

Incongruity Theory Of Humor

Authored by
mohammad looti

September 29, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Incongruity Theory Of Humor*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=31021>

Incongruity Theory Of Humor

Primary Disciplinary Field(s):

Psychology, Philosophy, Linguistics, Cognitive Science

Proponents:

Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, James Beattie, Henri Bergson, Victor Raskin, Salvatore Attardo

1. Core Principles: The Essence of Expectation Violation

The Incongruity Theory of Humor posits that humor arises from the perception of something that is unexpected, illogical, or out of place in a given context. At its heart, this theory suggests that laughter is a response to the sudden realization of a disparity between what is anticipated or expected and what actually occurs. This cognitive dissonance, or the juxtaposition of two or more disparate elements, is central to the experience of humor. The mind, accustomed to order and predictability, encounters a "non sequitur" - a conclusion or statement that does not logically follow from the previous one - and this unexpected twist triggers amusement.

Unlike theories that focus on superiority or relief, the incongruity theory emphasizes the intellectual or cognitive aspect of humor. It highlights the moment of surprise and the subsequent mental processing involved in recognizing a discrepancy. The joke's setup typically builds a certain expectation or establishes a familiar frame of reference. However, the punchline then shatters this frame, introducing an element that fundamentally contradicts the established pattern, leading to a sudden shift in perspective. This abrupt deviation from normality, when perceived as benign and not threatening, is what elicits laughter from the audience.

For instance, a seemingly ordinary situation or question might be presented, only to be followed by an answer or event that is completely illogical or absurd, thereby creating a profound sense of incongruity. This immediate clash between what is sensible and what is presented as nonsensical is the bedrock of this theory. The humor stems not from a feeling of triumph over another or the release of nervous energy, but from the intellectual pleasure of recognizing and processing an unexpected deviation from a cognitive schema. It is the sudden, often delightful, disruption of an established mental pattern that forms the basis of the humorous experience.

2. Historical Development: From Classical Philosophy to Modern Linguistics

The roots of the Incongruity Theory of Humor can be traced back to classical philosophical discourse, with early proponents recognizing the role of surprise and intellectual disjuncture in

evoking laughter. Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), famously articulated that "laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." This formulation laid a crucial groundwork, suggesting that the humorous effect lies in the mind's encounter with something that initially promised significance but resolved into triviality or absurdity, thus highlighting the cognitive shift inherent in humor.

Following Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), further developed this notion, asserting that laughter is produced by the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between a concept and the real objects that have been thought through it. Schopenhauer posited that our intellect strives to categorize and understand the world through concepts, and when a particular object or situation fails to align with the concept under which it was subsumed, the resulting mismatch triggers amusement. This emphasis on the disparity between abstract thought and concrete reality provided a more robust framework for understanding the cognitive mechanisms at play.

In the 20th century, the Incongruity Theory received significant attention from linguists and cognitive scientists. Theorists such as Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo developed the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), which, while more complex, integrates core principles of incongruity. GTVH suggests that humor often arises from the clash of two distinct "scripts" or semantic frames within a single text, where the punchline forces a reinterpretation from one script to an opposing one. This modern linguistic approach provides a detailed analysis of how incongruity is structured and resolved in verbal humor, bridging philosophical insights with empirical linguistic analysis.

3. Key Concepts and Mechanisms

Cognitive Discrepancy and Surprise: Central to the Incongruity Theory is the concept of a cognitive discrepancy, which refers to the perceived mismatch or contradiction between an expectation and a reality. Humor often relies on the element of surprise, where an established mental schema or script is suddenly violated by an unexpected turn of events or a piece of information. This sudden shift forces the mind to re-evaluate the situation, and the resulting cognitive effort, when resolved playfully, leads to amusement. The greater the initial discrepancy and the more abrupt the surprise, the stronger the potential for a humorous effect, provided the context remains non-threatening.

Frame Shifting and Script Opposition: Modern interpretations of incongruity often employ the concepts of "frame shifting" or "script opposition." A frame refers to a mental structure that organizes knowledge and expectations about a situation. Humor frequently involves establishing one frame (e.g., a serious conversation, a logical sequence of events) and then abruptly shifting to another, incompatible frame (e.g., an absurd non sequitur, a playful reinterpretation). In the context

of verbal humor, script opposition describes the collision of two distinct semantic scripts, where the punchline forces the listener to switch from the initial script to a secondary, often opposing or incongruous, script. This intellectual maneuver of re-framing the situation is a key mechanism for generating humor through incongruity.

