

# The semiology of humour: developing the “counter-sign” model

**Marina Borodenko**

Moscow Institute of Psychoanalysis, Russia  
[vp7766404@gmail.com](mailto:vp7766404@gmail.com)

**Vadim Petrovsky**

National Research University “Higher School of Economics”, Russia  
[petrowsky@mail.ru](mailto:petrowsky@mail.ru)

## Abstract

*A semiology-based approach to understanding humour is being developed and an interpretation of humour as a “counter-sign,” a two-faced sign within the space of conventionality, is put forward. The range of core attributes to interpret the phenomenon of humour is determined. The concepts of the “frame of significance,” “conventionality,” and “meta-communicative marker of conventionality” are elaborated. The general definition of humour is being formulated as a “sign-based identification of non-identifiable signs within the space of conventionality.” An outline is put forward to enable the formal distinction between satire, humour, irony, and jokes. The following questions are addressed: “Why does that which is funny cease to be so if it is repeated many times?”, “Why can the terrifying become funny when recollected?” “Why is the state of bewilderment not always funny but returning to it in one’s thoughts triggers laughter?”*

*Keywords: humour, semiology, trigger, counter-sign, conventionality, meta-communication*

## 1. Introduction

From the very moment that they attempt to define the phenomenon, researchers are confronted with the essentially paradoxical nature of humour. In the words of Jean Paul (1981 [1804]), humour possesses the nature of Proteus in that it eludes definition by taking on various forms. The centuries-long history of attempts to define the concept of “humour” provides a wealth of material for the modern systematization of ideas about the phenomenon (Borev 2003; Martin 2007; Zaynullina, Lavrentiev et al. 2017) as a result of the collision of such opposite principles as the ugly and the beautiful (Aristotle 1962), the insignificant and the sublime (Kant 2007), the absurd and the reasonable (Schopenhauer 1999-2001), infinite predestination and infinite arbitrariness (Schelling 2013), the mechanical and the living (Bergson 2012), the valueless and

that which lays claim to value (Volkelt 1905-1914), the insignificant and the great (Lipps 1898), the imaginary and the real (Hegel 1975), and others. All concepts of humour are dominated by the idea of deviating from the norm (Dziemidok 1974) but this idea turns out to be too abstract to explain the specifics of humour and, in the view of the German philosopher and mathematician Adolf Zeising, merely expands the idea of the “comedy of errors” in our attempts to arrive at a general definition (Zeising 1854). Paradoxically, all historically established definitions of humour are, as Dziemidok puts it, either a size too small or a size too large; we would add that sometimes they are just a “half-size” larger than is necessary.

The main concern of this study is the possibility of constructing a semiological interpretation of humour that is represented in culture by the idea of a deliberate discrepancy between things as they are and things as they should be (Petrovsky, Borodenko, 2005).

The purpose of this work is to describe core attributes of humour in the development of the “counter-sign” model: a self-opposing sign, which “depletes” its signifier (Borodenko 1995<sup>1</sup>); also, it aims to substantiate the thesis according to which humour has a “sign” structure, existing as it does on a conventional plane with no prototype in reality<sup>2</sup>.

We have adhered to the method of comparative analysis and semiological reconstruction of models of humour in various cultural contexts (aesthetics, ethics, cultural, and historical psychology).

## 2. Understanding humour

Henceforth, when speaking about situations which cause laughter, we will mainly use the long-established term “humour” to denote all comical things (as opposed to the word “humor,” which is encountered much more frequently in contemporary literature). This is to allow space within the typology, including, as it does, “humour” along with “irony,” “satire,” “joke,” as well as other related concepts. When referring to the concept of the “sign,” we rely on the semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure (de Saussure, 1983 [1922]), where the sign is the unity of the signifier and the signified:

$$\frac{\text{Signifier}(S)}{\text{Signified}(P)}$$

Using de Saussure’s semiological theory as a starting point, we define a symbol as a “two-sided psychological entity”: the unity of the signifier (the real of expression, S) and the signified (the real of meaning, P). For instance, the acoustic image of the word “tree” would be the signifier of the sign, and its definition – the signified.

Humour, being a sign, is no different and entails both these parts. However, in this case, the signifier and the signified have a complex structure and, as such, we will be referring to it as a complex sign.

### 2.1. Humour, as a complex sign, is the unity and mutual transition of signs which are opposite in meaning

Within humour (and its signified), two signs co-exist – Sign-1 (SP) and Sign-2 ((S\*)/(not P)) – which are opposite in meaning (in their signified) and alternate with one another as signifier and signified (see Fig. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> In Russian psychology, the work of M. V. Borodenko (1995), which began in the mid-80s of the last century, was perhaps one of the first to focus on the phenomenon of humour.

<sup>2</sup> The first experience of this understanding and the general definition of humour are presented in a joint paper by Petrovsky & Borodenko (2005, 134-135).

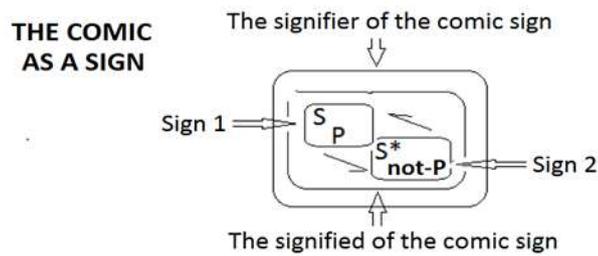


Figure 1. The composition of humour as a complex sign

The *signified* is represented by the outer border; this is the sensual, holistic apprehension of a situation, central to its perception (“the figure”). It encompasses a collision of other signs, thereby constituting the signifier (note that some “background” aspects of the situation’s perception, substantial for humour, are not reflected on the figure yet). The *signifier* is denoted by the inner border, pointed to by a vertical up-down arrow; it consists of two signs, 1 and 2, with contrary signified components, P and not-P. The signs 1 and 2 are, alternately, the *signified* and the *signifier* in relation to each other (diagonal arrows).

Here, the signs of large and small, worthy and unworthy, noble and vulgar, unknown and self-evident, reasonable and absurd, etc. substitute one another.

