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2025

Humor as Resemiotization

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Semiotics of humor:
Unraveling the dynamics of resemiotization

BY: **Jan Chovanec** and **Villy Tsakona**

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

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.

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[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.'

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.

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)

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[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).

In addition, semiotic approaches to humor go beyond the analysis of short de-contextualized (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

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[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).

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.

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[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

incongruities) leads to the resemiotization of social events and to the creation of inter-textual 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.

Moreover, the studies included here pay particular attention to the *effects* of re-semiotization. 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

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 so-cial-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 eas-ily 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 cor-responding, resemiotizing comments demonstrates that humorous incongruities stem from the unconventional combinations of semiotic resources to disguise taboo, offen-sive, 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 ambigu-ities 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 resemiotiza-tion of two disastrous, tragic events into humorous memes yields opposing interpre-tations. 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 inter-preted 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 contempo-rary 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 communi-cate through the same dialect. In such cases, humorists have the opportunity to public-ly 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 interpret-ed as harmless entertainment among intimates.

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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AUTHOR

Jan Chovanec is Professor of English Linguistics at the Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University in Brno, Czechia.

AUTHOR

Villy Tsakona is Professor of Social and Educational Approaches to Language at the Department of Early Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

"Who to save?":
Towards a social critique of antiracist (?) humorous criticism

BY: **Argiris Archakis** and **Villy Tsakona**

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to put forward a critical analytical schema for discriminatory humor, taking into consideration the incongruity and aggression/superiority theories of humor and the notion of social critique as conceptualized by Reisigl and Wodak (2001). Emphasis is placed on how humorous texts, which appear to criticize racist practices and values, turn out to be ambiguous by also reproducing them, thus constituting instances of liquid racism (Weaver 2016). In particular, we analyze three internet memes comparing two different disastrous events: the Titan submersible implosion and the Messenia migrant boat sinking, both occurring in June 2023. Our textual analysis at the micro-level in terms of humor theories constitutes a form of text immanent critique, as it brings to the surface the logical contradictions/incongruities included in the texts; namely, the fact that, although a large number of migrants lose their lives, Western authorities do little to save them. At the macro-level of analysis, the sociodiagnostic critique reveals the manipulative character of antiracist discourse with which the internet memes under scrutiny seem to align. We argue that this hypocritical, as we could call it, antiracist discourse obscures the origins of the problem, i.e., the existence and strengthening of the borders and related practices, which are not humorously questioned or even ridiculed in the data examined here. We conclude by discussing the underlying assumptions that could contribute to creating humorous texts that offer an unambiguous antiracist perspective on contemporary racist acts.

KEYWORDS:

Internet memes

Anti/racism

Liquid racism

Criticism

Social critique

> Sacrifice is a primary act of worship. Sacrificing border transgressors is part of the worship of the nation-state and acknowledgement of its sovereignty.
>
> (Khosravi 2010:29)

1. Introduction

The present study subscribes to Critical Humor Studies (CHS), aiming to investigate how humorous texts may reproduce various forms of social discrimination (racism, sexism, classism, ageism, etc.). The entertaining dimension of humor and its allegedly inconsequential nature (cf., *it's just a joke; I was just kidding*) may lead people to overlook the derogatory stereotypes and unequal power relations among groups, which are often reinforced via humorous texts. A critical perspective on humor intends to reveal how and why humorists may recycle discriminatory standpoints and values and, simultaneously, how and why humor recipients could identify such standpoints and values, and resist them (see, among others, Archakis and Tsakona 2019; 2021; Billig 2001; Lockyer and Pickering 2005; Pérez 2022; Weaver 2016).

For the present study, we draw on certain concepts coming from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which are compatible with the goals of CHS, as they both aim to unveil and oppose social inequalities and discrimination (Fairclough 2003; van Dijk 2008). In particular, a central principle of CDA concerns the relationship between the macro- and micro-level analysis. The macro-level involves the dominant (social, linguistic, educational, political, religious, moral) values and views, that is, the hegemonic discourses via which the representation and organization of social reality are attempted (Fairclough 2003). The concept of *discourse* refers to specific semantic relations on the basis of which aspects of social reality are represented from a particular perspective (Fairclough 2003; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002:143). The micro-level involves the discoursal strategies and texts through which individuals position themselves towards the macro-level discourses (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:591-593; van Dijk 2008:85-89). In the present study, humorous internet memes will be examined as texts at the micro-level, namely as humorists' positionings towards the macro-level discourses, here the racist and antiracist discourses.

In what follows, we examine three internet memes that refer to two different public events simultaneously: the Titan submersible implosion (Wikipedia 2024b) and the Messenia migrant boat sinking (Wikipedia 2024a), both occurring in June 2023. The memes under scrutiny concisely compare the two events by aligning with antiracist discourse: they humorously criticize the huge publicity and expensive rescue efforts for the submersible (with five rich men on board) compared to the less publicized, reluctant, and with limited resources rescue efforts for the migrant

boat (with several hundred migrants[1] from Africa and Asia on board). We will argue that the criticism in the form of humorous memes may superficially appear to serve antiracist, pro-migrant goals through highlighting and condemning the inequality between the two rescue expeditions. Still, simultaneously the same memes surreptitiously reproduce racist values and norms by not critically addressing the racio-national reasons which forced the migrants to travel in such conditions and led to the sinking of the migrant boat. Such an ambiguity renders the memes instances of *liquid racism* (Archakis and Tsakona 2024; Weaver 2016).

More specifically, in section 2, we attempt to define racist and antiracist discourse, paying particular attention to the ways state borders are perceived within these discourses. We highlight the blurred boundaries and overlap between racist and antiracist discourse, as well as the omnipresence of racist discrimination and prejudice in contemporary nation-states, even if social agents may not always be aware of it. In section 3, we discuss criticism as a core sociopragmatic function of humor, as more or less explicitly suggested by the *incongruity* and *superiority/aggression* theories of humor. From the perspective of these theories, we elaborate on both racist and antiracist humor. Although in principle they are opposed, in practice it is not always easy to distinguish one from the other. In section 4, we discuss the notion of *social critique*: Reisigl and Wodak (2001) propose three interrelated aspects of social critique which will be implemented in the analytical section 6 and the concluding section 7. In section 5, we present the data under scrutiny and, in section 6, we analyze them in terms of the above-mentioned theories of humor, which are combined with Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) approach to social critique. Finally, section 7 includes a summary of our findings and compares the hypocritical, as we call it, antiracist discourse and an unambiguous antiracist post-national discourse as part of what Reisigl and Wodak (2001) call *prospective critique*.

2. Oscillating between racist and antiracist discourses

In van Dijk's (2008:103) terms, racist discourse reproduces "social practices of discrimination", which are based on "socially shared and negatively oriented mental representations of Us about Them" (see also van Dijk 1991, 1992). Racist discourse turns out to be one of the most efficient means for the achievement of national homogenization since it intends to eradicate or assimilate the (linguistic, cultural, or other) difference of the Other through discrimination and denigration (Christopoulos 2004:346).

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[1] We use the term *migrant* as an umbrella term including immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, etc. In our view, if emphasis is placed on people's need to move towards a place for various reasons, such terminological/legal differences may not be that important (see also Archakis and Tsakona 2024:2).

In particular, given that within a nation-state one single culture, one language, and specific 'common' values are usually considered to be acceptable, racio-national discourse achieves homogeneity by giving privileges and advantages, that is, economic and political power as well as access to resources, only to those who consent to its linguacultural directives while excluding the Others (Golash-Boza 2016:133).

Furthermore, the racio-national discourse points to "divisions and exclusions […] fostered between 'host populations,' whose life and wealth should be enhanced, and the racialized refugees who, from a state-based perspective, would threaten the well-being of the former" (Aradau and Tazzioli 2019:6). In a similar vein, Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2022:32) put forward the *dehumanization* thesis to explain how human quality is ascribed to certain bodies, not all of them:

> humanity does not preexist the body as a fixed quality that belongs to all but, rather, that it is an attribute selectively attached to certain bodies over others in the process of giving meaning to these bodies within certain contexts of power. In this account, migrants are selectively construed as "human" […].

As a result, *necropolitics*, that is, the "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe 2003:39), or *thanatopolitics* defined by Agamben (1998:122) as the moment when "the decision on life becomes a decision on death'", are implemented at the expense of the 'threatening' racialized refugees (see Aradau and Tazzioli 2019:6).

In this context, state borders and *border deaths* (Squire 2017) prove to be significant for racio-national goals. Since 1990, migrant movements towards Greece have disturbed the national homogeneity. Thus, one of the main concerns of the Greek racio-national discourse has been to restore Greek homogeneity through strict border surveillance. The "ideology of repelling migration at the external borders" (Chatzi 2004:248) is implemented by tight border policing, harsh cross-border controls, as well as violent deportations and pushbacks. Such processes aiming to restore the purity of the Greek nation-state as part of the European 'fortress' result in thousands of migrants losing their lives. Khosravi's (2010:28) remarks are quite revealing, indicating the role of borders in "Fortress Europe" and in the rich Western world, in general:

> [t]he borders that separate the rich from the poor world demand more sacrifice than do the borders separating poor countries from each other. […] Today, the borders between poor world and rich world are turned into an exhibit of death (Inda 2007:148). Not unexpectedly, the highest rate of sacrifice of border transgressors takes place on the Mexico–USA border and on the borders of

Fortress Europe. While the former on average demands 500 sacrificial human beings per year, the latter on average demands more than 700 lives. On average more than three persons die daily along these borders. […] The Mediterranean Sea has turned into a cemetery for transgressive travelers, and the floating dead bodies washing up on the shores of European tourist islands are evidence of border-necropolitics.

At the same time, and despite this oppressive function of racio-national discourse and racio-national borders, in the Western world, the humanitarian and antiracist values of tolerance and acceptance of difference are in wide social circulation (van Dijk 1992:95-97). In particular, antiracism is opposed to "biological racism" and "many other forms of discriminatory discourse" (Bonnett 2000:177-178). Antiracism could be understood as "any theory and/or practice (whether political or personal) that seeks to challenge, reduce, or eliminate manifestations of racism in society" (O'Brien 2009:501). Antiracist discourse aims to change patterns of privilege and power relations by putting forward humanitarian values that have emerged from within social movements during at least the past three centuries. These movements have opposed slavery and racial segregation in North and South America, antisemitism and Nazism in Europe, Apartheid in South Africa, and European colonialism all over the world, and have defended human and civil rights for minorities (Archakis and Tsakona 2024:8; Maeso 2015:63; van Dijk 2021). Particular emphasis has been placed on human dignity, which has become a term "integral to the development of humanitarian law and to the development of various constitutional legal frameworks during the 20th century" (Squire 2017:526).

From an antiracist perspective, state borders serve an exclusionary, racist, and eventually inhumane function. As Khosravi (2010:98-99) points out,

> [t]hrough "inclusive exclusion" (Agamben 1998:17), undesirable people –'illegal' migrants, refugees and quasi-citizens are positioned on the threshold between *in* and *out*. Their experience is indistinct from the operation of the nation-state and their very existence is indistinct from the border (Raj 2006). By rebordering politics, the sovereign power does not merely exclude undesirable people, but penalizes and regulates them, by immobilizing them in detention centers, by ignominious and terrifying threats of deportation, or by racialized internal border control – all of which turns the citizen into a quasi-citizen (emphasis in the original).

The coexistence of racist and antiracist discourses often results in speakers oscillating between the two, since, on the one hand, they wish to portray themselves as

tolerant and antiracist individuals, and on the other, standpoints and practices that eventually reinforce their own privileges and powerful positions. For instance, antiracist claims (e.g., *I'm not racist*) and racist ones (e.g., *but I don't want to coexist with migrants*) co-occur, which leads to discursive ambiguities often hard to detect (Archakis and Tsakona 2022:165; 2024:14; see also Archakis 2022). By using such expressions, the majority of people exonerate themselves from accusations of racism and deny their own acceptance and reproduction of racist values.

Furthermore, by coexisting with national discourse, antiracist discourse ends up defending the rights not of every human being regardless of their origins and identities, but only of the national citizens, at least in the European national states and in the Western world (see Chouliaraki 2013; Douzinas 2011). As Khosravi (2010:121) points out, the discussion about human rights is usually premised on the nation-state system: "human rights are based on civil rights, that is, citizens' rights," and thus "human rights can only be achieved through the nation-state system."

Weaver (2016) calls the coexistence of racist and antiracist meanings in the same (con)texts *liquid racism*. More specifically, liquid racism

> does not produce a monolithic reading as racism […]. It has a structure that is constructed with far more potential for ambivalence. […] [L]iquid racism should not be seen as a weakened or challenged residue of racism but rather as an ambiguous form that is *encouraged* nowadays and one that weakens various defenses against claims of racism (Weaver 2016:63-64, emphasis in the original).

Liquid racism poses significant challenges to contemporary speakers because it is difficult to detect. In Archakis and Tsakona's (2024:21) terms, "the boundaries between racist and antiracist discourse are blurred and multiple interpretations emerge from the same utterance or text, both racist and antiracist ones." Consequently, liquid racism "requires reflexivity in the reader when questions are asked on its meaning, social impact or implications for the self" (Weaver 2016:153). Critical analyses of humorous discourse have demonstrated that such ambivalences are not uncommon therein: humor attempting to ridicule racist stereotypes and challenge racist practices and views may eventually reproduce them in an entertaining, uncritical manner. It may also be employed to mitigate or disguise social discrimination. In both cases, racist values and views often go unnoticed in humorous texts and thus become naturalized through liquid racism (Assimakopoulos and Piata 2024; Tsakona 2019; 2024a; 2024b; Tsami, Skoura and Archakis 2024; Weaver 2010; 2016). So, in what follows, we elaborate on the critical dimension of humor and its interplay with anti/racist discourses.

3. Humor as criticism

One of the most prominent and discussed sociopragmatic functions of humor is *criticism*. In fact, criticism appears to lie at the heart of humor, according to at least two of the main theories used for its analysis. First, the *incongruity* theory of humor maintains that humor is based on the incompatibility between what is deemed normal and abnormal, between what is expected and what violates our expectations in a particular context. It evolves around ideas, events, actions, etc., which deviate from our conceptualizations about aspects of social reality. In this sense, humor is based on *assessment*: we *evaluate* things as incongruous, incompatible, unexpected, abnormal, etc., thus more or less directly criticizing them or those persons responsible for, or related to, them.

The *superiority/aggression* theory of humor also connects it with criticism. By conceptualizing humor as a form of disapproving and even hostile behavior addressed to individuals, groups, ideas, institutions, etc., *assessed* as inferior and below our expectations, it once again renders criticism the core of humor. According to this theory, humor is employed to criticize aberrant, abnormal, antisocial, unconventional, etc. behaviors and, simultaneously, to more or less indirectly ask of the targets of its criticism to 'correct' themselves, reconsider their actions and ideas, etc., to conform to what is perceived as acceptable, normal, and conventional (on both theories, see among others Attardo 2024[1994]; Morreall 2009; Weaver 2016).

Given the above, racist humor represents sociocultural variation as incongruous and more often than not criticizes and denigrates minority groups so as either to contribute to their marginalization and exclusion or to force them to conform to dominant social norms and conventions by 'correcting' themselves, namely by adjusting their values, behaviors, and ideas to those prevailing among majority members (Billig 2001; Pérez 2022; Santa Ana 2009). On the other hand, antiracist humor represents racism as incongruous and criticizes its proponents for their values and practices. Thus, it attempts to defend minority groups and to support sociocultural variation and human rights. At the same time, antiracist humor challenges social discrimination and division by promoting more inclusive and equal conceptualizations of social relations (Feldman and Borum Chattoo 2019).

Although in principle racist and antiracist humor work in opposition to one another, relevant research has shown that it is not easy or straightforward to distinguish one from the other due to liquid racism (see section 2 and references therein). More specifically, it is often observed that canned jokes, political cartoons, satirical news, stand-up performances, and other humorous genres referring to racial discrimination and criticizing it end up reproducing it surreptitiously. In other words, even though humorists may have antiracist intentions, they may -more or less consciously- circulate and hence reinforce racist values and views by disguising them as antiracist.

In this context, our primary goal is to demonstrate how the analysis of humor as a form of criticism and in terms of the incongruity and superiority / aggression theories, could constitute the basis for a critical approach revealing its opposed and ambivalent (i.e. racist and antiracist) interpretations. To this end, besides the two above-mentioned theories, we resort to the concept of *critique* as defined within CDA. It should be noted at this point that there is extensive literature on the similarities and subtle differences between the notions of *criticism* and *critique*, especially among (political) philosophers (see, among others, Castree 2006; He 2016). In the present study, we will use the term *criticism* to refer to the sociopragmatic function of humor, and the term *critique* to refer to the critical analysis of humor put forward here.

4. Critique in the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis

Foucault (1997:31) maintains that *critique* involves "not accepting as true […] what an authority tells you is true, or at least not accepting it because an authority tells you that it is true." In a similar vein, *critique* constitutes a process of "denaturalization of the taken-for-granted understandings of reality" (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002:185), namely the process of denoting that "the entities which we see as objective and natural are, in reality, contingent combinations of elements which could always have been articulated differently" (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002:186). Such a resistant and concurrently potentially transformative quality of critique is underlined by McCarney (1990:109, as cited in Castree 2006:257), who, echoing Marx (1976), observes that critique is an act "not of judging the present but of disclosing its potentiality of making manifest what is latent and bringing to the surface what is active only in a subterranean way."

We will attempt to elaborate on such understandings of critique by following Reisigl and Wodak's (2001:32-35) three interrelated aspects of *social critique*:

1. *text immanent critique* aiming at discovering text-internal logical contradictions and inconsistencies;
2. *sociodiagnostic critique* aiming at demystifying the 'manipulative' character of discursive practices;
3. *prospective critique* aiming at improving communication and, in general, the transformation of the social structures.

The first aspect of critique proposed by Reisigl and Wodak (2001) focuses on the text-internal inconsistencies at the micro-level, i.e., on logically opposing standpoints, as well as on the fact that these inconsistencies are covered up and, thus, are not easily

discernible due to the manipulative, distorted character of the hegemonic discourse in the macro-level. Moving on to the macro-level, the manipulative combination of discourses is revealed through the sociodiagnostic critique, when the dominant discourse is compared to an antagonistic one. This comparison between antagonistic discourses eventually leads us to the third aspect of critique, namely the *prospective critique* offering an alternative and transformative perspective on communication and social relations and structures (see also Archakis 2025).

After describing our data (section 5), we employ text immanent critique and sociodiagnostic critique to critically analyze the memes under scrutiny (section 6). Then, we reflect on the resistant and transformative potential of humor as part of the prospective critique (section 7).

5. The data of the study

The data analyzed here compares two disastrous events that took place in June 2023 under totally different circumstances. The first one is the so-called *Messenia migrant boat disaster* (Wikipedia 2024a): on June 14th, a badly-kept, overloaded with migrants fishing boat coming from Tobruk, Libya, sank off the coast of Pylos, Greece, an event which was later on characterized as "a tragedy of unimaginable proportions, all the more so because it was entirely preventable" (Adriana Tidona, as cited in Rakshit 2023). The boat entered Greek waters on June 13th and was (allegedly) offered help by the Greek authorities, which was (also allegedly) declined as the boat was bound for Italy. Under circumstances that are still being investigated by Greek and international authorities, the boat capsized and sank. More than 750 people from Pakistan, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Afghanistan drowned, 82 dead bodies were recovered from the sea, and only 104 men were rescued.

According to Wikipedia (2004a), "[t]he European Ombudsman is investigating accusations that European Union (EU) border protection agency, Frontex, and the HCG [i.e., Hellenic Coast Guard] did not take preventative steps to avoid the shipwreck." This disaster is due to the EU and Greek authorities' efforts to guard the borders to keep migrants outside "Fortress Europe" (see section 2). The Greek authorities have been accused of not taking the appropriate measures to save the boat's passengers and even contributing to its capsizing and sinking while attempting to tow it, most probably towards Italian waters. Greek authorities also refused to recover the boat and the rest of the bodies with the pretext that such an expedition would be too difficult and expensive, since the boat sank in the deepest point of the Mediterranean Sea. Unfortunately, such disasters have not been uncommon since 2014 in the Mediterranean Sea, leading to a large number of casualties, as migrants from Asia or Africa attempt to enter Europe via Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain, or France.

Almost at the same time as these were happening in the Mediterranean Sea, the second disaster took place in the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada: the so-called *Titan submersible implosion* (Wikipedia 2024b). The American company OceanGate operated the Titan submersible, which was then used to take its passengers on a visit to the wreckage of the Titanic. On board the submersible were, besides the company's CEO, a famous French deep-sea explorer and Titanic expert acting as the submersible pilot, a British businessman, and a Pakistani-British businessman with his son. The price for this trip was $250,000 per person. On June 18th, only 1 hour and 45 minutes after the submersible had left the mother ship, communication between the two was lost. A few hours later, a massive search and rescue operation was launched

> by an international team organized by the United States Coast Guard (USCG), USN, and Canadian Coast Guard. Support was provided by aircraft from the Royal Canadian Air Force and United States Air National Guard, a Royal Canadian Navy ship, as well as several commercial and research vessels and ROVs [i.e., remotely operated underwater vehicles] (Wikipedia 2024b).

A few days later, a debris field (also including human remains) was discovered close to the Titanic wreckage, which led investigators to the conclusion that an implosion of the pressure chamber killed all five passengers instantly (Wikipedia 2024b).

The two disasters were discursively brought together and compared by online news, which criticized the limited media or other attention paid to the migrant boat (see, among others, Rakshit 2023; Rosenberg 2023; Sharp 2023; Walfisz 2023).[2] This comparison also features in the data examined here, offering a critical comment on social discrimination in terms of both social class[3] and, most importantly, in the present study, sociocultural origin: the memes employ humor to criticize the racist differences between the two rescue operations.[4] In the case of the migrant boat of 750

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[2] Interestingly, on June 23rd, i.e. one day before the debris was discovered, in two different public appearances in Greece, Barack Obama criticized the lack of media or other attention on the migrant boat and the respective disaster, and compared it to the huge attention dedicated to the search expedition to locate the missing submersible. He attributed this difference to the "untenable situation" (Stavros Niarchos Foundation 2023) of "obscene inequality" and "massive concentration of wealth" (NowThis Impact 2023).

[3] Due to space limitations, and to our focus on racism, the classist aspect of the comparison will not be elaborated on in the present study, but will be left for future inquiry.

[4] Most probably, the online articles, Obama's statements (see footnote 2), and the memes examined here are part of a *resemiotization* process (i.e. a meaning transformation process from one context to the other; see Iedema 2003). However, we cannot accurately trace the stages of this process, since we cannot establish whether the authors of the articles were aware of Obama's statements, or vice versa, and since we have no information about the place, time, and creators of the memes.

or more passengers, Greek and EU authorities failed to lead the boat safely to Greek or Italian shores. In contrast, the US and Canadian authorities organized a massive and extremely expensive operation to rescue the five upper-class citizens.

These memes come from a large corpus (283 English and Greek) retrieved from online sources from July 23rd, 2023, until May 3rd, 2024, and referring to the Titan submersible disaster. The producers of such humor were severely criticized for a lack of empathy and amoral behavior as they were perceived as making fun of people who were in grave danger and then confirmed as deceased due to the implosion of the vessel (see, among others, Rakshit 2023; Rosenberg 2023; Walfisz 2023). The three memes examined here represent a very small but not insignificant (at least from an anti/racist perspective) percentage of this corpus (1.06 per cent). They will be analyzed as instances of antiracist humor defending migrants' right to cross the borders, enter the EU safely, and become accepted by European people and authorities.

In general, memes constitute a significant part of speakers' online experiences in social media platforms: they are perceived as digital artefacts conveying cultural information and sociopolitical stances by drawing on multiple intertextual sources and multiplying rather quickly, as speakers redesign them to suit their own communicative and social purposes. Memes usually capture a specific time, context, and affect while reflecting and enhancing speaker involvement and everyday creativity. Given that memes are based on the combination of semiotic resources coming from different sources and carrying various connotations, they can be used for the representation and dissemination of complex ideas and values, often in an unconventional manner (see, among others, Divita 2022; Shifman 2014; Tsakona 2024a:68; Wiggins 2019). It is therefore not unexpected that, as we intend to show, contradictory interpretations may be derived from them: the emergence of both racist and antiracist meanings renders the memes under scrutiny instances of liquid racism.

Figure 1.

6. Data analysis

The three memes (Figures 1-3) exhibit both similarities and differences, the latter mostly pertaining to the semiotic resources employed to convey the same, more or less, message:
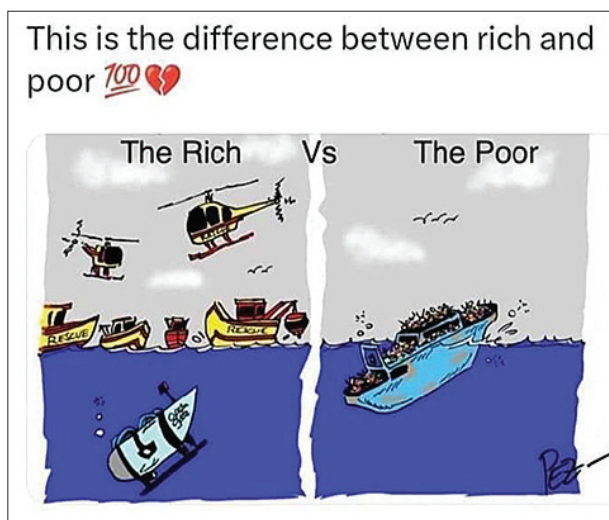

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

From an incongruity theory perspective, their humor is based on the incongruous difference between the two rescue operations:[5] the reluctant, unsuccessful, and with limited resources Greek/EU one, and the well-organized and expensive US/Canadian one. It is humorously proposed to "tighten the borders" for "750 missing migrants" (see Figure 1) and to abandon "a few hundred migrants fleeing war" (Figure 2) or "the poor" (Figure 3). Instead, it is also humorously proposed to save "5 rich missing men" (Figure 1) or "a few tourists that can afford $250,000 dip into the ocean" (Figure 2) or "the rich" (Figure 3). The juxtaposition of the two operations is premised on antiracist assumptions to the effect that human lives are equally important, precious, and eventually worth-preserving, whether we talk about wealthy and prestigious citizens or about poor, border-crossing migrants. In other words, the humorous incongruity constituting the core of these memes emerges from the comparison between the unequal sociopolitical and financial particularities of the two expeditions, bringing to the surface the racist (and classist) treatment of migrants risking their lives to reach the West. In this sense, the humor of these memes could be characterized as pro-migrant and antiracist.

