassing. In addition, the vocabulary in regards to sex is plentiful and so the easier and more feasible is the task of manipulating language while remaining on topic. Grammar, diction, and enunciation are the major aspects of POW jokes; a major facet of comedy are words that are, simply put, funny. This could mean the words have a humorous sound or amusing imagery, but nevertheless (Barnett)--even Seinfeld admits that certain sounds of words are certainly a huge contributor to many jokes (Woodward). It is apparent that sex lends itself to be joked about using POWS, for nearly every word related to the topic is funny sounding or offers amusing imagery.

- Examples: sexual anxiety, sexual drive, sexual acts.

SURPRISE

Also typically referred to as Misdirection, jokes with the element of surprise are incredibly effective for producing consistent humor. They consist of the audience having the rug of their preconceived notions pulled out from under them. Life can sometimes seem monotonous and predictable, but jokes that employ Surprise create unexpected experiences, which is a refreshing relief for most audiences. Furthermore, it is important to first establish the common ground, without telegraphing the punchline, and then go astray (Birbiglia).

Family

Whether the joke is specifically about a spouse, children, or embarrassing relatives, there is the notion that families are happy with one another and care for each other. This impression of family values creates a common ground that can easily be deviated from with a surprise punchline (Dixon). The mental image of a “perfect family” might be similar for everyone, but in reality everyone’s family is quite different with various dynamics, relationships, and characters. This potential for infinite deviations from the ideal makes Family a perfect topic for jokes that use Surprise. However, the surprise can work the other way around as well. To start a joke with the deviation from typical family values will create tension, which allows for the punchline to swiftly relieve that tension with some reveal. The Surprise aspect of family humor is quite versatile.

- Examples: marriage problems, difficult children, embarrassing relatives.

INCONGRUITY

Incongruity is a major facet of comedy, for it allows comedians to stray from reality and use their creativity. Many humor theories revolve around the idea of an incongruity playing the role of a moral violation (benign-violation theory), a major aspect of the joke's meaning (Logical Mechanisms), or a completely unrealistic premise. Incongruity simply refers to some aspect of a joke that is, in some way, slightly askew from normality. This can also take the form of looking at seemingly normal situation from an unconventional, Incongruous point of view. Incongruity can also refer to a joke that points out some Incongruity of life--that is, a joke might question why something exists or analyze a strange phenomenon.

Daily Life

This topic includes everyday experiences that are not typically thought of to have any intriguing meaning or importance. These topics are commonly discussed, for example, by comedian Jerry Seinfeld and can include things like supermarkets, chairs, or pop-tarts. Why do these topics work well with jokes of Incongruity? Well, typically, these topics are deemed boring by audiences, and rarely receive any special attention. In fact, Seinfeld describes his work as giving an inappropriate amount of time to underserving subjects (Woodward). Incongruity, though, creates a real tension, causing the audience to become invested in the topic; it makes a seemingly boring topic exciting. The ability to use Incongruity to transform this lack of emotion into ripe engagement is comedic in and of itself. Daily Life is a perfect topic for such jokes because it is sure to start with the aforementioned lack of emotion. Relatedly, it is humorous for a comedian to be so invested in and to dissect such a seemingly irrelevant topic and to be able to defend its worthiness of discussion.

- Examples: supermarkets, chairs, pop-tarts.

HOSTILITY

Everyone has pent up hostility toward some person, thing or idea and these sources of hostility act as sources of comedy (Helitzer 43). It can be fun to watch others become filled with anger, especially when you can empathize with their anger. Comedy comes from emotion, for otherwise it will seem forced and will not be well received (Bagg). Anger is a great way to display real emotion and sincerity in a joke, which audiences appreciate and can laugh at. It is similar to the idea of Superiority in that some of the humor comes from the audience laughing at the comedian's misfortune and fury. As Seinfeld puts it, "it's the anger that makes it funny" (Gervais).

Money

Money and finances are a huge cause of irritation and angst for most people (Helitzer 45). Hostility can sometimes lead to controversy, depending on the topic, but because we have all experienced anxiety about money, it is relatable without being polarizing. Money is what runs the world, and people are constantly striving to get more of it, no matter how much they have. There is an inherent and universal frustration in such an enduring pursuit, and it is therefore funny to watch someone else display that anger; it reminds audiences that they are not alone in their struggle, for others, too, wish they had more money and are angry about it. Money is a topic that people commonly talk about in

generalities or fabrications, and so it is refreshing, and resultantly funny, for a comedian to be sincere with such a topic.

