Semiotics of humor:
Unraveling the dynamics of resemiotization

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1. Introduction

While semiotics and humor studies might strike one as rather different notions and perhaps even incompatible, they are not as strange bedfellows as they might seem at first glance. In fact, semiotics and humor studies share a common underlying aspect: they are both centrally concerned with semiosis as the process of meaning-making, having a decidedly semantic substance. Semiotics has emerged as a structuralist answer to the mechanism of how linguistic or other material forms are linked to meaning, stressing the conventional nature of the sign. Humor studies, which explore the semantic mechanisms producing a funny/entertaining effect (Attardo 2020:107), rely on the conventional nature of the sign (whether linguistic or non-linguistic), and more specifically, on situations where the conventionality gets disrupted by a perceived incongruity, i.e., a violation of one's expectations, and the subsequent resolution of the incongruity, i.e., the ultimate assignment of a meaningful interpretation.

Instances of modern humor increasingly exist as multimodal signs, which is perhaps most evident in the recent format of digital memes, image macros, funny videos, and other forms of humor widely circulated on social media and online. However, the meaning-potential of humor – whatever traditional or modern forms it takes – is inseparably linked to the social context, which not only provides the background for

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the un/successful deployment of humor, but also ends up being shaped by the humor used therein. From a semiotic perspective, humor involves both the handling of complex socially embedded and publicly shared meanings as well as individualized personal motivations that underlie interlocutors' intentions and eventual communicative effects. In our view, there are two semiotic processes involved in the creation of humor: the first-order level of *semiotization*,[1] which resides in the particular incongruity-resolution mechanism, i.e. a device that is fundamental to signs operating in the service of humor; and the higher-order level of *resemiotization* (Iedema 2001; 2003), which captures the shifts of meaning from context to context, i.e. a property that arises from the common intertextual function of humor and explains how signification 'floats' (after Laclau 2000) across contexts in the sense that it may engender multiple, even opposing interpretations.

Given the above, our aim is twofold: (1) to discuss (a few fundamental aspects of) the overlap between semiotics and (linguistic) humor studies and to provide some helpful background information as to some main concepts for the analysis of humor, which are relevant to the papers of this special issue; and (2) to put forward a (tentative version of a) semiotics-related framing perspective which will bring together all the approaches included here – and perhaps will inspire further research revising or expanding this perspective.

To this end, we seek to discuss some connecting points between semiotics and humor. We start by laying out the notions central to semiotics (section 2) and then move on to discuss previous research in the semiotics of humor (section 3). In section 4, we lay out our conception of what we see as the two crucial meaning-making processes, namely *semiotization* and *resemiotization*, and identify the effects of resemiotization (Iedema 2001; 2003) on humor. Here, based on our previous work on intertextuality and humor (Chovanec and Tsakona 2020), we elaborate on the idea that humorists' exploitation of intertextual allusions together with their tendency to identify, create, and/or highlight incongruous aspects of social events lead them to resemiotize (in Iedema's 2001; 2003 sense) the latter to express their humorous perspectives. Section 5 contains brief summaries of the studies included in the special issue, placing emphasis on how the humorous data analyzed therein resemiotize social events and convey evaluative and often ambiguous meanings. Finally, in section 6, we come up with potential areas of further inquiry along these lines.

[1] We use the concept of *semiotization* in a loose sense to describe the systemic nature of meaning-making of humor (which is our focus in the present context), and to differentiate it from *resemiotization*, which we understand as the more individual, user-based applications of humor to various social events via intertextual connections and transformations (see section 4 and references therein). While the former notion is, thus, more 'semantic' in its nature, the latter is rather 'pragmatic' in its perspective. In a sense, this approach reflects the two complementary approaches to humor: the structural one and the functional and contextual one.

2. From signs to signs in context to humorous signs

By way of very briefly delimiting the field, it is worthwhile to review the classic starting points of semiotics from over a century ago and complement them with a more modern perspective. As linguists, we cannot, of course, avoid starting with the earliest definition of semiotics by Saussure (1983[1916]), who laid the foundation of the discipline and, most importantly, clarified its position with respect to linguistics:

> It is [...] possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. […] We shall call it semiology (from the Greek *semeîon*, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge. (Saussure 1983[1916]:15-16, emphasis in the original)

In Saussure's conceptualization, *sémiologie/semiology*, nowadays called *semiotics*, would constitute a broader research area encompassing linguistics (dedicated to the theory of linguistic signs, in particular) as well as other research fields studying other semiotic systems. This delimitation is particularly helpful because it liberates us from an over-reliance on the linguistic sign. Since semiotics is superordinate to linguistics, any conventionally meaningful sign can be relevant for communication, i.e., the exchange of intentional and unintentional messages between interlocutors or the meanings (*signifieds*) conventionally assigned to phenomena (*signifiers*). Extended to humor studies, this conception allows us to focus on humorous phenomena beyond language and probe their conventional meanings, including common physical actions (cf. the 'funniness' of slipping on a banana skin) or static phenomena (cf. the signification of a clown's nose, which can serve as a humorous contextualization cue).