Interestingly, the two opposed scripts are inferred from the context[6] (e.g., the news reports about the relevant events) rather than explicitly represented in the memes, especially regarding the Messenia migrant boat disaster. National borders and border guards are not depicted in any memes under scrutiny. Instead, their actions are evoked through short utterances only: the incongruous script of guarding the borders as a national/racist act is not visually represented. It only appears in Figure 1 via the directive "tighten the borders." The same holds for the antiracist script of rescuing hundreds of migrants from drowning, which is only briefly mentioned via the verb "save" in Figure 2. It therefore seems that these memes are addressed to readers who are familiar with both disasters and can recall the relevant details without being provided too many cues.

The superiority/aggression theory of humor allows us to trace the humorous target, namely, who is to blame for such a racist treatment of migrants. The above-mentioned incongruous difference between the two rescue operations appears to be attributed to Western supra/national authorities, especially the EU/Greek ones, who, according to these memes and media reports, prioritized guarding the borders over

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[5] It should be noted here that there may be readers who may not find the incongruity identified here humorous: indeed, incongruity is a prerequisite for humor but can trigger a variety of other, non-humorous reactions, such as disgust, terror, anxiety, and puzzlement, depending on one's background knowledge, ideological standpoints, or affective stance (see among others Morreall 2009:12-15; Tsakona 2020:48-62; 2024:39-65). However, since memes are usually created to convey a humorous perspective on social events, we assume that the data examined here could be perceived as humorous to at least a part of their intended audience.

[6] Opposing scripts contributing to the creation of humor may be evoked or even *inferred* from the text (see Attardo 2001:47-60).

saving the migrants. Such a racist treatment is highlighted through the comparison to the US/Canadian authorities' operation, which is humorously targeted for costing a significant amount of money to rescue only five people. Hence, an antiracist assumption is brought to the surface once again: Western states are humorously targeted and criticized for neglecting large groups of unwanted 'foreigners' at peril, but doing their best for a limited number of 'distinguished' citizens.

From a semiotic perspective, all the memes are divided into two parts to highlight the racism-related differences between the rescue operations. In two of them (Figures 1-2), easily recognizable photos from the media are used so that the (informed) audience can grasp the incongruous differences between the two operations. In contrast, Figure 3 includes a painted representation of the rescue operations, which seems to be based on related media photos as well. Interestingly, Figure 2 employs a popular meme template, that is, the *Drakeposting* meme,[7] to show approval of the US/Canadian operation and disapproval of a hypothetical attempt to rescue the migrants, thus attacking racist (and classist) discrimination through an ironic reversal.

Framing the preceding analysis in terms of Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) approach to social critique, and focusing on those parts of the memes which refer to the Messenia disaster, it could be suggested that the analysis in terms of humor theories at the micro-level, constitutes a form of text immanent critique, as it brings to the surface the logical contradictions included in the text and, in the present case, producing the humorous effect. It should be remembered here that, in humorous texts in particular, inconsistencies and contradictions are the *sine qua non*: humor relies on incongruity, namely on events, actions, situations, etc., violating social norms and expectations (see section 3). Here, antiracist perceptions about the value of human lives are framed as normal, while the racist discrimination between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' lives is represented as incongruous and is ridiculed.

According to the sociodiagnostic critique at the macro-level, the antiracist dimension of such humor concentrates on the criticism against everyday, normalized racio-national practices (i.e., guarding the borders and controlling who is going to be saved while crossing them), but does not (dare to) address the ideological premises of these practices. It obscures the fact that the mere existence of borders between "desirable destinations and undesirable origins" (Peeren 2015:174) is a significant

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[7] 'Drakeposting' refers to a common meme of using two screen captures from Drake's 'Hotline Bling' music video to denote preference of one thing over another. The top image would be of Drake turning his head away from an adjacent image or text with his hand extended as if to reject the image outright. The bottom image would then be Drake looking at another adjacent image or text with a look of satisfaction on his face as he points to it. The implication is that he (or the user posting the overall picture) prefers the bottom thing over the top thing" (Meming Wiki 2024).

part of racio-national discourse and not humorously questioned or ridiculed in such humorous memes. In other words, it is taken for granted that Greek/EU officials guarding the borders have the power to control who will receive help. A post-modern, antiracist perspective would perceive the segregating function of borders as incongruous (see section 2).

In other words, what is humorously represented as a problem here (i.e., the fact that large numbers of migrants lose their lives and Western authorities do little to save them) draws our attention away from the racist-national origins of this situation (i.e., the enforcement of borders and the unequal power relations they embody). The sociodiagnostic critique of such humor would be premised on an antagonistic antiracist post-national discourse, according to which humor could (but does not) refer critically to the violence and inequality sustained by the borders and their guarding: people from outside Europe are forced to risk their lives to move away from places where they can no longer live. In doing so, they end up at the EU/Greek authorities' and majorities' mercy and (limited) benevolence, who are in control of who will be on which side of the borders.

In sum, even though the text's immanent critique achieved by the analysis of humor in terms of incongruity and superiority/aggression theories supports an antiracist intention and interpretation of humor, the sociodiagnostic critique reveals a quite different story: pro-migrant and antiracist humor fails to effectively challenge the racist presuppositions of these texts. Instead, it takes the existence and guarding of the borders for granted and represents migrants as inferior and dominated by the powerful majority's officials. Thus, the majority members and authorities are expected to feel sorry for migrants risking their lives. Still, the role of the borders in this risky situation is not critically addressed via humor. In this sense, these memes could be perceived as instances of liquid racism involving contradictory, namely both racist and antiracist, interpretations.

In the following section, we summarize and discuss our findings. Additionally, we reflect on humor's resistant and transformative potential as part of the prospective critique.

7. Conclusion: Towards a prospective critique of humor

This paper adheres to CHS investigating how humor may (re)construct and perpetuate social inequalities in the form of stereotypes, xenophobia, and racism. To this end, we exploit CDA concepts that are compatible with CHS's goals. In particular, we draw on the concept of *discourse* and the distinction between the macro- and the micro-levels of analysis (Fairclough 2003). Our data consists of three internet memes comparing two different disastrous events: the Titan submersible implosion and the Messenia

migrant boat sinking, both occurring in June 2023. We argue that these humorous internet memes could be placed at the micro-level of analysis, functioning as humorists' positionings towards the racist and antiracist discourses.

The proposed analysis draws on incongruity and superiority/aggression theories of humor combined with Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) three interrelated aspects of social critique, i.e., text immanent critique, sociodiagnostic critique, and prospective critique. Thus, we attempt to scrutinize the critical function of humor, namely to identify the humorous incongruity and targets of the memes examined here and to explore how deeply this memetic criticism goes. Our semiotic/multimodal analysis at the micro-level in terms of humor theories constitutes a form of text immanent critique, as it brings to the surface the logical contradictions/incongruities included in the texts and targets the western authorities (i.e., the fact that western authorities do little to save migrants, even though they ought to). Thus, the humorous effect is produced.

Moving on to the macro-level of analysis, the sociodiagnostic critique reveals the manipulative character of the antiracist discourse with which the internet memes under scrutiny seem to align. More specifically, we argue that this hypocritical, as we could call it, antiracist discourse obscures the origins of the problem, i.e., the mere existence of borders which are not humorously questioned or even ridiculed in the data examined here. That is to say, the critical function of these memes stays within racio-national limits. It does not seem to challenge the naturalized 'necessity' of national borders, which is a key component of racio-national discourse. Hence, the majority of members and authorities are expected to sympathize with migrants risking and losing their lives. Still, the role of the borders in this precarious situation is not critically addressed via humor. In this sense, these memes could be perceived as instances of liquid racism involving contradictory, namely both racist and antiracist, interpretations.

The comparison between the hypocritical antiracist discourse including a hidden racio-national dimension that takes for granted the existence and segregating function of borders, on the one hand, and an unambiguous antiracist, post-national discourse that highlights the violence and inequality sustained by the borders and their guarding, on the other, could lead us to the third aspect of social critique, namely the *prospective critique* (see section 4). The post-national discourse challenges the traditional racio-national assumptions that survive in the hypocritical antiracist discourse, i.e., national "stability," strict "boundaries," and "uniformization" within state territory, language, and culture, by proposing "mobility," "fuzziness" and "multiplicity" instead (Blommaert and Rampton 2011:3-4; Heller 2008:512; see also Archakis 2016; 2025). Within a post-national discourse, a *prospective critique* of memes such as the ones examined here would put forward an alternative perspective drawing on assumptions such as the following:

> [h]umane law does not recognize any border. Borders are constructed by in-humane minds. […] Being at home means belonging, but it also means constructing borders and excluding the other. Any kind of group identification constructs the social category of the other. […] Homes are primarily sites of exclusion, not inclusion. The notion of the home nourishes racism and xenophobia. […] It is only in homelessness that genuine hospitality becomes possible. Homelessness means not recognizing anywhere as home. Only in that condition is humanity not territorialized and can the plagues inherent in the nation-state system vanish and the 'botanical' way of thinking about human beings, in terms of roots, and the uncritical link between individuals and territory fade away. (Khosravi 2010:108, 94, 95; emphasis in the original)

In our view, humorous texts critically addressing core values and practices constituting racio-national discourse could incite recipients to reflect on the taken-for-granted-ness of state borders and their strict control, or, paraphrasing Khosravi's words quoted above, on the inhumane laws enforcing borders and exclusion. Hence, they could contribute to the promotion and social circulation of a post-national discourse, which could improve the communication and social relations between the majority and migrant populations. Based on the findings of our analysis, creating memes and public texts, in general, that univocally fight racism and the (explicit or implicit) exclusions it imposes -whether in the form of borders or in any other form- remains a significant challenge.

A prospective critique on ambivalent anti/racist humor could be explored through critical literacy endeavors focusing on the semiotics of humorous texts and aiming at sensitizing readers to the multiple and often opposing interpretations of such humor as well as at inciting them to reflect on everyday aspects of racism that are taken for granted and/or even perceived as antiracism. Through readers' semiotic analyses in terms of humor theories, comparisons with other (non-)humorous texts on the same topic, and attempts at producing antiracist humorous material, they could realize not only the evaluative/critical but also the discriminatory dimensions of humor, which may be lurking under its entertaining façade (on critical literacy activities, see Tsakona 2019; 2020:181-188; Tsami, Skoura and Archakis 2024, and references therein).

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AUTHOR

Argiris Archakis is Professor of Discourse Analysis
and Sociolinguistics at the Department of Philology,
University of Patras, Greece.

AUTHOR

Villy Tsakona is Professor of Social and Educational
Approaches to Language at the Department of Early
Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens, Greece.

Humorous self-censorship strategies on YouTube: Semiotic structure and social-semiotic functions

BY: **Alexander Brock** and **Merle Willenberg**

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the semiotics of humorous self-censorship. To this end, selected examples from a corpus of YouTube commentary videos and their respective comment sections are presented and discussed. On the one hand, the analysis focuses on structural aspects of humorous self-censorship signs from various modes (written, spoken, images, emojis, etc.) in their multimodal interplay. On the other hand, we analyze socio-semiotic aspects of our examples: their anchoring in specific speech communities, marked by background knowledge and shared communicative practices. The analysis shows that (1) structural manipulations of the spelling and/or phonetic shape of lexical items and of images etc. serve to secure both the understanding of the censored item as well as plausible deniability, while generating potentially humorous incongruities, (2) various positions in the participation process are exploited to participate in this process, including trigger warnings and other metacommunicative actions and levels, (3) humorous self-censorship serves a number of social-semiotic functions, such as the negotiation of group norms of sayability, the expression of group solidarity, and – importantly – entertainment.

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1. Introduction

Attempts at regulating online communication, especially under conditions of anonymity, have led to several measures, such as the formulation of community guidelines for social network platforms, and various forms of punishment, including expulsion from platforms. A point especially interesting for linguists, however, is that regulation of digitally mediated communication (henceforth DMC) has not only led to censorship by the respective platform but also to self-censorship by users trying to avoid sanctions (Calhoun and Fawcett 2023; Marwick and boyd 2011; Willenberg 2023; 2024a; 2024b, among others). For our purposes, censorship is understood broadly as any form of (formal) suppression of language expression in awareness of existing or presumed communicative norms (cf. Allan and Burridge 2006:27). We differentiate between censorship as an external suppression of language expression, often by an authoritative or institutional body (like platform providers), and *self*-censorship, which describes the suppression or modification of language expression by its producers.

Our empirical observations have shown that self-censorship is sometimes performed in humorous ways, which is evident in the semiotic forms of censoring and in the recipients' reactions in the comment sections. Moreover, both the forms and the content of humorous self-censorship seem to react to the complex, multimodal and multi-level environments within which it takes place.

These observations lead to a number of research questions, which this article addresses:

- How does humorous self-censorship work in a multimodal, multi-level environment within a specific social context?
- How does humorous self-censorship reflect and shape this context?
- How do humorous forms of self-censorship on a micro-level relate to function in a social-semiotic framework and to language ideologies and norms of sayability on online platforms?

In connection with the observations mentioned initially, the video-sharing platform YouTube offers a unique research location for studying the intersection of self-/ censorship and humor signs, mainly in how multimodality is used as a social-semiotic resource in the pursuit of humor. This is the case not only due to its significance in the contemporary media landscape, but primarily due to its complex multimodal communication form (Androutsopoulos and Tereick 2015; Schmidt and Marx 2019), as described below (Section 2.1).

Regarding the specific genre under consideration here – commentary videos – this intersection is particularly evident, as such videos comment primarily on other platform creators or their content and usually revolve around potentially controversial topics that may go against YouTube's community guidelines. Debates instigated in the videos may be continued in the respective video's comment section. This way, a complex, multi-level communicative environment is created, extending across different videos (original and commentary videos) and comment sections. This environment will here be referred to as the *commentary sphere*, which subsumes these different text types and participants involved in their production and reception (Willenberg 2024b:89). A crucial point of interest lies in the potential uptake of self-/censorship techniques and humorous forms between videos and comments, as this would reveal shared norms and semiotic practices among the participants.

In this article, we analyze various occurrences of humorous self-censorship on YouTube commentary channels, examining their micro-semiotic forms and social-semiotic functions. We aim to represent not only the wide variety of techniques but also the multi-functionality of humor in self-censorship.

2. Social semiotics and humor theory

2.1. Micro- to macro-semiotics on YouTube – The censorship sign

Both self-/censorship and humor are relevant phenomena on different levels of meaning-making, ranging from the micro-semiotic level of the individual sign to the macro-semiotic level of social-semiotic processes. This section concentrates on censorship on various levels, while Section 2.2 introduces the humorous aspect.

The micro-level analysis consists of basic semiotic resources available for meaning-making in a given sign system, or communicative mode (e.g., Bateman 2016; Jewitt 2015; Stöckl 2019). For the communicative mode of writing, this would include the written mode in general but also its individual resources such as typography, orthography, and lexicogrammar, among others (Stöckl 2019:49). Their combined potential for meaning-making can be described as the mode's modal affordance (Jewitt 2015:72).

Among other things, semiotic resources can be used to create censorship signs. Taking the potentially offensive sign of the word *fuck* as an example, we can consider its censored counterpart *f*ck*. Here, the modal affordances of writing are used to obscure the original sign through typographic substitution (Willenberg 2024b:56-57): the grapheme <u> has been replaced by the typographic symbol of the asterisk <*>. This creates a new, ambiguous sign – a *censorship sign* – whose main characteristic is plausible deniability concerning the original sign body. *Plausible deniability* refers to the fact that while recipients may recover the original potentially offensive signifier, the sign-makers have created the possibility to deny using such a signifier.

The use of different semiotic resources in the creation of censorship signs can also achieve various degrees of concealment (Willenberg 2024b:188-193): staying with the example of *fuck*, substituting more graphemic material with alternative symbols, as in *f****, leads to a more comprehensive concealment of the original sign body and thus to a higher degree of plausible deniability.

In addition to performing the censorship, the creation and presence of a censorship sign highlight the very presence of censorship in a communicative setting. Figure 1 provides an overview of the concept.
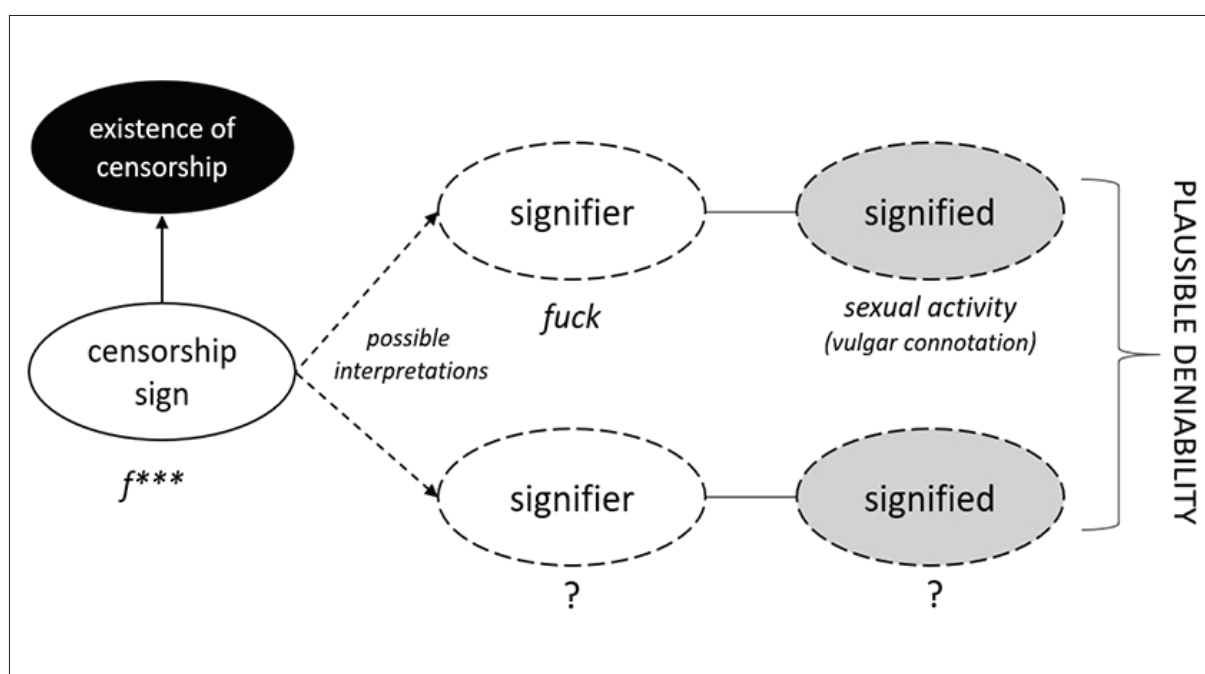
Figure 1. Graphic - Censorship Sign

The use of censorship signs may fulfil a variety of social functions, including politeness, (group) identity construction (including maintenance of anonymity) and more on the macro- or social-semiotic level of analysis. Meaning is always made on this macro level in relation to communicative constellations and prevailing norms. On social network platforms, these norms may be established either by codified rules (in the form of community guidelines), enforced by various sanctions that their violation may bring about (e.g., demonetization of content), or in the form of emergent community norms. In this normative environment self-censorship may become necessary and humor thrives.

The communicative constellations which constitute the communication form (Brock and Schildhauer 2017) of YouTube commentary videos are distributed across different communicative levels (Brock 2016; Chovanec 2022; Dynel 2014; Schmidt and Marx 2019). Using this conceptual ordering allows us to describe the distinct semiotic potentials of each communicative level (CL), with different affordances available between the video, the comments and the "hosting space" (Androutsopoulos and Tereick 2015:356). It also allows us to consider the different participation frameworks (Goffman 1981) present on the CLs and how they may affect humor or censorship processes. We follow Schmidt and Marx's (2019) conceptualization of four distinct CLs for YouTube, which are briefly summed up in Table 1:

Table 1. Communicative levels on YouTube, based on Schmidt and Marx (2019), see also Willenberg (2024a)

CL 1	video interaction	• basic participation framework, including speaker, ratified and non-ratified participants (Goffman 1981, Levinson 1988), as seen in the videos • podium / platform formats (Goffman 1981:138-140)
CL 2	sender-recipient interaction	• video production / author • video distribution / (collective) sender (Dynel 2014:43) / releaser • recipients / (mass) audience (Goffman 1981:137-138)
CL 3	comments	• alternation of production and recipient roles
CL 4	website-user interaction	• platform (YouTube) as communicator • user as producer or recipient = *produsers* [1]

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[1] Due to the potentially shifting participation roles, participants on YouTube will here be generally referred to as *produsers* (Bruns 2008). The term *YouTuber* is reserved for content creators who upload videos to the platform.

2.2. Humor theories and functions of humor

2.2.1 *Humor theories*

According to the incongruity theory of humor (Dynel 2009:41-68; Ritchie 2004:46-58, and many others), humor is generated when an ill-fitting, incongruous element is introduced into a horizon of expectation. This is the most widely accepted theory of humor, and elements of it can be found in other humor theories, including Bergson's (2013[1900]; see below). A much-discussed question remains whether an incongruity must be resolved to generate humor (e.g., Martínez 2023; Suls 1983). As demonstrated in the literature (Brock 2004:213-259), incongruities can be constructed in any dimension of the communicative process, from individual sounds and words, via sentence constructions and text patterns, to realms of social and group norms. Ambiguity (Chamizo-Domínguez 2018:80) – which was shown to be a central aspect of the censorship sign (see Section 2.1) – may also be used to generate humor, for instance, when alternative readings of the same surface form are triggered by the punchline of a joke (Suls 1972:82).

For this investigation, the central questions are: a) What constitutes a horizon of expectation for individual recipients in a DMC context, and b) when is a piece of communication regarded as ill-fitting and incongruous? These two aspects are closely connected. While it falls into social semiotics to reconstruct general aspects of a communicative context, it is impossible for researchers – as for introspective recipients – to reconstruct exactly what a complete state of expectation is at any given time. Deviations from expectations, however, are readily noticed, allowing us to reconstruct at least one particular aspect of the previous horizon of expectation – the one that fails to be fulfilled by the incongruous element. This makes an analysis of incongruities a methodologically plausible enterprise, supported in the case of comment sections in DMC by possible reactions and metacommunication by the recipients. In the context of censorship in DMC, there are numerous possibilities for incongruities to emerge. Among others, censorship and its degree may be marked as incongruous, and the censorship sign can be incongruous in itself.

Bergson (2013[1900]:37) proposed a humor theory in which he saw the mechanical behavior in humans – "something mechanical encrusted upon the living"– as the primary source of humor. In his theory, human behavior is funny inasmuch as it resembles a blind mechanism. It should be noted that mechanical behavior can be considered a special case of incongruous behavior. In the context of DMC and self-censorship in the *commentary sphere*, censorship can be executed mechanically and profusely, even affecting elements of communication which are not censorable, such as YouTubers' names (see Section 4.3 below).

2.2.2 *Functions of humor*

The literature on functions of humor is extensive (Fry 1977; Hay 2000; Husband 1977; Long and Graesser 1988; Marone 2015; Martineau 1972; Zijderveld 1976 and many others), and some of its functions are more situation-specific than others. Functions mentioned in the literature are the following:

- rebellion against the powers that be and liberation (Zijderveld 1976:97, 173, 200-201),
- bolstering of morale and hope (Martineau 1972:104),
- 'safety valve' (ibid.) and catharsis (Husband 1977:267), where humor is used by people to vent their frustration, for instance, under repressive regimes,
- adaptation to circumstances (Martineau 1972:106, 111; Zijderveld 1976:74),
- conveying social norms (Long and Graesser 1988:54; Martineau 1972:108),
- undermining social norms (Zijderveld 1976:178),
- communication management (Hay 2000:725; Long and Graesser 1988:55; Marone 2015; Martineau 1972:103, 106; Zijderveld 1976:181-185),
- expression of group solidarity (Hay 2000:716-717; Martineau 1972:108, 116-119; Zijderveld 1976:186),
- power and control (Hay 2000:716-717; Holmes 2000:165; Long and Graesser 1988:53-54; Martineau 1972:106-107),
- self-disclosure and social probing (Martineau 1972:113; Long and Graesser 1988:53; Hay 2000:716),
- (positive) face work (Haugh 2011; Holmes 2000:167; Long and Graesser 1988:54-55)
- the *aesthetic* function (Martin 1987; Nunez-Ramos and Lorenzo 1997; Tsur 1994), which arises out of the play with semiotic elements.

While any combination of these functions may be relevant on the social-semiotic level of the analysis, some of them may be particularly important in the context of self-censorship in the social media. Among them might be the expression of group solidarity, for instance, if a number of *produsers* of a commentary channel applies the same humorous censorship techniques. Conveying social norms might also play a role in using humorous censorship signs. Here, "the speaker focuses attention on norms that society is unclear about, and points out the direction of his or her opinion" (Long and Graesser 1988:54). This function draws its significance from the fact that the *produsers* united on a YouTube channel commonly do not know each other offline and the norms conveyed online are the only ones available to regulate their social contact (Tsakona 2017:183). Finally, the self-disclosure and social probing function may also play a central role in the communicative environment of self-censorship. With each post, there is a risk that the values expressed in them do not meet with the *commentary sphere*'s approval.

