An Application of the General Theory of Verbal Humor to Kurt Vonnegut's "Cat's Cradle"

Une application de la théorie générale de l'humour verbal au roman « Cat's Cradle » de Kurt Vonnegut

O aplicaţie a teoriei generale a umorului verbal pe romanul "Cat's Cradle" de Kurt Vonnegut

Alexandru OLTEAN
Facultatea de Litere, Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai Cluj-Napoca
Email: andyoltean@yahoo.com

Abstract

The following article represents a step in an ongoing work to determine the nature of humor in the works of Kurt Vonnegut. Here I focus on "Cat's Cradle" – perhaps the author's first work of significant success – and seek to create a formal model of the novel, outlining only the fragments of text which are humorous. The methodology used is based primarily on the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) created by Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin, which the authors claim can be applied to any kind of text. The purpose of the present paper is not to dispute this claim, but rather, on the basis of its validity, to apply the GTVH directly onto "Cat's Cradle", primarily so as to identify patterns in the usage and placement of humor within the text of the novel. What the paper seeks to prove is that elements of humor in a novel are not placed at random and do not exist only to lighten the mood of a story or to push forward an idea that the narrator seeks to get through to the reader. Instead, the precise placement of the humorous pieces of text creates a formal image that is also a representation of the way in which the novel as a whole is constructed.

Résumé

L'article représente un pas dans un ouvrage en cours pour déterminer la nature de l'humour dans les œuvres de Kurt Vonnegut. Je me concentre ici sur « Cat's Cradle », probablement le premier ouvrage de l'auteur qui a eu un succès significatif – et j'essaye de créer un modèle formel du roman, en mettant en évidence seulement des fragments de texte qui contiennent de l'humour. La méthodologie utilisée est basée premièrement sur la Théorie Générale de l'Humour Verbal (GTVH), créée par Salvatore Attardo et Raskin Victor, les auteurs considérant que celle-ci peut être appliquée à tout type de texte. Le but de l'ouvrage n'est pas de contester cette affirmation mais, plutôt, d'appliquer, sur les bases de sa validité, leur théorie directement à « Cat's Cradle », premièrement pour identifier des modèles dans l'usage et le placement de l'humour dans le cadre du roman. Ce qui l'ouvrage essaye de démontrer est que les éléments d'humour ne sont pas placés au hasard dans un roman et qu'ils n'existent pas seulement pour soulager l'état d'esprit d'une historie ou pour pousser une idée que le narrateur essaye de transmettre à l'auteur. En revanche, le placement exact des fragments humoristiques crée une image formelle qui est, également, une représentation de la manière dont le roman entier est construit.

Rezumat

Articolul de faţă reprezintă un pas într-o muncă în curs de desfăşurare pentru a determina natura umorului în lucrările lui Kurt Vonnegut. Aici mă concentrez pe "Cat's Cradle" – probabil prima operă a autorului care a avut un succes semnificativ – şi încerc să creez un model formal al romanului, evidenţând doar fragmente de text care conţin umor. Metodologia utilizată se bazează în primul rând pe Teoria Generală a Umorului Verbal (GTVH) creat de Salvatore Attardo şi Raskin Victor şi care autorii consideră că pot fi aplicat la orice tip de text. Scopul lucrării de faţă nu este să conteste această afirmaţie, ci mai degrabă, pe baza valabilităţii sale, de a pune în aplicaţie teoria lor direct pe "Cat's Cradle", în primul rând pentru a identifica elemente de tipar în utilizarea si plasarea umorului în cadrul textului de tip roman. Ceea ce încearcă lucrarea să demonstreze este că elemente de umor dintr-un roman nu sunt plasate la întâmplare şi nu există doar pentru a uşura starea de spirit a unei poveşti sau pentru a împinge înainte o idee pe care naratorul încearcă să o transmită cititorului. În schimb, plasarea exactă a fragmentelor umoristice creează o imagine formală, care este, de asemenea, o reprezentare a modului în care romanul ca un întreg este construit.

