Humor as Discourse: A Schema-Theoretic Approach

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要旨

　本来、ユーモアと呼ばれる出来事のひとつひとつは、それに関わる人間（とりわけ受け手）の主観やそれをとりまく状況に大きく左右される現象であるのに、ユーモア理論研究において目下主流である「不調和理論」は、ユーモアを専ら研究者としての客観的な視点から分析してきたため、そこに含まれる動的な過程を捉えきれなかったきらいがある。本稿はこの反省を踏まえ、ユーモアの受け手が経験する動的かつ複雑な過程を捉えうる方法の一つとして、Cook (1989, 1994) の「ディスコース」および「スキーマ理論」の概念を用いた主観的視点からのユーモア分析を提案する。このような分析方法の導入は、ユーモア理論研究に抜本的な変化をもたらすとは言わないまでも、ユーモアという現象を考える上で従来見過ごされてきた、あるいは当然のこととして殊更注目されなかった部分に焦点を当てることによって、ユーモア理論のさらなる改良に貢献すると考えられる。

Key words: Humor, The subject's viewpoint, Context, Discourse, Schema theory

1. Introduction

　　　　Generally speaking, a researcher in other academic fields need not ask such a basic question as what her/his object of research is. Humor researchers, on the other hand, have long been troubled by the difficulty of defining humor itself, since it is by nature an elusive concept. However, recent decades have witnessed at least a certain degree of convergence in humor studies, one which is most evident in the emergence of a mainstream humor theory: incongruity theory. While there still exist some other competing theories such as superiority theories (e.g. Koestler [1964] 1966; Gruner 1978, [1997] 2000) and release theories (e.g. Freud [1905] 1991; cf. Matte 2001), incongruity-based theories seem to have found much wider acceptance among humor researchers, so much so that it has even been claimed that the argument of incongruity-based theories "is universally accepted in every serious analysis of the subject" (Perlmutter 2002: 155). Considering this predominance of incongruity-based theories, it seems

impossible to deny that the cognition of some form of incongruity plays a significant part in any humor event. On the other hand, however, this does not mean that there is no room for refinement of incongruity-based approaches to humor.

A possible weakness of incongruity-based theories, which has apparently begun to be recognized by some researchers, is that most incongruity theorists neglect the subject's point of view, tending rather to analyze examples of humor events from the serious, analytical viewpoint of the researcher (Latta 1999: 129-135). The prevalence of this "objective" (or at least, non-subjective) viewpoint is evidenced by two noticeable tendencies in humor analyses based more or less on incongruity theories. First, most incongruity-based humor analyses often take examples only from genres which are conventionally characterized by a specific form and considered to deliver some type of humor, such as set-piece jokes, limericks and comedies. Closely related to this is the second tendency, that of incongruity-based analyses to detach their examples from context (sometimes with appropriate justification; see Attardo 1994: 196-197) or at least lay little emphasis on it. These two tendencies show that most incongruity-based approaches depend on a conventional and objective judgment of the humorous quality of their examples, and allow in as little subjectivity as possible. The resulting analyses inevitably tend to shed an objective light on visible textual features of the examples (including both form and meaning), even though incongruity is in itself an invisible, and to some extent subjective, cognitive concept.

The importance of the subject's viewpoint is actually recognized by some incongruity theorists themselves; Forabosco, for example, argues that "incongruity is most definitely described not as a characteristic of the stimulus as such but as the outcome of the stimulus-subject relationship" (Forabosco 1992: 54), while Oring observes that "humor is not a structure of ideas but the perception of such structure" (Oring 1995: 230). Nevertheless, the fact is that "most joke analysts ... have made little effort to explore [the subject's point of view] (as opposed to merely imagine it)" (Oring 1999: 463). This may at least partially be a natural consequence of the fact that many recent incongruity-related approaches to humor draw on linguistics (e.g. Nash 1985; Raskin 1985; Attardo and Raskin 1991; Chiaro 1992), a field whose research object, language, usually has some visible form and is thus easily analyzed objectively in formal terms. However, it seems that there are two more important reasons which are directly related to the lack of attention to the subject's viewpoint. On the one hand, it is undeniable that there is an inevitable dilemma for humor researchers: it is virtually impossible to enjoy humor as a relaxed subject and at the same time analyze it as a serious researcher. On the other hand, it is an extremely difficult task to do justice to the full complexity of the contextual factors which surround a subject involved in a humor event.

Considering all this, what is needed for incongruity-based humor analyses is a conceptual tool which can successfully deal with both textual features on the stimulus side and contextual factors on the subject side at the same time. As a possible solution to this problem, this paper presents concepts from discourse analysis and schema theory borrowed from Cook (1989; 1994). The discourse approach presented here will hopefully incorporate the subject's viewpoint into the analysis of humor events, and suggest a possible direction for the refinement of incongruity-based humor theories.

2. Discourse and schema theory

2.1 The concept of discourse

The concept of discourse is most clearly captured by contrast with that of "text", which is defined by Cook as "the linguistic forms in a stretch of language, and those interpretations of them which do not vary with context" (1994: 24). In opposition, discourse "is a stretch of language in use, taking on meaning in context for its users, and perceived by them as purposeful, meaningful, and connected" (*Ibid.*: 25).