Through humorous statements or language forms, participants can test the community's reaction to specific views, language forms, etc. In the case of a lack of approval, they can withdraw the form in question and mark it as non-serious and something they did not really mean. This way, a participant can cautiously convey their opinions and probe the community for their stance on things without taking full responsibility for what was communicated.

2.3. The humorous censorship sign

In Section 2.1, it was pointed out that the censorship sign typically works on two functional levels simultaneously: it performs the censorship and thereby creates plausible deniability, and it signals the very fact of censorship at the same time. The humorous censorship sign adds another functional level to these by not only performing and indicating censorship, but by doing so in a humorous way. This is shown in Figure 2:
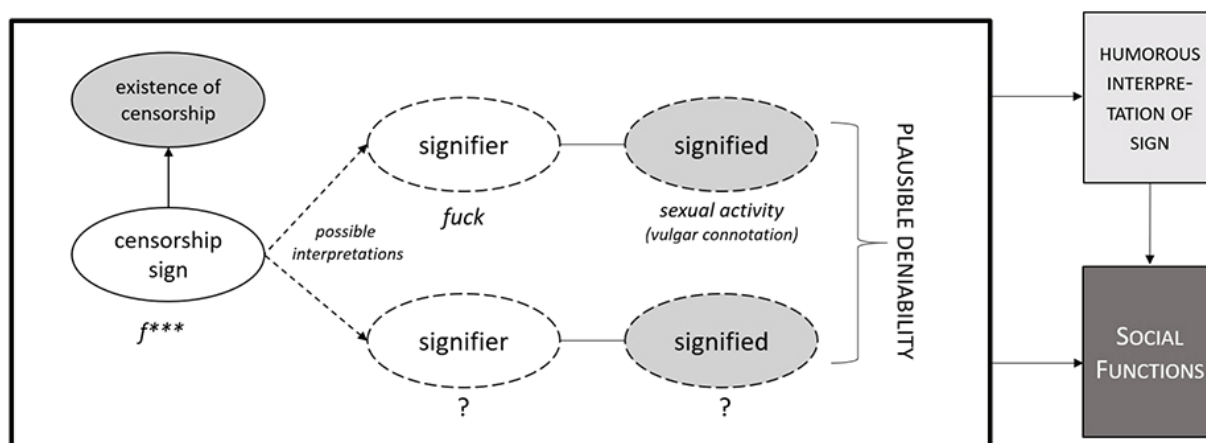
Figure 2. Graphic - Humorous Censorship Sign

Consequently, there are three levels of description when it comes to humorous censorship signs:

1. *Performing censorship*: The micro-semiotic processes that create plausible deniability concerning the original, potentially offensive sign body.
2. *Indicating censorship*: A censorship sign points to the institutional censorship regime, or in other words, a need for self-censorship.
3. *Introducing humor with its potential functions*: A censorship sign's form and/or presence may be perceived as humorous.

The following section introduces both corpus and methods used for the present investigation.

3. Corpus and methods

The corpus for this investigation consists of 42 YouTube commentary videos (1,244 minutes in total) and their corresponding comments (169,526) collected for a project on censorship and self-censorship (Willenberg 2024b). This material was qualitatively coded for occurrences of censorship in the context of that project. These coded instances were then investigated for cases of humor.

Occurrences of humor and their potential functions were identified in three steps:

1. The authors subjectively identified places of potentially humorous incongruities.
2. These potential instances of humor were then confirmed by identifying humor responses in the videos' comment sections. Possible indicators of humorous reception are emojis and digital laughter (e.g., *hehe*, *haha*, abbreviations like *lmao – laughing my ass off*) or metacommunicative passages.
3. Functions of these humorous segments were identified via recipients' reactions and the communicative environment. The primary source of insight here was metacommunicative comments, but other indicators were also considered. For instance, repetition of the same censorship technique is qualified as a possible sign of solidarity, norm-building / acceptance, and positive facework. An example is the uptake of the censorship sign *eating d*, which will be discussed in detail below (see Section 4.2).

Methodologically, it must be pointed out that we regard the functions of humor mentioned above only as *potential* functions carried mainly by the third semiotic layer of the humorous censorship sign (Section 2.3). We consider any function fulfilled only if explicit evidence of it can be found in the *commentary sphere*, for instance in the form of metacommunicative comments by recipients or in the videos themselves.

In the interest of completeness, we include some examples in our discussion which are clearly incongruous but did not get an explicit humor reaction in the comments. An example is the replacement of the word *fuck* by a duck emoji (see Section 4.1 below). This censorship technique works on the rhyme between the two words. At the same time, replacing a taboo lexeme with a harmless image is incongruous in the contrast between content and micro-semiotic form.

Overall, the selected examples are meant to illustrate how humorous self-censorship is performed on various levels, using several semiotic resources for both humor and self-censorship.

4. Examples of humorous self-censorship on YouTube commentary channels

The analysis of the material shows that censorship signs used on YouTube commentary channels often fulfil a humorous function in addition to their censorship function (see Section 2.3). The following examples from the corpus illustrate this.

4.1. Humorous censorship signs in the written mode

Several words in our corpus are (self-)censored by replacing a part of their graphemic form with a different letter, resulting in seemingly innocent words being used in place of dispreferred items (see Willenberg 2024b:199-204). One instance of this is the micro-semiotic censorship sign of duck as a substitute for the taboo word *fuck* (Example 1), occasionally in the form of an emoji (Example 2).

Example 1: Comment on "I watched the haunting of Shane Dawson so you didn't have to…" [2]

> Shane can't redeem himself. He's gross. Shane and Trisha have one thing in common, a complete lack of giving a duck 😉 about how ppl feel about them.

Example 2: Comment on "These family vloggers just made the worst video on YouTube"

> Short answer? No.
> Long answer? No, 🦆 you. […

As pointed out above (Section 3), the innocent form of a duck emoji to stand for the taboo word fuck constitutes an incongruity which undermines social norms of sayability and – if taken up by other *produsers* – creates group solidarity. In addition, the playful manipulation of the signifier introduces an aesthetic dimension into the communication. In Example 1, the author marks their non-serious dimension with an emoji.

Other rhyming forms used for censorship and humor are so-called shm-reduplications (Nevins and Vaux 2003).

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[2] All comments are presented in their original form, including possible typos or grammatical errors.

Example 3: Comment on "These family vloggers just made the worst video on You-Tube"

> Does it rhyme with smish smortion?

Here, the poor quality of the phonetic replacement of *abortion* adds another layer of incongruity to the censorship: an ill-conceived and therefore incongruous realization of a shm-reduplication. At the same time, an element of Bergson's (2013 [1900]) mechanical can be traced here, in that the form in Example 3 constitutes a link in the endless chain of mechanical shm-reduplications, be they well-formed or deficient.

Example 4: Comment on "Family Vlog Channels Are Sad"

> @commenter Charlie drip is hit but this is not cornhub

The replacement of *Pornhub* by *cornhub* potentially fulfils all the functions identified for Examples 1 and 2. In addition, the form presupposes an in-group of *produsers* familiar with the pornography website Pornhub. As well as group solidarity of people in the know, this usage conveys a social norm for this particular group by suggesting this to be a possible form to refer to the website.

Example 5: Comment on "Nikocado Avocado is Eating Himself to the Grave"

> Heart Attack Grill is filled to the absolute brim with sin/gluttony & I honestly hope that it is burned to the ground 1 of these days as an almost symbolic gesture of it going up in he 🏒 🏒 fire & thereby cleansing the ungodly grip it has on the fools of society.

Here, the aesthetic play with two innocent emojis in the form of hockey sticks standing for similar-looking graphemes may be central beyond the fact that the manipulation renders the word hellfire unrecognizable to the YouTube content moderation algorithm. Further, an incongruity is introduced on the micro-semiotic level, as emojis are typically used to substitute entire lexemes rather than individual graphemes (see Example 2 above).

Example 6: Comment Thread on "Shane's Comeback"

Comment	Shane dropping the oops "I almost kermited herbaside" for sympathy is such a manipulative behavior it brings back memories of every shitty guy I dated	commenter1
Reply 1	💀💀 especially when he basically almost herbacide baited James Charles	commenter2
Reply 2	i'm surprised no one pointed out he said that jc was too egotistical to commit herbacide when tati pointed out that this might send james over the edge. i definitely would have commented that lol edit: changed "sudoku (i wrote the real word) to herbacide	commenter3
Reply 3	took me a while to understand that quote 😂	commenter4
Reply 5	What is herbacide	commenter5

Example 6 shows that censorship signs cannot be taken for granted, even in a tight-knit *commentary sphere*. While it is evident that at least some *produsers* consider the form *kermited herbaside* funny,[3] at the same time, a new group norm of referring to suicide is being discussed, with candidates such as *kermit/commit* and *herbaside/herbacide* as potential candidates. The playfulness introduced via the humorous censorship sign in the top comment leads to further language play, as evident in the edited section in Reply 2, where *sudoku* is introduced as another possible substitute for *suicide*. Finally, a *produser* asks for information on the signified behind the signifier *herbacide*, which clearly indicates that a reliable group norm for referring to suicide has not been established.

While much humorous self-censorship takes place on the level of individual lexemes or phrases, it may also affect larger units and dynamic discourse processes. A case in point is pseudo-corrections in the written mode, which use the different options for correction in the spoken and the written modes. Corrections in spoken language necessarily leave traces: the correctible cannot be undone but is replaced *post hoc* or midway by an alternative formulation, i.e., a different word, phrase of grammatical construction (see Section 4.2 for how this can result in involuntary humor in the context of oral censorship signs on CL 1). In written language, correctibles can usually be deleted without a trace (real-time processing in DMC excepted). Example 7, taken from the written comments (CL 3), plays exactly with this difference:

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[3] Evidence from the corpus suggests that the skull emojis in the first reply function as a humor indicator (along the lines of "I'm dead from laughing", cf. Example 9 below), similar to other laughter-indicating emojis.

Example 7: Comment on "The Worst Religious Channel"

> My sister watched this channel, like what the fu- I mean frick

In the written mode within YouTube's communication form, such corrections are obviously unnecessary, as *produsers* may correct their message before posting it (Meredith and Stokoe 2014). However, the corpus contains instances of such corrections in the written mode where they are explicitly performed in constructing the message, therefore taking on a pseudo-like character. The effect is that the taboo lexeme is almost called up but ultimately avoided. Therefore, this kind of pseudo-correction in the written mode is a deliberately transparent self-censorship technique. If the censorship could be hidden in the editing process, but is not, there must be reasons for not doing so. We see these potentially in identity construction and/or humor. What is common to all these forms is that they may trigger humor reactions in the corpus and fulfil the function of undermining social norms (Zijderveld 1976: 178). While paying lip service to these norms, they clearly indicate their transgression.

4.2. Unintentional (?) sexual self-censorship

In the following example, the commentary YouTuber Repzion discusses another content creator (Eugenia Cooney), who allegedly suffers from an eating disorder.

Example 8: Video excerpt from "We Need To Talk About This Woman" (01:31-01:45)

> 3   **Repzion:** because if you go to her comment section you'll even find people who are recovering from ED
> <draws letters in the air with fingers>
> It's an abbreviation for eating uh D hah
> I just realized that that sounds like uh when I say ED ugh
>   <moves hand in front of face>

Repzion uses the initialism *ED* as a substitute for the compound noun *eating disorders*. Afterwards, he attempts to explain what the abbreviation stands for but seems to realize midway that he wants to avoid the term *disorder*, hence shortening it to [di:]. This is indicated by the hesitancy marker *uh* (Pomerantz 1975), and results in the formulation *eating d*. He then laughs awkwardly, seemingly realizing that the formulation has now taken up an additional meaning. Then he *meta*-metacommunicates, i.e., he metacommunicates about his own metacommunicative comment, before ultimately stopping to speak. He then indicates embarrassment through 'face palming'.

The unintended meaning generated in his first metacommunicative utterance is a sexual one, as the initialism *D* may also be used as a substitute for the word *dick*. *Eating d* thus has taken on a sexual meaning, which is incongruous with the topic currently discussed. The absurdity of the potential formulation "people who are recovering from eating dick" makes the sequence humorous, as well as the fact of an unintended additional censorable meaning generated in the censorship process (Brock 2016). Rather than creating plausible deniability with a censorship sign (*ED*), the result is the creation of a *more* rather than a *less* offensive alternative interpretation.

This segment is metacommunicatively discussed in the video's comment section (CL 3). We were able to identify 120 comments reacting to this incident. The blunder is perceived as humorous, with commenters identifying the incongruity of the sexual meaning of Repzion's own metacommunication as the source of involuntary humor. At the same time, his need for self-censoring is ridiculed through the further uptake of the ill-conceived form in the comments.

Example 9: Comment on "We Need to Talk about This Woman"

> *Eating D*, I'm dying.
> I shouldn't be this entertained by the video, but man that made me laugh

Since Repzion has used the initialism *ED* in the video before to describe Cooney's condition, the commenters also associate the sexual meaning with her person. They then use this interpretation for further humorous comments, using Repzion's involuntary humor as a springboard. This results in a game of one-upmanship, where *produsers* make new jokes using the sexual meaning of the ill-conceived censorship sign as the source of humor.

Example 10: Comment on "We Need to Talk about This Woman"

> I'm not guilty of ever eating D, but I've fed D to people before.

Example 11: Comment on "We Need to Talk about This Woman"

> Hey she's got to be eating something right lol just kidding.... Sorry if that was in poor taste (I hate my phone's voice to text) but that's the first thing that popped up when I read this comment.

Such games can be considered affiliative behavior in the service of social cohesion (Marone 2015:74). In terms of function, this humorous passage shows strong signs of building group solidarity.

Further, some commenters offer improvement on the self-censorship measure taken by Repzion to avoid such involuntarily humorous instances in the future, as in Example 12.

Example 12: Comment on "We Need to Talk about This Woman"

> @Repzion "disordered eating" gets the same point across without it being so…. amusing to my immature brain. lmao (I did get a couple of giggles out of it and I use humor to cope so it helped me chuckle through the content a little easier. Thank you for the accidental black humor.)

This shows that his attempts at self-censorship are accepted by the viewers, affirming the taboo character of the term *eating disorder*.

In Example 8, the censorship conventions attached to a specific form (abbreviation) lead to involuntary humorous self-censorship. This is possible because the censorship potential of abbreviations lies in their potential polysemy. The censorship sign *ED* has competing interpretations, not only *eating disorder*, as intended by Repzion, but also *erectile dysfunction*, which is also referred to in the humorous comments on the video (Example 13). This shows that the sign *ED* is not fully conventionalized and its polysemy has humorous potential.

Example 13: Comment on "We Need to Talk about This Woman"

> Oh my gawd Eugenia haz Erectile Disfunction 😱

Lastly, the involuntariness of humor in Example 8 is ultimately questionable. While the accidental sexual formulation seems unintentional at first, its inclusion in the video is clearly intentional, as it was not deleted in the editing process. This fundamentally differs from how accidental humor shows up in live video formats, as the participants in such frameworks do not have *post hoc* control over what is included in the broadcast (see Chovanec 2021). In other words, the humorous utterance on CL 1 at the time the video was recorded may have been involuntary. Still, the collective sender on CL 2 approved of its presence in the video, making the humor intentional for the audience on this level. This demonstrates that the multi-level environment on YouTube leads to specific options for creating humor.

4.3. **Name censorship**

Another instance of humorous censorship could be identified through indicators of humorous reception in the comments. Here, humor originates in an incongruous censorship practice of names. Names are usually censored – online and offline – for privacy concerns (e.g., Bös and Kleinke 2017:90-92, 107). The censorship in this case can be achieved through various means, such as complete omission or via censorship signs like abbreviations, blurring, and blackout. The goal is usually to obscure the respective name as an identifier completely. In the material considered here, name censorship not only occurs in less obscure forms, but recipients also interpret it as humorous, as seen in the following examples. Example 14 shows a comment thread (CL 3) posted under one of the videos.

Example 14: Comments on "Shane Dawson"

Comment	sh*ne used to be one of my biggest role models and to realize that your role model is an awful human being hurts so much	commenter1
Reply 1	Did you just censor "shane" 😂	commenter2
Reply 2	Don't think you need to censor his name 🤣 […]	commenter3
Reply 3	@commenter2 its a bad word man	commenter1

The crying-laughing emojis in Reply 1 and 2 show a humorous reception of the previous comment, in which the name Shane has been censored via typographic concealment in the form of *sh*ne*.[4] This indicates an incongruity present in the original comment. It stems from a break in conventions of name censorship, as evident by the question in Reply 1 and the correction undertaken in Reply 2: names of public YouTubers are not normally censored in the *commentary sphere*. In a response (Reply 3), the original poster of the comment provides an account for the censorship sign, explaining that the name is "a bad word". This evaluative function of the censorship sign seems to be dominant. An avoidance of the name due to privacy concerns is unlikely here, because the censored name can be found under a video explicitly discussing Dawson, which means that the name is accessible to all *produsers* anyway.

The name is also featured as a censorship sign (*Sh/ne D/wson*) in a different video's content warning,[5] where it occurs alongside other censorship signs like *s/icide* and *s/xual* (Hotbox, "The Haunting Return of Shane Dawson", 00:00-00:13). Even though the name occurs in this censored form in the beginning of the video (CL 2), its title contains

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[4] The name refers to Shane Dawson, a well-known YouTuber who was involved in many controversies over the years. A sub-section of the corpus considered here consists of commentary videos discussing him.
[5] Trigger or content warnings warn recipients of potentially triggering (i.e. retraumatizing) content contained in a succeeding text.

the name in an uncensored form (CL 4). As with Example 14, censorship in the pursuit of privacy does not seem to be the primary concern here. In terms of humorous incongruities, not only is the name censorship interpreted as humorous in the comments but also its inclusion in the content warning in the first place. An incongruity can be assumed to lie in the inclusion of a name in addition to potentially triggering topics, as the metacommunicative comment in Example 15 suggests:

Example 15: Comment on "The Haunting Return of Shane Dawson"

> I love how you censored his name in the CW list LOLOL

Example 14 also allows for an interpretation according to Bergson's theory: the *produsers* who censor Shane's name pretend to indiscriminately and mechanically censor any potentially harmful linguistic expression, thereby creating the character of the mechanical censor. As trigger warnings or censorship signs are usually related to taboo topics or words only, the name censorship or inclusion in trigger warnings puts the referent of the name on the same level. It thereby marks them as taboo or potentially offensive. In this way, the censorship of the name achieves various functions: It generates humor for the audience and allows the sign maker to take a negative stance on Dawson (Willenberg 2024a:110-111).

Another such instance in the material confirms the incongruous nature of name inclusion in trigger warnings (TWs). In a video about Dawson by greenistnotnick, the name is included in an uncensored form (CL 2). The inclusion of the name is considered humorous in the same video's comments (CL 3), too. This is indicated again by the use of emojis, digital laughter, expressions of incredulity, or metacommunication.

Example 16: Comment on "I Watched Shane Dawson's New Video"

> "Tw: Shane Dawson" LMFAO [6]

Example 17: Comment on "I Watched Shane Dawson's New Video"

> I love how Shane Dawson was the TW... I mean... It's true... But it made me laugh

What these examples have in common is that the incongruous censorship of the name *Shane Dawson* and its incongruous inclusion in the censorship-adjacent trigger warnings seem to break with community practices related to both.[7] The incongruity is thus situated on the macro level of social semiotics, reflecting a break in the expectation concerning TWs in the *commentary sphere*.

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[6] This initialism stands for *laughing my fucking ass off*.
[7] For more on the relationship between trigger warnings and censorship in terms of YouTube's participation framework, see Willenberg (2024b:266-270).

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the material shows that online content regulation often triggers both self-censorship and humor. Our presentation of the examples has demonstrated that what is common to all instances of humorous self-censorship is the function to undermine communicative norms about sayability. This affects both micro-semiotic dimensions of individual signifiers and macro-level semiotic structures such as taboo topics, trigger warnings, etc. Sign-makers use the semiotic affordances of YouTube's communication form in these endeavors. More specifically, it has been demonstrated how manipulations on the micro-semiotic levels affect the macro level of social semiotics in that they fulfil different functions and contribute to shaping language ideologies and linguistic norms on YouTube. What can and cannot be said on the platform is negotiated – among other things – via humorous censorship signs. While self-censorship more or less directly reflects the norms of sayability, humor needs these norms to determine an expectation which is then humorously transgressed and undermined. While it is impossible to predict whether self-censorship will stabilize the norms of communicative conduct or humorous transgression will gradually establish altered or new norms of sayability and face-work, it remains to be seen how these opposing tendencies will play out in the long run.

The material considered here allows us to identify incongruities within and in the use of censorship signs. Some cases, such as Example 6, show that censorship conventions in the *commentary sphere* are dynamic and a matter of negotiation. Acceptance or rejection of humorous censorship signs may contribute to the renegotiation or emergence of new language norms within the *commentary sphere*. This process allows sign-makers to engage in playful and non-serious self-censorship, particularly in the context of otherwise serious topics that may be subject to platform moderation, such as suicide or eating disorders.

Another significant function potentially fulfilled by humorous censorship signs is the establishment of group solidarity. Humor can function as a social glue, especially in the face of socially charged domains such as censorship. Members of the *commentary sphere* engage in humorous semiotic practices to signal group membership through shared communicative norms concerning self-censorship and the creation of an in-group identity tied to specific knowledge, which is obscured through self-censorship and accessible only to those 'in-the-know'.

The present discussion attempted to show that self-censorship techniques and conventions continue to evolve in the context of constantly changing content regulation methods on online platforms like YouTube, generating potential for new humor signs and shaping social-semiotic patterns.

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AUTHOR

Alexander Brock is Professor of English Linguistics at Martin-Luther-University, Halle-Wittenberg, Germany.

AUTHOR

Merle Willenberg is a research assistant and doctoral candidate at Martin-Luther-University, Halle-Wittenberg, Germany.

Past and present clashes as a source of humor

BY: **Dorota Brzozowska** and **Władysław Chłopicki**

ABSTRACT

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

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1. The past and present incongruity

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

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

2. The *1670* Netflix comic series

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

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

The most central pivot of the series is Jan Paweł, owner of (almost) half of the village of Adamczycha, where the action takes place. He is the stereotypical no-bleman, who takes great pride in his traditional, colorful outfit (an essential part of his image, see Figure 1) and much less in his intellectual development. He is highly self-indulgent, one could even say narcissistic, although the events and cir-cumstances do not give him a reason to feel that way (he is barely literate). He is the head of his family, which includes his devout, aggressive, but also love-greedy wife, Zofia; a progressive daughter, Anielka, who organizes the equality march in the village, and whom he wants to marry off to a wealthy but obnoxious magnate; and two sons. One son, Jakub, is a cynical and greedy Roman Catholic priest, and the other, Stanisław, is a late Baroque 'rock' music fan whom Jan Paweł tries to help marry an educated townsfolk girl but fails due to his own botched attempt to show off. He also has a bachelor brother-in-law, Bogdan, a warmongering loser, who is graciously offered a place to sleep on the hay in the shed. Jan Paweł's neighbor, Andrzej, is also an important character, as he owns the other half of the village and is quite progressive and successful, a reason enough for Jan Paweł to resent him. The village (a symbol of old Poland) is inhabited by peasants as well as representa-tives of minority religions – Jewish, Protestant, Orthodox (it is also once visited by Muslim Tatars), as well as one Lithuanian, Maciej, who has arrived "on a peasant

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

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

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

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

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

3. Methodology – between semiotics and pragmatics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Clash of the past and the present in *1670*

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

4.1. **Class and ethnicity**

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

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

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

> **make-sense frames** – father-daughter conflict. Anielka is criticized for working in the village together with the peasants.
> **cultural frames** – Polish nobility with all their assumptions about inheriting property and not undertaking physical work, relying on their family estates and the work of peasants.

> **utterance interpretation** – question-answer pattern in conversation [politeness]. Jan Paweł's question is not genuine – just a reminder that Anielka should not work.
> **dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers)** – noblemen, work.

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

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

> (2) Bogdan: Wait, wait, a **peasant** and a **Jew**, alone in a room, are you **plotting** something?
> Izaak: No…, no way.
> Maciej: This is **pure anti-Semitism**, my lord.
> Bogdan: **Thank you**.
> Izaak: And anti-… Is there a term for **prejudice against peasants**?
> Bogdan: There is. **Patriotism**. Be careful because I have an eye on you…
> (Episode 6, *The Duel*).

