

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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Gestalt-theoretical Joke Analyses

1. Introduction

Jokes are verbal or drawn pieces of information from our everyday lives that are intended to elicit amusement. We will base our analysis on linguistic jokes as we encounter them in books, magazines, and now also on the internet. The following examples are taken from a huge of online folders traceable through the keyword “English jokes” (links will follow). From a Gestalt theory perspective, a perceived joke belongs to the consumer’s phenomenal field, he or she must perceive, understand, possibly supplement, and react to the linguistic unit. He or she often also has “to put themselves in the shoes” of the joke characters.

Many theoretical approaches have addressed the question of what is essential to a joke. What characteristics, content, and forms are crucial for triggering certain reactions and possibly even amusement in the consumer? Freud (1905, 1970) distinguished between tendentious and harmless jokes: The latter are effective only because of a specific technique (e.g., repetition, double meaning, condensation: e.g., “familiär” and “millionär” become “famillionär”). Tendentious (obscene, aggressive) jokes are effective because their content aims at a harmless and socially acceptable satisfaction of hidden and repressed instinctual impulses.

Other theories postulate that superiority and denigration of individuals or groups are decisive factors (La Fave, 1972, Duncan, 1985). Cognitively oriented theories (Suls, 1972, Yus, 2017) assume that in a joke, an incongruity or discrepancy is initially experienced, which is then resolved using further information. A linguistic theory by Raskin (1979, 2017) is also widely discussed: the script-oriented semantics theory, which is based on the assumption that humor is based on the overlap of two or more scripts. Scripts largely correspond to the psychological concept of schema and summarize our experiential and everyday knowledge on a specific topic.

Our approach assumes that structural similarities can be identified in a series of jokes, which can be well characterized against the background of Gestalt theory (Metz-Göckel, 1989).

1.1 Basic Gestalt Theoretical Constructs

In the following, some Gestalt theoretical concepts that will be used in the analysis of the jokes will be explained. We do not have enough space here for more complex examples.

We will assume an orchestra as it might be perceived from outside. It consists of people who have relationships with one another and also form subgroups that play various musical instruments (such as strings, winds, or percussion instruments). Together with the conductor, they form a whole with a specific structure. In our everyday lives, we certainly encounter many situations where such a structure is not obvious, which we must first recognize or create, for example, when various facts need to be sorted or combined. From a Gestalt theoretical perspective, it will be important to create the best possible structure from the given circumstances. This would correspond to the *Prägnanz* principle.

In the orchestra example, one would speak of *restructuring* if, for example, a spatial arrangement of the orchestra groups were necessary in a foreign country. The string players would then sit on the right (not left). Another form of restructuring could be seen in the formation of informal subgroups, which occurs during intermissions or in the seating arrangement on a bus or airplane and does not necessarily correspond to the formal structure. People (or, alternatively, things or circumstances) have then different relationships with one another.

Another process important from a Gestalt theoretical perspective can also be illustrated using the orchestra example: *centering* and *re-centering*, which expresses a weighting and its change. For the outside observer, a natural hierarchy of what is to be observed emerges in the concert, with the conductor initially forming the focus of attention. However, it may be that, over the course of the performance, the group of wind instruments arouses the listener's interest, perhaps even deliberately. The listener would then direct his attention to them. This would be a case of *re-centering*.

Figure-ground duality plays a central role in psychological processes. Textbook depictions of simple figure-ground arrangements are well known, with a black goblet representing the figure against a light background. The figure takes precedence; it also has form and an outline, but not the background. A reversal of the figure-ground relationship can also occur. In the case of the well-known figure mentioned above, a closer look reveals that the ground is also formed, containing the outlines of faces. However, figure-ground differentiations can be applied to many other psychological processes, such as reading. Ideally, one only considers words that belong together thematically and express a meaning. However, it is possible to focus on words with different meanings and realize a different narrative thread. This would be a new kind of figure-ground arrangement.