On the level of the sign, thus, one distinct relation between humor studies and semiotics rests in the fact that some signs, on the most general level of abstraction, can be humorous *per se* or perceived as potentially humorous (or not) by their users. At the same time, humor can be achieved through an extraordinarily broad range of discursive and non-discursive practices; in particular, humorous meaning-making results from the users drawing on very many diverse semiotic resources. Hence, what is needed is a more context-related approach to humor semiotics to capture adequately what happens to 'signs in context.'

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In this connection, it is hardly surprising that more contemporary approaches to, and definitions of, semiotics tend to engage more with pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspectives. These approaches and definitions reflect the currently dominant research paradigm in modern linguistics, which has seen a shift away from the analysis of language in isolation to language in use, namely from language as structure and system to language as discourse, interaction, and social practice. In this conception, meaning arises in context and is negotiated by discourse participants, who draw on shared discursive conventions and norms, but exploit the available means of expression – the signs in diverse material forms and other semiotic resources – to suit their purposes. Such a sociopragmatic approach is increasingly present in some more recent definitions of semiotics, which also link the semiotic practices to societal values and cultural contexts, as in the following one by Iskanderova (2024:5-6):

> Semiotics, as a captivating field of study, investigates the multifaceted realm of signs and symbols, shedding light on the intricate ways meaning is constructed across various modes of communication (Chandler 1994). Within the expansive scope of semiotics, the exploration of signs extends beyond mere symbols to encompass a rich tapestry of linguistic, visual, and cultural elements. […] Signs […] can manifest in various forms, including images, symbols, language, and even the arrangement of elements within a frame or scene. The visual symbols and metaphors, the linguistic choices made in narration or dialogue, and the spatial organization of elements all contribute to the semiotic landscape […]. By delving into the semiotic dimensions […], we gain the ability to decipher the hidden meanings, ideologies, and cultural references that media creators seek to convey. The study of semiotics […] goes beyond the surface interpretation of visual and auditory stimuli. It involves a deep exploration of how signs operate within specific cultural contexts, influencing and reflecting societal values. Semiotics becomes a key to unlocking the cultural codes embedded in media, revealing the subtle ways in which meaning is negotiated, contested, and constructed.

Obviously, the differences between the two definitions are due to the fact that Saussure only envisioned a semiologic/semiotic theory, while Iskanderova (among many other scholars) presents a research field that has developed enormously since the end of the 19th century: it encompasses multiple approaches, theories, analytical terms and tools, and has also been applied to a wide range of texts, semiotic

artefacts, and contexts, from oral, written, and multimodal discourse to musical texts, theater, cinema, architecture, and in general any kind of human expression and artefact intended and/or perceived as meaningful (see Chandler 1994; Trifonas 2015, and references therein). This diversity and multiplicity is represented in the contents of this special issue, which brings together studies in a variety of genres such as television series (Brzozowska and Chłopicki), oral literature (Perrino), online discussions in the social media (Brock and Willenberg), memes (Archakis and Tsakona, Merkoulova, Mullan, Shilikhina, Valijärvi and Kahn), cartoons (Constantinescu), and argumentation (de Salvador Agra). All these studies also exploit diverse theoretical backgrounds and analytical concepts to account for how humor as a semiotic phenomenon is created and how it works in context.

There is one more theoretical linguistic perspective that should not be overlooked when considering the interface between semiotics and humor studies. In his overarching theory of language, the systemic functional linguist Halliday (1978) views the system of language as a *social semiotic*: a means whereby people create meanings and establish social relationships. In this sense, any communicative activity realized through language is analyzable in terms of the social relations that it constructs. Admittedly, while the conception of language as a social semiotic may be of less central interest to semioticians, who have traditionally theorized semiosis as more distinctly sign-based (and connecting the levels of content and expression), the study of humor from the systemic functional point of view as a social semiosis is not unusual (see, for instance, an analysis of how stand-up performers affiliate with their audiences by Logi and Zappavigna 2019). However, what appears to be a very salient and timely connection between the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics and current semiotics is the social-semiotic research into multimodality, where visual and other signs (in our case, cartoons, memes, image macros, etc.) are analyzed and interpreted within the framework as carrying specific social meanings.

Relevant in this connection is also the specification of the research goals of scholars engaged in semiotic analysis. As van Leeuwen (2005:3) specifies, to provide a description of semantic inventories, the task of semioticians is to:

> (1) collect, document and systematically catalogue semiotic resources – including their history (2) investigate how these resources are used in specific historical, cultural and institutional contexts, and how people talk about them in these contexts – plan them, teach them, justify them, critique them, etc. (3) contribute to the discovery and development of new semiotic resources and new uses of existing semiotic resources.

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While we can, from a macro-perspective, see humor as a social-semiotic practice in itself, it is realized, as mentioned previously, through a myriad of semiotic resources and practices. The semiotic mechanisms of humor, extensively investigated in humor studies, linguistics, and other disciplines, can be seen as constituting semiotic inventories. In view of van Leeuwen's proposal above, we suggest that such inventories consist of the resources for semiotization (i.e., the more or less conventional humorous meaning-making) as well as resemiotization (where actual users draw on these resources and inventories and intertextually transplant them to new contexts).