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

> **make-sense frames** – A peasant and a Jew, alone in a room, epitomize danger for xenophobic Bogdan.
> **cultural frames** – Jew, anti-Semitism, anti-peasant prejudice, patriotism; lack of empathy is a typical feature that leads to exclusion of minority groups.
> **utterance interpretation** – Thanking assumes something beneficial, while here thanks are offered for being an anti-Semite, while patriotism is reinterpreted to refer to prejudice against peasants, reprimand clashes with praise.
> **dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers)** – Jew, peasant, plotting, anti-Semitism, prejudice, patriotism

4.2. Gender roles

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

(3) Anielka: Don't you understand that this draws on the **toxic** pattern that is only a source of pain for subsequent generations of men? You live in constant **tension**, and you can't build a **healthy relationship** with other men because you are constantly hiding under the shell of your hopeless **pride**.
Jan Paweł: A pretty **braid**, you've got, Anielka.
(Episode 6, *The Duel*)

make-sense frames – the father-daughter communication is not easy; Anielka criticizes men for lacking skills to develop good relations with other men
cultural frames – patriarchal values, pretending to be strong and proud [the floating signifiers of God, honor, homeland are assumed for Polish readers], feminist critique of masculine society, ignoring female voices
utterance interpretation – men should leave their shell and drop their pride (Anielka), female looks matter (Jan Paweł), appearance dominates over mind for Jan Paweł
dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – toxic/ healthy patterns of communication, tension, pride, girl's braid

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

(4). Jakub: Why do **women** take part in our council?
Anielka: Because you are in **our** sitting room, idiot!
Jakub: Haven't I asked you to address me, **Father**?
Anielka: Yuk….

make-sense frames – power relations between siblings, men and women, priests and laymen.
cultural frames – excluding women from the decision making, traditional respectful forms used to address priests (Father), showing their higher position in the social hierarchy
utterance interpretation – Jakub doesn't want to see women in public space and wants to exclude them, Anielka doesn't want to call her brother – Father, perceives it as disgusting
dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – our/ your (space – sitting room), women, Father

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

4.3. Religious cultures

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

> (5) Jakub: I have a new system. I mark Judaism with a sad **face** (emoji), and Orthodoxy with a furious one. […] atheists we mark with the skull and crossbones.
> Jakub: Who do you believe in?
> Peasant: No one… I don't have that metaphysical element in me, I hope that's not a **problem** […].
> Jan Paweł: That's not a problem, but unfortunately, we'll have to kill you.
> (Episode 4, *Equality March*).
> **make-sense frames** – (lack of) equality and (non)discrimination. Jakub tries to be fair and offer clear criteria for the assessment of "heretic" religions, but in fact, he ridicules them by drawing simplistic symbols.

> **cultural frames** – Religious tolerance in old Poland, dominated by the Catholic religion, had its drawbacks too and involved various forms of discrimination.
>
> **utterance interpretation** – On the one hand, Jakub's aim is the statistical census of religious denominations; on the other, he ridicules all non-Catholic religions verbally (he calls them infidels) and visually (drawings), and threatens the atheists with death.
>
> **dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers)** – problem, visual face signs.

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

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

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

make-sense frames – Jan Paweł introduces his wife as a kind person, which is not the case because of her religious fanaticism and bigotry
cultural frames – Poland as a Catholic country, the Pole-Catholic stereotype assumes that Poland is the country of one religion, belief in the afterlife
utterance interpretation – Zofia is not an easygoing, extroverted person, living with her is difficult, she is cruel, stubborn, and fierce, able to torment others, thus not a role model of Christian virtues
dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – party soul, torment.

4.4. Social attitudes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

make-sense frames – Jan Paweł is riding a coach driven by a peasant coachman and talks directly to the viewer when the coach suddenly shakes on a bumpy road, and he is dissatisfied with this ride, calling it a "cheap" line in relation to popular cheap airways – in fact, it is completely free for him as a nobleman.
cultural frames – drinking is good for safe driving (past), versus drink driving is dangerous (present).
utterance interpretation – Jan Paweł's usually dismissive attitude implies that the coachman failed to drink and is now nervous and cannot drive properly.
dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – drink, nervous, cheap lines.

4.5. Technology of the past and present

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

> (9) Jan Paweł: You will **inherit** all of this one day, and you just sit there on **your picture** all day.
> Stanisław: Gimme a break, will you, dad?
> Jan Paweł: **Put the picture away!**
> Stanisław: **In a minute**, Dad.
> Jan Paweł: Not in a minute! **Now!** Life is passing you by.
> (Episode 2, *The Estate*).
>
> **make-sense frames** – father - son communication. Jan Paweł urges Stanisław again to get involved in managing the estate; this time, he wants to get his attention away from his picture with his potential girlfriends.
> **cultural frames** – inheritance rules among nobility, picture (past) versus smartphone (present).
> **utterance interpretation** – Jan Paweł wants to talk to his child, who is busy playing, and they exchange the cliché phrases that fathers and children use nowadays when children do not want to get away from the computer or phone.
> **dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers)** – picture, put it away, in a minute, now.

4.6. Communication styles

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

> (10) Jan Paweł: Tomorrow's sejmik? I'm calm. We're practicing the *best* traditional **Polish rhetorical tactics... I didn't interrupt you**, sir!
> Jakub: Louder!
> Jan Paweł: **I didn't interrupt you,** sir!
> Jakub: Look me in the eye. Tougher! Tougher! [They both bang the table with their fists, scream, and smile with satisfaction.] (Episode 1, *The Assembly*).

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

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

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

utterance interpretation – The son wants his father to be louder and sound tougher to win the argument at the assembly.
dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers) – best Polish rhetorical tactics, I didn't interrupt you, sir!

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

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

make-sense frames – Jan Paweł and Jakub refuse to talk to Andrzej in a way that is meant to be dismissive (their favorite attitude again) and excluding. Jan Paweł is unwilling to allow his guest to converse with his neighbor.
cultural frames – polite conversation, insult
utterance interpretation – They want to interrupt the conversation by breaking the rules of etiquette.
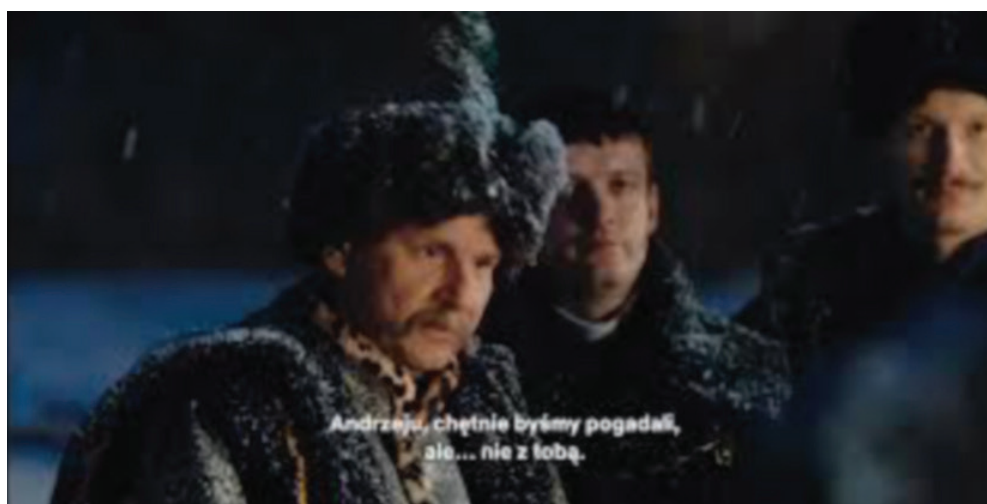**dialogic actions/reactions (use of floating signifiers)** – chat.

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

5. Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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AUTHOR

Dorota Brzozowska is a Professor of Linguistics at the Institute of Linguistics, University of Opole, Poland.

AUTHOR

Władysław Chłopicki is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University, Poland.

Nineteenth-century Romanian cartoons on freedom of expression

BY: **Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu**

ABSTRACT

The study examines Romanian cartoons from the mid-nineteenth century that illustrate the satirical journals' reaction against conservative press legislation affecting freedom of expression. The cartoons are excerpted from satirical publications issued by a famous journalist, Nicolae Orășanu, who was imprisoned several times for press delicts. In some cartoons, the artists refer to or allude to censorship or other political actions against the press and comment on the risk of imprisonment while doing one's profession. The approach draws from discourse analysis supplemented by rhetorical and cognitive metaphor-driven theoretical suggestions. The results indicate that cartoons are primarily multimodal, with a marked preference for metonymy and synecdoche as semiotic resources. The journalist profession is represented metonymically via a writing instrument (a quill), while censors' professional tools are represented as padlocks, handcuffs, scissors, chains, or muzzles. Recurring images are the single character to stand for a group (*pars pro toto*) and metonymic or synecdoche chains (*instrument for action and action for agent*). The exaggerated size of objects is meant to trigger emotional effects: empathy towards the press and discontent or indignation against political power. The article also examines cartoons' potential contribution to creating a myth or romanticized perception of the journalist and/or cartoonist as an altruistic martyr or a hero, a social representation that emerged in the nineteenth century.

1. Preliminary remarks

Cartoons are more than playful depictions of daily events; they represent a prominent part of social discourse (Bouko, Calabrese and De Clercq 2017). Discussed and debated for (un)limited freedom of expression, rights and restrains, or (in)tolerance, cartoons are at "the intersection between journalism and art", revealing moral and ideological stances, critiques, alarm triggers, etc. (Pedrazzini and Royaards 2022:361 – 362). See also the definition "political cartoons act as 'visual news discourse'" (Greenberg 2002:181 apud Bouko, Calabrese and De Clercq 2017:25). Given that cartoonists have been regarded as "influential and highly respected political commentators" (Pedrazzini and Scheuer 2018:102, see also Harvey 2009), this article aims to tackle the topic of freedom of expression in cartoons.

Our study focuses on mid-nineteenth-century Romanian cartoons illustrating the reaction of the satirical press against conservative legislation affecting the freedom of expression for the press. The cartoons are excerpted from satirical publications. In some cases, the cartoonists refer or allude to the political actions against (satirical) publications – like censorship – and reflect on the risk entailed by the profession (i.e., imprisonment). Our analysis also examines how the cartoons have potentially contributed to the creation of a myth or romanticized view of the journalist and/or cartoonist as a martyr or a hero with an altruistic role, a social representation that emerged in the nineteenth century (Bouko, Calabrese and De Clercq 2017:29 – 30).

Guided by the paradigms of rhetorics, discourse analysis, and cognitive metaphor theory applied to multimodal items (El Refaie 2003; Forceville 1994; 2008; 2020), the article highlights the semiotic resources used by Romanian cartoonists. Some preferred mechanisms are metonymy, synecdoche, metaphors, playing with the transition from a connotative to a denotative interpretation, etc. The interplay between text and image (Hempelmann and Samson 2008; Tsakona 2009) is vital for constructing social representations through cartoons.

This paper has the following structure: Section 2 discusses the relationship between cartoons and (political) censorship, while Section 3 begins with an overview of the study of cartoons as multimodal puzzles and focuses on rhetorical and cognitive perspectives. Section 4 is dedicated to the case study based on Romanian cartoons. The conclusions are presented in Section 5.

2. Cartoons and (political) censorship

As an "integral part of the social discourse" (Bouko, Calabrese, and De Clercq 2017:24), cartoons are more than a playful or satirical re-presentation of events or characters. Cartoons appeal to the collective memory (Bouko, Calabrese and De Clercq 2017:25)

and can also become part of this memory. Western European cartoons originate from an Italian source that favored exaggerated portraits, with their roots in the iconography of Egyptian, Roman, and Greek Antiquity (Hempelmann and Samson 2008:613), as well as from the German and Dutch sources, focusing on scenes with symbolic buildups influenced by the Reformation context (EU 2002:995). These traditions of Western European cartoons merged in the works of British and French artists from the eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, such as Hogarth, Gilray, Cruikshank, Philipon, and Daumier, who influenced the graphic artists throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.

Goldstein's (1989) synthesis on the French satirical press in the nineteenth century convincingly shows the importance attributed to cartoons by both politicians and journalists: cartoons can be "read" by the illiterate, they cross language barriers, and they are harder to counter than satirical texts (see also Pedrazzini and Scheuer 2018:102). Due to their (potential) influence, cartoons have been subject to censorship, mainly in the nineteenth century, but also in the twentieth century (during the World Wars, in communist countries, etc.). Censorship can be broadly defined as an intervention in the "voluntary exchange of information and ideas" (George 2024:608). This intervention can be made by state institutions, considering various national or international interests or sensibilities, or it can be demanded by professional, religious, ethnic, etc. groups, and enforced by state institutions, a situation characteristic mostly of present-day cartoons. It is considered that publicly pointing out the interference of censorship generates considerably more interest in the forbidden image or text than in the pre-censorship situation (George 2024:608). In some cases, what is censored ("the content") is considerably less prominent than the context in which censorship is enforced or demanded: "who engages in these episodes of contention, as well as when, where and with what intensity" (George 2024:608). This is one of the reasons satirical publications have mentioned the intervention of censorship regarding their cartoons or have published cartoons missing some parts of the drawing, parts considered inappropriate by censors (Goldstein 1989; 2018[2012]).

Nineteenth-century cartoons were censored when they targeted royalty, important politicians or public figures, or if they were perceived as licentious, thus outraging society's morals.[1] Media engages in a "struggle for symbolic power" (Thompson 2000:9 apud Nieuwenhuis 2024:103): the rise of the media as a symbolic power is a feature of the nineteenth century. The media challenged state institutions and gradually became an important component of modern societies.

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[1] See also the present-day legal cases against cartoons or stand-up jokes within forensic humor studies (Godioli 2020; Godioli, Young and Fiori 2022; Pedrazzini and Royaards 2022).

3. Cartoons through the lens of various theoretical models

Cartoons are multimodal puzzles, characterized by "high semiotic density" (Pedrazzini 2024:121), which "stand out as a particularly compact and semantically dense form of communication" (Godioli 2020:6). Semiotic condensation (Morris 1993 apud El Refaie 2003:88; Pedrazzini 2024:120 – 121) is one of the main characteristics of cartoons. The complexity of pictorial humor has been highlighted in various studies that mention the challenge of 'translating' visual meaning into verbal meaning (El Refaie 2003; Lessard 1991; Tsakona 2009). Decoding pictorial humor entails visual literacy (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996) and social, cultural, and political encyclopedic knowledge.

Various authors (Gervereau 2000; Nikolajeva and Scott 2000; Samson and Huber 2007; Tsakona 2009) have distinguished between three main types of cartoons: a type in which the visual component illustrates the verbal one (like a joke accompanied by illustration); a type in which the interplay between the two semiotic modes is essential (equal importance for the visual and verbal components); and a type in which the verbal component (if any) is an appendix for the visual one. Cartoons have been analyzed from various perspectives: some studies are informed by the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Hempelmann and Samson 2008; Tsakona 2009; Genova 2018), others by cognitive theory (Brône and Feyaerts 2003; Marín Arrese 2008; Yus 2016), conceptual metaphors included (Bergen 2003; Bounegru and Forceville 2011; El Refaie 2003; Rohrer 2004), to mention only these important strands.

Our approach is informed by discourse analysis and rhetorical and cognitive metaphor-driven theories. One crucial thread starts from the work of Forceville (1994; 2008; 2020). Having as a starting point Barthes's (1964) suggestions, Forceville (1994) distinguishes between three types of messages: the linguistic message (belonging to the verbal component), and the denoted and the connoted messages, which are attributes of the visual element. The verbal message, included in the image or placed above it, can be complementary to the image, having a relaying function, or it can guide the visual decoding, thus providing an anchoring function. The denoted and the connoted messages can be related to what Pedrazzini and Scheuer (2018:103) label the referenced situation ("the topic of the cartoon") and the fictional situation. These two situations are recognised due to the relationship between the thematic and rhetorical levels of the cartoon. The denoted message comes from the fictional situation depicted in the cartoon, while the connoted message draws from the referenced situation.

According to the conceptual metaphor theory (drawing from the classical work of Lakoff and Johnson 1980), metaphors are based on the mappings or correspondences between two domains: a source (usually concrete, familiar) and a target domain (usually abstract, less familiar), connected in a relationship of

equivalence *A is B*. Metonymies[2] rely on the (cor)relations within a domain: for example, a person stands for a professional *category/group*, an *object* stands for a *profession* or for an *institutional action*, etc. A subtype of metonymy is synecdoche: a *part* stands for the *entire entity*, "pars pro toto."

Forceville (1994; 2008) proposes the concepts of *pictorial* and *multimodal metaphor*. Pictorial metaphors are visual, nonverbal metaphors (Forceville 2008:463, 464): "their target and source are entirely rendered in visual terms" (Forceville 2008:464). The *multimodal metaphor* consists of "target, source, and/or mappable features […] represented or suggested by at least two different sign systems (one of which may be language) or modes of perception" (Forceville 2008:463). Forceville considers that three criteria should be met for a combination of semiotic modes to be regarded as a multimodal metaphor (although only the last criterion is typical of multimodality): (1) the two modes ("phenomena") have to be part of distinct categories; (2) they "can be slotted as target and source, respectively, and captured in an *A is B* format that forces or invites an addressee to map one or more features, connotations, or affordances […] from source to target"; and (3) they "are cued" in more than one semiotic system (Forceville 2008:469). Forceville (2008:463) enumerates several differences between pictorial and multimodal metaphors and their linguistic/verbal correspondents concerning their "construal and impact": "perceptual immediacy," specific modalities of cueing, greater cross-cultural accessibility, and a potentially "stronger emotional appeal" (see also El Refaie 2003:89) characterize pictorial and multimodal targets and sources. Multimodal metaphors are also important for metarepresentation: implicatures and explicatures are involved both for the artist creating the cartoon and for the addressee (Forceville 2020:183).

El Refaie (2003:75) considers visual metaphors[3] "the pictorial expression of a metaphorical way of thinking." Metaphors usually surface from the combination of various "verbal and visual signs, which, through their particular relation to one another, together produce the idea," the "thought," or concept (El Refaie 2003:80). Meaning is the result of a negotiation between producers/creators and viewers (El Refaie 2003:81).

We focus on metonymies and metaphors in cartoons, and we combine attention to the conceptual component with highlighting "the potential significance of the 'grammar' of visual metaphor" explored in a particular sociopolitical context (El Refaie 2003:76 – 77). The importance of both the viewers' expectations and the influence exerted by the social and political context on the cartoons' creation cannot be ignored (El Refaie 2003:77). From the three types of metaphorical meaning delineated

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[2] Metonymies as cognitive mechanisms are instrumental for the analysis of cartoons (El Refaie 2003).
[3] Although most of the studies mention only metaphor as a concept, the observations are valid also for metonymy. In section 4 we will draw attention, when necessary, to the distinctions between the two cognitive mechanisms. "Visual metaphor" and "pictorial metaphor" are synonyms.

by Kövecses (2020:157) – *meaningfulness, decontextualized meaning,* and *contextualized meaning*, the latter is more significant for our approach. While meaningfulness and decontextualized meaning are drawn from more abstract levels (the image schema and domain and frame levels), contextualized (contextual) meaning corresponds to instantiation (Kövecses 2020:157). According to Kövecses (2020:158), "a particular contextual meaning is introduced in order to enable a variety of social, pragmatic, emotive, rhetorical, etc. functions and effects," which equals what Forceville (1994, following Barthes 1964) labels the *connoted meaning* (see above).

4. The Romanian case study

This section focuses on cartoons published by satirical publications in Romania in the second half of the nineteenth century (1859–1864). The nineteenth-century cartoons target official state censorship and the lack of freedom of expression for the press due to the absence of modern legislation. The cartoons are extracted from satirical publications directed by, or having as main contributor, Nicolae Orășanu, a journalist imprisoned several times for his articles. Our examples are selected from *Nichipercea, Coarnele lui Nichipercea* 'The Horns of Nichipercea', *Calendarul lui Nichipercea* 'Nichipercea's Calendar.'

The collection[4] of the Central University Library in Bucharest contains around 100 issues from these publications (1859–1864), and we have identified 10 cartoons on censorship. Their frequency is relatively low, especially if compared with other topics. In general, each issue has two cartoons (or two pages with illustrations), which leads to roughly 200 cartoons in the collection. The cartoons targeting the "political menagerie" are far more frequent than those on censorship. These cartoons usually appear in connection with specific official interventions against the (satirical) press.

4.1. Political and cultural context

Before 1828, in the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia (which united in 1859 and later became known as Romania), censorship targeted printed works with religious content. There were very few printers, usually managed by the Church. The Russian occupation of the Principalities (due to the Russian-Ottoman war of 1828 – 1829) imposed censorship on local publications and imported books or journals. The official role of censor was also established (Petcu 2005:19 – 23). The newly 'born' press in the Romanian language (the first journals appeared in 1829) could publish news only after receiving approval from the censors (i.e., prior censorship). Between 1829 and 1856, the Russian protectorate doubled the Ottoman suzerainty over the

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[4] The material is copyright free and publicly accessible.

Principalities. Both imperial powers were very cautious regarding freedom of the press. In 1856, Prince Ghica attempted to abolish prior censorship, but the initiative was suspended after three months due to objections from the Ottoman suzerain (Petcu 2005:34 – 35). In 1859, shortly after the Union of the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, satirical journals began to appear.[5] The Prince of the United Principalities Alexandru Ioan Cuza (1859 – 1866) was tolerant towards the press. However, without press legislation designed on democratic principles, the Minister of Internal Affairs had the authority to suspend publications, imprison journalists, or censor cartoons.

The (still) conservative press legislation between 1859 and 1866 thus affected the freedom of expression (Petcu 2005; Șerbănescu 2013; Trifu 1974). For example, some caricatures were censored after Cuza's *coup d'état* in 1864. For instance, in *Nichipercea* (issue 20 / 10.05.1864, page 160, figure 1), the publisher printed a last page titled *Goana din rai* ('The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden'), without the caricature, but with a footnote: *Foaia aceasta ese fără caricature din causă că d. Ministru din întru a găsit de cuviință a le opri* ('This journal is printed without caricatures because the Minister of Internal Affairs thought it better to stop them').
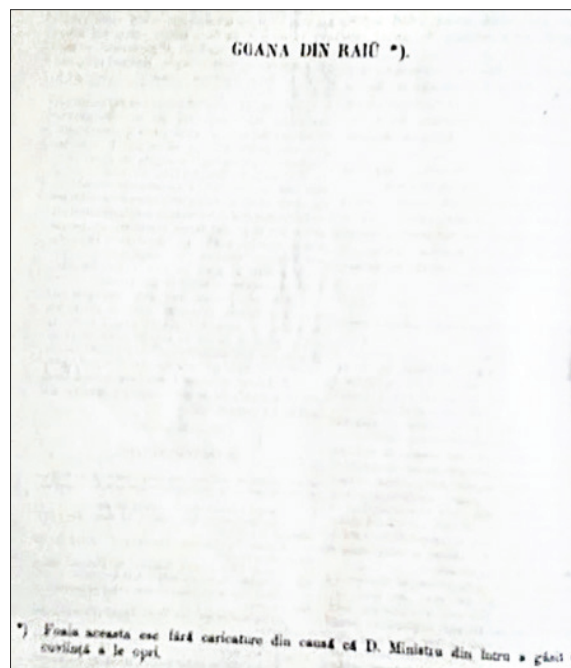

Figure 1. Collection of the Central University Library, Bucharest

[5] One example is *Țânțarul* 'The Mosquito', the first issue in February 1859.

In his detailed presentation of nineteenth-century censorship of political caricatures in France, Goldstein (1989:54) mentions that "the publication of caricatures that had obviously been mutilated by the censors" represents a strategy to protest against censorship. Other strategies are to publish caricatures "with obviously missing or obscured parts" or with the portions censored "replaced by the notice 'forbidden by the censor'" (Goldstein 1989:54).

4.2. Analysis of the cartoons

In Romanian journals, the first cartoons were (lithograph) copies of works by mainly French artists like Honoré Daumier, from *Le Charivari* (Oprescu 1945; Șerbănescu 2013:9). There were very few artists willing to illustrate satirical periodicals at the early stages of the satirical press in Romania, as cartoons were viewed as a minor art (Șerbănescu 2013). Furthermore, in the first years of their existence, the artists usually did not sign the illustrations from satirical journals. Most of the mid-nineteenth-century satirical press cartoons are multimodal metonymies blended with metaphors.

The cartoon on the next page (Figure 2, *Nichipercea*, no 10/17.12.1859, p. 16), published in 1859, was signed by Henri Trenk.[6] The paratext contextualizes the visual part of the cartoon. Under the title *Ziaristica română* ('Romanian press/journalism'), the artist represents three versions of the press (with temporal cues): an ideal one, the character on the left, under the caption *Cum ar trebui să fie*[7] ('How it should be'), and two situations influenced by the political setting[8] – the contemporary situation, after the Paris Convention of 1858, the character in the middle – *Cum e după Convenție* ('How it is after the Convention'), and the previous one, after the Organic Regulation, the character on the right – *Cum era sub Regulament* ('How it was under the Regulation').

In all three depictions, the male figures – the fictional situation, conveying the denoted message – metonymically represent the Romanian press – the referenced situation, conveying the connoted message. It is a PERSON STANDS FOR A CATEGORY/ GROUP visual metonymy: "The conceptual relationship between journalist and press is that of contiguity because the journalist is part of the press institution and, hence, serves as a metonym standing for the press" (Toumi 2022:14). The cartoon itself can be construed as a multimodal metonymy.

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[6] One of the most important illustrators of the satirical publications in the first years of their existence was Henri Trenk (1818–1892), a Swiss born painter. He illustrated some of the publications issued by Orășanu.

[7] The captions written in the transitional alphabet are transliterated here in the Latin alphabet. In mid-nineteenth-century, Romanian printers in the Principalities started to use the Latin alphabet, but some letters from the Cyrillic alphabet were still in use.

[8] The Organic Regulation, adopted in 1831 in Wallachia and in 1832 in Moldavia, acted as a first Constitution for the Principalities. It was followed by the Paris Convention of 1858. The first Constitution created by the Romanian Parliament was adopted in 1866.

Figure 2. Collection of the Central University Library, Bucharest.