- Examples: lack of money, people borrowing money, celebrities wasting money.

Technology

Technology invades our privacy, doesn't work, and makes us feel incompetent. The hostility reminds audiences they are right to want privacy, deserve working machinery, and are fully competent. People are constantly frustrated with technology, and older generations are consistently becoming more frustrated at how often younger generations use the technology. It is therefore an extremely relatable topic to be angry about.

- Examples: broken technology, invaded privacy, confusing technology.

DEEPER TRUTH

It is human nature to want to feel included, rather than lonely. People like to know they share sentiments and experiences with others, no matter how irrelevant. These small similarities are mockingly deemed "false karrasses" by Kurt Vonnegut, but can actually have a great comedic impact on an audience (Vonnegut 56). When a comedian tells a joke that has apparent truth to it, an audience appreciates this because they can relate to it and feel as if they are being included in on an inside joke. These jokes are typically relevant to what is happening in the world and often include a comment on society.

Politics/Race

People develop strong opinions about politics and race relations, which involve moral issues, and therefore are extremely polarizing subjects. These are separate topics, but have similar justifications as to why they work well with jokes employing Deeper Truth as their LM. A political or racial disagreement can certainly be frustrating, but it is that much more rewarding when someone agrees with your outlook. If a comedian plays to his target audience with political or racial humor, he/she can quickly win the audience over, an important step in creating comedy (Gervais). Meanwhile, the joke plays to the joy that comes from sharing sentiment with someone and the perception that they are telling inherent truths. Additionally, these topics are quite serious and can be quite intense for some audiences based on backgrounds and experiences. However, humor is a way to cope with these serious topics; comedy acts as a way to discuss something in a way that it is easy to digest, for comedy offers relief from the natural tension of these subjects (Gervais). Politics and Race are naturally intense, but have become major constituents of the comedic world, and it is often due to their jokes that reveal some deeper truth about our world.

- Examples: poor state of a nation, differences between races, political figure's incompetence.

We must recall that these LMs, and SOs, are not mutually exclusive, but rather can work together in jokes, and often such combinations enhance the comedy. For some of the LMs with only one topic assigned to them (e.g. Surprise), it is not because they are ineffective LMs, but rather it is because they are quite versatile and work relatively well with many topics. In fact, they are often imbedded into the humor of a joke naturally, almost as a side effect, due to their knack for being humorous. We, though, are seeking

out which topics work *best* with certain types of jokes, and so must be deliberate in our pairings of SOs and LMs.

4.2 Narrative Strategy Drives Language

We will next look at how the style or structure of a joke can help determine the specific words that should be used in order to maximize funniness. We have categorized Narrative Strategy into three different types: story telling, one-liners, and observational. We then describe the language that fits best with the style in order to allow for the greatest potential for comedy. Because the Language of a joke is so reliant on the context of what is happening in the joke, we cannot offer specific words to use with the three NSs. However, we can describe the type of words that should be used, and the structure of sentences that can best achieve comedy. It is worthwhile to recall what the Knowledge Resources of NS and LA specifically refer to:

Language	=	LA	=	word choice, syntax
Narrative Structure	=	NS	=	number of sentences, form of the joke

Figure 4. The Narrative Strategy helps determine the Language to be employed.

The following shows the Narrative Structures we will examine, summaries of their meanings, the Language that work best when used with their corresponding NAs, an explanation of why the pairing works, and examples of specific language.

STORY TELLING

Story telling is an increasingly popular Narrative Strategy in comedy, for stories are how people experience most entertainment. People are comfortable following a story with a beginning, middle, and end--specifically with a rising action, climax, and falling action-- and so audiences can easily follow what is happening and are less likely to be confused. Comedy with story telling has jokes woven into the narrative that play off of topics or events in the story. A pure story telling comedian is Mike Birbiglia, whose writing partner has said that the story is a Christmas tree, and finding the spots to add jokes is like putting the ornaments on the tree (Birbiglia).

Telling a story is often a personal experience, and the same applies to jokes that are woven into story telling. It is therefore important to choose words that demonstrate specificity and rich details. One way to accomplish this is to find words with strong imagery. Doing so will establish the stories validity, an important aspect of the comedic story telling strategy (Birbiglia). In addition, because the stories can sometimes feel sluggish, it is important to cut what is unnecessary. To add to the story telling rhythm, it is best to increase the funniness with each joke in a bit (that is if there are multiple related jokes in a single part of the story (Woodward). For this comedy, each detail of the story should offer a joke, for otherwise it is unnecessary (Birbiglia).

