

# “Girding up the Loins”: A Cognitive Semantic Analysis of Humorous Expressions

**Zoltán Kövecses**

ELTE Budapest

zkovecses@ludens.elte.hu

## Abstract

*A large number of humorous linguistic expressions in English (and also in other languages) are characterized by such cognitive processes as metonymy, metaphor, and conceptual integration, or blending. However, these figurative devices are neither sufficient nor necessary for humorous effects. Following other researchers, I suggest that in order to account for humorous expressions we need the notion of conceptual incongruity, or incompatibility inside or between frames of knowledge. In the paper I will take stock of some of the commonly occurring types of incongruity, or incompatibility, in my data of humorous expressions. I will account for the existence of a large number of metonymy-, metaphor-, and blending-based humorous expressions by proposing that these figurative devices create or facilitate the creation of incongruities. The analyses of a number of humorous expressions will make it possible to suggest a rough and sketchy cognitive linguistic account of the humorous effect of these expressions.*

*Keywords: metaphor, metonymy, blending, frames, incongruity, conceptual pathways*

## Streszczenie

“Girding Up the Loins”. Semantyczno-kognitywna analiza wyrażen żartobliwych

*Duża liczba wyrażen żartobliwych w języku angielskim, a także w innych językach, charakteryzuje się obecnością takich procesów poznawczych, jak metonimia, metafora, integracja pojęciowa czy amalgamat. Te wyrażenia figuratywne nie są jednak ani niezbędne ani konieczne, aby efekt humorystyczny mógł zaistnieć. Zgadzając się z innymi badaczami, proponuję dla scharakteryzowania wyrażen żartobliwych przyjąć istnienie pojęcia niespójności pojęciowej czy też niezgodności wewnątrz albo między ramami poznawczymi. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiam klasyfikację wybranych typów niespójności czy też niezgodności, występujących w moim zbiorze wyrażen żartobliwych. Istnienie dużej liczby wyrażen żartobliwych opartych o metonimię, metaforę czy amalgamat da się moim zdaniem wyjaśnić tym, że te środki stylistyczne tworzą lub ułatwiają tworzenie się niespójności. Analiza szeregu wyrażen żartobliwych umożliwi wstępne naszkicowanie kognitywnego wyjaśnienia mechanizmu, który powoduje, że te wyrażenia wywołują efekt humorystyczny.*

*Słowa kluczowe: metafora, metonimia, amalgamat, rama, niespójność, ścieżki pojęciowe*

## **Introduction**

Why do we find certain linguistic expressions humorous? This is an apparently straightforward question that we think, until we try, is equally easy and straightforward to answer. But it is not simple and straightforward to answer it. If it were, we would not have dozens, or perhaps even hundreds, of theories of humor in general and linguistic humor in particular. (See, e.g., Raskin 1985; Attardo 1994; Ritchie 2004; Shibles <http://facstaff.uww.edu/shiblesw/>; Krikmann 2009).

This paper is an attempt on my part to answer the question in the previous paragraph as best as I can. Obviously, my answer is heavily influenced by the fact that I am a cognitive linguist; I will emphasize the relevance of cognitive operations in understanding humor (see also, Barcelona 2003; Coulson 2003, 2005; Feyaerts, Brône 2005). At the same time, however, I will suggest that such cognitive operations as metaphor, metonymy, and blending cannot in themselves explain the nature of humor. I will propose, together with others, that the notion of incongruity is an essential part of what we find humorous (see, e.g., Koestler 1964; Raskin 1985) and, in addition, I will offer a list of specific types of incongruities.

In doing so, I will suggest that figurative devices, such as metaphor and several others, play a very special role in achieving humorous effects; namely, they help us create the incongruities themselves that are responsible for humor.

If the research question and the answer to the question are not simple and straightforward, at least the methodology I will use is. I checked the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* for expressions that are marked humorous. The search yielded over 200 phrases. Of these, I analyzed the first one hundred or so. In the paper I will use only these expressions, together with their definitions and, in most cases, with the examples as I found them in this dictionary.

### **1. Cognitive processes in humor**

One of the striking features that one notices about humorous expressions from a cognitive linguistic perspective is the very noticeable presence of a number of “figurative” cognitive devices in the expressions. These include metonymy, metaphor, and blending. (On these, see

Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Kövecses 2002; Fauconnier and Turner 2002). Let us see some examples for each.