Key words: *Cat's Cradle, GTVH, formal model, humor, text, Vonnegut*
Mots clés: *Cat's Cradle, GTVH, modèle formel, humour, texte, Vonnegut*
Cuvinte cheie: *Cat's Cradle, GTVH, model formal, umor, text, Vonnegut*

Introduction

This paper presents an application of the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) on the text of a novel, namely Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*. The aim of the paper is to create a formal model of the humor in the text, focusing both on *narrative levels* and on the humorous fragments of text that exist within the novel in general and within each narrative level in particular. As stated, the paper relies heavily on the concepts adopted by Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin in the creation and development of the GTVH, including the notions of *punch line* and *jab line*, and the set of symbols that make it possible to formally present the humorous fragments of text found within the novel. What the paper will seek to prove is that elements of humor in a novel are not placed at random and do not exist only to lighten the mood of a story or to push forward an idea that the narrator seeks to get through to the reader. Instead, the precise placement of the humorous pieces of text creates a formal image that is also a representation of the way in which the novel as a whole is constructed.

1. GTVH – the theory including the six KR's, jab lines vs punch lines

The *punch line* is already a well-established concept. For the purposes of this article it is sufficient to note that it is a segment of a text which disrupts the flow of the narrative for humorous purposes. In a joke it is usually found at the end of the text and is the word or phrase which forces the reader to go back over the text in search for the new semantic script. In contrast to the *punch line*, Attardo introduces for the first time in 1996 the *jab line*. Unlike the former concept, this one stands out most notably because of the fact that it "does not disrupt the flow of the narrative" (2001:83), meaning that it is an integrated element of the narrative (integrated within the context of the text) which creates the script opposition without forcing the reader to reevaluate the previously read piece of text.

The GTVH is a revision of Raskin's Semantic Script-based Theory of Humor (SSTH), created in 1985. The latter is limited to jokes and focuses primarily on the semantic aspect of humor, particularly on script opposition. *Script opposition* refers to the central condition for a joke-like text to be humorous, namely that the text in question be compatible, fully or in part, with two semantic scripts that are opposite in meaning, at least within the text itself. The textual and linguistic limitations of the SSTH (that it refers only to jokes and focuses mainly on semantics)

prompted Attardo and Raskin to work on a new theory that could be applied to all types of text. The result is the GTVH.

First postulated in 1991, the GTVH "is broadened to include all humorous texts, at any length. Specifically it is not limited to narrative texts, but also to dramatic and conversational texts, in which there is no narrator" (Attardo, 2001:28). Rather than a semantic theory, the GTVH is a general linguistic one that is based on distinct *Knowledge Resources* (KRs) that must be tapped into when generating a joke (see Attardo, 1994, 1998, 2001). In 'The analysis of humorous narratives' (1998), Attardo applies the GTVH to an episode from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, namely 'Chuckles bites the dust'. Apart from analyzing the humorous fragments, Attardo also endeavors to formally depict the text. In order to do so, he introduces the following table of symbols:

-	Non-humorous text (of any length)
$\rightarrow$	End of narrative + material occurring after a punch line
J	Jab line
P	Punch line
[…]	Beginning and end markers of a narrative
…	Any occurrence of – and J
$\mapsto$	The beginning of a text

As such, a humorous fragment of text that ends in a *punch line* would look as followed:
[$\mapsto$ - P $\rightarrow$]

That the above representation could be used just as well on a stand-alone joke-like text is hardly a coincidence. In fact, one of the characteristics of the humorous fragments of text that belong to a novel and which bear the same formal rendering is that they could be extracted from the larger text without losing much (if any) of the semantic value of the sentence(s). In other words, their contextual dependency upon the larger text is limited or non-existent. Let us consider as an example the following passage found at the end of Chapter 6 of *Cat's Cradle*

> "After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America
> could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to
> Father and said, 'Science has now known sin.' And do you know
> what Father said? He said, 'What is sin?'"

(Vonnegut 1963[2011], p 13).

Even without knowing who *Father* is, the text still provides enough information so that the reader can understand that the bomb is the atomic bomb or that the two characters are scientists and he can perceive the script opposition between a normal reaction (agreeing or disagreeing with the man's statement) and the abnormal reaction (innocently asking what sin is).

With *jab lines* things are rather different. Because they do not interrupt the narrative flow and are well integrated into the larger text, removing a humorous fragment of text which contains such a line would most often render the fragment incomprehensible and certainly the humor would be lost due to the lack of definable reference points.

