The semiotics of *barzellette* in Veneto, Northern Italy

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ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: **11**

Issue: **01**

Summer **2025**

ISSN: **2459-2943**

DOI: **10.18680/hss.2025.0009**

Pages: **179-200**

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KEYWORDS:

Codeswitching

Joke-telling

Narrative

Northern Italy

Scales

Short story

Veneto

ABSTRACT

In Italy, *barzellette*, or 'short funny stories', are joke-telling practices that speakers perform in diverse social events with large or small groups of friends, relatives, or colleagues. In Northern Italy, where a strong anti-immigration platform has been implemented by the influential far-right political party *Lega Nord* ('Northern League'), *barzellette* are often performed to talk about migrants and migration issues. In this article, after a brief historical overview of this genre, which has deep roots in the Italian fifteenth and sixteenth-century literary ballads, I examine the semiotics of multilingual play in race-based humor through a linguistic anthropological analysis of one *barzelletta* that I video-recorded in 2019. I show how speakers of Venetian, the local language of the Northeastern Italian region of Veneto, engage in these short storytelling practices to mock migrants, using approaches that purport to obscure their racist remarks in their local code. Ultimately, I examine how racializing discourses emerge in *barzellette* through participants' semiotic and scalar enactments and how racist ideologies thus get solidified in Italy.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **11:**01**:**2025
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2025.0009 | **punctum.gr**

1. Humoristic stories in Italy

> [H]umor needs above all an intimacy of style, which we [i.e. writers] have always resisted by [our] preoccupation over form and by all the rhetorical questions around [issues of] language. Humor needs the most vivacious, free, spontaneous, and immediate movement of language – a movement that can be achieved only when form creates itself anew every time. […] Movement is only in living language and in form that creates itself. And humor that cannot be without it [i.e., this movement] (both in its broad sense and in its proper sense), [we] will find it – I repeat – in the dialectal expressions, in macaronic poetry, and in the writers who rebelled against Rhetoric[1].
>
> (Pirandello 1920:68)

In 1908, in his well-known essay entitled *L'umorismo* ('humor'), Pirandello emphasized the need for an *intimate* and free style for written humorous stories to be effective. In his view, writers need to free themselves from their preoccupation to follow the aesthetic rules of form, and should instead follow "the most vivacious, free, spontaneous, and immediate movement of language"[2] (Pirandello 1920:68). Humor, continues Pirandello (1920:68), cannot exist without this movement that is found in "living language," including "dialectal ways of speaking" (*espressioni dialettali*). Pirandello's stance against rhetorical issues powerfully emerged from his reflections on past and present literary works, so that he could find a justification for the use of humor in his dramas, novels, and short stories. The co-presence of multiple languages or ways of speaking was also noted by Bakhtin (1981) in his analysis of a wide range of novels. Bakhtin (1981) coined the term *heteroglossia* to describe this co-existence of languages and ways of speaking, a concept that has seen a prolific application across many disciplines (Jaffe et al. 2015). Short humoristic stories, such as jokes, which were widely circulated in written form in the nineteenth century, are also examples of how multiple languages are used together, following a heteroglossic model.

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[1] All translations from standard Italian and Venetan to English are mine unless otherwise stated.
Original Italian version: "[…] [L]'umorismo ha soprattutto bisogno d'intimità di stile, la quale fu sempre da noi ostacolata dalla preoccupazione della forma, da tutte quelle questioni retoriche che si fecero sempre da noi intorno alla lingua. L'umorismo ha bisogno del più vivace, libero, spontaneo e immediato movimento della lingua, movimento che si può avere sol quando la forma a volta a volta si crea. […] Il movimento è nella lingua viva e nella forma che si crea. E l'umorismo che non può farne a meno (sia nel senso largo, sia nel suo proprio senso), lo troveremo— ripeto—nelle espressioni dialettali, nella poesia macaronica e negli scrittori ribelli alla retorica" (Pirandello 1920:68).

[2] Original Italian version: "[il] più vivace, libero, spontaneo e immediato movimento della lingua" (Pirandello 1920:68).

In Italy, *barzellette*,[3] or 'short funny stories', have been part of a literary genre that originated in old ballads and other literary texts. Today, *barzellette*, as short stories (Georgakopoulou 2007; Mizzau 2005), widely circulate both in written and oral form, including short texts and videos that are recontextualized (Bauman 1977) across virtual platforms at unparalleled speeds. More specifically, *barzellette* about migrants and migration issues have become very popular across Italy over the last two decades. For example, jokes about classrooms with more students with 'non-Italian' names have been widely circulating on digital platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp (Perrino 2020a). In addition to being represented negatively in the Italian media daily (Montali et al. 2013), many migrants and Italian citizens of migrant descent have experienced discrimination and derision at various scales through joke-telling performances.