First, take the expression ***gird yourself (gird (up) your loins)***, which is used in the title of the paper. According to the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, its meaning is ‘to get ready to do something or to deal with something,’ especially something difficult. The expression is exemplified with two sentences: *We girded ourselves for the fray* and *Europe's finest golfers are girding their loins for the challenge of the Ryder Cup*. The expression is **metonymic** in the sense that a preparatory action (girding the loins) is used to indicate the state of readiness to deal with a difficult action, or put in the conventional form: GIRDING YOURSELF FOR THE STATE OF READINESS TO DEAL WITH SOMETHING DIFFICULT. More generally, the metonymy is PREPARATORY ACTION FOR STATE OF READINESS, or even more generally, CAUSE FOR EFFECT.

Another example that comes from British English is: ***put the flags out***. This is said ‘when you are pleased and surprised that something has happened.’ The example provided by the dictionary is *Josh has cleaned the bathroom – put the flags out!* Here we have the somewhat more complicated situation, in which we have a chain of metonymies: PUTTING THE FLAGS OUT FOR THE OBSERVANCE OF A NATIONAL HOLIDAY and NATIONAL HOLIDAYS FOR ANY EXCEPTIONAL EVENT. Since in the example Josh's cleaning the bathroom is an exceptional event and since national holidays stand for exceptional events that are observed by putting the flags out, it is possible to indicate the exceptional event of Josh's cleaning the dishes by the phrase *putting the flags out*.

Second, other expressions rely on **metaphors**. One of them is ***(as) clear as mud***, meaning ‘very difficult to understand,’ as in the example *His instructions were as clear as mud*. The conceptual metaphor that underlies this is UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING, where the correspondences, or mappings, “ability to see through something → to understand something” and “inability to see through something → to not understand” account for the particular meaning the expression has.

Third, an expression that has the same kind of syntactic structure as the previous one but that is based on the somewhat different mental operation of **conceptual integration**, or **blending**, is the following: ***as blind as a bat***. This means ‘to be unable to see well,’ demonstrated by the example *I'm as blind as a bat without my glasses*. Whereas the previous expression can only be understood metaphorically, this one does not require the assumption that a conceptual metaphor is present. We have an input space, input1, where there is a person who can see well with his glasses and we have another input space, input2, where we have

bats that do not see at all. Now in a third mental space, called the blended space, or blend, there is a person who cannot see. The property of bats is projected into the blend, where it applies to a person without his glasses. The person without his glasses comes from input space<sup>1</sup> and the inability to see comes from input space<sup>2</sup>. In the blend, the person and the bat's property are fused. (On blending in humor, see Coulson <http://cogsci.ucsd.edu/coulson/funstuff/funny.html>.)

There is heated debate in cognitive linguistics and its rival camps concerning the issue of whether these expressions are understood metonymically, metaphorically, or as blends *online* or it is only their creation that has happened as a result of these processes. In the paper, I will not be concerned with this issue. Instead, the question I would like to explore is whether the processes are inevitable for the understanding of humor (either in the sense of the online understanding of humorous expressions or in the sense of historically creating them). I turn to this issue next.

## 2. The cognitive basis in humor

There are two kinds of evidence that indicate that figurative devices are neither sufficient nor necessary for humorous effects. One is that there are humorous expressions that do not contain any of the figurative devices mentioned above, and, second, there are humorous expressions that do involve such figurative devices but are not humorous in their effects.

First, I will examine a case where an obviously humorous expression does not employ a figurative device. We find expressions in the data that do not seem to be based on any of the figurative mental operations mentioned above; instead, their understanding requires familiarity with some (literal) **conventional knowledge**. Let us take the following expression as an example: *there's a God!* The expression 'is said in a bad situation when something good happens unexpectedly.' The interpretation of the expression requires a certain amount of conventional knowledge: There are people who have doubts about the existence of God. However, there are other people who believe in the existence of God and who think that when something good happens to people in trouble, it is God who helps them.

Second, not all expressions that are based on figurative devices have a humorous effect. We can see that this is the case if we look at some additional examples of the UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING metaphor discussed above. Examples, such as *I see your point*, *That's a transparent argument*, and *It's not clear to me*, employ metaphors but that does not make them humorous.

No one would take *see*, *transparent*, and *clear* in the sentences as in any way humorous, though they are all based on a conceptual metaphor.

If there are expressions that are humorous but do not rely on figurative devices and if there are expressions that employ figurative devices but are not humorous, then there must be more to humor in language than figurative processes.

Following other researchers (especially Raskin 1985), I suggest that the more that is needed is the notion of **incongruity**, or incompatibility, or contrast, inside or between conceptual frames of knowledge – either figurative or literal. In the present section, I would like to take stock of some of the commonly occurring types of incongruity, or incompatibility, in the data, together with the cognitive mechanisms on which the various kinds of incongruities are based.

