The Comic Representation of Identity and Otherness in a Narrative Text: a Case-Study

Raluca Mihaela LEVONIAN*

Key-words: *humor, script, identity, otherness, narrative, Romanian*

Introduction. Semantic scripts and the theories of umor

According to the theory developed by V. Raskin, the production of humor in a text or in a discourse is understood to be a complex mechanism involving inferences both on the part of the addresser and the addressee. Raskin uses as a starting point the semantic theory of language, which has at its base the notion of script. From the lexical point of view, each word in a language has a specific meaning which is conventionally assigned to it; the most common meanings are registered in dictionaries. Besides denotations and connotations, words may also have particular meanings which are specific for only one speaker and do not appear in dictionaries or in other reference books. The semantic theory assumes that a word or a group of words can be associated not only with one signification, but also with a network of meanings, whose dimensions and complexity depend upon the speakers' knowledge and experience. A script is thus defined as "a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it [...] a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker" (Raskin 1985: 81). In order for a text to be humorous, two criteria have to be satisfied: (1) the text must be compatible with two different scripts at the same time and (2) there has to be a special kind of opposition between the two scripts involved, which may overlap fully or in part. These criteria are considered to be "the necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be funny" (Raskin 1985: 99).

The following studies tried to offer additional explanations and to make easier the use of this theory in practice. The script-based theory attributes to the semantic scripts a central role in the production of humor, while disregarding other aspects, for example the logical mechanisms involved in jokes. Hence, a substantial revision of the theory is proposed by Attardo and Raskin (1991). The result is a general theory of verbal humor, able to take into account six knowledge resources which contribute to the production of jokes: script oppositions, logical mechanisms, situations, target, narrative strategies and language (Attardo, Raskin 1991: 329).

The semantic theory was developed mainly through the analysis of short comic texts as jokes; however, it proved to be an useful tool also for the analysis of

* University of Calabria, Italy/ University of Bucharest, Romania.

„Philologica Jassyensia", An VII, Nr. 1 (13), 2011, p. 89–95

BDD-A977 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:58 UTC)

longer literary narratives. For example, Holcomb confirms this assertion by using the semantic script theory of humor in the analysis of literary short stories. His aim is to explain not only the production of humor in terms of the semantic properties of the texts, but also the linking of the humorous passages to the narrative frame (Holcomb 1992: 233–234). An important concern of his research regards the difference between "real-life" jokes and comic passages in literary works. Jokes have an inner meaning, so they can be told and understood without regard to a specific context, while "joke-like constructions" have a comic meaning only in the context of the narrative. In other words, if such a fragment would be retold as a joke, it would not succeed in amusing the listeners. Therefore, an analysis of humor in literature should pay attention to the context of the literary work (Holcomb 1992: 234–235). Humor is also not a general characteristic of a text, but of special sections or lexical units inside the text; in other words, comic and serious passages alternate. While the humorous effect of a joke is generated mainly by its punchline, a narrative text may contain "nodal points of humor", i.e. "locations in the narrative where humor is perceptibly more concentrated than in the immediately surrounding text" and which have a semantic connection to the general narrative (Holcomb 1992: 234).

The types and number of scripts activated in a humorous text – or in the humorous passages of the text – need a closer examination as well. The comic effect can be viewed as the result of the opposition of two different scripts, but what exactly are these scripts? Raskin identifies three levels of script oppositions, the most abstract type of script opposition being "real" vs. "unreal". At a lower level of abstraction, there are three possible types of oppositions: "actual" vs. "non-actual", „normal" vs. „abnormal", "possible" vs. "impossible". The most concrete oppositions are various, such as "life" vs. "death", "money" vs. "no-money" or, generally, "good" vs. "bad" (Raskin 1985: 111–114; Attardo, Raskin 1991: 308). Other studies have shown that scripts can also be classified, taking into account their triggering at the various levels of a text. Attardo, Hempelmann and Di Maio propose a taxonomy including three main types of scripts: lexical, sentential and inferential. A typical semantic script is lexicalized, so it contains also phonological, morphological, syntactic and collocational information besides the semantic information. The inferential type of scripts seems to be the most problematic and difficult to grasp, since these scripts are not activated by specific lexical units, but by reference to the entire context of the enunciation (Attardo, Hempelmann et alii 2002: 20).

If the number of scripts activated within a text is high, the relationships between them will become more intricate than a typical relationship of opposition and will involve a sort of hierarchy. As a consequence of the complexity of semantic scripts, A. Brock (2004) proposed considering "additional script constellations" in humorous communication. Besides script opposition, this complement to SSTH takes into account other possible situations, like the manipulations produced within a script or the complex script constellations which can generate clusters of incongruities (Brock 2004: 358).