Given the generalized *unmarkedness* of racist remarks in Italy (Pagliai 2011; Perrino 2018b; 2020a; 2020b), these joke-telling events are not unusual. In her analysis of narratives about migrants in the Italian region of Tuscany, for example, Pagliai (2011:E96) reminds us that racism is not an individual concern, but rather "[i]t is produced in interaction." As she demonstrates through her detailed analysis of racialized stories, many cases of racializing discourses are "commonsensical and unmarked," not only due to the strong influence of the mass media and the political parties that make racism taken for granted, but also because speakers often do not react to such discourses to save face (Pagliai 2011:E97).[4] It would be interactionally problematic to show disapproval of these jokes or try to consider them not funny at all. More generally, joking practices subtly force the audience members, and thus make them complicit, to play along and laugh (Sacks 1974).[5]

In this article, I examine how short, humorous stories, or *barzellette*, in Northern Italy, are sometimes performed to racialize certain migrant groups, especially the so-called *extracomunitari*, and how these stories emerge in multilingual, heteroglossic communities of practice. More specifically, how do right-wing supporters perform *barzellette*? How and why do they code-switch from standard Italian to Venetian, their local language, and vice versa? I thus show how *barzellette* tellers not only perform *covert racism* (Hill 2008), but they might also position their audiences as complicit as their short,

[3] In standard Italian, *barzelletta* is the feminine singular noun, while *barzellette* is the feminine plural noun. In this article, I use both options depending on the number they index.

[4] Saving face is so much part of the Italian culture that there is even an expression for it, *fare bella figura* (lit. 'to look oneself beautiful'), as Pagliai (2011) emphasized. Positive face, or the desire to give a good impression or to be liked, and *negative face*, or the emphasis of being more private or not to impose on others, were classically studied by Brown and Levinson (1987) within their theories on politeness. Since the 1980s, however, these theories have been variously developed and criticized since they revolve around some problematic universal claims, oversimplified models of social interaction, and potential biases (e.g. Hammood 2016).

[5] Alongside widespread anti-immigrant sentiment in Italy, there have been circulating ideological frameworks about certain groups of migrants, such as the 'Arabs' and the 'Africans,' in addition to the 'Chinese.' These ideologies are frequently applied to Italian citizens of migrant descent, too, thus keeping the "forever foreignness" stereotype (Balibar 2017) as a marker persistently attached to these individuals (Perrino 2024).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **11:**01:2025
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2025.0009 | **punctum.gr**

funny stories unfold. Through these mocking practices, Venetians (individuals living in the Veneto region) semiotically model the jokes' concealment or containment—as if limiting their jokes' accessibility and potential offensiveness to an imagined audience of Italian-speaking migrants by choosing Venetian over the standard language.

In his research with Hindi-English bilingual speakers, Gumperz (1976; 1978; 1982) discovered that the direction of a code-switch provides important clues about utterances. In his words, "what at the societal level are seen as norms of language usage or symbolic affirmations of ethnic boundaries are transformed here and built upon in conversation to affect the interpretation of speakers' intent and determine effectiveness in communication" (Gumperz 1976:39-40). Thus, for Gumperz, code choice between the they code (or the code of the "threat" language, or, in this case standard Italian, the language of the Italian State) and the we code (or the code indexing more intimate relationships, in this case Venetan) is an approach that can determine and affect the interpretation of an utterance. However, in these cases, the boundaries between the *we*/*they* codes are less categorical and more fluid and heterogeneous (Perrino and Wortham 2022).

Intimacies of exclusion (Perrino 2018b; 2020a) are thus co-constructed in interaction during these joke-telling events. While *barzellette* in the Veneto region can be delivered in standard Italian, many speakers use Venetan as a resource for humorous effects. In this way, they metapragmatically (Kramer 2011; Silverstein 1993; Tsakona 2024) address their jokes to particular audience members who are assumed to be fluent in the code, while they might ideologically exclude other audience members. That is how Northern Italian joke-tellers enact exclusionary stances by metapragmatically dismissing migrants and other Italian citizens of migrant descent from the short stories and from their performances (Perrino 2018b; 2020a). Furthermore, how do Northern Italian joke-tellers enact their individual and collective, intimate identities and exclusionary intimacies through their scalar moves (Koven, Kramer, and Perrino 2024; Perrino 2024) while they deliver their jokes around migration issues? How are racialized ideologies co-constructed in these interactional events, and how are they quickly disseminated? After a short description of the political landscape in Italy, an overview of some relevant literature on jokes as narrative practices, and a concise historical and literary background of Italian *barzellette*, I turn to the analysis of one *barzelletta*, drawn from my corpus data.