A central principle of Gestalt-theoretical thinking is that a given fact receives its distinctive character, its meaning, and its sense from the *psychological context* to which it belongs. The psychological contexts can be very diverse. One form represents the *reference system* in the narrower sense, which, based on gradations and quantities, allows statements about intensities, such as a penny is little and a million is a lot. Or temperature assessments: The assessment of 'cold' depends on whether the impression is placed in the winter or summer reference system. In each of the two, 'cold' will correspond to a different temperature level. These reference systems are often phenomenally not in the foreground, thus unconscious, but they have a functional effect. Other reference systems are more qualitative and give a fact its meaning by being anchored in them. A star in its constellation, a piece of jewelry in a jewelry store's display, or a player on a team. References also occur in comparisons: Something is stronger than something else, or the son resembles the father (i.e., when judging the son's appearance, reference is made to the father's appearance). In order not to overload the text, we have mostly spoken of systems. More precise differentiations can be found in Metz-Göckel (2014).

System changes can play a role in jokes. '2 : 2' can be a math problem that the teacher writes on the board, while the student emphasizes that it means 'draw', thus relating it to sports. This is an ambiguity upon which many joke techniques rely: A fact fits in both systems, but has a different meaning in each.

"The surgeon then performed the repair." Reading this sentence, one might be surprised that a surgeon would perform such an action. However, if one replaces 'repair' with 'operation', one gets the impression that this is more accurate. One can assume that *closure* is taking place. One experiences that "operation" fits the surgeon much better than "repair," meaning the statement is now more concise.

In jokes, the protagonists demonstrate or express *errors of reasoning* that usually contradict reality or logic, or, as primitive conclusions, exclude other important factors involved.

Contradiction and *contrast* also occasionally play a role. Both express not just a difference, but a maximum degree of diversity. Here, too, we see a variant of the *Prägnanz* principle.

Structuring and *system reference*, as well as *Prägnanz* (or good fit), have the character of constructs. They are usually not inherent in the joke consumers thinking, but serve to explain them psychologically. Our method of analysis is presented using the following joke examples and their explanations.

2. Joke Structures with Examples and Analysis

2.1 Structuring and Restructuring

Example 1

Four million of people enter our country every year. They are uneducated, unskilled, and contribute nothing. They are a burden to honest, hardworking Americans and our government is doing nothing to stop them, not to mention they're dirty and they smell bad. They don't even speak English!! - Man, I hate babies. (<https://upjoke.com/uneducated-jokes>, last view: 17.11.2025)

The concluding sentence introduces a completely *new structuring* of the information, bringing the pieces of information together and making sense thanks to the punch line. This might still suggest that one recognizes the statement of a particular politician, but not in relation to babies. One can also recognize how the structure and content interact. With the concluding punch line, all the information takes on meaning and subordinates itself to a single thought.

Example 2

A man goes to the doctor and says, "Doctor, wherever I touch, it hurts." The doctor asks, "What do you mean?" The man says, "When I touch my shoulder, it really hurts. If I touch my knee - OUCH! When I touch my forehead, it really, really hurts." The doctor says, "I know what's wrong with you - you've broken your finger!" (<https://www.manythings.org/jokes/9995.html>, last view 17.11.2025)

Here, too, a *restructuring* takes place in the reader. The source of the pain lies in the broken finger. This gives meaning to all previous complaints.

Example 3

A taxi passenger tapped the driver on the shoulder to ask him a question. The driver screamed, lost control of the car, nearly hit a bus, went up on the footpath, and stopped inches from a shop window. For a second, everything was quiet in the cab. Then the driver said, "Look, mate, don't ever do that again. You scared the living daylights out of me!" The passenger apologized and said, "I didn't realize that a little tap would scare you so much." The driver replied, "Sorry, it's not really your fault. Today is my first day as a cab driver — I've been driving a funeral van for the last 25 years." (<https://prayables.com/humor-taxi-driver-092625/>, last view 17.11.2025)

Based on the taxi driver's explanation, a *restructuring* takes place that makes his agitated behavior seem plausible.

Example 4

A New York attorney representing a wealthy art collector called his client and said to him, "Saul, I have some good news and I have some bad news."

