

## ANALYZING HUMOR IN NEWSPAPER COMIC STRIPS USING VERBAL-VISUAL ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

*The researchers aimed at analyzing the meaning of humor in newspaper comic strips within a variety of incongruous combinations of multimodal rhetoric. The current research focused on how humor was produced via verbal medium only, via both verbal and visual media, as well as via visual only. The source of data was 74 political comic strips featured in Kompas newspaper. The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) was adapted as a framework of analysis. The analysis of the data confirms the following categorization: 49 humors appear only in text, 22 humor result from the interaction of text and image, and three humor come from images. In addition, humor which appears in text only and cases of the interaction between the two semiotic modes (either complementary or contradictory) is based on puns, exaggerations, contradictions, analogies, parallelisms, or verbal metaphors. Special attention is given to humor produced by the interaction of both text and image and by the images only which cause the hyperdetermination of humor, which can produce two or more humorous utterances. Meanwhile, the humor appeared in visual comic strips is produced exclusively by the visual language of knowledge resources.*

**Keywords:** humor, comic strips, verbal analysis, visual analysis

### INTRODUCTION

Comics is a medium to represent a person, place, thing, or idea through images that are often combined with words or other visual information (McCloud & Martin, 1993). According to the definition of the comic in the Oxford English Dictionary (Mitchell, 2014), comics lie in the frame of comedy interpretation rather than tragedy. Thus, comics convey the communicative goal presenting humor. In addition, comic strip conveys a sequence of illustrations arranged either in single or multiple panels with text in balloons or captions (Cohn, 2013).

The popularization of comic strips has been distinctively recognized in certain communication contexts, such as newspapers and magazines. While comic can have different genres which may not have a humorous tone (e.g., adventures, relationship, etc.), political comic strips appear in newspaper pages need elements of humor to pass the ethical or moral judgment on individuals, institutions, or groups (Eko, 2007). In short, the pages are expected to be the funniest, and indeed a reader can expect the context to be humorous, let alone the original intention of the content it has in the strips.

Tsakona (2009) has analyzed the humorous effects via visual and verbal modes of 561 political cartoons of the

most popular weekly and daily Greek newspaper. A General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) framework of analysis is used and based its assumption that image and language may or may not collaborate for the creation of humor. The research has found that humor mostly results from the interaction of verbal and visual elements in the political cartoons (66,84%), and followed by humor produced via verbal elements only (31,01%). Meanwhile, humor produced via the visual elements only are found with the lowest percentage (2,13%).

In special cases, the interaction of the two semiotic codes might result in both textual and punctual hyperdetermination of humor, which might result in multiple active opposed scripts. Textual hyperdetermination contains only one context which causes multiple script oppositions, for example in a comic duet figure of political opponents. Meanwhile, punctual hyperdetermination produces multiple humor in different levels and contexts of text and image interaction, for example, changing a page is viewed differently with turning a page into a folder and can be considered as a failure in political views (Bounegru & Forceville, 2011). Finally, Tsakona (2009) has suggested that the GTVH framework is a potential linguistic device to transmit humorous political, social, or other messages.

Another research conducted by Fägersten (2017)

who has investigated the humor of English-language swearwords in Swedish-language comic strips. The research thus represents interdiscourse humor based on incongruity via the intercultural clashes. It employs the encryption theory of humor. This fact is encrypted in the comic strips which show incongruity of two discourse systems under different norms of appropriateness. The analysis of the selection of examples of Swedish comic strips featuring English swearing switches has suggested that humor created via English swearwords is a function of shared background knowledge. In spite of considering the comic strip frame as playful, the inappropriateness is resolved by the Swedes speakers' common knowledge in that they are inactively concerned with the native (English speakers) norms of swearword usage. To conclude, certain communities like the Swedes unlikely experience offense or impropriety by using English swearwords.

Abdel-Raheem (2018) has examined multimodal humor in editorial/political cartoons by combining the incongruity-resolution theory in humor studies, as well as blending and relevance theory. The researchers aim to analyze humorous components in political cartoons. A corpus of 45 West political cartoons in Egypt's two influential state newspapers covers political dissatisfaction over the US decision to cut aid to Egypt. The results have claimed incongruities in multimodal humor (e.g., Rambo-Obama) are resolved by the blending theory which based its interpretation on the input mental spaces and its antonym (e.g., fighting versus sponsoring; hand versus barrel). Concerning how relevance theory work, it is when readers pragmatically infer explicatures via visual codes and implicatures via individual's background knowledge, cultural values, psychological traits, and the broader social context. Finally, the analysis in the research emphasizes in that the theories are fundamental in the interaction of readers' linguistic and cognitive system for cartoons.