2. The *Lega* Nord ('Northern League') and its xenophobic politics

One of Italy's most prominent political parties is the *Lega Nord* ('Northern League'), which has been part of the Italian Government for decades. This party has become very successful, especially for its anti-immigrant and xenophobic agenda. When it

was first created in the 1970s, however, it was just a small movement supporting the supremacy of the North with respect to the South of Italy (Giordano 2004:64). Very rapidly, the *Lega* developed into a national political party with an agenda focused on opposing the entrance of migrants in Italy and on expatriating the undocumented ones already residing in the country. The *Lega*'s chauvinistic stances have increased tremendously in recent years across Italy, thus promoting ideologies about Italianness, authenticity, and national identity. The *Lega*'s policies have been directed against the so-called *extracomunitari* (masculine, plural), one of the many derogatory terms used across Italy. This term was first used in Italy in the 1980s to indicate the legal status of migrants in Italy – as people who are not citizens of the European Union (the European Union was once called *Comunità Europea*, 'European Community,' hence *extra-comunitario*, 'from outside the European Community'). More recently, it has been used to refer to undocumented migrants across Italy. Even though its negative connotations are evident, this term is still widely used to refer to migrants from developing countries, especially Africa, South Asia, Eastern Europe, and, more recently, the Middle East. Italian politicians, journalists, writers, and even academics commonly use this term to describe migrants from these countries (Perrino 2020a).

Furthermore, these nationalistic policies have often coincided with language revitalization proposals across Italy. The *Lega* has promoted many initiatives to revalorize local languages, traditions, and historical memories. For example, in many Italian towns and villages, one can see signs and inscriptions in standard Italian and the local language(s). While these revitalization initiatives are not exclusively connected to the opposition of migrants, since they also follow a more globalized trend focused on keeping minority languages and traditions alive, the timing of these efforts happening at moments of high migratory movements towards Italy cannot be underestimated (Perrino 2015; 2018a; 2018b).[6] Many Northern Italians have explicitly indicated their opposition to migration by using their local code in their presence and at a more general, self-protective scale. One of my research participants, for example, said the following during an informal conversation with me: "I am all for the *Lega* and its politics because [we] are tired of these *extracomunitari* in our streets, trying to sell us their junk, and stealing from our houses."[7] Similar points have emerged in many stories and interviews I collected while interacting with Northern Italians (2003-2024).

[6] For more research on the intricate relationship between anti-immigrant politics and language revitalization initiatives in Northern Italy, see Perrino (2018a; 2020a).

[7] Original Italian version: "sono tutto per la Lega and la sua politica perché siamo davvero stanchi di questi extracomunitari nelle nostre strade, che cercano di venderci le loro porcherie e che rubano dalle nostre case."

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **11:01:2025**
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2025.0009 | **punctum.gr**

3. Jokes as narrative practices

Joke-telling performances can help create and solidify ideologies *through* and *at* various scales. This is true for cases of mocking practices (Attardo 1994; 2010; 2020; Chłopicki 2017; Dundes 1987; Perrino 2015), ritualized "joking relations" between kin (Handelman and Kapferer 1972; Radcliffe-Brown 1940), short funny stories, and other typologies of jokes, since they can metapragmatically comment on an event, fact, or, at a larger scale, on a broader political and sociocultural issue (Perrino 2015; Tsakona 2011; 2020). Through attentive analyses of the interactional, performative, and discursive aspects of joke-telling practices, linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have indeed considered jokes within broader social and cultural contexts and beyond the immediate interactions in which they are performed (Kramer 2011; Perrino 2015; Sacks 1974; Sherzer 2002; Tsakona 2011; Tsakona and Chovanec 2018) rather than as isolated or decontextualized acts or texts. In this respect, a careful analysis needs to focus not only on the content of the joke (or its *denotational* text), but also on the surrounding context, the recipients, and the emerging interactional dynamics (or *interactional text*). This is also true for stand-up comedies. As Tsakona (2020:116) writes on this topic,

> [t]he fact that research has often concentrated on the text produced by the stand–up comedian or the narrator of the oral anecdote does not necessarily mean that audience reactions and contributions are not equally (if not more, sometimes) important for the unfolding of discourse and the continuation of the interaction in real time.