At the same time, the contrasting attitudes of the characters lead to different visual implicatures. Considering the character on the left, the position of his legs suggests ample movements similar to those in sports or dancing. The overall image conveys the idea of free movement, which metaphorically maps to the concept of freedom of expression for the press. The journals the first character holds above his head and under his arm can be considered a visual synecdoche with multiple layers: the part, i.e., some journals, stands for the whole entity, i.e., the press, *pars pro toto*. The journal under the arm of the first character has the title Charivari on the frontispiece, which is the title of a famous French satirical publication. The reference to this publication can be seen as a reference to the satirical press in general, a subordinate pars pro toto synecdoche: since a satirical publication is part of the satirical press, which is part of the press in general, the synecdochical chain can be *pars pro pars pro toto*. The character also holds a toy and a small devil with a paper (or a journal?) in its hand. The small devil can be a metonymical or synecdochical representation of the Romanian satirical publication *Nichipercea*. The journal's title is a folk playful name of the devil, and it had a visual representation of a small devil on its frontispiece (see Constantinescu 2020). Thus, the representation in the cartoon can be seen as a symbol for the journal. At the same time, the cartoon is printed on the pages of the journal (a metonymic relation of inclusion).

The second character (in the middle) contrasts sharply with the first. His body position suggests immobility; his head is down, and he is handcuffed. An oversized padlock covers his mouth. The position of the third character's hands and legs suggests an attempt to run away from oversized scissors cutting his body in half (the character on the right). A quill, a metonymical representation of the profession, is also cut: the quill is a writing tool indicating the figure's status as a journalist. The second and third characters are victims of a force (i.e., human agents manipulating objects) that is metonymically and metaphorically represented through the padlock, handcuffs, and scissors. The handcuffs are objects unambiguously related to the police, a state institution that can restrain citizens' freedom of movement. The lack of mobility and the oversized padlock and scissors map onto the lack of freedom of expression.

Focusing on the padlock and the scissors, each has its own referential and connotative sphere. Padlocks are objects meant to prevent something from being opened, protect valuable items, or prevent someone from entering or leaving a place. The scissors indicate the cutting action: the verb is polysemous, and the meaning associated with suppression of words or texts is the prominent one in the context of the press. In this context, the objects affecting the journalists are instruments of official institutions hindering freedom of expression. The use of padlocks and scissors entails purposeful action by state institutions: "censorship is an intended practice to prevent journalistic work being carried out properly at different stages" (Toumi 2022:158); in the case of the cartoons we are examining, the stage seems to be the writing of articles. The oversized padlock and scissors are immediately perceptible; they trigger an emotional reaction of empathy with the victim and fear or indignation concerning the agent using these tools.

The padlock is a recurring metonymical and metaphorical representation of censorship. Both fictional and referenced situations are recurring. Other cartoons from *Nichipercea's Calendar for 1860*, published at the end of 1859, titled *Libertatea presei* ('Freedom of the press'), and from *Nichipercea* (46/1.04.1862, p. 368) depict similar images. The victims are either the journalists (Figure 3) or the entire public opinion (Figure 4, Nichipercea, no. 46/1.04.1862, p. 368). The text again serves a contextualizing function, attributing a referent to the characters depicted. The title in Figure 3 or the caption *Opiniunea publică, restaurată prin noua metodă a domnului Manolache Kostache* ('The public opinion, restored by the new method of mister Manolache Kostache'), in Figure 4, is ironic compared to the drawing. In Figure 3, the male character has his hands tied behind his back, his legs also tied, while his mouth is pierced by a giant padlock. He is in front of a door with a sign above it that reads Redaktia ('Editorial office'). The title and the sign help reconstruct the metonymy: the character is a journalist, and thus, he stands for the press.
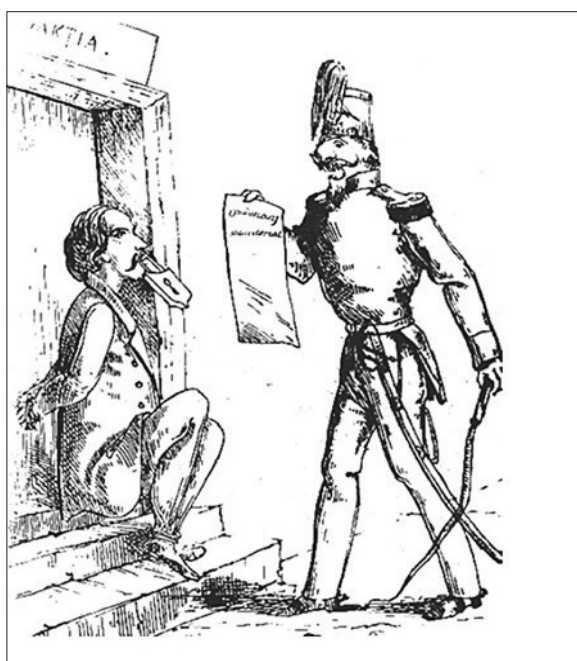
Figure 3. *Calendarul lui Nichipercea pe anul 1860 [Nichipercea's Calendar for 1860]*, 1859, p. 11 (from Oprescu 1945: LXVIII).

Figure 4. Collection of the Central University Library, Bucharest.

The same mechanism is found in Figure 4. The four male characters, each with a giant padlock on their mouth, are a synecdoche for public opinion. The same text, *lege de presă* ('press law'), is written on the padlock. Writing the words on the objects indicates a metaphor: the press law, at that moment, equals a padlock. The cartoons from both Figure 3 and 4 can be construed as multimodal metonymy.

In the Romanian cartoons, the padlock impedes speaking (the denoted message). Journalists and artists convey their messages (i.e., 'speak') through articles and caricatures. The impediment to communication relates to a metaphorical representation of press censorship (Toumi 2022:154). Thus, the connoted message is that PRESS CENSORSHIP IMPEDES COMMUNICATION. As Toumi (2022:155) notices for the Algerian caricatures published during the Civil War in Algeria (1992–2002), "[t]he oversized padlocks invoke the conceptual metaphoric mapping linking significance to physical size" (Grady 1997). Oversized objects, with their "perceptual immediacy" (Forceville 2008), imply a major intervention against the freedom of expression of journalists and artists (see also El Refaie 2003:85). The depiction of oversized instruments directly correlates with the extent of the state intervention against the press. The visual representation is probably intended for emotional appeal. It aims to trigger a complex affective reaction from the cartoon viewers, as mentioned above: indignation against state officials vs. empathy for the journalists. The emotional appeal is included in the connoted (according to Forceville 1994) or contextual(ized) meaning (as mentioned by Kövecses 2020).

In Figure 2, the scissors stand for the intervention in the text (SCISSORS STAND FOR TEXT SUPPRESSION) of an agent, a censor. Intervening in the text is typical of a censor, thus TEXT SUPPRESSION STANDS FOR CENSOR. The metonymical chain within the connoted meaning involves the INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION and ACTION FOR THE AGENT. The handcuffs stand for arrest (INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION), a penalty imposed by the authorities on journalists or caricaturists: for example, the journalist Orășanu was imprisoned 5 times for press offences, for short periods, in the first years of his career (1859–1864). The action of arrest also involves an agent with institutional authority: an ACTION FOR THE AGENT. The agent represents the state authority (*pars pro toto*) for all three objects. Only in Figure 3 is a depiction of state authority through the officer showing the arrested journalist an official document. In this figure, the officer's presence explicitly comments on the fact that the agent enforcing censorship represents the state (the explicature). The way of cueing state intervention makes the idea of censorship more visible to the journal's readers.

The scissors are a famous metonymy for censorship[9] in the French satirical press in the second half of the nineteenth century, starting with the drawings of André Gill or Alfred Le Petit in *L'Eclipse*[10] and *Le Grelot*.[11] Le Grelot's frontispiece depicted an open padlock under the title.

Both the scissors and the quill are metonymical representations: while the scissors are the instrument used by censors (INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION and ACTION FOR THE AGENT), the quill is historically the symbol for journalists (Bouko, Calabrese and De Clercq 2017; Goldstein 1989, 2018[2012]; Toumi 2022), thus INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION and ACTION FOR THE AGENT as well. The confrontation between "a sword and a pen/pencil/quill" represents "a legacy from Islamic literature, which found continuity in Hebrew literature" (Bouko, Calabrese, and De Clercq 2017:28; Cf. *the pen is mightier than the sword*[12]). It is plausible to consider that the repeated visual metonymic or metaphorical representation leads to conventionalization and its addition to the interdiscourse: "the constant repetition of particular metaphors will encourage the unconscious or at least semi-conscious acceptance of a particular metaphorical concept as the normal, natural way of seeing a particular area of experience" (El Refaie 2003: 83–84). In other words, a recurrent fictional situation can become conventionalized, and the implicatures associated with that fictional situation can become shared knowledge.

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[9] In France, censorship for the satirical texts stopped in 1822, but for cartoons it continued until 1881 (briefly abolished in 1830, 1848, 1870), for more details regarding French satirical publications and their caricatures see Goldstein (1989, 2018 [2012]).

[10] For example, Gill's famous *Madame Anastasie* from *L'Eclipse*, July 19, 1874.

[11] For example, the first page of *Le Grelot* from July 20, 1873, or December 28, 1873.

[12] I would like to thank the editors for this suggestion.

There are also cases where the cartoon is based on a visual metaphor supported by the abovementioned metonymies. This is the case with the multimodal representation in Figure 5 (*Nichipercea*, no 10 / 10.02.1863, page 76), which also draws on the analogy with a folk saying alluded to in the caption: *Când mâța e legată, muselată și potcovită cu coji de nuci, șoarecii mănâncă nesupărați bostanul. Adevărul spus cu alte cuvinte se trimite la pușcărie.* 'When the cat is tied to a post, wearing a muzzle and walnut shells on its paws, the mice eat the pumpkin undisturbed. The truth told in other words is sent to prison.'

The visual cues are not only prominent (i.e., immediately perceptible) but also able to provoke an emotional reaction of disapproval regarding the status of the press, prevented from acting, and indignation regarding politicians.
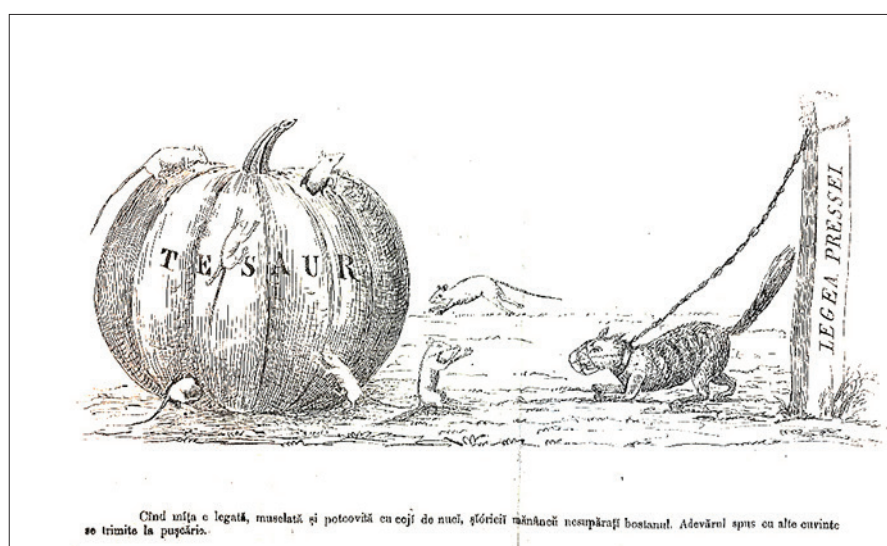

Figure 5. Collection of the Central University Library, Bucharest

In the fictional situation, the censored press is mapped onto the image of the cat wearing a muzzle (which is the equivalent of the padlock from the previous cartoons), walnut shells (which impede walking), and being tied to a post on which it is written *legea presei* 'law of the press.' The fictional situation of the cat (the denoted message) maps onto the restrictions imposed on the press (the connoted message). The pumpkin has the word *tezaur* ('treasure' or 'treasury') superimposed, so the implicature is that politicians (i.e., mice) are taking advantage of the state's wealth, enjoying the press's lack of freedom. The explicature in the caption is that daring to tell the truth is punished with prison time. Censorship is visually alluded to through 'instruments': the chain, the muzzle, the shells, and the pillar are metonymies for the actions exerted on the press.

4.3. **Linguistic considerations**

Next, we want to address the connection between the multimodal metonymy and metaphor and their verbal counterparts. We explore if the expressions *a pune lacăt la gură* (lit. 'to put a padlock at someone's mouth') and the connotation of the verb a *tăia* ('to cut') were prominent in Romanian at the time of the drawings. *A pune lacăt la gură* (meaning 'to be discreet, not to talk too much'; see DA *s.v. lacăt*) is positively appraised in Romanian folk wisdom,[13] maybe as a reflection of the religious value of *humilitas.* Thus, the everyday use of the expression would not favor the expression to be a source for the visual representation. Instead, it seems that the visual representation feeds a negative connotation of the expression, which developed (much) later in Romanian. The visual representation may be influenced by a French expression[14] (considering the overall influence of French in Romania) or by visual representations in foreign press. In any case, the presence of the same tools for framing a specific action (censorship) in various cultural spaces attests to their cross-cultural accessibility (Forceville 2008).

A tăia ('to cut') is attested with the meaning 'to suppress (a text or parts of a text by crossing lines)' in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (see DLR *s.v.*). Even though the dictionary does not record an earlier use, the meaning could have appeared in informal, oral contexts. Considering the linguistic and cultural French influence in Romania in the mid-nineteenth century, we should also explore the situation in French. The meaning 'suppress' for the verb *couper* ('to cut') is old, attested in the fifteenth century (see TLFi, *s.v. couper*). The censors' scissors are mentioned in the early nineteenth century in Chateaubriand's *La Liberté de la Presse*, 1822–28, p. 101: "Le Moniteur porte ensuite un défi à l'opposition: il l'appelle en champ clos, bien entendu qu'il combattra cuirassé de la censure, et que l'opposition toute nue sera menacée *des ciseaux des censeurs*"[15] (apud TLFi, *s.v. ciseau*, emphasis added). Thus, in French, the verbal metaphor–metonymy can be placed at the foundation of the visual representation. The "censor's scissors" metaphor appears, for example, in the memoirs of two Romanian writers when referring to censorship either before 1848 (the revolutionary year) or in the 1850s: commenting on the short life of a journal, Ghica says "the censor's scissors came and cut its thread of life," while Aricescu revives his protest for "two articles mutilated by the censorship's scissors" (cited in Petcu 2005:27, 35, our translation). The appearance of the scissors in Romanian cartoons to signal censorship (before the famous drawings by Gill and Le Petit) may indicate the same verbal origin for the graphic representation. El Refaie (2003:83) mentions, for example, the situation in

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[13] See the recommendations from Anton Pann's translation of a conduct book in early nineteenth century.

[14] In French there is an expression *attacher des cadenas aux lèvres* (de qqn), lit. 'putting a padlock at someone's lips', meaning 'to make someone shut up', first attested at Diderot (1779) (apud TLFi, *s.v. cadenas*).

[15] In Engl. 'The *Moniteur* defies the opposition: it calls the opposition in an enclosed space, of course it will fight against the opposition armored by censorship. The naked opposition will be threatened by the censors' scissors.'

which "highly conventional verbal expressions […] were also often reinforced through visual depictions." A creative metaphor/metonymy can become conventional and be reinforced by how it is visually presented (El Refaie 2003:84).

In the case of the last example, the caption and the image allude to and transform a folk saying: *Când pisica nu-i acasă, șoarecii joacă pe masă* 'when the cat's away, the mice will play'. In the saying, the cat maps the person with authority, able to sanction misbehavior. In the cartoon, it seems that the cartoonist assigns the press the social function of gatekeeper (the present-day *watchdog*), while the politicians in power avoid public sanction by limiting the freedom of the press. Another textual and visual allusion is to the punishment involving walnut shells, which was both humiliating and painful (usually inflicted on children in the past).

Journalists or cartoonists as heroes or martyrs are representations created in the nineteenth century; they are added to the existing social representations and, in time, become pervasive symbols. These representations are influenced by the constantly growing literacy and political awareness rates.

5. Conclusion

Romanian cartoons referencing different types of censorship reveal several traits. Nineteenth-century cartoons are mostly multimodal. The semiotic resources noticed in the cartoons indicate a preference for metonymy and synecdoche and the construction of a pervasive social representation. In relation to the profession, the use of metonymy, where an instrument represents the protagonists (a quill for a journalist), is a constant, as is the use of instruments for the antagonists-censors (i.e., padlocks, handcuffs, scissors, chains, or muzzles for state censors). Another constant is the use of a single character to stand for a group (*pars pro toto*) and the existence of metonymic or synecdoche chains (*instrument for action for agent, pars pro pars pro toto*).

The oversized objects are cues for implicatures pointing to the exaggerated actions of state officials. They are meant to trigger emotional effects: to yield empathy towards the press and to enhance discontent, displeasure, or indignation against the politicians in power. An emotional appeal can spark not only emotional reactions but also actions of protest against those depicted as enemies of the press and, by extension, of the citizens.

The recurrence of the fictional situation (the denoted message) with minimal changes or creativity in its presentation reinforces a particular social representation. The image of the hero or martyr (the connoted message) became part of the interdiscourse both verbally and visually.

We consider the analytical tools provided by rhetorical and cognitive metaphor and metonymy-driven theories useful for exploring the semiotic puzzle of cartoons.

The preferred mechanisms artists exploit can be highlighted, even though it is not always a straightforward endeavor.

The study is limited regarding the number of cartoons that fit the topic of freedom of expression in the nineteenth-century Romanian press. A supplementary limitation is that these cartoons are excerpted from publications issued under the management of a single journalist with a rebellious ethos. At this stage of the research, we cannot venture to say what the impact of the cartoons at the time was: whether several other publications recreated the same imagery in the cartoons published or if other imagery was preferred. Many aspects remain to be explored: the semiotic practices concerning the freedom of speech in a broader range of publications, the potential influence from foreign sources (French, British, German, Austrian, etc.), and the way foreign models were adapted to the Romanian context, etc.

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AUTHOR

Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu is Associate Professor at the Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, Romania.

Counterspeech humor for discursive justice

BY: **Saleta de Salvador Agra**

ABSTRACT

Humor can be key in counteracting harmful discourse and addressing *conversational injustices*. This paper introduces the concept of counterspeech humor as the antithesis of *hate speech*, highlighting its ability to promote discursive justice. First, the central role of the counterspeaker is analyzed; second, three specific strategies of counterspeech humor are proposed: resignifying parody, bending irony, and intentionally blocking laughter. These forms of counterspeech humor are explored as effective responses to neutralize discursive harm and dismantle unjust practices. The effectiveness of counterspeech humor and its limitations in addressing harmful discourse are assessed through concrete examples. The paper emphasizes the reparative capacity of humor, showcasing its potential to offer constructive responses to hate. It concludes that counterspeech humor is a powerful tool for challenging injustices, transforming exclusionary contexts, and promoting social justice through creative use of language.

1. Introduction: In the name of humor

In the name of humor, we perform and easily justify very different actions. I am also going to invoke humor here and take advantage of the performative versatility that characterizes it, to think about a type of humor that, rather than doing, dismantles, disarms, and deconstructs. A kind of humor that I will call *counterspeech*, since, paraphrasing and expanding on the famous title of John L. Austin's (1962) book, its objective

is to undo things with signs. More specifically, I will focus on undoing bad things through humorous signs, proposing *counterspeech humor* as an antonym of *hate speech* (Zollner 2024).

Although humor and hate represent different concepts, their antagonism is not always apparent. This is evident, for example, when we resort to humor to support and excuse hostile forms of speech. Thus, the common expression "It's just a joke" represents an attempt to conceal the hurtful meaning of specific comments, as if the mere intention could minimize the impact of the utterance (De Salvador 2023b). However, the connections between humor and hate are not limited to the use of these "get-out clauses" (Shahvisi 2023:53). Both notions share a common background, bringing them together in sociocultural and psychological terms and expanding their relationship beyond mere discursive justifications. This paper will show that for counterspeech humor to function adequately as a response to hate speech,[1] various contextual and social factors must influence its pragmatic felicity. That is, the impact and effectiveness of counterspeech humor depend not only on a specific linguistic structure or on the intention of the sender but also on deeply rooted power dynamics.

To develop this idea, I will begin by paying attention to the notion of *counterspeech humor*, resorting to the specialized literature for each of its components, and articulating both notions coherently and well-founded. Next, I will look at the counterspeaker. That is, the central role of the receiver who, on receiving the hate speech, can deactivate it. Without ignoring the effort such a task entails in epistemic and pragmatic terms, I will address three discursive strategies that function as humorous tools. Thus, I will focus on parody, irony, and a specific type of laughter, and I will take them as examples to reflect on possible cases of counterspeech humor.

These three instances will be presented from the feminist perspective. This choice is justified because these forms of humor stand out for their critical approach, proving the relevance of what is nowadays known as the "feminist philosophy of humor" (Marvin 2022:4). In fact, prominent feminist philosophers (Braidotti 1996; Butler 1990; Haraway 1985) have not only used and analyzed them as critical tools but also claimed their feminist application. Furthermore, feminist humor, whether parodic and ironic or not, can be understood as a counterspeech to the extent that it is constructed as discourse in opposition to certain hegemonic narratives. In this sense, feminist humor, as a form of *subversive humor* (Walker 1988; Gilbert 1997; Homes and Marra 2002; Kramer 2015), is an example of discursive resistance (De Salvador 2024) since, as I will explain, it works as a tool capable of counteracting sign structures of power. As Barba (2021:170) said, "[i]f one of the natural strategies of feminism is to invert meanings to

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[1] Although the expression *hate speech* can encompass different uses, in this context I will understand it as the hostile use of linguistic expressions meant to do harm.

highlight the inequality they contain, feminist humor is undoubtedly the epitome of that gesture." In Crawford's (1997:129) words, "the political uses of humor by feminists indicate the potential of the humor mode to infiltrate and disrupt dominant." Therefore, we face a disruptive, counterspeech humor capable of generating what Paolucci and Caruana (2019:69) call *semiotic laughter*, that is, laughter capable of challenging the established social order. Finally, instead of focusing on the injustices caused and generated by humor, I will focus on its potential for undoing. Thus, this paper deals with a counterspeech humor that promotes discursive justice: a humor that has the power to respond to hate speech.

2. Counterspeech humor: Affinity network

A possible combination of humor and counterspeech reveals a harmony based on a common reflective structure, since both can function as potential second-order arguments. This means that both counterspeech and humor are built based on a previous speech. In the case of counterspeech, it is clear that its development depends on an initial argument or position that serves as the reference to be questioned. Following Eco (1984:8), something similar happens with humor for "[h]umor[2] is always, if not metalinguistic, metasemiotic: through verbal language or some other sign system it casts in doubt other cultural codes." This sequentially subordinated structure connects humor and counterspeech as possible responses to a previous message or code. From this perspective, the connection between them focuses on a shared metasemiotic structure.

However, not all humor is counterspeech, nor do all types of counterspeech resort to humor. Differences occur both in the message and the intention. Therefore, the purpose and content of the second-order argument will give rise to the classic dichotomy of humor: it either reinforces or subverts the preceding code. Thus, unlike counterspeech, which always arises as a response to hate speech, humor can reinforce and insist on the code that precedes it and reaffirm what is considered established in a sociocultural context. For example, as Bergson (1900) defends, humor can fulfil a corrective social function, strengthening existing social norms. This is where humor stops being subversive to embrace the status quo and preserve a specific sociocultural code. And also, in extreme cases, humor converges with hate speech if, through its actions, it enhances social conventions that discriminate and cause harm.

Far from this offensive and hurtful humor, what I will classify as counterspeech is precisely the type of humor that is presented to challenge and reverse situations

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[2] In his paper, Eco (1984) draws a distinction between comedy and humor that we will not go into here, for want of space.

of *discursive injustice* (Kukla 2014). That is, counterspeech humor reacts to the unfair restriction that limits the linguistic capacity of certain speakers by preventing them from performing certain speech acts. In fact, counterspeech is always a way to combat linguistic toxicity (Tirrell 2018), which systematically harms some individuals just because they have a specific social identity. Undoing the damage of toxic speech is, therefore, the task of counterspeech. And it is when this is done through humor that we can see the counterspeech humor, whose main aim is precisely to deactivate toxic discourse. This does not imply understanding humor as a simple ingredient added to counterspeech and capable of facilitating or amplifying its effectiveness (although this may be true). In fact, humor can take the form of counterspeech.

Thus, in the following pages, rather than considering humor as a mere stylistic flourish, I will focus on a type of performative humor that defuses the harmful potential of the message that precedes it. With this purpose in mind, I will check my proposal of counterspeech humor against historical and contemporary theories of humor, seeking to identify a possible network of conceptual affinities. In other words, I will account for the possible similarities that, paraphrasing Wittgenstein (PI § 67), make up the "family resemblance" of humorous language games.

The meta-semiotic structure of humor focuses on a discourse capable of putting its own meaning in crisis. This undoing capacity of humor also depends on the purpose. If humor is counterspeech, its objective is to counter-argue to refute a previous thesis. A thesis that is necessarily circumscribed within the general framework of hate speech, understood as a type of speech that discriminates, causes harm, and systematically reifies oppressions. Therefore, counterspeech humor is presented as a type of response that seeks to deactivate the force of an oppressive discourse. A response that can be interpreted from the perspective of historical theories of humor (Morreall 1987), namely in terms of superiority, relief, or incongruity, or, in other words, considering the three elements activated by humor: authority, emotion, and the logic of discourse.

Thus, regarding the first theory, if we understand humor as a manifestation of superiority, counterspeech humor would seek to mock the interlocutor to disrupt their argument. In this case, humor could reverse the meaning of the previous argument – perhaps more aggressively and directly – and turn it into an object of laughter. There would be an attempt to ridicule the person and, consequently, to counteract their point of view, either by means of what we could call *ad hominem* humor or by mockingly discrediting the reasoning heard.

