

Past and present clashes as a source of humor

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to illustrate the semiotic and pragmatic basis of the humorous opposition between past and present scripts, which underlie many examples of multi-modal humor. Highly popular among Polish viewers, the Netflix series *1670* (produced in 2023) is taken under scrutiny as a good illustration of the possibilities that the historical mockumentary as a broadly conceived genre offers to comment on contemporary global conflicts, especially between liberalism (cosmopolitanism) and conservatism (patriotism), and specifically on the political and ideological situation in Poland. The main characters of the series are depicted in rural contexts, which serve as an environment to mock the class system, different ethnic groups and religions in Old Poland, gender roles, social attitudes, technology of the past and present, and the stereotypically Polish communication style, which we discuss based on representative examples. Past topics, historical events, and stereotypes recur as vehicles for current debates, while catchy comments by characters make dialogs memorable and allow the screenplay to avoid predictability. The series tends to assume a grotesque or even farcical nature and thrives in simplifying and stereotyping Polish tradition to resonate with the audience. As contemporary problems are dressed in historical costumes, the twenty-first-century socio-political context is then viewed from a fresh point of view that allows the reinterpretation of tradition and is a good source of humor at the same time.

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1. The past and present incongruity

This paper aims to illustrate the humorous potential of the essential incongruity between the past and the present that often occurs in multimodal humor as an underlying frame, using the example of one Polish Netflix series. This type of opposition is quite broad and well suited for a multifarious and rich constellation of incongruities in any joke, particularly in ethnic jokes and memes, which sometimes compare the past and present as well, contrasting the allegedly primitive lifestyle of an ethnic, regional or social minority (peripheral) group which retains traditional, rural customs from the past, and that of the “civilized” mainstream culture which represents the progressive, developed cultural, urban, cosmopolitan center (Davies 1990).

In an earlier study (Brzozowska and Chłopicki 2024), we discussed various other guises of this incongruity, which focus on the broadly conceived discrepancy between traditional past and progressive present within Poland and across cultural boundaries in the West and in the East. This discrepancy primarily comprises the following dichotomies: patriarchal/progressive, Christian/atheist, patriotic-nationalist/cosmopolitan, Polish/Western, Soviet/Western, Polish/Russian, communist/anti-communist, and pro-European/anti-European.

2. The 1670 Netflix comic series

Our current study material is based on examples from the Netflix series *1670* (2023) – a historical comedy often described as a mockumentary, highly popular among Polish viewers, which surprised even their directors, middle-aged rising stars of cinema Maciej Buchwald and Konrad Kądziera. We have examined all eight episodes of the series’ first season (the second season did not appear until September 2025, too late to be included). Since the series is very much focused on characters which are sketched out with rough features, both of costumes and character and behavior that bring out controversy, we discuss a few representative examples where characters play the central role which we have selected from the dialogs (out of very many recurring ones) to illustrate the variety of the past-present opposition as discussed in section 4.



Figure 1. Jan Paweł, the main protagonist of the series.

The most central pivot of the series is Jan Paweł, owner of (almost) half of the village of Adamczycha, where the action takes place. He is the stereotypical nobleman, who takes great pride in his traditional, colorful outfit (an essential part of his image, see Figure 1) and much less in his intellectual development. He is highly self-indulgent, one could even say narcissistic, although the events and circumstances do not give him a reason to feel that way (he is barely literate). He is the head of his family, which includes his devout, aggressive, but also love-greedy wife, Zofia; a progressive daughter, Anielka, who organizes the equality march in the village, and whom he wants to marry off to a wealthy but obnoxious magnate; and two sons. One son, Jakub, is a cynical and greedy Roman Catholic priest, and the other, Stanisław, is a late Baroque 'rock' music fan whom Jan Paweł tries to help marry an educated townsfolk girl but fails due to his own botched attempt to show off. He also has a bachelor brother-in-law, Bogdan, a warmongering loser, who is graciously offered a place to sleep on the hay in the shed. Jan Paweł's neighbor, Andrzej, is also an important character, as he owns the other half of the village and is quite progressive and successful, a reason enough for Jan Paweł to resent him. The village (a symbol of old Poland) is inhabited by peasants as well as representatives of minority religions – Jewish, Protestant, Orthodox (it is also once visited by Muslim Tatars), as well as one Lithuanian, Maciej, who has arrived “on a peasant

Erasmus exchange” and fell in love with Jan Paweł’s daughter. The episodes focus on various events, such as a regional assembly of nobility (Pol. *sejmik*), a duel, an equality march, a bubonic plague, a hunting trip, several engagement attempts, and a wedding.