3. Exploring the semiotics of humor

In this section, we rely on Attardo (2024[1994]) and Berger (1995) to briefly discuss some points of convergence between semiotics and humor studies. Our aim is to highlight the incongruity basis of humor and prepare the ground for exploring the role of intertextuality in relation to what we see as central to many forms and functions of modern humor, namely the resemiotization of aspects of social events and the available semiotic resources.

In his seminal chapter on the semiotic theories of humor, Attardo (2024[1994]:138-155) discusses the central tenets and goals of semiotic approaches to the analysis of humor and offers particularly important critical insights on them. Attardo's chapter is a must-read, so we are not going to propose here another overview of semiotic theories of humor. However, let us summarize some main points of his chapter, which we consider important for the theoretical grounding and positioning of research at the interface between humor and semiotics.

Being a linguist, Attardo (2024[1994]) emphasizes the similarities between semiotic and linguistic theories of humor and maps the influences among them. Such influences result in common conceptualizations of humor as a violation of social conventions, norms, and expectations via semiosis. To create humor, a more or less fixed combination of semiotic form and conceptual content no longer holds: words or, in general, signs, are not used in their conventional senses; meanings are created which do not comply with common perceptions of aspects of social reality; discourse is used in ways that are not expected in specific contexts. From a semiotic point of view, this incompatible quality of humor may be called *bisociation* (by Koestler 1964 and Norrick 1986, among others), *rule violation* (Eco 1986; Mizzau 1982; Vogel 1989), *deviant semiotic strategies* (Fónagy 1982), or *breaking of a frame of reference* (Wenzel 1989), but it is precisely what within (linguistic) humor theory is called incongruity.

We argue that this property constitutes one of the fundamental semiotic characteristics of humor. Thus, as far as humor is concerned, the process of semiotization revolves around the potentiality (or oscillation) of meaning, where the identification

of incongruity ultimately leads to semantic switches and meaning reinterpretation. While the semiotic sign is characterized by the conventional fixity between its components (i.e., the signifier and the signified), humorous semiosis seeks to undermine such fixity and offers an alternative kind of semiosis that capitalizes on bisociation.[2]

The incongruity theory of humor is one of the main theories of humor and the one most commonly used by linguists (see, among others, Raskin 1985; Attardo 2001; 2024[1994]). In cognitive terms, incongruity is described as a *script opposition*: in fact, nowadays the terms are often used interchangeably among humor scholars. More specifically, Raskin (1985:99) suggests that a humorous text "is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts" and that "[t]he two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite," that is, they lead to interpretations that are incompatible with each other in a particular context. In his conceptualization, a script is

> a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker and […] represents the native speaker's knowledge of a small part of the world. Every speaker has internalized rather a large repertoire of scripts of 'common sense' which represent his/her knowledge of certain routines, standard procedures, basic situations, etc. (Raskin 1985:81)

So, the concept of incongruity (whatever its semiotic variants may be; see *bisociation*, etc. above) is an important common thread linking linguistic and semiotic approaches to humor and perhaps accounting for the fact that it does not seem to be easy to distinguish between linguistic and semiotic analyses of humor, especially when they pertain to multimodal texts.

Semioticians such as Vogel (1989) also draw on Freud's (1991[1905]) work on humor and underline the significance of context and participant roles (i.e., the joke teller, the hearer, and the butt of the joke, namely the person/entity denigrated by the joke) in its production and interpretation. Vogel (1989:140) notes that, in her work,

> the following variables have been considered [for the analysis of humor]: the participants, their roles in the situation, their individual processing potentials, their social affiliations, their interest and/or engagement in text-mediated integration, and their basic interpretation of the intentions behind the text situation – as well as the various ways the actual channel of interactive communication can be regulated. (cited in Attardo 2024[1994]:145)

[2] Needless to say, some other non-humorous communicative situations are characterized by similar potentiality emerging from the non-fixity of conventional meanings (e.g. political evasion, which often involves social agents operating with calculated semantic ambivalence; see among others Chovanec 2020; Engel and Wodak 2013).

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In addition, semiotic approaches to humor go beyond the analysis of short decontextualized (oral, written, canned) jokes: semioticians are interested in longer texts (e.g. literary ones), multimodal ones (e.g. cartoons), works of art (e.g. paintings), etc. and examine the social factors shaping their meanings (see Attardo 2024[1994]:155, and references therein). In a similar vein, in recent years, and moving away from purely formal and structuralist approaches to humor, humor scholars have capitalized on the generic variation of humorous discourse and on the importance of context for the emergence of humor as well as for its success or failure in given circumstances (see Chovanec 2021; Tsakona 2017b; 2020a; 2024a; Tsakona and Chovanec 2018; 2024, and references therein).

Attardo (2024[1994]:155) concludes his chapter by claiming that

> all semiotic approaches are, often implicitly, based on the principle that all humor is at root a semantic phenomenon; thus, a semiotics of humor is in fact the analysis of the different types of signifiers that a common semantic mechanism (script opposition/isotopy disjunction[3]/bisociation) can be transposed into. There are many problems confronting the establishment of a coherent semiotic theory, but insofar as it can parallel a linguistic theory, it is easy to match step by step the problems that are analyzed in the linguistics of humor with those of a semiotics of humor.

