

GENERAL THEORY OF VERBAL HUMOR IN LINGUISTICS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF APPLICATIONS, TRENDS, AND CHALLENGES

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.30983/mj.v4i2.11157>

<i>Submission: February 18, 2026</i>	<i>Revised: May 30, 2026</i>	<i>Published: June 30, 2026</i>
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Abstract

Humor is a pervasive linguistic phenomenon that varies across communicative, cultural, and multimodal contexts. The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) has become an influential framework for analyzing such variation through six Knowledge Resources: Script Opposition, Logical Mechanism, Situation, Target, Narrative Strategy, and Language. This study systematically reviews the applications, thematic trends, and theoretical critiques of GTVH in linguistic research. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted following the PRISMA protocol using Scopus as the primary database, with search terms derived from GTVH and humor-related linguistic concepts. Through the implementation of a predetermined review procedure, a total of 25 journal articles were identified and analyzed. The findings reveal three key contributions: (1) GTVH has been operationalized across twelve linguistic domains, including pragmatics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, translation studies, digital discourse, multimodal semiotics, forensic linguistics, and cultural analysis; (2) research has increasingly shifted from canonical joke analysis toward applied, interdisciplinary, digital, and multimodal contexts; and (3) persistent challenges remain, particularly the inconsistent operationalization of Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism, limited methodological standardization, and difficulties in incorporating cultural, contextual, audience-related, and multimodal factors. The review suggests that GTVH functions increasingly as a flexible analytical framework rather than a uniformly operationalized theory. Future research should focus on theoretical refinement, standardized coding, cross-cultural validation, and multimodal extension of GTVH.

Keywords: General Theory of Verbal Humor, SLR, Applied Linguistics, Humor linguistics.

1. Introduction

Linguistic research on humor has expanded considerably since Raskin (1985) introduced the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH), a framework that highlights how opposition between semantic scripts drives humorous effects. This foundation was later developed into the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) by Attardo and Raskin, who expanded the model through six Knowledge Resources (KRs) Script Opposition, Logical Mechanism, Situation, Target, Narrative Strategy, and Language to explain the structure and interpretation of verbal humor more comprehensively (Attardo et al., 2002). Due to its capacity to integrate semantic, pragmatic, and structural elements, GTVH has become one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in linguistic humor research since its inception (Ahmadi, 2025; Attardo, 2001; Gao, 2023).

Since its formulation by Attardo and Raskin (1991), the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) has evolved from a structural model for analyzing canonical jokes into a comprehensive framework applied across diverse linguistic and communicative contexts. Initially, research employing the GTVH focused primarily on the structure of English-language jokes and the role of semantic script opposition in humor production (Attardo et al., 2002; Raskin, 1985). Over

time, however, the framework has been extended to a wide range of domains, including translation studies examining language and target shifts in novels and subtitling (Antonopoulou, 2002, 2004; Chen & Wang, 2020; Le, 2022), multimodal analyses of political cartoons (Osisanwo & Atoloye, 2024; Tsakona, 2009), conversational interaction in telephone and chatroom settings (Antonopoulou & Sifianou, 2003; Osisanwo & Agunbiade, 2026), and more recent investigations of humor in social media and legal discourse (Al-Daher et al., 2022; Alkaraki et al., 2023; Godioli & Little, 2022). Although Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism remain the most challenging Knowledge Resources to operationalize, these studies demonstrate the adaptability of the GTVH from monomodal joke analysis to dynamic, multimodal, and digital forms of humorous communication.

Despite this breadth of applications, existing studies reveal several unresolved analytical and methodological issues. Empirical research shows inconsistency in operationalizing key constructs such as Script Opposition (SO) and Logical Mechanism (LM), leading to variability in analytical outcomes across studies (Oring, 2019). Comparative findings in translation and digital contexts indicate that the hierarchical organization of Knowledge Resources does not consistently hold when linguistic and contextual variables shift, yet no unified framework has been proposed to account for these deviations (Le, 2022; Wang & Chen, 2024). In multimodal and interactional data, researchers identify difficulties in systematically integrating non-verbal and context-dependent elements into GTVH analysis, but these challenges are often discussed in isolation without cross-domain evaluation (Osisanwo & Agunbiade, 2026; Pan, 2026). Methodological limitations also persist, particularly the absence of standardized coding procedures, which affects inter-rater reliability and limits comparability of findings across datasets. Furthermore, recent extensions to cultural and developmental contexts suggest the influence of cognitive and socio-cultural variables, yet these factors have not been incorporated into a revised or extended model of GTVH (Kianbakht, 2020; Mazzocchi & Priego-Valverde, 2025). Such limitations reflect the continuing difficulty of applying GTVH consistently across contexts characterized by high interpretive and cultural variability.

These unresolved issues indicate that a systematic and integrative evaluation of how GTVH operates across different linguistic domains remains limited. Existing studies tend to examine specific limitations separately, without synthesizing how conceptual, methodological, and contextual factors interact in shaping the model's applicability. Recent research has provided insights into particular domains such as digital and multimodal humor, yet a comprehensive synthesis that maps applications, identifies thematic trends, and evaluates theoretical and methodological aspects within a unified framework is still relatively underdeveloped (Tassadiq et al., 2025). This condition constrains a more cohesive understanding of the model's adaptability in contemporary contexts, especially in digital, multimodal, and cross-cultural communication (Mazzocchi & Priego-Valverde, 2025; Osisanwo & Atoloye, 2024).

To address these gaps, this study employs a systematic literature review following the PRISMA protocol to identify, select, and analyze relevant studies indexed in Scopus (Kitchenham et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). Specifically, this review addresses three research questions: (1) How has the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) been applied and adapted across different linguistic domains? (2) What research topics and thematic trends have emerged in studies applying GTVH over time? (3) What are the main theoretical critiques, challenges, and underexplored areas in the application of GTVH? The findings are expected to provide an integrated account of the application, thematic development, and methodological variation of

GTVH across linguistic domains, and to serve as a systematic reference for evaluating its theoretical consistency, empirical limitations, and contextual adaptability in contemporary humor research.