The series’ main characters are depicted in rural contexts, and the class system, religions, different ethnic groups, and gender roles are mocked, which evokes controversy when compared with the modern political state, gender and family relations, work ethos, institutions, customs, and values. The strong conservative-liberal opposition present in the current Polish and international political debate (see e.g., Chłopicki 2023) is reflected in the opposed views of the characters, as illustrated in section 4. Even though the directors have the costumed 17th-century characters speak and address the audience directly in contemporary language as if from the present perspective, they retain traditional opinions in what they say.

The series seems to represent the mockumentary genre that breaks the boundaries between genres and conventions, fact and fiction (cf. Allen and Jensen 2021), and the traditional divide between the actors and the audience. So far it has been studied mainly using examples of *The Office* TV series (cf. Tosina Fernandez 2023). The early typical examples of the genre would be the *Swiss Spaghetti Harvest* by the BBC (1957) or *Monty Python Flying Circus* (1969-1974). In *1670*, the actors directly address the audience from the screen, thus also providing another potentially humorous clash, which is made even stronger as the characters are portrayed as 17th-century ones. Through this format, the series comments on contemporary conflicts, especially between broadly conceived liberalism (cosmopolitanism) and conservatism (patriotism) and the political and ideological struggles in Poland and worldwide. One problem with classifying the series as a mockumentary is that this is a work of fiction and does not assume a documentary format to parody the subject as the definition of the genre would generally have it. On the other hand,

[m]ockumentaries may be said to include parodies of documentary, the humor being based in either the deception of the audience [...] or the absurdity of the premise [...]. However, [...] we should conceive of the category more broadly still, including mimetic fiction films that borrow documentary realist techniques to avail themselves of the authoritative verisimilitude that documentary films attempt to inspire so as then to subvert that authority [...]. (Lebow 2006:228-229)

Thus, *1670* could be regarded as falling into a broadly conceived mockumentary genre, although perhaps as a non-prototypical instance of it.

3. Methodology – between semiotics and pragmatics

The mockumentary humor (or satire) is usually discussed from the perspective of genre (cf. Allen and Jensen 2021) and does not involve a focus on dialog. Here, we attempt to change that and refocus on the workings and functions of dialog by drawing on the school of thought developed by Kecskés (2010, 2016) and Weigand (2017), which adopts the perspective of *dialog pragmatics and/or dialogic action*. Weigand (2017) claims that such actions are determined by their purpose, but also by the shared interests of the interlocutors. Weigand's (2021:6) general claim is that human communication is a complex "mixed action game." It gives humans the "extraordinary ability [...] to tackle complexity by adaptation to various action conditions in changing surroundings." Both Weigand (2017) and Kecskés (2016) propose to go beyond the conceptual level of analysis and attempt to identify the interlocutors' discursive agenda via dialogic actions and reactions (as argued also by Hietalahti 2023), and this applies both to dialog actions between characters and between characters and the audience, which is typical of mockumentary (see section 2).

Kecskés (2010:53) calls this a "communicative agenda" and claims that human beings "communicate in dialogic interaction not only by producing and understanding utterances but also by acting and reacting" (Kecskés 2016:27). This is a useful perspective when analyzing the nature of humor, which stems from making dialog moves that break dialog conventions. This is well in line with Attardo's analysis of digital humor in terms of violation of cultural norms ("breaking the normie barrier", in Attardo 2023:284) and Yus's (2023) analysis of internet pragmatics, which tracks the users' intentions, predicting the audiences' interpretive strategies. In addition, it is essential to consider the role of *intertextuality* in humor as a double-edged sword: it divides audiences into those "in the know," who feel privileged, and those "out of the know," who may fail in identifying humor, but may still arrive at some interpretation of the message. Consequently, alternative readings may emerge that may ignore humor or intentionally resist it if its interpretation does not agree with the recipient's social norms (Tsakona and Chovanec 2020:7-9).