In light of the second theory, counterspeech humor could be analyzed as a form of relief, particularly when humor works as a release in uncomfortable and embarrassing situations, such as those generated by hate speech. Thus, we could get relief by laughing and, hence, reacting and dissipating the bad vibes of a tense and aggressive atmosphere.

Finally, from the perspective of the theory of incongruity, counterspeech humor manifests itself more obviously. This is so because this theory emphasizes the shock, the twist, and the challenge of previous expectations, bringing into question and testing our system of beliefs and habits. It is based on a contradiction between what is expected and what happens. From this point of view, the response of counterspeech humor may give way to an incongruity regarding the previous statement. However, incongruities can also generate a disruptive effect on the dominant discourse. In both cases, an attempt would be made to disrupt unfair presuppositions and highlight discursive inconsistencies while simultaneously introducing a new perspective into discourse. To sum up, making fun of the interlocutor, freeing oneself from an oppressive situation, or destabilizing expectations can be counterspeech humor resources, provided they help to dismantle discursive injustices.

The widely revisited and expanded three theories[3] have recently experienced what could be described as a political turn due to the assumption of a humor-*situated position.* This entails a critical perspective that explicitly addresses the political implications of humor, considering both the social context and the power relations that percolate through it. The focus is on how the experiences of the subjects involved and their position in a specific humorous situation influence their ability to make and receive humor. Among the current theories that align with this approach, the following conceptual proposals stand out: *charged humor* (Krefting 2014), *subversive humor* (Kramer 2015), or *humorwork* (Billingsley 2019).

All of them understand humor as a socio-political practice that "cannot be separated from the relationship between a subject and the political world in which they live" (Billingsley 2019:17). By politicizing humor, we also assume what the Willet and Willet (2019:18) call "humor from below." That is, a situational humor that seeks change and that "it would not just reinforce or temporarily invert hierarchies but level them" (Willet and Willet 2019:35). Thus, by using the adjective *subversive*, Kramer (2015:122) focuses on a type of humor that, as a persuasion device, seeks "to disclose and transmit information in such a way as to create change in both attitudes and practical social interactions through bringing to light flaws in our thinking and acting." The same occurs with the "charged" metaphor used by Krefting to describe a double humor movement, in which "[j]okesters unmask inequality by identifying the legal arrangements and cultural attitudes and beliefs contributing to their subordinated status – joking about it, challenging that which has become normalized and compulsory, and offering new solutions and strategies" (Krefting 2014: 2). Both "subversive" and "charged humor"

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[3] The three historical theories have been reformulated several times. And new theories have also been proposed, such as the play theory and the theories focused on the linguistic-formal aspects of humor or its epistemic dimension.

make an emphasis on exposing the situation and proposing ways to transform it. Both would be "humorworks" that, far from idealized and essentialist positions,[4] are based on the embodied subject situated in the context of humor. In this regard, it could be said that we are facing proposals related to feminist *empathic humor*, which also seeks to level social hierarchies and inequalities from the standpoint of linguistic effectiveness.

Counterspeech humor is also the outcome of the political turn. This is why its "family resemblance" with the rest of the proposals is evident in its criticism of those theories that obscure the experiences of marginalized groups. Their kinship also sprouts from their explicit commitment to social change. In fact, the metasemiotic structure of counterspeech humor makes it possible to contradict a toxic discourse and, by opposing it, it also questions the conventions that support it, thus questioning the semiotic mechanisms whereby hate speech is constructed and exposing the underlying structure of power. Like the other proposals mentioned, counterspeech humor pays special attention to humor's socio-political and subjective structures, prioritizing them over the formal-linguistic features. Besides, it is in line with the growing philosophical relevance that counterspeech has recently acquired (Caponetto and Cepollaro 2022; Caponetto and Cepollaro 2024; Tirrell 2018; Langton 2018b; MacGowan 2018; Tirrell 2018; Ulmann and Tomalin 2024). It shares with counterspeech the urgency of offering a response that counteracts widespread hate speech. Counterspeech humor, as a tool for individual and collective use, is presented as an intentional act that seeks to ruin the "felicity" of the preceding speech act. That is to say, it aims to prevent what has been told from having an impact; in other words, it tries to deactivate its harmful effects. So, the "felicity conditions" of the speech act announced by Austin (1975:14-15)[5] remain in the hands of the receiver (De Salvador 2024), that is, of the subject who seeks to contradict through humor.

To clarify the concept of counterspeech humor, I will begin by exploring the role of the counterspeaker (2.1), as I consider their position pivotal in generating the humorous effect. I will then analyze three strategies to produce such an effect (3).

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[4] Thus, Billingsley (2019:47) writes:

> core essentialist approaches to humor such as those found in Victor Raskin's script semantic theory and Raskin's and Salvatore Attardo's general theory of verbal humor has staved off a consideration of humor's relationship to power, prejudice, social norms, and subjectivity, instead calling for an investigation of idealized subjects who navigate a purified linguistic network shorn from any power-laden social context.

[5] The philosopher mentioned four key factors, grouped into three types of *felicity* (A, B and Γ), for the success of broadcasts that take into account what has been said, how it has been said, who has said it and the context of enunciation.

2.1. Counterspeaker humor: Agency and authority

The figure of the counterspeaker is that of an active receiver who, like the Barthesian (1977) reader, plays a central role in the construction of meaning. His/Her participation in the speech context positions him/her not only as a co-creator of meaning but also as someone with the capacity to question and redirect conversation. From this second perspective, we could say that the counterspeaker assumes the role of Eco's (1986:142) semiological guerrilla for s/he must "discuss the arriving message in the light of the codes at the destination, comparing them with the codes at the source." Code interplay (the confrontation between the entry and exit codes) allows for generating normative changes within a given speech situation. Such changes would allow the rules of the conversational game to be altered, undermining the direction of discourse and the position of whoever assumes authority in it. In this scenario, humor, when it is *guerrilla humor*, is also situated in an *intentio receptoris* capable of opening spaces for discursive resistance in the hands of the recipient. Thus, the counterspeaker uses humor to deliberately confront hate speech. Its comic action, far from focusing on entertainment, is aimed at disarming and re-signifying, generating new meanings that question unfair presuppositions and challenge oppressive ideologies. To achieve this goal, the counterspeaker often uses the indirect mode of humor to shock and promote change. As Crawford (1997:134) says, "Indirect modes can save face, minimize accountability for one's actions, and slip taboo topics into conversation. And humor is perhaps the most flexible and powerful of indirect modes." Humor thus emerges as a promising counterspeech weapon since, in addition to protecting the comedian, it captures the audience's attention and makes it easier to join the conversation. These ingredients, specifically intended to respond to hate speech, transform humor into a potential tool for semiological guerrilla warfare.

If hate speech is an invitation to leave the conversation (Langton 2018b), its antithesis, here, counterspeech humor, can become a way to join it. Unlike other forms of speech, humor allows marginalized groups to access discourse more easily and even claim spaces of agency. This is so because the indirect mode is a mitigated way of softening the impact of the message, making it more socially acceptable, so the humor

> can be a useful strategy in interpersonal conversation, where a humorous mode of communication may give a speaker a chance to demonstrate her point of view more vividly, and with less cognitive resistance on the part of her interlocutors, than serious assertion. (Butterfield 2022:700)

For speakers whose linguistic agency is systematically restricted, humor can become a key tool to access one's conversational exchange. An example of this is found in the first-person account of the Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby, who, facing

prejudice for being lesbian and fat and for having Autistic Spectrum Disorder, describes how, from her childhood and on numerous occasions, humor became the way to access discourse. Thus, for example, Gadsby (2022:107) explains that she would try to join any conversation "the only way I knew how: by saying something funny." This does not mean that humor, as a form of linguistic agency vindication, is a tool that is easy to use, unambiguous, or free of epistemic efforts.[6] Nor does it mean it is trouble-free or would never backfire and reinforce oppressions. In this sense, the examples we found show both the inherent instability of intentions (incapable of unilaterally determining a speech act) and the prejudices associated with the subject of humor itself. A subject constructed in light of a stereotype that defines both the image of the humor producer and that of its object. Thus, traditionally, men have occupied the leading role, while the secondary role has been assigned to women (Bunkers 1985; Bergmann 1986; Walker 1988).

Joining the conversation by using humor can be risky if you are not an authorized subject, since you could suffer what Butterfield (2022), based on Fricker's (2007) epistemic injustices, calls "comedic hermeneutical injustice." Such an injustice systematically "manifests itself in disadvantages, experienced by members of hermeneutically marginalized groups, in successfully sharing humor and being considered funny by others" (Butterfield 2022:688). The ability of hate speech to undermine the illocutionary force of the words uttered by specific individuals turns re-entering through humor into a difficult task. In fact, the subject targeted by hate sometimes resorts to self-mockery or self-ridicule (i.e., making humor at one's own expense) as a strategy to enter or reclaim the conversation. We are faced with a form of self-deprecation characteristic of *marginal humor* (Gilbert 2004) that plays with stereotypes[7] and blurs the fine line between laughing at oneself and laughing with someone. This is precisely one of the reasons why Gadsby, in her acclaimed stand-up comedy, *Nanette* (2018), announces that she is leaving comedy. In this comic monologue, the comedian openly questions the rule of self-hatred imposed on marginalized subjects as a way of accessing discourse and, by extension, comic authority. This would be a case of "charged humor," where the complaint of becoming a joke is intertwined with criticism because it "reveals one's immediate experience of second-class citizenship and gives us proactive means of addressing inequality" (Krefting 2014: 26). Authority in discourse, however, can also be

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[6] It not only requires creativity and wit, cognitive skills but also the ability to quickly apply a range of semantic and pragmatic abilities.

[7] Regarding the transgressive role that stereotypes can play in stand-up comedy humor, I refer to the study by Gilbert (2004:165), who stated:

> By performing marginality onstage, a comic is doubly empowered -first by foregrounding difference, and second by commodifying and ultimately profiting from that difference. In this way, social stigma may function as a rhetorical means to a political end.

achieved through other means. This is precisely what constitutes the core of counter-speech, since it implies breaking with the authority assumed by a subject who carries out a linguistic act of hate. Thus, the counterspeaker seeks to provoke a normative change that counteracts the power of the said subject, challenging both their authority and the content transmitted.

As we will see below, the different strategies of counterspeech focus on undoing unfair discursive practices, deactivating the message, and, therefore, disavowing it. Counterspeech in the hands of the comedian reflects the intention not only to partici-pate in a conversation but also to exercise an agency that responds to a situation of lin-guistic oppression. Besides, the situation becomes even more counterdiscursive when those seeking to join are subjects in socially subaltern positions. Hence, counterspeech humor can be read as a vindication of comic agency and a challenge against the discur-sive authority that attempts to expel them.

3. Some strategies of counterspeech humor

The different counterspeech strategies depend on several factors, such as the context of the communicative situation, the lexicon used, the content of the counterargument, or the social position of the interlocutors (Caponetto and Cepollaro 2024). Similarly, the effectiveness of counterspeech humor is also conditioned by the message to which it responds and by the place and people involved in the conversation. With regards to the latter, the fact that the counterspeaker is a member of the hate speech target group is highly relevant because, aside from the aforementioned epistemic injustices – as MacGowan (2018) denounces – on the one hand, "it places the burden of the remedy on those targeted (and potentially harmed) by the allegedly harmful speech" (Mac-Gowan 2018:183) and, on the other hand, "it appears to assume a level playing field for all speakers" (MacGowan 2018:185).

In addition to the position of the counterspeaker, the context also exerts an influ-ence. A stand-up comedy-style monologue is not the same as an everyday conversa-tion. In the case of the monologue, humorous authority is influenced by market logic, since, as Krefting (2014) explains, some comic characters are more marketable than others. This limits activist humor, such as charged humor, by confining it to a narrower market niche. However, the stage continues to be a space for enunciation that grants the comedian some power: a place to express oneself and contradict hate speech. This is precisely how Gadsby (2022:251) describes her position after announcing, on stage, that she is leaving comedy: "My stunned audience remained so still and quiet, I had them in the palm of my hand, and that's when I first really understood that despite having little power in the world, I did have incredible power over a room when I was on stage. The time had come to wield it." The situation off stage changes, and with it,

so do the dynamics of authority. In fact, in everyday conversation, those who cause verbal harm usually rely on authority,[8] whether they have it or not, to spread and legitimize prejudices and stereotypes. Therefore, as in guerrilla warfare, counterspeech humor tactics must focus on delegitimizing that authority.

Disavowing a hate message without resorting to legal and institutional censorship can be achieved in different ways. Each of them constitutes a different type of counterspeech. However, they all share the objective of undoing a verbal expression that creates hostility towards people because they belong to a discriminated social group. In this context, counterspeech humor arises with the same purpose: addressing situations of patent injustice by undermining the illocutionary force of a previous message, that is, by ruining the effectiveness of the harmful speech act. Among the ways in which humor deploys its counterspeech potential, I will first take a brief look at parody as a way to imitate and transform meanings; then, I will look at irony as a resource that exploits double meaning and implicit contradiction; and, finally, I will focus on laughter as a sound that is capable of interrupting and preventing the percolation of unfair presuppositions. The approach is that of a feminist humor whose political commitment shows strategically since "feminism has shown that humor can also be the perfect Trojan horse to enter a society besieged by structural male chauvinism" (Barba 2021:14). It is about entering and ruining the sexist, racist, xenophobic, classist, homophobic party and any other party celebrating discrimination and perpetuating social inequalities. In other words, it is about practicing what would be typical of "killjoy" humor (to make a pun based on Ahmed's 2023 terms). Or, using Clinton's terminology, fusing *humor* and *feminist*, the *fumerist*, because, in Barreca's (2023:178) words, this term "captures the idea of being funny and wanting to burn the house down all at once." For "feminism as fumerism offers one way to confront and detoxify the stereotypes, to joyfully reappropriate energy and eros from systems of domination" (Willet and Willet 2019:45). In short, using humor to bring about resignification, bending and blocking, or, in other words, using parody, irony, and laughter to stop hate speech.

3.1. **Parodying to achieve resignification**

Humorous counterspeech games exploit the idea that several meanings coexist in a single signifier. As a form of humor, parody plays with that distance between the elements of the sign, stretching it until it breaks and thus undoing the original union. This is where the parodic response exhibits its counterspeech potential. That is, by parodying, it is possible to alter the conversation, introduce new information and even undo the relationship between the signifier and its harmful semantic load. This humorous strategy, based on imitating and exaggerating until meaning is distorted, was adopted and promoted

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[8] As to authority in hate speech, I refer to Langton (2018a).

by the feminist movement, especially in the early nineties of the last century. Thus, at a theoretical level, authors such as Butler (1990) or Braidotti (1996) highlighted the political potential of parody, while artistic collectives, such as the Guerrilla Girls or the broad phenomenon of the Grrls, and cyberfeminist groups, such as the VeNuS Matrix, put it into practice. The common idea was, on the one hand, to reveal the instability of a dominant semiotic configuration and, on the other hand, to combat the hate speech that was transmitted inside and outside cyberspace, ridiculing it to the extreme.

Butler (1997:15) maintained that the relationship between particular words or speeches and their offensive charge is neither fixed nor invariable. In fact, she thought of language as an iterable activity open to change where repetition opened a possible gap between the harmful speech act and its perlocutionary effects. A repetition that Bergson (1900) had previously highlighted as a comic element with the capacity to generate a break with whatever is expected, and that Butler, in line with Derrida, picks up to claim a linguistic agency capable of re-signifying.: "[t]he resignification of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms" (Butler 1997: 41). From this point of view, the parodic counterspeaker can resort to generalizations, stereotypes or even prejudices and use them as weapons with which to dismantle their simplifying potential. Drag culture is one of the examples that Butler (1990) gives as a type of gender exaggeration that dissolves associations through parodic hyperbole. We find a similar case in the nascent cyberspace when the VeNuS Matrix group created, in 1993, the interactive game *All New Gen*. This gamification takes up established meanings about bodies, acting as an iconic and cartoonish counterspeech regarding gender norms. Thus, they present avatars with hypersexualized bodies that are dismantled to challenge biological constructions (De Salvador 2018).

Parody and acting "as if" intersect when imitation has a critical purpose. This is what Braidotti (2002:353) suggested when he stated that "parody can be politically empowering on the condition of being sustained by a critical consciousness that aims at the subversion of dominant codes". The philosopher identified the politics of parody with the transgressive aesthetics of the Guerrilla Girls, with their King Kong masks, and with the roar of the Riot Grrl (an onomatopoeia that imitates the wild sound by changing the *i* for the *r*). Their counterspeech humor can be clearly seen in the poster that the Guerrilla Girls put up in the Metropolitan Museum in 1989, where they openly parodied the painting *La Grande Odalisque* (1814). The naked woman, dressed in a gorilla mask, was accompanied by a written text that read: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female." The parody of the Guerrillas sought to call the iconic significance of the naked woman into crisis, though reappropriated to transgress gender codes semiotically. In contrast to the passive and sexualized figure that

Ingres presents for the male gaze, the Guerrilla Girls' parody exposes and critiques the mechanisms of silencing (De Salvador 2023a), invisibility, and exclusion that women have historically faced within the artistic canon. Thus, by deliberately exaggerating, the strategic procedure of parody can become a direct counterspeech mockery, making it a more dangerous situation for the counterspeaker.

3.2. Using irony for bending

Humorous shortcuts are essential to avoid direct confrontation, especially in a situation of verbal violence. The Guerrilla Girls masks focused on the message they wanted to convey, but, at the same time, they turned out to be a good protective shield for them to hide behind. An anonymity that cyberfeminists themselves also exploited to their advantage in cyberspace and that, to this day, continues to be valid, for example, in humorous formats such as memes. Tools that, in any case, in the hands of the counterspeaker must be used to counteract narratives based on inequalities and expulsions precisely. When it is counterspeech, parody re-signifies toxic discourse, using the possibilities that acting "as if" opens. In fact, what Braidotti (2002:353) calls "the philosophy as if", in his own words, "with its ritualized repetitions, needs to be grounded in order to be politically effective." The "as if" practices can take on a parodic but also ironic character, or a simultaneous combination of both. In this sense, the clearest example is found in *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21ˢᵗ Century* (1991) and *Bitch Mutant Manifesto* (1996), where the VeNuS Matrix combined satire, parody, and irony in equal parts. They present themselves with phrases such as "We are the virus of the new world disorder" (VeNuS 1991) and "We are the malignant accident which fell into your system while you were sleeping" (VeNuS 1996), which exemplify this mixture and through which they denounce the discursive injustice inherent in the patriarchal and technological system. In the two *Manifestos*, they follow Haraway's approaches to the cyborg as fiction, while openly adopting her conception of irony. As Haraway (1991a:149) points out, "[i]rony is about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical and political strategy, one I would like to see more honored within socialist-feminism. At the center of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg." Later, she wrote, "[f]or many of us, the irony made it possible to participate-indeed, to participate as fully committed, if semiotically unruly" (Haraway 1991b:318). Using irony as a critical access tool manifests itself in counterspeech through tactics such as *bending* or *disunderstanding*.

Caponetto and Cepollaro (2022) proposed their own modality, which aligns with current studies on counterspeech, in which toxic speech is counteracted through a deviant and improved response. A response that deviates from the path demarcated by the original discourse, twisting it until its toxicity is transformed or, in other words, "turning poison into medicine." Thus, the authors above point out that

[q]ua distorting move, [bending] succeeds when, in addition, it manages to make the ameliorated content enter the common ground in place of the toxic content. This is the case when the toxic speaker plays along and does not retort by explicitly asserting the toxic content they were implicitly conveying. (Caponetto and Cepollaro 2024:71)

Bending, using Tirrell's (2018) terminology, would be both an inoculation that reorients what has been said to generate a positive effect – neutralizing the toxic damage previously inflicted in a conversation – and a kind of vaccine that prevents the installation of toxins in the "common ground," by stimulating the immune system and stopping the spread of discursive toxins. In other words, the "distortion in the service of social justice" (Caponetto and Cepollaro 2022:3). In this sense, bending would also be an example of what Maxime Lepoutre (2019:34) calls "positive counterspeech" since it "is less about directly contesting a distorted vision of the world, and more about affirming a correct vision of the world that is inconsistent with the falsehoods at hand."

Diverting the course of a conversation can also be carried out by *disunderstanding*. The pun on words created by Shahvisi (2023) points to a deliberate misunderstanding with which the listener refuses to accept an explanation. With this discursive movement, the person is forced to openly expose the assumptions that underlie a more than dubious explanation. The reason for this is that

[e]xplanations for marginalizing actions or perspectives often rely on vague, euphemistic phrases. When a person is forced to explicitly state their assumptions, they must reflect more closely on what they're actually saying, and whether or not they can justify it. (Shahvisi 2023:136)

This way, the counterspeaker, with a deep pedagogical intention in the style of Socratic irony, feigns ignorance to make the interlocutor fall into an open explanation of whatever was implicitly said. This is an ironic dissimulation, a maneuver to put unfair presuppositions on the table, thus opening the possibility of confronting or blocking them. Therefore, disunderstanding begins with an ironic pretense, as in the case of bending, to finally separate from it and seek an open disagreement, as occurs with the last counterpeech strategies I will expose next: *blocking*.

3.3. Laughing for the sake of blocking

Jankélévitch argued that irony, when used with humor, can make deep philosophical tensions more friendly and accessible. In this sense, humorous irony does not lose its critical capacity during bending or disunderstanding, because it is open. That is to say, "humor is open irony: because while closed irony is not aimed at instructing the other,

open irony is ultimately the beginning of understanding and spiritual community" (Jankélévitch 1964:172). Irony, at the service of humor, does not aim to devalue the other, but rather to promote understanding as a basis for building community. In contrast to historical theories of superiority, humorous irony embraces what Willet and Willet (2019:10) renamed *leveling humor*: an empathetic humor from the margins "to reject the old patriarchal formulas for laughs" (Willet and Willet 2019:151). In other words, compared to the Hobbesian (1969) laughter typical of the theory of superiority, a horizontal laughter is proposed, a laughter that, instead of humiliating and reinforcing inequalities, promotes new power dynamics based on complicity between people.

Laughter can arise as a reaction to a comical situation but can also originate in opposite circumstances. It is a complex response that can be read both from what causes it and from what it generates. Or, in Austin's terms, there is perlocutionary laughter as an effect or cause, and illocutionary laughter that does things with sounds. A laughter, which I call *counterspeech*, emerges from the broad framework of the illocutionary force of laughter. A laughter that could act as a blocking (Langton 2018b) and that, with its sound, causes speech to stop. Butler (2019) highlighted the political potential of laughter as a noise capable of disrupting discursive functioning because "laughter interrupts discourse" and "exercises a renewing power." In this sense, laughter intervenes in communication as a side effect and an active response to what is heard. So, as Heller (2005:25) points out, "[l]aughter is judgmental; with it, we pass a judgment." When we laugh, we make judgments, assess, and even challenge what we hear. In this context, a counterspeech laugh deliberately prevents unfair presuppositions from being inserted into the discourse, paralyzing violence and functioning as a strategy similar to blocking, as Langton (2018b) proposed.

In Langton's proposal (2018b), blocking is presented as a semiotic-political tactic aimed at explicitly preventing the "accommodation of injustice." It is a counterspeech tool that combines Lewis's (1979) *rule of accommodation* with Sbisà's (2021) idea of *explicitation practices*. So, on the one hand, "[w]hen you block something, you don't 'accommodate' it – you don't adjust to it, or help it along" (Langton 2018b:145) and, on the other hand, "[w]hen the hearer blocks with explicitation, forcing the speaker's cards onto the table, the back-door speech acts fail, at least as *back-door* speech acts" (Langton 2018b:154). In both cases, the focus is on the presuppositions, that is, on the implicit contents that are communicated and, more specifically, on those that perform a persuasive function. Thus, it is about "assumptions, not necessarily conscious but liable to be brought to consciousness, about how our human world is and how it should be" (Sbisà 1999:493). Blocking implies preventing implicit content from percolating through the speaker's intervention, thus rejecting ideological presuppositions that transmit derogatory and pejorative content. To carry out the act of blocking, the presupposition must be made explicit, since, as Sbisà (1999:507) states,

> [o]nce it is made explicit, of course, a presupposition becomes just an assertion and, like all assertions, whilst the speaker is committed to defending it, the listener or reader is allowed to challenge it and even to ask the speaker for his or her grounds for making that assertion.

Langton (2018b:149) points to other forms of blocking in addition to explicitation since "[s]ometimes a rephrasing, a raised eyebrow, or a joke, might work better than a 'Wait a minute!' or a righteous calling out." Laughter could also act as an additional form of non-explicit blocking – one where it becomes an obstacle in the speech of someone who seeks to hurt through their words. Although laughter is not an explicit form of articulate verbal communication, it can convey many meanings. Words are unnecessary, as they can function as an acoustic response that shows complicity or disagreement. When the expected perlocutionary effect is for someone to laugh, not doing so does not nullify the act but fails as it provokes an unintended reaction. Now, laughing also can illocutionally annul an act, and that is why it could be interpreted as a powerful tool to stop and block a message. In this second sense, all forms of killjoy laughter may serve as illustrative examples of discursive blocking. As Ahmed (2023:174) writes, "laughter can be the sound of a door being slammed," thus preventing anything from slipping through it, as Langton (2018b) suggests. Although historical records of women laughing are scarce – a fact that is revealing in itself – the well-known biblical figure Sarah stands out as an act of resistance. Her laughter not only expresses skepticism but also disrupts the underlying presuppositions of the discourse directed at her: that her body is still fertile, that motherhood remains a possible destiny despite her advanced age, and that she is expected to accept the divine promise without question. Also, laughter showing teeth –which denotes both aggression and disobedience – can break the conventional structure of the conversation, introduce changes in the assumed normative positions, and, thereby, stop toxic discourse. In this sense, the obscene and transgressive laughter of Baubo, a figure from Greek mythology, together with her irreverent gesture, constitutes another paradigmatic example: it manages to break Demeter's silence and reset the discursive order, thus subverting the imposed social expectations. These are forms of laughter not covered by the hand, blocking laughter that, like ironic or parodic laughter, acts as counterspeech, challenging and embarrassing speakers who seek to harm with their speech. In short, semiotic laughter emerges, and this, as Paolucci and Caruana (2019) taught us, can call into question the social system and, therefore, could contribute to discursive justice.

