

Humor Mechanisms in Gary Larson's Cartoons

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Abstract

Gary Larson is a cartoonists' cartoonist. His subtle and sophisticated style has earned him a devoted readership among those who value humor beyond immediate pleasure. Studying the humor mechanisms in his cartoons can provide clues to the nature of humor. I examine several of his cartoons to illustrate several mechanisms of humor through the theoretical framework I have developed in recent years. My central claim is that the mechanisms at work in Larson's visual humor are fundamentally the same as those that operate in jokes. This challenges the widespread assumption that jokes are purely linguistic entities, essentially distinct from other forms of humorous expression. I analyze Larson's cartoons in light of a theory of humor I developed in earlier publications (Aharoni 2011, 2018, 2020) and presented in full in my 2026 book manuscript, available online.

Keywords: cartoons, humor mechanisms, meaning and its detachment, Gary Larson

Introduction

Gary Larson (1950–) is my favorite cartoonist. He spares no one, breaks taboos freely, and yet his cartoons radiate a deep, compassionate humanity. He is equally capable of eliciting empathy for animals: in his world, cows and dogs possess a status comparable to that of human beings. Above all, Larson is a comic genius, whose sophisticated observations expose human motives we are often reluctant to acknowledge. Larson might be called the Samuel Beckett of cartooning. Like Beckett, he reveals the absurdity of human vanity while preserving a measure of sympathy for those caught in it. From December of 1979 until 1995, *The Far Side* appeared as a single-panel comic strip in newspapers internationally. Its humor drew on surreal situations, anthropomorphized animals, scientific references, social discomfort, and existential incongruity. Maintaining a consistently high level of invention at such a pace was inevitably difficult;

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nevertheless, Larson produced hundreds of remarkably refined cartoons, several of which will be discussed in this article.

1. Outline of Aharoni's Theory of Humor

Humor research is an unending source of wonder to me. A referee once wrote scathingly of one of my papers: "and here the author offers a theory of humor." The implication was clear: the cheek! It was not that I had concealed my intention. I was simply not important enough to propose a theory. "The difference between science and the humanities," the Israeli mathematician Azriel Levy once said, "is that in science somebody important is somebody who said something important; in the humanities something important is something said by somebody important."² In plain language: snobbery. So let me be explicit. Important or not, a member of the humor-research community or not, I am offering a theory of humor.

Is another theory really needed? I will try to show that it is—urgently. The question of what humor is or how it works remains unresolved. Across its long history, humor theory has shown a remarkable tolerance for two things: counterexamples and conceptual vagueness. Major theories survive repeated and obvious counterexamples with little apparent embarrassment. Consider the superiority theory, commonly associated with Plato and Aristotle. It remains influential even though much humor seems to involve neither ridicule nor a feeling of superiority. The incongruity theory presents a different problem. "Incongruity" can be defined so broadly that almost any joke—and a great many non-jokes—can be made to fit it. As Latta (Latta 1999) argues persuasively, the concept often becomes too indeterminate to do real explanatory work. In a mature scientific discipline, such standards would not be acceptable.

There is, then, room for a re-examination of the field. In earlier publications listed in the bibliography, I presented the skeleton of a theory; here I shall apply it to Larson's cartoons. Let me begin with a summary—a road map intended to help the reader find his or her bearings.

1. The playground of humor is meaning. By "meaning" I mean our interpretation of the words we hear and of the situations and actions we encounter. Interpretation is essential to survival: it is part of understanding and navigating the world. When we observe another person's action, however trivial, we ascribe intentions or motives to it; this

² The Associate Editor of this Journal, trained in Comparative Literature and thus a member of the Humanities, objects to this generalization.

enables us to anticipate what that person may do next. Similarly, we interpret situations to orient ourselves within them.

2. Every meaning has a carrier: the object interpreted. The most familiar carriers are words. The word “cat” is a carrier; its meaning is the concept or referent to which it directs us—plainly, cats.
3. Words, however, are not the only carriers – and in ordinary life they are not even the principal ones. We interpret every action and situation, thereby giving them meaning. In humor, actions and situations are more common carriers than words.
4. Even in verbal jokes, words are usually intermediate steps. The real carrier, I argue, is the action or situation to which the words point. Consider the flagship joke from the SSTH, a linguistic theory of humor:

A man stands outside a doctor’s door and asks, “Is the doctor at home?”

“No,” answers a young woman’s voice from behind the door. “Come right in.

”The text describes a situation, and that situation is the real carrier. Its interpretation—as a patient’s visit or as a lover’s visit—is the core of the joke. What is ambiguous is not the words but the situation they construct.