The humorous effect is achieved through thought, alternately turning each of these signs into the signifier of the other (with the latter accordingly acting as the signified). Thus, Cervantes’ windmill transforms into the giant; the chief clerk in Bulgakov’s novel becomes the coat signing papers. We should note that the founder of the semantic theory of humour, Victor Raskin (1985), when describing humour’s logical mechanism, highlights the transitions of the figure to the background and back again. We would emphasize that the difference between the above and perceptual metamorphoses is that the “figure” and the “background” in humour metamorphoses alternate within the composition of the sign, being either the signifiers or the signified. The seeming analogy with perceptive phenomena does not fit here: the vase (the figure) and two profiles facing each other (the background), alternating, *do not enter* into sign relations with each other (figure/background ↔ background/figure).

The “castling” of the “signified ↔ signifier” most clearly appears in an example cited by Arthur Koestler in his bisociative concept of humour (Koestler, 1975): “A marquis of the court of Louis XV unexpectedly returned from a journey and, on entering his wife’s boudoir, found her in the arms of a bishop. After a moment’s hesitation, the marquis walked calmly to the window, leaned out, and began going through the motions of blessing the people in the street. ‘What are you doing?’ cried the anguished wife. ‘Monseigneur is performing my functions, so I am performing his’” (quoted from: Zaynullina, Lavrentiev et al. 2017: 36).

The linguistic arrangement of humour as a complex sign is markedly different from the organization of statements including words which have many possible meanings. These meanings, when interpreted as the signified of the corresponding signs, are usually neither the signifiers nor signified (“aspects”) of each other; they “simply” coexist, regardless of whether they are compatible or incompatible with one other. So the mathematical symbol X can have many meanings (for example, in complex numbers, four suitable values of X can be specified in the equation  $X = \sqrt[4]{1}$ ,  $X_1=1$ ;  $X_2 = -1$ ;  $X_3 = i$ ;  $X_4 = -i$ ); however, the coexistence of these meanings in natural and formal languages, as a rule, does not raise a smile.

In a humorous situation, the funny is not at all that some X or other deviates from the norm or ideal X\*, but rather that we mistakenly take one to be the other; what is “funny” is not that we first think one thing and then something else about the same thing that is the opposite of the

first, but that something completely different was hiding for us under the guise of one thing and we are now revealing this appearance (or are close to such a reveal). An intrigue is created that induces the resolution of semantic paradoxes (most cognitive theories target the experience of discrepancy and the search for a solution).

There are two options for constructing humour as a complex sign.

*The first option* is “sign dualities.” The presence of Sign-1 and Sign-2 in a humorous sign is characterized by a mismatch of both the signifiers ( $S \neq S^*$ ) and the signified of both signs ( $P$  and  $non-P$ ). This is an instance of contradiction between two mismatched signifieds of a humour sign.

An example is the drawing “A Stradivarius violin, a label, and a man in a fur hat” (see Fig. 2):



Figure 2. “A Stradivarius violin, a label, and a man in a fur hat” (by R. Dolzhenets)

It is an illustration of the *conventional* sign identification of unidentifiable signs. We see the intentionally coarse and unnatural image of an uncouth man with a dull face expression, his hat cocked at an angle, a cigarette-butt between his teeth, to mark the conditionality of the sign situation and the logically contradictory combination of the two signs.

The written label with the inscription “Stradivarius (2nd grade)” and the drawing of a Stradivarius violin play alternately in the viewer’s mind, either in the role of the signifier or in the role of the signified; they seem to wink at each other without ever leaving the drawing, a complex sign of their temporary union.

*The second option* is ambiguous signs. Here, the signifier of Sign-1 coincides with the signifier of Sign-2 ( $S = S^*$ ), while the signifieds differ substantially. These are self-opposing signs. Such signs can be described and interpreted in different terms: in Raskin’s theory, as a *trigger switch* between different scenarios of understanding a situation (Raskin 1985; Raskin, Hempelmann et al. 2009); or in the concept of Marina Borodenko, as a counter-sign (Borodenko 1991, 1995). In both cases, we are dealing with a dual, *bipolar signifier*.

The following often cited joke from the works of Raskin can be used to explain the idea of a “trigger”: “Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. ‘No,’ the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. ‘Come right in.’” (Raskin, 1985: 111).

Raskin believes that the following two conditions should be met in order to create humour in a verbal joke:

- the text is compatible, either fully or in part, with two different scenarios;
- the two scenarios with which the text is compatible are opposite; the two scenarios with which the text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part in the text (Raskin, 1985: 99).

The laughter effect is formed because the trigger at the end of the joke prompts the listener or reader to drastically switch their understanding from one (usually more obvious) scenario to an additional, opposite scenario.

Both options of the humorous sign (sign duality and ambiguous signs) can be described in a unified way through the idea of a “counter-sign” (a dynamic sign, a destroyer of signs). In the *counter-sign* concept, the dual signifier within the comedy is a shifting element associated with the signifieds, which are opposite in meaning (Borodenko, 1995). The mobility of this element is determined by the actions of the comedy bearer (the narrator, the comedian, the clown, the fool), although the observer is also able to dynamize the signifier themselves, mentally incorporating it into various contexts and thereby “turning” it back onto itself with new aspects: this is, we should note, the general mechanism of thinking interpreted by Sergei Rubinstein as “analysis through synthesis” (Rubinstein 1958). As a result, the signifieds which are opposite in meaning, in coexistence, destroy (“deplete”) the sign. Hence the term “counter-sign.”

While ordinary signs, according to de Saussure, have a two-link structure (the unity of the signifier and the signified), the defining attribute of the counter-sign is its underlying three-link structure (see Fig. 3):

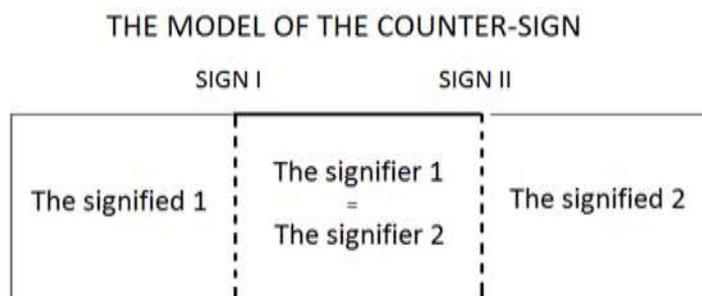


Figure 3. The counter-sign (Borodenko 1995)

An example of a counter-sign is the laughter of a fool (turning things inside out, buffoonery, smutty words, exposure) which enables an explicit manifestation (in an outwardly expanded form) of the usually convoluted dynamics of the “castling” of the signified, while the signifieds repeatedly erase one another; hence the term “counter-sign,” the destroyer of signs (Borodenko 1995).