2.   The example: *Cat's Cradle*
2.1.   Narrative levels in *Cat's Cradle*
On the basis of both the GTVH and by adopting the formal symbols created by Attardo as shown in the table above, in what follows I will present a formal model of humor in Cat's Cradle. Given the nature of the text, it is not surprising that the novel's structure is rather complex. In *Cat's Cradle* this complexity is rendered through a system of narrative frames. Attardo (2001) has already touched upon narrative frames (or, *narrative levels* (NL) as he calls them). Within the system postulated by Attardo *Levels* are attributed to each narrative in order to illustrate their relationship

to one another. In this sense, a macro-narrative at level$_0$ is usually the main storyline of the text, the level at which the story typically begins and ends. If within this narrative a character begins to tell a story, the events of that story are placed at level$_{-1}$.

Working within the same system, in *Cat's Cradle* NL$_0$ presents the present time – that is to say, the period where the world has ended and when John (or Jonah) is writing his diary-like account of his journey – as well as the events that took place beginning roughly one year before and leading up to the present. Thus, the bulk of the text presents to the reader the narrator's journey to Ilium, then to the island of San Lorenzo, as well as his transition from a small-time freelance writer to the president of a nation and finally one of the last survivors of the human race. NL$_0$ also includes two additional levels. The first is made up of the history of the Hoenikkers, while the second presents the history of San Lorenzo, including the lives of its more prominent figures (Bokonon, McCabe, Julien Castle etc). Because the two narrative levels have no connection to each other and because their role in this novel is to complement NL$_0$, it makes sense to consider them as being on an equal level, which I will call NL$_{-1a}$ and NL$_{-1b}$. Therefore, in the most abstract way, *Cat's Cradle* can be rendered into a simple formula:

$$\textbf{NL}_0 \; \textbf{[} \textit{[NL}_{-1a}\textit{]} + \underline{\text{[NL}_{-1b}\text{]}} \textbf{]}$$

Two observations need to be made here. The first is that the differences in font in the representation above are merely to aid in distinguishing the framework of each narrative level. Thus, the formal representations that follow and which belong to NL$_0$ will be placed in bold, those belonging to NL$_{-1a}$ will be italicized and those from NL$_{-1b}$ will be underlined. The second observation is that the separation between narrative levels is nowhere near as clean as the formula above could imply. This is most evident in relation to the places where the two secondary narrative levels (NL$_{-1a}$ and NL$_{-1b}$) come into play. The formula might make one believe that the first of these two appears, evolves and is concluded at the beginning or at least during the first half of NL$_0$, after which the second emerges. In reality, instances of both these appear periodically and intermittently, as cases appear where events pertaining to NL$_0$ require additional information.

2.2. Formal representation of *Cat's Cradle*

The analysis of the humor in *Cat's Cradle* was done by going through the text and pausing on each humorous fragment at a time. For each case in point a depiction of the six KRs was presented, as well as a determination of whether the fragment contains a *punch line* or a *jab line*. In the end, if we take into consideration only the formal representations of humor, *Cat's Cradle* can be depicted as shown below:

$$[\mapsto - J - [\mapsto - J - [\mapsto - P \to] - [\mapsto - J \to] - P \to] \to] - [\mapsto - P \to] - J$$
$$- P - J - J - J - J - J - J - [\mapsto - J - J \to] - [\mapsto - P \to] - J - J - [\mapsto - P$$
$$\to] - P - J - [\mapsto - P \to] - [\mapsto - P \to] - J - \underline{[\mapsto - J \to]} - \underline{[\mapsto - P \to]} - J$$
$$- [\mapsto - J \to] - J - \underline{[\mapsto - P \to]} - \underline{[\mapsto - J - J \to]} - J - [\mapsto - J \to] - J - \underline{[\mapsto}$$
$$\underline{- J \to]} - \underline{[\mapsto - P \to]} - J - J - J - J - \underline{[\mapsto - P \to]} - [\mapsto - P \to] - J -$$
$$[\mapsto - P \to] - [\mapsto - P \to] - \underline{[\mapsto - P \to]} - J - J - J - J - [\mapsto - P \to] - [\mapsto$$
$$- P \to] - J - J - [\mapsto - J \to] - J - J - J - \underline{[\mapsto - J \to]} - [\mapsto - P \to] - J - J$$
$$- J - J - [\mapsto - P \to] - [\mapsto - P \to] - [\mapsto - J \to] - J - [\mapsto - P \to] - J -$$
$$[\mapsto - P \to] - [\mapsto - P \to] - J \to]$$

A couple of explanatory observations must be made. The first is that the various fonts here are the same as in the formula above and serve to differentiate the three narrative levels. The second is that the formal symbols of *beginning* ([ ) and *end* ( ]) serve both as markers of separation between *narrative levels* and as indicators of where the text of a given *narrative level* comes into play and where it stops.