5. The currently most popular theories of humor speak of a clash between two meanings. Theories of ambiguity, such as SSTH, state this explicitly. Other theories speak about the less focused terminology of a clash between incongruous elements. My claim is that the play in humor is not between two meanings, but between a meaning and its carrier. The two are suddenly detached; a rift opens between them. I shall use “detachment” and “rift” interchangeably.
6. “Detachment” may sound vague, but it is concrete. It means that the carrier is no longer committed to the meaning ordinarily attached to it. In practice, detachment takes three principal forms:

(a) *The meaning disappears.*

Old man A: “Do you remember how we used to chase girls?”

Old man B: “Yes, I just forget why.”

The meaning of the action—its motive or drive—does not change; it simply vanishes.

(b) *The meaning changes.* In the patient-lover joke, the same situation first receives one interpretation and then another.

(c) *The carrier becomes the meaning.* The pointer points at itself:

“I always thought I was indecisive. Now I’m not so sure.”

Or: “I never make mistakes. I once thought that I did, but that was by mistake.”

These are self-referential jokes. They are more common than is usually assumed.

7. The most common meaning of an action is the intention behind it. It is no accident that “to intend” is “to mean”: “I mean to go to school today.” A popular comic mechanism is detachment of intention. Slipping on a banana peel is a classic case: the person intends to keep walking, but the peel has other plans. In the patient-lover joke, it is the man’s apparent intention that changes. “Man plans and God laughs,” as the Yiddish saying has it. Why laughter rather than pity, anger, or indifference? Because the comic moment lies in the gap between intention and actual action.
8. The rift shifts weight from meaning to carrier. It redirects attention to the latter. Once the ordinarily automatic connection between a carrier and its meaning is severed, we are obliged to reconsider that connection. I shall call this the **victory of the carrier**. Roman Jakobson made a related claim about poetry: the poetic function directs attention to the message for its own sake, rather than treating it merely as a transparent vehicle for referent.
9. Attention to the pointer rather than to the object pointed at is not only an outcome of the rift; it is also one way of producing it. Many jokes are based on self-reference or on a shift from an event to its perception:

“After ten years of psychological treatment, I finally solved my bed-wetting problem.”

“You no longer wet your bed?”

“I do—but I’m no longer ashamed of it.”
10. In some jokes, the apparent movement is the opposite of detachment: a new and surprising meaning emerges. This may seem a counterexample to the theory, but it is not. The mind moves rapidly forward and backward in time. When a new meaning emerges, we recall that it did not exist before. So, before it was detached.

11. Why humor? Mental links are constructed with pain and effort—what function does their dismantling play? One answer is “change.” Constructing a new scaffold for thought requires challenging the old ones.

2. Aharoni's Theory in Relation to Earlier Theories of Humor

This section is not a critique of existing theories. The literature contains enough such critiques. Nor must a new theory be erected on the ruins of its predecessors: it must stand on its own. My aim here is to situate my theory in relation to familiar accounts of humor, so that readers can more readily find their bearings. Familiar ground is reassuring. I shall argue that each major theory isolates a particular form of detachment—one fragment of the larger body of humor. Here I intend to identify the common denominator among these fragments.

Bergson. Surprisingly, the theory closest to my own (and to my heart) is among the least fashionable: Bergson's “automatic reactions.” We laugh, he argues, when a spontaneous and flexible human response is replaced by that of an automaton. In my terms, this is *detachment of intention*. Automata have neither will nor intentions. When an action appears automatic, it is detached from the agent's will:

A woman returns to her room in an old-age home and finds another resident with her hand in her husband's trousers. Furious, she asks, “What does she have that I don't?”
“Parkinson's,” the husband replies.

An action assumed to be loaded with sexual meaning turns out to be involuntary convulsions. It is detached from intention. The advantage of this formulation over “automatic behavior” is explanatory: it identifies what is funny about automatism and connects it to other kinds of humor.

Bergson also makes emotional detachment a condition of comic appreciation—his famous “anesthesia of the heart.” A joke must be told, as it were, with a stiff upper lip; emotional involvement obstructs amusement.

Schopenhauer. Another account close in spirit to mine is Schopenhauer's. Laughter, for him, arises from the sudden recognition of an incongruity between a concept and the objects subsumed under it. The following example illustrates his point:

Tourist: "Last year there were ten windmills here. Now there are only five. What happened?"

Local: "There wasn't enough wind for all of them."

The logic of scarce resources applies naturally in other contexts, but not here. A conceptual pattern initially seems to organize the situation and is then exposed as inappropriate. This is detachment of meaning, achieved through the detachment of a logic from the situation.

Superiority or derision. The oldest theory of humor, associated with Plato and Aristotle and developed in a different form by Hobbes, explains laughter through superiority, derision, or scorn. It captures an important class of comic responses, but it cannot plausibly account for humor as such. Much humor, in particular most jokes, contains neither mockery nor triumph over another person.

Yet any adequate theory must explain why derision is funny. My theory, like Bergson's, can do so. Derision detaches intention, motivation, and ultimately empathy from its object. The derided person is no longer viewed as a thinker whose reasons require understanding; he becomes, in effect, empty of inner motives or thought. In Bergson's terms, he becomes inanimate. Scorn involves a withdrawal of empathy: the other's thoughts and intentions are annulled.