Resolution and Non-Resolution Debates: A significant debate within the Incongruity Theory concerns the role of "resolution." Some theorists argue that for incongruity to be humorous, it must be resolved in some way, meaning the listener must be able to make sense of the unexpected twist, even if that sense is purely absurd. This "Incongruity-Resolution" model suggests that the humor comes from the successful cognitive effort of reconciling the conflicting elements. Conversely, other perspectives, particularly in the realm of absurd humor, suggest that humor can arise from unresolved incongruity, where the disparate elements simply remain clashing without a logical reconciliation. In these cases, the humor lies precisely in the persistent irrationality or the inability to make conventional sense, challenging the mind's innate drive for coherence.

4. Psychological and Cognitive Underpinnings

The psychological underpinnings of the Incongruity Theory are deeply rooted in cognitive processing. When confronted with an incongruous situation, the brain initially registers a violation of its predictive models or mental schemata. Human cognition is inherently geared towards pattern recognition and expectation management, constantly anticipating future events based on past experiences and learned rules. Therefore, an unexpected event or statement creates a momentary cognitive disruption, a "puzzlement" that the mind attempts to resolve.

This cognitive effort to reconcile the incongruity is a critical component. If the mind successfully reinterprets the situation or finds a new, often absurd, logic that connects the disparate elements, the tension of the initial discrepancy is released, often through laughter. The feeling of amusement can be seen as a reward for this successful cognitive re-framing, a signal that the brain has efficiently processed and understood the anomaly, albeit within a non-serious context. This process involves executive functions, working memory, and rapid associative thinking, demonstrating the complex neural activity associated with humor perception.

Furthermore, the emotional context plays a crucial role. For incongruity to be humorous rather than frightening, confusing, or irritating, it must occur within a perceived "play frame" or a benign environment. If the unexpected event poses a threat or signifies danger, the cognitive disruption will likely trigger a fight-or-flight response instead of laughter. Thus, the Incongruity Theory often implicitly or explicitly acknowledges the necessity of a non-serious emotional appraisal alongside the cognitive recognition of discrepancy. This highlights the interplay between cognitive processing and emotional regulation in determining whether an incongruity results in humor.

5. Applications and Illustrative Examples

The Incongruity Theory provides a powerful framework for understanding a vast array of humorous phenomena, from simple jokes to complex comedic narratives. Its applicability is widespread across different forms of humor, including verbal, visual, and situational comedy. Many classic joke structures rely explicitly on setting up an expectation and then subverting it with an incongruous punchline. For instance, the example provided in the source content, a sign stating, "Be Alert!--- The world needs more Lerts!", perfectly illustrates this principle. The initial phrase "Be Alert!" sets a serious, cautionary tone, implying a need for vigilance. The follow-up, "The world needs more Lerts!", introduces a playful, nonsensical word that completely undermines the serious expectation, creating a sudden and amusing cognitive shift.

Beyond simple wordplay, the theory explains the humor in absurd situations, surrealist comedy, and many forms of satire. Observational humor often derives its comedic effect from highlighting the incongruities in everyday life, pointing out the subtle mismatches between how people present themselves and their actual behavior, or the logical flaws in common practices. For example, a comedian might observe the elaborate rituals people undertake for a mundane task, contrasting the effort with the insignificance of the outcome. Similarly, a cartoon depicting animals behaving with human characteristics, such as a dog wearing a business suit and conducting a meeting, is humorous because it presents an unexpected and illogical juxtaposition of animal and human attributes.

Puns and double entendres also operate on the principle of incongruity, exploiting the multiple meanings of words or phrases. The humor arises from the sudden realization that a word can be interpreted in a way that is unexpected and often playful, creating a clash between two possible meanings within a single linguistic expression. Even more complex comedic forms, such as dramatic irony in literature or stand-up comedy routines that build tension through a series of logical steps only to culminate in an absurd conclusion, rely heavily on the audience's ability to recognize and appreciate the unexpected deviation from an established pattern. The enduring appeal of this type of humor underscores the fundamental human tendency to find amusement in the illogical when it is presented in a non-threatening context.