The performativity of joke-telling, which includes its capacity to create sociability, sharedness, and a range of other pragmatic effects, has been studied across the humanities and the social sciences. While anthropological research has often addressed humor as embedded in the sociocultural practices under study (Oring 1992; 2003; 2008), linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have studied more systematically the performative and semiotic qualities of joke-telling rather than, for example, their apparent versus opaque meanings *per se* – this being one way of theorizing how jokes 'work.' This has resulted in descriptions of diverse pragmatic functions of joke-telling in various sociocultural contexts. In his research on Zulu gospel choir participants in South Africa, for example, Black (2012) demonstrated that joke-telling practices helped individuals (co)construct solidarity and support around the HIV / AIDS stigma. Joking moments are key to also define and reinforce participants' identities (Managan 2012; Perrino 2015), as Bucholtz et al. (2011) illustrated in their work on *entextualized humor.* In this case, students interactively enact and reinforce their "scientific" identities by performing certain formulaic and predictable jokes.

Joke-telling performances are idiosyncratic speech events since there are some expected remarks, such as punchlines and funny moments. This is why they are considered keyed performances. In this light, Bauman and Briggs (1990) contended that all performances are "keyed," in the sense that listeners need to be able to recognize certain aspects of the performance to fully understand and appreciate it (Chun 2004). Some sociocultural, shared knowledge (Gumperz 1982) is necessary to know that a specific type of performance is taking place. If the audience members are unfamiliar with the sociocultural patterns incorporated in the joking performance, such as mocking configurations, the performance might not be successful. In exploring participation frameworks, Goffman (1974) long ago referred to *keyed events* through his theory of *frames* as ways to better appreciate that a performance is taking place. Thus, joke-telling events are complex, keyed performances since they follow a particular structure in which a final punchline is expected and in which the audience members are supposed to laugh. Along these lines, as Chovanec and Tsakona (2018:10, emphasis in original) contend,

> *[r]eactions* to humorous discourse are significant since they reveal whether or not the audience understood the intended humorous message, what was their exact interpretation of it (which may more or less deviate from what the speaker initially intended), and whether they evaluate it positively (e.g. they like/agree with it) or negatively (e.g. they do not like/agree with it).

There are many types of audience reactions, from non-verbal ones (such as smiling, gestures, facial expressions, and applause) and verbal ones (such as loud laughter, minimal responses, and verbal statements). In this sense, short funny stories, such as Italian *barzellette*, make sense only if considered within their surrounding context.

As De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012:61) write, "stories are not told in a vacuum but by tellers to audiences in specific settings and for specific purposes, [and thus] the mechanisms through which performers contextualize meanings for their audience come to the forefront." Stories, including joke-telling practices, are thus enacted in context, and their presuppositions about and effects on those contexts are central to their meaning (Perrino and Wortham 2022). Therefore, humoristic narratives need to be appreciated not only for their content or plot but also for their interactional import (Tsakona and Chovanec 2018). Joke-telling practices are indeed particular types of short stories that need to be studied as daily interactional events, as they are embedded in their sociocultural surroundings (Perrino 2015; Tsakona and Chovanec 2018). This is true for longer narratives as well.

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ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2025.0009 | **punctum.gr**

In the last two decades, indeed, narrative studies have experienced a significant shift from a text-oriented to a practice-oriented approach (De Fina 2013; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012; Ochs and Capps 2001; Schiffrin 1996; Schiffrin, De Fina, and Nylund 2010). Since what has been called "the narrative turn" in the 1980s, linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have studied narratives as practices embedded in their sociocultural contexts, and not as decontextualized texts (Bauman 1977; 1986). Thus, narratives, such as joke-telling performances, need to be analyzed not only for their content, or *denotational* text, but also for their role in the storytelling event or the *interactional text* (Perrino 2015; Silverstein 1998; Wortham 2000, 2001). While the denotational text describes the reference and predication about "states of affairs" described in the story, including its central themes, the interactional text refers to the interactional dynamics between the storyteller and the other speech participants (Perrino 2015; 2019a; Perrino and Wortham 2022; Silverstein 1998; Wortham 2000; 2001). In terms of the denotational text of the joke-telling practices, even when it seems apparent, their laughability is felt to derive from their hidden, equivocal sense. Whether the joke's climax is constructed around lexical, morphological, phonological, or other linguistic ambiguity, the way to fully appreciate these joking moments is when their incongruity (Attardo 2020), or opaqueness, is resolved or clarified (Pepicello and Wisberg 1983).