Kant. Kant's account fits the "detachment" framework especially well. Laughter, he claims, arises when a strained expectation is suddenly transformed into nothing. The anticipated significance of an event is emptied out: detachment proceeds from the highly charged to the null. Relief theories describe a related movement, from high psychic energy or tension to its discharge.

Freud. Freud is often classified with relief theories, but this does not capture his core idea. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, jokes are claimed to work by allowing forbidden wishes or thoughts to bypass psychic censorship through disguise, effected by displacement and

verbal ingenuity. The difficulty is that Freud must extend this framework to jokes with no evident forbidden content. Strangely, he claims that in that case the forbidden message is the distorted logic (the same that before was supposed to hide the forbidden content). A feat of coercion. I remain a great admirer of Freud, but I find his theory of the joke off mark.

Ambiguity and Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH). Theories of ambiguity hold that humor results from two interpretations of the same utterance, action, or situation. The fashionable theory of this type is Victor Raskin's Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH), according to which a joke-text is compatible with two opposed scripts. Ambiguity involves detachment: one meaning is displaced in favor of another. The theory suffers from two drawbacks. One is separation of verbal from non-verbal humor, thus going against the scientific goal of integration. The other is massive coercion – most jokes need mental gymnastics to fit the pattern. Its only attraction is in the pseudo-scientific jargon it uses (“scripts”).

3. Families of Jokes and Cartoons

I now turn to the main topic of this paper: an analysis of some of Gary Larson's cartoons through the prism of my own theory. As in (Aharoni 2026), I will adopt a “divide and conquer” approach consisting of two stages. First, I identify families of jokes and cartoons that share common mechanisms. I then generalize from these examples to arrive at the the broader formula of “detachment of meaning.”

Family A: Coincidences

One technique Larson is particularly fond of is coincidence: apparent causal links between events that are in fact entirely unrelated. The events merely happen together accidentally.

The gap between perceived causality and actual randomness is a fertile source of humor. We initially interpret the events as connected, only to realize that the connection is illusory. The presumed causal structure dissolves. If two friends discover that, without prior coordination, they are both wearing green pants and yellow shirts, they laugh. Likewise, when two people unexpectedly run into each other several times in a single day, the repeated encounters often acquire a comic quality.

Coincidences instantiate a particular form of detached meaning: detachment of causality. Causes in the physical world play a role analogous to intentions in the human world. Intentions interpret human actions; causes interpret natural events. In coincidence humor, an interpretive framework briefly appears to hold, then collapses. For a moment, the mind constructs an underlying connection, only to discover that none exists.

The humor lies precisely in this collapse. We wore the same strange clothes not because of secret coordination, but because each of us independently made the same questionable fashion choice. What initially seemed meaningful is revealed to be superficial. The comic effect emerges from the fleeting illusion of depth followed by its sudden disappearance.

In the following joke uses strange accidental similarity between two pairs of father-son. The humor develops through a sequence of increasingly specific similarities that strongly encourage the listener to infer a hidden causal connection. The punchline abruptly detaches that interpretation and replaces it with an entirely different explanatory framework.

Jesus ascends to heaven and searches for his father. He meets an old blind man and asks him, "Have you perhaps seen my father?"

"What was your father?" asks the old man, and Jesus replies, "A carpenter."

"I'm a carpenter too!" says the old man. "And I'm looking for my son."

"What's special about your son?"

"He is famous all over the world."

"I'm famous all over the world too!" says Jesus. "What else?"

"He had nails in his hands and feet."

"I had nails in my hands and feet too!" exclaims Jesus and throws himself into the old man's arms, shouting, "Father!"

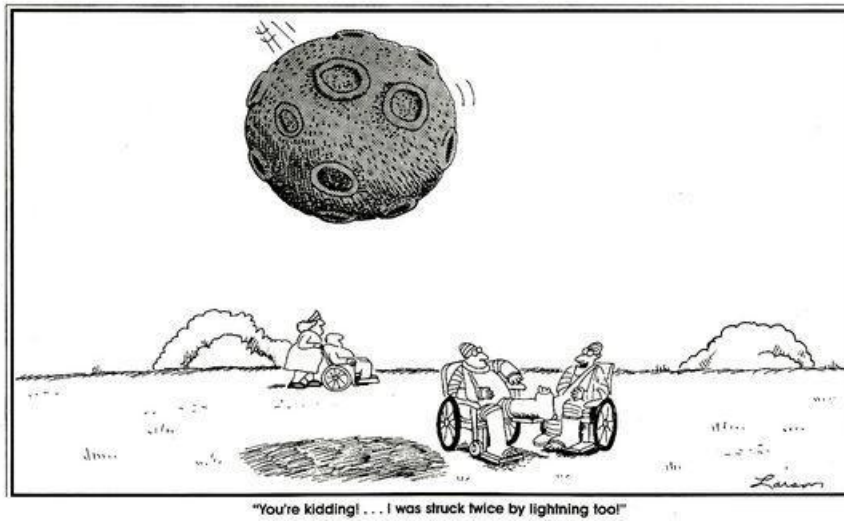
Geppetto hugs him back and says, "Pinocchio!"