6. Relationship to Other Theories of Humor

While the Incongruity Theory stands as a distinct explanation for humor, it frequently intersects with and is contrasted against other prominent theories, most notably the Superiority Theory and the Relief Theory. The Superiority Theory, with roots in Plato and Aristotle and further developed by Thomas Hobbes, suggests that humor arises from feeling a sudden glory or triumph over another's misfortune or perceived inferiority. While some instances of incongruity might incidentally involve a sense of superiority (e.g., laughing at someone's absurd mistake), the core mechanism of the

Incongruity Theory does not require putting others down; it focuses on the cognitive recognition of a mismatch itself. However, a joke combining incongruity with a character's foolishness might activate both mechanisms simultaneously.

The Relief Theory, championed by Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud, proposes that humor serves as a safe outlet for the release of nervous energy or suppressed psychic tension. According to this view, laughter dissipates pent-up emotions or anxieties. While some forms of incongruous humor might coincidentally provide a sense of relief (e.g., a dark joke breaking tension), the primary driver of humor in the Incongruity Theory is intellectual recognition, not emotional catharsis. However, it can be argued that the resolution of cognitive tension from recognizing incongruity provides a form of psychological relief, suggesting a subtle overlap where cognitive and emotional processes intertwine.

In contemporary humor research, there is a growing consensus that no single theory fully explains all forms of humor. Instead, many researchers adopt a multi-theory approach, recognizing that different types of humor might be best explained by different theories, or that a single humorous event might draw upon elements from multiple theories. For instance, the "Benign Violation Theory" attempts to unify aspects of incongruity and relief, proposing that humor arises when something is perceived as a "violation" (e.g., an incongruity, a threat, a moral transgression) that is simultaneously "benign" (non-threatening, safe, or playful). This integrative approach acknowledges the powerful explanatory power of incongruity while also accounting for the affective and social dimensions of humor.

7. Criticisms and Limitations of a Unifying Framework

Despite its broad explanatory power, the Incongruity Theory of Humor faces several criticisms and limitations as a comprehensive, standalone explanation for all forms of humor. One primary criticism is that not all incongruities are humorous. Life is full of unexpected events, illogical occurrences, or mismatched elements that evoke confusion, fear, anger, or simply indifference, rather than laughter. For instance, encountering a serious car accident is highly incongruous with the expectation of a safe journey, but it is certainly not funny. This suggests that incongruity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for humor; other factors must be present for amusement to arise.

This limitation has led to the development of "resolution" components within the theory, attempting to explain how some incongruities become funny while others do not. However, even the "Incongruity-Resolution" model struggles to account for forms of absurd or surreal humor, where the incongruity is deliberately left unresolved, and the humor stems precisely from the persistent lack of sense. Moreover, the theory often struggles to explain purely affective forms of humor, such as slapstick, where the humor might derive more from physical surprise, pain (when benign), or the

release of tension, rather than a complex cognitive recognition of mismatch.

Furthermore, the Incongruity Theory can sometimes overlook the social and emotional dimensions of humor. It tends to focus heavily on the cognitive processes of the individual perceiving the joke, potentially downplaying the role of shared context, group dynamics, cultural norms, and emotional states in determining what is found funny. Humor is often deeply personal and culturally specific, and while incongruity might be a universal mechanism, the specific types of incongruity that are appreciated and the ways in which they are processed can vary significantly. Therefore, while providing a robust explanation for the cognitive structure of many jokes, the Incongruity Theory is best understood as one crucial component within a broader, multi-faceted understanding of humor.

8. Further Reading

[Theories of humor - Wikipedia](#)

[Incongruity theory - Wikipedia](#)

[Immanuel Kant - Wikipedia](#)

[Arthur Schopenhauer - Wikipedia](#)

[Victor Raskin - Wikipedia](#)

[Salvatore Attardo - Wikipedia](#)

[General Theory of Verbal Humor - Wikipedia](#)

[Script theory of humor - Wikipedia](#)

[Benign violation theory - Wikipedia](#)