Thus, he highlights the common origins, goals, and aspirations between semioticians and linguists when it comes to the analysis of humorous discourse.

Another scholar whose work on humor is often cited by semioticians is Arthur Asa Berger, who has also dedicated a chapter to the semiotics of humor in his 1995 book. In this chapter, Berger (1995:65-76) likewise claims that a semiotic approach to humor is based on the concept of incongruity:

> From a semiotic point of view, humor can be thought of as involving some kind of code violation. This notion can be thought of as a semiotic variation of the concept of incongruity. According to this incongruity theory, humor is based on some kind of surprise, in which what you get is not what you might anticipate. (Berger 1995:66)

In the rest of his chapter, Berger discusses how punch lines, puns, metaphors, metonymies, intertextuality, and parody are premised on the play between conventional

[3] Greimas' (1966) *isotopy-disjunction model* has been quite influential for the analysis of humor and is close to the incongruity theory of humor (for an extensive discussion of Greimas' model, see Attardo 2024[1994]:41-60).

and unconventional relations between signifiers and signifieds, thus producing incongruities. In a different chapter of the same book, Berger (1995:12-13) offers a "semiotic analysis" of a joke and concludes it by saying that "its humor comes from the way it defeats our expectations of normalcy" (Berger 1995:13).

What the approaches summarized above more or less explicitly indicate is that the semiotic analysis is concerned with the actual process of semiotization, which we understand as a first-order semiotic system. Here, the focus is essentially on forms (signifiers) and the semantic mechanisms that transpose expected (conventional) meanings (signifieds) to unexpected (incongruous and humorous) ones. However, we argue that there is more to the semiotics of humor than that: the semiotic analysis should deal with not only semiotization but also with resemiotization, which operates on a higher level of the social semiotic. In this connection, let us consider Matthiessen's (2017:461) observation about the distinction between first-order and higher-order systems:

> Semiotic systems are defined as systems of meaning; depending on their power and complexity, they either carry meaning (first-order semiotic systems) or create meaning (higher-order semiotic systems). As a semiotic system, language is theorized as a higher-order semiotic system for creating meaning.

This conception of semiotics of humor allows for the theoretical unification of the 'semantic' and 'pragmatic' dimensions of humor: it enables us to analytically describe the nature and operation of humor, on the one hand, and its often-strategic deployment by users in specific communicative situations, on the other.

4. The interplay of intertextuality and resemiotization for the creation and interpretation of humor

As stated above, the semiotics of humor relies on the complementary processes of semiotization and resemiotization. In addition, since no text, in general, cannot but be intertextual by echoing previous texts (Bakhtin 1986), we consider resemiotization and intertextuality as central and inseparable concepts shaping our understanding and analysis of how humor works in context.

The concept of intertextuality is premised on the facts that "speech is primarily a product of speech" (Gasparov 2010:16) and that "every new artefact of speech emerges out of the material provided by previous speech experience" (Gasparov 2010:3, 16; obviously echoing Kristeva 1980 and Bakhtin 1986). The concept of resemiotization pertains to "meaning making shifts from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a practice to the next" (Iedema 2003:41, drawing on Mehan 1993).

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Such meaning-making shifts require our understanding of the relations existing between not only contexts but also the recontextualized/resemiotized forms and texts. In that sense, intertextuality lies at the core of resemiotization; the two concepts complement each other and can hardly exist independently (see also Scollon 2008).

Let us begin with the relationship between humor and intertextuality, which has been extensively studied among humor scholars focusing on either the form and content of humorous texts or on their diverse communicative effects in different contexts (see the special issue edited by Chovanec and Tsakona 2020). We have elaborated on this relationship (see Tsakona and Chovanec 2020, and references therein) by mainly arguing that

> the very concept of incongruity or script opposition, which is used to account for most (if not all) humorous instances (Raskin 1985; Attardo [2024]/1994; 2001), relies on intertextuality. When interpreting humorous texts, recipients evoke specific scripts, namely previous experiences and knowledge of the world (including, and/or included in, previous texts) to make sense of the humorous material at hand. Such previous intertextual experience and knowledge become the benchmark against which the second, incongruous script of interpretation creating the humorous effect surfaces. In other words, incongruity or script opposition cannot actually be established without reference to previous (con)texts, which are considered as expected, conventional, or normal in some sense. Therefore, establishing intertextual connections with previous (con)texts determines what is incompatible or incongruous in a given (con)text. In this sense, *intertextuality lies at the heart of humor: there cannot be any humorous text that is not intertextual*. (Tsakona and Chovanec 2020:7, our emphasis)

In this sense, intertextuality [4] can divide interlocutors into those 'in the know' and those 'out of the know' when the former can evoke the opposing scripts upon which humor is built, and the latter cannot or resist to do so. On the one hand, the evocation or recognition of scripts may allow recipients to participate in certain groups consisting of people with common knowledge, (textual or other) experiences, values, and views. On the other hand, failed attempts at recognizing the scripts or deliberate *resistant readings* (in Fairclough's 1992:134-136 sense; see also Chovanec 2017) which involve alternative scripts of interpretation, usually signify miscommunication or overt disagreement and disaffiliation among interlocutors, respectively.