The art collector replied, "I've had an awful day; let's hear the good news first." The attorney said, "Well, I met with your wife today, and she informed me that she invested \$5,000 in two pictures that she thinks will bring a minimum of \$15-20 million. I think she could be right." Saul replied enthusiastically, "Well done! My wife is a brilliant businesswoman! You've just made my day. Now I know I can handle the bad news. What is it?" The attorney replied: "The pictures are of you with your secretary." (https://jokesoftheday.com/funny-marriage-joke-a-new-york-attorney-representing-a-wealthy-art-collector-called-his-client/, last view 17.11.2025)

With the last remark, the situation changes completely; these are not works of art that the art collector's wife has invested in, but rather compromising pictures of him and his secretary.

2.2 Reasoning errors

Example 5

A man was trying to teach his young son the evil of alcohol. He put one worm in a glass of water and another worm in a glass of whiskey. The worm in the water lived, while the other in the whiskey curled up and died. "Alright son," asked the father, "What does that show you?" "Well, Dad, it shows that if you drink alcohol, you will not have worms." (https://www.jokebuddha.com/joke/Worms_and_alcohol, last view 17.11.2025)

The conclusion may seem wrong or even naive at first glance, but it actually makes sense.

Example 6

Teacher: Maria please point to America on the map. Maria: This is it. Teacher: Well done. Now class, who found America? Class: Maria did. (https://unijokes.com/joke-6348/, last view 17.11.2025)

The preceding part of the episode is ignored. This reveals *short-circuited thinking*. Furthermore, in the language of Gestalt theory, there is a *false centering*.

Example 7

During a recent password audit, it was found that a blonde was using the following password: "MickeyMinniePlutoHueyLouieDeweyDonaldGoofySacramento". When asked why such a long password, she said she was told that it had to be at least 8 characters long and include at least one capital. (https://www.reddit.com/r/Jokes/comments/7nihq3/during_a_recent_password_audit_it_was_found_that/, last view 17.11.2025)

There are several underlying misunderstandings here; 'character' is interpreted as a person. The fact that a 'blonde' woman developed this password constitutes discrimination.

In other examples, errors are clearly attributed to a specific group of people, such as Welsh, Scots, Irish, etc. This usually reveals a discriminatory tendency (see below).

2.3 Contradiction – Contrast

Example 8

Employer to Frances (applying for a job): “Can you write shorthand?” – “Yes sir, but it takes me longer.” (Sammlung Hellmuth Metz-Göckel)

Here, the *contrast* between 'short' and 'longer' may be amusing. At the same time, one can recognize discrimination against the young woman.

Example 9

“Am I the first man you have ever loved?” he said. “Of course,” she answered “Why do men always ask the same question?” (<http://iteslj.org/c/jokes.html>, last view 17.11.2025)

A *contradiction* emerges. The statement that her partner is the first person she loves is contradicted by the addition that everyone always asks the same thing.

Example 10

Two diplomats - an english and a russian - walk into a toilet. They pee into urinals. After they've done it, the english diplomat washes his hands - the russian one, however, doesn't. - We, in the Royal University of Diplomacy, were told to wash our hands after we pee, - says the englishman. - And we, - the russian responds, - in the University of International Relationships, were told not to pee on our hands. (<https://upjoke.com/diplomacy-jokes>, last view 17.11.2025)

Here, too, a *contrast* or *contradiction* is expressed. Diplomats are trained differently in Russia and England. At the same time, there is a hint of a devaluation of the Russians, claiming that they behave less hygienically.

Example 11

Isn't weird that America believes in education? The average professor earns more money in a year than a professional athlete makes in a whole day. (<https://www.umsl.edu/~wadsworthbrown/Spring%202009/ENGL%204880/lemberger.web.pdf>, last view 17.11.2025)

There may also be a *contrast* here. However, it's a mistake to compare a year with a day; that's unusual, to say the least.