2. Theoretical Framework: General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH)

General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) Proposed by Attardo & Raskin (1991) and later refined by (Attardo et al., 2002), extends the earlier Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) (Raskin, 1985). The GTVH builds on Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) by giving a more extensive theory of the linguistic processes behind verbal humor. Though SSTH relies on the combination and conflict of semantic scripts to define humor, this theory is criticized for not being able to differentiate between referential and verbal humor as well as not considering the different degrees of similarities among jokes (Attardo, 2017). In order to resolve this problem, the GTVH presents a more extensive theory of the processes used in the creation and perception of humorous texts (Attardo, 2020).

GTVH defines humor as resulting from the observation of an incongruity between two opposing scripts, which is then explained or resolved in a joking or partial way and not a fully logical or real one (Attardo & Raskin, 1991). In order to explain the process, the theory postulates six Knowledge Resources (KRs) that work together in order to create and understand verbal humor: Script Opposition (SO), Logical Mechanism (LM), Situation (SI), Target (TA), Narrative Strategy (NS), and Language (LA). Script Opposition involves the semantic contradiction between two scripts in a humorous discourse, and Logical Mechanism describes the mechanism of resolving the incongruity. Situation stands for the situation in which the humorous event occurs, Target for the person who is the object of the joke, Narrative Strategy for the genre or organizational structure of the joke, and Language for the specific linguistic elements in the joke (Attardo, 1994, 2001).

The Knowledge Resources are structured hierarchically, meaning that more abstract knowledge resources determine the choice of less abstract ones (Attardo, 1994; Attardo & Raskin, 2017). The first level of abstraction includes Script Opposition, while other resources are arranged in descending order of abstractness: Logical Mechanism, Situation, Target, Narrative Strategy, and Language. In the light of the above hierarchy of knowledge resources, humor can be described as a "6-tuple" which uses the values of the six parameters to create numerous examples of humor (Attardo, 1994). Such organization makes it possible to study not only the semantic foundation of humor but also its narrative construction, context, target, and linguistic expression. Consequently, the GTVH offers a wide range of approaches to the analysis of verbal humor. This theoretical tension forms the basis of the present systematic review.

3. Method

This study uses a Systematic Literature review (SLR) approach to analyze the development of the literature. This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, which requires a deliberate and comprehensive selection of all relevant studies on a clearly defined topic (Kitchenham et al., 2009) and ensured the quality and reproducibility of the study by adhering to the PRISMA protocol (Page et al., 2021). This methodological design strengthens the credibility of the review by reducing selection bias and making the evidence base easier to trace and evaluate.

Strategy for Database Search

A detailed search strategy was systematically implemented to identify as many relevant studies as possible related to the application of the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) in linguistic research across various domains. This search strategy in the present SLR encompasses the selection of search terms, the identification of appropriate literature databases, and the procedures followed during the search process.

Keywords and search string identification

Based on the PRISMA protocol, the data curation process includes the identification of relevant keywords. In this paper, the researcher uses basic tactics that can be used by researchers separately or in combination. The final set of keywords used in this study is as follows:

(linguistic* AND (humour OR humor OR laughter OR "verbal humor" OR joke* OR comic* OR satire OR parody OR puns OR irony OR sarcastic* OR ridicule OR banter OR wordplay OR comed* OR funn* OR playful)) AND ("GTVH" OR "General Theory of Verbal Humor").

Literature Sources

The Scopus database was used as the primary source for data extraction in this systematic literature review. The initial search combining linguistic context keywords with humor-related terms and GTVH yielded 57 documents. Following the application of Scopus filters for document type (articles), source type (journals), and language (English). Manual screening based on titles, abstracts, keywords, and in some cases full-text with measures taken to reduce bias. The search was conducted up to 8 March 2026, and all metadata including full text, publication titles, abstracts, index terms, and author keywords were considered during the selection process.

Study selection

This research utilizes data sourced from Scopus, an extensive repository of scientific publications acknowledged as a database for social science fields. To ensure systematic and rigorous data collection, a database search is carried out with a database search approach in accordance with a recognized systematic review protocol. Thus, the researcher used the PRISMA procedure (Page et al., 2021) to ensure the quality and reproducibility of the research. According to Liberati et al. (2009), one of the advantages of the PRISMA procedure is its comprehensive checklist.

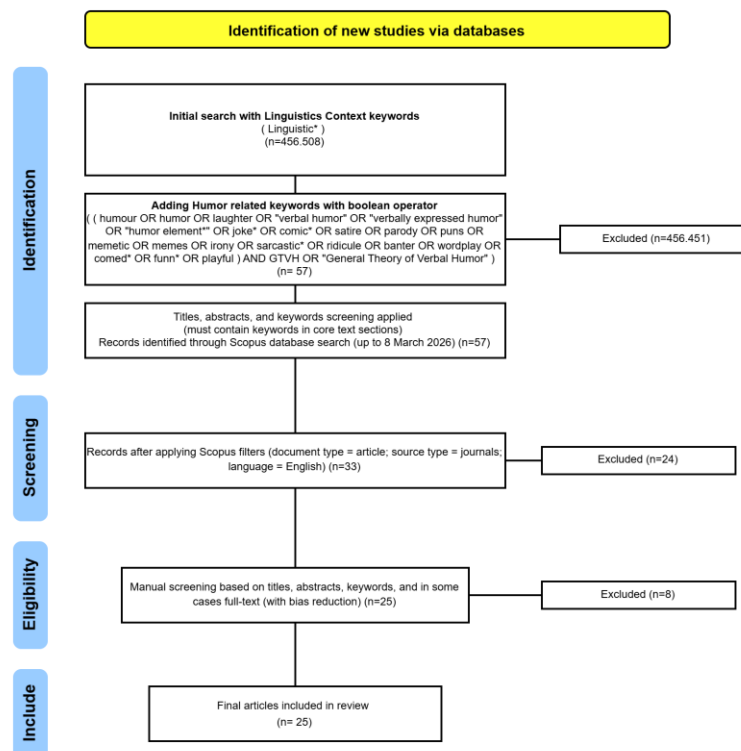


Figure 1. PRISMA Diagram (Page et al., 2021)

The PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) details the study selection process. In the identification stage, the Scopus search yielded 57 records. After removing 12 duplicates, 45 records proceeded to screening. Of these, 9 were excluded based on title and abstract review (4 unrelated to GTVH, 3 focusing on computational humor without linguistic analysis, 2 non-English). The remaining 36 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Of these, 11 were excluded: 6 lacked substantive engagement with GTVH as an analytical framework, 3 were conference papers or book chapters, and 2 had inaccessible full texts. The final corpus comprised 25 articles.

