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METHODS AND CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING HUMOROUS FRAGMENTS IN FICTION

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Abstract. Identifying humorous fragments in fictional discourse is an important methodological problem in linguistic humor research. Unlike conventional jokes, humorous elements in fiction may occur in dialogue, narration, characterization, description, or interaction and may not contain an explicit marker of comic intention. Therefore, identifying humorous fragments cannot rely only on laughter, humorous vocabulary, or the researcher's subjective interpretation. This article aims to develop a systematic set of criteria for identifying humorous fragments in fiction, with particular relevance to comparative English–Uzbek research. The study combines the Semantic Script Theory of Humor, the General Theory of Verbal Humor, pragmatic analysis, contextual interpretation, and linguocultural approaches. The proposed framework focuses on incongruity, script opposition, reinterpretation, pragmatic intention, linguistic devices, narrative context, and cultural knowledge. The study argues that a fictional fragment should be classified as humorous when several independent indicators support a comic interpretation. A five-level model is proposed, including linguistic, cognitive-semantic, pragmatic, narrative-contextual, and linguocultural levels. The methodology can be used for the systematic collection and annotation of humorous fragments and may provide a methodological foundation for comparative studies of humor in English and Uzbek fiction.

Keywords: humor, humorous fragment, fiction, identification criteria, script opposition, incongruity, pragmatics, linguoculturology, English, Uzbek.

Introduction

Humor is a complex linguistic, cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural phenomenon. Although numerous studies have examined the nature and functions of humor, one important methodological question remains: **how can a researcher objectively determine whether a particular fragment of fictional discourse is humorous?**

This problem is especially relevant when analyzing literary texts. Unlike conventional jokes, which often have a recognizable structure consisting of a setup and a punchline, humor in fiction may be distributed across several sentences or narrative episodes. A humorous effect may result from irony, exaggeration, lexical ambiguity, unexpected characterization, dialogue, metaphor, cultural reference, or a combination of several mechanisms.

Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) provides a useful framework for analyzing humorous texts. It identifies six Knowledge Resources: Script Opposition, Logical Mechanism, Situation, Target, Narrative Strategy, and Language. The theory can also be applied to literary texts such as short stories and poems.

Therefore, the present study addresses the following question: **What linguistic, cognitive, pragmatic, contextual, and cultural criteria can be used to identify humorous fragments in fiction?**The purpose of the study is to propose a practical framework for identifying and classifying humorous fragments, particularly for future comparative research on English and Uzbek fiction.

Theoretical Background

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One of the central concepts in humor research is **incongruity**. A humorous interpretation frequently appears when an established expectation conflicts with an actual situation or with an alternative interpretation. The general structure can be represented as: **Expectation → Incongruity → Reinterpretation → Comic effect**

For example: *He was famous for his punctuality. He was only three hours late this time.*

The second sentence contradicts the expectation established by the first sentence. However, incongruity alone does not necessarily create humor. Fiction contains many unexpected events that may be tragic, dramatic, or simply surprising. Therefore, incongruity should be considered an important indicator rather than a sufficient condition for humor. Another important concept is **Script Opposition**, developed within Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humor. According to this approach, humor may emerge when two incompatible scripts are activated. These can include oppositions such as success/failure, wisdom/stupidity, seriousness/playfulness, appearance/reality, or expectation/reality. Raskin and Attardo also connect humor with non-bona-fide communication and interpretive processes in which the hearer or reader moves beyond the literal interpretation.

The GTVH expands this approach by introducing six Knowledge Resources: **Script Opposition (SO), Logical Mechanism (LM), Situation (SI), Target (TA), Narrative Strategy (NS), and Language (LA)**. These resources are particularly useful for fiction because they allow researchers to consider both linguistic form and narrative organization.

Methods and Criteria for Identifying Humorous Fragments

For the purposes of this study, a **humorous fragment** is defined as a linguistically and contextually identifiable segment of fictional discourse in which incongruity, semantic opposition, pragmatic intention, narrative organization, or culturally shared knowledge contributes to a recognizable humorous interpretation. A fragment may consist of a word, phrase, sentence, dialogue exchange, paragraph, or larger narrative episode. The boundaries of the fragment should therefore be determined by semantic and pragmatic completeness rather than grammatical boundaries alone.

1. Incongruity

The first criterion is the presence of an identifiable discrepancy between expectation and reality, literal and implied meaning, or two interpretations.

For example: *The doctor told him he needed more exercise, so he started running away from his responsibilities.*

The humor is produced by the reinterpretation of *running* from a physical activity to a metaphorical expression. The researcher should ask:

Does the fragment contain a meaningful incongruity that can contribute to a comic interpretation?

2. Script Opposition

The second criterion is the activation of two incompatible scripts. A humorous fragment may contrast: wisdom and stupidity; seriousness and playfulness; appearance and reality; success and failure; politeness and rudeness; expectation and reality. For example: *He was considered the wisest man in the village because he had never asked a difficult question.*

The first part activates a **wisdom** script, whereas the second introduces an interpretation associated with ignorance or avoidance. Thus, the researcher should determine whether two opposing scripts can be reconstructed from the fragment and its context.

3. Reinterpretation

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A humorous fragment often requires the reader to reinterpret an initially established meaning. For example: *The manager wanted employees who could think outside the box. Tom moved his desk into the corridor.*

The expression *think outside the box* is normally interpreted metaphorically. The character's action creates a literal interpretation, producing a humorous effect. Consequently, the researcher should examine whether the fragment activates more than one possible interpretation.