ONE-LINERS

One-Line jokes are a difficult form of comedy to do on its own because in order to create a long act, one simply needs a lot of jokes. These jokes do not necessarily have to only consist of one-line, but are quick and often involve looking at topics from an unconventional perspective. Excellent one-line comics are Mitch Hedburg and Steven Wright. The jokes are usually light, playful, and straight to the point.

Because of the short nature of One-Liners, it is useful to use succinct words that are still able to portray good imagery. There is no time to explain an entire situation, as is the case in story telling, and so it is imperative to choose words that can offer an accurate description in a small amount of words. The words should also be sharp and crisp to add to the hurried feel of this style of comedy. For these jokes, it is best to have practically every sentence be funny and have a joke in it--there is little room for humorless exposition.

OBSERVATIONAL

Observational humor is a sort of narration of life. It can be in the form of a description of an event or a complaint about a social norm. Typically it involves jokes that take topics and explaining them or discussing them in a way that is funny. Unlike a long, arched story, and unlike short, biting one-liners, observational comedy is a bunch of short stories filled with one-liners; in other words, it's a blend of the two previous styles. One excellent observational comic is Jerry Seinfeld.

Because the Narrative Strategy of Observational humor is a combination of story telling and one-liners, it makes sense that the Language best suited for humor reflects this characteristic. Comedy that is primarily observational works best when words are chosen to create powerful imagery--however, in this case, it is not meant to demonstrate sincerity, as with story-telling, but rather is meant to convey great emotion. The emotion lets the audience know how the comedian feels and also gives them a chance to feel as well, which is an important step of observational humor, because it is heavily reliant on the comedian's perspective. It is funnier to see that a comedian is emotionally invested in the humor, rather than simply saying it (Gervais).

4.3 Target Drives Situation

Next we will look at how a selected Target can determine the Situation that the Target should be placed in to maximize the funniness of the joke. Target, though is actually a component of a joke that does not occur in every joke (Oring 205). It should also be noted that there are an infinite number of targets and infinite number of situations to put them in, so instead of attempting to analyze each individual combination, we have instead outline a general way to maximize the humor that results from teasing some Target:

A **Target** is a person, a group, or an idea that is in some way criticized in a humorous way. It results from the joke acknowledging a characteristic of the Target that is unique

and possibly deemed as negative by the majority of society, and then exploiting that characteristic at the expense of the Target. The funny thing about a Target is typically its funny characteristic, not the Target itself. Therefore, the Situation in which the Target should be placed within should be such that the characteristic is highlighted and must be acknowledged. A great example is how in Joke 1, the Target, the Poles, are being made fun of for having the negative characteristic of being unintelligent. The Situation, being asked to complete a relatively simple task, is perfect because it finds a way to bring the focus to their funny characteristic. If the Situation was an extremely difficult task, and they couldn't perform it, that would not be unique, would ignore their lack of intelligence, and would not be funny. The Situation is meant to maximize the impact of the Target's unique characteristic in order to maximize the funniness. The Target is the only optional KR (Attardo and Raskin 298), and since the Target is a direct determiner of Situation, it follows that Situation is also optional, as suggested by Oring, and in compliance with our theory.

4.4 An Explanation of Order

It might seem curious as to how we chose the order of each combination. That is, why does, for example, SO drive LM and not vice-versa? This was not left to chance, but rather was deliberately done and is related to the process that a joke goes through. A joke typically starts as an observation of some event (Helitzer). The comedian might notice something unique about the event or observation that they believe has potential to be funny, but maybe they aren't quite sure how or why yet (DeMayo). At this early stage of the joke, the SO has been determined. The comedian must then find out how to hone in on the funny aspect of his observation. Another step in the joke construction process is the form it will take. The comedian, based on the nature of the observation, will have an idea of the best way for the joke to be told. The exact wording of the joke cannot be determined until after the structure of the joke is set. In terms of TA and SI, a Target must first be selected in order to then determine "how" to poke fun at them. These jokes typically are meant to put down the specific Target, and so the SI is simply a way to accomplish that task. It is rare that the focus is on the SI (that is, that the purpose is to make fun of the characteristic, rather than the Target).

Through studying the process that a joke must go through from its original formation to a final work, we determined that the combinations of KRs must have a specific order. It makes chronological sense that the KR that is developed first in a joke drives a subsequently developed KR.