Relatedly, humor often relies on signs whose significance is mainly symbolic. This links to the semiotic notions of *floating signifier*, which is a "symbol in its pure state" (Lévi-Strauss 1987:63), as well as of the *empty signifier*, which

is one that tends to represent a heterogeneous area, being universal and losing any possibility of referring to a particular meaning. On the contrary, the floating signifier shows a large extent of linkage to many different projects, being full of diverse possibilities. (Gradinaru 2018:297)

The notions were creatively developed by Laclau (e.g., 2000) in the context of social interactions, when he defined the *floating signifier* as a symbol that is flexible enough to be adjusted to different circumstances; thus, it could be applied to broadly symbolic notions from Polish culture, such as *nobleman*, *Jew*, *Swede*, or *Cossack* in the series. They are used or implied in dialogs to evoke dialogic actions or reactions, which are often humorous due to the ambiguity of the symbols, but also in the context of opposing past and present.

Another approach, the *Intersecting Circles Model* (henceforth ICM; Yus 2013), helps deal with the specific humorous incongruities that result from the past-present clash, and serves as an analytical tool of verbal humor in the broader social context. ICM assumes the presence of three sources of humor, which can coincide in producing different types of jokes (see Yus 2013:11):

- *make-sense frames* (general mental storage),
- *cultural frames* (prototypical cultural, stereotypical information),
- *utterance interpretation* (personal information – from code to intention).

In Yus's view, make-sense frames can only be said to be activated when they play a role in the generation of humorous effects. In contrast, cultural frames are always used by the hearers to interpret the utterances; hence, default (prototypical) frames are applied to save them some mental effort, and sometimes they are activated only as background to humor. Finally, utterance interpretation refers more to actual dialog moves, which are usually underdetermined and there is always a space to make inferences, although Yus argues that this circle only applies when utterances are used (manipulated) to achieve humor (Yus 2013:12). Thus, in our analyses below, we combine the ICM model with the concept of dialogic actions, which make use of semiotic symbols that can be considered *floating signifiers*.

When analyzing examples of the humor resulting from the incongruity of the past and the present in the series, we also draw attention to some pragmatic, conversational phenomena, which shed light on the workings of humor and help understand the dialogic actions and reactions from the speaker's perspective. This agrees with Kecskés' (2016) view of pragmatic meaning, which needs to be shifted from the hearer's to the speaker's viewpoint. He argues as follows:

The main problem with the hearer-centered views is that they want to recover speaker meaning from a hearer perspective. As a result, what is actually 'recovered' is hearer meaning, in the sense of how the hearer interprets what the speaker said. The proposition the speaker produces will not be exactly the same as that which will be re-covered by the hearer, because [...] interlocutors are individuals with different cognitive predispositions, different commitments, different prior experiences, and different histories of use of the same words and expressions. (Kecskés 2016:33)

4. Clash of the past and the present in 1670

We have selected representative examples from the series and grouped them under headings that illustrate the types of clashes between past and present that contribute to the multifarious nature of humor in the series. These range from class and ethnic relations, gender roles, and religious cultures to social attitudes, technological changes, and communication styles.

4.1. Class and ethnicity

Jan Paweł is very supportive of the traditional approach to noblemen's lifestyle, which he voices in the opinion that "noblemen do not work," expressed for the sake of his progressive, feminist daughter Anielka. Given the cliché nature of the comment (clearly part of a cultural frame), however, it can be considered a dialogic action undertaken for the sake of the audience, both as a reminder to older viewers, aware of noblemen's ways, and an eye-opener for younger audiences who may not be aware of it due to their lack of historical knowledge. More precisely, it is the floating signifiers, *noblemen* and *work*, that are thrown into the conversation, to evoke reactions both of noblemen admirers and their haters, both of workaholics and leisure lovers (notably work is assumed here to be physical work). The fact that Jan Paweł takes this opinion for granted contributes to its humorous value, too, since it is clear that neither Anielka nor the entire audience subscribes to it. Thus, the opinion is kind of forced on the audience.

(1) Jan Paweł: Anielka, how many times do I have to tell you? **Noblemen do not work!** (Episode 1, *The Assembly*)

Still, this is a simplification of the cultural frame of nobility and a characteristic feature of dialogic action: grotesque or even farcical stereotyping of Polish nobility tradition is a way of resonating with the audience, and the presence of characters who represent the tradition and openly express such stereotypical opinions contributes to the overall humorous effect. Utterances such as those in Example 1 are considered dialogic actions that make dialogues memorable and allow the screenplay to avoid predictability.

make-sense frames – father-daughter conflict. Anielka is criticized for working in the village together with the peasants.

cultural frames – Polish nobility with all their assumptions about inheriting property and not undertaking physical work, relying on their family estates and the work of peasants.

utterance interpretation – question-answer pattern in conversation [politeness]. Jan Paweł's question is not genuine – just a reminder that Anielka should not work.

dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – noblemen, work.