The first to include coincidences as part of his theory of humor was Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), a mathematical prodigy in his youth, and a philosopher and theologian in his later years. Pascal noted that when we see two identical faces of non-twins, we laugh. For Larson, coincidences serve as a central motif.



In this cartoon, there is an “accidental” coincidence between a baby nursery and a dingo (wild Australian dogs) farm established side by side. The cartoon was published at a time that it was suspected that a dingo had snatched a baby from a camping tent. The proximity of the two locales looks coincidental at first, but a closer look reveals an ominous meaning—look at the line of dingoes watching their new neighbors hungrily!

Improbable coincidences also explain the humor in the next cartoon. Here not just one, or even two—three rare events coincide. One of the crippled men says – “What? Have you also been struck twice by lightning?”



The detachment here is of causal links. How likely is a person to be struck twice by lightning? The probability that it happens to two people who meet randomly is minute, but then another improbable event is looming—being struck by a meteorite. The conclusion that there is deep causality here seems inevitable. But in fact, there is no such causal connection.

Disconnection of responsibility for one's actions is a central mechanism in jokes. One common form appears in jokes about marriage and romantic choice, where responsibility for one's own decisions is displaced onto external circumstances.

A man stands in front of a gravestone in a cemetery, weeping bitterly, and asking,
 "Why did you die? O, Why did you die?"

Someone passing by notices and, being curious, asks,

"He must have been a relative of yours?"

"No," the man replies.

"A friend?"

"No, I didn't know him at all."

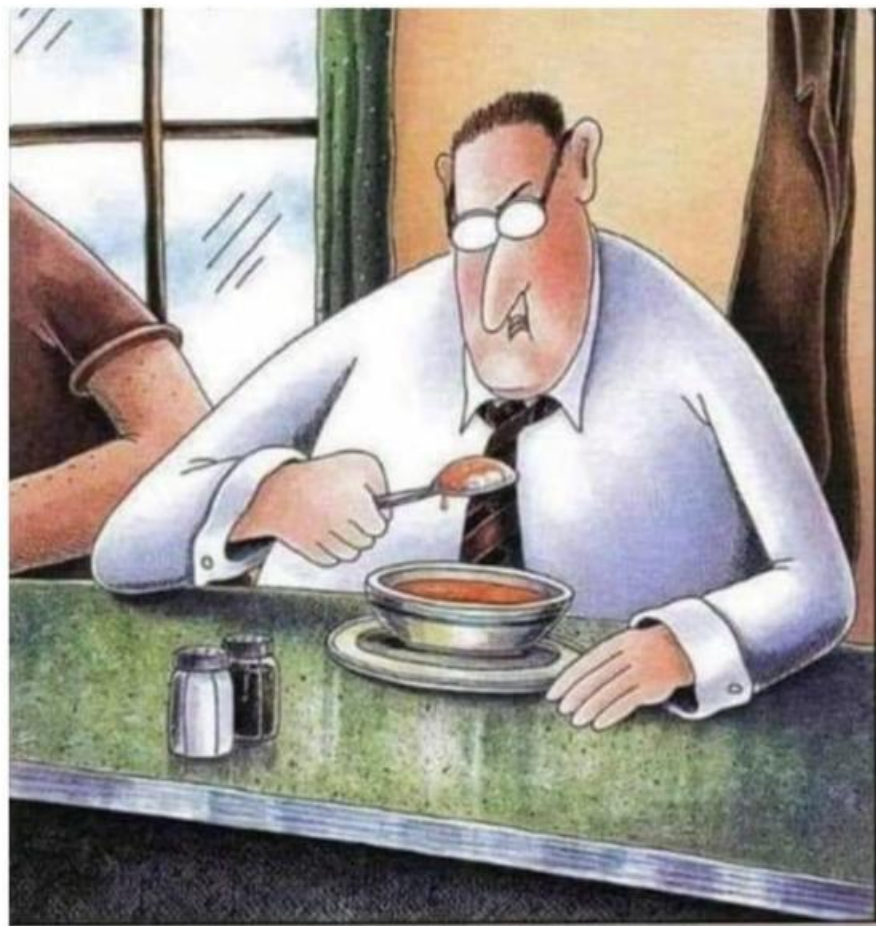
"Then why are you crying so much?"

"He was my wife's first husband."

The humor arises from the husband's implicit logic. Had the first husband remained alive, the speaker would never have married this woman and therefore would have been spared his current misery. Responsibility for his own marital choice is thus absurdly transferred onto the

dead man. The joke detaches intention and responsibility from the speaker's own actions and relocates them elsewhere.