The counter-sign also differs from the ordinary sign in that it does not perform the designatory function that is typical for the latter, but is rather a means of deforming existing signs, as it destroys the certainty of their signifieds and “erodes” their meanings.

We shall explain the above by highlighting three ways of perceiving any situation which exists in the mind. The first instance is a situation identified with reality (the world “as it is” = a naive picture of the world, that is, not a sign). In the second case, the “situation” is a collection of signs (be they signs of real or imaginary objects, for example, people in a crowd in a photograph of a town square). The third variation is a certain sign which combines the signifier and the signified (“All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players (...)” (Shakespeare 1993 [1623])).

When dealing with a humorous situation, the audience initially ascribes the status of a sign to it, along with certain integrity (storytelling, public action, a mental “playing out” of situations, an installation, film, drawing, etc. – everything that is addressed to someone and has a direction and an implied meaning).

There are markers of “significance” which show that we are faced with not just a sign situation, but with a sign that covers different aspects of the situation, possibly including other

signs. The presence of such markers enables the audience to distinguish, even with a fleeting glance, a documentary (a sign situation) from a feature film (the sign of a situation).

It seems that the counter-sign is a fragment of a more general sign situation; it is a sign among the signs that constitute a system; it exists, as we say, within the frames of significance (or, according to Koestler, in an “associative context,” “conceptual space” etc.).

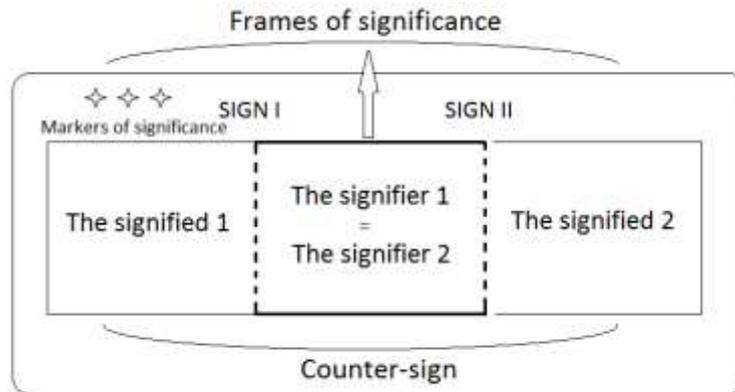


Figure 4. The counter-sign and breaking through the frames of significance. The counter-sign as a part of a sign situation (a story, a show, a dialogue, a mental conversation with oneself, etc.) and the signified of this sign

Usually, when speaking of the word “signifier,” we imply the observed side of the sign, “inside” which the signified is located. But, as we emphasize, the “external contour” of the counter-sign goes beyond the boundaries of its own signifier: the sign situation, combining within itself many signs, sets a wider framework for their existence; it endows them with a single property, the presence of the “signifier-signified” connection. Usually such a framework for the existence of signs is invisible – a person does not distinguish it in their consciousness since the thought connection of “signifier” and “signified” is automatically actualized.

Humour is another matter entirely. Suddenly, it turns out that its signifier and signified are in special, “non-sign” relations with each other, as if violating the “framework agreements”; the counter-sign splits into parts and undermines the “signifier-signified” connection (metaphorically, it “crosses the line”). Hence, we speak of it as the “*counter-sign*.”

The affirmation of the content inherent to signs becomes lost here; the movement of transition, merger, opposition, and, ultimately, the mutual annihilation of the signified becomes the signified. The counter-sign is a sign of equality, equal opportunities, and, at the same time, the abolition of each of the alternatives; it possesses a special quality of the contradictory “co-sensing” of meanings (“*both this and the other*” + “*neither the one nor the other*”). The “funny” is the existence “between” opposites, when it is impossible to express and rationalize one’s emotional state (it is impossible to explain “*what’s funny*”).

A combination of signs with opposite meanings in the composition of a complex sign is a necessary, but clearly insufficient, attribute of humour. Therefore, the set of attributes that make up the definition of humour must be extended.

## 2.2. Humour is a blank sign

The idea of destroying a sign from the inside, mentioned in the interpretation of humour as a trigger and a counter-sign, also extends to humour with binary signifiers. In either case, each of the two composite signs destroys itself from within, thereby losing any certainty and connection

with objects existing in reality. Two blank signs form an empty unity; therefore, the signified of humour is, as a sign, empty:

$$\frac{Sign1}{Sign2} = \emptyset; \frac{Sign2}{Sign1} = \emptyset; \emptyset + \emptyset = \emptyset.$$

In other words, given the mutual annihilation of the signifiers and the signified within humour, a semantic vacuum arises in their place, which interrupts the process of the stereotyped reproduction of existing forms of activity (analogous to the “pattern breakdown” in NLP). Thus, it has been empirically demonstrated that humour destabilizes the personal settings of the subject, causing a restructuring in their behaviour and thinking (Borodenko 1991, 1995).

The phenomenon noted above, of the internal depletion of humour as a sign, that is to say, the destruction of its signified, is not seen as negative by the audience. On the contrary, it is welcomed, accompanied by hedonistically positive experiences. According to Aristotle, “The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others” (Aristotle 1962: 6). Why, as a result of the destruction of certainty inherent in signs, does a person experience pleasure rather than suffering?

Here are three possible answers.

1) The components of the signified “erasing” themselves and each other are the *signs* of objects, but not objects as such. The “smutty words” of the fool do not indicate his impaired judgement; the patient who is also the lover cannot be caught by the doctor who is the husband of the unfaithful wife; the man in the fur hat is not trying to flog a violin whose value is unknown to him, etc. The signs exaggerate, distort, tease, or scare but they do not punish. Unlike things and people, they are light and pliable; here “everything can become anything” (as in a children’s game); the destruction of signs is not detrimental: that’s why they’re signs!

It is necessary to emphasize the difference between the proposed *semiology* of humour and its seemingly “synonymous” and seemingly permissible *semiotics*. In our model, transitions within a complex sign are a game of signifiers and the signifieds, they do not leave the realm of signs, and, unlike the “signs” in the models of Charles Sanders Peirce (1883), Charles W. Morris (1964), and other semioticians, they do not indicate an external object. In terms of Raskin’s classic model, “alternative scenarios,” which coexist in a complex sign and are triggered, push each other apart but they do not, we should point out, push each other beyond the limits of this sign and do not create anything out of place.