There are two significant differences between the current research and the three related researches that are explained above. First, the difference is the source of data which will explain different graphic styles in which sequential patterns of images are created. For example, Tsakona (2009) has analyzed Greek political cartoon; Fägersten (2017) has conducted humor research on Swedish comic strips; Abdel-Raheem (2018) has analyzed political cartoons on the West by Egypt's newspapers. Meanwhile, the current research particularly analyzes Indonesian political comic strips which may result in more exclusive verbal or visual sources.

Second, the difference is the theories applied. The current research uses the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) (Attardo, 2017) which has been developed from focusing on semantic scripts to pragmatic model. The interaction between the pictorial and textual components is particularly important since humor can appear in either one of the modes or both of them. In addition, humorous components can appear in different levels and contexts due to the language and image interaction, which means humor can appear in the middle (jab line) or at the end of the text (punch line) or sequences of images (Tsakona, 2009).

Reflecting the background of the research, the current research aims to analyze multimodal humor of comic strips in one of Indonesian influential state newspaper. The researchers expect that the research can contribute to humor study found in comic strips. The theories employed are the Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH) and the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). Since

a comic has its language grammar, the way a comic artist creates sequences of illustrations in one or more panels, the multimodal analysis is especially important.

Known as humorous picture-stories, the comic has the different graphics style that distinguishes it from gag or editorial cartoon. There are panel arrangements, gutter or panel frames, body types and sizes, postures, facial expressions, speech or thought balloons, onomatopoeia and written words in the story (e.g., *SSTH*), pictograms (e.g., ) and pictorial runes (e.g., spikes ) (Forceville, Refaie, & Meesters, 2014). In addition, comics are often accompanied by textual devices, such as caption or dialogues.

Raskin (2017) further develops the SSTH theory that has been commonly associated with the opposition of two distinct scripts. Raskin (1987) postulates the possibilities of script oppositions, yet not limited to; normal/abnormal, actual/non-actual, possible/impossible, good/bad, life/death, non-sex/sex, money/non-money, high stature/low stature. In other words, a story is found to be funny or not when readers can find violations of expectation of the other opposed script, for instance, if people see or do things that hardly happen in real or normal life.

Incongruity occurred in the opposed scripts also demonstrates a fully-cognitive linguistic, vis-à-vis semantic, and pragmatic theories (Yus, 2003). In this case, readers' knowledge of the most relevant information is inadequate to resolve the humor effect; therefore the information has to be replaced with a more unlikely but eventually turns out to be the correct interpretation (Refaie, 2011; Yus, 2017). In short, readers can find unpredictable situations while they expect a more likely situation. The unpredictability has been set up into six knowledge resources (KR) in the GTVH theory.

Moreover, the resources can be described as follows; (1) script opposition (SO) is the opposed scripts that are explicitly stated and inferentially understood by readers. (2) The logical mechanism (LM) accounts for the playful and non-serious logic to resolve the incongruities from the opposed scripts. (3) Situation describes the background of events, such as participants, objects, activities, or places. (4) Target (TA) talks about human and their activities, such as practices or beliefs. (5) Narrative strategy (NS) refers to text organization, such as narratives, dialogues, riddles, or puns, and presents a jab line or a punch line in the text. (6) Language (LA) contains linguistic resources, for example phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical description.

## METHODS

The data collection is done by gathering comic strips in one of Indonesian state newspaper, KOMPAS (2017), from February to November 2017. The newspaper is chosen because the comic strips can represent the nation in general. For instance, there are *Panji & Koming* in which the setting takes place in the old Javanese times featuring Javanese aristocrats and peasants' family, *Timun* which has its special characteristics of body figures, *Sukribo* which features an ordinary boy who pays attention to Indonesian social and political conditions, *Konpopilan* which only relies on visual communication instead of words. Those strips have one similarity in that they appear as political commentary.