The comic effect of a narrative text usually results from the intricate association of scripts and subscripts, a view illustrated by the following examples from a contemporary Romanian novel. The relationships between identity and otherness have been widely studied and discussed as a main topic for many

BDD-A977 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:58 UTC)

disciplines like cultural studies, anthropology or psychology. There are many possible forms of otherness (ethnic, racial, religious, professional etc.), but the selected examples concern the relationship between natives and foreigners. From this perspective, such literary passages can be associated with the common jokes regarding foreigners. There is however a difference: jokes highlight one stereotypical trait of the strangers (Attardo, Raskin 1991: 301) while the representation of otherness in a literary narrative is more complex and involves more traits. These characteristics are gradually introduced as the plot unfolds and the opposition of two main scripts is replaced by a network of scripts and subscripts which amplify, overlap, complement or contradict each other.

General plot of the novel

The novel *Sunt o babă comunistă!* by the Romanian author Dan Lungu (2007) represents an example for the complex interplay of semantic and cultural scripts in a large narrative text. Two reasons motivated the choice of this novel. First, the text has a certain comic dimension, although it can not be considered an entirely humorous fiction. A more appropriate label would be "realistic humor", which is defined as "a serious central narrative line (macronarrative) with a few jab lines scattered throughout the text" (Attardo 1998: 251). Although jokes and comic utterances are present, they are used frequently in order to counterbalance the gravity of the general discourse. Two main sources of comic can be identified in the text: jokes which are inserted in the narrative but maintain their meaning even if taken out of the context and comic utterances whose meaning is more dependent on the narrative context. Second, because the subject of the novel is focused on a period in recent Romanian history, the semantic scripts activated in the text have also a strong historical and cultural reference. They require a particular type of knowledge on the part of the reader, but they can be easily recognized by readers who have previous information about the communist regime and traditional culture in Romania.

Emilia Apostoae, the main heroine of the novel and its narrator, spent most of her life working in a communist factory and is puzzled by the fast changes in the Romanian society after the fall of communism. Two temporal levels, the post-communist present and the communist past, alternate during the narration. The subject of the novel is based on a complex system of oppositions, which are both spatial and temporal. The major scripts which can be recognized here are "identity" and "otherness"; however, their incongruity functions as a source of comic only in the narration in the present time. In regard to the narration in the past, the difference between the perception of the own identity and of the identities of other people acquires a tragic value, as Emilia's childhood is marked by the contrast between the rural and the urban world. Her parents are poor peasants but Emilia stubbornly refuses to accept this identity and instead she identifies herself to be a "town girl". As a teenager, she runs away from home, deciding to go to an intermediate school for workers and to become a worker in a factory. The town people are the only type of alterity she has known and she managed to become one of them. The shift to democracy brings also a broadening of Emilia's perspective as her understanding of

BDD-A977 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:58 UTC)

identity and otherness is changing and the two notions are now defined in terms of East European versus Western nations.

"Identity" and "otherness" as semantic and cultural scripts

(1) Într-o bună zi, Alice s-a urcat în avion şi a plecat în Canada. Cică ăştia, canadienii, caută oameni deştepţi cu disperare. Nu că ei ar fi mai prostuţi, dar cică au un hârdău de ţară şi-s doar o mână de oameni. Dacă i-ar împrăştia în toată ţara, ar trebui să se uite cu binoclul unul la altul ca să se vadă. Adună minţi luminate de pe toate continentele şi le dau casă, masă şi slujbă. Vor să facă o ţară deşteaptă şi să-i ia pe americani. Spun şi eu ce-am auzit de la alţii… (Lungu 2007: 6).

As the script opposition "village" vs. "town" can not be applied to present times anymore, Emilia and her husband have to confront a geographical and ethnical alterity, represented in the novel by Western countries, or, more exactly, by Canada, since Emilia's daughter, Alice, left Romania and found a job in Canada. Emilia and her husband feel left behind because they can not understand this new, more distant otherness. The word "Canada" at the end of the first sentence triggers a semantic and cultural script, expressed in Emilia's digression about the foreign country, an attempt to describe a folk she has never met. Her knowledge is not based on reliable sources, nor is it a scientifically documented knowledge (use of the adverb "cică"). Two types of incongruity as sources of humor can be observed here. An extratextual incongruity is established between the reader's information on this topic (Canada and Canadian people) and the information provided by the narrator. An intratextual incongruity is built on the contrast between the serious topics (the forming of a nation, the social and economical development of a Western country, the problem of immigration) and the manner in which this subject is discussed. The style has marks of orality and the subject is obviously simplified and presented in an informal manner. Canadians are designated by use of the demonstrative pronoun "ăştia", an etymologically simple form which is used only in the colloquial style; the geographical magnitude of the country is expressed by using a superlative construction ("hârdău de ţară"), also specific for the colloquial speech. The stylistic dimension is inappropriate for the seriousness of the topic, an incongruity which functions as an indicator of Emilia's lack of knowledge and culture. The latest sentence of the example which closes the script also has the function of framing the narrator's digression: the character pretends to be in touch with external politics, then, in the end, she admits she has only "second-hand" information and cannot grasp the complex topic of "otherness".