5. Implementing the Theory

We want to try out the theory that joke construction can be broken down in such a way that helps maximize the funniness of a joke by manipulating the components. More specifically, some components of the joke can be used to determine how the remaining KRs should be used in order to create the funniest combinations. This theory would help jokes reach their comedic potential. To do so, we have devised, separately, a short comedic sketch and a short stand-up comedy routine that employs our comedic theory.

5.1 Comedic Sketch

INT. BASEMENT POKER GAME

Five people sit around a table playing poker and drinking. One round is just ending and only two players have yet to fold.

SAM
Three Jacks, beat that!

BEN
Three Queens, ha!

SAM
Oh c'mon, And all I needed was one more card. Are you sure we're playing with a full deck?

BEN
I'm not sure *you're* playing with a full deck, if you know what I mean.

They all chuckle a little.

I. TRIP
See, I love that, I love sayings like that, but I'm always afraid to try one because I don't know when to use one.

BEN
It's not that hard, just go for it... So, are we playing another hand or what?

II. TRIP
Of course, unless you think we're "lost about a rainforest".

III. SAM (In agreement)
Yea, haha.

BEN
What?

SAM
He said, unless you think we're lost about--

BEN
No, no, I heard what he said. I'm just not sure what it means.

IV. TRIP
I was trying out a new saying I made up, y'know testing the proverbial waters. It doesn't mean anything.

BEN

Um... try to use one that already exists. (smug) Okay, can we keep playing, so I can keep winning?

TRIP (satisfied)

Oh, you're not winning this hand, I'm "playing my Trump card". (laughs)

V. SAM
Classic.

VI. BEN (annoyed)
Uh.. I guess that works. "Playing your Trump card"--does that mean you've got a good hand or something?

VII. TRIP
No, it means I'm going to yell my ill-based opinions obnoxiously until everyone else gets so fed up they drop out of the Republican primary, I mean, uh, fold.

VIII. BEN
Listen, just because these phrases mean something to you doesn't mean they're sayings. Let's looking up some popular ones on google. Siri: "popular clichés".

SIRI

I'm sorry, I couldn't find any "pop-tart creameries" near you.

BEN

"Common Phrases"!

SIRI

I don't know what you mean by "come on rabies."

BEN

What? Ah, this thing never works. Just look some up on google.

TRIP

Alright.

SAM

Deal me in.

MORGAN

Well I'm out, it's getting late.

IX. TRIP
Ohhh, look whose going to "give a man
a fish and feed him for a day".

BEN
No. Dammit TRIP, that doesn't work!

X. TRIP (innocently)
What? It says here that's the ninth
most popular saying that people use.

BEN
Yea, but it doesn't make any sense in
that situation. It's completely
irrelevant.

XI. MORGAN (amused)
No, no, he got me. That was good TRIP.

TRIP
Siri, did that saying make sense.

BEN
She's not going to know--

SIRI
I thought that was a cleverly- used
and well-timed saying.

XII. BEN (irritated)
Oh come on, that she understood?!...
Listen, here's a tip, make sure it's
related to what's going on. For
example, let's say I went all in on
the next hand... you might say "don't
put all your eggs in one basket" or
"you're off your rocker!" or--

XIII. TRIP
--or "I see your trying to win a lot
of money in poker tonight by going
all-in on this hand, BEN".

BEN
How is that even a saying?

XIV. TRIP
You said to keep it relevant.

XV. SAM
He's right, you did you say that.

BEN
Yea, but you can't just make up a
saying to fit the situation.

XVI. TRIP
Ok, now I'm really lost. I can't keep
up with all these new, fancy,
complicated, convoluted rules.

BEN
Have you ever even used one saying
correctly? Ever?!

XVII. TRIP (singing)
When you, were young...

BEN
That's not even a saying, that's a
song lyric.

TRIP
I know that, because on Wednesdays I
wear pink.

BEN
No! That's a movie reference.

TRIP (speaking quickly)
Oh, what an oblate spheroid.

BEN
That's literally just a geometrical
shape!

TRIP
Bradgelina?

BEN
A celebrity couple!

XVIII. TRIP
Hurlong Durlong Durp!

BEN
That's not anything!!
Forget it, you're hopeless. Y'know
what, I'm done. That's the last straw.

BEN takes the money he's earned and slams the door as he storms out.

TRIP
That doesn't even make sense. There's
plenty more right here.

XIX. TRIP points to a pile of unused straws in the middle of the
table.

XX. TRIP (cont'd)
What an idiot.

Blackout.