The same mechanism appears in cartoons where protagonists confront ordinary objects as though these objects possessed independent agency. In the following cartoon, Darrell gazes gloomily at the spoon instead of simply turning it. As if it were imposed by fate rather than subject to intentional action.

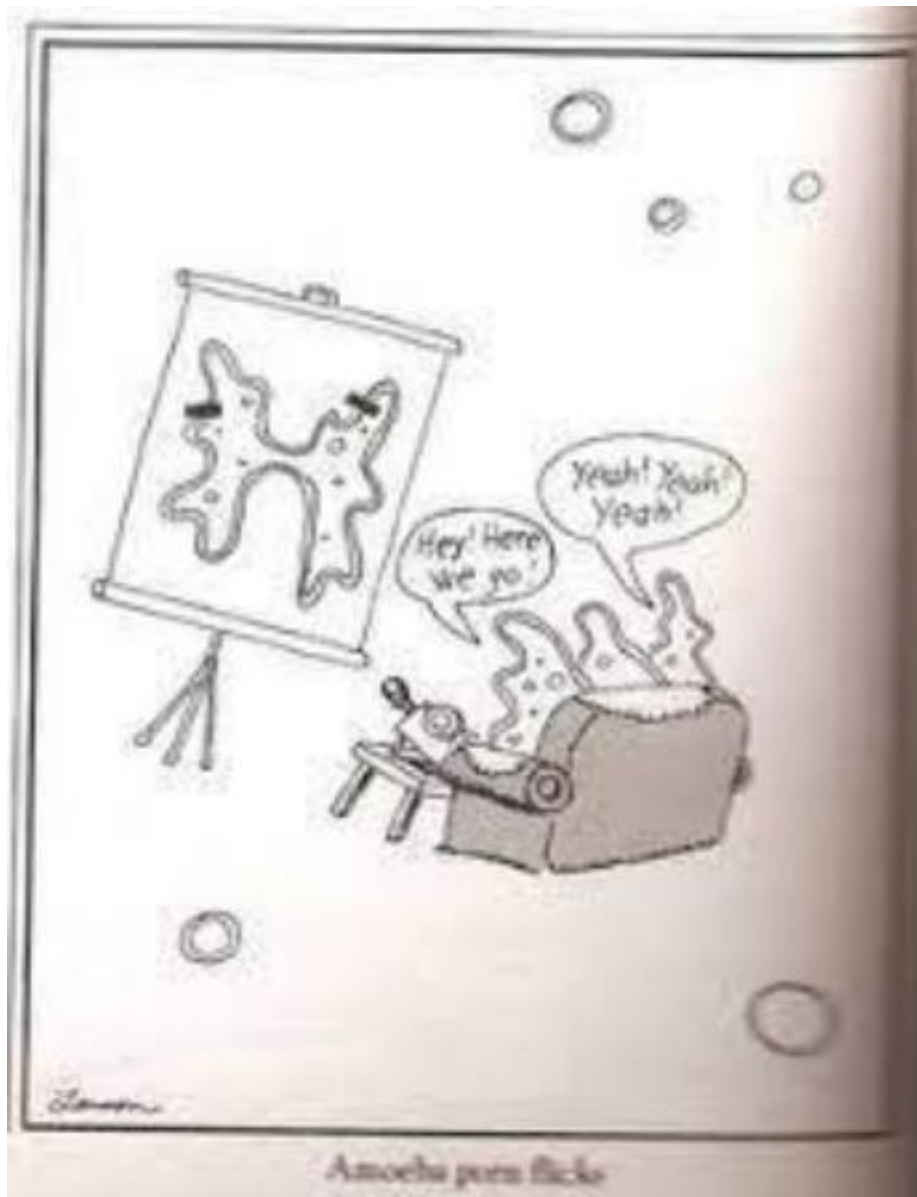


Darrell suspected someone had once again slipped him a trick spoon with the concave side reversed.

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Family C: Detachment of drive

A staple technique in Larson's humor is presenting situations that ordinarily evoke strong human drives—especially sexuality—from the perspective of creatures that possess no such drives or intentions. The effect depends precisely on this absence. The same cartoon would not work with higher animals, which themselves participate in sexual desire. Through the “eyes” of amoebas, however, sexuality appears entirely mechanical and devoid of emotional meaning.



Sex, the cartoon reminds us, is ultimately a biological function. From this detached perspective, the embarrassment and emotional intensity surrounding it appear strangely disproportionate. Pornography becomes absurd when presented to creatures incapable of sexual arousal.

The same mechanism explains the humor in the following joke:

The farmer's daughter instructs the inexperienced farmhand:

'Now push it in, now pull it out, now push it in, now pull it out.'

'Make up your mind already,' he replies, 'I need to feed the cows.'"