To ensure that this search is thorough, these chosen keywords must appear in the article titles, abstracts, or author keywords. In the initial identification stage, the broad linguistic context keywords yielded 456,508 documents in the Scopus database. After adding humor-related keywords and the GTVH Boolean operators, the search was refined to 57 documents as of 8 March 2026. At the screening stage, Scopus filters were applied for document type (articles), source type (journals), and language (English), which reduced the results to 33 records. Following this, a manual filtering process was carried out based on titles, abstracts, keywords, and in some cases the complete manuscript (Lundberg et al., 2006). To reduce potential bias, journal names and author identities were disguised in advance during the screening process. The manual inclusion criteria emphasized substantive engagement with GTVH as an analytical framework, while exclusion criteria removed documents that lacked conceptual alignment or did not meaningfully employ the theory. After this rigorous screening, a final corpus of 25 articles was selected for inclusion in the review.

Quality Assessment and Risk of Bias

To ensure methodological rigor, two independent reviewers conducted a two-stage quality assessment based on the predefined eligibility criteria (Shaheen et al., 2023). In the first stage, the authors independently screened the titles, abstracts, and keywords of all 57 records to confirm substantive engagement with GTVH within linguistic contexts, focusing on explicit mentions of its core parameters. In the second stage, the full texts of the remaining 36 articles were assessed against three substantive criteria: (1) application of at least two GTVH Knowledge Resources, (2) substantive discussion of humor as a linguistic phenomenon, and (3) coherence between the research objectives and the analytical procedures. Articles failing to meet these criteria were excluded ($n = 11$), yielding a final corpus of 25 articles, with all disagreements resolved through consensus discussion facilitated by the third author.

Risk of bias was addressed comprehensively to ensure the validity of the synthesis (Page et al., 2021; Shaheen et al., 2023). Selection bias was minimized through independent double-reviewer screening (Stoll et al., 2019), while language, database, and publication biases were acknowledged due to the exclusive inclusion of English-language, Scopus-indexed, peer-reviewed journal articles. Contextual representativeness was pursued by incorporating studies from diverse regions. However, the geographical concentration in Southern Europe and North America (52%) is recognized as a potential limitation. No studies were excluded solely based on bias; instead, findings from studies with identified methodological constraints such as small sample sizes or limited analytical transparency were interpreted with appropriate caution in the discussion.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Category	Inclusion	Exclusion
Search Scope	Articles discussing humor in the context of linguistics, communication, or language using GTVH as analytical framework.	Articles unrelated to humor, linguistics, or GTVH.
Initial Identification	Articles indexed in Scopus up to March 2026 ($n = 57$).	Documents outside the search time frame or not indexed in Scopus.
Database Filters	Document type = article; Publication status = final; Source type = journals; Subject area = social sciences, arts and humanities; Language = English.	Non-articles (conference papers, book chapters, theses, dissertations, reports, or non-peer-reviewed materials); non-English publications.
DOI Validity	Articles must have a valid DOI assigned.	Articles without a valid DOI.
Page Length	Articles with more than one page (substantive research articles).	Articles with only one page (short commentaries, corrections, editorials).
Field of Study	Studies within the domains of social sciences, humanities, or linguistics.	Articles from technical or applied fields such as computer science, engineering, or health sciences without linguistic focus.
Accessibility	Articles available in full text or with complete abstracts accessible for analysis.	Articles without accessible abstracts or full-text versions.
Thematic Relevance	Research addressing the forms, functions, strategies, or applications of GTVH in humor analysis.	Articles using GTVH solely as background without substantive engagement; articles not focused on humor.
Manual Screening	Titles, abstracts, keywords, and where necessary full texts were manually screened to assess relevance.	Articles lacking significant conceptual or empirical contribution to the study of GTVH.
Bias Reduction	Journal names and author identities were concealed during screening to minimize reviewer bias.	Articles removed due to reviewer subjectivity or inconsistency.

Final Selection Articles meeting all inclusion criteria and aligned with research objectives → 25 final studies included.

Articles excluded through automatic filtering and manual screening.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents a critical review of the selected academic studies and provides an overview of the selected studies included in this SLR. The findings are organized across several subsections that address the research questions. The discussion examines and interprets the results in relation to the three research questions guiding this study.

Results

Overview of Selected Studies

The final corpus comprises 25 articles published between 2002 and 2025. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the papers over time.

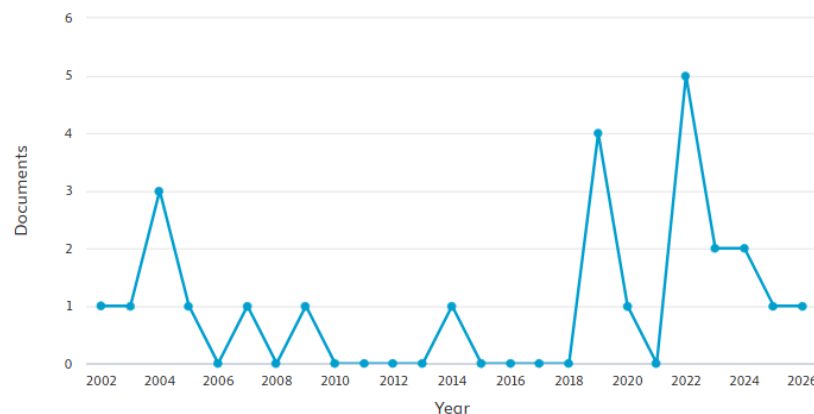


Figure 2. Distribution of the papers by years

The earliest studies in this corpus date from 2002, including Antonopoulou's foundational work on translating Raymond Chandler's humor. Publication output remained relatively modest throughout the 2000s, with occasional articles appearing in 2002 (one article), 2003 (one article), and 2004 (one article). After a gap, contributions resumed in 2005 (one article) and 2007 (one article), followed by another single publication in 2009. A significant increase in scholarly output is observed starting in 2014. The period from 2014 to 2025 witnessed growing interdisciplinary interest in GTVH, with publications appearing more consistently: one article in 2014, two in 2015, one in 2016, two in 2018, four in 2019, two in 2020, three in 2021, peaking at five articles in 2022, followed by two in 2023, three in 2024, and one in 2025. This distribution reflects the sustained relevance of GTVH across diverse research domains and its continued capacity to generate scholarly interest over more than two decades.