There are two significant points which make text and discourse different from each other. First discourse is differentiated from text in that the former takes into account the existence of a user (or a reader, as far as a written text is concerned), whose perception is a significant factor in defining the quality of a discourse. In this sense the contrast between text and discourse corresponds to the phenomenological dichotomy between autonomous objects, which exist in the world in their own right, and heteronomous objects, which only come into being when engaged by an observing consciousness (Stockwell 2002: 135). Discourse analysis must keep both in sight: it focuses not only on what the formal linguistic qualities of a text are, but on how a text is interpreted and mentally represented by a reader.

Secondly, this contrast relies heavily on the concept of "context", a term which might be interpreted in various ways. Cook defines it in a broad sense as "a form of *knowledge* of the world" (Cook 1994: 24-25; my emphasis), including not only knowledge of factors outside the text under consideration (e.g. paralinguistic features, other texts, the physical situation, the social and cultural situation, and interlocutors), but also knowledge of other parts of the text under consideration, or "co-text". Defined as a form of knowledge, context cannot exist independently of a reader: it constitutes a part of her/his mental reality in processing a discourse. In short, discourse is the complex whole constituted by the mental representation of text and context.

2.2 Schema theory and knowledge of a reader

Discourse analysis lays great emphasis on the perception and knowledge of the reader. As

such it needs some framework which can successfully deal with the knowledge structure in the mind of a reader. A possible framework is provided by schema theory, which Cook (1994) draws on in his arguments.

Schema theory was first put forward in the Gestalt psychology of the 1920s to explain how people deal with new experiences. The general principles of the theory can be summarized as follows: (a) Schemata are "mental representations of typical instances"; (b) Schemata are "used in discourse processing to predict and make sense of the particular instance which the discourse describes"; (c) "[T]he mind, stimulated either by key linguistic items in the text (often referred to as 'triggers' …) or by the context, activates a schema, and uses it to make sense of the discourse" (Cook 1994: 11). In terms of schema theory, a text can be seen as a new experience, which a reader tries to comprehend by comparison with her/his knowledge of typical instances accumulated from her/his experiences in the past. Thus reading a text is not a mere mechanical process of decoding, but rather a dynamic process of active interaction between text, context, and mind.

2.3 Kinds of schemata

Cook (1994) assumes the existence of three different kinds of schemata, i.e. language schemata, text schemata, and world schemata, which work cooperatively in discourse processing, creating the mental representation of text and context.

(a) Language schemata: First of all, understanding a text is possible only if a reader has some knowledge of language. Language schemata consist of this background knowledge of language, and include knowledge of those elements which are needed to process linguistic elements of text, such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and graphology. For example, a language schema for the word *Archimedes* would be structured as shown in the illustration below (S(L):THING = a language schema named "THING"; [ ] = a value instantiated in text; PHN = phonological or phonetic value; SYN = syntactic role; SEM = meaning(s)).

S(L): ARCHIMEDES
PHN: [ɑrkəmɪdiːz]
SYN: [NOUN] ...
SEM: [Archimedes]

Figure 1. The language schema of ARCHIMEDES.

Language schemata thus enable a reader to deal with formal aspects of text in an analytic, bottom-up way.

(b) Text schemata: Analytic, bottom-up processing is not, however, the only way of reading a text: rather, discourse processing is often helped by some synthetic knowledge which can deal with a text in a top-down way. A typical reader knows that most texts can be classified into types, each of which may be characterized in terms of some of the following aspects (Cook 1989: 99): sender/receiver; function; situation; physical form; title; overt introduction; pre-sequence; internal structure; cohesion; grammar; vocabulary; pronunciation; graphology. This is more clearly understood through the fact that there are a great number of ordinary words referring to text types, or, more casually, genres, such as *diary*, *encyclopedia*, *newspaper*, *poetry*, etc. This background knowledge about text types is contained in text schemata, which cooperate with language schemata in creating the mental representation of a text.

For instance, an encyclopedia is a text type which is typically written with the specific aim of giving information about every branch of knowledge. The text schema for ENCYCLOPEDIA would be as in Figure 2 (S(T):THING = a text schema named "THING"; ( ) = default values (prescriptively activated but not instantiated yet, and which can be overridden by other values if demanded); STR = internal structure; FNC = function).

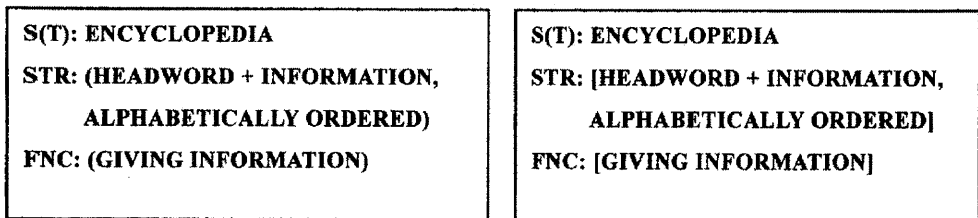| S(T): ENCYCLOPEDIA
STR: (HEADWORD + INFORMATION,
       ALPHABETICALLY ORDERED)
FNC: (GIVING INFORMATION)
	S(T): ENCYCLOPEDIA
	STR: [HEADWORD + INFORMATION,
	       ALPHABETICALLY ORDERED]
	FNC: [GIVING INFORMATION]

Figure 2. The text schema of ENCYCLOPEDIA activated in two different ways.