The methods of data analysis consist of three steps. First, the researchers classify the comic strips based on a variety of incongruous combinations of multimodal humor

(Samson & Huber, 2007). There can be opposition in text only, between text and image, or in images only. Second, the researchers identify two opposed scripts with the SSTH theory. Third, the researchers observe the resolution (namely as Logical Mechanism in Knowledge Resources) of the two opposed scripts, hence produce humor, based on readers' KR in GTVH theory. Consider the following KR analysis for the example of the joke or verbal humor: A skeleton walks into a bar and says, "I'll have a beer and a mop." (Attardo, 2017).

The situation portrays 'patronizing a bar' script. However, incongruities are found in the real/unreal script of 'walk into', 'talk', and 'drink' that are done by a skeleton as an agent. Needless to say, the script opposition breaks the expectation of normal activity in a bar (e.g., drinking) by setting up a new yet abnormal action (e.g., mopping). The humor is based on the analogy of the opposed scripts, in which one can hardly imagine a skeleton, via metonymy replaces a human, walks into a bar and, asks for a beer and a mop.

The analysis of the data confirms that comic strips can be categorized based on the assumption that language and image may or may not collaborate for the creation of humor (Samson & Huber, 2007). More specifically, in 49 out of total 74 (66,2%) humor appears only in the text; in 22% out of total (29,7) humor results from the interaction of text and image; and in 3 from total (4,05%) comic strips the image is the only source of humor. In the following section, each category will be analyzed separately, in order to identify the creation of humor within the GTVH framework.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the first category, the verbal language is responsible for the production of humor in the comic strips. The script oppositions are conveyed in the text. Sequences of images in this particular case support the production of humor by providing the background of the event; hence those elements reflect readers' knowledge of the situation.



Figure 1 A Comic Strip by Rachmat Riyadi (*Libra*), Published in *Kompas* (08 January 2017) (Source: <https://kompas.id/baca/hiburan/>)

The strip in Figure 1 contains only one panel which portrays situations and events that happen at the beginning of the New Year. There are three Timun characters that are famously recognized portraying a wide range of personalities, such as a citizen, government official, a man spreading hoax and hatred, as well as skulls as the metaphor of death. The first man figure, as the main character in the strip, is cautiously watching several people shouting over the New Year's resolution by saying, 'they're still partying

in the new year...' The 'partying' script is incongruously associated with the other attributes of things the other characters refer to (e.g., corruption, tragedy, drugs, or hoax). The normal script of partying is to have new resolutions for a better future, while the strip presents misfortunes and troubles. The humor is thus resolved by using the exaggerating expression. This strip thus criticizes certain responsible parties that cause disorders for the country. Finally, the humorous effects are created via text only in which pictorial elements supports the humor with its exaggerated expressions and human-like figure.



Figure 2 A Comic Strip by Faisal Ismail, Published in *Kompas* (11 June 2017) (Source: <https://kompas.id/baca/hiburan/>)

In Figure 2, Sukribo tells his friend that he will wear formal shoes with heels for Eid Mubarak. To his friend's surprise, Sukribo is expected to present a plausible reason for his decision. Sukribo's last utterance then becomes the punch line of the strip as he incongruously refers 'hak' (heels) to two opposed scripts, which can have two different meanings both of 'heels' and 'rights'. The humor here is produced based on one of the language components that is a pun (homonymy) which refers to the same words but with different meanings. Readers, therefore, can understand the humor meaning if they can find the analogy or contrast meaning of 'hak' script. Indeed, the strip captures the situation where the Indonesian House of Representatives tries to weaken The Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi; henceforth KPK).



Figure 3 A Comic Strip by Rachmat Riyadi (*Libra*), Published in *Kompas* (09 April 2017) (Source: <https://kompas.id/baca/hiburan/>)

In Figure 3, a boy character named Terong is indignantly telling his parents that he is accused of stealing. The boy reacts, hence is equivalent to that of Setya Novanto, when he is accused of the e-ID graft case. The mother's response, "our child is consumed with news about

the e-ID graft case” becomes the punch line of the strip as the utterance concludes the incongruous actions of her son. In the actual politic practice, the obsession with stage play becomes the aesthetic side of political behavior. As a result, such play in the strip is presented in an exaggerated manner.