The first *narrative level* – NL_0 – effectively includes the other two and begins with the narrator's almost non-humorous (though witty) quick presentation of who he is and what his initial plan as a writer was (that is, to write a book about the day the A-bomb dropped entitled *The Day the World Ended*). This initial part of the novel is for the most part rhetorical and the only comic element to be found is a poem taken from the so-called *Book of Bokonon* about widespread interpersonal connections. The verses are supposed to be of religious importance, but lines such as "Nice, nice, very nice – / So many people / In the same device" (Vonnegut 1963[2011], p 3) make it wholly ridiculous **(↦ - J →).** Shortly after that, the novel glides into the events which begin roughly one year earlier. Interestingly enough, it is only when, through Newt's telling of what he remembers of the day the bomb dropped, we enter NL_{-1a} that we encounter a humorous fragment of text, namely Newt's comically grotesque description of his father who scared the poor boy when coming to play with him. The premise is that Dr. Hoenikker never plays with his children. Yet this time he decides to act as a father, but comes out looking like "the ugliest thing I had ever seen" (Vonnegut 1963[2011], p 9): ↦ - J →

As the novel progresses, the text jumps back and forth between NL_0 and NL_{-1a}, respectively NL_{-1b}, thus creating a full image of the events that take place in *Cat's Cradle*, as well as the ideas that the reader can depict from the novel. The ending contains the final sentences in *The Book of Bokonon*, which, up until now, was a continuous work in progress. The words he has written are:

> "If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history as a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues out of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who."
>
>   (Vonnegut 1963[2011], p 206)

↦ - **P** →

Thus the novel concludes in a punch line that belongs as much to Bokonon's text as, perhaps, to *Cat's Cradle* as a whole.

3.   Observations

Right off the bat, two observations can be made. The first is that there is a correlation between the value of each narrative level and the number of humorous fragments of text which they contain. If one were to not read the novel at all, but simply look at the formal model, he would still be able to realize what the narrative structure of the text is. He would be able to see that, there is a main storyline (in bold), which is interrupted at certain moments by two secondary narrations (in italics and underlined). The importance of one narrative level over another is here determined by nothing more than the number of jab lines and punch lines provided. In this sense, the main storyline is obviously the most important, followed by the secondary narrations.

The second clear observation is that, both in the case of NL_{-1a} and NL_{-1b} there is a reasonably larger concentration of humorous fragments when each narrative level is introduced (which is to say, when the reader is first told about the Hoenikkers, respectively about San Lorenzo) and then only sporadically throughout the novel. This would suggest a high level of intentionality on behalf of the writer when positioning the punch lines and jab lines within each of the secondary narratives. Why exactly Kurt Vonnegut chose to position the bulk of the humorous fragments belonging to NL_{-1a}, respectively NL_{-1b}, in the beginning (or, for that matter, why the author chose to use humor at all) is open to interpretation. It is a generally accepted fact that Vonnegut used humor as a means of underplaying the gravity of the notions and events that his novels portray (see Allen (1988); Freese (2008); Klinkowitz (1973); etc). For example, in *Cat's Cradle* Felix Hoenikker