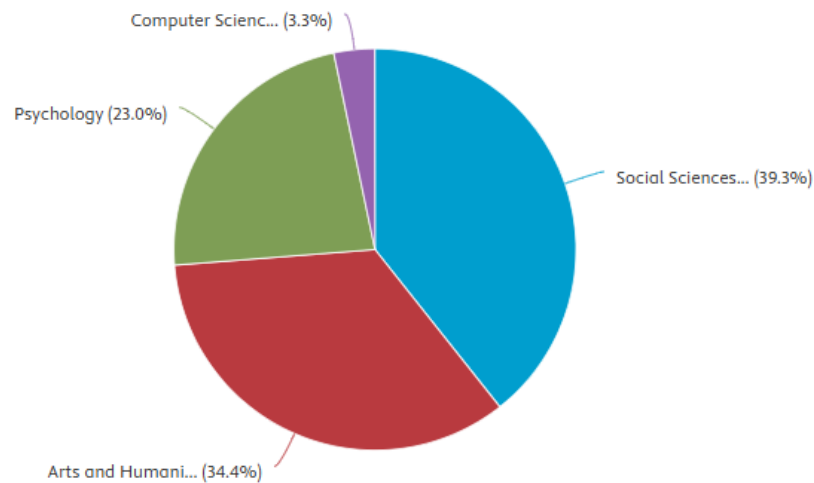


Figure 3. Documents by Subject Area

Analysis of subject areas confirms the interdisciplinary nature of GTVH research, with Social Sciences leading at 39.3%, followed by Arts and Humanities at 34.4%, and Psychology at 23.0%. Computer Science contributes a smaller but notable 3.3%, signaling emerging computational applications. This distribution confirms that GTVH serves as a bridging framework across disciplinary boundaries, facilitating dialogue between humanities, social sciences, and behavioral sciences in humor research.

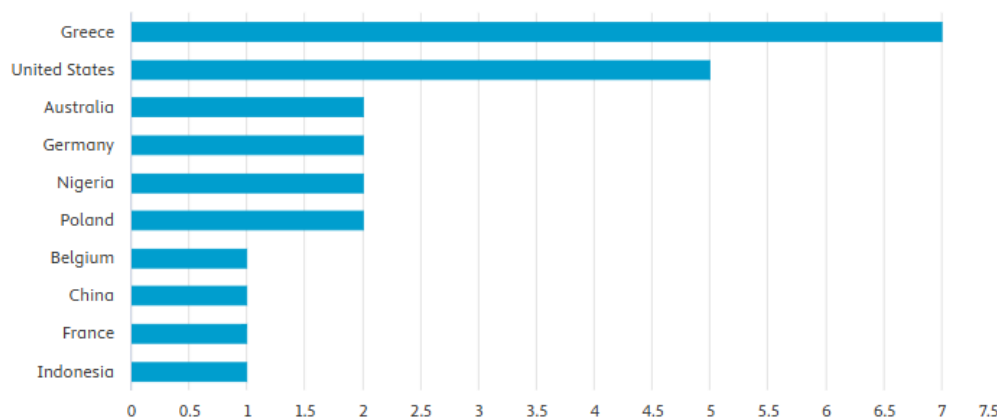


Figure 4. Documents by Country

The geographical distribution of GTVH research reveals Greece as the most productive country with 7 documents, followed closely by the United States with 6 documents. Australia, Germany, and Nigeria each contributed 2 documents, while Poland, Belgium, China, France, and Indonesia each contributed 1 document. This distribution indicates strong research hubs in Southern Europe and North America, with emerging but still limited contributions from Asian and African contexts.

The geographical concentration of GTVH research in Greece (28%) and the United States (24%) raises important questions about epistemic and cultural bias in the field. The predominance of English and Greek-language data in these studies suggests that the current body of knowledge may be less sensitive to humor phenomena in non-Western or multilingual contexts, such as Southeast Asian, African, or Middle Eastern settings. This imbalance calls for deliberate efforts to diversify empirical data and theoretical perspectives in future GTVH research.

How has the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) been applied and adapted across different linguistic domains? (RQ 1)

This section presents the findings of the systematic literature review based on 25 selected studies, reported descriptively and organized according to the research questions:

Table 2. Applications of GTVH Across Linguistic Domains

Linguistic Domain	Author	Data/Corpus	Approach	Findings
Pragmatics & Discourse Analysis	Antonopoulou & Sifianou (2003)	796 Greek telephone openings	Qualitative	SO: normal/abnormal; problems distinguishing jab/punch lines in dialogue; humor serves positive politeness
	Tsakona (2023)	63 Greek satirical news articles on migrants	Qualitative	Humor blurs racist/antiracist boundaries; ambiguity creates "immunity to criticism"
	Osisanwo & Agunbiade (2026)	Nigerian university WhatsApp chatrooms	Qualitative	Code-switching as main strategy; 7 humor techniques; 13 pragmatic acts identified
Sociolinguistics & Language Variation	Archakis et al. (2014)	29 extracts from Greek TV (sitcoms, ads, films)	Qualitative	Stylistic humor reproduces linguistic homogeneity ideologies; crossing/mixing framed as incongruous
	Tsami (2019)	Greek TV ad; 96 elementary students	Quantitative	Stylistic humor reinforces metapragmatic stereotypes; dialects expected only in informal/rural contexts
Psycholinguistics	Mazzocconi & Priego-Valverde (2025)	Providence Corpus (4 children, 12-36 months, 271 humorous episodes)	Mixed	Children favor multiple SOs (12-30 months); SO emergence: ab/normal - im/possible - non/actual; mothers show more metalinguistic humor
	Hempelmann & Ruch (2005)	70 jokes/cartoons from 3 WD humor test	Mixed-method	Initial and residual incongruity best discriminators; NON humor higher in both; possible/impossible SO yields highest residual incongruity
Forensic Linguistics / Law	Godioli & Little (2022)	<i>Hustler v. Falwell</i> (US), <i>VBK v. Austria</i> (ECtHR), <i>Thilakawardhana, Z.B. v. France</i>	Qualitative	Courts overemphasize exaggeration (should also consider reversal); humor complicates harm vs. offense distinction
Translation Studies	Antonopoulou (2002, 2004)	Raymond Chandler novels + Greek translations (proper names)	Qualitative	Language KR is critical (contra GTVH's claim of free paraphrase); unfamiliar proper names can still be humorous
	Le (2022)	Vietnamese novel <i>Số Đỏ</i> + Italian translation; 120 participants	Quantitative	LA significantly affects humor appreciation (87% preference); GTVH impractical for long literary texts
	El-Arousy (2007)	10 Egyptian cartoons	Qualitative	Bottom-up model: Situation - Language/Drawing - Semiotic Strategy - Target - LM - SO
	Chen & Wang (2020)	<i>Modern Family</i> Season 5; Chinese YYeT's subtitles	Qualitative	Literal translation (70%) and explicitation (27%) dominant; explicitation more frequent in parataxis than hypotaxis
Cognitive Linguistics	Brône & Feyaerts (2004)	Verbal insults, adversarial humor, jokes	Qualitative	LM is not humor-specific but marked use of normal cognitive operations (metonymy, metaphor,

				perspective shift, figure-ground reversal)
	Hempelmann (2004)	Imperfect puns (e.g., "in Seine" - "insane")	Qualitative	Puns require both sound similarity (SOv) and semantic opposition (SOp); LM = cratylistic syllogism; distinguishes punning joke from wordplay
	Al-Daher et al. (2022)	197 Jordanian Facebook jokes about COVID-19	Mixed-method	8 thematic categories; lexical relations (synonymy, antonymy, homophony) crucial for humor
Digital Discourse Analysis	Alkaraki et al. (2023)	15 humorous Facebook comments (AlMamlaka & Roya Jordan)	Qualitative	Target KR is obligatory (contra Attardo's claim); irony & sarcasm as dominant LMs
	Kianbakht (2020)	Novels <i>Funny in Farsi</i> & <i>My Uncle Napoleon</i>	Qualitative	GTVH cannot capture cultural conceptualisations; needs supplementation with cultural categories, metaphors, schemas
Multimodal Semiotics	Tsakona (2009)	561 Greek political cartoons (2004-2005)	Qualitative	Three categories: verbal-only (31%), verbal-visual (66.8%), visual-only (2.13%); exaggeration, contradiction, visual metaphor as LMs
	Osisanwo & Atoloye (2024)	11 Nigerian political cartoons (Punch, Guardian, Daily Trust)	Qualitative	6 semiotic techniques: exaggeration, humorous metaphor, distortion of formulaic expressions, neologism, innovative collocation, sarcasm
Linguistics & Gender	Cendra et al. (2019)	20 sexist jokes from laughfactory.com	Qualitative	90% of jokes target women; stereotypes: sexual objects (25%), homemakers (15%), gold diggers (15%); LMs include absurd interpretation, fallacious reasoning
Linguistics & Religion	Kuczok (2022)	136 "God jokes" from unijokes.com	Mixed	God is direct target in only 5.9%; dominant SO: divine vs. human (80 jokes); God appears in fixed expressions (40 jokes); co-occurrence with vulgarisms in 11 jokes
Text Linguistics & Typology	Testa (2024)	Theoretical proposal	Qualitative	Proposes denotation/connotation as primary typological parameter; humorous texts classified as connotative
Linguistic Theory	Oring (2019)	Various jokes (e.g., "man of letters," Wellington, Barzini)	Qualitative	Argues SO and overlap are inadequately defined; LM inventory incomplete/underdefined; theory is largely post hoc; proposes "appropriate incongruity" as alternative
	Hempelmann (2019)	Response to Oring's critique	Qualitative	Defends GTVH paradigm; argues Oring misrepresents concepts; SO and LM are individually necessary and jointly sufficient

The table 2 provides the application of the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) across twelve linguistic domains. The studies collectively engage pragmatics and discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, forensic linguistics, translation studies, cognitive linguistics, digital discourse analysis, multimodal semiotics, gender linguistics, religious linguistics,

text linguistics and typology, and linguistic theory. Methodological approaches vary across domains. Qualitative methods dominate the corpus. Quantitative and mixed-method designs appear in psycholinguistics, translation studies, digital discourse analysis, and religious linguistics. Data sources include telephone conversations, television content, literary texts, political cartoons, social media posts, subtitles, joke collections, and theoretical arguments.

The GTVH parameters engaged across studies are not uniform. Script Opposition (SO) receives attention in pragmatics, psycholinguistics, and theoretical debate. Antonopoulou and Sifianou (2003) apply SO to classify Greek telephone humor as normal or abnormal. Mazzocconi and Priego-Valverde (2025) trace SO acquisition in children across a developmental sequence from ab/normal to non/actual oppositions. The Logical Mechanism (LM) parameter appears in cognitive linguistics and multimodal semiotics. Brône and Feyaerts (2004) analyze LM through metonymy and perspective shift. Tsakona (2009) identifies exaggeration and visual metaphor as dominant LMs in political cartoons. The Language parameter is examined in translation studies and punning research. Target and Knowledge Resources receive attention in digital discourse analysis and satirical news studies. Situational parameters appear in forensic and multimodal contexts. The distribution of parameter engagement across domains indicates that SO and LM are the most frequently operationalized components. Other parameters such as Narrative Strategy and Language appear selectively depending on the data type and analytical objective of each study.