2) Humour “deactivates” the familiar meanings of objects and cleanses the mind so as to enable it to perceive and produce the new. As a mechanism for the development of culture, through the destruction of stereotypes, humour is described in the fundamental works of Yuri Lotman (1992), Dmitry Likhachev (1975), and Alexandr Kozintsev (2010). The appearance of “counter-signs” in culture can be considered as a condition for going beyond the limits of the present; the mechanism of “cleansing” the consciousness mediated by the counter-sign, and its role in the movement of culture, is substantiated in the work of Borodenko (1995). Borodenko’s research validates the notion that humour (humour) “marks out” the child’s “zone of proximal development” (in the words of Lev Vygotsky): that is, what goes beyond the limits of the just mastered norm (“the new norm”) is the “funny” thing (Borodenko 1991). An example of this is the “toilet humour” of children learning to control their bodily functions (later on, these “jokes” come to be perceived as stupid, primitive or vulgar, inviting contempt rather than laughter).

3) *Instant loss of reality*. Alexandr Kozintsev (2010), who shared the view of humour in the counter-sign model, emphasizes the “anti-referential function” of humour. In particular, the author writes: “in shaking our bodies, laughter frees us from words, thoughts and our feelings, and brings us to blissful temporary thoughtlessness, insensibility and inaction. This “shake-up of the soul” is a brief and healing respite from the burden that humanity has shouldered

throughout anthropogenesis and cultural genesis. Nature temporarily takes revenge in its rivalry with culture. Laughter is the reaction of our nature to the “human revolution” (Kozintsev, 2010: 199).

In order to elaborate on the above, we will emphasize the quoted words “respite from the burden”: they quite accurately express the essence of the existential effect of humour. A laughing man is temporarily freed from censorship, from adherence to the requirements of the “society in one’s head,” from cultural stereotypes, from the need to follow the principle of reality to the detriment of the pleasure of “the here and now.” *The loss of reality* is an extraordinary experience, akin to the experience of going into a special dimension, one that is metaphorically “perpendicular” to life.

Let us emphasize emotionally what has been said. Is there any other way, besides humour, to reach this state of being “beyond reality”? Even a dream, as a “fulfilment of desires” (Freud 2008 [1900]), although it leaves a person “one-on-one” with everyone, nevertheless realizes the socially structured promptings of the dreamer, no matter how uncensored they are from the point of view of the super-ego (even the early regime of desire, according to Jacques Lacan, is determined from the outside: “My desire happens to be the desire of the Other” (Lacan 1998: 195)).

Laughter is a unique way for a person to go beyond the boundaries of the earthly, the mundane, the cultural – it is a true, albeit short-term, loss of reality, the evidence of the existential justification of humour. Humour, as a sign, introduces into the world of signs (or rather, into the sign system) a moment of absurdity that objectively affects the functioning potential of other signs (for they are all interconnected within the sign system). To emphasize this relationship, we shall imagine for a moment that the king in chess goes crazy, changes his gender and imagines that he is the queen and is now “allowed to do anything.” At this point, the game of chess can be considered won as well as lost. The craziness (self-destruction) of one of the signs is reflected in the sanity of other signs in the system, so that, for example, the term “counter-sign” justifies its name by the fact that it can “bring down” the functioning of other signs. Perhaps that is why the counter-sign has the role of “innovator” in the movement of culture (the laughter of the fool in the interpretation of Borodenko).

We shall make note that, in formal systems, any lie implicates “anything.” For example, in the witty book by an outstanding English mathematician John Littlewood, *A Mathematician’s Miscellany*, we read: “X finds gravitational waves in these conditions, but there is a suggestion that there is a mistake in the work. Clearly, any mistake generates gravitational waves,” as Littlewood comments on the “discovery” (Littlewood 1979: 46).

Therefore, “depletion” is a further core feature of humour. However, even in conjunction with its other characteristics outlined above (namely, the union of conflicting signs), the definition of humour remains incomplete.

### **3. The marker of conventionality**

In the concept of the counter-sign, Borodenko also expressed the idea of the conventionality of conflicts between the signified in a counter-sign. This thesis is further developed in the present study.

The absence of objects outside that correspond to Sign 1 and Sign 2 and the destruction of these signs as such do not leave a person with a feeling of emptiness associated with the collapse of the signified of humour<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, the feeling of emptiness is impossible, although, in psychological counselling, there is a typical answer to the consultant’s question that does not require effort on the part of the client. Psychiatrist: “What are you feeling right now?” Client (shrugging): “Nothing.”

The mutual annihilation of these signs results in a paradoxical experience of the impossibility of what is currently happening, where the signs, which are opposite in meaning, are identical to each other. A vivid example of experiences falling outside of the realm of thought are impossible objects. “The specificity of the world of experiences consists in the fact that it is where the non-existent exists and the unthinkable finds itself” (Petrovsky 1996: 276-277).

However, impossible objects, in and of themselves, are not funny.

Is humour, as a sign, capable of retaining within itself this experience of impossibility (the identity of the unidentifiable)? We believe that the ability to grasp the experience of identity of the non-identifiable, the emptiness of the signified, as part of a humorous sign, forms its third necessary attribute. In this case, experiences which have either not yet become or have already ceased to be a thought, as well as an experience of the unthinkable, could be a true signified of humour as a sign.

### 3.1. “Beyond the thought”

In laughing, we could find ourselves *on the other side* of thought, in the realm of the unthinkable; we could discard the exoskeleton of thinking and refer to experiences that cannot be rationalized (objectified). This is possible only if, within a person’s perceptual field, there is a sign of *non-reality* in a given paradoxical identity, namely the indication: *this is not present, this is just a sign, this is impossible, we are faced with something artificial, far-fetched, exclusively subjective*, etc. Essentially, we are talking about the existence of a marker of the *impossibility of the impossible*; we will also speak of it as a *marker of conventionality (fiction, irreality)*.

Humour as a complex sign does indeed incorporate this marker, and its absence would be destructive for the laughter effect (see Figs. 4 and 5).