In actual discourse processing, a text schema might be activated in one of two ways. One is when, for some reason such as a clearly defined context or a clear declaration of intention (e.g. the title), a reader knows or is informed of the nature of a text in advance. In this case the activated schema is at first like the one on the left in Figure 2. It should be noted that parentheses are used instead of brackets. These express "default values," which are prescriptively activated but not instantiated yet. After activation, the reader goes on processing, comparing the actual text with the default values of the text schema.

The other kind of activation occurs when, not knowing the nature of a text in advance, a reader of a text can accumulate enough information about the structure or function (or both) of the text to judge what type of text it is. In this way s/he activates a text schema whose values have already been instantiated, as on the right in Figure 2.

(c) World schemata: Although language schemata and text schemata cooperatively create

a mental representation of a text in a reader's mind, this representation cannot yet be called a discourse, since it has not yet been completely contextualized for the specific reader. A text is processed into a discourse only when it is related to the world knowledge of a reader, that is, to her/his world schemata.

Just as in the case of text schemata, there are two ways of activation, both illustrated in Figure 3.


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+--------------------------------+      +--------------------------------------+
|  S(W): BREAKFAST               |      |  +--------------------------------+  |
|       (S(W): MORNING)          |      |  |  S(W): MORNING               |  |  |
|       (S(W): EATING)           |      |  +--------------------------------+  |
|       (S(W): LIGHT MEAL)       |      |  +--------------------------------+  |
+--------------------------------+      |  |  S(W): EATING                |  |  |
                                        |  +--------------------------------+  |
                                        |  +--------------------------------+  |
                                        |  |  S(W): LIGHT MEAL            |  |  |
                                        |  +--------------------------------+  |
                                        |             S(W): BREAKFAST          |
                                        +--------------------------------------+
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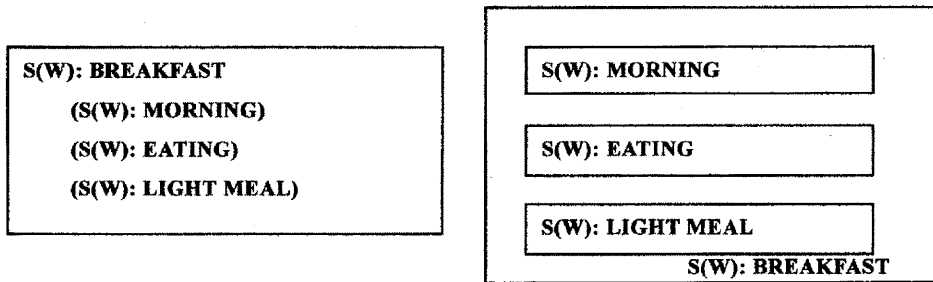
Figure 3. Illustrations of the two ways the world schema of BREAKFAST is activated.

For example, if the word *breakfast* is received, it is usually recognized as referring to an event which occurs in the morning, and includes the behavior of eating something, typically of a relatively small quantity, etc. This can be paraphrased in terms of schemata by saying that the world schema of BREAKFAST, which has been activated by the language schema of BREAKFAST, contains as default values other schemata like MORNING, EATING, LIGHT MEAL, etc., as on the left of the illustration above. These schemata are expected to be instantiated in the text, but, as the discourse is processed, a receiver might find, for example, that the event of eating does not occur, or if it does occur, that the quantity of the meal might be more than expected.

The right half of the illustration covers the case where the set of instantiated world schemata activates another schema which can give unity and coherence to all of them. In this way (1) would be recognized as a breakfast scene even if that was not stated overtly.

(1) I woke up at seven forty. I made some toast and a cup of tea. I listened to the news. And I left for work at about eight thirty. (Cook 1994: 12)

It should be understood that, although in both examples the world schema BREAKFAST binds all the others and thus there is a hierarchical relationship between them, this is not a relationship which is steadily determined. For example, if the presented schemata are RISING SUN, ALARM CLOCK and BREAKFAST, the schema MORNING is an adequate one to include all the others, and thus on this occasion MORNING becomes "higher" than BREAKFAST. The basis of the relationship between schemata is their association of meaning, which can be changed

flexibly in different contexts, and in this way a network (or networks) of meaning is formed among world schemata.

2.4 Advantages and limitations of schema theory

From the viewpoint of schema theory it is natural enough that a text can be perceived as different discourses by different individuals in different situations, simply because of the different schemata possessed by those individuals. However, it is not the case that Cook's schema-theoretic approach lays exclusive emphasis on the differences between readers and neglects the formal aspects of a text: rather he fully realizes the necessity of paying careful attention to the form, since that is what triggers the perception of a reader. This is shown by his emphasis on the existence of language schemata and discourse schemata, which are directly connected to the form of a text. Thus his schema-theoretic approach is neither purely form-oriented nor purely mind-oriented: it is an attempt to capture the fact that the meaning of a text emerges for a reader not as a static product but rather through a dynamic process of form-mind interplay.