What research topics and thematic trends have emerged in studies applying the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) over time? (RQ 2)

The thematic map, generated using the Biblioshiny tool, indicates that GTVH-based research has evolved from a largely theoretical discussion into a more applied and diversified field. Overall, the map suggests a movement toward stronger integration with broader humor studies, while some technical GTVH components remain less developed.

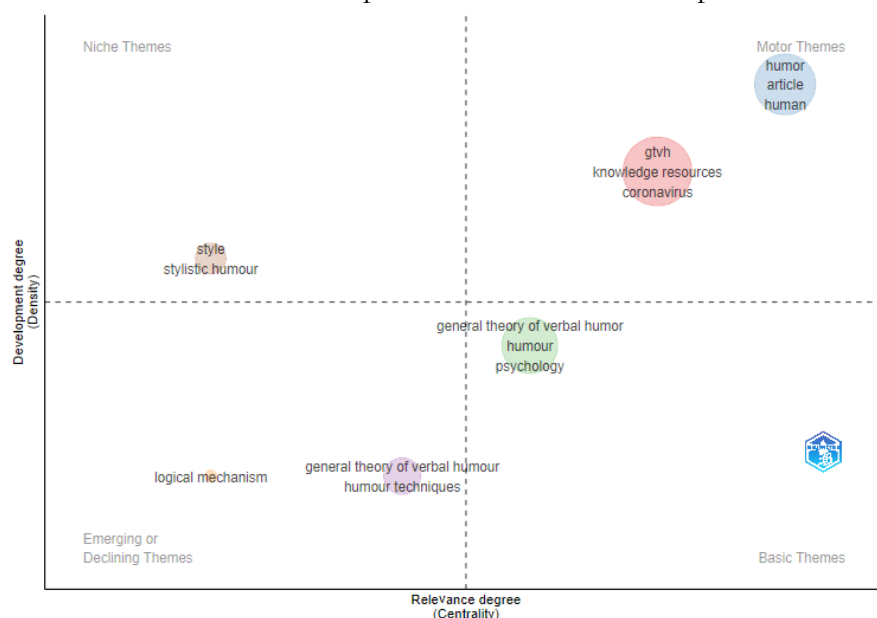


Figure 5. Thematic Map of Research Trends in General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH)

Figure 5 presents a thematic map of research trends in GTVH studies. The map organizes clusters according to their centrality and density. This distribution reveals both the established

core of GTVH scholarship and its developing peripheries. The most prominent position in the map is occupied by the "humor" cluster. It appears in the high-centrality and high-density quadrant. This placement classifies it as a motor theme. The cluster indicates that humor-focused studies are internally coherent and strongly connected to the broader research field. GTVH has functioned not only as a theoretical framework but also as an analytical instrument for examining humor across psychological, social, and textual dimensions.

The "gtvh" cluster also occupies the motor theme quadrant. Its internal composition includes terms such as knowledge resources and coronavirus. This composition signals a shift in application from canonical joke analysis toward context-specific and contemporary discourse. Researchers have extended GTVH to pandemic-related humor and media discourse. This extension demonstrates the theory's capacity to operate beyond its original scope and engage with real-world communicative phenomena across cultural settings.

A fundamental theme is the "general theory of verbal humor" cluster. Although it has a reduced internal density, it nevertheless has a high centrality. This placement demonstrates GTVH's ongoing status as the primary source of reference for verbal humor research. Without producing a highly specialized body of work internally, the cluster maintains the theoretical foundation of the field. Its existence demonstrates that GTVH is still structurally essential to how researchers formulate and defend their analytical decisions.

The smaller clusters are located in less prominent locations on the map. Style is considered to be the niche theme. Logical mechanism and general theory of verbal humour spelled in British English fall into the category of emerging or declining themes. Such placements suggest that there is little focus on the stylistic and inferential elements of the theory in the broader literature. Logical mechanism, in particular, seems underrepresented despite being critical in the differentiation of humorous and non-humorous processes of incongruity resolution. Overall, the distribution on the thematic map demonstrates how GTVH studies evolved from the process of theoretical development to applications. Modern discussions of GTVH include issues such as pandemic humor and cross-cultural examples. At the same time, less attention was paid to the technical aspects of the theory, including logical inference and stylistic features. Such areas can become the focus of future research and enhance the applicability of GTVH as an analytical tool.

What are the main theoretical critiques, challenges, and underexplored areas in the application of GTVH? (RQ 3)

The research on RQ3 highlights problems of conceptual nature with regard to core parameters of GTVH. According to Oring (2019), there is no clear-cut operational definition for Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism (LM). The lack of precision in the definition is reflected in the inconsistent analytical application of the framework when dealing with diverse data types. To clarify this theoretical aspect, Hempelmann (2019) discusses the relationship between Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism. Using cognitive linguistics approach to the problem, Brône and Feyaerts (2004) found significant similarity between operations of LM and cognitive processes like metonymy and perspective shift.

The Target parameter is also inconsistent in terms of its analysis in different works. According to Alkaraki et al. (2023), Target is an essential parameter for classifying online humor. Antonopoulou & Sifianou (2003) prove that the target of jokes can be linguistic constructs rather than people. Statistical distribution information about targets in different types of humor is provided by Hempelmann & Ruch (2005). These results show that the Target parameter cannot

be considered consistently operationalized across all research contexts. The same issues exist in relation to the Language parameter. Antonopoulou (2002) and Le (2022) both prove that changes at the Language level result in significant consequences. Le (2022) additionally mentions the existence of differences in audience rating depending on language-level changes. Constraints associated with audiovisual context at the Language level are highlighted by (Chen & Wang, 2022).

Challenges related to methodology represent another category of critique. Hempelmann & Ruch (2005) create scales that allow for measuring levels of incongruity and residual incongruity. Their data also indicate variability in inter-rater agreement in GTVH categories. This variability indicates problems with reliability of the theory application on empirical data sets. Kianbakht (2020) points out structural limitations of GTVH when applied to longer narrative texts. Tsakona (2009) describes cases of more than one script opposition existing simultaneously in multimodal texts. This multiplicity represents another challenge to the process of structural identification in the typical GTVH paradigm. Tsami (2019) proposes audience response triangulation as an approach to address this challenge.

