

# Tweet dreams are made of this: Appropriate incongruity in the dreamwork of language



Tony Veale<sup>a,\*</sup>, Alessandro Valitutti<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>UCD School of Computer Science, Dublin, Ireland

<sup>b</sup>Dipartimento di Informatica, Università degli Studi di Bari, Bari, Italy

Received 9 February 2017; received in revised form 9 June 2017; accepted 12 July 2017

Available online 25 July 2017

## Abstract

Metaphors and jokes are spectral cousins, residing at different points on a scale of *appropriate incongruity*. To evoke laughter with a metaphor, or suggest profundity with a joke, one needs to recalibrate the delicate balance of incongruity and appropriateness. In this paper we present a systematic approach to the generation of comedic narratives from a seed metaphor that a system can also generate for itself. We provide empirical support for our claim that when the incongruity of a seed metaphor is heightened through the jarring integration of vivid detail, the resulting stories are judged significantly higher on the dimensions of entertainment, laughter, drama and imagination. Our story teller, whose knowledge resources are made publicly available for others to exploit, is embodied in a *software robot*, or *bot*, that operates autonomously on Twitter.

© 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Laughter; Metaphor; Comedy; Narrative; Appropriateness; Incongruity

## 1. Introduction

The direst admonition and the sternest lecture are rarely as persuasive as a good story told well. Stories bring moral instruction to life, and vividly ground one's life lessons in contexts and settings from which useful causal generalizations can be derived (Veale, 2016). But if conventional stories illustrate the basis of conventional wisdom, jokes offer us unconventional stories that mark out the boundaries of received wisdom, beyond which one is forced to look for sense in nonsense. Jokes, like stories, revolve around a central conflict, though for jokes this conflict is less a matter of interpersonal tension than a matter of conceptual congruence (Suls, 1972). Indeed, narrative jokes (the kind we consider here, which are stories with a comedic flourish) skillfully exploit a rift in our reasoning processes to generate an amusing blend of familiarity, tension and relief. The rift, called a *bisociation* by Koestler (1964), emerges from the operation of competing reasoning systems that Kahneman (2011) dubs *System 1* and *System 2*.

This is the mind viewed through the lens of caricature, but as Kahneman argues, *Systems 1* and *2* are useful fictions for understanding many fallacies in human reasoning. For *System 1* is a collection of processes and heuristics that rely on stereotypical associations to respond rapidly to a problem with an answer that seems intuitive and reflexive. When we leap to what seems like a reasonable conclusion based on limited but provocative evidence, it is *System 1* that urges us to

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [tony.veale@ucd.ie](mailto:tony.veale@ucd.ie) (T. Veale).

jump. Though its conclusions are often valid, making it an invaluable time-saver, *System 1* is also frequently wrong and easily misled, such as by advertisers, politicians, magicians or comedians. Fortunately, *System 2* is a complementary source of analytical reasoning, and though it is a good deal slower and easily depleted, *System 2* diligently follows well-formed chains of cause and effect to reach its conclusions. When both systems – active simultaneously but reaching their conclusions via different routes and at different times – agree, then *System 2* validates the intuitions of *System 1*. But when they disagree, it is *System 2* that offers the most compelling answer, albeit at a noticeable time lag after *System 1* has given its initially seductive but ultimately invalid result. For jokes, it is this “race condition” that yields the mix of tension and resolution that is triggered by a punchline and other sources of incongruity in a narrative, such as passing comedic flourishes or what Attardo (2001) calls *jab lines*.