It is not surprising that schema theory should have become a major conceptual framework in the analysis of literary texts (see Stockwell 2002: 75-89), since schema theory can readily handle both those textual features which have traditionally attracted academic attention, and the controversially different interpretations of literary critics. By the same token, the concept of discourse seems to be applicable also to the analysis of humor, which can be characterized both by its peculiar structural features and by "the high degree of individual variability in its perception" (Forabosco 1992: 56). The resulting analyses are not analyses of humorous texts but rather of humorous discourses, thus reflecting the subject's viewpoint and the contextual factors in play in any specific encounter with a text, both of which have been relatively neglected in the past.

It must be admitted that there is at least one limitation in this discourse approach: the analyses can only be done through introspection or retrospection, and thus it is not perfectly certain that the analyses directly reflect the real-time insider experience of a subject. Although this means that the discourse approach is not exempt from the inevitable conflict between the subject's and the researcher's perspectives mentioned in the introduction, the approach might nevertheless be able to provide insights not otherwise available despite this methodological limitation.

3. Schema-theoretic analyses
3.1 Limericks

As an illustration of schema-theoretic analysis it seems better first to analyze a relatively

small piece of humorous discourse such as (2), a limerick:

(2) Archimedes, the early truth-seeker,

Leapt out of his bath, and cried "Eureka!"

And ran half a mile,

Wearing only a smile,

Thus becoming the very first streaker. (Parrot 1984: 69)

Conventionally, in the field of humor studies, limericks have been dealt with mainly from the linguistic/stylistic point of view, with most attention paid to their formal or textual structure (e.g. Nash 1985: 52-53, Chiaro 1992: 59-60). In contrast, the analysis here tries to explain not what textual features of limericks are humorous, but how limericks are recognized as humorous by a subject.

This example (2) was found in a book titled *The Penguin Book of Limericks*. I was already familiar with limericks and, both from previous experience and from the content of other parts of the book, I had expected (2) to deal with some humorous topic. In other words, the contextual information was salient enough to activate the text schema of LIMERICK, as illustrated in Figure 4.

S(T): LIMERICK

STR: (PHN: (xx/xx/xx/ rhyme a

xx/xx/xx/ rhyme a

xx/xx/ rhyme b

xx/xx/ rhyme b

xx/xx/xx/ rhyme a))

FNC: (HUMOR)

Figure 4. A text schema activated before reading (2).

As usual, the first line used the characteristic meter of the limerick to announce the topic, in this case Archimedes. The second line then told me that (2) was about a famous episode in the life of Archimedes: when he found "the Archimedes principle" in the public bath, he was so happy that he leapt out of the bath and ran home naked. At the end of the second line, the encounter with the word "Eureka", was a pleasurable one, giving me a feeling of pre-established harmony: the coming of this word had already been at least to some extent expected, since "Eureka" is one of the words most closely associated with "Archimedes", and this expectation had been further strengthened by the appearance at the end of the first line of the word "seeker", as a rhyme for "Eureka". On the other hand, however, the coming of "Eureka" was still a little surprising, making me notice the ingenuity of the author in having so easily found a rhyme for "Eureka",

which seems at first sight to be a difficult word to rhyme with. The activation of the schemata so far is roughly shown in Figure 5.
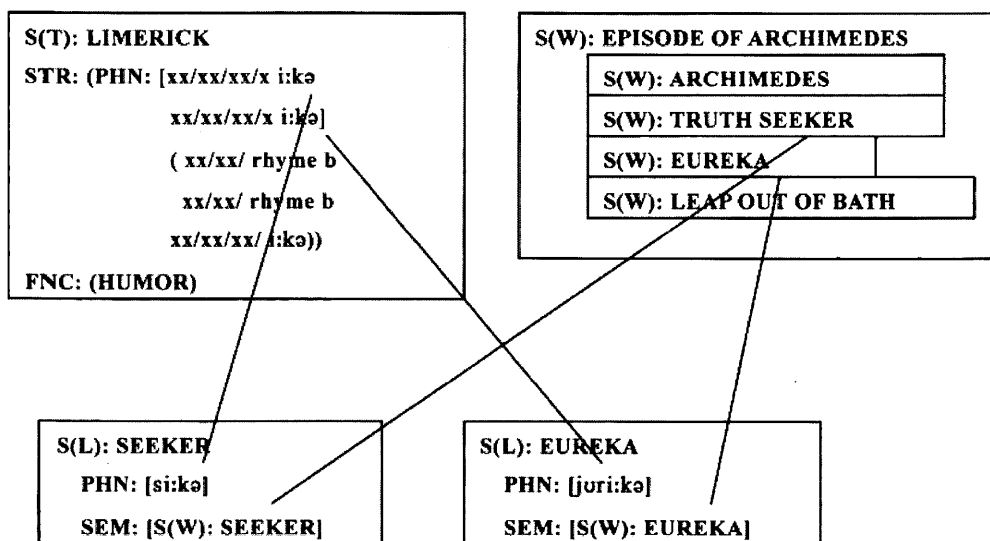

Figure 5. Schemata activated by the end of the second line of (2).

The next two lines went smoothly: the content was not at odds with the famous episode, the meter was the one typical of limericks. However, this consistency made me look forward to the coming of some pleasurably unpredictable punchline.