2.4 *Figur-Ground-Inversion*

Example 12

“How do you actually make nets?” a landlubber asks the old fisherman. “Well, it’s quite simple: you tie all the holes together with string, and that’s it.” (Sammlung Hellmuth Metz-Göckel)

Normally, one would tie the string together in such a way that the holes appear in the net. Here, the focus is on the holes from which one acts. This is a *figure-ground inversion*.

Example 13

Dr. Samuel Johnson, author of the first great dictionary of English language, was visited by a delegation of respectable ladies of London. “Dr. Johnson,” they said, “we congratulate you for omitting all indecent or obscene words from your dictionary.” “Ladies,” said Dr. Johnson, “I congratulate you for looking them up.” (Sammlung Hellmuth Metz-Göckel)

This is a play on the *figure-ground dichotomy*. The obscene parts are omitted from the dictionary, but they had to be read and recognized beforehand, by the respectable ladies. Without this attribution, the joke would be ineffective.

2.5 *Incongruity and Solution*

Example 14

A teacher set an arithmetic problem. “You have six pounds in your pocket. You lose four. What do you have in your pocket?” Quickly came the answer - “A hole.” (Sammlung Hellmuth Metz-Göckel)

The teacher’s starting point is the *system* of numbers. And the *expectation* is that the answer also consists of a number. The answer represents a disappointed expectation and thus initially an *incongruity*. This is then resolved by the realization that ‘hole’ is a perfectly plausible answer when viewed in relation to another system, namely clothing. Thus, a reference system change takes place. And in retrospect, the answer makes sense after all. This is an example that can be assigned to the joke category ‘*incongruity and solution*’ and has been recognized as a structure in a large group of jokes.

Example 15

“Hey, Mom, “asked Little Johnny, “can you give me twenty dollars?” “Certainly not!” answered his mother.” If you do, “Little Johnny went on, “I’ll tell you what dad said to the maid when you were at the beauty shop.” His mother’s ears perked up and, grabbing her purse, she handed over the money. “Well? what did he say?” “He said, “Hey, Juanita, make sure you wash my socks tomorrow.” (<https://theneoncloud.blogspot.com/2024/07/johnny-talk-with-his-mom.html>, last view 17.11.2025)

This example also shows a *disappointed expectation*. It is not a lewdness or obscenity that is being said, but an everyday occurrence or banality.

2.6 Ambiguity

A popular joke principle is the use of *ambiguous words*:

Example 16

Teacher: "You missed school yesterday didn't you?" Pupil: "Not a bit!" (<https://unijokes.com/joke-2789/>, last view 17.11.2025)

'Missed' is understood in one sense as 'not being there' and in another as 'missing'. Essentially, the same word belongs to two *different conceptual systems*, and this structure is therefore similar to that of jokes classified in the 'incongruity-resolution' category.

Example 17

Two fish in a tank. One turns to the other and says: "Do you know how to drive this?" (<https://unijokes.com/joke-12401/> last view 17.11.2025)

'Tank' means both aquarium and military vehicle.

Example 18

Why do cows wear bells? Because their horns don't work. (Google; english jokes: [Reddit.rdadjokes](https://www.reddit.com/r/dadjokes/), last view 17.11.2025)

'Horns' is used in two senses: 'horn' (of animals) and 'car warning signal'. Here, too, two *different terminological systems* are at work.

In English, this joke principle is used very frequently in the mostly single-line 'puns'. There is often a consonance with slightly different spellings. In the Example 19 the noun "desert" must be written with two s's.

Example 19

The soldier decided to desert his dessert in the desert. (([https://hinative.com.](https://hinative.com/) last view 17.11.2025)

Example 20

Since there is no time like the present, he thought it was time to present the present. (www.google.com/search?q=since+there+is+no+time..., last view 17.11.2025)

Example 21

The insurance was invalid for the invalid. (www.google.com/search?q=The+insurance+was+invalid+for+the+invalid. last view 17.11.2025)

Example 22

There was a row among the oarsmen about how to row. (www.google.com/search?q=There+was+a+row+among+the+oarsmen..., last view 17.11.2025)

Example 23

They were too close to the door to close it. (www.google.com/search?q=They+were+too+close+to+door.., last view 17.11.2025)

An English peculiarity comes to the fore in the Example 24: ‘Knights’ and ‘nights’ are pronounced the same and create ambiguity.