From the three comic strips presented in Figure 1, 2, and 3, humor exclusively appears within the text, while the images support the language expressions between the comic characters. The humorous effects identified in the data are the same as the ones found in other humorous genres (e.g., in narrative jokes or political cartoons), namely as puns, exaggerations, contradictions, analogies, parallelisms, or verbal metaphors. Finally, the analytical tools of the GTVH can account for the creation of humor in comic strips.

In the second category, the examination of humor production in comic strips is more complex since the interaction of text and images is not so straightforwardly addressed or appears within the sequences of panels. The humor in this category is created by either producing or enhancing humorous effects. In other words, there are two kinds of interaction which either be a contradictory or complementary one. In addition, humor can also create hyperdetermined humor, since there can be more than one humorous utterances in different panels (evoking a different but thematically script oppositions).



Figure 4 A Comic Strip by Dwi Koendoro, Published in *Kompas* (12 March 2017) (Source: <https://kompas.id/baca/hiburan/>)

In the background of Figure 4, an administrator announces an official decision made by Javanese authorities. The official decision is about the suspension of one of the Javanese authorities (portrayed as the character of Denmas Aryo Kendor) who is responsible for the graft case of identity card. The script opposition is caused by the incongruity between the administrator’s words and results of one’s words in images. The image in panel 4 (the first panel appears in the left top, continuing from the left bottom as well) shows the contrast between the authority’s and common people’s intention. The contrast script indicates the normal versus abnormal scripts of the KR analysis. The punch line is concluded by the last utterance of the two peasants witnessing the contradiction of the antagonist characters.

In cases such as contradiction depicted in Figure 4, humor can be produced via the interaction of verbal and visual elements. The examination of data in Figure 4 indicates that there is a kind of humorous production that

is counterpointing or contradictory one. Depending on the degree and distribution of different information presented, a counterpointing dynamic develops words and images collaborating to communicate meaning.

Figure 5 represents Indonesian government officials or House of Representatives to comic characters of Javanese authorities, which can reflect that particular events take place between the two periods. The characters are very popular with their incongruous actions, dialogues, and personalities in general. The incongruity of this strip emerges from the overlap and contrast between the normal script which involving the government officials concern for the country’s problems (see panels 1-4), and the abnormal one involving the authorities’ indifference for the country’s problems. The opposed scripts show that such actions are rarely exposed to the present time. The punch line comes from the peasants’ exaggerated reactions over the authorities’ exaggerated actions. Finally, the interactions of the image and text are complementary since the real-like portrayals of characters are explicitly inferred via the pictorial components (e.g., pictorial runes indicating movement) and implicitly understood by readers with similar common knowledge of certain behaviors.



Figure 5 A Comic Strip by Dwi Koendoro, published in *Kompas* (17 September 2017) (Source: <https://kompas.id/baca/hiburan/>)

In Figure 6, the figure of KPK’s top investigators Novel Baswedan is represented like Timun character. The character is famously recognized to create laughter with their odd actions, dialogues, and personalities. In this strip, the artist creates a visual metaphor which combines the physical traits of Novel, for example, his half-baldness, with that of Timun. In addition, though the visual metaphors of a crocodile figure the cartoonist aim to criticize the nation’s criminals. The first opposed script appeared here is resolved by the analogy that contributes to the creation of the same visual metaphor.

Furthermore, the metaphor is verbally realized through a pun of the monologue. The second humor emerges from the incongruity between the actual script involving the seriousness of some unfortunate event, and the non-actual one suggesting the comicality inherent with Timun hyperbolic actions and words.

Moreover, it can be claimed that, in the former cases of figure 4 and 5, the combinations of pictures and words may complement or contradict to each other to create the humorous meaning, while in the latter case (Figure

6) a kind of hyperdetermined humor may occur. More specifically, the analysis of Figure 6 proposes that textual hyperdetermination which can occur where the script opposition and the logical mechanism coming from the verbal means differ from the ones coming from the visual ones, hence there may be two (or more) script oppositions. In other words, the above cases reflect the examination of data where verbal humor (usually a pun or a fixed expression) co-occur with visual metaphors.