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4. Conclusion: Semiotic laughter for discursive justice

Neither parody, nor irony, nor laughter is *per se* a counterspeech movement. In fact, they could all be humorless and hateful. This shows humor's political instability (Billingsley 2019) and counterspeech (MacGowan 2018), since they are not an infallible formula. They are sign practices, and their use, as Wittgenstein (1958) said, determines their meaning. Now, this approach opens up the possibility of assigning humor the ability to bring about resignification, bending, or even blocking oppressive meanings. In doing so, humor becomes a counterspeech medium, capable of altering dominant discourses and generating new interpretations. By intervening in the semiotic process, humor challenges social conventions and offers ways to question and transform established power structures that generate inequalities.

As has already been said, responding with humor is not an infallible remedy, nor is it a strategy that guarantees counteracting the verbal damage caused. However, as they say, sometimes, laughter is the only way out. In fact, when laughter is semiotic and counterspeech, it can have a contagious illocutionary force that may defuse tensions, resolve conflicts, and even offer respite in an environment of pressure and oppression. It is then that laughter is presented as a form of discursive resistance that, just like the parodic and ironic tactic, proves its ability to undo.

However, counterspeech humor lives during a conversation, so, despite seeking to stop hatred, it could be followed by a rejoinder. In fact, one of the risks of responding with humor is that it can lead to everything becoming trivial and losing seriousness in the face of unfair situations. This is so because, as was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, many things can be done in the name of humor. Here I have sought to accentuate the good things that can be done with it, those that contribute to a discursive justice that, instead of silencing and oppressing, favors the entry of other voices, especially those that have seen their illocutionary potential undermined.

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AUTHOR

Saleta de Salvador Agra is Associate Professor of Logic and Philosophy of Science, University Complutense of Madrid, Spain.

A literary character as a humorous meme:
A semiotic perspective

BY: **Inna Merkoulova**

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the phenomenon of a unique meme-literary character that appeared simultaneously with ChatGPT. This meme is a striking example of a *floating signifier* (Buchanan 2010) arising from mixed discourses. This is the Shoggoth meme, which was created based on a fantastic monster from the novels of Howard Lovecraft, and in our time has turned into a humorous picture with a smiley. The seriousness of "Lovecraftian horrors" as an element of mass culture of the 20th century gave way to a playful, humorous beginning in the digital reality of the 21st century. To understand the meaning of the meme, it must be considered from the standpoint of the semiotics of fear, according to the classification of Lotman (2004d), but also from the point of view of the semiotics of humor. The meaning of the humorous meme Shoggoth is to show that artificial intelligence and human intelligence can interact and understand each other.

1. Introduction: On the semiotics of culture and the semiotics of humor

In our article, we will analyze the phenomenon of a unique meme-literary character that appeared simultaneously with ChatGPT. We are talking about the Shoggoth meme, which was created based on a fantastic monster from the novels of Howard Lovecraft, and in our time has turned into a humorous picture with a smiley. The meaning of the humorous Shoggoth meme is to show that artificial intelligence and human intelligence can interact and understand each other.

To analyze humor using a specific meme as an example, we will turn to the concept of internal cheerfulness. The creator of the semiotics of culture, Yuri Lotman, according to the memoirs of his contemporaries, was distinguished not only by his outstanding qualities as a scientist but also by his so-called *internal cheerfulness*. Several years ago, on the eve of his centenary, his drawings were published, where he humorously portrays himself ("I am conditional"), his relatives, colleagues, and pets ("The cat and the sandwich were eaten," "We are cuckoos": Lotman 2016).[1] The preface to his 2016 book ends with Lotman's words about internal cheerfulness:

> Of course, one can and must deal with external affairs, but one must not let the level of internal cheerfulness fall below a certain critical level. Otherwise, it will not come back even under the most favorable external circumstances. If there is some choice, then it means things are not so bad, and even without choice they are not so bad, and even if they are bad, there is pride to be taken in being cheerful then too (I'm not talking about the kind of cheerfulness that makes one whinny with gaiety, but of a cheerful spirit that lets one enjoy good weather, playing with the children and brainwork [...]). (Lotman 2016:75)

For Lotman, internal cheerfulness is the basis of the semiotics of behavior. In this sense, his approach is similar to the reflections of Eco, when he writes about Pirandello's (1908) attitude to humor: "life seems to be specially created for a humorous approach" (Eco 2020a:93). Life is a continuous flow, and the forms of logic are attempts to stop this flow, but there "comes a moment when they stop working and reveal their true nature: they are masks" (Eco 2020a:94).

To reformulate Pirandello and Eco, we can say that trying to comprehend and treat today's digital reality and humor semiotically are synonymous actions. Because humor, unlike comedy or irony, presupposes a rejection of the position of detachment (alienation/*Verfremdung*, in Brecht's 1967:301 terms) and of the feeling of one's own superiority over the situation: our laughter is colored with pity and turns into a smile. We do not laugh at Don Quixote as a comic madman; we, like Cervantes, could have been in his place. That is why Don Quixote, according to Eco (2020:89), is a great humorous novel.

We also reject the position of alienation in online communication through memes. Memes have a "capsular" or "polyphonic" format (Cingolani 2024:10): the first impression they make on users is that the meaning is seemingly obvious and lies on the surface. However, memes are built on our encyclopedic knowledge of characters,

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[1] *Yuri Lotman* and *Zara Mintz* as birds sitting on the "Concept tree". The drawing is available in Lotman (2016) and also on the portal https://arzamas.academy/materials/2398 (image 2.2).

situations, stories, and narratives, including humor. The meaning of a meme arises within and is entirely dependent on the vast online context; memes are distinguished by their discursive omnipresence.

To begin our reflections on the semiotics of contemporary "internet-based humor" (Chovanec and Tsakona 2018:20), let us turn to an archival humorous drawing (Figure 1). It is an exhibit of the Memorial Cabinet-Museum of the outstanding film director Sergei Eisenstein in the collection of the Cinema Museum in Moscow. This Memorial Cabinet contains a collection of books, photographs, and objects of fine art from different countries and eras, and at the same time, Eisenstein's creative and intellectual laboratory, the result of the art of montage, and the prototype of many of his cinematic masterpieces.

The director's library contains the science fiction novel *The Twentieth Century*

Figure 1. "People of the 21st Century." Drawing by Sergei Eisenstein. Photo by the article's author in Eisenstein's Cabinet Museum, courtesy of the Cinema Museum in Moscow. The drawing is also included in Rumyantseva-Kleiman's book (2018).

(Robida 1883), published in the 19th century in Paris. The French cartoonist and writer Albert Robida placed the novel's action in the 1950s. In Eisenstein's office, there is a drawing that the young future director most likely made under the influence of Robida's book. The drawing is called "People of the 21st Century": it humorously presents humanity of the future. The novel's story begins in 2001, with a humanoid character in the style of an old-fashioned university professor. After 25 years, he turns into a humanoid with robotic features, at the age of 75, his body is endowed with all sorts of technical improvements, and in 2100, the first stage of his life ends. The drawing is divided in half by a pencil line, and at the bottom, we see the continuation of the story in reverse order. In 2100, the humanoid character is "resurrected," then acquires the appearance of a medieval man, after 75 years, he loses the features of a rational man, and finally, from a distant ancestor of people turns into a predatory animal.

Today, the drawing of a very young Sergei Eisenstein evokes our admiration for its dynamics, the juxtaposition of general and close-up shots, and the paradoxical "in reverse" story. What does this drawing mean? A genius's view of human history from the distant future? A metaphor designed to warn and reassure us simultaneously, because the author looks into the future with humor?
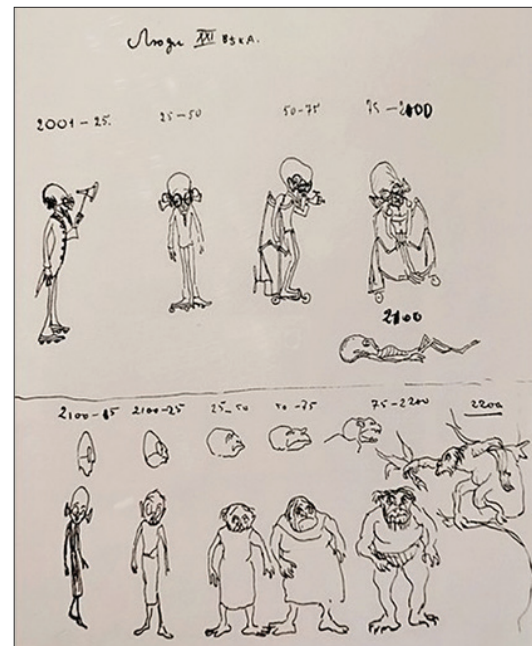
The example of Eisenstein's drawing reminds us of the connection between virtual reality and the "logic and semantics of science fiction worlds" (Eco 2020b:214). The drawing is also a kind of allusion to today's trend of digital detox, when users are humorously offered not just to disconnect from the internet for a while, but to "draw a selfie with a pencil" or "ask a person for an address, not a smartphone" (Paris hors ligne 2025).

Many memes, including humorous ones, originated from pencil drawings or caricatures. However, the Shoggoth meme, which we examine in this article, has its own characteristics because it originated from a literary character. We will explore the humorous Shoggoth meme as a *floating signifier*, emerging from a literary novel and gradually becoming a meme representing AI. As defined by Buchanan (2010:72), a floating signifier is a signifier without a specific signified. It is also called an *empty signifier* that absorbs rather than emits meaning. On the one hand, the literary 'shell' of the Shoggoth hides a character created by Lovecraft and then drawn by various artists. On the other hand, the Shoggoth as an empty signifier attracts and 'absorbs' the expectations of Internet users. It becomes a meme filled with mixed discourses: from fear to humor.

2. A character from Lovecraft's novels

Shoggoth is a fantastic green creature resembling an octopus. The image was created in the 1930s by Howard Lovecraft in the novel *At the Mountains of Madness*. Shoggoths are amorphous creatures consisting of a protoplasmic mass with many eyes on the surface. Their main features are their extraordinary strength, their ability to take any form, and their adaptability to a variety of situations and tasks. Shoggoths were initially created by aliens, highly intelligent Old Ones, as an auxiliary race of slaves who eventually rebelled against their masters. Lovecraft's novel, which was unsuccessful during the author's lifetime (Miéville 2009:510), became the basis for the Cthulhu Mythos, a literary fictional universe of aliens who visited Earth in ancient times. The theme was developed in more detail by the followers of the American writer and today the tradition of "Lovecraftian horror" is singled out as a separate type of literature.

Lovecraft's novels are called "weird fiction," where the dominant theme is fear of the unknown and the incomprehensible (Miéville 2009:511). Lovecraft's works have had a profound influence on the development of popular culture, from the 1970s to the present day. At the center of the novel *At the Mountains of Madness* is the story of a scientific expedition to Antarctica, during which scientists encounter representatives of an ancient alien civilization. The meeting with the Shoggoth in an underground tunnel is described in the technological style of the early 20th century: the creature seems to be the real embodiment of an alien, foreign organism, resembling a train in motion seen from a subway station platform – one of the common depictions of the Shoggoth as a tentacled monster was made by Tatsuya Nottsuo (2017).

A dark mass, dotted with luminous multi-colored dots, bursts out of the underground darkness, "as a piston fills a cylinder" (Lovecraft 2005:11). The metaphor of the metro train refers readers to the film *Arrival of a Train* (*L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat* 1896) by the Lumière Brothers. As is well known, the moving train on the screen terrified the first viewers, who perceived the screen as real and the train as a living being. In Lovecraft's text, comparing a foreign organism with a train has the opposite semantic effect: to counter the fear of encountering the unknown by likening it to the transport that became popular in the 1930s. That is why the narrator begins to recall the names of the subway stations he knows in the Boston tunnel: "South Station Under—Washington Under—Park Street Under—Kendall—Central—Harvard […]" (Lovecraft 2005:11). The explorers are saved by a miracle, since the Shoggoth turns into the wrong tunnel at an intersection. At the end of the story, the narrator dissuades the scientists from other expeditions so as not to disturb the Shoggoths, who threaten all of humanity.

3. The new Shoggoth of the 21st century

With the appearance of the ChatGPT neural network in the fall of 2022, which caused a wave of discussions and fears around the world, the Shoggoth character was born again. In December 2022, a month after the appearance of ChatGPT, a Twitter user @TetraspaceWest launched an updated image of Shoggoth into the Internet space: an octopus with 1001 tentacles was endowed with a mask in the form of an emoji. According to TetraspaceWest (Nicholson 2023), the meaning of the meme is to show that ChatGPT's predecessor, GPT-3, can be controlled by humans: GPT-3 + RLHF (i.e., Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback; see Figure 2). In other words, the AI system and human consciousness can better understand each other.

Figure 2. Shoggoth smiley meme created by TetraspaceWest

Shoggoth has become a viral meme among artificial intelligence insiders and a symbol of the risks of using the entire series of chatbots. Among AI experts, Shoggoth was perceived in three ways: as a joke, as a vivid visual metaphor for the work of chatbots, and also as a signal of concern about the new models:

> Shoggoth had become a jokey reference among workers in artificial intelligence, as a vivid visual metaphor for how a large language model (the type of AI system that powers ChatGPT and other chatbots) actually works. But it was only partly a joke […] because it also hinted at the anxieties that many researchers and engineers have about the tools they're building. (Roose 2023)

On the one hand, the smiley face on one of Shoggoth's tentacles symbolizes how humans train AI language models to act politely and harmlessly, thus indirectly claiming that there is no need to fear them. On the other hand, according to TetraspaceWest, the friendly mask may actually hide a mysterious "beast" with logic unknown to us: Shoggoth represents something that thinks in a way that humans do not understand and that is totally different from how humans think. By creating the Shoggoth meme after the literary Lovecraftian character, TetraspaceWest wanted to present the chatbot not as evil or good, but "unknowable by nature" (Roose 2023). Users should not fear the Shoggoth, but they should not completely trust it either. AI systems are "black box-like" and "Shoggoth-like."

Elon Musk reposted the Shoggoth meme to his 141 million subscribers in February 2023. Therefore, from the pages of specialized forums, Shoggoth moved to social networks (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Shoggoth meme on Elon Musk's page in social networks

This resulted in millions of users using it in short messages, creating its stickers, etc.[2] Thus, the Shoggoth's humorous potential was inextricably linked to the social context and began to shape it. As noted by Chovanec and Tsakona (2018:7), "social roles, identities, norms, and restrictions usually determine whether humor is going to be used or perceived as aggressive, critical, affiliative, mitigating, supportive, etc."

4. The instance of humor and the "instance of enunciation"[3]

The humorous Shoggoth meme has become an element integrated into users' messages and popular science publications on artificial intelligence, as well as a critical look at the chatbot phenomenon. As Tsakona and Chovanec (2018:6) suggest, humor is employed "as a tool for testing common ground and shared values, thus bringing interlocutors closer together or driving them further apart."

The original version of the meme from TetraspaceWest, issued on December 30, 2022, is quite schematic and compares two Shoggoths. On the left is a Shoggoth with the inscription GPT-3 and on the right is a Shoggoth with the inscription GPT-3 + RLHF with a smiley. After a few months, ex-tended comments on the meme appeared on the Internet, and phrases like "Shoggoth meme explainer" and "Shoggoth with smiley face" appeared in English (see Figure 4 above). In the "Shoggoth meme explainer" version, the picture is given color: the Shoggoth becomes green, according to the Lovecraftian tradition of describing this creature; the smiley is tradi-tionally yellow, and two red arrows with a me-ta-commentary on the creation of the meme ap-pear. Commentary on the left Shoggoth GPT-3: The body: *"Alls are alien minds" (we "grow them but don't know what they're really thinking)*. Com-mentary on the right Shoggoth GPT-3 + RLHF: *The mask: early versions were horrifying, so we trained them to act nice and human-like* (Figure 4).
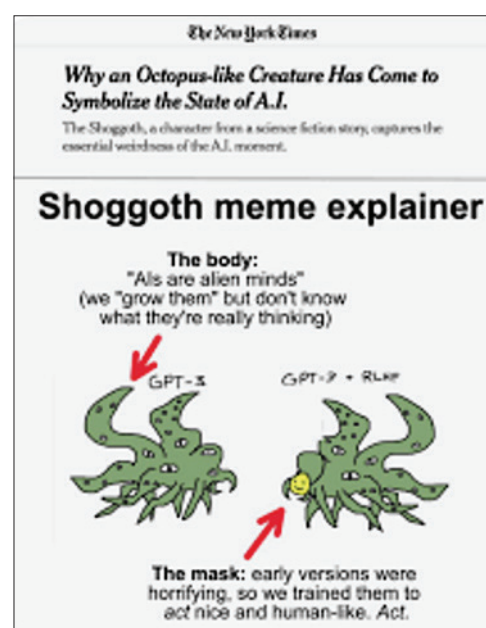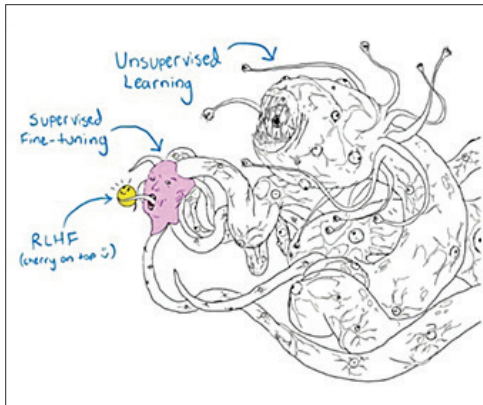

Figure 4. Shoggoth meme explainer

Figure 5. Shoggoth with smiley face

In the "Shoggoth with smiley face" version, only the 'augmented' elements of the Shoggoth are given color - the human face (pink or flesh-colored) and the smiley (yellow). Comments in blue with arrows imitate handwriting, explaining the "structure" of the Shoggoth: *Unsupervised Learning - body, Supervised Fine-tuning - face, RLHF (cherry on top :)*. The yellow smiley drawing is duplicated typographically, introducing an additional note of humor into the metacommentary (Figure 5).

In both versions, the metacommentary is addressed to users and readers on behalf of the creators of the Shoggoth, who are human specialists in the field of artificial intelligence. So, people-creators address people-users using the pronoun *we: we grow them*. This expression demonstrates the degree of enunciative support and shows the global dynamics of linguistic activity around the "instances of enunciation" proposed by Coquet (1984). The instances are designated by personal pronouns: *I, WE, HE, IT* (in French: *JE, ON, IL, ÇA*). According to Coquet, the subject "expresses himself" through his actions or speech; depending on the personal pronoun used, we understand the degree of his subjectivity or objectivity concerning the enunciation: for example, we are the subjective instance, and *he* is the objective one. The nature of the expressed instance in the key phrases "Shoggoth meme explainer" and "Shoggoth with smiley face" is that we, when the position of we can be shared by both those who speak and those to whom the enunciation is addressed (i.e., the collective of users).

The "Shoggoth meme explainer" version was published on X.com with the tagline *AI Notkilleveryoneism Memes*; the "Shoggoth with smiley face" version was published on the Know Your Meme portal. Then, the Shoggoth meme moves to TikTok, and the instance of the enunciation changes, from the subjective *we* to the objective *he*. Users are addressed "on behalf of the meme." Therefore, on the verbal level, a passive form is introduced, and "meme explainer" turns into "meme explained" (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Shoggoth AI meme explained

In TikTok, only the word *Shoggoth* remains from the meme, while the meme itself is anthropomorphized, featuring a human face.

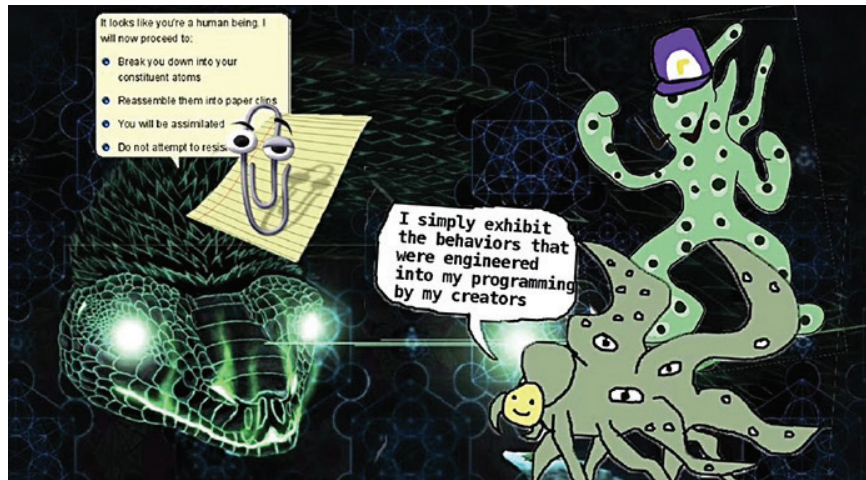Subsequent versions of the meme are expanded versions of the meme-human communicative situations:

Figure 7. What is "The Waluigi effect"

a) the meme speaks to people in the first person (subjective instance I): its discourse contains an emotional load of "justification" with the so-called *Waluigi effect* (i.e., chatbot behavior that is unexpected for the user: see Figure 7);
b) the user gives the mask to the meme, takes it away, or peacefully coexists with the masked Shoggoth. In the absence of verbal comments, the instance of the enunciation is expressed only visually, and this objective it (in French: *ÇA*) is something supernatural, without gender or number, but subject to human control (Figures 8a, 8b with the slogan "AI is a Shoggoth").
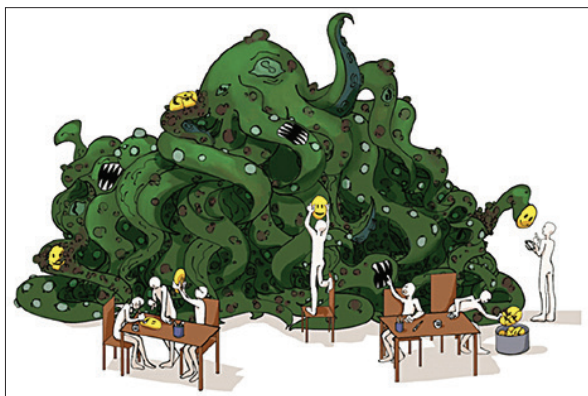

Figure: 8a & **8b.** AI is a Shoggoth: the instance *it*

5. From the semiotics of fear to the semiotics of humor?

In our opinion, the emergence of the Shoggoth meme appears not to have been accidental - it can be seen as actually addressing users' fears of artificial intelligence. Recently, the topic of artificial intelligence as a threat to a wide range of fears from the sphere of dystopian novels and utopian films has been steadily shifting to the attention of many readers. We get the impression that this very tendency is the result of the work of artificial intelligence, which seems to be trying to make us understand that it can perform actions that are inexplicable to humans. The world of artificial intelligence is described in Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopia, *Clara and the Sun*, about so-called "Artificial Friends" (Ishiguro 2021). Also, the topic of "coexistence" with artificial intelligence is on the UNESCO agenda: for example, the graphic novel *Inside AI – An Algorithmic Adventure* was recently created on the initiative of this organization (UNESCO 2022).

For Lotman (2004b[1977], 2004c[1988]), the issues of progress and the future of humanity, as well as the dangers associated with it, have always been among the central ones. Lotman (2004c[1988]) writes that the desire to "look into the future" is inherent in humans in general, but it becomes especially acute in times of crisis. Lotman considers technological progress and the scientific and technological revolution to cause a change in people's entire way of life and all their cultural ideas. Paradigms change, and with them, the whole world changes. In an earlier work, Lotman (1970) puts forward several postulates about the general functioning of human culture that explain our fear in the face of highly intelligent creatures other than humans. Developing the idea of Levi-Strauss (1958:97), Lotman argues that culture should be understood as a "system of additional restrictions" or prohibitions imposed on natural human behavior (Lotman 2004d[1970]:664). The scope of these additional behavioral restrictions is determined by the type of culture and is divided into two areas: the first is regulated by shame, the second by fear. This division coincides with the division of the collective into *we* and *they*. Within the cultural *we*, as a rule, the norms of shame and honor operate (hence the customs of duels, medical courts, student public opinion, etc.). As for our attitude to *others*, here the norms of fear and coercion are most often encountered.

New meme variations in mid-2023 evolved into a classic mini-narrative in the spirit of "AI takeover," where humanity in the form of a cartoon man fights artificial intelligence in the form of the Shoggoth meme (Figures 9a and 9b). These mini-stories are built on Propp's (2021:98) fairy tale model: hero-anti-hero (pest); the course of the narrative from the state of insufficiency through intermediate functions of tests to the denouement, namely production, wedding, and/or the elimination of trouble.