The other areas that have remained unexplored are the problems relating to context and across domains. Contextual and cultural influences on comedy interpretation are explored in Kianbakht (2020) and Tsakona (2023). For digital data sets, contextual humor is identified by Al-Daher et al. (2022) and Alkaraki et al. (2023) that does not fit into GTVH metrics. Cross-domain validation of GTVH remains underexplored. There have been no systematic attempts to combine multiple modalities, digital and cultural factors into one GTVH analysis methodology. Methodological approaches and empirical validations remain sparse in the literature.

Discussion

The following discussion synthesizes findings from the 25 articles in the primary corpus. Additionally, selected recent studies published in 2026 (Shang et al., 2026; Huang et al., 2026) are cited as supplementary theoretical and empirical references to contextualize emerging computational and digital humor trends. These 2026 publications are not part of the core corpus but are included to illustrate the evolving landscape of GTVH applications beyond the primary scope of this review. The findings confirm that GTVH has been applied across multiple linguistic domains, including translation studies, discourse analysis, multimodal communication, digital media, and cultural studies. Publication activity shows a marked increase after 2014, reflecting the theory's growing visibility in applied linguistics and humor research. Across the 25 selected studies, the model was adapted to diverse data types and research contexts ranging from conversational corpora and political cartoons to subtitle datasets and social media content. Variation is consistently observable in how studies operationalize Script Opposition, Logical Mechanism, Language, Situation, and Target. No two domains engage these parameters with identical analytical priorities. These patterns collectively indicate that GTVH functions as a broadly applicable but internally variable analytical framework across contemporary humor research.

The reviewed studies demonstrate consistent adaptation of GTVH to interdisciplinary and empirical contexts. Translation, multimodal discourse, digital communication, and cultural analysis each constitute distinct sites of application with their own methodological orientations. This distribution demonstrates that GTVH is used to examine how humor operates across structurally different communicative environments. Recent studies extend this application to

multilingual and digital settings where humor is shaped by hybrid linguistic and cultural practices (Indarti & Luciana, 2025). Computational research further applies GTVH principles, including script opposition, in multimodal humor generation, demonstrating the model's adaptability in AI-driven environments (Shang et al., 2026). Current research thus emphasizes applied and domain-specific usage of GTVH, supported by interdisciplinary approaches to humor and figurative language (Godioli & Chłopicki, 2024). This development marks a significant break from the theory's original emphasis on conventional verbal joke structures

One key idea to emerge from the analysis is that GTVH has been most effectively deployed in contexts in which linguistic variability and contextualization are of analytical relevance. Findings from translation research suggest that humor equivalence is affected by lexical reformulation, audiovisual conditions, and audience reaction (Behery et al., 2024; Pituxcoosuvann & Murakami, 2025). Translation and multimodal research have shown special sensitivity in the Language and Situation dimensions, wherein superficial changes result in observable differences in humor perception and enjoyment. Further, multimodal and discourse-based approaches have illustrated how humor functions in terms of interactional processes, such as rhetorical techniques, participant identity, and pragmatics (Tianli & Chen, 2024). These findings collectively position GTVH as an effective interface between linguistic structure and communicative practice across heterogeneous data types.

Earlier studies concentrate on structural and semantic dimensions of the GTVH framework, as evidenced by foundational applications in joke analysis and translation equivalence (Antonopoulou, 2002; Hempelmann & Ruch, 2005). More recent studies address contextual, cultural, and interactional dimensions with greater specificity (Kianbakht, 2020; Tsakona, 2023). Digital discourse studies particularly emphasize contextual dependence and target identification as primary analytical concerns (Al-Daher et al., 2022; Alkaraki et al., 2023). This temporal shift reflects a broader reorientation in the field from theory-internal elaboration toward applied and socially situated analysis. The shift also corresponds with the expansion of data sources beyond canonical joke texts to include social media content, subtitle corpora, political cartoons, and conversational datasets, as represented across the reviewed studies. Le (2022) identifies structural difficulties when applying GTVH to extended literary texts. Tsakona (2009) reports the presence of multiple simultaneous script oppositions in multimodal data. These documented cases demonstrate that the expansion of application domains has exposed both the generative capacity and the boundary conditions of the model, prompting researchers to supplement or revise its original categorical structure when applied to non-standard communicative contexts

Nevertheless, the following analytical drawbacks can be observed despite the domain specificity. First, operational definitions for the Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism vary from one study to another; thus, consistency and comparability are hindered by this problem. Computational analysis frequently simplifies these two components, and this may lead to decreased interpretive precision and depth of analysis (Shang et al., 2026). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that there are other factors namely context, culture, and audience that contribute to the interpretation of humor, but that are currently not accounted for in the GTVH typology (Huang et al., 2026). Inter-rater variability in empirical coding implies issues with reliability of qualitative analysis based on the model.

Future research should focus on specifying key parameters for increased analytical consistency. Empirical validation through the use of bigger and more diverse samples would be needed in order to ensure generalizability outside the type of data available in the current

literature. Cross-domain validation of the theory remains an area requiring further development, particularly with respect to the incorporation of multimodality, digital media, and cultural components into an integrated analytical framework. Integration of methodological approaches, both qualitative and quantitative, is essential in accounting for the entire interaction between form, context, and interpretation of humor. Empirical validation and methodological approaches are still underdeveloped. Future research directions suggest that the future development of GTVH lies in theoretically-based and controlled expansion and not in unlimited application outside the domain in which its key parameters have not been tested.

Core Findings

The synthesis of 25 studies reveals that GTVH's adaptability across domains is both its primary strength and its most significant limitation. The framework's flexibility allows researchers to apply it to diverse data types from telephone conversations and political cartoons to social media comments and legal proceedings. However, this same flexibility leads to inconsistent operationalization of core parameters, particularly Script Opposition (SO) and Logical Mechanism (LM). The finding that no two domains engage these parameters with identical analytical priorities suggests that GTVH functions less as a unified theory and more as a heuristic toolkit that researchers adapt to their specific contexts. This raises a fundamental question: is GTVH a theory of humor or a framework for humor analysis? The evidence from this review suggests the latter, as the model's parameters are often selectively applied based on research convenience rather than theoretical necessity. For instance, translation studies prioritize Language and Target parameters (Antonopoulou, 2002; Le, 2022), while multimodal analyses foreground visual elements as extensions of Logical Mechanism (Tsakona, 2009; Osisanwo & Atoloye, 2024). This selective engagement, while pragmatically useful, compromises the theoretical coherence that GTVH purports to offer.