[4] For a more detailed discussion of the content of the next two paragraphs, see Tsakona and Chovanec (2020:7-10) and references therein.

Simultaneously, intertextual allusions to previous texts, whether humorous or not, may be motivated by the humorists' will and attempt to criticize the intertexts, their authors, the latter's stances and standpoints, etc. This may also entail a critical perspective on the stylistic and generic conventions, thus leading to genre renewal: "creating intertextual links among genres and the ensuing generic mixing contribute to the emergence of novel or creative humorous texts and genres" (Tsakona and Chovanec 2020:8). Well-established genres appear not to be adequate to convey humorists' meanings and views, so new humorous genres may emerge drawing more or less on previous ones and trying to overcome the latter's 'rigidity' and 'inadequacy.'

By recontextualizing formal or content elements from one text/genre to another, speakers establish traceable connections between texts/genres, and such connections may be repeated in time and across contexts. Hence, they establish what Fairclough (1992) calls intertextual chains, that is, "series of types of texts which are transformationally related to each other in the sense that each member of the series is transformed into one or more of the others in regular and predictable ways" and "for strategic purposes" (Fairclough 1992:130, 133; see also Tsakona 2020b; 2024a:126-149). The analysis of contemporary online humor in such terms has yielded some interesting results as to how intertextually connected humorous and non-humorous texts form intertextual chains enabling the publicization and subsequent evaluation of social events. An example of such a chain comes from Tsakona (2020b:181; 2024a:135):

1. News reports in the media announce specific events.
2. Posts by social media participants humorously comment on the reported events through verbal jokes and/or memes. Some verbal jokes may be further recontextualized into memes.
3. Hashtags join thematically related texts/posts and explicitly mark intertextual connections: social media participants create and use hashtags to bring together humorous (and non-humorous) comments by people who may be strangers to each other.
4. News articles in online newspapers collect humorous posts to further disseminate and comment on the humorous reactions to the events.
5. Further comments and repostings of humorous material take place.

We want to take this line of thought a bit further and shed a different light on such intertextual connections and transformations, where humor is an important ingredient. What we propose here is to perceive humor as a mechanism for the *resemiotization* of social events, playing a significant role in their dissemination and evaluation across diverse audiences. In our view, the synergy between intertextuality (i.e., establishing connections between texts) and humor (i.e., identifying, creating, and/or highlighting

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incongruities) leads to the resemiotization of social events and to the creation of intertextual chains containing more or less different texts/genres.

Coming back to Iedema's (2001, 2003) theorization of resemiotization, it needs to be noted that the semiotic transposition across contexts does not result in the replication of meanings but leads to inevitable semantic (hence semiotic) shifts:

> [R]esemiotization transposes meanings from one semiotic mode into one which is different. Each semiotic will have its own specific (systemic) constraints and affordances. The things we can do with language, for example, can't all be done in visual representation, and vice versa […]. A semiotic mode is therefore hard pressed to provide an unproblematic, transparent, and accurate translation for the meanings from another mode. Transposition between different semiotics inevitably introduces discrepancy, and resemiotization is necessarily a process which produces not exact likenesses, but which represents 'a multi-channel set of directions.' (Iedema 2001:33)

Notably, "[t]his perspective is about historicizing meaning. It asks how, why, and which meanings become recontextualized" (Iedema 2003:40), without however placing particular emphasis on the similarities between the connected texts, but on how "restructuring derives from different expertises and literacies, and [thus] resemiotization opens up different modalities of human experience" (Iedema 2003:48). In other words, the resemiotized products are usually expected to be more or less different from the 'original' or previous texts due to the different affordances of the semiotic mode used each time. Meanings seem to be recreated and re-evaluated during the resemiotization process (see also Christensson 2021; Leppänen et al. 2013; Scollon 2008; Scollon and Scollon 2004; Vladimirou and House 2018). It should be noted here that, when we talk of 'resemiotized products,' we mean the total semiotic outcome of the transposition of forms/texts/signs to new contexts, namely the resulting potential meaning. The said forms/texts/signs can be – and often are – replicated verbatim, for instance, in the case of viral spread of humorous memes, pass-along jokes, etc. Despite the identical forms, the act of transposition to new contexts gives rise to new communicative situations involving new and different participants, and thus results in new meanings. In this sense, some scholars (e.g. Attardo 2024) operate with Laclau's (2000) notion of the *floating signifier*. Less commonly, one may encounter situations where identical meanings are transposed across contexts, taking on new forms and thus operating as *floating signifieds*.

Furthermore, the form/text/genre that is part of an intertextual chain and becomes resemiotized into another form/text/genre may or may not presuppose tracing and being familiar with the previous link of the chain to be understood or interpreted.