An illustration. Suppose we see that something massive and ugly, swaying as it moves, is slowly coming toward us; the creature looks similar to a tyrannosaurus and has small arms and a huge human-like head, vaguely reminiscent, oh horror, of our own. But the terrible and repulsive creature is no longer scary as soon as we understand that we are looking at ourselves in a distorting mirror (at a funfair). We find it funny because it is only the reflection in the mirror that is crooked. Similarly, within humour, there is always an indication that there is a sign of reality but not reality itself. We recall that signs can be completely transparent and invisible (“glass words,” according to Vygotsky). For children of a certain age, “the word is transparent glass through which the child looks at what is hidden behind this glass, but does not see the glass itself” (Vygotsky 1984: 364). In humour, on the other hand, the sign speaks about itself, it declares itself by “signalling”: “I am!”, “This is me!”, which ensures the separation of the form of the sign from its content.

The following indicators of significance emphasizing the artificial nature of experience may be encountered:

- aphoristic brevity
- unjustified verbosity
- multiple repetition
- special intonation
- an unusual word order in the sentence
- the presence of invective (swear words)
- clichéd elements of non-reality in the form of distortions of the proportions of objects (a clown’s nose, a fool’s robe)
- rhyme (an unusual example of humorous rhyme can be found in a Russian proverb that is completely untranslatable into English: “Salo bylo, stalo mylo”); the four words rhyme in pairs; the old fat (salo, fat) with time (bylo → stalo, was → became) turns into a piece of soap (mylo, soap), and this statement is perceived as something funny owing to its brevity, rhythm, and

rhyme. The translated version of this proverb into English gives us an illustration of the thesis on markers of a sign as attributes of humour but the translation will obviously not be funny and this can be easily proved: “There was fat, it became soap.”

- a smile and various forms of laughter (in the early stages of child’s personality development, adults smile at it in order to show that something “is funny”; TV directors, who confuse adult spectators with pre-school children, and offer us humorous scenes, switch on the wretched “canned laughter,” as they strangely believe that this should set off the process of recognizing humour, or that it can make the unfunny funny). We should note that not all laughter is always contagious. It has been noted that the laughter of a hebephrenic (a juvenile form of schizophrenia), unlike the laughter of a hysteric, is not contagious; nor do we think that “canned laughter” is funny.

- the implausible, pretentious (everything that cannot be, and if it exists, has clearly been contrived, as in the example of the unlucky “seller” of the Stradivarius violin in the fur hat and with a cigarette in his mouth). Some absurdities may be unconscious and yet they can significantly affect the perception of the situation as a whole (as shown by Viktor Allakhverdov in his material for solving mental tasks (Allakhverdov 2006)).

This list of “markers” can be substantially expanded. In some works, researchers subtly differentiate markers of different types of humour (e.g., Attardo et al. 2003).

### 3.2. A vice versa performative

It remains to be clarified what constitutes the common marker of conventionality in humour communication. Previously, we found common ground between humour and the game. This analogy is by no means accidental. It corresponds to Raskin’s important distinction between two types of communication: the bona fide mode (“present,” “genuine”), in which speech design is identical to the speaker’s communicative intent, and the non-bona fide mode of communication (“fake,” “not authentic”), where they diverge and contradict each other. The non-bona fide mode characterizes various forms of the “game and fictitious” behaviour; humour, according to Raskin, is an individual case among them, while the specifics of humour are determined by conscious or unconscious ambiguity. Many theorists of humour, like the creator of the semantic theory of humour, note within it the presence of the game principle.

In the counter-sign model, the idea of the conventionality of a situation is considered essential for the understanding of humour (Borodenko 1991, 1995). The question is how conventionality is formed and how it manifests itself, the playful and fictitious behaviour, in order to make people laugh. If our understanding of Raskin is correct, the non-bona fide mode of communication is determined by ambiguity *itself*, as if it was itself responsible for the experienced conventionality. The linguistic tools applied to form the non-bona fide mode of communication, of which humour is a particular form, are considered by Raskin’s student and co-author, Salvatore Attardo, in his later works (Attardo 2001: 15-25). But even today, given existing developments, the idea of conventionality still needs to be clarified (we, of course, cannot “deduce” it from words such as “game” or “fictitious behaviour” since conventionality is incorporated into the semantic fabric of these words as their defining attribute); even an appreciation of the linguistic means by which conventionality comes into being is not enough to understand it – we need to explicate *what* exactly is being formed.

Apparently, *conventionality* originates from the early childhood game of “Peekaboo,” when a child sees something appear, then disappear, and then reappear. In this case, the disappearing thing is the sign of the reappearing thing, and vice versa. In other words, each object X acts here in two roles: it *is there* and it *is not there*; it is the same as the absent one, its presence is the signifier of its subsequent absence. A special sign is formed: “X (*signifier*) / non-X (*signified*).” In the observer’s mind (first, in a child and, later, in an adult), an experience of conventionality

of what is happening is created, marked by this sign (the “marker of conventionality,”  $X / non-X$ ). The speed of switching in the process of alternating *the presence of X* ↔ *the absence of X* should be such that *both X and non-X* can be simultaneously present in the person’s mind. We believe it is precisely this circumstance that can explain the need (recorded by the researchers) for a quick switch between alternative meanings in the dynamic structure of humour.

Thus, the marker of conventionality is a sign of the *nonexistence of the existing*, a sign of the “presence of absence.” Metaphorically, conventionality, if it could speak, could honestly say about itself (as did the wily philosopher from Crete): “I am lying” (the paradox is in the question: is the speaker lying when he claims to be lying?).

We believe that, as a general matter, the conventionality sign is neither a “trigger” nor a “counter-sign,” although it is possible that they can act in that capacity. We are faced with a *meta-communicative* sign, part of a meta-message (a message about a message, as put by Gregory Bateson (1972), addressed to a real or imagined audience, including oneself; in a sense, it is a vice versa performative: “I am not saying what I am saying” (while in a performative, the statement itself affirms what is being expressed, for example, “I swear,” a vice versa performative denies what it expresses).

One of the situations of meta-communication that includes a marker of conventionality, markers of significance, and signs of humour is shown in the figure below (Fig. 5).