(2) De mâncare nici nu vreau să-mi amintesc. Alain a luat o salată şi doi peşti leşinaţi, cu o feliuţă de lămâie, de m-am speriat că ţine regim. [...] Dar nu, cică aşa mănâncă ei, te miri ce, trei lulele, trei surcele. Frugal şi dietetic. [...] Ei şi japonezii. Ţucu a luat o ciorbă de burtă şi ceafă la grătar cu cartofi prăjiţi. Mie nu prea mi-era a mânca, aşa că am luat cinci mici cu muştar (Lungu 2007: 33).

The script "otherness" is developed here, by adding of another trait: food or feeding practices. Cultural studies acknowledge that this is one of the traits which make the difference between members of the same group and strangers or outsiders: the stranger is not only the person who looks or speaks differently, but also a person

BDD-A977 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:58 UTC)

with different customs regarding food and eating. Example (2) is part of a longer narrative sequence, in which Emilia describes a lunch at a restaurant in her town. Her daughter, Alice, has come on holiday in Romania and she is visiting her parents, accompanied by Alain, her Canadian fiancè. The parents accept the invitation to lunch unwillingly, because it does not respect the Romanian tradition: the fiancè should have come to the parents' house and asked for permission to marry the daughter. The description of the lunch is another opportunity for Emilia to discover one more difference between Canadians and Romanians. The script acts at two levels: Alain is considered to be representative for the Canadian folk, while Emilia considers herself and her husband representative for Romanians.

The introduction of the restaurant scene creates a special expectation from the reader, suggesting that the food was bad, while the next utterance provides a contradictory explanation. Emilia's insatisfaction regards only Alain's choice of having salad and fish for lunch. The script oppositions involved here can be explained in terms of a cultural clash. The script implied here by Emilia's experience demands that a healthy person should eat a lot; however, this assumption is valid for Romanian traditional culture. The "script" interferes here with other scripts, like "health" and "marriage". Emilia is closely watching her future son-in-law, trying to analyze his eating and drinking habits, to find out if he is a healthy man or not. The disapproval of foreigners' eating habits – and inherently of the foreigners themselves – is expressed first by use of an adjective ("leşinaţi") with a belittling meaning. The following constructions add to the idea of belittlement ("aşa mănâncă ei, te miri ce, trei lulele, trei surcele"). Two different discourses can be recognized here. The derisive discourse, rich in informal, popular constructions, is expressed by the mother, while the next sentence, consisting in two neologisms ("Frugal şi dietetic"), must belong to the daughter, who is trying to act as a cultural mediator.

In the first part, the comic results from the inability of the mother to understand correctly the eating habits of the strangers. In the last sentences of the example, the eating practices of Alice's parents become comic for the reader, as they choose traditional Romanian foods, which are fat and not very healthy. The most humorous sentence is still the last one, in which Emilia talks about herself. The first part of the sentence creates again a certain subscript or expectation within the general script "food": Emilia did not feel like eating, so the reader expects that she did not eat at all. Instead, the closing of the sentence contradicts this expectation, as Emilia affirms to have ordered five sausages with mustard. The comic can be understood only if the reader is familiar with Romanian cuisine and knows that such a dish requires a strong appetite. The relationship between the two parts of the utterance is unexpected and what the character affirms to be coherent behaviour is coherent only for the character's so-called experience in the fictional world. The character's behaviour will be interpreted by the reader as incongruous in regard to the extratextual semantic and cultural information which the reader is supposed to possess.

(3) – Băiatul ăsta, Alin... [...] Păi, pe băiatul ăsta, dacă îl pui să care o roabă cu mortar, cade lat după zece metri.
– Şi?
– Zic şi eu...
– La ce să care mortar, că doar lucrează la bancă.

BDD-A977 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:58 UTC)

– Mda, şi tu ai cumva dreptate" (Lungu 2007: 35).