Below is a list of the kinds of incongruity I found:

Real vs. imagined/ Possible vs. impossible

Socially neutral/expected/acceptable vs. socially unacceptable/stigmatized/taboo

Elevated vs. mundane

Large amount vs. small amount

Natural vs. constructed

Positive vs. negative evaluation

Action vs. event

Logical incongruity

Linguistic/discourse incongruity

Not all of these are equally common. It is especially the first three that predominate in the data under consideration. I will now examine each of these categories of incongruity through some examples.

### 2.1. Real vs. imagined/ Possible vs. impossible

These are cases of incongruity where what we take to be real conflicts with some imaginary situation. A special case of this is where something possible, an aspect of real, is in conflict with something impossible, which is often something imagined.

Take, for example, the following humorous idiom: *that'll put hairs on your chest!* This is 'said to somebody who is going to drink something that is strongly alcoholic or eat something satisfying that will make their stomach feel full.' This is based on the metonymy EFFECT FOR

CAUSE, or more specifically, RESPONSE FOR STATE. Instead of saying that the drink is very strong, the speaker can choose to indicate this through a response that is associated with this state. But the real issue is where the humorous effect comes from. It is clear that not all RESPONSE FOR STATE metonymies are humorous. I suggest that the humor in the example comes from the incongruity between the real responses we associate with drinking strong alcohol (coughing, getting dizzy, etc.) and the imagined and impossible ones, such as putting hairs on someone's chest. So the metonymy we employ in understanding this idiom could be rephrased as IMAGINED RESPONSE FOR STATE. It is the incongruity between the real or possible, on the one hand, and the imagined or impossible, on the other, that seems to best account for the humorous effect of this particular expression.

We can see that something similar occurs in a metaphorical example. Consider the expression *be dripping with something*. The expression means 'to be wearing a lot of something,' as in *She was absolutely dripping with gold/jewels*. The underlying conceptual metaphor in this case is LARGE QUANTITIES OF OBJECTS ARE LARGE MASSES OF FLUID. The humor of the expression stems from the incongruity between the image of the person wearing a lot of jewelry and imagining a person dripping with jewelry, as if with water. The former is a realistic image, while the second is impossible and is based on our imagination. Several forms of exaggeration may be based on such incongruous images.

But we do not need metaphor and metonymy to create incongruities that may be responsible for humorous effects. The British English expression *before the flood* is a case in point. Its meaning is 'a very long time ago.' The conventional knowledge we have in connection with this expression maintains that the biblical flood happened many thousands of years ago. The incongruity lies in the (assumed, supposed) reality of the occurrence of the flood and the impossibility of the personal event happening such a long time ago.

## 2.2. Socially expected/acceptable/neutral vs. socially unacceptable/stigmatized/taboo

This category of incongruities has also produced a number of examples in the data. The incongruity is between what is socially accepted, expected, respected, or at least neutral, on the one hand, and what is not acceptable, stigmatized, or taboo, on the other. The examples that fall into this category often involve sex, since this form of behavior constitutes a prime case of socially unacceptable and/or tabooed behavior.

Let us first look at an idiom that involves a body part that is somewhat socially stigmatized: *be the armpit of something*. The American expression is defined by the dictionary as follows: 'to be an extremely unpleasant, often dirty, place,' as in the phrase *the*

*armpit of the North*. A very general metaphor that accounts for such expressions is THE WORLD IS THE BODY, which is basically equivalent to the assumption that we conceptualize the world surrounding us through our body. This is called the “embodiment hypothesis” in cognitive linguistics and psychology. A specific case of the metaphor is SOCIAL/SPATIAL/etc. RELATIONS ARE BODY ORGANS. This is a very productive conceptual metaphor, as shown by such expressions as *in back of*, *ahead of*, and *at the foot of*.

We can account for the humorous effect of the phrase if we assume that there is another metaphor that is part of the metaphor system in which the concept of armpit participates; it is the metaphor UNPLEASANT IS SMELLY, and more generally, BAD IS SMELLY. We have knowledge about parts/areas of the body. The smell of the armpit came to be socially constructed as unpleasant. Given this social construction and the BAD IS SMELLY metaphor, the armpit came to be constructed as something bad and unpleasant and as a body part that can serve as a source domain for any unpleasant place. In this case, the incongruity lies between a neutral spatial concept and a socially stigmatized body part that serves as its metaphorical source domain.

We can perhaps think of the distinction between socially acceptable and unacceptable as being closely related to other distinctions, like the distinction between the public and the private. This again has to do with sexual matters, in that sexual behavior dominantly occurs in the private realm. One example that may be relevant to this distinction is the following: *get to first base*. The American expression means ‘to kiss somebody in a sexual way; to fail to get through the first stage.’ This has clearly to do with such well known conceptual metaphors as LIFE IS A GAME, LOVE IS A GAME, and SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS ARE GAMES, as well as a number of metaphors from the Event Structure metaphor, such as ACTION IS SELF-PROPELLED MOTION, PROGRESS IS MOTION FORWARD, and DIFFICULTIES ARE OBSTACLES. The incongruity that is evoked here is between the private, personal performance of sexual actions, as opposed to the public, social occasion of performing games, such as baseball.