As expected, the story had a funny ending: an episode in the life of a great philosopher had changed into a ridiculous story of a streaker. Nevertheless, this is not actually a groundless change of topic, but can be justified in at least three ways. First, the last, vulgar word perfectly met the formal requirement of the rhyme scheme. Limericks often use this technique: they try to upset the expectation aroused by the rhyme scheme by using a word as unlikely as possible, while still not violating the rules of rhyme. Secondly, the last line is not unnatural in terms of the story: it is at least supposed to be true that Archimedes ran down the street without wearing any clothes. The point is that the episode can be told both in terms of the greatness of Archimedes as a discoverer of his principle, and in terms of his strange behavior. It can easily be realized that the latter is more appropriate in terms of humor.

The third and last point is that, as I said at the beginning of the previous paragraph, the coming of the funny ending was "expected", because I had already activated the text schema of LIMERICK. This does not mean that I could predict every detail of the delivery, but only that I expected the text to be humorous in some way I did not yet realize. A similar thing can also be said of the other two points mentioned above: humor often meets the expectation of a

receiver in as unexpected a way as possible. This is the situation other humor researchers have often attempted to express by using phrases such as "consistently inconsistent or inconsistently consistent" (Mulkay 1988: 219) or "a congruent incongruity" (Forabosco 1992: 59).

In the light of the description above, the discourse processing can be summarized as having the following three aspects, as illustrated in Figure 6.

(i) The expectation of rhyming was met.

(ii) The topic was changed from the famous episode in the life of Archimedes to the story of a streaker.
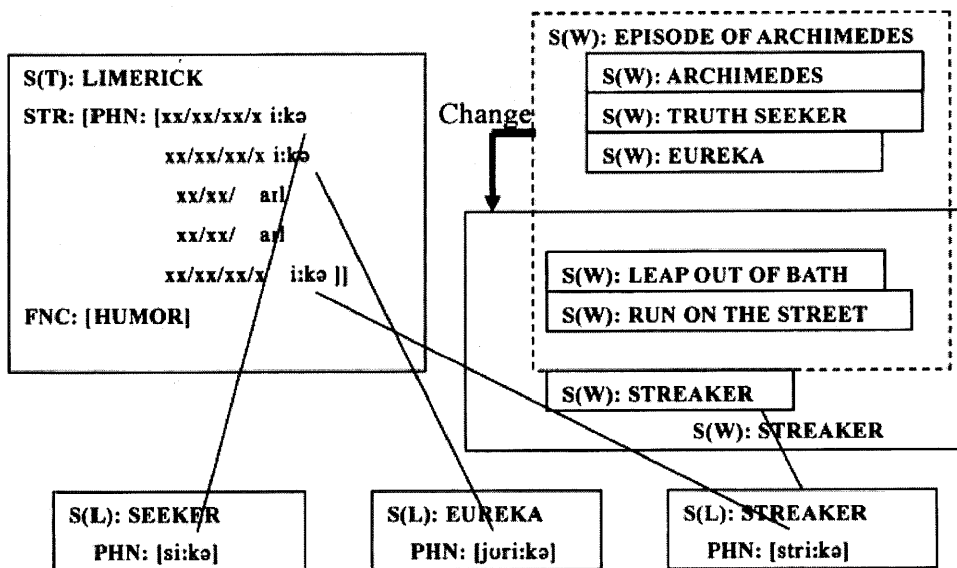
(iii) The expectation of humor was met.

Figure 6. Discourse processing involved in reading (2).

This schema-theoretic analysis does not make a revolutionary addition to previous incongruity-based theories, but rather confirms their argument concerning the consistent inconsistency or congruent incongruity involved in humor. On the other hand, the present analysis does illuminate an aspect of a humor event which has previously been ignored or at least taken for granted: i.e. the "setup" stage (Attardo 1997: 411), or the process involved in forming the subject's expectations. To be more specific, previous incongruity-based approaches would have analyzed the humor event of reading (2) with much of their attention attracted to (ii), which could have been interpreted as a textual element of incongruity between a serious topic and a ludicrous one; (i) and (iii) would have not been emphasized because they are "not funny *per se*" (Attardo 1997: 411). However, the description above stresses that the three main

cognitive changes occurred not as independent processes separable from each other, but as closely interrelated processes which integratively constituted the one specific humor event: the topical change was recognized as humorous because it at the same time met the subject's (i.e. my) expectations of rhyming and of humorous content aroused by the activated text schema of LIMERICK. The schema-theoretic analysis captures and visualizes this form-mind interactive process from the subject's viewpoint.

3.2 Parody

The advantage of the schema-theoretic approach may more clearly be seen in a detailed description of the discourse processing involved in reading a slightly longer piece of humor.

(3) "A Llyric of the Llama"

  Behold how from her lair the youthful llama

    Llopes forth and llightly scans the llandscape o'er.

With llusty heart she llooks upon llife's drama,

    Relying on her llate-llearnt worldly llore.

But llo! Some llad, armed with a yoke infama

    Soon llures her into llowly llabor's cause;

Her wool is llopped to weave into pajama,

    And llanguidly she llearns her Gees and Haws.

My children, heed this llesson from all llanguishing young llamas,

    If you would lllive with lllatitude, avoid each llluring lllay:

And do not lllightly lllleave, I beg, your llllonsome, lllloving mammas,

    And llllast of allll, don't spelllll your name in such a sillllly way.