This is mechanization of sex—detaching it from the drive.

Family D: Defamiliarization

"Defamiliarization" is a term borrowed from literary theory, introduced by the Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984). It is also known as "de-automatization": presenting familiar expressions or situations in a way that makes them appear newly strange and forces conscious attention upon them. Humor frequently relies on this mechanism. Comedian Jack Benny, famous for jokes about his stinginess, used the technique in a well-known radio sketch from the 1950s. A robber points a gun at him and demands:

"Your money or your life!"

Silence ensues. After a moment, the robber repeats:

"Your money or your life!"

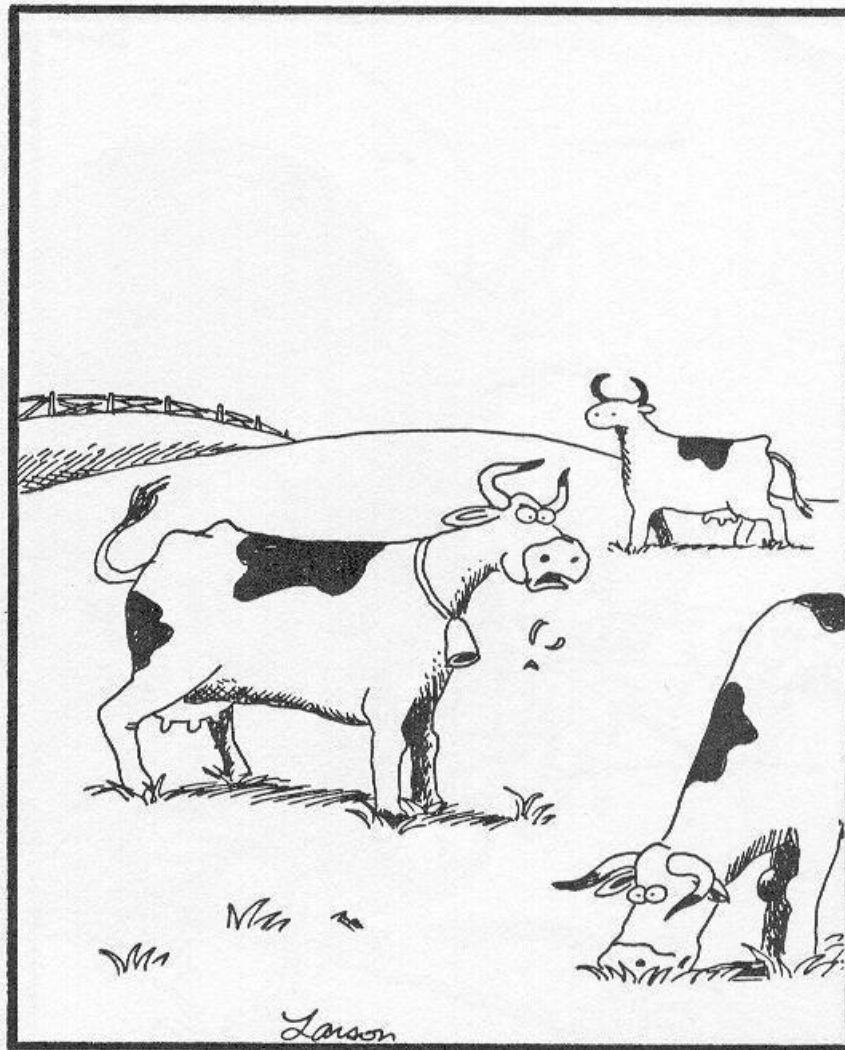
"I heard you," Benny retorts, "I'm thinking!"

The humor depends on restoring the phrase to its literal meaning. Ordinarily, "your money or your life" is not processed as a genuine choice; the correct response should be automatic. Benny suspends this automatism and treats the statement as though the alternatives deserved actual consideration. The familiar expression is detached from its conventional pragmatic meaning and reconsidered from scratch.

One interesting connection between these two families is that both involve removing a layer of automatic human interpretation. In detachment of drive instinctive emotional meaning disappears. In defamiliarization, habitual linguistic meaning disappears. In both cases, the

audience momentarily confronts human behavior stripped of the interpretive framework that normally renders it natural.

The following is one of my favorite Larson cartoons:



"Hey, wait a minute! This is grass! We've been eating grass!"

This cartoon is a strong example of **defamiliarization**, and it can also be read as a detachment of biological drive from its habitual meaning. The cows abruptly perceive grass not as the unexamined object of grazing, but as "grass"—a familiar substance made startlingly strange.

The key line is: "Hey, wait a minute! This is grass! We've been eating grass!" The comedy comes from treating an utterly ordinary, species-typical activity as a shocking discovery. Cows normally do not stand outside their own feeding behavior and classify its object

conceptually; they simply graze. Larson gives them a reflective, almost human awareness that interrupts this automatic relation to food.