### 2.3. Elevated vs. mundane

The next large category of incongruities is that between elevated and mundane, or down-to-earth. The idea simply is that we take certain situations to be elevated, out of the ordinary, while others as everyday. This category also involves several related incongruous distinctions. For example, it may serve us well to discuss the significant vs. trivial, the formal vs. informal, and the poetic language vs. conventional, everyday language distinctions as related aspects or cases of the elevated vs. mundane distinction.

This type of incongruity can be exemplified by an expression discussed above: *before the flood*. In addition to the incongruity between the reality of the occurrence of the flood and the impossibility of the personal event happening such a long time ago, the expression is characterized by the incongruity between a(n assumed) significant public event and a less significant, mundane personal event. The biblical flood acquired a special, elevated status among events due to its being part of the Bible. This contrasts markedly with the personal, hence mundane or much less significant, event with which it is compared. In other words, humorous expressions may have multiple sources of humor, as the present example indicates.

Consider now the metaphor-based humorous expression: *call of nature*. The meaning as defined by the dictionary is ‘the need to use the toilet.’ Clearly, nature does not call anyone, only people can call other people; thus, we have to do with metaphor, more precisely, personification: NATURE IS A PERSON. What makes the expression humorous, I suggest, is that the personification evokes the large romantic attraction that humans feel for nature and contrasts it with the trivial and mundane need to defecate. As a result, an incongruity between something elevated (large romantic attraction) and something mundane, or down-to-earth (need to defecate) emerges.

A final example that exploits the related contrast between poetic language and conventional everyday language is: *hark at somebody!*, which is ‘said to somebody who has just accused you of something that you think they are guilty of themselves,’ in such examples as *Hark at him calling me lazy when he never walks anywhere if he can drive!* There is an incongruity in register here. The archaic, formal word *hark* is used in a completely informal, everyday situation, as in the example. The humor arises from the incongruity between the two registers.

#### 2.4. Large amount vs. small amount

Many of the humorous expressions involve exaggeration. We can account for several such expressions by assuming what can be called the “large amount vs. small amount” incongruity. This kind of incongruity does not necessarily reveal itself in specific numbers or amounts. The distinction can be merely presupposed. The expression *can’t boil an egg* means ‘to be unable to cook even the simplest meal.’ There are a number of metonymies that account for this meaning: BOILING FOR COOKING; WAY OF DOING SOMETHING FOR DOING IT; COOKING EGGS FOR COOKING IN GENERAL; and, most importantly, INABILITY TO COOK AN EGG FOR INABILITY TO COOK. In our folk theory of cooking, cooking an egg requires very little expertise. By contrast, cooking in general demands a great deal of expertise. This conflict between little and a great

deal of expertise creates the incongruity on which the humor of the phrase is based. Furthermore, we also need a piece of natural logic: if you can't do a simple version of an activity, you can't do more complex versions of the same activity.

### 2.5. Natural vs. constructed

Some other humorous expressions make use of the incongruence between what can be taken to be naturally-given as opposed to what is rationally-constructed. As one example of this, consider *in the brain/looks department*, which has the meaning 'in intelligence/attractiveness,' as in *He's a bit lacking in the brain department*. The expression assumes the metaphor A PERSON IS A COMPANY/ INSTITUTION, where the different aspects of the person correspond to different departments; that is, we have the mapping "departments → aspects of the person". Given the metaphor, a "natural" person contrasts with an "unnatural" company or other institution. The incongruence is between certain natural capacities of human beings and the rationally designed setup of a company or institution. The clear sense of incongruity is achieved by selecting an element in the source domain that does the trick; that is, one that brings to the fore the "largest possible conceptual distance" between the two domains.

### 2.6. Positive vs. negative evaluation

Straightforward cases of incongruity are those where the same thing receives both a positive and a negative evaluation. There was one such expression in the data: *economical with the truth*, meaning 'avoiding stating the true facts of a situation, or lying about it.' The expression is based on the conventional metaphor IDEAS ARE COMMODITIES. The correspondence that brings together an element from the source and an element from the target domain is this: you may economize with your resources, or commodities, and you may economize with your ideas. However, being economical is evaluated differently in the source and the target. In the source, it is considered a good thing, but in the target a bad one. (This may have to do with Gricean maxims like being informative.) It is this incongruity that accounts for the humor of the expression.