                         (Phillips 1999: 105-106)

This example (3) was found in a book titled *The Random House Treasury of Humorous Verse*. Thus, just as in the case of (2), I was already expecting some humorous content before I had started to read. The title of this verse, *A Llyric of the Llama*, also aroused my expectation of something humorous: it seemed clear that this title was playing with the unusual spelling of the word *llama*. Thus I was encouraged to read this "llyric" in a playful way. The activated text schemata might be illustrated as in Figure 7.
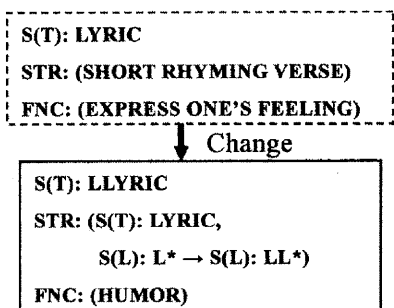
```
S(T): LYRIC
STR: (SHORT RHYMING VERSE)
FNC: (EXPRESS ONE'S FEELING)
```
↓ Change
```
S(T): LLYRIC
STR: (S(T): LYRIC,
        S(L): L* → S(L): LL*)
FNC: (HUMOR)
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Figure 7. Text schemata activated by the title of (3).

In terms of the word play, the first two stanzas went just as expected: another "l" was added to most of the words which usually start with "l". Actually, after eight lines of this I had begun to lose interest in the content; probably because of the impression made by the title, my efforts were devoted to not missing the parts where some humorous word play would appear. However, I still felt the content of the first two stanzas to be funny in a different way: I noticed that this "llyric" was not in fact a lyric. Rather, it had a taste of a different kind of discourse: i.e. the fable, a story about an animal from which a moral is drawn, even though it could clearly be seen from the way the author was playing with the words starting with "l" that (3) was not intended to inculcate a serious moral. This shift between text schemata can be illustrated as in Figure 8.

```
S(T): THE FABLE
FNC: (MORAL)
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S(T): LLYRIC
STR: (S(T): LYRIC,
        S(L): L* → S(L): LL*)
FNC: (HUMOR)
```
↓ Change
```
S(T): LLYRIC
STR: ((S(T): THE FABLE),
        [S(L): L* → S(L): LL*])
FNC: (MOCK MORAL, HUMOR)
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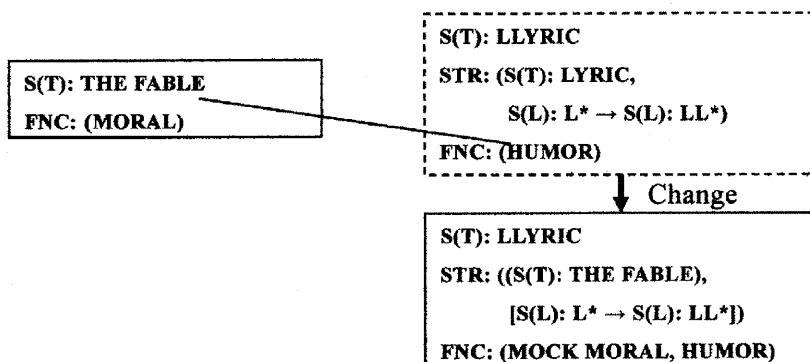
Figure 8. Text schemata activated by the end of the second stanza of (3).

Then came the last stanza, which proved to completely meet the expectations aroused in the first two stanzas, i.e. the expectation of humorous word play and the expectation that there would be some (mock) moral. Even at first sight, it was clear that there were an unusual number of "l" s in the last stanza. While reading through it, the number of extra "l"s attached to words with "l" in the initial position increased one by one in a great escalation. In the last line, even the

words with "l" in the final or medial position began to take an odd form, eventually arriving at a very *silllllly* end. What made the last stanza funnier was that the assumed narrator of this verse (presumably a parent) started to provide some moral lessons to her/his children, regardless of the foolishness of her/his own way of spelling. Thus it became clear that this llyric was mocking the style of didactic verse (i.e. verse which makes a clear moral, instructional point).

The complete discourse processing of (3) is illustrated in Figure 9, and can be summarized as follows:

(i) The operating text schema was gradually changed from that of lyric to that of mock didactic verse.

(ii) My expectation of the word play using the unusual spelling of *llama* was met in an unexpected way: the number of "l"s attached to the words increased in a tremendous escalation.

(iii) The expectations of a mock moral and of humor were met.

S(T): LYRIC
STR: (SHORT RHYMING VERSE)
FNC: (EXPRESS ONE'S FEELING)

↓ Change

S(T): LLYRIC
STR: (S(T): LYRIC,
      S(L): L* → S(L): LL*)
FNC: (HUMOR)

S(T): THE FABLE
FNC: (MORAL)

↓ Change

S(T): LLYRIC
STR: ((S(T): THE FABLE),
      [S(L): L* → S(L): LL*])
FNC: (MOCK MORAL, HUMOR)

S(T): DIDACTIC VERSE
FNC: (MORAL)

↓ Change

S(T): LLYRIC
STR: [S(T): DIDACTIC VERSE,
      S(L): L* → S(L): LL*→ S(L): LLL* → ... → S(L): *LLLLLL*]
FNC: [MOCK MORAL, HUMOR]