Example 24

Why do dragons often sleep during the day? So they can fight knights. (<https://learn-englishkids.britishconcil.org>, last view 17.11.2025)

2.7 Reference systems

Other examples use *reference systems* in the narrower sense, namely those that are based on a gradation, in this case the passage of years:

Example 25

A man is talking to God. The man: “God, how long is a million years?” God: “To me, it’s about a minute.” The man: “God, how much is a million dollars?” God: “To me it’s a penny.” The man: “God, may I have a penny?” God: “Wait a minute.” (<https://unijokes.com/joke-5580/>, last view 17.11.2025)

References to these types of systems occur in jokes that are intended to express *exaggeration* or *understatement*.

Example 26

“You were driving at over 70 kilometers per hour...” “That can’t be right, Sergeant, maybe 50, I’d say 30, possibly even 20 or 10...” “Enough! Stop it! Ten pounds for illegal parking!” (Sammlung Hellmuth Metz-Göckel)

Interim note: We did not find any other enhancement jokes such as *“We caught such a big fish that we couldn’t get it onto the ship.” – “Was it a whale?” – “No, we used a whale as bait.”* (Sammlung Hellmuth Metz-Göckel) in our English joke selection. Whether this is characteristic cannot be decided solely on the basis of the sample drawn from the Internet.

2.8 Group stereotypes and discrimination

Many of the joke structures listed do not exclude tendentious jokes in Freud’s sense. However, where certain groups are concerned, such as the Welsh, Scots, Irish (in Germany, East Frisians), there is usually an element of discrimination,

which is expressed in errors of thought and action attributed to the group or in aggression, as in the following example:

Example 27

An Englishman, an Irishman, and a Scotsman were out fishing in a boat on a lake together and doing very well. "This is a terrific spot for fishing," said the Englishman. "How will we know where this spot is next time?" "I've thought of that," said the Scotsman, "I've just put a mark on the side of the boat." "You idiot," said the Irishman, "how do you know we will get this boat the next time?" (<https://www.funny-jokes.com/international-jokes.htm>, last view 17.11.2025)

Scots and Irish are ascribed certain - in this case even double - errors of reasoning. Or - next example - an aggressive action towards the disregarded group is expressed. The occasion could, of course, be the Englishman's statement ('my good man'), which could have been interpreted as arrogant:

Example 28

An Englishman is out walking in the Highlands and gets thirsty, so he stops at a river to get some water. He's about to bring the water up to his mouth with his hand when he gets interrupted by a shepherd nearby. "Dinnae drink oot the river, it's foo o' sheep pish!" The Englishman looks confused and replies, "I'm sorry, my good man, I didn't understand a word of that! I'm English and on a walking holiday!" The shepherd smirks and says, "I said use both hands; you'll get more water that way!" (<https://upjoke.com/highlands-jokes>, last view 17.11.2025)

The following joke drastically reveals the *negative attitudes* of the English towards the Welsh.

Example 29

The doctor tells them there's been a mix up and doesn't know who's baby is who's. The English man runs in and grabs the only brown baby and starts to walk out. The Indian man looks really confused and says "I'm pretty sure that's not your baby it looks Indian so it's mine". The English man says "I know, but there's not a chance in hell I'm leaving here with a baby that could be Welsh." (Sammlung Hellmuth Metz-Göckel)

We also find a meta joke that involves Germans and contradicts the joke stereotype that you need a larger number of Welsh or East Frisians to turn a light bulb.

Example 30

How many Germans does it take to change a light bulb? – One. We are very efficient and this is not a joke. (<https://www.thespoof.com/jokes/5908/how-many-germans>, last view 17.11.2025)

2.9 Closure

In the following we want to discuss *closure*, which is a joke structure that is particularly interesting from a Gestalt-theoretical point of view (cf. Metz-Göckel, 2008), which has not been recognized or discussed in the literature, but is also frequently found in the English joke collection.