### 2.7. Action vs. event

One example in the data reveals an incongruity between an action and an event. The expression is *what's the damage?*, 'used to ask how much something has cost you.' In the expression, the person is viewed as a commodity; hence the metaphor A PERSON IS A

COMMODITY. The specific mapping that accounts for the meaning is “damage to the commodity → expense to the person.” We find an incongruity here between the person and the commodity, as well as one between an action done (paying) and a passive process/ event (damage) that happens to the commodity.

## 2.8. Logical incongruity

In the data, a number of examples reveal what can be seen as “logical incongruities.” These involve a variety of distinct cases, such as the incompatibility between truth and falsehood, redundancy, logical impossibility, and possibly some others that did not occur in the data.

Let us begin with redundancy, or tautology, as in the following example: *a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do*. The expression means ‘you will do whatever you have to do, even if it’s difficult or dangerous.’ This is a statement of the obvious. There is no incongruence here in any of the senses discussed above, but there is a logical incompatibility, where the statement involves a redundancy, or tautology. The logical incompatibility applies, however, only to the surface form of the expression. If it were a pure case of redundancy, it could not mean what it does; namely, that you have to do something *even it is difficult or dangerous*. The italicized part of the expression’s meaning arises as a result of a metonymic process (PROPERTY OF A CATEGORY FOR THE WHOLE CATEGORY), but this is not my concern here.

A more complex example that involves the incompatibility of truth and falsehood is the following: *excuse/pardon my French*. This is ‘said when you are pretending to be sorry for saying a swear word,’ as in *That sod Wilkins, excuse my French, has taken my bloody parking space*. By social convention, you should apologize for swearing. In the example, the speaker pretends to do so. We know this because he swears again immediately after apologizing. We know that French is not the language of swearing, but the speaker sets up a mapping between swear words and French. He equates the language of swearing with French. The logical incompatibility arises between the truth that French is not the language of swearing, on the one hand, and the obvious falsehood that is generated by its temporary, online construction as being one, on the other. In other words, we have a contradiction between truth and falsehood. This is one form of logical incongruity.

## 2.9. Linguistic/discourse incongruity

Finally, a type of incongruity involves the use of language. This happens in several distinct forms, of which I will mention two here. Take the expression *bottoms up!* Its meaning is described in the dictionary as follows: ‘sometimes said in a friendly way just before drinking

an alcoholic drink together.’ The understanding of the emergence of the phrase from a historical point of view involves some knowledge about containers: Containers have a bottom; containers are used for drinking; we keep liquids in containers; and the idea that by moving the bottom of the container up, the fluid comes out of the container. The crucial part of the creation of the phrase is a metonymy: STATE FOR EVENT, according to which the state of having the bottoms up stands for the event of drinking (the drink coming out of the container). In a way, the request *bottoms up!* employs words that describe a small part of the entire scenario and seem to be at first entirely independent from it. There is no mention of cups, beer, drinking, and the like. What is given (*bottom* and *up*) in the phrase makes sense via the metonymy. The apparent conceptual independence of the words used from the rest of the scenario is a kind of linguistic/ discourse incongruity.

A distinct kind of linguistic incongruity can be found in the example *great minds think alike*, which is ‘said to somebody just after you have discovered that they have had the same idea as you.’ Here the expression involves the metonymy MIND FOR THE PERSON and the metaphor GOOD/ IMPORTANT IS BIG (to account for *great*). The linguistic incompatibility results from the distinction between the person who says this (who is obviously not a great mind but an ordinary person) and the people who are great minds in most people’s opinion. That is to say, the linguistic incongruity is generated by the legitimate applicability of the phrase itself to the person who uses it. The user pretends that the phrase is legitimately applied to him, but at the same time we know and he knows that it isn’t.

### 3. The role of figurative cognitive operations in humor

In the section “Cognitive processes in humor,” we saw that humorous expressions often employ figurative cognitive operations, such as metonymy, metaphor, and conceptual integration, or blending. However, in the section “The cognitive basis of humor” I argued that the humor in humorous expressions does not come from the presence of these figurative cognitive operations; instead, I suggested that it comes from the many kinds of incongruity that are involved in the humorous expressions in the data. This situation leaves us with an important question: *What, then, is the role of these cognitive operations in humor?* If it is the case that humorous expressions are commonly based on metonymy, metaphor, and blending, but these cognitive operations are not responsible for the humorous effect of the expressions, then the question is: Why do we have so many metonymy-, metaphor-, and blend-based humorous expressions? The present section is devoted to the discussion of this issue.

My strategy will be to examine a number of additional humorous expressions from the data, see which figurative devices are utilized in them, and establish what role the devices play in creating a humorous effect.