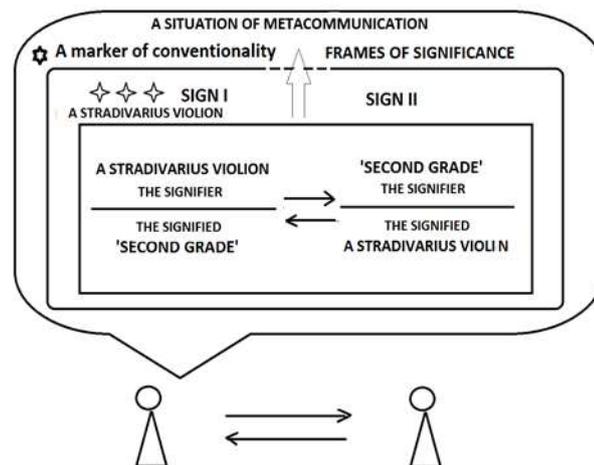


Figure 5. Humour: meta-communication, a marker of conventionality signification and two-faced Signs A and B

The importance of the idea of a meta-communicative marker of conventionality in the generation of humour is illustrated by a mental experiment that anticipates future empirical research. Let us suppose that subjects are presented with a small text similar to the joke quoted from the work by Raskin. But we will assume that the text is modified: everything that happens in the narrative should be perceived as a description of a real meeting between a man and a woman who are in a relationship, which will be revealed later after the dialogue between them. He and she will be described in more detail. The whispered communication (trigger) is to be preserved in the story. The woman politely (and not in a directive manner, as in the original joke) invites the man to come in. As in the original text, the conversation takes place on the threshold of the doctor’s office but the marker that gives the situation the status of conventionality should be excluded (in the original text, conventionality consists both in the fact that the participants communicate in a whisper and that the woman immediately invites the man to come in, although the doctor is out, and this does not fully meet the tradition). The question to the subjects: how to explain the invitation to enter while the doctor is absent? It is likely that

some subjects, upon reflection, will guess that the man and woman are in a relationship. But will this understanding be enough in the experiment to make the participants laugh? It can be assumed (this requires experimental verification) that the guess about the close relationships (a scenario that can be thought of in the final flip) may seem interesting to the subjects but perhaps not overly funny.

Essentially, we are proposing here to enhance the realism of the story, agreeing that “from the point of view of semantics, we have before us what, in a different context, might seem like a small entertaining short story (...). In order to laugh, it is necessary (although not enough) to move to the meta-level and make a conclusion regarding not the narrative that is not being described, but the story itself” (Kozintsev 2010: 15), that is, in our terms, to feel the presence of a marker of conventionality in the story.

The presence of such a marker of conventionality completes the set of attributes that we deem necessary to define humour as a complex sign.

### 3.3. Circumstantial factors of humour

To conclude this part of the study, we will answer three questions.

*Why does that which is funny cease to be so when it is repeated many times?* How can we explain why a stale joke is not funny? Although people return to humour texts (jokes, comedies, or series), incorporated as the cultural artefacts of a certain group, priority is retained by the momentary surprise inherent in the creation of humour, which later degenerates into its echo (Hale 2018).

It seems strange at first glance that the opposing signifiers and signifieds of signs in the structure of humour remain the same but the laughter effect disappears. The answer is determined by the nature of humour. When the same humour situation (a joke or a scene) is repeatedly reproduced, a rigid associative connection is established between these signs; the sign combination Sign 1 & Sign 2 becomes habitual, and the impression of contradiction is lost (just as when dealing with one of the signs, we imply the presence of the other). By analogy, there is nothing unusual in the combination of the colours green (the peel) and red (the flesh) of a sliced watermelon. The marker of conventionality in this case is redundant and it disappears as completely unnecessary. In order for the humour experience to return, operations are required to *de-identify* the two signs, as well as to restore the *marker of conventionality*.

*Why can the terrifying become funny when recollected?* In the light of the semiological interpretation of humour, the answer is obvious. In this case, the *representations* of memory are signs of a reality which previously had a sense of menace to it. Phenomenologically speaking, ideas about something that happened there-and-then are significantly different from experiencing the same thing in a here-and-now situation. The *representation*, as a marker of the conditional presence of the past in the present, allows us to explain the ongoing reversing of non-humorous episodes of life into funny ones when they return to a person in the form of memories.

*Why can a state of bewilderment be funny? Why does the overcoming of this state seem like a source of laughter?* These questions are part of the discussion above. We will dwell on them here, as some authors, when considering the dilemma of the *rationality/illogicality* of humour, argue that the necessary condition for laughter is the resolution of a contradiction; otherwise, in their opinion, there is only bewilderment, confusion, and a state of frustration. These authors, in the spirit of the theory of “resolving the inconsistency (“changing the framework”),” reject the position (shared by us) of such theorists of humour as Sigmund Freud (2013 [1900]), Mikhail Bakhtin (1990), and Grigori Kozintsev (2010) who see laughter as a reaction to the temporary abolition of requirements imposed by culture and the norms of rational thinking (see the analysis of “rationalistically” oriented views in the book by Zaynullina, Lavrentiev et al. 2017). For

example, J. Suls writes that the main part of a joke makes the listener predict the likely result. When the climax does not meet this prediction, the listener is surprised and searches for a cognitive rule that enables the climax to logically follow from the content of the main part of the joke. When this cognitive rule is discovered, the discrepancy is eliminated, the joke is perceived as funny, and the person laughs. However, if the cognitive rule is not found, the discrepancy remains and the joke causes only confusion rather than laughter. Thus, according to this viewpoint, humour is the result of eliminating or resolving a discrepancy rather than its presence (Suls 1972, 1983 - in Martin 2007). Leon Festinger, in his book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Festinger 1999), when describing the feeling of failed expectations, indicates that it is human nature to avoid such feelings and in a situation of cognitive dissonance, people seek to remove themselves from such a situation as quickly as possible; it is as unnatural to enjoy misunderstanding, illogicality, and absurdity as it is to enjoy hunger. The American philosopher D. Santayana and the English sociologist B. Barnes adhered to the same point of view,” as noted by the authors of the book *Humour in the comparative study of cultures* (Zaynullina, Lavrentiev et al. 2017).

This remark, which seemingly refutes the idea that bewilderment can cause a humorous effect, can in turn be disputed. Visual humour is represented by a multitude of drawings which are in no way amenable to rational interpretation and are rather funny; we could easily have used one such picture as an example, had another author not already done this before us, recalling ski tracks diverging in front of a tree, navigating it to the left and right, and converging behind it (this is the counter-argument brought by Aleksander Kozintsev (2010)). Not only visual, but also verbal humour is replete with examples of situations which cannot be rationalized. Here is an example: a person complains about a headache but the bandage is on their leg; “Why?!” – “It’s slid down!”