Figure 6 A Comic Strip by Rachmat Riyadi (*Libra*), Published in *Kompas* (07 May 2017). (Source: <https://kompas.id/baca/hiburan/>)

In the third category, there are comic strips which solely based on its humorous effect on their pictorial elements. The strip in Figure 7 is one of the visual communications depicted via the interaction of human and animal characters. There are certain kinds of animals which symbolize certain parties in Indonesian politics. In this case, one can assume from the first panel and the first animal cartoon character (e.g., a lion) that the situation happens in a circus show. Although a bear does not normally jump over a hula hoop (see panel 2), a bear is still a part of trained animals which usually performs a show in a circus (which refers to the ‘normal’ script of the SO in KR analysis). From all information presented in panels 1-2, a rat can expect the same treatment, even though the animal is not normally part of the trained animals in a circus show. The first opposition is thus resolved by metaphors of the rat as corruptors figure.



Figure 7 A Comic Strip by Ade R, Published in *Kompas* (19 March 2017) (Source: <https://kompas.id/baca/hiburan/>)

Just like humor examined in a multimodal strip (text only or text and image), the punch line in visual humor is based on information presented in the set-up which is not identical. It reveals no information that will ruin the final

surprise of a new and unexpected event. In addition, the new script opposition (refers to the possible and impossible scripts in Script Opposition below) can be illustrated as follows; although a rat is illustrated as a trained animal and will get the same opportunity as the others, the same opportunity does not come for the rat. The possibility of escaping the obstacle is compared – in an exaggerated manner – to which readers can infer that the hole is intentionally set up to fit the rat’s body or the rat is expecting the similar size of a hula hoop that has been given to the other animals. Finally, the cartoonist intends to represent the nation’s view on political stands.

The results of the current research may contradict with the previous research, for example in terms of theories applied and sources of data. First of all, the examination of the data in this current research is based on The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). The theory systematically explains how readers can identify incongruous inputs of both textual and pictorial elements, then implicitly infer humor based on their common knowledge. This view is also supported by Sosa-Abella and Reyes (2015) in which they explain that humor represented not only the mental process of audiences but also a fairly complex view of social interaction. The theory is different from that of Fägersten (2017) and Abdel-Raheem (2018). Even though they emphasize multimodal issues in their research, they do not present distinctive importance of the interaction of the two semiotic modes, whether humor appears on text only, text and image, or image only. Particular attention should have been given to humor found in text and image in which many kinds of interaction, whether it will be complementary rather than contradictory interaction or result in hyperdetermined humor that can be made.

Moreover, different sources of data may create different results. Since the current source of data in the current research is different from Tsakona (2009). The current researchers can expect different results. While Tsakona has found that the production of humor in the editorial cartoon is primarily as a result of the interaction of image and text, the current research confirms that humor in comic strips is mostly produced by the textual features only. In this case, Shifman (2007) agrees that humor is a statistic and moving image, as well as written language and oral communication.

## CONCLUSIONS

The current analysis reveals three significant results. First, in 49 out of 74 comic strips (66,2%), humor is based solely on their texts, while images support humor by providing the background or situation of the humorous utterance or text. In such cases, humor is based on puns, exaggerations, contradictions, analogies, parallelisms, or verbal metaphors. Second, in 22 out of the total 74 comic strips (29,7%), humor results from the interaction of text and image which is either contradictory or complementary to each other. In this case, linguistics combines with multimodal analysis to be able to explain the process of communication in humor (Brock, 2017). The interaction of the two semiotic modes also makes the analysis becomes more complex and not so straightforward.

An interesting result emerges from the knowledge resources where the interaction of text and image creates a textual hyperdetermination of humor occurs. The hyperdetermined humor particularly present multiple

analysis of the script opposition and logical mechanism, and language resources of the comic strips, hence there may be two (or more) jab lines present. Such humorous effects can also result where verbal humor (usually a pun or a fixed expression) co-occur with a visual metaphor. Finally, there are 3 out of 74 comic strips (4,05%) which are based solely on pictorial elements. The humor appeared in visual comic strips is produced exclusively by the visual language of knowledge resources.

The current research covers only a particular range of time, which is from February to November 2017. Further research on multimodal humor studies, more specifically the diachronic one will be interesting to discuss. It may assist the researchers to gain a better understanding of which type of multimodal rhetoric used to retell important political events. Besides, further research can also focus on thematic-based studies of multimodal humor. In this case, there will be more themes, other than political strips, for example themes of social and culture, corruptions, law, economy, pers, and many others. Further research can find that humor produced via text and image may be more appropriate than humor created via text only within a particular time or theme.

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