5.2 Explaining the Implementation: Comedic Sketch

Let's first do a simple explanation of the common structure of a comedic sketch. Typically, a comedic sketch has a **game**: the funny element of the sketch. The game is repeated thorough the sketch in small variations called **beats**, which give the sketch rhythm. The game of this particular sketch can be described as a person who cannot understand how to correctly use clichés. There are also sometimes opportunities to add jokes into the sketch that are unrelated to the game; it is important to take advantage of these opportunities.

Another important issue to cover is that of justification. Most jokes benefit from some justification as to why something has happened, especially jokes employing Incongruity. Without the justification, the incongruity is simply nonsense (Helitzer 52) and has no root in reality--reducing the comedic effect (Chadwick). The justification, or explanation is an important aspect of the humor (TEDx). Throughout, the sketch, we are constantly justifying the Incongruities in order to keep from the narrative to become too unrealistic. In **IV**, for example, we justify TRIPs misuse of a cliché in **II** by explaining that the cliché in **II** was made up. Another instance of this justification occurs in **VIII** where BEN gives an explanation as to why TRIP thinks that his erroneous reasoning in **VII** makes sense. Other justifications occur in **X**, **XIV**, and **XIX**.

Let's also discuss what we knowledge we Assume the audience to have in order for this sketch to be comedically effective. We recall that Assumption, which we have proposed as an additional Knowledge Resource in **3**, refers only to information that is pertinent to the overall funniness of the joke. Not all the information in a joke relates to the funny part of the joke. The information that does contribute to the comedy of the joke is what AS refers to, and can be related to any of the existing six KRs. In the sketch, it is important that the audience understands that an idiom, or cliché, is a common phrase that has an implied meaning that otherwise would not be easily discernable. Otherwise, the very first instance of Incongruity, in **I**, wouldn't be funny. Similarly, it is necessary for the audience to be familiar with common sayings, their meanings, and have the ability to recognize a common saying that is not real. Otherwise, the instances where TRIP misuses idioms in various ways as in **II**, **VII**, **IX**, **XIII**, will not be completely understood. This lack of understanding translates into a lack of humor detection, and thus a lack of humor appreciation (Moran 1056-1057).

The first beat occurs at **I**. This beat is more of a premise that sets up the situation for the rest of the sketch than a punchline, but actually can be met with major laughs. The Script Opposition of this beat is daily life, for it is about common everyday sayings. This is not a particularly engaging or controversial topic, and so, based on our combinations from **4.1**, we choose to make this joke funny by using the Logical Mechanism of Incongruity. The incongruity of this beat, and the rest of the sketch, is that an average person cannot comprehend how to correctly use a cliché-- a fairly simple task. This unlikely struggle causes some tension with the audience, as Incongruity is meant to do, and has transformed a dull topic into an engaging situation. This tension grows when BEN slowly becomes frustrated with TRIP inability.

Sketch is most similar to the Narrative Strategy of Story Telling since there is a comprehensible narrative. Therefore, based on our combinations in **4.2**, we want to use Language that creates the perception of realism through rich imagery and specificity. This is why at **II** we do not simply have TRIP say “lost in a rainforest”, but rather “lost *about* a rainforest”. This language matches the type of language commonly used in clichés and thus contributes to the legitimacy of the situation. Another technique that works well with Story Telling is increasing the funniness of related jokes. Since the game is woven throughout the sketch, we can increase the magnitude of incongruity with each beat, for this increases the tension and thus increases the funniness of the joke (Chadwick). Another Incongruity occurs at **II**. This beat doesn’t introduce any new Script Opposition, but rather elevates the Incongruity from the previous beat. Instead of simply stating that he doesn’t know how to use clichés, TRIP has now actually attempted to do so, pitifully unsuccessfully.

Another source of incongruity that is repeated throughout the sketch as a running gag is that other characters (except BEN) support and seem to understand TRIP as he continues to misuse or make-up sayings. A few examples of this are at **III**, **V**, and **XI**. These short incongruities, though, are simply a few words, and do not have a Script Opposition of their own. Rather, they contribute to the overall incongruity of the sketch and SO of daily trifles, specifically, using clichés.