Change / Change / Change

S(L): L*   S(L): LL*   S(L): LLL*   • • •   S(L): *LLLLLL*
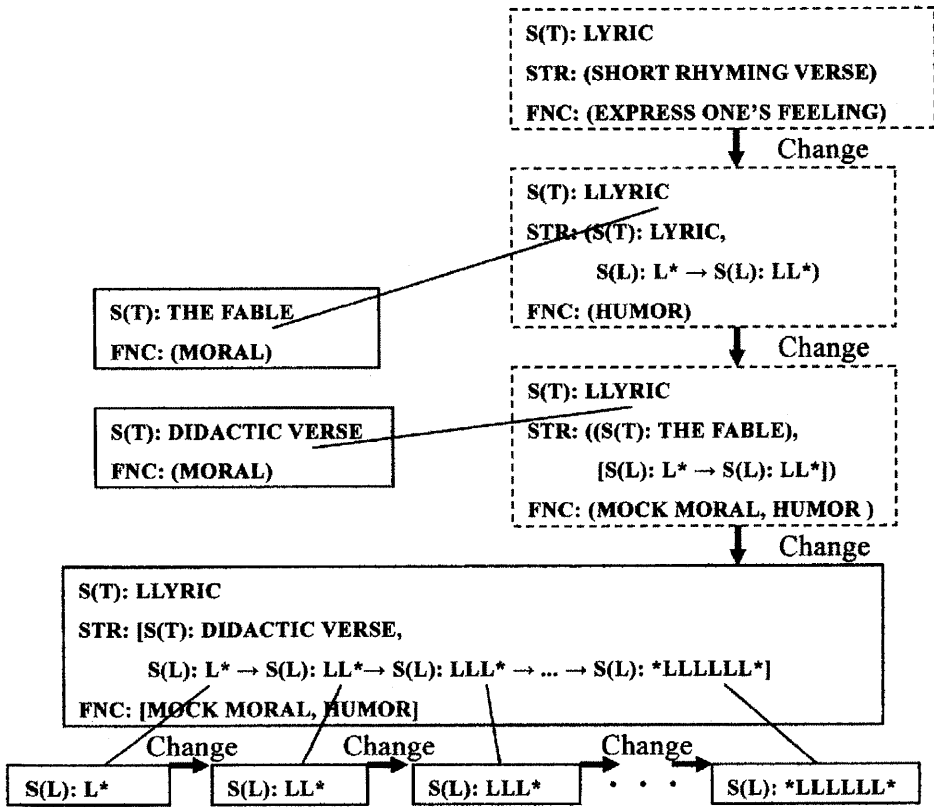
Figure 9. Discourse processing involved in reading (3).

Sequential schematic changes such as (i) and (ii) could not have been fully captured by previous approaches, which have often dealt with examples of humorous discourses as finished products rather than dynamic processes. This again suggests the advantage of incorporating the subject's viewpoint in the analysis of humor.

3.3 A student's work

As mentioned in the introduction, the prevailing view of humorous discourses as finished products has led to a tendency for previous approaches to deal only with examples which are conventionally recognized as humor. The schema-theoretic approach, on the other hand, can readily describe and analyze personal and thus more subject- and context-dependent experiences of humor as well. The following is an example I encountered when I was checking the written assignments of a high-school class studying English as a foreign language in Japan.

(4) "Tragedy"

Charlie gave a nice present to Anne,
who loved Stan,
who was crazy about Beth,
who fell in love with Kenneth,
who was attracted by Kelly,
who was so fond of Charlie.

When this assignment was given to the students, they had not yet got used to my way of teaching, nor was I familiar with the students. Since I wanted to avoid my class being boring, I decided to use some playful material which I thought could be enjoyed by the students. The selected text was "The House that Jack Built", a nursery rhyme famous for its structure, in which the stanzas are made longer and longer by using relative clauses:

This is the cow with the crumpled horn
that tossed the dog
that worried the cat
that killed the rat
that ate the malt
that lay in the house
that Jack built.

The students were directed to make a long sentence using relative clauses as in "The House that Jack Built". This was intended as practice in using relative clauses so that they could come to understand the basic nature of backward modification.

Because of the playfulness of the material, I expected that students would also write

playfully and humorously. However, contrary to my expectation, most of the students wrote their assignment in a serious way. They seemed a little puzzled by the activity, possibly because they might not have been used to thinking of English grammar exercises as an opportunity for play.

As I checked their sheets one by one, mechanically correcting grammatical mistakes, boredom set in. By the time I had checked about twenty sheets, I began to feel sleepy.

In terms of schemata, two points should be noted. First, my expectation of reading some humorous work by the students was upset, which can be seen as a schematic change from the text schema of PLAYFUL WRITING into that of SERIOUS WRITING. Secondly, I started to feel bored with the monotonous activity, which can be expressed as the activation of a world schema BORING WORK. Both are illustrated in Figure 10.
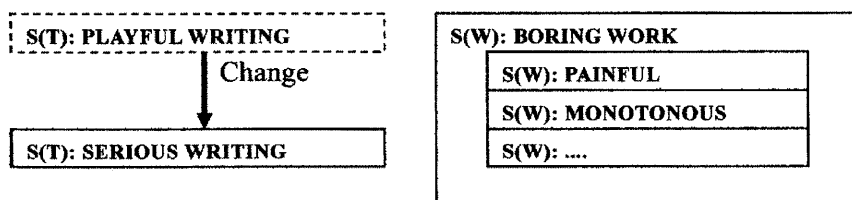

Figure 10. Schemata activated before encountering (4).