For example, some background knowledge about a public event is usually necessary to grasp the point of a meme referring to this event (see among others Archakis and Tsakona this special issue; Mullan this special issue; Shilikhina this special issue), but a television or standup comedy sketch inspired by the same meme may stand on its own and not presuppose familiarity with it. As Mehan remarks,

> texts, generated from a particular event in the sequential process (e.g., a testing encounter), become the basis of the interaction in the next step of the sequence (e.g., a placement committee meeting). These texts become divorced from the social interaction that created them as they move through the system, institutionally isolated from the interactional practices that generated them in the preceding events. (Mehan 1993:246, as cited in Iedema 2001:24-25; see also Iedema 2003:41-42)

In other words, resemiotization concentrates on the processes which result in "socially recognizable and practically meaningful artifacts" (Iedema 2003:50; see also Leppänen et al. 2013; Scollon 2008; Scollon and Scollon 2004; Vladimirou and House 2018:151). This dynamic perspective links to the social-semiotic conception of communicative practices and aligns with van Leeuwen (2005:5), who provides for the recontextualization of semiotic resources to new situations as follows:

> Studying the semiotic potential of a given semiotic resource is studying how that resource has been, is, and can be used for purposes of communication, it is drawing up an inventory of past and present and maybe also future resources and their uses. By nature such inventories are never complete, because they tend to be made for specific purposes.

This procedure also accounts for the possibility of semiotic change when the products of resemiotization become conventionalized within a given community. What was merely instantial and individual may become systemic and collective; the *ad hoc* semiosis characteristic of the higher-order system of resemiotization actually gives way to a more conventional one, thus enriching the lower-order system of semiotization.

Investigating humor as a means of resemiotizing social events (including previous texts) via intertextual allusions thus allows us, among other things, to trace how humorists rely on previous (inter)texts to produce 'new' humorous ones, as well as to map the semiotic processes and the outcomes of doing so. Along these lines, the analyses offered in the papers included in this special issue pay particular attention to the semiotic particularities and details of the data under scrutiny and, most importantly, to their meanings as recreated after the resemiotization of the 'initial' (inter)texts.

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Moreover, the studies included here pay particular attention to the *effects* of resemiotization. Exactly like what happens with intertextuality, the meanings that get recycled and resemiotized from one genre or semiotic mode to another unavoidably convey humorists' (in the present case) perception and evaluation of social events, their own choices about what is important to be resemiotized and what is not, and eventually their communicative goals, which are likely to be different from those of the 'initial' text, typically produced by someone else with some other communicative goals in mind. In other words, the humorous resemiotized products will more or less deviate from the intertexts in terms of content, stance, goals, and actual effects. In broad semiotic terms, while the intertext, which is lifted from the 'original' context, can be seen as a broadly conceived 'signifier', it realizes meaning through the combination of two elements: first, the importation of some of the 'original' meaning transposed or implied from the original communicative situation (i.e. the recipients are likely to infer the original 'signified' of the intertext on the basis of their shared cultural knowledge, etc.); and second, the actual novel meanings arising from the recontextualized use of the intertext (i.e. its the content, stance, goals and actual effects which are associated with the new use – recontextualized and resemiotized).

According to the findings of the studies included in this special issue, some of the main effects of resemiotization via humor appear to be the following:

1. Resemiotization for the creation of humor may blur the boundaries between social events ('reality') and fiction, especially in cases where the humorous product is a work of (popular) art. By creating humorous anachronisms and juxtaposing past and present/future/fictional events, resemiotization incites or even forces its recipients to constantly switch to and fro and to establish incongruous connections which may be entertaining but not necessarily historically accurate (see Brzozowska and Chłopicki, Merkoulova, Valijärvi and Kahn). Thus, new concepts and signs may emerge and become disseminated rather quickly especially in online environments (see also Milner and Wolff 2023; Tsakona 2018).

2. Resemiotization for the creation of humor may lead to the production of ambiguous texts: different recipients may yield different, even opposing interpretations depending on their background knowledge and ideological standpoints, which led them to evoke different scripts (see Archakis and Tsakona, Brock and Willenberg, Brzozowska and Chłopicki, Constantinescu, de Salvador Agra, Perrino). In this sense, humor could be perceived as a floating signifier, since it manifests "results from the unfixity introduced by a plurality of discourses interrupting each other" (Laclau 2000:305; on humor as a *floating signifier*, see also Attardo 2024; Mascha 2010).

3. Resemiotization for the creation of humor may contribute to bonding and community building, provided that its recipients recognize the intertexts and embrace the meanings and values included therein (see Brock and Willenberg, Perrino, Shilikhina, Valijärvi and Kahn,). This may take place even among people who communicate online yet are strangers offline (see also Tsakona 2017a; 2018; 2020b; 2024a).

5. Overview of the special issue

As already mentioned, the aim of this special issue is to explore how humor is produced via the resemiotization of previously existing texts and, in general, social events; and what are the effects of such a resemiotization process: among other things, resemiotization contributes to the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the fictional world created in the humorous texts; the polysemy of humorous discourse; and the establishment of groups on the basis of shared background knowledge and values. In this section, we briefly present each paper's contribution to this main idea developed here, ordering them in terms of thematic affinity.