### 3.1. Metonymy

We can begin with a case involving metonymy. Take the expression *the birds and the bees*, which has the meaning ‘the basic facts about sex and reproduction,’ as in *She’s only six, but she already knows about the birds and the bees*. It seems that in this case we have the general category of BASIC FACTS that has a variety of members, including BASIC FACTS ABOUT SEX and BASIC FACTS ABOUT ANIMAL BIOLOGY. Now the expression *the birds and the bees* makes use of basic facts about animal biology to access, or indicate, basic facts about sex and reproduction. This is metonymic thinking. In it, A MEMBER OF THE CATEGORY OF BASIC FACTS (BASIC FACTS ABOUT ANIMAL BIOLOGY) STANDS FOR ANOTHER MEMBER (BASIC FACTS ABOUT SEX) OF THE WHOLE CATEGORY (BASIC FACTS IN GENERAL). Actually, since the expression mentions only *birds and bees*, another metonymy is needed to account for its meaning: KNOWLEDGE ABOUT BIRDS AND BEES FOR BASIC KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ANIMAL BIOLOGY.

The incongruity that produces the humorous effect resides in the conflict between a public and socially neutral topic (basic facts about birds and bees) and a highly private and taboo topic (human sex). I suggest that metonymy is used in order to create the very possibility of such an incongruity. This conclusion parallels and reinforces Barcelona’s (2003) finding that in one-line jokes certain generic-level conventional metonymies enable the setting up of conceptual incongruities.

Moreover, an appropriate concept or set of concepts has to be selected from the large number of concepts that a metonymy allows for. *Birds and bees* are appropriate because they represent sufficiently neutral, public knowledge connected with the tabooed topic of human sex through a metonymic relationship.

While the metonymy above is a conventional one at the generic level, namely, A MEMBER OF A CATEGORY FOR ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE SAME CATEGORY, at the specific level it is a fairly unconventional one. This is also a common feature of metaphors used in humorous expressions: They tend to be conventional at the generic level but unconventional at the specific level. (And in some other cases, even the generic-level metaphor can be unconventional.)

### 3.2. Metaphor

That metaphors commonly contribute to the creation of incongruities has been noted by a number of researchers (see, e.g. Barcelona 2003; Feyaerts and Brône 2005; Krikmann 2009). Take, as an example from the data, the expression *won't break the bank*, meaning 'to not cost too much,' as in *It only costs two pounds. That's not going to break the bank*. What this metaphorical expression assumes is the metaphor PEOPLE ARE INSTITUTIONS. This is a generic-level metaphor, but it is probably not a conventional one. Not even the less generic version of it, PEOPLE ARE BANKS, could be easily regarded as conventional. The correspondence that is relevant to the meaning of the expression would be something like: "institutional financial transactions → personal financial transactions." The incongruity here is based on some of our knowledge about the functioning of banks: Some large-scale financial transactions can ruin a bank, while small-scale transactions can't. This is similar to and contrasts with one's personal financial transactions. It is similar because both banks and persons carry out financial transactions, and it is different because the transactions of banks typically involve much larger amounts of money than those involved in personal transactions. In other words, there is a sharp contrast between the relatively small amounts of money and the often huge amounts of money involved. This incongruity may be a source of the humor of the expression.

The unconventional metaphor sets up a situation in which small and large amounts of money are involved and, based on our knowledge of how banks operate, it becomes possible to say that such a small amount won't damage the bank, and hence, it won't damage the person's financial situation either.

The expression *have a bun in the oven* means 'to be pregnant.' The expression does not reflect a conventional conceptual metaphor today (though it may once have reflected one). The metaphor relies on an image-schematic similarity between a pregnant woman and a bun in the oven. The incongruity between the two consists of several aspects. First, there is an incompatibility between the socially constructed wonder and significance of being pregnant and the mundane and (relatively) insignificant action of baking buns. Second, there is an incongruity between the tabooed nature of having sex (and, as a result, having a child) and the non-tabooed action of baking a bun. With the help of the cognitive device of metaphor, a suitable source domain is found that serves as a counterpoint to the elevated character of the target domain and that avoids the tabooed nature of the activity that leads to having a child.

In the next case, we do have a full-fledged conventional conceptual metaphor: HUMANS ARE ANIMALS. An expression from the data is *be like feeding time at the zoo*, meaning 'to be very noisy, untidy and lacking order,' as in *Tea-time in our house is like feeding time at the*

*zoo*. The metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS can be used to achieve an incongruity between socially acceptable and instinctual behavior. The specific socially unacceptable behavior (being noisy, untidy, etc.) in the expression has to be matched by a similar specific kind of instinctual behavior; it is feeding time in the zoo. Thus, an appropriate correspondence is set up within the conceptual metaphor: “animal behavior at feeding time → noisy, untidy, disorderly human behavior on social occasions.” In other words, the conventional conceptual metaphor may be a first step in finding the appropriate source domain within which the incongruity can be achieved, but a further step is needed; to find, through following the mappings, the expression that is the best, the most complete and fitting match for the original idea in the target domain.