In this vein, speech participants always create relationships between denotational texts and storytelling events, or, as Jakobson (1957) referred to them, *narrated* and *narrating* events. In other words, what stories communicate as their denotational content and what stories do in the storytelling event depend on each other. This interdependence has been studied in various settings, such as interviews (De Fina and Perrino 2011; Perrino 2011; Wortham et al. 2011), classrooms (Rymes 2008; Wortham 2001; 2006), medical and therapy settings (Ainsworth-Vaughn 1998), and the digital realm (De Fina 2016; De Fina and Toscano-Gore 2017; De Fina and Perrino 2019; Koven and Simões Marques 2015; Page 2011; 2015; Perrino 2019b; Tsakona 2024). By examining these interconnections in many of these joke-telling practices, I have studied the emerging *exclusionary stances* that narrators enact at various scales, vis-à-vis migrants and migration issues, while creating intimate spaces of inclusion for Venetians. Moreover, these stances are imagined to be widely shared as narrators establish collective identities and camaraderie with other speech participants (Nichols and Wortham 2018; Perrino and Wortham 2022; Van De Mieroop 2015). The co-construction of these intimate and collective identities also needs to be considered as an effect of the Italian political climate that has supported similar anti-migrant ideologies for many years (see section 2). In this sense, some participants would express their frustration *vis-à-vis* the political situation in Italy by simply engaging in joke-telling performances, as my example shows.

4. Joke-telling practices in Northern Italy: *Barzellette*

In standard Italian, the term *barzellette* (plural, feminine) refers to 'short funny stories.' However, two other terms describe joke-telling practices: 1) *scherzo* (singular, masculine) is the general term for 'joke,' in the sense of 'prank' or 'trick'; 2) *battuta* (singular, feminine) is a short joke, an unexpected reaction to some conversational topic. While *scherzi* and *battute* can happen anytime in conversation, since they are short and do not require much time for their delivery, *barzellette* follow the structure of short stories and usually have intense moments and a punchline at their end. Historically, *barzellette* emerged as literary ballads or poems in the 15th century in Naples, Southern Italy (Pèrcopo 1893). Today, *barzellette* covers various topics, from political issues to regionalized stereotypes. Migrants and Italian citizens of migrant descent have been targets of these joke-telling practices as well, as my example shows.

During my research in Northern Italy, I audio- and video-recorded many *barzellette*[8] in diverse settings. More specifically, several joke-tellers performed *barzellette* in the Veneto region while codeswitching from standard Italian to Venetian. As research on codeswitching has emphasized (Auer 1999; 2000a; Bailey 2000b; 2007; Gal 1989; Gumperz 1982; Heller 1988; Perrino 2020a; Woolard 1995), this practice can accomplish multiple, discursive functions. In Veneto, for example, joke-tellers frequently shift from standard Italian to Venetian at particular moments during their short stories, mainly when they utter problematic, racialized remarks. In Northern Italy, and in Italy more generally, joke-tellers perform racialized *barzellette* in various sociocultural situations such as public and political discourse (Jacobs-Huey 2006; Perrino 2015), formal and informal conversations, mealtimes, and other social occasions. In her research on junk, or mock, Spanish, Hill (2008:41) argued that speakers often engage in "covert racist discourse," which is less evident than uttering problematic, racist slurs. In this sense, humorous narratives have also been vehicles of what has been defined as *liquid racism* (Archakis 2022; Giaxoglou and Spilioti 2024; Tsakona, Karachaliou, and Archakis 2020).

On the ambivalence of joke-telling practices, Dickinson (2007) examines bivalency and speech play in multilingual communities in the Czech Republic. She describes how narrators assert their narrative authority using these bivalent senses in their jokes. Furthermore, Dickinson (2007:236) contends that the stories she collected amongst migrants demonstrate that interactions between different groups serve "as icons for ethnic and economic power relations." In these joke-telling practices, Czechs semiotically emerge as rich and bright; Ukrainians come across as not very smart, but generous and with good intentions; and, finally, Russians are seen as mostly gangsters. Analogously, in many of the *barzellette* that I collected, migrants become the main protagonists of the

[8] For more research on, and analyses of, barzellette, see Mizzau (2005) and Perrino (2015; 2018b).

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ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2025.0009 | **punctum.gr**

jokes, and they are portrayed as clumsy, inappropriate, and unintelligent. In this sense, Italian joke-tellers seem to not only enact exclusionary stances vis-à-vis migrants or issues around migration, but they also feed the already circulating racist ideologies in the process (Perrino 2020a). In the next section, I analyze a *barzelletta* as an example of how these racializing patterns are unmarked in this society.