This contest of paradigms, between fast intuition and slow reason, is reflected in the dominant theories of verbal humor. Incongruity Resolution (or *IR*) theories (Suls, 1972; Raskin, 1985; Attardo and Raskin, 1991) see humor arising from the resolution of an apparent incongruity, in which, one imagines, *System 1* jumps to an incongruous conclusion that *System 2* is then called upon to resolve. Oring (2003) argues that jokes hinge upon an “appropriate incongruity”, a flirtation with the illogical or the absurd that only subsequent reasoning can make meaningful in context. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1961) noted that “As every psychotic and comic ought to know, an *accurately improper* move can poke through the thin sleeve of immediate reality.” For Goffman, an “accurately improper” move is any incongruous act that breaks with convention so as to bring the inadequacy of convention to our attention. Norrick (1986) refers to this delicate balance of incongruity and appropriateness as the “method in the madness” of a joke, while in a re-tooling of Oring’s perspective for irony, Attardo (2000) describes this balance as a source of “relevant inappropriateness”. In each case, the “fast” thought processes of *System 1* lead to an incongruity that only the “slow” processes of *System 2* can resolve and make meaningful.

Jokes are not the only uses of language that pit *Systems 1* and *2* against each other. Metaphors achieve semantic tension by likewise engineering an appropriately incongruous bisociation between a *target* idea (that which is described) and a *source* idea (that which offers the figurative description). Consider the metaphor explored in Glucksberg (1998): “My job is a jail”. The assertion, bold as it is, is literally absurd. The categories of *job* and *jail* are mutually exclusive, so an instance of one can never be an instance of the other. Yet Glucksberg argues that readers understand “jail” here as having a dual reference, both to the literal category of jails (including, e.g. *Alcatraz*, *Sing Sing*, *Devil’s Island*) and to the wider category of confining and oppressive situations. As any specific job can literally belong to the latter, it can also figuratively belong to the former. When *System 1* hits an impasse by considering only the conventional meaning of “jail”, it falls to *System 2* to reason about the broader category of situations of which *jail* is a typical member, and place *job* in this category too. If the *job-as-jail* metaphor now lacks the power to provoke laughter, it may be because the metaphor has become passé through repeated usage that has increased its cultural appropriateness but diminished its shock value. Yet its incongruity can be restored by importing ever more detail from the source domain, to vividly remind us just how provocative this metaphor can be. For instance, Veale (2012) fleshes out the metaphor to reveal its humorous potential as follows: “workers are prisoners, managers are guards, cubicles are cells, the boss is the warden, and the water-cooler is the exercise yard. The office bully might even be the hulking white-supremacist in the bottom bunk, the one with a taste for fresh meat and a romantic gleam in his eye.”

In this paper we set out to generate humorous narratives – stories with comic flourishes that do not necessarily end with a surprise or a punch-line – from machine-generated metaphors that are made vividly entertaining via the addition of appropriately incongruous detail. We show, in turn, how this detail emerges from a tight integration of familiar characters and plots. We begin in Section 2 with the principles and processes of metaphor generation. Section 3 then presents a generic plot-generation process, while Section 4 shows how the metaphors of Section 2 are married with the plots of Section 3 to yield a detail-rich integration of characterization and plotting. We set about evaluating the humor potential of these integrated stories, under various experimental manipulations and generative settings, in Section 5. The paper concludes with a summary of our main findings.

## 2. Metaphors to dream by and laugh at

The philosopher Donald Davidson memorably described metaphor as “the dreamwork of language” (Davidson, 1978). Metaphors, like dreams, license the breaking of semantic norms and so allow us to slip the surly bounds of literal experience, but at a cost that includes ambiguity and indeterminacy. The meaning of the most creative metaphors can be as hard to pin down as the meaning of an enigmatic dream, and for Davidson this draws the whole enterprise of “meaning” in metaphor into doubt. For Davidson, a metaphor means just what it claims to mean (so e.g. my job *is* a jail after all), just as a dream means just what it purports to mean (e.g. my legs really are made of lead and unable to move, that cigar really is just a cigar, etc.). Yet dreams can make for good stories that resonate with readers because readers are free to view a dream narrative through the prism of their own experiences. The same can be said of metaphors, which are as much the starting post of a good story as the final post of a meaning-transfer task. It is enough that our machine-generated

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5043010>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5043010>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)