It could be suggested in connection with the expression *be like feeding time at the zoo* that it is based on an analogy created within the framework of a larger, generic-level conceptual metaphor: HUMANS ARE ANIMALS. An expression that is based on an extremely skeletal analogy without any cognitive backing from a conceptual metaphor is: *do bears shit in the woods?* According to the dictionary, this is ‘used to say that the answer to the question you have just been asked is obviously “yes.”’ The analogous relation is skeletal because the analogy lies in the format: “speech act: question – answer: yes,” which has nothing to do with the content of the question and applies to all questions to which the answer is an obvious “yes.” As an example, consider the conversation: *A: “Do you want a nice cold beer?” B: “Do bears shit in the woods?”* The incongruity that accounts for the humor is that between a socially acceptable or neutral question and a socially unacceptable or vulgar question. The skeletal analogy allows speakers to produce the incongruity.

As an opposite case, let us take the expression: *be full of the joys of spring*, whose meaning is ‘to be very happy,’ as in *He bounced into the office, full of the joys of spring*. This is the opposite of the previous example in two ways: First, instead of vulgar language, it uses poetic language and, second, instead of a skeletal analogy, it is based a rich set of conventional conceptual metaphors. The humorous effect of the expression derives from the incongruity between the conventional, everyday way of talking about being happy, using the word *happy*, and the poetic, unconventional way of talking about it. What enables speakers to move between the two horns of the incongruity? I would propose that it is a set of conventional conceptual metaphors that are combined: A LIFETIME IS A YEAR; EMOTIONS ARE SUBSTANCES; PEOPLE ARE CONTAINERS; INTENSITY IS QUANTITY. As LAKOFF - TURNER (1989) point out, one of the ways in which poetic language is produced is by means of such combinations of

conceptual metaphors. That is to say, the incongruity between the everyday and the poetic is brought about by combining the metaphors.

Metaphor and metonymy often combine to yield humorous figurative expressions. One example of this is the phrase *hold court*, which means ‘to get a lot of attention from people who gather round to listen, especially on a social occasion,’ as in *Patrick is holding court at the end of the table*. The meaning of the phrase assumes THE OBJECT OF ATTENTION IS THE CENTER and the IMPORTANT IS CENTRAL conceptual metaphors, as well as the metonymy SURROUNDING SOMEBODY FOR PAYING ATTENTION TO THAT PERSON. Here the incongruity, or incompatibility, arises between the everyday situation when this happens and the archaic situation in the king’s court. Thus, what is needed, in addition, to set up the incongruity is the metonymy SPECIFIC INSTANCE OF THE CATEGORY FOR THE WHOLE CATEGORY, where the general concept of attention is the whole category, one instance of the general category is an everyday situation, and another instance is the archaic situation in the king’s court.

### 3.3. Blending

Blends are especially useful devices in creating and resolving incongruities (see, e.g., Coulson 2003, 2005). First, I will examine two expressions whose humorous effect is due to the incongruity between what’s real and impossible, and then, I will look at two expressions that involve logical incongruities.

In the expression *somebody’s eyes are bigger than their belly/stomach*, there is a surface incongruity between the size of the eyes and the size of the stomach. Based on our knowledge, we know that this is impossible; people’s eyes are not bigger than their stomach. According to the dictionary, the expression is used ‘to say when somebody has taken more food than they can eat.’ I believe a more precise formulation of the expression’s meaning would be this: ‘to desire more than what you can eat.’ How can we get from the expression that is characterized by a surface incongruity to the meaning of the expression that is not incongruous?

We can postulate two input spaces: input1 with the eyes and input2 with the stomach. In input1, the eyes stand metonymically for looking (EYES FOR LOOKING, more generally, INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION). The action of looking stands, in turn, for desire; hence, LOOKING FOR DESIRE (more generally, BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS FOR THE EMOTION). Furthermore, based on our everyday knowledge we know that opening the eyes wider indicates more desire to eat.

In input2, the stomach stands metonymically for eating in virtue of the metonymy OBJECT INVOLVED IN AN ACTION FOR THE ACTION. Furthermore, we have some everyday

knowledge about the stomach; namely, that the stomach has a certain capacity and that its capacity can be responsible for how much we eat.

In the blend, we have eyes bigger than the stomach, meaning that somebody's desire to eat something is bigger than what the person can actually eat. Thus, the blend creates but, at the same time, also resolves a surface incongruity between what's real and what's not.