4.1. *Extracomunitari* in Venezia ('Venice') [9]

The following *barzelletta* was video-recorded [10] during a conversation over coffee in Venice, Northern Italy, in the summer of 2019. A woman in her fifties, whom I named Daniela,[11] recounted this short story while sipping coffee and savoring Venetian cookies in a café in a well-known town square. Since Venice attracts many tourists all year long, street sellers often belong to various migrant groups and are described as *extracomunitari* by many Italians, as I mentioned earlier. Besides the storyteller, seven participants (including myself) in this interaction were fully fluent in standard Italian and Venetian. The *barzelletta* went as follows:

***Extracomunitari* in Venezia (Venice)** [12]
Joke-Teller: Daniela

	Original Standard Italian and *Venetan*	**English Translation**
1.	un rumeno, un cinese e un ***venessian*** si trovano in un caffè a bere qualcosa insieme	a Romanian [man],[13] a Chinese [man] and a ***Venetian man*** [from Venice] meet in a café to drink something together
2.	e quindi ***el*** rumeno… ***el*** beve ***el so capusin***	and so ***the*** Romanian [man]… ***he*** drinks ***his cappuccino***
3.	e all'improvviso lancia la tazza e il piattino di porcellana per terra	and all of a sudden [he] throws the porcelain cup and saucer on the floor
4.	impugna una pistola [gesture of grabbing a gun]	[he] grabs a gun [gesture of grabbing a gun]
5.	e spara colpendo la tazza e il piattino per terra	and [he] shoots and hits the cup and the saucer on the floor

[9] Venezia ('Venice') is the main town of the Veneto region, in Northeastern Italy.
[10] All my research projects received approval for audio- and video-recording from the Institutional Review Board (IRB).
[11] In this article, I use pseudonyms to protect my research participants' identity and privacy.
[12] See transcription conventions in the Appendix.
[13] Despite the fact that Romania has been part of the European Union since 2007, racializing stances against Romanians have continued to surface in Italy.

6.	*e poi* ***el dise***	*and then* ***he says***
7.	'in Romania la porcellana è più bella e valorosa	'in Romania porcelain is more beautiful and valuable.
8.	questa veneziana non vale niente'	this one [i.e., the one on the floor] from Venice is not worth anything'
9.	il cinese @@@ che ***iera scioca'*** dell'azione dell'amico rumeno::: @@@	the Chinese [man] @@@ who ***was shocked*** by his Romanian friend's action @@@
10.	***el*** *beve* ***a so tassa de te'***	***he*** *drinks* ***his cup of tea***
11.	lancia la sua tazzina con il piattino in aria [gesture of launching cup and saucer]	[he] launches his cup with the saucer in the air
12.	tira fuori la pistola [gesture of taking out a gun from pocket]	[gesture of launching cup and saucer] [he] takes out the gun
13.	spara rompendo la tazza con il piattino ancora in volo [gesture of shooting in the air] ***e::: l dise***	[gesture of taking out a gun from pocket] [he] shoots and breaks the cup and the saucer still in the air [gesture of shooting in the air] ***he::: says***
14.	'in Cina abbiamo così tanta porcellana di qualità ottima	'in China [we] have so much porcelain of an excellent quality
15.	che non abbiamo bisogno di quella veneziana'@@@@	that [we] don't need the Venetian one [i.e., porcelain]'@@@@
16.	***eee::l venessian*** *fa finta* ***de*** *niente*	***the:: man from Venice*** *pretends* ***that*** nothing happened
17.	***alsa a tassa de*** *caffè*	[he] ***raises his cup of*** *coffee*
18.	***e a beve*** *con molto* ***piaser***	***and [he] drinks it*** *with a lot of* ***pleasure***
19.	***el lancia a so tassa*** *in aria*	***he launches his cup*** *in the air*
20.	*prende* ***el fusil*** *da caccia*	*[he] grabs* ***the*** *hunting* ***shotgun***
21.	***e el*** *spara al romeno e al cinese*	***and he*** *shoots the Romanian* [man] *and the Chinese* [man]
22.	***el va fora*** *dal caffè*	***he leaves*** *the café*
23.	e ***el dise***	and ***he says***
24.	*'a* ***Venessia ghe ze*** *talmente* *tanti extracomunitari*	*'in* ***Venice there are*** *so many extracomunitari* [i.e., migrants from non-Western countries]
25.	*che* ***no gavemo*** *bisogno* ***de romeni*** *e* ***de*** *cinesi'* @@@@@@@@@@@	*that* [we] ***don't*** *need* ***Romanians*** *and Chinese'* @@@@@@@@@@@
	[laughing and applauding from the audience]	[laughing and applauding from the audience]

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **11:**01**:**2025
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2025.0009 | **punctum.gr**

This *barzelletta* shows how the joke-teller switched back and forth from standard Italian to Venetian at specific moments. In line 16, for example, Daniela switches to Venetian when she describes the man's actions from Venice. Throughout the joke-telling event, she used Venetian and bivalent forms (Woolard 1998) – utterances that could be both in Venetian and standard Italian. The fact that the narrator spoke more in Venetian than in standard Italian from line 16 until the end of the joke illustrates her attempt to entice more of the audience who were expected to know the local language.