represents the embodiment of evil made manifest through ignorance. He is portrayed as being "harmless and gentle" (Vonnegut 1963[2011], p 48), since he never worked on anything with the intent of hurting another human being. At the same time, neither did he pay any attention to how his inventions might be used by others and so, in his quest to satisfy his own intellectual curiosity, he invents *ice-nine*, which ends up destroying the world. In order to underplay the gravity of Felix's actions and the actions of his children, who, in their selfish endeavors to find personal happiness, made the end of the world possible, a heavy dose of humor is required. It is therefore conceivable that Vonnegut's tactic of ensuring this dose was that of bombarding the reader from the beginning, after which only sporadic reminders are required in order to maintain the mood of the story at a reasonably light level. The history of San Lorenzo may not possess the kind of global impact that the actions of the Hoenikkers have, but it makes up for this lack through the misery of the island's inhabitants and the savagery of their leaders. The inhabitants are portrayed as "oatmeal colored, […] thin and […] every person had teeth missing" (Vonnegut 1963[2011], p 97). Past rulers include Emperor Tum-bumwa, "a demented man, an escaped slave" (Vonnegut 1963[2011], p 152), and various dictators, such as McCabe and 'Papa' Monzano. All in all, San Lorenzo is a miserable third-world country. It is therefore understandable to imagine that undermining the depravity of this society would require the same tactic used to restrict the gravity of the actions carried out by the Hoenikkers.

Another observation is that, regardless of the *narrative level*, the punch lines and jab lines in the text appear for the most part evenly spaced apart, with an average of one to three humorous bits of text per chapter. There are, of course, exceptions in a few places. Chapter 99 'Dyot Meet Mat', for example, can be seen as a humorous text in its entirety, while Chapter 118 'The Iron Maiden and the Oubliette' has no humorous fragments at all. These discrepancies seem, however, to have more to do with the author's choices rather than with any underlying structure. And since we cannot ask Kurt Vonnegut in person about the matter (nor is it certain that he would have a useful answer were he still with us), the safest decision would be to ignore these discrepancies entirely. Neither would it be very illuminating to speculate as to why there are distinctively more *jab lines* than punch lines, since *punch lines* and *jab lines* both have the exact same role in the novel, which is to make the text as a whole a humorous one. One might hypothesize here though, at least at an empirical level, that, since *punch lines* interrupt the reading of a text, it would make sense that a novel which contains predominantly these types of lines would make for a stressfully abrupt read.

Conclusion

One could argue, as many literary theorists have, that the intentionality of the author in the development of a novel is secondary to the reader's interpretation of the text. Some have even said that it has no importance at all. But when it comes to the placement of humorous fragments of text within the larger text of the novel, we can clearly see the writer's hand at work. The *jab lines* and *punch lines* appear fairly evenly spread out throughout the novel, which maintains the light mood that the author is known to have wanted to be prevalent. The two secondary narrative levels which enforce the main storyline both have the bulk of their humorous fragments of text situated at the beginning, when they are introduced to the reader, which again sends to authorial intent. Apart from their positions, the number of *jab lines* and *punch lines* belonging to any given *narrative level* also speaks to the importance which that particular *narrative level* has within the novel as a whole. All in all, what becomes apparent is that humor in the text of a novel is very much a pragmatic device. Its function has less to do with the various meanings that can be extrapolated from the novel, and more to do with the author's stylistic approach. The use of humor thus speaks rather to the question of *how* the intended reader should handle the text and not to *what* the reader should perceive.

Bibliography

Attardo, Salvatore; Raskin, Victor. 'Script theory rivis(it)ed'. In Humor, vol 4-3/4 (1991), 293-347

Attardo, Salvatore (1994). *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Berlin: Mouton de Druzter

Attardo, Salvatore; Attardo, Donalee; Baltes Paul; Marnie Jo Petray. 'The linear organization of jokes: analysis of two thousand texts'. In Humor, vol 7-1 (1994), 27-54

Attardo, Salvatore. 'The analysis of humorous narratives'. In Humor, vol 11-3 (1998), p 231-260

Attardo, Salvatore. 'Trend in european humor research: towards a text model'. In Humor, vol 11-4 (1998), 349-369

Freese, Peter (2008). *The Clown of Armageddon*. Heidelberg: Heidelberg Winter

Klinkowitz, Jerome (1973). The Vonnegut Statement. Boston: Delacorte Press

Klinkowitz, Jerome (1977). Vonnegut in America. New York: Delacorte Press

Mustazza Leonard (1994). The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut. Westport: Greenwood Press.

Tsakona, Villy. 'Jab lines in narrative jokes'. In *Humor*, vol 16-3 (2003), p 315-329

Raskin, Victor (1984). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor.* Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co.

Vonnegut, Kurt (1993[2011]). *Cat's Cradle*. London: Penguin Books