VI and **VII** are good examples of how there can be two Logical Mechanisms in a single joke with one clearly having precedence. In this case, **VI** offers an explanation for TRIP saying “playing my Trump card”. However, because this is not the correct explanation, as revealed in **VII**, there is an element of Surprise in **VII**, and this is funny because it is not the reasonable explanation offered in **VI** by BEN. Although there is an element of Surprise in this beat, the major source of comedy is the Deeper Truth within TRIP’s actual explanation. This beat is a joke about Donald Trump and his unconventional popularity in the 2016 United States presidential race. Because the beat is a reference to the political rise of Donald Trump, we have chosen to use the Logical Mechanism of Deeper Truth based on the combinations of **4.1**. This beat will certainly upset supporters of Trump, but for those in opposition, the joke will give them a sense of inclusion and a way to cope with their possible frustration of his popularity. So although Surprise is an element of this beat, it is not the underlying source of the humor. Therefore, we were successful in our implementation of the theory and pairing Politics with a Deeper Truth. This joke, though, even has another component.

In this beat, there is also the Script Opposition of authority, for Donald Trump, a successful businessman and politician, is certainly a figure of authority and prestige. This beat, in compliance with the combinations in **4.1**, utilizes the Logical Mechanism of Superiority to increase the funniness. In addition to a Deeper Truth, this beat is clearly poking fun at Donald Trump’s controversial speaking habits and in doing so effectively allows the audience to take part in judging his actions. Although there are multiple Script Oppositions and Logical Mechanisms at play in this single beat, we are not concerned with the Surprise LM because it is not at the forefront of the humor. As for the SOs of Politics and Authority present in the joke, we have paired them with the appropriate LMs

of Deeper Truth and Superiority, respectively, and we have thus successfully implemented the theory into this beat.

In **IX**, we return to the game of the sketch, for the SO and LM are Daily Trifles (misusing clichés) and Incongruity, respectively. It is important to note, though, that this Incongruity is a variation on what has occurred previously. In other beats, such as **II** and **VI**, TRIP is using sayings that don't exist. However, in **IX**, he is using a real, common saying, but this time the Incongruity lies with the context in which the saying was used; it makes no sense. Varying the ways that the game of a sketch is carried out, especially with Incongruity, is extremely useful, for it keeps the LM fresh and prevents the beats from becoming repetitive and predictable (Chadwick). Also, in this case, it demonstrates growth by TRIP, for he has taken BEN's feedback from **VIII**, and has attempted to make an adjustment. The Incongruity takes place when he does so unsuccessfully by using a completely irrelevant cliché.

In **XIII**, we have a beat that veers from the game of the scene a little bit. Similar to **VII**, this humor is not solely based in Incongruity and Daily Trifles (misusing clichés), for we are trying to take our main story, or game, and add as many jokes as we can. This technique is useful for story telling, and can be thought of as putting ornaments on a Christmas tree (Birbiglia). The Script Opposition here is technology--more specifically, technology that doesn't work the way it's supposed to. Therefore, based on the combinations of **4.1**, we have used the Logical Mechanism of Hostility. This beat is set up by the previous malfunctions of technology of **VIII**. Then, in **XIII** we see that the technology works for TRIP, whereas it didn't work for BEN. This is certainly a relatable source of frustration, for technology often appears to have grudges for a single person. To add to the Hostility of BEN, the cases in which the technology worked improperly were reasonable instances in which technology should work--but didn't. In order to elevate the tension of the story and the sketch for comedic effect (Chadwick), the third and final confrontation with technology of **XIII** involves an unrealistic task for the technology to complete. Yet, the technology fulfills the task, which causes to BEN to lash out in anger for a humorous conclusion to the technology conflict.

In **XIII**, we return to the primary game of the sketch by pairing Daily Trifles with Incongruity. Once again, though, we have varied the way in which the Incongruity takes place. Making an attempt to use BEN's advice from **XIII**, TRIP tries a phrase that is relevant to the situation. However, the incongruity takes place when the phrase is overly specific and is simply a summary of what is happening.

In **XVI**, we again divert from the principal Logical Mechanism, or game, of the sketch. Instead of Incongruity, **XVI** is a joke about Inferiority. In **XVI**, TRIP is expressing his confusion and inability to master such a simple skill. This character has already demonstrated his inferiority by repeatedly failing to, despite the help afforded to him, complete an easy task. Therefore, TRIP is an easy target, for the work of bringing him down a peg has already been done. Crudely, TRIP is already down, and now we just have to kick him. Because the audience already agrees that this character is sub-par (in some regard), and the SO is Inferiority, we comply with the combinations from **4.1** and employ the Logical Mechanism of Superiority. Jokes of Superiority almost always have