The storyteller scaled up when she shifted to standard Italian in enacting the reported speech of the two migrants featured in her *barzelletta*, the Romanian man and the Chinese man[14] in lines 7-8 and 14-15. This scalar shift unveiled how the joke-teller might have felt about the two migrants: her *exclusionary* stances started taking shape when she described the Venetian man until the end of the joke when she delivered her punchline. In lines 16-25, the *barzellette* teller voiced the man from Venice by using more Venetian than standard Italian. The reported speech of the voiced man is indeed the joke's punchline (lines 24-25). This confirmed the identity of the quoted speaker as Venetan, established a presumed solidarity with other Venetans, and also metapragmatically veiled the joke's problematic lines from potential, or imaginary, non-speakers of Venetian, including migrants and Italians from different regions. In this *barzelletta*, the man from Venice, shockingly, took out his shotgun and eliminated the two migrants, saying that "*in Venice* ***there are*** *so many extracomunitari that [we]* ***don't*** *need* ***Romanians*** *and* ***Chinese***." As the above transcript indicates, Daniela's punchline is embraced by the audience's laughing and applauding moments. Yet, the joke-teller used laughter in other instances of her telling, precisely in lines 9, 15, and 25, thus prompting the other speech participants to follow her interactional moves. In this way, the joke-teller engaged in *upscaling* and *downscaling* practices (Flowers 2021; Perrino 2024) through the lines of her *barzelletta*.

Scaling practices strongly emerge in this joke-telling performance. First, Daniela scaled down to her local language, Venetian, and thus supposedly created an *intimate* space with the other participants. Individuals can thus distance themselves or become more intimate with other co-present or imaginary speech participants through their scalar moves, and this often emerges in their storytelling practices, including short stories like *barzellette*. As Carr and Fisher (2016:136) write,

[14] Residents of Chinese background constitute the most numerous non-EU ethnic minority in Italy (Zhang 2019). When they first arrive in Italy, these individuals usually have the possibility to work in small businesses such as Chinese restaurants and small cafés. They can thus rely on an initial, safe network while they navigate their new life paths (Zhang 2019; Perrino 2024).

> scaling is a practice that can – among other things – spawn a sense of intimacy and an ethic of interrelatedness at the same time it serves projects that discriminate, individuate, and alienate […]. This is so because there is more than one pragmatics of scale: different sorts of sign activities amount to distinctive modes of scaling, each enjoying its own productive potentials.

As the progression of this joke-telling performance illustrates, the use of Venetian intensified from line 16 until the end. From a scalar perspective, Daniela's increasing focus on her local region and language strongly emerged upon closely examining the spatial scales that the teller presupposed. By using the local code, Venetian, the joke-teller downscaled and thus emphasized her deep commitment and devotion to her region, local traditions, and historical and artistic patrimony (Perrino 2024). Crucially, Daniela upscaled her town, Venice, to the same level as the other larger geographical locations (which are also on different scales) that she mentioned in her *barzelletta* – the nation of Romania and the country of China – in line 1, when she presented the three characters of her short story.

Thus, from a scalar perspective, by performing the final portion of the joke entirely in Venetian, Daniela downscaled to the local code of her region to reinforce the intimate exclusions that she had created throughout her performance. By linguistically excluding people like the two migrants from the joke and possibly migrants in her real-time interaction, the narrator performed *intimacies of exclusions* (Perrino 2020a) at different, scalar, and nuanced levels. Along these lines, Daniela's joke-telling performance seemed to reinforce the existing ideologies around migrants and Italian citizens of migrant descent. Moreover, the *barzelletta* was recounted in a way that seemed even to take away the responsibility of the racialized remarks from the teller, who actually uttered them. This sense of responsibility seemed to be attributable to the three *voices* (Bakhtin 1981) that the joke-teller performed: the Romanian's, the Chinese's, and the voice of the man from Venice. This performance's laughability is created through various layers, or scales, made of this unresolved dissonance: the final, unexpected punchline, and the absurdity of the emerging situation. Moreover, the use of Venetian, with its metapragmatic entailments, constructed a deep connection between the joke-teller and the audience members, who can then be considered complicit. Through these joking routines, joke-tellers are thus able to ridicule others while shifting responsibility for some problematic remarks onto their protagonists. By using codeswitching, as we have seen, narrators can enact voices and achieve some objectives, such as the exclusion of migrants or of other speakers who are not fluent in the local code. In this case, since migrants were not present during the coffee gathering, these joking practices allowed speakers to communicate and share racialized stances with fellow Venetian participants and thus solidify their localized

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Venetian identities. This is how participants' collective, intimate identities emerge through these shifting enactments.