In example (3), the script "otherness" is focused on a particular individual, Alain. After the meeting has ended, the parents talk about Alice's future husband. Although Emilia previously declared that the fiancé had made a favourable impression on them, the discussion shows the father's discontent. His main discontent regards the fact that the young man does not have a strong constitution. Two concrete subscripts ("hard labour" vs. "intellectual labour") are opposed at the surface level. It should not be surprising that the subscript implied by the bride's father also triggers another opposition ("strength" vs. "lack of strength") as this trait was required in rural traditional Romanian collectivities for the bridegroom: an unhealthy, fragile man would not have been able to support his family. The inability which worries Alice's father is also a trigger for a more general script which implies intratextual and extratextual knowledge. Emilia and her husband have had a difficult life and worked hard to acquire a better social status. They lived most of their life in the communist regime, which emphasized physical labor while belittling the importance of intellectual labor. Not only semantic scripts, but also different cultural traits and systems of values are clashing and overlapping, as Emilia's husband is trying to apply a particular value to a person who does not live in the same society and according to the same unwritten rules. Example (3) also shows an apparent misunderstanding between the two speakers, or an incongruity at the semantic level. The father expresses his belief about Alain's physical strength not directly, but by referring to a specific situation: the future son-in-law is not able to carry a wheelbarrow full with mortar. Although the mother must have understood the implied meaning, she chooses to respond to the literal meaning (Alain does need to carry mortar, because he is working in a bank), managing to shift the topic to the son-in-law's profession.

Conclusion

All the examples discussed above are based on the opposition of two major scripts, "identity" and "otherness", which is also one of the main themes of the book. The script "otherness" includes numerous subscripts, which can be divided into two categories: "country" (geography, nation, politics) and "stranger" (appearence, skin colour, physical anomalies, clothes, eating and drinking habits, language, even world view). All these subscripts are activated while Emilia's story progresses. The opposition "good" vs. "bad" is not explicitly stated, mostly implied, as the narrator considers the practices in her community to be the right ones and analyzes the strangers according to this set of values. In the fictional world of the novel, the opposition "identity" vs. "otherness" may be subsumed to Raskin's distinction between normal and abnormal state of affairs: the heroine's final opinion is that the strangers have a different, somehow abnormal behaviour and approach to life.

However, it is obvious that not the mere activation of the scripts and subscripts provides the comic effect; insofar, the novel would not be very different from a report in cultural studies. The comic results from the opposition of the scripts "identity" and otherness" at an intratextual level (resulting from Emilia's inability to fully understand the strangers or, at least, to tolerate their way of life) and from the

BDD-A977 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:58 UTC)

creation of false expectations on the part of the reader, or from the selection of inappropriate linguistical tools. The examples show that humor in literary narratives can be created not only by the jokes embedded in the narrative, but also by constructions and scenes whose comic meaning is contextual. The correct interpretation of the linguistic elements and the inferences involved depends on the reader's knowledge regarding the narrative and also the cultural extratextual context. The importance of cultural scripts in literary texts may offer directions for future research.

References

Attardo 1998: Salvatore Attardo, *The analysis of humorous narratives*, "Humor: International Journal of Humor Research", 11/3, p. 231–260.

Attardo, Hempelmann et alii 2002: Salvatore Attardo, Christian F. Hempelmann, Sara Di Maio, *Script oppositions and logical mechanisms. Modelling incongruities and their resolution*, "Humor: International Journal of Humor Research", 15 (1), p. 3– 46.

Attardo, Raskin 1991: Salvatore Attardo, Victor Raskin, *Script theory revis(it)ed: joke similarity and joke representation model*, "Humor: International Journal of Humor Research", 4 (3/4), 293–347.

Brock 2004: Alexander Brock, *Analyzing scripts in humorous communication*, "Humor: International Journal of Humor Research", 17/4, p. 353–360.

Holcomb 1992: Christopher Holcomb, *Nodal humor in comic narrative: a semantic analysis of two stories by Twain and Wodehouse,* "Humor: International Journal of Humor Research", 5/3 (1992), p. 233–250.

Kuipers 2009: Giselinde Kuipers, *Humor style and symbolic boundaries*, "Journal of Literary Theory", 3/2, p. 219–240.

Lungu 2007: Dan Lungu, *Sunt o babă comunistă!*, Iaşi, Editura Polirom.

Perlmutter 2002: Daniel D. Perlmutter, *On incongruities and logical inconsistencies in humor: The delicate balance*, "Humor: International Journal of Humor Research", 15/2, p. 155–168.

Raskin 1985: Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht/ Boston/ Lancaster.

Abstract

The paper aims to support previous research on the importance of the script-based semantic theory for the study of literary humor. The first part of the article includes a brief description of the semantic scripts theory (Raskin 1985) and some of its later modifications. The next sections analyze some excerpts from the novel *Sunt o babă comunistă!* by the Romanian author Dan Lungu. The outcomes show that complex networks of scripts are activated in a literary narrative and that, besides the semantic information, the cultural dimension of the scripts activated in literary texts should be taken into account.

BDD-A977 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:03:58 UTC)