a Target, and in this beat, TRIP is the Target. Following the guidelines of **4.3**, we have placed the Target, TRIP, whose unique characteristic is his inability to successfully use clichés, in a Situation that accentuates this characteristic. TRIP is in a social environment, surrounded by people who can easily use clichés, and the topic of conversation has been directed towards his unique characteristic. If the sketch instead recounted a conversation about sports, or movies, or the intricate workings of a cow's digestive track, TRIP's unique characteristic might not have surfaced, and the sketch would prove to be quite unfunny. This Situation thus allows the Target to be subject to a joke of Superiority in which he is overwhelmed by the simple instructions of how to properly use a common saying. This relatively harmless frustration gives the chance for the audience to laugh at the Target, and acts as a release of the tension built up by his repeated acts of Inferiority. This beat not only makes apparent the strong relationship between Target and Situation, but also the successful pairing of the SO and LM of Inferiority and Superiority, respectively.

From **xvii** to **xviii**, the Logical Mechanism returns to, once again, Incongruity. Here, we are reaching the conclusion of the sketch, and so the aforementioned elevation of the Incongruity reaches a maximum, with TRIP saying literal nonsense-words.

In **xx**, the sketch ends. A good comedic sketch typically ends with a **button**, a final funny thought that leaves the audience with something to laugh about. Otherwise, the ending of the sketch may unclear, awkward, and can detract from the overall comedic impact of the work (Chadwick). The button here is about authority, for the sketch ends with an insult to BEN, the leading authority in this sketch. BEN secures his position of authority by being the one to originally give a correct example of a cliché, and then continues to give advice to TRIP on how to also do so. BEN begins to get frustrated with TRIP's innocent struggles, and eventually bursts out in response to **xviii**. TRIP is more likely to be sympathized with than BEN, and so he is both an Authority, and slightly disliked. Therefore, based on the combinations of **4.1**, we use Superiority as the LM in the button of the sketch. The joke doesn't necessarily prey on a unique characteristic of BEN, but rather is a simply name-call. This joke still works, though, because of BEN's position of Authority, and the reversal that occurs when TRIP, who is obviously lacking intelligence, calls BEN "an idiot". Although the overarching LM for the sketch is Incongruity, this specific beat, the button, employs Superiority because the SO is Authority.

5.4 Stand-Up Comedy

- I.** Who's the jerk that started the habit of clapping?
- II.** You don't even realize what you're doing, do you?
- III.** You violently smash your meaty hands together to create an irritating, high-pitched noise...And this is supposed to signify something *positive!*
- IV.** I guess this moron got cocky, though, because he went out and came up with a new product:...Standing Ovation.
- V.** This person's sitting in the front of a Rolling Stones concert and thinks "y'know what? I enjoyed that so much, I'm going to prove to these people that my legs work." And how did it catch on? It's not like someone in the back row saw him and thought "whoa, is that guy sustaining the weight of his own body? He must've really liked the show."
- VI.** Recently, I tried to reverse-engineer the process at a concert: I really hated the show so I decided to lie down. I looked up "ovation's" definition and it is a "sustained and enthusiastic show of appreciation".
- VII.** So really it's about: how much energy are you willing to expend for the performers? But it's not that hard to stand up. So, for a healthy person, a standing ovation isn't all that impressive. If it's all about the energy you put in to it, a standing ovation actually seems kinda mocking.
- VIII.** "Oh my legs are so exhausted just standing here".
- IX.** If they were really impressed, they'd maybe do some jumping jacks or a little jog. If everyone's doing laps in the audience,...that's a killer show.

5.5 Explaining the Implementation: Stand-Up Comedy

The routine starts with a question about clapping. From the outset of **I**, it is clear that the SO is Daily life, for applause is certainly a dull topic that most people are most likely not concerned with. Since the SO is about something that typically receives little attention, we chose the Logical Mechanism of Incongruity, as based on the combinations in **4.1**. As with the comedic sketch, it is useful to vary the ways in which the Logical Mechanism is employed. In the first case of Incongruity, **III**, we see that the comedian is trying to shed light on some apparent incongruity. To do so, the comedian juxtaposes the negative description with its seemingly contradictory positive characterization.