It is possible that the initial human reaction in such cases is bewilderment and confusion. But when we realize that we are faced with a sign of a situation that exists on a conditional plane (“as if”), then, at this moment and by virtue of this, we may find it humorous.

In other words, it is not funny that a situation has no solution, and, of course, it is not funny that we cannot cope with the solution but the funny thing is that we delude ourselves that the problem has a possible solution. Ultimately, this is laughing at oneself, laughter as a liberation from illusion. The “sign-destroyer of signs” is a condition for such liberation. In this matter, we share Kozintsev’s idea when he writes about the “anti-referential” function of the “counter-sign,” in turn sharing the idea of the counter-sign:

“M. V. Borodenko calls signs which are used by humour counter-signs. In her words, counter-signs remind us of the conventionality, the “frailty” of the sign (Kozintsev, 2010: 75). “In fact, a person unconsciously reflects on language and culture. They temporarily gain the ability to contemplate the levels of signs from the meta-level, notice their conventionality, deprive them of the plane of content and play with the plane of expression. In essence, humour uses ex-signs, the empty shells of former signs, or, according to Kant, the ideas of the mind through which nothing can be thought” (Kozintsev 2010: 136).

However, it remains to be explained why the *resolution* of a contradiction seems, to some authors (see Martin 2007), a necessary condition for laughter. It is legitimate to assume that having solved the problem (if it has a solution), a person reconstructs the path travelled, starting from a state of bewilderment, looks at the situation “from the side,” sees that now it does not exist anymore, and thereby gives it the status of conventionality. In this case, the feeling of perplexed bewilderment is erased, the present situation (“I’ve solved it”) turns into a sign of the earlier situation (“I could not solve it”), the sign of the possibility of solution decays, and, metaphorically speaking, the energy of laughter is released. But this is a post factum laughter, the laughter “in hindsight”: it turns out that I used to think that I “thought up” the impossibility of a solution and now I see that it is futile.

At the same time, it is reasonable to assume that patients with certain cognitive disorders, manifesting in a difficulty in gaining a clear and precise picture of what is happening, would react with laughter more intensively to those humorous situations which provide a chance to cope with incongruities. Thus, in the study of Alyona Ivanova et al., who examined the sense of humour disorders in patients with mental illnesses, it was shown that “only those patients with pronounced cognitive disorders associated with creeping schizophrenia prefer humour based on incongruity resolution, which forms the specific schizotypal sense of humour, observed by clinicians” (Ivanova et al. 2008: 56). In this case, apparently, overcoming the “invasion of meanings” (Kharmis 2004) brings them temporary relief and is experienced as a personal success.

Comedy lies in the fact that signs which are opposite in meaning, and present in the conditional sign situation, mediate each other, alternating between themselves as signifiers and signifieds, each to the other; as a result, a “blank sign” is formed, which immediately, owing to the presence of a marker of conventionality, is perceived as evidence: “this has never existed, never is, and never will be,” “this is what is not there.” The contradiction itself (overlapping scenarios) is not funny but it is funny to believe that it points to something real.

#### 4. The experience of semiological expansion into the aesthetics of humour

How justified (or, one might say, how “functional”) is our interpretation of humour as a complex sign? We shall offer here a scheme for the formal distinction between such forms of humour in aesthetics as satire, humour, irony, and jokes.

The proposed typology is not so sensitive to the types and shades of humour as to claim to distinguish between its diverse manifestations, such as, for example, fun, benevolent humour, nonsense, wit, irony, satire, sarcasm, and cynicism (Mendiburo-Seguel & Heintz 2018), but it does set out a simple logical form for the subsequent differentiation and substantive specification of the phenomena of humour.

In addition to the “sign” interpretation, this typology distinguishes between the positions of Sign 1 and Sign 2 on a generalized scale of values with the poles “good” and “bad.” We encounter a similar, generalized (universal) scale of values in particular in the reflexive theory of Vladimir Lefebvre (the opposition of good and evil) (Lefebvre 1997) and the transactional and analytical theory of Eric Berne (the states of OK/Not OK) (Berne 2001), where there are such popular categories as “pleasant-unpleasant,” “necessary-useless,” “ordinary-artsy,” “complex-primitive,” “high-low,” “moral-immoral,” and other oppositions represented in the cultural history of the category of humour. The possibility of a meaningful analysis and the conditions of interrelationship between humour and the OK/Not OK variables can be traced in the work of C. Davies (2009), where such inseparable elements from humour as shame, embarrassment, etc., which are driven by cultural and ethnic factors, are shown.

We shall illustrate the above using four examples taken from the observations of the Russian writer Mikhail Zhvanetsky (2006):

*Satire*: Sign 1 Bad/Sign 2 Bad. Example: “The highest degree of embarrassment is when the eyes of two Peeping Toms meet on either side of a keyhole.” Here we have a sign identity (a union) of “shameful” **and** “shameful.”

*Humour*: (traditional aesthetic sense of the word, characterized by the prevalence of a positive moment in the funny): Sign 1 Bad/Sign 2 Good: “Happiness is to see a toilet and to be able to reach it in time” (“unbearable” **and** “filling one’s soul with joy”).

*Irony*: Sign 1 Good/Sign 2 Bad:

a) “Optimists believe that we live in the best of all worlds. Pessimists are afraid that this is indeed the case” (“inspiring” **and** “frightening”);

b) “The light is visible at the end of the tunnel, it is just that the f...ing tunnel won’t end” (“giving a chance” **and** “hopeless”).

In functional terms, following A. Kozintsev, it makes sense to distinguish between humour and irony, with the former considered as a unifying principle, and the latter as a disuniting one (Kozintsev 2010).

*Joke*: (good-natured wit that gives joy): Sign 1 Good/Sign 2 Good: Pushkin, who was in love with Natalia Goncharova, wrote: “I am delighted, I am fascinated, in short, I am Goncharovated!” Here we have the union of “delight” **and** “delight” (while the signs of each do not coincide).

By introducing an additional point of “neutral” between the poles on the “good – bad” scale of values, as well as by distinguishing the degrees of OK, you can expand the range of jokes in the proposed typology and offer more subtle estimates which differentiate the types and shades of humour.