Example 2 illustrates another dialogic action. This time, the dialog is between Jan Paweł's brother-in-law Bogdan, Maciej (the Lithuanian peasant), and Izaak (a depressive and self-critical Jewish innkeeper who dreams of his first conspiracy). The scene screenshot is attached in Figure 2, where their identifying costumes can also be seen (the Jewish hat, sideburns and beard, contrasted with Maciej's rather contemporary sweat jacket and an old-style fur hat).



Figure 2. A Jewish-Lithuanian 'conspiracy' as seen by an anti-Semite.

(2) Bogdan: Wait, wait, a **peasant** and a **Jew**, alone in a room, are you **plotting** something?

Izaak: No..., no way.

Maciej: This is **pure anti-Semitism**, my lord.

Bogdan: **Thank you**.

Izaak: And anti-... Is there a term for **prejudice against peasants**?

Bogdan: There is. **Patriotism**. Be careful because I have an eye on you...

(Episode 6, *The Duel*).

To analyze this, we have drawn on the abovementioned combination of the ICM and that of dialogic action to emphasize, on the one hand, the indirectness and background-knowledge dependence of the exchange, and, on the other, the provocative nature of dialog actions and reactions (the floating signifiers are marked in bold). Bogdan assumes right away that plotting takes place, which is a dialogic action in Weigand's (2017) and Kecskés' (2016) sense (see section 3). Maciej, in turn, assumes that the question about plotting is tantamount to an accusation of plotting and thus represents an example of anti-Semitism, even a 'pure' one, by which he probably means groundless insinuation. Bogdan's response to that is an example of a provocation from today's perspective, when the admission of anti-Semitic prejudice is a cause of shame, while for a conceited 17th-century nobleman holding such prejudice (or seemingly justified certainty of Jewish conspiracy) is implied to have been a reason for pride. Thus, Maciej's dialogic move, intended as an accusation, is actually received as a compliment (*thank you*). Bogdan follows up with another dialogic response, which implies that prejudice against peasants can be considered justified and an example of patriotism. Characteristically, Bogdan's dialogic moves openly approve of exclusion and display a lack of empathy towards minorities. This rough feature of his (and some other characters' as well, including Jan Paweł) is one of the reasons why the series has evoked ambivalent responses – either humorous or critical. Below is the summary analysis of the example in the ICM and dialogic terms:

make-sense frames – A peasant and a Jew, alone in a room, epitomize danger for xenophobic Bogdan.

cultural frames – Jew, anti-Semitism, anti-peasant prejudice, patriotism; lack of empathy is a typical feature that leads to exclusion of minority groups.

utterance interpretation – Thanking assumes something beneficial, while here thanks are offered for being an anti-Semite, while patriotism is reinterpreted to refer to prejudice against peasants, reprimand clashes with praise.

dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – Jew, peasant, plotting, anti-Semitism, prejudice, patriotism

4.2. Gender roles

Example 3 brings an intertextual allusion to the contemporary feminist discourse, which chastises men for being close-minded and unable to enter into relationships. It is represented here by Jan Paweł's daughter Anielka, who is portrayed as a champion of liberalism, cosmopolitanism, non-discrimination, and the cause of minority religions of Old Poland. She calls on her family and others to "get their act together as this is the 17th century" (Episode 2, *The Estate*). Her very contemporary dialogic action, much in line with the 21st century, is used nowadays to condemn obsolete opinions or behaviors. In the example, it clearly clashes with masculinist discourse, which disregards women's views and focuses on their looks ("pretty braid").

(3) Anielka: Don't you understand that this draws on the **toxic** pattern that is only a source of pain for subsequent generations of men? You live in constant **tension**, and you can't build a **healthy relationship** with other men because you are constantly hiding under the shell of your hopeless **pride**.

Jan Paweł: A pretty **braid**, you've got, Anielka.