The strong imagery takes on an irritated tone, and conveys emotion with the clearly unsettling diction of "meaty" and "irritating". It makes sense for the routine to employ this type of Language, for the Narrative Strategy is clearly Observational. This routine is structured in a way that is simply a discussion of a topic, rather than a plot-based Story or a bunch of One-Liners. As suggested in **4.2**, since we are using an Observational NS, in order to maximize the funniness of the joke, we should also use Language that has strong, emotional imagery and demonstrates the comedian's investment in the topic. It should be noted that the AS in this joke would be that the audience must be familiar with the action of clapping. For otherwise, the harsh description of the act might confuse an audience and might even cause them to think of the Script Opposition as intense topic, instead of a mundane trifle of daily life. This mistake could effect the funniness of the Logical Mechanism, and thus we see how AS is relevant to the comprehension and eventual appreciation of a joke.

In **IV**, we introduce a new LM, for there is also a new SO. Instead of focusing on the SO of clapping as in **III**, in **IV**, the focus is directed to the person who “invented” the action of clapping. In assigning this role, we have designated this person as an authority figure, and as demonstrated by the emotionally spurred Language of **III**, this is an authority we do not particularly care for. Therefore, in compliance with the combinations of **4.1**, it makes sense for the Logical Mechanism to be that of Superiority. There is not too much of a joke here, but the name calling of “moron” and “cocky”, if delivered correctly, is worth comedic value.

In **V**, we return to the overarching Script Opposition of Daily Trifles (more specifically, applause), and thus also return to the respective Logical Mechanism of Incongruity. We previously mentioned that it is useful to vary the use of the LM, and here, as opposed to explaining an Incongruous phenomenon as in **III**, in **V**, we are offering an Incongruous explanation as to how or why something mundane occurs. It is ridiculous to think that someone consciously used their leg-muscles to demonstrate their satisfaction (as is humorously proposed in **V**), but the joke works well because the topic is otherwise quite uninteresting, and so this Incongruity does not take over the joke.

It is also interesting to note that this part of the joke, **V**, is told in more of a Story-Telling NS than the surrounding Observational style. Therefore, the LA should reflect this change based on the combinations in **4.2**. Story-Telling is most effective when the Language is specific to reveal validity, and to ensure that the funniness, or in this case, the Incongruity, is escalated. The former characteristic is successfully implemented through specifying the band and the character’s locations. The latter characteristic is successfully implemented through the escalation of the Incongruity, for it is more unlikely for someone to accurately interpret someone’s illogical act than it is for someone to simply commit the act. As a contrast to **I**, in this case, we would not consider the phrase “reverse-engineer” AS. Although its meaning may not be easily understood in this context, it is not considered AS because it is not imperative to the comprehension of the joke, for the phrase is explained with the statement “I really hated the show so I decided to lie down”. Since the comprehension is not obstructed with, the joke’s funniness remains unharmed.

We now, in **VI**, have another variation on the LM theme of Incongruity. Here, an illogical plan is set in action where doing the opposite of something is predicted to have the opposite meaning.

In **VIII** we once again see the Incongruity being used with the Daily topic in such a way that depicts a relatively ridiculous situation: someone giving a standing ovation as a mocking gesture. The Language used to express sarcasm, “just” and contribute to the overall tone of **VIII** makes the joke more effective. The simple word “just” gives **VIII** emotion, and as pointed out in **4.2**, this helps to maximize the joke’s comedic impact.

The final joke, **IX**, repeats the LM of offering an Incongruous and unlikely situation that involves the SO of Daily Life (applause).

It should be recalled that these combinations of KRs do ensure that a joke is funny, but rather maximize the potential funniness of a joke. Without these combinations, the joke could still work, but wouldn’t be as funny.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research

This project set out with the objective to determine way to manipulate the components of a joke in order to maximize its funniness. The GTVH did an excellent job of breaking down a joke into components, the six Knowledge Resources. We examined these KRs and attempted to find some relationships between the six KRs that would allow us to understand in what ways they interact such that a joke can reach its maximum potential funniness. We came up with a theory, applied it, and analyzed our application of it. However, due to the nature of the project, there was no room to do experimental testing of our hypothesis. It would be useful to create a short-film of the performance of each implementation as well as control implementations, that is, where the theory was neglected. Next, all four films could be shown to audiences for them to rate the comedic value of each film.

A similar recommendation for further research would be to find jokes with various combinations of KRs, as related to our thesis, and ask audiences to rate the jokes' funniness. This would allow us to see if our combinations are in fact conducive to humor or not. It would be necessary to ensure each KR was isolated so that the changing of one KR did not affect the effect of another (Attardo). It would also be imperative to, as mentioned in the Introduction, to make sure the experiment is testing for the humor of a joke, and not simply laughter because laughter does not always stem from a source of humor.

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