Family E: Realization of metaphors

A familiar poetic and comic device is the realization of a metaphor: treating literally a figurative expression. The metaphor is no longer understood as referring beyond itself; instead, its words are taken at face value.

Girl: "I will never give you my heart."

Suitor: "I never aimed as high as that."

"Giving one's heart" is ordinarily a metaphor for love or emotional commitment. The suitor deliberately interprets it literally, as though the girl were speaking of an anatomical organ. He thereby shifts the remark to a lower, bodily level. The joke is a classic instance of detachment of meaning. The figurative meaning is removed, and the expression is treated as a description of an ordinary physical object.

The same device appears in the following cartoon:



The familiar parental threat, "If you do not eat your vegetables, a monster will come and take you away," is not normally intended or understood literally. Even children generally

recognize it as an exaggerated disciplinary formula. In the cartoon, however, the supposed monster actually arrives. The figurative or conventional threat is realized, and that realization produces the comic effect.

Family F: Pulling the rug from under our feet

Another common form of humor consists in pulling the rug out from beneath an assumption. A joke begins by inviting us to accept a certain framework, then reveals that the framework lacks its expected foundation.

“These are my principles. If you don’t like them, I have others.”

—Groucho Marx

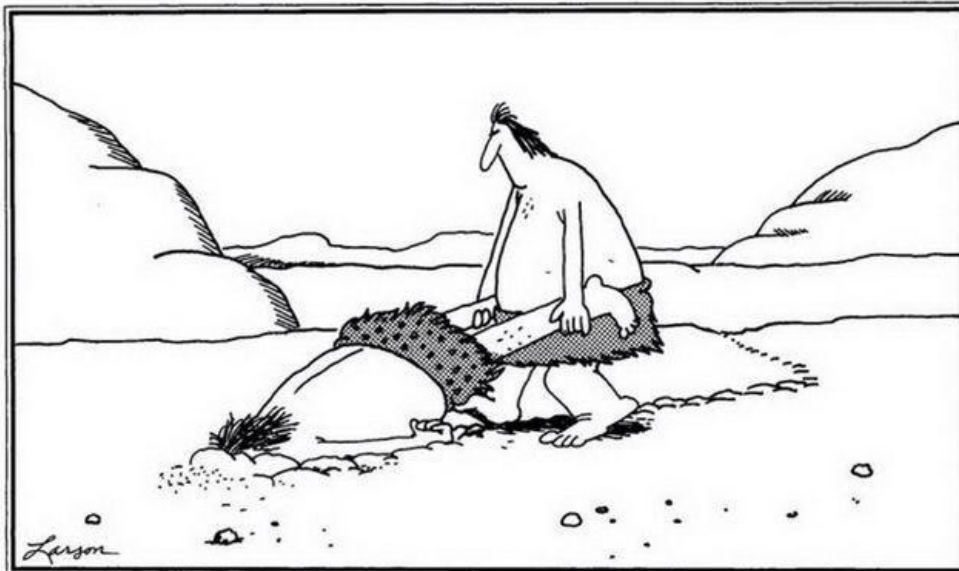
The first sentence invites us to regard the speaker as a person of firm principle. The second removes the basis for that impression. The word “principles” remains, but its ordinary meaning—stable moral commitments—has been detached from it.

The same structure appears in Larson cartoons built around games. A game such as rock-paper-scissors presupposes the existence of all three objects named in its title. In a Stone Age setting, that presupposition becomes faulty: rocks are readily available, but paper and scissors are not. The game’s conceptual framework is retained while the material conditions that give it meaning are removed.