Example 31

I wrote a poem about communism for my English class. I had to share it with everyone. (Google.english.jokes: Reddit.r/communism, last view 17.11.2025)

In the first part something is given and in the second part something is stated that fits the opening note. Under communism, everything should be shared.

Example 32

Did you hear about the skeleton who walked into a cafe? He ordered a cup of coffee and a mop. (<https://www.italki.com.post>, last view 17.11.2025)

In this example, the mop goes particularly well with the skeleton, as the drink would run onto the floor.

Example 33

What's the difference between ignorance and apathy? I don't know, and I don't care. (google.english.jokes.Reddit.r/Jokes, last view 17.11.2025)

Both negative expressions fit perfectly with ignorance and apathy. The prägnanz-principle obviously has a particularly strong effect with this type of joke structure.

Example 34

My partner and I always laugh about how competitive we are... But I laugh harder! (<https://upjoke.com/competitive-jokes>, last view 17.11.2025) The characters want to express that they are not competitive by laughing about it. But the main character behaves competitively by laughing harder.

Example 35

Another serious social problem is what to send the florist's daughter when she is ill? (Sammlung Metz-Göckel)

In this example, closure plays a role, but a counter-case is expressed. A simple closure process would occur if the florist's daughter received flowers as a gift in the event of illness. However, the contradiction of giving the florist's daughter flowers that she already has or knows is pointed out.

In summary, it can be said that in most joke groups, processes such as fitting into a system, structuring and restructuring or closure occur in the joke consumers mind, which consist of or have the aim of recognizing meaning and significance

in the events presented. Perhaps this is less clear in the case of contradiction and contrast, and also in the case of errors in reasoning, because they are direct phenomena.

3. Latent Structure and Knowledge

Sometimes the structure and meaning can be read openly from the text. In some cases, they are based on further processes in the joke consumer that are not contained in the text. He or she draws on memories, adds something, draws conclusions in order to gain insight and complete understanding, which is a prerequisite for the effect of the joke. We want to characterize these processes as latent, because they can be activated in principle. This is because we use them to uncover the joke structure. (In the examples of discrimination against certain groups given above, the existing stereotype has probably often already been taken into account: Welsh people are stupid and simple-minded, English people are arrogant, etc.).

Example 36

Two sheep were talking. "You look really tired," one said. "I know," replied the other. "I had to count 500 shepherds last night before I could get to sleep." (Sammlung Hellmuth Metz-Göckel)

The fact that a sheep speaks of shepherds is a closure. The fact that sheep count shepherds naturally activates one of our well-known techniques for falling asleep, namely counting sheep. This analogy is probably constitutive for this joke, but remains latent.

Example 37

A Doberman, a Golden Retriever and a cat died and met God. God said to them, "Tell me why I should let you into heaven." The Doberman said, "I'll protect you with my life." God said, "You can sit at my right side." The Golden Retriever said, "I will fetch your slippers and anything else you ask me to." God said, "Then you can sit at my left side." Finally, God looked at the cat and said, "And what will you do?" The cat said, "Excuse me. I think you're sitting in my seat." (<https://www.sunnyskyz.com/funny-jokes/256/a-german-shepherd-doberman-and-cat-have-died-and-gone-to-heaven>, last view 17.11.2025)

We come across a three-way constellation relatively often in jokes. The Doberman and the Golden Retriever try to be of service to God. The cat deviates from this strategy by merely pointing out that God is sitting in her armchair. Measured against the lead-up, this is a break and leads to a disappointed expectation that the joke consumer can only wonder about. This then activates our general knowledge about the behavior of cats, who like to occupy an armchair that is

usually preferred by a family member. Since only the knowledge about cats plays a role here and there is only a weak connection to the preceding content (e.g. dogs and God), we miss the moment of fitting here. However, it could also be that the positive pet behaviour of dogs is being emphasized. And the question arises as to whether the joke is really amusing.