While in the previous example the blended space resolves the incompatibility between surface impossibility and deep reality, the next example creates a blend with an unresolved incongruity. The expression *with friends like you, who needs enemies?* is 'said to or about somebody who claims to be your friend but who is treating you very badly.' In input1, there is a friend and input2 there is an enemy. Our everyday knowledge about friends and enemies includes that friends help each other and do not hurt each other, whereas enemies hurt each other and do not help each other. In the blend, we have a friend who hurts you; that is, an essential property of friends is replaced by an essential property of enemies. Thus, there is an incompatibility inside the blend: a friend who hurts you. In other words, the blend creates an incongruity, which is the source of humor.

#### **4. Toward a cognitive linguistic account of humorous expressions**

In light of the foregoing analyses, we can attempt to formulate the sketch of a cognitive linguistic account that can explain at least a part of the humor we find in many linguistic expressions. I propose that such a skeletal account would consist of the following:

First, it would recognize that there is a particular meaning that needs to be expressed;

Second, this meaning has, or can be assigned, one or several values in a system of dichotomous values, such as the ones that have been identified (e.g., elevated – mundane; large – small);

Third, given this value, an expression has to be found that bears the meaning that needs to be expressed but that has a value opposite to the value of the original meaning;

Fourth, there is a conceptual pathway that leads from the original meaning that has a value (or values) and that is expressed via a more conventional form to an expression with the same meaning but that has the opposite value and that can be expressed by another, less conventional form.

Fifth, the conceptual pathways include metonymy, metaphor, conceptual integration, and also conventional knowledge.

Obviously, this is very sketchy but, hopefully, it is on the right track, at least in many cases. The types of cases where it may not work very well include linguistic and logical incongruities. It remains to be seen how far this model could be generalized to incongruities of this kind.

## 5. Conclusion

In the paper, I have examined roughly one hundred linguistic expressions that are marked humorous by the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. The analyses of particular expressions indicate that many of these are based on metonymy, metaphor, and conceptual integration.

However, I pointed out that these figurative devices are neither sufficient nor necessary for the humorous effect of such expressions. Following other researchers, I suggested that in order to account for humorous expressions we need the notion of conceptual incongruity, or incompatibility, inside or between frames of knowledge.

On the basis of the analyses, I argued that there are a number of clearly identifiable types or kinds of incongruity that appear to be responsible for humorous effects. These include “real vs. imagined,” “possible vs. impossible,” “socially neutral/expected/acceptable vs. socially unacceptable/stigmatized/taboo,” “elevated vs. mundane,” and several others.

As regards the issue of why we have so many metonymy-, metaphor-, and blending-based humorous expressions, my suggestion was that these figurative devices create or facilitate the creation of incongruities.

Given such findings, an embryonic cognitive linguistic account of humor can be outlined. At the heart of this theory is the conceptual pathway that recreates a particular meaning by means of a new form and a new (opposing) value.

## Acknowledgements

This paper first appeared in 2010 [in:] Anna T. Litovkina et al. (eds.) *Humour and Culture 1: Linguistic Shots at Humour*, Kraków: Tertium, p. 103-120. The author is grateful to Arvo Krikmann and Reka Benczes for their comments on this paper.

## References

- Attardo, Salvatore (1994) *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Barcelona, Antonio (2003) "The case for a metonymic basis of pragmatic inferencing. Evidence from jokes and funny anecdotes." [ In:] Klaus-Uwe Panther, Linda L. Thornburg (eds.), *Metonymy and Pragmatic Inferencing*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 81–102.
- Coulson, Seana (2003) "What's so funny?: Conceptual integration in humorous examples." <http://cogsci.ucsd.edu/coulson/funstuff/funny.html>
- Coulson, Seana (2005) "Extemporaneous blending: Conceptual integration in humorous discourse from talk radio." *Style* 39 (2); 107–122.
- Fauconnier, Gilles, Mark Turner (2002) *The Way We Think*. New York: Basic Books.
- Feyaerts, Kurt, Geert Brône (2005) "Expressivity and metonymic inferencing: Stylistic variation in non-literary language use." *Style* 39 (1); 12-35.
- Koestler, Arthur (1964) *The Act of Creation*. London: Hutchinson.
- Kövecses, Zoltán (2002) *Metaphor. A Practical Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Krikmann, Arvo (2009) "On the similarity and distinguishability of humor and figurative speech". [retrieved from: [http://haldjas.folklore.ee/~kriku/HUUMOR/Krikmann\\_HUMFIG.pdf](http://haldjas.folklore.ee/~kriku/HUUMOR/Krikmann_HUMFIG.pdf)]
- Lakoff, George, Mark Turner (1989) *More Than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, George, Mark Johnson (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Raskin, Victor (1985) *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Ritchie, Graeme (2004) *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Shibles, Warren (1998) *Humor Reference Guide: A Comprehensive Classification and Analysis*. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press.