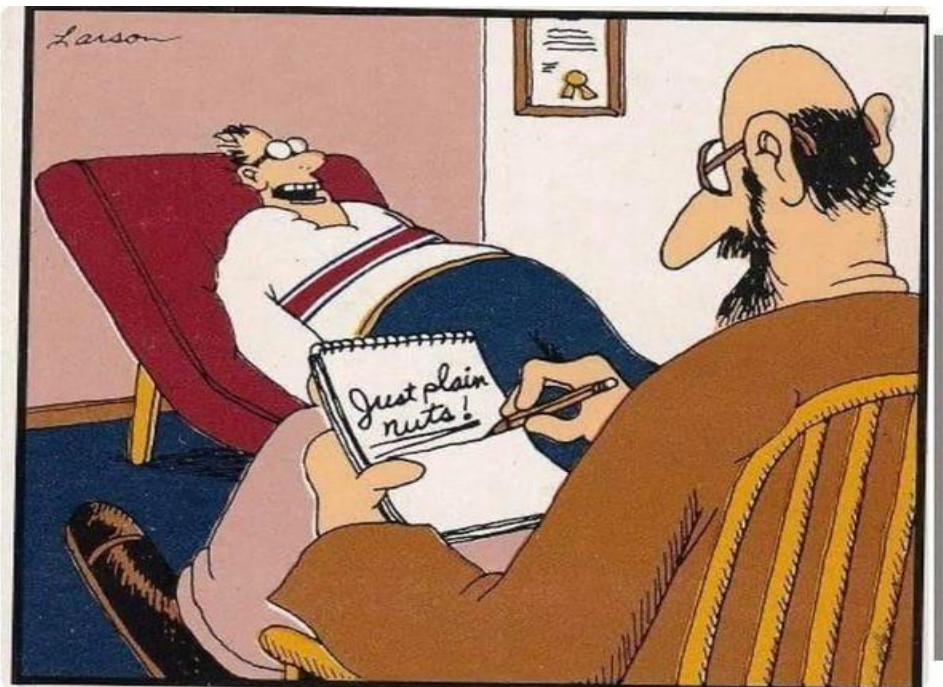
Before paper and scissors

A related cartoon may replace the game with “wheelbarrow,” while ignoring the fact that the wheel has not yet been invented. The joke depends on the collapse of an unnoticed background assumption. A wheelbarrow game is conceivable only where wheels exist; once that condition disappears, the game’s name and rules lose their footing.



"Barrow"—precursor to the game of "wheelbarrow"

The same mechanism can apply to professional authority. We assume that a psychiatrist listens attentively and tries to formulate a plausible, perhaps insightful, hypothesis about a patient's difficulty. In the next cartoon, that trust turns out to be misplaced: the psychiatrist's apparent "deep insight" turns out to be a blunt or superficial denunciation. The professional role remains visible, but the concern, understanding, and interpretive competence that normally give the role its meaning has been detached.

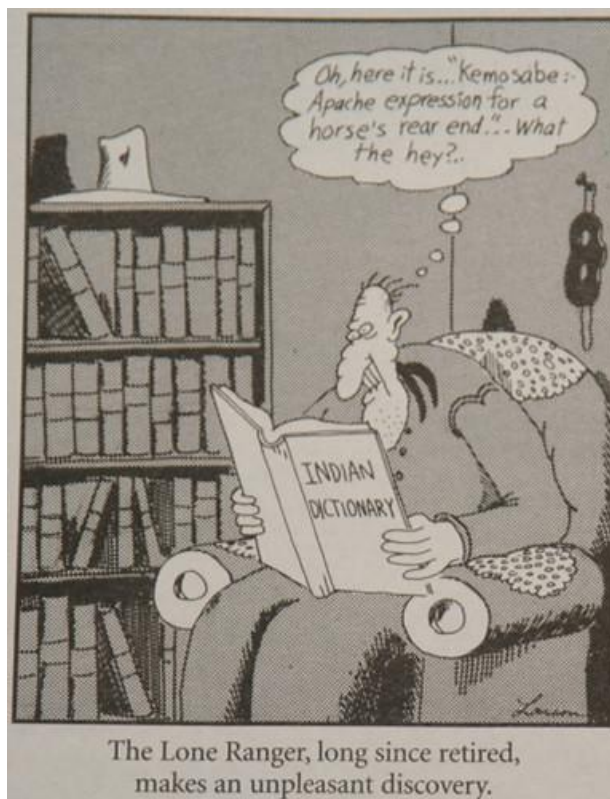


Family G

Family G: Charging with Meaning

The last cartoon I wish to mention illustrates the principle discussed in Section 7 of the summary: the loading, or charging, of an expression with new meaning rather than the detachment of an existing meaning. Charging with meaning is nevertheless a form of detachment, provided we do what the mind does especially well: move rapidly back and forth in time. What appears, in the present moment, as a newly acquired meaning simultaneously reveals that the earlier meaning has been detached. When a new connection is suddenly formed, we recognize the prior absence of that connection.

The cartoon below offers a classic illustration. The Lone Ranger suddenly understands the real meaning of the name the Indians have used for him. What he had previously taken as an honorific, or at least a serious name, is retrospectively charged with a new and embarrassing significance.



The comic effect lies in this retrospective reversal. The audience, along with the Lone Ranger, must reinterpret the entire earlier situation. A name that had seemed respectful becomes

meaningful in a way that exposes the hero's previous ignorance. The new meaning does not merely add information; it detaches the old, innocent interpretation and replaces it with another.

Conclusion

This paper has two aims. The first is to pay tribute to Gary Larson's genius. The second is to show that there is no fundamental divide between verbal and nonverbal humor. Verbal Jokes and cartoons (images as well as captions) operate through the same underlying mechanisms, even though they employ different media. I proposed a set of such mechanisms and illustrated them through examples: detachment of causality, intention, responsibility, drive, conventional meaning, and background assumptions, as well as the complementary process of suddenly charging an expression or situation with new meaning. In each case, humor operates within a conceptual structure that distinguishes a pointer or carrier of meaning from the meaning to which it points. The comic effect arises when that connection is detached, displaced, literalized, or retrospectively transformed.

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