Example 38

A wife desperately tries to prove to her husband that her affair is over. He had already forgiven her, but still hadn't spoken to her in days. The only thing she could think of is that he must still not trust her. To convince him, she cut her ex lover's obituary out of the newspaper. Her affair ended long before the accident, but she thought she could ease her husband's mind once and for all. "You see," she told him, "he was struck by a drunk driver." "I wasn't drunk." He replied. (https://www.reddit.com/r/cleanjokes/comments/1afe2ck/a_wife_desperately_tries_to_prove_to_her_husband/, last view 17.11.2025)

The wife tries to appease the still resentful, jealous husband by confronting him with the death notice of the rival, who, as it says, was killed by a drunk driver. The husband's answer only allows the conclusion that he was the driver, and not drunk, as he emphasizes. The joke consumer can only conclude that vengeful motives and wounded pride were still the deciding factors. However, the joke itself does not say this, and the question arises as to whether the joke is really amusing.

Example 39

A tourist driving across rural England decided to stay the night in a small town. The only place with rooms available was a quaint English pub, 'The George and Dragon' which had a lovingly painted sign with a Knight beside a defeated dragon blowing in the evening breeze. Entering the barroom, which while empty had a roaring fire against the back wall, leather-padded booths, and a mahogany bar with brass rails, polished to a shine, the tourist went up to the bar and asked for a room. "Rooms cost £20 per night, we don't accept euros, and you must be out by 7am tomorrow, or else you pay for both days." "Alright then, could I get something to eat, madam?" "The kitchen closed at 6, and I am not going back there until 11am tomorrow, no matter what you say. Anything else?" "Yes, could I please talk to George?" (https://www.babamail.com/jokes/comeback-jokes/?jokeid=1170, last view 17.11.2025)

The latent background knowledge becomes very clear in this case. However, further structural features must be added. The landlady proves to be extremely inhospitable, even nasty, through her remarks. The tourist's final question establishes the relationship to the inn sign (a closure). Her unfriendliness makes it easy to identify the landlady as a 'dragon', and according to the old legend, George fought and defeated the dragon. The fact that the tourist then wants to speak to

George (and not the innkeeper) after the many refusals by the landlady makes sense under these circumstances.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

Finding meaning and significance in the jokes presented is usually an overriding result of our analysis based on Gestalt theory. If this is successful, then a prerequisite for amusement exists. However, the processes are based on very different conditions, as the differentiations made show.

In one group of jokes, the information contained is directly absorbed and experienced as a *contrast* or *contradiction*. In one example, the joke character says that he can write in shorthand, but that it takes longer: fast vs. slow writing represent opposites in the experience of the joke consumer. These represent direct phenomena. The cognitive effort required to process them is relatively low.

In the majority of what we call joke structures, the relationships to the joke consumer are more complex. They usually seem to lead to the question of whether something makes sense, i.e. whether it can be categorized in a structure. Examples of such thought processes are *closures*, and we have thus given a new joke structure its name. Information is contained in the opening and what follows immediately relates to it. For example, a skeleton orders a coffee and a mop in a restaurant. We deduce that if a carcass were to eat a coffee, the liquid would run onto the floor and the carcass would need a mop. Mop therefore fits very well with the theme of carcass and liquid. The following example perhaps illustrates the basic idea even better (cf. Metz-Göckel, 2008, 333).

Example 40

“What is your son, the ventriloquist, doing now?” – “He is selling parrots in a pet-shop.” (Sammlung Hellmuth Metz-Göckel)

If the son was employed somewhere as an office clerk (and the mother had answered this way), then this would not be a joke. But the fact that the son is now using his ability to sell parrots (and possibly cheating buyers in the process) leads to closure and fits perfectly, which is probably crucial for the joke effect. The *Prägnanz* aspect is particularly clear here.

This also applies - perhaps in a somewhat weaker form - to another group of jokes in which structuring or restructuring is suggested. In one of the examples, it is stated that too many people are always coming to us, are a burden to others, don't smell good and don't even know English. These (and other) characteristics somehow belong together and could be titled 'asylum seekers'. The final sentence then refers to babies and leads directly to a restructuring in which the characteristics mentioned fit just as well.