(Episode 6, *The Duel*)

make-sense frames – the father-daughter communication is not easy; Anielka criticizes men for lacking skills to develop good relations with other men

cultural frames – patriarchal values, pretending to be strong and proud [the floating signifiers of God, honor, homeland are assumed for Polish readers], feminist critique of masculine society, ignoring female voices

utterance interpretation – men should leave their shell and drop their pride (Anielka), female looks matter (Jan Paweł), appearance dominates over mind for Jan Paweł

dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – toxic/ healthy patterns of communication, tension, pride, girl's braid

Similarly, in one scene of the family council in the sitting room of the house before the regional assembly, Jakub is surprised and unhappy to see his sister and other women participating in the council. Anielka claims the council takes part in their room, so women have the right to be there. He wants to be addressed with the honors of his priesthood state, while she refuses and calls her brother an idiot for having those ridiculous expectations. The following dialog unveils:

(4). Jakub: Why do **women** take part in our council?

Anielka: Because you are in **our** sitting room, idiot!

Jakub: Haven't I asked you to address me, **Father**?

Anielka: Yuk....

make-sense frames – power relations between siblings, men and women, priests and laymen.

cultural frames – excluding women from the decision making, traditional respectful forms used to address priests (Father), showing their higher position in the social hierarchy

utterance interpretation – Jakub doesn't want to see women in public space and wants to exclude them, Anielka doesn't want to call her brother – Father, perceives it as disgusting

dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – our/ your (space – sitting room), women, Father



Figure 3. The annual census of infidels in the village of Adamczycha.

4.3. Religious cultures

The village described in the series is inhabited by different ethnic groups and people representing various religious beliefs, which aims to depict the multinational character of 17th-century Poland and its (seemingly) tolerant character. The main religion and the most powerful church is the Roman Catholic Church. The family members – especially the most traditional and conservative ones (Jan Paweł, his wife Zofia, and Jakub, the younger son) – identify with it most strongly. In Example 5, Jakub, as a Catholic priest, in the presence of the villagers, is preparing the annual census of infidels (see also Figure 3).

(5) Jakub: I have a new system. I mark Judaism with a sad face (emoji), and Orthodoxy with a furious one. [...] atheists we mark with the skull and crossbones.

Jakub: Who do you believe in?

Peasant: No one... I don't have that metaphysical element in me, I hope that's not a **problem** [...].

Jan Paweł: That's not a problem, but unfortunately, we'll have to kill you. (Episode 4, *Equality March*).

make-sense frames – (lack of) equality and (non)discrimination. Jakub tries to be fair and offer clear criteria for the assessment of “heretic” religions, but in fact, he ridicules them by drawing simplistic symbols.

cultural frames – Religious tolerance in old Poland, dominated by the Catholic religion, had its drawbacks too and involved various forms of discrimination.

utterance interpretation – On the one hand, Jakub’s aim is the statistical census of religious denominations; on the other, he ridicules all non-Catholic religions verbally (he calls them infidels) and visually (drawings), and threatens the atheists with death.

dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – problem, visual face signs.

In Example 6, Jan Paweł introduces his wife to the viewers as the last member of his family, emphasizing her religious devotion and rather marginal role in his life. Here, the clash between the past and the present occurs on a more multimodal ground: the text plays on the literal and metaphorical notion of *soul* as floating signifier, while the images show Zofia clad in black, the viewers hear her prayer while she is lying prostrate on the ground, or witness her decisive resistance (knife stuck into the table) as in Figure 4: this features a visual contrast of Christian symbols and violence. She introduces herself to the viewers by saying, “*Memento mori* – my favorite motivational line,” which is an intertextual reference and, at the same time, ridicules coaching practices, which are so popular nowadays. She is also a supporter of ascetic religious practices, such as flagellation, as a solution to practical problems, of which Jan Paweł is highly critical.



Figure 4. Jan Paweł’s wife, Zofia, is a religious fanatic.

(6) Jan Paweł: Oh, yes, there is also my wife, Zofia. I would not call her the **party soul**, more like the soul of a deceased who **torments** you posthumously. (Episode 1, *The Assembly*).

make-sense frames – Jan Paweł introduces his wife as a kind person, which is not the case because of her religious fanaticism and bigotry

cultural frames – Poland as a Catholic country, the Pole-Catholic stereotype assumes that Poland is the country of one religion, belief in the afterlife

utterance interpretation – Zofia is not an easygoing, extroverted person, living with her is difficult, she is cruel, stubborn, and fierce, able to torment others, thus not a role model of Christian virtues

dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – party soul, torment.