In this situation, (4) seemed very refreshing. In fact, it was the first sheet written in a playful way, after about twenty serious ones. (4) was well written (considered as work by a high school student in a foreign language), and the fact that I did not have to correct any mistakes was a relief. The topic, love, also amused me. However, what was most impressive was the student's ingenuity. She had thought of the idea of making the long sentence a complete circle expressing an endless chain of unrequited relationships; it represented, as it were, a love hexagon. Although I had expected to read some humorous work, the cleverness of this exceeded my expectation. In addition, her work completely met the structural requirement of the assignment: i.e. to write a long sentence using relative clauses as in "The House that Jack Built". She succeeded in creating an attractive piece of work without violating the rule at all.

The cognitive shifts involved in my experience of (4) are illustrated in Figure 11, and can be summarized as follows:

(i) When I was bored with the work of checking assignments, I was suddenly refreshed by encountering an impressive one.

(ii) My expectation of reading playful work, which had been upset by the content of the assignments read up to that point, was first met by (4).

(iii) The student's ingenious use of an endlessly long sentence to represent a "love

hexagon" exceeded my expectation.

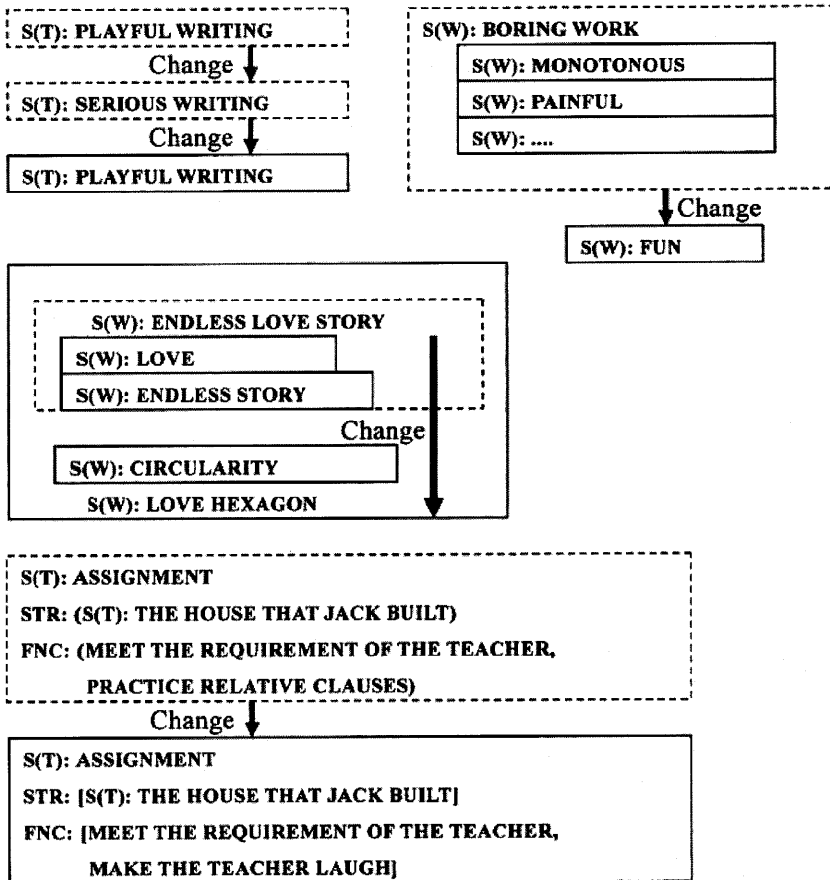(iv) The formal requirement of the assignment was completely met.

Figure 11. Discourse processing involved in reading (4).

It might be possible to detach (4) from its context and present it as a humorous text. However, it cannot necessarily be said that (4) would be commonly perceived as humorous by every subject. The only certain guarantee of the humorous quality of this discourse is the fact that (4) was perceived as humorous by me in the specific context. On the other hand, this does not necessarily mean that my reading was totally idiosyncratic. Rather, the discourse processing of (4) has an element arguably similar to those in (2) and (3): all three experiences involved some unexpected schematic changes while other expectations aroused by activated schemata were met. This, needless to say, is the congruent incongruity, whose existence in humor events is exactly the key point of incongruity-based theories. This suggests that the explanation of personal humor events, although previously avoided, might be within the reach of incongruity-based theories if

the subject's viewpoint were incorporated into their analytic methodology.

4. Concluding remarks

This paper has analyzed a few of my own experiences of humor using the concepts of discourse and schema theory as tools, and in doing so has emphasized the need to pay more attention to the subject's involvement in humor events. The schema-theoretic approach, while supporting the argument of mainstream incongruity-based theories, can, on the other hand, shed light on the interactive, sequential and complex processing of humorous discourses which has tended to be simplified or overgeneralized when humor events are viewed too strictly from the researcher's viewpoint.

What is especially important is that the schema-theoretic approach enables a detailed analysis of personal, context-dependent humor examples by allowing subjectivity in to a certain extent, and can thus give more explanatory power to incongruity-based theories.

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