First, **Inna Merkoulova**'s study titled "A literary character as a humorous meme: A semiotic perspective" meticulously traces the resemiotization of the literary character of Shoggoth from Lovecraft's (2005[1936]) novel *At the Mountains of Madness* to refer to contemporary affairs and conditions. The author analyzes how the character is used to metaphorically represent artificial intelligence (henceforth AI), particularly to visually represent the relationship between humans and AI and the related feelings of fear and shame. The author perceives the character as a floating signifier (see Laclau 2000 in section 4) and discusses its transformations mostly in online environments by internet users working with, or interested in, AI. These transformations emerge from the need to account for people's ambivalent thoughts, feelings, stances, and ideas about the use, ubiquitousness, and potential risks of AI. All this results in humorous and increasingly creative representations and memes circulating in social media or other digital venues.

In "Past and present clashes as a source of humor," **Dorota Brzozowska** and **Władysław Chłopicki** concentrate on how humor contributes to ambiguities stemming from juxtaposing different historical eras. Based on the most successful Polish series *1670* taking place in 17th-century Poland, they investigate the ways humorous incongruities, double meanings, and eventually criticism are produced in dialogs from the series concerning a wide range of topics: class and ethnicity, gender roles, religious cultures, social attitudes, technology, and communication. By constantly switching between the past and the present, the series offers a resemiotized version of past conditions, which goes hand in hand with a critical perspective on contemporary Poland via anachronisms and comparisons, which seem to be more or less positively

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received by the viewers. Thus, the authors convincingly argue that the series belongs to the *mockumentary* genre, which parodies documentaries (Lebow 2006), and highlights unexpected similarities and differences between distant historical eras.

Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi and **Lily Kahn**, in their paper titled "A semiotic analysis of the humor in K-drama memes," explore the humorous resemiotization of Korean dramas, which have been particularly popular among young people worldwide. The authors identify three main semiotic mechanisms for creating humor therein: meme templates, blending, and benign violation. They also explore the social and psychological functions of such humorous texts: their analysis shows that the memes are exchanged among Korean drama fans in their attempt to signify belonging in the same group of people sharing interests and experiences related to the dramas. The memes also appear to assist fans in expressing the emotions caused by watching Korean dramas: such emotions may be related to why they enjoy watching the dramas or even to how fans perceive their own lives after watching the stories and characters in the dramas. An interesting blending of real life and fiction thus occurs in such humor.

Saleta de Salvador Agra's study on "Counterspeech humor for discursive justice" is premised on the thesis that the ambiguity of humor and laughter is context-dependent. The author elaborates on the idea that humor and laughter can be not only part of a harmful, denigrating message, but also a response to it offered by the offended party. She explains how what she calls *counterspeech humor* allows its producer to reenter an interaction from which s/he has previously been excluded, as well as to oppose and challenge discriminatory and oppressive meanings conveyed via humor. The author identifies three strategies involved in counterspeech humor: resignifying parody, bending irony, and intentionally blocking laughter. Even though humor is often employed as an aggressive (more or less playful) tool against minoritized groups, de Salvador Agra maintains that it can be resemiotized to have the opposite effects: it could be used to fight against *discursive injustice* (Kukla 2014) and *linguistic toxicity* (Tirrell 2018).

In her study on "Nineteenth-century Romanian cartoons on freedom of expression," **Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu** analyzes cartoons protesting censorship, which use very common and, at the same time, creative tropes, such as metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche, to visually represent (in fact, resemiotize) censors and their activities. Such visual representations appear to gradually become conventionalized and also to be related to verbal expressions bearing similar meanings, thus underscoring the similarities between different semiotic modes. The author convincingly argues that the satirical humor of such cartoons aims to denounce and, simultaneously, bypass attempts at restraining the freedom of the press, which seems to be as old as the press itself. The tropes employed for the humorous resemiotization constitute ways of indirectly referring to forbidden topics through deliberately produced ambiguities and hidden-in-plain-sight connotations, which could be retrieved by considering the sociopolitical and linguacultural context of cartoon creation and consumption.

In "Humorous self-censorship strategies on YouTube: Semiotic structure and social-semiotic functions," **Alexander Brock** and **Merle Willenberg** focus on the less explored topic of humor and self-censorship. Their study shows how self-censorship may lead to humorous incongruity and ambiguity, which are more often than not easily resolved by participants and reveal speakers' intention not only to avoid external censorship, but also to create a sense of belonging via shared semiotic resources and shared laughter. The analysis of a corpus of YouTube commentary videos and the corresponding, resemiotizing comments demonstrates that humorous incongruities stem from the unconventional combinations of semiotic resources to disguise taboo, offensive, or improper expressions as well as from the failure of such combinations to hide the taboo, offensive, or improper meanings. Thus, self-censorship results in ambiguities mostly perceived as entertaining by interlocutors: they end up playing with the boundaries between what is accepted and what can be potentially censored by the administrators of the medium.

Argiris Archakis and **Villy Tsakona**'s study titled "'Who to save?': Towards a social critique of antiracist (?) humorous criticism" discusses how the resemiotization of two disastrous, tragic events into humorous memes yields opposing interpretations. Even though *prima facie* the intention of the meme creators appears to be to criticize common, naturalized racist practices concerning the exclusion of migrants attempting to enter the European Union, the memes could simultaneously be interpreted as racist, as they take for granted everyday racist practices such as guarding the borders and controlling who will be accepted in the European Union and who will not. Such an ambiguity, the authors suggest, is typical of *liquid racism* (Archakis and Tsakona 2024; Weaver 2016), namely a form of racism occurring in contemporary nation-states and emerging from the coexistence of racist and antiracist values and views in the same (con)texts.