A special place in this list belongs to sarcasm (although, as we shall see, it is outside this list). Of course, if we could introduce the degrees of Good and Bad, then sarcasm could easily be “entered” into the proposed typology. It would be enough to simply emphasize the significant contrast between the statuses of Sign 1 and Sign 2 on the value scale. The question, however, is whether sarcasm may be considered a manifestation of humour.

It is doubtful! Sarcasm is usually understood as a cutting, contemptuous remark that precludes sympathy and compassion. The comic effect of sarcasm is typically minimal and, despite superficial similarity, it should be distinguished from humour in that it tends to upset or distress the person to whom it is directed. These explanations reveal the essence of sarcasm as a phenomenon that resembles humour but is not humour; contrary to the definition of humour given by Aristotle, it causes suffering and is clearly harmful, at least for the person targeted by the utterance. Sarcasm may be a manifestation of wit, too, but, in this case, the latter is offensive rather than funny – for example: “You should never pretend to be more stupid than you really are...” (Joseph Laskavyi) (Petrovsky & Khodorych 2019: 348). It is quite witty but it does not sound very funny.

## 5. Conclusion

We propose a general definition which includes all the core attributes of our object of study: humour is the identification of unidentifiable signs in the domain of conventionality.

The constituting factor of humour in all metamorphoses of signs is the marker of conventionality, or the “signification” of transformations. If no reference is made to it, the possibility of “being funny” is taken away. Without an element of conventionality, satire would lose the meaning of humour condemnation, and would be reduced to direct insult and abuse. Humour would turn into a reprimand. Irony would become a reproach. A joke (“play on words,” “funny absurdity”) that expresses the position “I’m OK – You’re OK,” lacking an element of conventionality, would become merely a strange misunderstanding. The emphasis on the conditional nature of a game of mutual transformations distinguishes humour from the aporia and sophisms that lay beyond it, from thinking “in the extremes,” from paradoxical statements in science and paralogisms of ordinary thinking, from cheating and disguised insults (as in the case of sarcasm, which not only “dispenses” with a marker of conventionality, but also contains evidence of *unconditional* deprecation, denunciation or humiliation of someone).

Laughter as a reaction to a discrepancy between what is and what should be is a way of symbolic transcendence, or “removal,” of the discrepancy. In this way, a person’s attitude to the world is harmonized to enable them to cope with such experiences as anger, bewilderment, boredom,

and fear. For a time, the person falls out of a reality which does not bring them the joy of existence.

The semiological definition of humour which we propose (*the sign identification of unidentifiable signs in the space of conventionality*) seems to us to be similar in some ways to the defined term itself (spry, playful, befitting humour); we believe that it comprises the core attributes of humour, the combination of which is sufficient to determine and comprehend this phenomenon.

## **6. Perspectives**

In this paper, the themes for possible new studies of humour in the aspect of semiology have been touched upon. A number of assumptions expressed require experimental verification:

- a) early childhood manipulations (“Peekaboo”) as the root cause of experiencing the conventionality of a situation (“Peekaboo,” replacing some objects with others, and the laughter of children);
- b) the dependence of laughter on the level of conventionality of the situation; the higher the level of conventionality, the more intense the laughter response (by the gradual introduction of elements of reality into Raskin’s original scheme of humorous texts). On the contrary, a reduction of experienced conventionality decreases the possibility and intensity of the laughter reaction. These suggestions, in our opinion, are consistent with the results of the study on humour preferences of patients with affective disorders (Ivanova et al. 2008: 157-158). Thus, patients with depression do not appreciate indecent jokes because of possible identification with the characters and the corresponding “injurious” content of the jokes, the protective layer of conventionality, turns out to be penetrable; the situation is experienced as real, directly touching the subject;
- c) the dependence of the laughter response on the level of awareness of the marker of conventionality. It is assumed that the maximum intensity response is generated between the “inconspicuous” and “obvious” poles of the marker of conventionality. Compare the effect of a joke performed by an actor with a straight face and the same joke accompanied by “canned laughter”;
- d) the laughter of “returning” to previously experienced situations of difficulty and “unsolvability”;
- e) the reduction of the laughter response as the new sign incorporating the incompatible signs is formed.

The construction and substantiation of the “ascent towards laughter” model, formulated for the first time below, also constitutes a special prospect for research. In this model, laughter is interpreted as a process that is formed at different levels of perception of a humour situation. It is assumed that, over time, it will be possible to show that existing theories of humour, without contradicting each other, may be “placed” at different stages of the ascent towards laughter. At the same time, they are all adequate ways of describing and interpreting the dynamics of human experiences in the process of reflecting various aspects of a humorous situation.

The following stages can be identified:

- a sense of “sign-ness” (conditionality) of metamorphoses and collisions in a humorous situation, which guarantee their harmlessness for the laughing person, and the healing power of “sign mediation,” in the words of Vygotsky (such is the Aristotelian “root” of all old and new theories of humour, in particular psychoanalytically oriented ones);

- the unexpected split of the sign and a switch between opposite signifiers as a challenge to which the subject responds with joyful excitement and laughter (theories of “incongruity,” from John Locke (1975 [1898]) to Daniel Berlyne (1974));
- the sign “castling” of the signified to generate cognitive dissonance compensated for by laughter of bewilderment and attempts to cope with the paradox (Kant on humour that turns delusion into “nothingness” (1994); Koestler’s theory of Bisociation (1975); the script opposition theory of Raskin (1985) and his followers (Raskin 1985; Attardo et al. 2003; Raskin et al. 2009); “two-stage” models for resolving incongruity (see an analysis of these theories (Martin, 2007), and other incongruity theories);
- the conventionality of a situation as a meta-communicative sign of the imaginary nature of an experience, and “a vice versa performative” (“this is not what I am saying”), awakens the winner’s laughter at themselves; the laughing person understands that there is no point in searching for meaning where it does not exist. In his “theory of superiority,” Thomas Hobbes (1964) interprets humour as an opportunity to laugh at one’s own past. Kozintsev, in his fundamental study of laughter (Kozintsev 2010) answers the same question, to our way of thinking, in a similar way. The point is that, when laughing, a person transcends themselves.

These are potential directions for further investigation that could yield empirical confirmation of the “ascent towards laughter” model, which we herein propose.

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