4.4. Social attitudes

A typical kind of humor stemming from 17th-century-style social relations results from the callousness of traditional customs, which the series ridicules and opposes to the present ones. This comes out again and again, for instance, in Jan Paweł's attitude to his son, the priest (*The pride of the family, he works in the corporation*, Episode 1, *The Assembly*) or the relation to the peasant children in the village (*Poor and hungry little kids. But now – time for lunch*, Episode 1, *The Assembly*), or to peasants themselves (*The carrot and stick method. Carrot for the ox, and stick for the peasant when he was lazing around*; Episode 2, *The Estate*).

In Example 7, which has become a classical line in the Polish cultural sphere, the dialogic action takes the form of a set of onomatopoeic calls to peasants to work faster, thus forming another category of actions. In Polish, *hop* implies hopping or jumping, like in English. The conversation takes place between Jan Paweł and his son Stanisław, a future heir of the estate, who is taught by his father how to get *involved* in running it by encouraging peasants to work faster. Stanisław is a happy-go-lucky late Baroque “rock” music lover who is not very keen to manage the estate and thus needs to be prompted. Once shown the way, he keeps running around the village and *hops*, rushing the peasants in this absurd way. The simplistically onomatopoeic nature of this peasant rushing has now become memetic.

(7) Jan Paweł: Stanisław, you must get more involved. You must **love** your peasants, you must *rush* them. *Hop, hop, hop, hop...* (Episode 2, *The Estate*).

make-sense frames – estate management, peasants must work efficiently and cannot laze around. Stanisław, as a future heir, must be encouraged to drop his ways and learn management skills.

cultural frames – feudal relations, tradition of forcing peasants to work
utterance interpretation – for Jan Paweł, loving peasants means making them run to complete their duties and not allowing them to rest so as to not waste time.
dialogic actions/reactions(use of floating signifiers) – love, rush, hop.

Example 8 is less complex but also depends on the incompatibility of 17th- and 21st-century beliefs. This time, it refers to the role of alcohol while driving. Jan Paweł and the coachman believe that it has a salutary effect as it calms the driver's nerves, which are clearly wrecked, given his way of driving the coach. Drinking alcohol (or mead in old Poland) has always been a popular pastime both among peasants and nobility. However, peasants could largely afford moonshine and getting drunk was their favorite habit. In old Poland, taverns were usually run by Jewish innkeepers (like Izaak in example 2). Drinking "one for the road" (it was called a "stirrup drink" then, horses being the most common means of transport) was the habit of the day as well.

(8) Jan Paweł: My coachman, did you **drink** anything before the journey?
 Coachman: Of course I did, my lord.
 Jan Paweł: Well, I don't know, I don't know, you're so **nervous**... [to the viewers] These **cheap lines**. One is afraid to get on board.
 (Episode 1, *The Assembly*).

make-sense frames – Jan Paweł is riding a coach driven by a peasant coachman and talks directly to the viewer when the coach suddenly shakes on a bumpy road, and he is dissatisfied with this ride, calling it a "cheap" line in relation to popular cheap airways – in fact, it is completely free for him as a nobleman.

cultural frames – drinking is good for safe driving (past), versus drink driving is dangerous (present).

utterance interpretation – Jan Paweł's usually dismissive attitude implies that the coachman failed to drink and is now nervous and cannot drive properly.

dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – drink, nervous, cheap lines.

4.5. Technology of the past and present

Example 9 is also multimodal in nature. Stanisław, Jan Paweł's son, is scrolling on the 17th-century version of a smartphone, looking at the pictures of his potential fiancées, which we see on the screen. His father reprimands him for not participating in a family discussion and wasting his life, which resembles parents scolding their children for spending their time online instead of doing something productive, thus evoking the past and present incongruity from a new perspective.

(9) Jan Paweł: You will **inherit** all of this one day, and you just sit there on **your picture** all day.

Stanisław: Gimme a break, will you, dad?

Jan Paweł: **Put the picture away!**

Stanisław: **In a minute**, Dad.

Jan Paweł: Not in a minute! **Now!** Life is passing you by.

(Episode 2, *The Estate*).

make-sense frames – father - son communication. Jan Paweł urges Stanisław again to get involved in managing the estate; this time, he wants to get his attention away from his picture with his potential girlfriends.

cultural frames – inheritance rules among nobility, picture (past) versus smartphone (present).

utterance interpretation – Jan Paweł wants to talk to his child, who is busy playing, and they exchange the cliché phrases that fathers and children use nowadays when children do not want to get away from the computer or phone.

dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – picture, put it away, in a minute, now.