However, restructuring can also lead to changes in meaning. The art collector is told that his wife has found new objects, but these are not art objects, but compromising pictures of him and his secretary, which the wife could probably use as a future source of money (or so we think). This restructuring leads to changes in the whole story.

In another group of jokes, its ending, the punchline, leads to a disappointment of a built-up expectation, which then fits in a different context after all. The teacher asks the student, “if you lose two of the six pounds in your pocket, what do you have in your pocket?”, to which the student says: “one hole”. One system here would be that of numbers, the other would be clothes. The discrepancy is therefore resolved by this system reference, because the answer fits quite well into this other system.

We have spoken here of two systems, basically reference systems in the sense of knowledge patterns or clusters, on the basis of which a fact acquires its meaning. Comparable terms are schemata, scripts, possibly also wholes (cf. Metz-Göckel, 2014). Since the classification is not always easy, we speak of systems.

A similar structure underlies jokes that use ambiguity, often lexical, sometimes also syntactic ambiguity. We have given several examples. Here we speak of meaning field or semantic context as the system (van Petten, 2002) in which the one of two meanings can be placed, thus leading to the resolution of ambiguity.

The phenomenon of fitting (into a system or a semantic context) and thus an experience of *Prägnanz* seems to be less compelling in the case of errors in jokes or contradiction and contrast.

If mistakes are attributed to a certain category of people who, according to the stereotype, can be expected to do such stupid things, then this is certainly an argument for a reference to the system. Scots, Welsh and East Frisians are just a bit limited, as we have always known. However, it could be that such stereotypes are also promoted by the many jokes that are in circulation. Incidentally, when we looked through thousands of English jokes, we didn't even come across the fact that Scots are stingy and thrifty, as is our joke stereotype. On the other hand, there are mistakes in our collection that individuals make without any evidence of discrimination. Perhaps this can be explained by the superiority thesis, which assumes that we think: ‘How can one be so stupid, such a mistake would not have happened to me’.

In the case of contrast and contradiction, there is also no recognizable reference to a system. They are phenomenal categories which, however, express maximum difference. Following research by Savardi and Bianchi (Bianchi & Savardi, 2006), we have emphasized that “...contrariness - often appearing in perception as contrast - represents not only a form of difference, but the maximum possible

difference. It can then be seen as a special case of prägnanz“ (Metz-Göckel, 2018, 264). Contradiction can be characterized in a similar way.

The prerequisite for - in the best case - amusement on the part of the joke consumer is a complete understanding of the events presented. With some types of jokes, this is obvious. However, there are a considerable number of jokes where this is not the case. The joke consumer has to make additions, draw conclusions, etc. In doing so, they have to draw on processes and memories that are not fully formulated. We have listed some examples of such latent knowledge structures. Only in one case (counting sheep) is there probably a system activation; otherwise it is more a matter of conclusions in the form of restructuring, on the basis of which meaning is given to what is presented.

5. Summary

It has been shown that (verbal) jokes, as they are presented to us in the public media (now also on the Internet), differ not only in terms of content and form, but also in terms of structural features, which are the starting point and prerequisite for cognitive processing by the joke consumer. Such joke characteristics can lead to a new structure and restructuring, figure-ground inversions or system and whole references also to phenomena such as contradiction and contrast, closure, errors of thought, etc. In the majority of cases, it plays a role how well a piece of information, usually the punch line, fits in with the content of the joke. This can involve the structuring of various related features or the change to a reference system (in a broad sense). The extent of the fit, i.e. the prägnanz-aspect, seems to vary slightly depending on structural circumstances. However, it usually plays a role. Also in jokes, for example, in which contrast and contradiction are expressed, because this involves maximum difference. The criterion of fit seems to be less clear in jokes about different groups (Welsh, Scottish, Irish), unless you think that certain characteristics (such as stupidity and aggression) are part of the stereotype of the group.

Keywords: gestalttheory, cognition, jokes, reference systems, closure, ambiguity

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