Sabina Perrino's paper on "The semiotics of *barzellette* in Veneto, Northern Italy" concentrates on the ambiguity created in humorous discourse via code-switching and heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981). The author explains in detail how the oral humorous genre of Italian *barzellette* allows for the resemiotization and eventual entrenchment of racist stereotypes among people who belong to the same community and communicate through the same dialect. In such cases, humorists have the opportunity to publicly voice inadmissible and improper ideas and values (here, racist ones) and to render each other complicit in denigrating practices, since resisting them would constitute a problem in interaction and would damage the ingroup identity. Reminding us of Janks' (2010:61) critical observation that "texts have designs on us" as "[t]hey entice us into their way of seeing and understanding the world," the text under scrutiny positions the audience as racists or at least as tolerant of racism: it enacts exclusionary stances among interactants. Simultaneously, it involves an ambiguity as it is interpreted as harmless entertainment among intimates.

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Kerry Mullan's paper "#staystrongmelbs: Collective identity unleashed by an earthquake" sheds light on the resemiotization process of a public event and the ambiguities surrounding its consequences and perceptions by social media participants. Mullan's analysis underlines the potential of humor to offer serious sociopolitical commentary on trivial issues and, vice versa, to trivialize issues that are (or could be) more or less significant. The resemiotization of news reports about a (rare) earthquake that occurred in Australia results in inside jokes and cryptic instances of humor that can be easily understood only by the members of a specific community. The case study at hand also confirms that the humorous texts emerging from the resemiotization a single event and forming a particular humor cycle can fall into different categories, thus forming different subcycles (cf. Chovanec and Tsakona 2023; Divita 2022; Tsakona 2024b) depending on the topics they refer to – in the present case, political humor, pandemic humor, and mock disaster humor.

Last but not least, in her study on the "Semiotic resources in multimodal sociopolitical irony," **Ksenia Shilikhina** focuses on how ironical meanings are conveyed in political memes expressing criticism and opposition to Putin's regime and propaganda in contemporary Russia. After offering a comprehensive and critical overview of recent studies in the genre of internet memes, Shilikhina proceeds with a semiotic analysis demonstrating how irony is produced via the juxtaposition of incongruous images in monomodal political memes or via the synergy of incongruous verbal and visual elements in multimodal political memes. Her findings suggest that irony constitutes an important and powerful tool in the hands of the opposition to express ideas that highlight the absurdity and inappropriateness of certain events and situations in Russia nowadays. The ironic effect is achieved through resemiotized images or catch-phrases which establish intertextual allusions to well-known political statements or events as well as to easily recognizable works of popular culture, such as films and television shows.

6. Future directions

The exploration of the interface between humor studies and semiotics reveals a surprisingly rich area for further research. Due to lack of space and the immense breadth of the field, we can only scratch the surface of some of these phenomena in this text, limiting ourselves to outlining some general directions.

We expect that scholars interested in the semiotics of humor will move towards a theoretical analysis of the relationship between the processes of semiotization and resemiotization, particularly in relation to the emergence of new signs and their gradual acceptance and conventionalization in the community, i.e. the development and strengthening of new aspects of meaning (signifieds) and the weakening and disappearance of the older aspects of meaning. Thus, attention will need to be paid to the

different degrees of salience between potential multiple signifieds of specific signifiers (texts, genres, etc.) and, in general, to how the higher-order semiotic system (resemiotization) affects the lower-order system (semiotization). In this context, it would also be interesting to examine how humorous incongruities may be resemiotized and even conventionalized into 'serious' meanings – and vice versa.

The semiotic analyses of humorous discourse allow us to trace the relativization of the nature of the sign that arises from the intentional exploitation of the switch of signifieds as a result of the incongruity-resolution mechanism, script oppositions, and semantic reversals that underlie the creation of humor (see section 3). Future research will undoubtedly continue to probe the dynamic relation and interplay between the verbal and the visual modes (cf. Yus 2021) and their complementary or completing roles in constructing meaning. This is particularly acute at a time when new forms of multimodal humor are developing very fast (Attardo 2023; Dynel and Chovanec 2021; Laineste and Shilikhina 2024; Vásquez 2019; Yus 2023). Most importantly, the sociolinguistic perspective on such processes could bring to the surface the diverse identities speakers appear to construct for themselves or others during the resemiotization process (see Christensson 2021; Mullan, this special issue; Perrino, this special issue).

Methodologically, we can see much potential in the application of existing approaches from various branches of pragmatics, as the linguistic discipline *par excellence* dealing with the construction of meaning on the level of interpersonal interactions. In this field, relevance theory (cf. Yus 2016; 2023; Zuo 2020) promises to bring some thought-provoking findings and contribute to our understanding of how users' (conventional) expectations operate and what inferential processes the recipients of humor draw on, particularly in relation to new, creative, or unexpected resemiotizations of signs, texts, genres and social events.

Until then, we do hope that the papers and the findings included in this special issue are recontextualized beyond our computers and resemiotized so as to inspire and contribute to more research in the interface of semiotics and humor studies.

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