4.6. Communication styles

Example 10 illustrates the confrontational, spontaneous, and argumentative communication style, typical of Poland and East Slavic countries, both old and contemporary (see Chłopicki 2017 for an analysis). A screenshot from the scene is attached in Figure 5.

(10) Jan Paweł: Tomorrow's sejmik? I'm calm. We're practicing the *best* traditional **Polish rhetorical tactics... I didn't interrupt you**, sir!

Jakub: Louder!

Jan Paweł: **I didn't interrupt you**, sir!

Jakub: Look me in the eye. Tougher! Tougher! [They both bang the table with their fists, scream, and smile with satisfaction.] (Episode 1, *The Assembly*).



Figure 5. Traditional Polish dialog style: [Jan Paweł] "I didn't interrupt you, sir." [Jakub] "Look me in the eye! Tougher!"

The frame of negotiation, which is supposed to be fair and becomes one-sided, uses the concept of dialogic action metalinguistically. Example 10, where at first Jan Paweł addresses the viewers directly, is representative of a large corpus of metalinguistic humor, very much in line with the nature of the mockumentary genre. The concept of *sejmik* (or regional assembly of nobility) is a culture-specific frame that involves a large gathering of all the nobility from a given area who were supposed to arrive at group decisions by consensus or voting. Naturally, such processes were not deprived of pitfalls, since the democratic voting system could be undermined by a group of rich and strong-minded negotiators who would lobby for their cause (McKenna 2012), not refraining from bribery and other brutal tactics. The example of dialogic action used here (*ja panu nie przerywałem* "I didn't interrupt you, sir") is typical of today's Polish political debates both in parliament and in the media. What the line does is imply "You should not interrupt me either," which has been conventionalized to be a request: "Allow me to speak without interruption." Below is the summary analysis:

Make-sense frames – (one-sided) negotiation. Jan Paweł is trained by his son Jakub, the priest, in forcing people to keep silent and preventing interruption.
cultural frames – *sejmik* regional assembly, Polish nobility political culture, which is implied to be based on powerplay and trickery

utterance interpretation – The son wants his father to be louder and sound tougher to win the argument at the assembly.

dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – best Polish rhetorical tactics, I didn't interrupt you, sir!

Example 11 involves undermining a conversation frame, where Jan Paweł opts out of the conversation and closes the communication channel with his neighbor Andrzej, thus making the dialog move of exclusion. He dislikes Andrzej for being better educated, more progressive, more open-minded, less conceited, and more successful in business, even though he would not admit this. This ridicules the above-mentioned spontaneous argumentative style typical of Poland, especially since the example is exaggeratedly impolite. The screenshot from the scene is attached in Figure 6, with Jakub in the background supporting his father.

(11) Jan Paweł: Andrzej, we would love to **chat**, but not with you!
(Episode 3, *Spring*).

make-sense frames – Jan Paweł and Jakub refuse to talk to Andrzej in a way that is meant to be dismissive (their favorite attitude again) and excluding. Jan Paweł is unwilling to allow his guest to converse with his neighbor.

cultural frames – polite conversation, insult

utterance interpretation – They want to interrupt the conversation by breaking the rules of etiquette.

dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – chat.

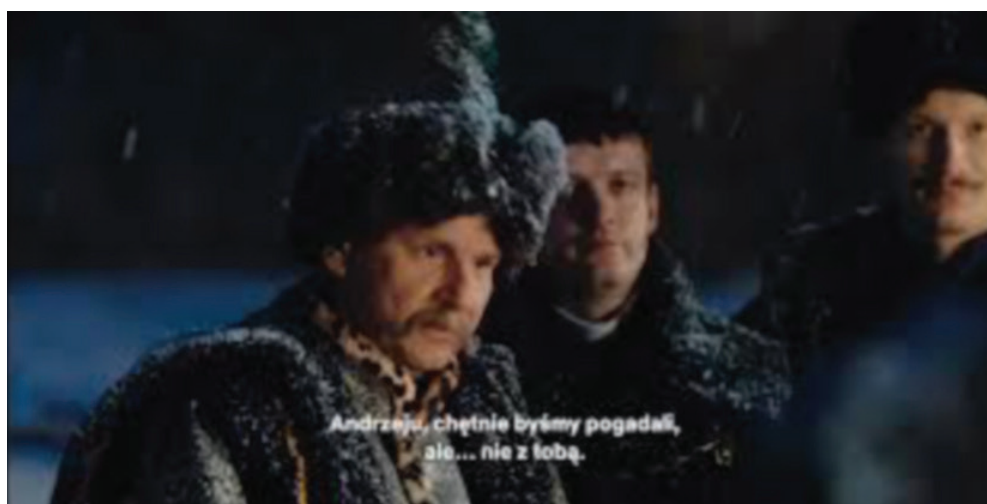


Figure 6. Dialog refusal. "Andrzej, we would be happy to chat, but... not with you."

