

Deconstructing verbal humour with Construction Grammar*

Eleni Antonopoulou and Kiki Nikiforidou

1. Introduction

As can be easily attested in the literature on cognitive stylistics (Semino and Culpeper 2002) and cognitive poetics (Stockwell 2002) the main insights of Cognitive Linguistics exploited for the analysis of literary texts are the ones bearing on conceptual metaphor and blending. Similarly, in cognitive linguistic approaches to humour, “marked construals” (as candidates for humorous effect) are accounted for in terms of well established construal mechanisms, such as metaphor, metonymy and conceptual blending (Brône and Feyaerts 2004). Use made of other trends within the cognitive paradigm, such as frame semantics, is restricted to early versions of Fillmore’s theory (up to Fillmore 1985). In Humour Studies, scripts/frames have been (independently) used in both Raskin’s (1985) SSTH (Semantic Script Theory of Humor) and its offshoot, the GTVH (General Theory of Verbal Humor) (Attardo 2001).¹ The current development of frame semantics into a fully blown linguistic theory, i.e. Construction Grammar (henceforth CxG), has not been applied either to humour or to literary texts yet. This paper is the first attempt to apply CxG to the analysis of verbal literary humour.

The focus on “verbal” requires an explanation, since the term has been used to imply both “verbal” as opposed to “referential” and “language based” as opposed to “visually triggered” humour. The former distinction refers to the manipulation of the *signifiant* rather than the *signifié* and has a long history (dating from Aristotle and Cicero) as does the

* We would like to thank Anna Despotopoulou, Sophia Marmaridou and Villy Tsakona for their input, as well as the two reviewers for comments and suggestions. Errors and omissions are entirely our own. Research for this paper was partly supported by grants no 70/4/5754 and 70/4/5531 of the Special Research Fund of the University of Athens.

1. For an overview of scripts, frames, scenes etc. and their use in AI, see Emmott (1999: 23–41).