4. Pragmatic Intention

Humor is not simply a formal linguistic phenomenon. It may perform a particular communicative function. A humorous fragment may: criticize; ridicule; establish solidarity; soften disagreement; reduce tension; characterize a person; comment on social behavior.

For example: *"Wonderful. Another meeting," she said.*

The literal positive meaning of *wonderful* contrasts with the negative contextual situation. The utterance can therefore function as humorous criticism or irony. Attardo's semantic-pragmatic approach emphasizes the importance of considering pragmatic interpretation alongside semantic mechanisms in humor.

5. Linguistic Indicators

Several linguistic devices may support the identification of humor: lexical ambiguity; polysemy; homonymy; wordplay; metaphor; idiomatic reinterpretation; hyperbole; understatement; irony.

However, these devices should not automatically be classified as humorous. A metaphor, for example, becomes relevant to humor only when its use contributes to a recognizable comic interpretation.

6. Narrative and Contextual Criteria

Context is particularly important in fictional humor. A sentence may appear humorous when isolated but lose its comic interpretation within the broader narrative. Conversely, a seemingly neutral sentence may become humorous because of information provided earlier in the story.

Therefore, three contextual levels should be considered: **Micro-context:** surrounding sentences and dialogue. **Meso-context:** paragraph, scene, or interaction. **Macro-context:** the wider narrative, character development, and cultural setting.

Character-based humor is a particularly important example. A character may become humorous through repeated demonstrations of incompetence, excessive confidence, naivety, hypocrisy, or social awkwardness. In such cases, humor emerges cumulatively rather than from a single sentence.

7. Linguocultural Criteria

Cultural knowledge is essential when analyzing humor in different languages. A humorous fragment may depend on: proverbs; idioms; historical references; cultural stereotypes; social customs; family relations; traditional values; culturally specific metaphors; precedent names and texts. Kianbakht emphasizes that culturally constructed humor requires attention to cultural categories, cultural metaphors, and cultural schemas. This is particularly important in English–Uzbek comparative research because a fragment may be immediately humorous to members of one cultural community but difficult to interpret for readers from another cultural background.

Proposed Five-Level Identification Model

Based on the theoretical discussion, the study proposes a five-level model for identifying humorous fragments:

Level	Main elements

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Level	Main elements
Linguistic	wordplay, ambiguity, metaphor, irony, hyperbole
Cognitive-semantic	incongruity, script opposition, reinterpretation
Pragmatic	intention, implicature, speech act, interpersonal function
Narrative-contextual	character, situation, narrative strategy, surrounding context
Linguocultural	cultural schema, cultural metaphor, social norms, cultural references

The model can be summarized as:

LINGUISTIC → COGNITIVE → PRAGMATIC → NARRATIVE → LINGUOCULTURAL

The more levels that provide converging evidence, the stronger the justification for classifying a fragment as humorous.

Identification Procedure For practical corpus research, the following procedure can be applied:

1. Initial reading: read the fictional text and identify potentially humorous passages.

2. Candidate extraction: mark words, sentences, dialogues, or episodes that appear potentially humorous.

3. Contextual verification: examine the preceding and following context.

4. Mechanism identification: identify incongruity, script opposition, wordplay, irony, metaphor, hyperbole, or another mechanism.

5. Functional analysis: determine whether the fragment entertains, criticizes, characterizes, establishes solidarity, or performs another function.

6. Cultural analysis: determine whether interpretation depends on culturally shared knowledge.

7. Final classification: classify the fragment as:

- **H — Humorous**
- **PH — Potentially humorous / context-dependent**
- **NH — Non-humorous**

This procedure can reduce subjective identification and make the process more transparent.

Exclusion Criteria

Several phenomena should not automatically be classified as humor.

First, **mere surprise** does not necessarily constitute humor. Second, **irony** can be serious or tragic and therefore is not always humorous. Third, **sarcasm** may express aggression without producing a comic effect. Fourth, the presence of **metaphor, unusual vocabulary, or exaggeration** alone does not prove humor. Finally, words such as *laughed*, *smiled*, or *chuckled* do not necessarily indicate that the preceding fragment itself is humorous.

These distinctions are particularly important for constructing a reliable corpus.

Discussion. The analysis demonstrates that identifying humor in fiction requires a multidimensional approach. No single linguistic marker can adequately identify all humorous fragments. Thus:

Irony ≠ always humor; **Incongruity ≠ always humor; Metaphor ≠ always humor;**
Wordplay ≠ always humor

Instead, humorous classification should be based on the convergence of linguistic, cognitive, pragmatic, contextual, and cultural evidence. The GTVH provides a useful theoretical foundation because it enables researchers to examine both the linguistic realization and the broader structure of

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humorous texts. Empirical research has also investigated the Knowledge Resources proposed by the theory and provided support for several of its predictions.

For English–Uzbek comparative research, however, a purely formal approach is insufficient. Cultural schemas, social norms, culturally salient metaphors, and historical references may be essential to the interpretation of humorous fragments. Therefore, the proposed model combines **GTVH + pragmatics + narrative context + linguocultural analysis**.

Conclusion. Identifying humorous fragments in fiction is a significant methodological issue in linguistic humor research. Unlike conventional jokes, fictional humor may be distributed across dialogue, narration, characterization, situational context, and culturally embedded references.

The present study proposes a five-level framework consisting of linguistic, cognitive-semantic, pragmatic, narrative-contextual, and linguocultural criteria. The principal indicators include incongruity, script opposition, reinterpretation, pragmatic intention, linguistic devices, narrative function, and cultural knowledge. The main methodological principle is that **no single feature should automatically determine whether a fragment is humorous**. Instead, humor should be established through the convergence of several independent indicators and through verification of the wider textual and cultural context.

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