5. Conclusions

We can conclude this study by emphasizing that past topics, history, and stereotypes are recurring vehicles for current debates. Overall, we have argued the applicability of semiotics within dialog pragmatics to the new type of analysis of humor evoked by the opposition of the past and the present. This approach is based on the notion of *pragma-dialogue*, “which calls attention to the dialogic nature of communication by emphasizing that interlocutors are actors who act and react” (Kecskés 2016: 27). As a result,

the speaker-hearer not only interprets but also reacts to the other interlocutor’s utterance. The basic dialogic principle is that human beings are dialogic individuals (social individuals) who communicate in dialogic interaction not only by producing and understanding utterances but also by acting and reacting (Kecskés 2016: 27).

We have applied this analysis to multimodal humor in the Netflix *1670* mockumentary series, which is controversial and, as such, divides Polish audiences between those who are highly responsive to it and those who fail to see humor in it and find it offensive. The nature of the genre (specifically, the direct explanation of events and opinions to the audience by the main characters, contrasted with grotesque dialogs and explicit visual symbols) facilitates the contrast between past and present cultural frames. These feature the Poland of noblemen and peasants, the situation of religion and ethnic minorities, gender conflict, Parliamentary traditions, communication styles and conspiracy theories, and are all related to the contemporary political scene. We have tried to demonstrate different pragmatic and multimodal mechanisms used to evoke such humorous reactions, often involving the contrast between visual and verbal signs, and sometimes between visual signs in the same image (cf. Figure 4).

While analyzing examples, we have identified several categories of dialogic action that include:

1. using floating signifiers that evoke 17th-century customs in a contemporary context, such as *plotting* or *sejmik*, or the reverse;
2. using modern concepts, such as smartphones, in the 17th-century context;
3. evoking beliefs that have changed their meaning over the centuries (e.g., about alcohol or prejudice);
4. using historical clichés such as “Noblemen do not work” that are no longer applicable;
5. bringing up the traditional, spontaneous argumentative Polish communication style, which still persists in Polish public sphere with the destructive metalinguistic strategies such as *I did not interrupt you*.

These directly contrast the principle that “the common purpose of dialog is not only interpreting what the speaker said, but progressing towards an understanding between different speakers” (Weigand 2023:12).

The series is character-driven, and among the leading traits of the 17th-century characters that dominate the humor is the grotesque lack of empathy and shameless tendency to exclude. Today, that attitude would be called anti-social and discriminatory, but when set in the historical context and accompanied by openly biased and exaggerated language of characters who express their opinions straight into the eyes of the viewers, comic effects are guaranteed. The farcical scenes that abound in the series have a factual basis, however, and thus for the Polish audience, they ring true even though they simplify facts and are grotesquely overblown. All Poles had learned at school of the greatness and power of the Polish state, especially in its golden period (16th-17th century), of the tradition of freedom and democracy and religious tolerance that old Poland nourished in contrast to their autocratic neighbors. What is played down in school teaching is precisely what the film emphasizes, which is discriminatory social attitudes as well as laws against minorities, “heretics” and Jews, not to mention the subservient role of women (*it is splendid time to be a woman*, as Jan Paweł says to the audience sarcastically, when trying to force his daughter to marry a magnate), brutal attitudes towards servants (*You can make two mistakes, we have enough servants*, says Jakub to his father when he wants to try to cut an apple on a servant’s head with his saber) and animals (*hunting is inviting animals to a joint physical activity*, says Jan Paweł). These rough, excluding attitudes, expressed through the behaviors and comments that lack empathy, apply to everyone apart from male noblemen (i.e., peasants, Jews, Lithuanians, townsfolk, women, or neighbors).

Summing up, the constant dialog between past and present serves the purpose of offers a fresh perspective that stereotypes and simplifies, but also points out weaknesses of the past, teases, makes viewers undertake critical reflections, provokes reactions, and last but not least, entertains and amuses.

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