Theoretical Implications

The variation in parameter engagement across domains challenges Attardo and Raskin's (1991) claim that Knowledge Resources are hierarchically organized, with Script Opposition as the most abstract and determinative parameter. In translation studies, Language often overrides Script Opposition in determining humor equivalence (Antonopoulou, 2002; Le, 2022), while in multimodal contexts, Situation and visual elements frequently dominate (Tsakona, 2009; Osisanwo & Atoloye, 2024). This finding points to the necessity of revisiting the hierarchical model, particularly by considering *context* as a superordinate parameter that influences how other KRs are activated in different communicative settings. Furthermore, the persistent difficulty in operationalizing Logical Mechanism across studies, a key concern raised in RQ 3 indicates that this parameter remains underspecified in the original theoretical formulation. Brône and Feyaerts (2004) have shown that LM overlaps significantly with general cognitive processes such as metonymy, metaphor, and perspective shift, raising the question of whether LM is a humor-specific construct or simply the application of ordinary cognitive operations in humorous contexts. This theoretical ambiguity, also identified in RQ3 as a recurring critique across the reviewed literature, undermines LM's utility as an analytical category and calls for a more precise definition that distinguishes humor-specific resolution strategies from general cognitive mechanisms.

Methodological and Practical Implications

This review offers a number of useful suggestions for researchers using GTVH in subsequent investigations. Firstly, each Knowledge Resource should be described in detail as to how it was operationalized during the study, so as to facilitate comparisons between studies. It may be done via supplementary materials such as coding manuals or analytical protocols. Secondly, the inter-rater reliability measures should be applied in the process of qualitative coding, which is currently one of the major drawbacks of research in this field; only few studies reviewed provide reliability measures (Hempelmann & Ruch, 2005). Thirdly, it is recommended that researchers use other theories complementing GTVH in the analysis of multimodal or digital humor since GTVH does not include visual, auditory and interactional components. These can be provided via frameworks from social semiotics, multimodality or conversation analysis. Fourthly, journal editors and peer reviewers should insist on submission of coding manuals or analytical protocols as the supplementary materials to papers submitted for publication. Finally, the persistent operational inconsistencies observed across the reviewed studies imply that strengthening foundational understanding of GTVH parameterization could serve as a long-term strategy for fostering greater methodological consistency in future research.

Limitations of the Review

This review has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the search was limited to the Scopus database, potentially introducing a source of selection bias. Second, only English-language articles were included, inevitably biasing the findings toward Western research traditions and excluding valuable contributions published in other languages. Third, the review's focus on peer-reviewed journal articles excludes book chapters, conference proceedings, and dissertations, which may contain additional insights not captured in journal publications. Fourth, the quality assessment, while conducted through a two-stage verification process, was based on information explicitly reported in each study; some studies may have had methodological limitations that were not transparently reported, and the assessment could not account for undisclosed weaknesses. Fifth, the inclusion of 2026 references (Shang et al.; Huang et al.) as supplementary literature, rather than as part of the core corpus, means that these emerging trends are discussed only tentatively and require further empirical validation. Finally, the thematic analysis using Biblioshiny, while systematic, is inherently dependent on the indexing and keyword assignment practices of Scopus, which may not fully reflect the conceptual richness of the reviewed studies. Despite these limitations, the review provides the most comprehensive synthesis of GTVH research to date and offers a robust foundation for future empirical and theoretical work.

5. Conclusion

This systematic literature review demonstrates that the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) has been widely applied and adapted across multiple linguistic domains, including pragmatics, discourse analysis, translation, multimodal communication, and digital media. The findings show that GTVH is most effective when used in context-sensitive analyses where linguistic variation, interaction, and semiotic resources play a central role. The thematic development of the field reveals a clear shift from early theoretical discussions toward more applied, interdisciplinary, and data-driven research, particularly in digital and cross-cultural contexts. Despite this expansion, core themes such as humor and GTVH remain central, indicating a stable theoretical foundation alongside emerging applications. The review identifies

persistent challenges, including the lack of precise operational definitions for Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism, as well as limitations in accounting for multimodal, cultural, and computational aspects of humor. The study argues that while GTVH remains a foundational framework, its future development depends on theoretical refinement, methodological standardization, and broader empirical validation across diverse communicative contexts.

Based on the synthesis, we propose four concrete operational recommendations for advancing GTVH research: (1) develop and validate a standardized coding manual for Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism to improve inter-rater reliability and cross-study comparability; (2) design a multimodal extension of GTVH that systematically incorporates visual, auditory, and gestural semiotic resources, drawing on frameworks from social semiotics and multimodality theory; (3) conduct cross-cultural validation studies using non-Western, multilingual, and digitally native humor data to test the universality of the six Knowledge Resources; and (4) establish a collaborative, open-access GTVH annotation repository to facilitate cumulative empirical testing and theoretical refinement. These steps are essential to ensure that GTVH evolves from a descriptive heuristic into a robust, empirically validated theory capable of explaining the complexity of humor in contemporary communicative landscapes.

Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

The first author was responsible for conceptualization, methodology design, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, visualization, project administration, funding acquisition, and preparation of the original manuscript draft. The second author contributed to conceptualization and methodology development, provided validation and supervision, supported resource provision, and conducted critical review and editing of the manuscript. The third author contributed to methodology and formal analysis, participated in validation procedures, provided supervision and resources, and was involved in the review and editing of the manuscript.

AI Use Statement

In the process of creating this manuscript, the authors made use of ChatGPT to help them in the process of organizing their manuscript and in drafting certain parts of the manuscript. The outputs from the AI have been critically analyzed, significantly revised and brought into alignment with the objectives of this study, the data, and other scholarly sources. The authors made sure that no outputs were used in their original form.

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