Like many storytelling events, *barzellette* are told by many individuals and in diverse sociocultural settings. Naturally, these short stories undergo many changes and adaptations, or recontextualizations (Bauman 1977). The *barzelletta* I analyzed earlier has been recontextualized across time and space. A *barzellette* teller from the town of Vicenza (another city in the Veneto region), for example, would have replaced the man from Venice with a man from Vicenza, to make their town the centerpiece of the story. As Lockyer and Pickering (2005) note, similar short stories have been circulating amongst the Conservatives in England. In May 2002, for instance, the Conservative Tory MP Ann Winterton concluded a political address with the following joke:

> An Englishman, a Cuban, a Japanese man, and a Pakistani were all on a train. The Cuban threw a fine Havana cigar out of the window. When he was asked why, he replied: "They are 10 a penny in my country." The Japanese man then threw a Nikon camera out of the carriage, adding: "These are 10 a penny in my country." The Englishman then picked up the Pakistani and threw him out of the train window. When all the other travelers asked him to account for his actions, he said: "They are 10 a penny in my country". (Lockyer and Pickering 2005:7)

While the context and the short story are, in this case, different, the main thread and punchline bear strong similarities to the *barzelletta* that has been recontextualized in the Veneto region and across Italy (Perrino and Wortham 2022). This trend has been common for other joke-telling practices as well, thus showing the global recontextualizing potential of *barzellette* and storytelling practices more generally across various scales.

5. Conclusion

Ethnonationalism and the racialization of migrants in humorous stories are particularly visible in Northern Italy, where the *Lega*'s strong anti-immigrant politics have had significant success over many years. Through a close study of narratives, analysts can uncover racializing ideologies (Giaxoglou and Spilioti 2024; Perrino 2015; 2016a; Perrino and Jereza 2020; Rosa 2016b) that circulate in Italian society and beyond. As the case study I have presented illustrates, Daniela, the joke-teller, shifts across perspectives, or scales, using codeswitching from standard Italian to Venetan

as a discursive strategy (Gumperz 1982; Perrino 2015; 2020a). In this way, she positioned the other participants as complicit with her exclusionary ideologies. As we have seen, this complicity is confirmed by laughter and applause throughout the *barzelletta*, especially after the final punchline.

In terms of scales, Daniela enacts her stances through significant scalar moves: in the beginning of the joke, she scales up by comparing Venice, a small town, to larger geographical spaces such as Romania and China. She then downscales when she codeswitches into Venetan and thus projects intimacy and solidarity with the other participants who are fluent in this local language. This shows the lack of impartiality (Carr and Lempert 2016; Gal 2016) of Daniela's scalar moves while she delivers her *barzelletta*. These perspectival shifts, which usually go unnoticed in interaction, are semiotically significant and add key layers of understanding while emphasizing participants' fluctuating positionings.

It is then critical to consider spatiotemporal scalar moves and effects in any interactional analysis of storytelling practices and beyond (Koven, Kramer, and Perrino 2024). Indeed, scalar moves frequently occur unknowingly. Furthermore, as I have contended, other discursive strategies emerge in these short funny stories, such as codeswitching, laughter, and an overall performative stance with the joke-teller being the main narrator until she delivers the punchline of her *barzelletta*. Thus, the way joke-tellers code-switch between languages, the way they use laughter, pitch, or a softer voice (Perrino 2024) might indicate a shift in the dynamic of an interaction, thus enacting various degrees of exclusionary or other stances. As I have argued, by performing racialized jokes, these storytellers strengthen and disseminate discriminatory and racist ideologies. Moreover, the audience members are usually positioned as complicit participants since they are believed to understand the local language and to share thus the racializing ideologies enacted by the storyteller. In this way, humoristic stories, as instances where *espressioni dialettali* ('dialectal ways of speaking') occur, as Pirandello (1920:68) long ago anticipated, can be recontextualized through their wide (re)circulation, and can thus legitimize racist ideologies in Italy and elsewhere.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks go to the many joke-tellers and ordinary speakers in Northern Italy who agreed to be audio- and video-recorded for this project. Many thanks to two anonymous reviewers whose astute critical comments were very valuable. I wish to thank the guest editors of this Special Issue, Villy Tsakona and Jan Chovanec, for their meaningful feedback and guidance throughout the publication process. I am solely responsible for any remaining infelicities.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions[15]

:::: syllable lengthening

- syllable cut-off

. stopping fall in tone

, continuing intonation

? rising intonation

@ laughter

[overlap

[…] omitted material

[ ] transcriber's comments

Bold and Italic Venetian (the local language of the Veneto region)

Italic and underlining bivalent forms

Regular Font standard Italian

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[15] My transcription conventions are inspired by Duranti (1997) and Jefferson (1978).

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