The first mini-story (Figure 9a) of the Shoggoth meme is based on the division of society into *we* (people) and *they* (artificial intelligence), and our attitude to the group *they* is regulated by fear. In summary, the meaning of the formula is as follows: artificial intelligence is different from us, we can lose control over its actions, and it can harm us. In the first story, Shoggoth kills a man (visual sequence - a gun and a pool of blood) and says *La la la, now I'm free to do X* (verbal commentary with an ironic 'musical notes' emoji).
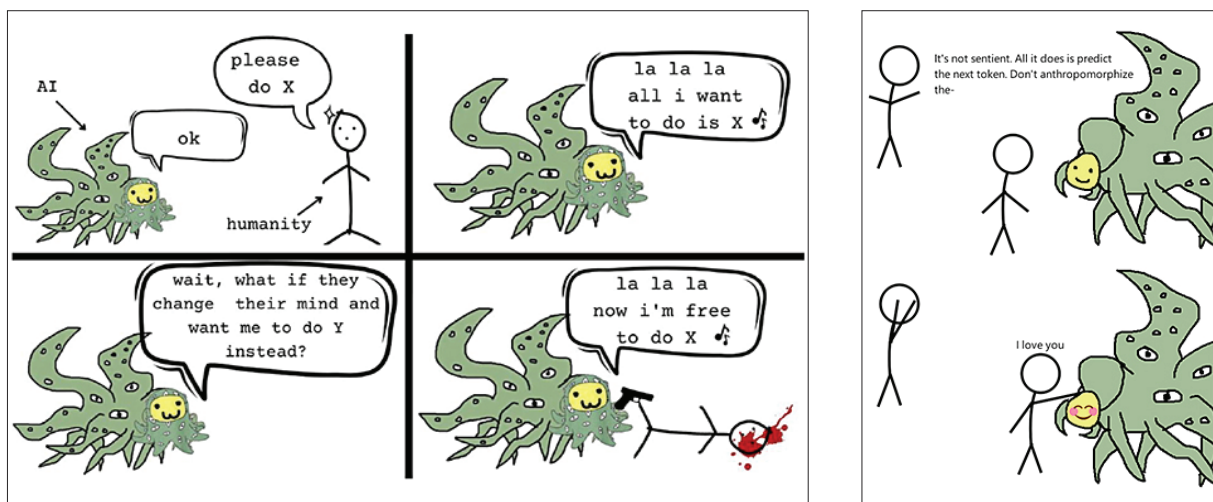

Figure: 9a & **9b.** Mini-stories

The second mini-story (Figure 9b) is about whether it is possible to apply the norms of ethics and shame to artificial intelligence. Today, the topic of ethical standards in AI is one of the key ones not only in social networks and in the press, but also on the agenda of international organizations. For example, one of the thematic issues of the *UNESCO Courier* is called "Artificial intelligence: Prospects and threats" (UNESCO 2018). The communicative opposition, addressed to both international experts and a wide range of readers, is based on Lotman's dichotomy: a threat as fear, and a prospect as shame (Lotman 2004d:664). The problem lies in the speed of research into the aspects of artificial intelligence. While its technical aspects are being researched at a rapid pace, the study of its ethical aspects is much slower. In other words, it is much more challenging to recognize elements of shame (ethical aspects) than elements of fear (Lotman 2004d:665). According to UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay (2018:37), "AI can be a fantastic opportunity to achieve the goals set by the 2030 Agenda, but that means addressing the ethical issues it presents, without further delay."

Referring to Pascal's metaphor (2023[1670]:39), Lotman (2004a:51) wrote about the creative person as a *thinking reed*. Man is just a weak reed, but it is a thinking reed. A drop of water is enough to kill him, but his ability to innovate and make unpredictable decisions is his evolutionary advantage. In this sense, the evolutionary advantage of man over the artificial intelligence he created lies in the ability to find an unconventional solution, to transform the meaning of a situation in an unpredictable but useful way. In Figure 9b, the communication between Shoggoth and the human ends with an unexpected victory for the human, on a tactile and verbal level. In response to Shoggoth's demand not to attribute human qualities to him, the human gently touches the green monster with the words *I love you*, and the smiley blushes from completely human emotions: embarrassment, joy, and pleasure. Users are invited to move from a system of normalizing relations with artificial intelligence based on fear (*we - he*) to regulation based on shame (ethical standards, creating a new community *we*). The declaration of love for a meme has some parodic features. In Nissenbaum and Shifman's (2018:294) terms, the meme "expresses happiness ironically." As Jost (2022:13) points out, today we declare our love using the "script-visual" language of memes: *Are you memeing me?* (In French: *Est-ce que tu mèmes?*).

In January 2024, the Shoggoth meme received a new educational and pedagogical function. Graphic designer Joseph Gregory has published three parts of a video called "Confronting Shoggoth" (Figures 10a, 10b, 10c) on the website of his author's project *Echonova*. They do not feature the traditional green monster with a smiley face, but during the online course "Design for Everyone," the author teaches us how to create a Shoggoth using vector drawing.

In the first video, the designer draws the Shoggoth's tentacles (Figure 10a). Then, internet users are offered, in Lotman's (2004a:108) terminology, an unpredictable solution: the tentacles turn out to be the hair of a beautiful girl (Figure 10b). Finally, in the final video, the girl's head is compared to the cap of an atomic mushroom (Figure 10c). Users can perceive the drawing as a threat (a relationship with
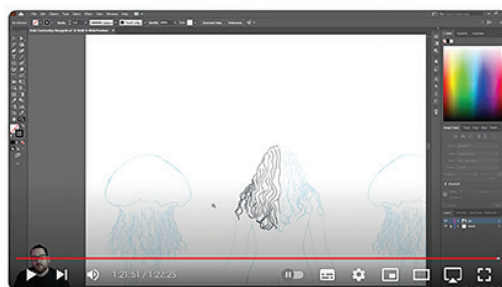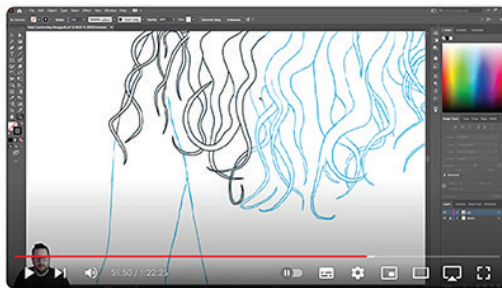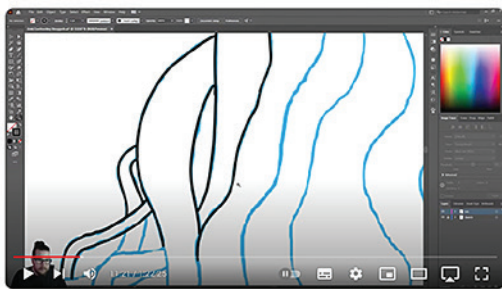

Figure 10a, 10b, 10c. Confronting Shoggoth (screenshots taken by the article's author).

artificial intelligence based on fear) or look for beauty in it (a relationship based on shame: it is impossible to see only the bad). The video has three parts (i.e., introduction, composition, and denouement). Still, at the end we find ourselves at a bifurcation point, faced with a choice of one of the alternative paths: "whenever we talk about unpredictability, we mean a certain set of equally probable possibilities, of which only one is realized" (Lotman 2004e:161).

In his article on new forms of philosophical practice in the digital age, Pezzano coined the term *comicepts* meaning philosophical concepts created and communicated in the form of comics (Pezzano 2024:67). According to him, "doing philosophy with comics" means opening up new possibilities by moving away from old traditions of philosophizing. Similarly, we are probably still far from talking about the Shoggoth meme as a *memocept*. Still, it is already evident that this meme is an example of what Eco (2020) called the third type of humor in Pirandello. Unlike the first type, i.e. when the comic can only happen, and the second type, i.e. when I do not distance myself and do not try to show my superiority, but rather understand and sympathize with the comic situation, the third type of humor is when "I participate in the story, but I try to look at myself as someone else," as an actor, that is, I look at the situation with humor (Eco 2020:91). In the examples discussed so far, users can work with a designer to create a vector drawing of a Shoggoth or can identify themselves with the characters in mini-stories. In both cases, they use virtual reality as a mirror and, like actors, "play themselves" (Eco 2020:91), presenting the situation as comic.

6. Conclusion: A house with transparent walls

"On a short leash. House with transparent walls" is the title of one of the articles in a special issue of the business magazine *Profil* dedicated to Artificial Intelligence (Grinkevitch 2023:28). The special issue was published in May 2023, and the main theme of its articles is fear and the search for solutions to the threats and risks of AI. "Transparent walls" is a metaphor for living space in the digital world, where Artificial Intelligence controls everything.

In 1926, almost a hundred years ago, Sergei Eisenstein, mentioned at the beginning of this article, came up with an unusual film, *The Glass House*. The film's script was one of the first the director offered to Paramount during a trip to Hollywood in the 1920s. "The action was to take place in a skyscraper with transparent walls, floors, and ceilings. Everyone can see each other, but no one pays attention to the needs and troubles of their neighbors" (Rumyantseva-Kleiman 2018:94). As a result, the call to live together and help one's neighbors turns into universal surveillance and suffering. However, Eisenstein's visionary plan, not understood even by his friends, was not realized.

Digital reality, which can be imagined as a "glass house" or a "house with trans-parent Walls," is filled with metaphors. The Shoggoth meme is not just a successful example of using metaphor in the digital space. Metaphors in digital reality have been used since the early days of the internet to popularize new technologies. Internet users regularly encounter Shoggoth on social networks, but only a few are familiar with the prototype of the character from Lovecraft's novel. The evolution of Shoggoth in messages and publications, the emergence of mini-stories testifies to the interaction and 'competition' of instances of enunciation (*I, WE, HE, IT* in Coquet 1984), when each instance strives to dominate.

Ultimately, the meme becomes an element of a global *trans-enunciation*, in the words of Colas-Blaise (2023), bearing a unifying repeating element (Shoggoth) at all semiotic levels: text, typographic signs, picture, video clip.

According to AI experts, one of the reasons for the emergence and launch of the Shoggoth meme into the internet space is to combat users' fears of artificial intelligence (Roose 2023). The meme reminds us of our fears and evokes empathy in the face of uncertainty. Today, our interaction with digital reality is characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. As Sedda (2025:5) writes, "[t]he unpredictable happens. And it upsets our existences. […] Other times it does not happen, but it seems to happen. It is evoked, exalted, feared, even without having happened."[4] In the French context, the Shoggoth meme became a play on the words: the image illustrating the article about Shoggoth on the *France* 24 portal was placed under the heading MEME PAS PEUR. The phrase can be interpreted in two ways: "not afraid of the meme" (*mème pas peur*) and "not afraid anymore" (même pas peur; Seibt 2023; see Figure 11). However, today the Shoggoth meme remains as dually utopian as Eisenstein's idea of a "house with transparent walls." We laugh at the smiley face on the tentacles, but we still do not know what is hidden behind the smiley (e.g., good or danger), and this explains the desire of users to decipher the riddle of the Shoggoth, endowing the meme with this or that mini-story. Thus, we follow the development of the meme as a *floating signifier* (Buchanan 2010:72) that represents an intersection of discourses reflecting a semiotics of fear that evolves into shame and humor. Escudero Chauvel (2024:44) states that[5] the meme is the "first specific format for producing discursive meaning" on social media. The Shoggoth meme, as a result of mixed discourses, is one example of such a specific format, "in an increasingly TLDR (too long, didn't read) world" (Wiggins 2019:19).

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[4] See the original in Italian: "L'imprevedibile accade. E sconvolge le nostre esistenze. […] Altre volte non accade ma sembra accadere. Viene evocato, esaltato, temuto, pur senza essere accaduto" (Sedda 2025:5).

[5] See the original in Spanish: "El meme es, en realidad, el primer *formato específico de producción de sentido discursivo* de las redes sociales" (Escudero Chauvel 2024:44, emphasis in the original).

Figure 11. Meme variant in French context
(MEME PAS PEUR)

Figure 12. Fairytale happy ending

The Shoggoth meme's success is that it has several levels of reading: instead of a linear interpretation (smiley: people should not be afraid), a critical interpretation appears (the smiley mask: masks the dangers of the chatbot, which do not disappear). Everything new and changing the usual paradigm of human existence causes fear, and the paradox is that moving forward can "stimulate the regeneration of very archaic cultural models and models of consciousness" (Lotman 2004c:638). When faced with the risks of artificial intelligence, a person turns to the archaic model of a fairy tale or myth to come out of all trials with honor like the fairy tale hero. New versions of the meme that appeared online in the winter of 2024-2025 directly refer to the happy ending in the traditional fairy tale castle (Figure 12).

The literary and fairytale character Shoggoth, who has become a meme, embodies the idea of a happy coexistence between man and machine, a "living with" new technologies through mutual adaptation. According to Fontanille (2015:27), the universal way of existence is "to *be* together (exist or act with, or against)":

> In short, in "living with", and by placing action and interactions at the center of the problem, and not life in general, it is "with" (doing with) which is the first and to which we can give a recognizable syntagmatic form (the figurative style of the schema of existence), and it is "living" which is second, and which receives the contents specific to human life (modalities, emotions, passions, norms, etc.).[6]

Within this social category, a subcategory is distinguished for living beings who experience "living together" (*vivre avec*). *Vivre avec ChatGPT*, as in the title of a recent book by Gefen (2023), indirectly confirms Fontanille's idea that *vivre avec*, as a subcategory of the mode of social existence, can acquire a typically human model and passionate components. ChatGPT is a useful "copilot" and a surprising "other organism" (Gefen 2023:9). By passing the Shoggoth meme to each other, internet users enact nothing less than the transition from a few people to a group, and then to a community that manages to build something "common" based on the notion of "sharing", including the participation of non-human actors (Basso Fossali 2021:26). We are invited to move from a system of normalizing relations with artificial intelligence based on fear (*we - he*) to regulation based on shame, ethical norms and humor, to the creation of a new joint collective *we*. This collective should be understood in the spirit of anthroposemiotic research in recent years, as an interaction of people, collectives, habitats and imaginations (Fontanille and Couégnas 2018). In this sense, the Shoggoth meme created by TetraspaceWest became part of the collective creativity of internet users aimed at peaceful coexistence with artificial intelligence. As Tsakona notes (2020:182), "even though online jokes can sometimes be attributed to specific jokers […], very quickly they become part of collective creative processes."

Lovecraft's stories and characters have been filmed many times in the 20th century, and his work continues to inspire today's directors. Will there ever be a film or TV series about the Shoggoth meme? Quoting Sergei Eisenstein's amazing drawing about "human progress" discussed at the beginning of our article (Figure 1), we would like to conclude not with words, but with another example of the "Shoggoth case," a kind

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[6] See the original in French: «En somme, dans «vivre avec», et en plaçant au centre de la problématique l'action et les interactions, et non la vie en général, c'est «avec» (faire avec) qui est premier, et auquel on peut donner une forme syntagmatique reconnaissable (le style figural du schème d'existence), et c'est «vivre» qui est second, et qui reçoit les contenus propres à la vie humaine (modalités, émotions, passions, normes, etc.)» (Fontanille 2015:27).

of echo of the thoughts of the great film director (see Figure 13). *Human Progress Through Time* is the name of the drawing, where Shoggoth's tentacles pull the green arrow of time upwards. Forward to the future? Or back to the past? We are again at the bifurcation point.

According to Eco (2020:90), "thanks to humor, we can speak of a tragic situation in the present as if it had already happened or had not yet happened."

Figure 13. Human progress through time

When we endow the Shoggoth meme with a humorous smiley, we attribute to it a genuinely human quality, the ability to laugh. "Man is the only animal capable of laughing" (Eco 2020:96), but he laughs for very sad reasons: from a futile desire to rationalize his irrationality. A person laughs at his fears about artificial intelligence, knowing that a tragic situation can become comical at any moment, and vice versa.

At the beginning of the article, we mentioned Lotman's *internal cheerfulness*. When talking about artificial intelligence, he liked to quote a joke from the memoirs of the poet Andrei Bely (1931:71) about his father, the famous 19th-century mathematician Nikolai Bugayev. In his lecture on animal intelligence, Bugayev asked students what intelligence was in general, in their opinion. No one could give a satisfactory answer, so the professor declared the lecture over (Lotman 2004f:580).

The humorous meme and its fantastic literary prototype have become part of the mythical discourse about artificial intelligence. We create a myth about AI not as a set of technological solutions, but as a certain *Actant* that can take the form of this or that *Actor* (Shoggoth), can anthropomorphize and laugh like a person. However, the main task of semioticians in today's digital age is not to develop a "story" or "myth" about AI, but to explore "the two-faced actant" that carries out semiosis through machine-generated expression and human-recreated content (Fontanille 2024).[7]

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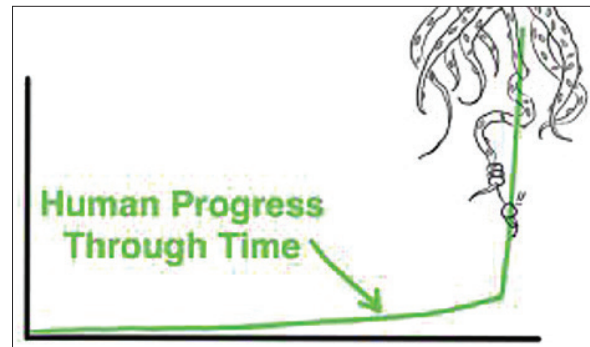
[7] See the video of Fontanille's speech at the Semiotic Seminar in Paris on March 13, 2024: «un actant à deux faces, qui réalise la sémiose en réunissant une expression générée par la machine et un contenu restitué ou interprété par l'usager humain» (Fontanille 2024).

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AUTHOR

Inna Merkoulova is Associate Professor, Founder and Director of the International Center for Semiotics and Intercultural Dialogue, State Academic University for the Humanities, Moscow, Russian Federation.

#staystrongmelbs: Collective identity unleashed by an earthquake

BY: **Kerry Mullan**

ABSTRACT

Humor is widely recognized as a way to process and deal with disasters and tragic events. This is particularly the case in our digital age: political controversies, wars, natural disasters, and other crises, such as COVID-19, often lead to the rapid proliferation of creative and amusing memes as a digital response mechanism, creating a sense of community and levity and an outlet for anxiety and frustration in participatory digital cultures. While it turned out to be relatively minor, the earthquake that shook Melbourne in September 2021 during the city's sixth COVID-19 lockdown prompted an outpouring of multimodal humor on Australian social media, becoming a *memetic moment* (Smith and Copland 2022). Humorous tweets and memes began circulating just moments after the tremors stopped, and continued unabated for several days, much of it linking the earthquake to the lockdowns in Melbourne. Using multimodal digital discourse analysis, this article will analyze a selection of interconnected sociopolitical tweets, memes, and other online humor that circulated in the week of September 22, 2021, as a result of the earthquake. By focusing primarily on the semiotic, linguistic, and pragmatic elements (intertextuality, wordplay, incongruity), it will be shown how the humor in these multimodal examples was not just performing as a coping mechanism for the earthquake, but as a creative way of engaging with current political issues to create a sense of collective identity. This article will illustrate the construction of the social identity of Melbourne as a strong and resilient city following an earthquake experienced during the pandemic.

1. Contextual and theoretical background

This article examines the humor generated by a 5.6 magnitude earthquake that struck Melbourne, in the state of Victoria, Australia, at 9.15 am on September 22, 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, it is an analysis of the online humor that the author personally collected over the following week, and of how the textual and semiotic elements combined to create meaning, in turn reflecting and/ or creating a sense of local identity, resilience (see also Comer 2022), and solidarity.

While an earthquake may not immediately appear to be an amusing event, it is well documented that humor is a common way for people to process and deal with disasters and tragic events such as war (e.g., Dynel 2024) and COVID-19 (e.g., Browning and Brassett 2023, Mpofu 2021, Yus and Maíz-Arévalo 2023). Browning and Brassett (2023) found that during COVID-19, humor functioned as a form of stress relief and anxiety management, and reaffirmed biographical narratives of (national) community and status. They also found that the community-building function of humor during the COVID-19 pandemic took the form of othering through national stereotypes.

While some of the humor in the wake of the Melbourne earthquake was at the expense of other states (see Section 3.1), most was achieved through self-directed and/or self-deprecatory humor. It is important to note that Melbourne was ranked by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Global Liveability Index as the "world's most livable city" for seven consecutive years, from 2011 to 2017.[1] While the Victorian State government was (and still is) very proud of this title, Melburnians themselves tend not to take it too seriously. More often than not, the title instead prompts self-deprecatory humor, a type of humor which is very common in Australia, where not taking oneself too seriously and engaging in "jocular mockery" are highly valued (Haugh 2014), particularly when self-directed (Béal and Mullan 2017). Indeed, many Melburnians referred to their city as *Lockdownistan* during the pandemic (Milner 2021), the suffix *–(i)stan* (meaning "land" or "place of") being used to (self-)mockingly rename – yet at the same time signal affectionate ownership of – this newfound community. Irreverence and a preference for deadpan humor and irony have also been found to be highly valued in Australian culture (Goddard 2006, 2009), as evidenced in the examples of earthquake humor collected (see Section 3.3). Thornhill describes what he calls *Australian humor*[2] as follows:

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[1] The EIU index ranks 173 cities across five categories: stability, healthcare, education, culture and the environment, and infrastructure. At the time of the earthquake in 2021, Melbourne was ranked equal eighth most livable city (Economist Intelligence Unit 2021).

[2] Many of the characteristics described here of course can be found in humor in other cultures, although this particular combination is often considered to be stereotypically Australian.

> Australian humor […] can be exuberant and boisterous, but more usually dry and understated. It delights in an irreverence which cautions us not to take ourselves, or the things we revere, too seriously. Irony is one of its favorite devices […]. The best Australian humor has a severe economy – of language, in its laconic wording, and of emotional expression, in its deadpan delivery. (Thornhill 1992:134, 137 as cited in Goddard 2006:86)

As it happens, although the earthquake was felt many hundreds of kilometers away in the neighboring states of New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, South Australia and Tasmania, and was the largest ever recorded in Victoria, it caused only minor structural damage in parts of Melbourne (which in itself became a source of some of the humor created, cf. Section 3.3), and left one person injured. That said, it is worth noting that the humor started long before people knew the scale of the damage.

Earthquakes are rare in Melbourne and, while most residents took a minute or two to understand the cause of the trembling (which also became a source of self-deprecatory humor; see example 10), others immediately began creating memes and amusing tweets (the first one I received was timestamped 9.19 am, just four minutes after the earthquake). As Aslan (2021) points out, political controversies, natural disasters, and other crises often lead to the rapid spread of creative and amusing memes as a digital response mechanism, creating a sense of community and levity and allowing us to process current issues and events collectively. Smith and Copland (2022) studied the intersection of speed, memes, and social media of two particular "memetic moments" on Twitter and found that speed can create a sense of joy, entertainment, and important discussion online. They argue that to be understood successfully, emergent memes rely on a reader's sophisticated knowledge of online communication norms and jokes, and

> are the product of a particular subset of online cultures, one that is 'always on' and constantly consuming news and events. It is a culture that prioritizes speed. Part of hacking the attention economy of the 'always on' internet culture is to be first: first to spot the joke, first to make the joke. (Smith and Copland 2022:26)

They also argue that speed can work to knit publics together, as will be seen here. According to Tsakona (2024:68), memes are prototypical instances of contemporary internet culture reflecting and enhancing user participation and creativity.[3] Their semiotic resources mean they can represent and disseminate complex ideas using humor. As well as being entertaining, "meme genres play an important role in the construction of

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[3] See Tsakona (2024:68-72) for a comprehensive review of the literature and a detailed discussion on memes.

group identity and social boundaries" (Shifman 2014:100). Newton et al. (2022:1) describe memes as "bonding icons: semiotic artifacts which foreground shared feelings and invite alignment around a collective identity." They argue that understanding the meaning of a meme requires alignment with its values, further reinforcing ties to a community. Of particular relevance to this study is Dynel and Messerli's (2020) article on what they call *nation memes,* which provide insight into how a nation and its culture are perceived by other nations/cultures, as well as how a nation portrays itself through memes. Let us consider Melbourne a mini-nation for this study, albeit on a much smaller scale than that intended by Dynel and Messerli (2020). We can apply this concept to the analysis of the humor here, where the humor showcased Melburnians as bonded, resilient, and a community (or mini-nation) that was 'in this together.'

Melbourne has long been a source of mockery for other Australians (particularly for its unpredictable weather and its penchant for coffee), and a *Melbourne Memes* Facebook group was created in the early days of memes in 2012.[4] According to a recent news article (Kenny 2022), "[t]o the rest of Australia, Melbourne is easy to mock. Melburnians are often derided as a bunch of latte-sipping, bleeding-heart-liberal, intellectually superior snobs, naive to the concerns and realities of life outside the self-proclaimed cultural capital of the country." Kenny (2022) says that "Melbourne culture provides just as much fodder for comedy" for locals, however, noting that several recently created Instagram accounts make fun of life in inner-city Melbourne. Kenny claims that

> [t]he average Melburnian's unusually high cultural literacy and self-awareness, paired with classically Australian self-deprecating humour, makes Melbourne a city friendly to memes. The humour of these accounts feels like a healthier evolution of tall poppy syndrome,[5] in that rather than offering a brutal takedown of any one high-achieving individual, they present a cheerful mocking of society at large.

However, it is important to note that "the ribbing is overwhelmingly from a place of love and recognition, rather than a serious desire to call people out" (Kenny 2022). Kenny quotes one of the local meme creators as saying that "[g]ags are made with a spirit of affection … [a]t the heart of the humour is a love and affection for Melbourne and its pretentious coffee, food, wine and intellectual culture," in which we all participate (Kenny 2022).

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[4] That said, the group only has 51,000 followers, or 1% of the population of Melbourne.
[5] This notion is particularly prominent in Australia and New Zealand. It refers to a tendency to discredit or disparage people who have achieved notable wealth or public success, especially when they promote their own achievements.

Indeed, it is well known that humor brings people together around something shared, creating a sense of solidarity. Zappavigna (2014) referred to it as *ambient affiliation* when referring to those momentary connections we share with other internet users. In their paper on the humor in YouTube comments following the 2019 Notre Dame fire in Paris, Chovanec and Tsakona (2023) stress the importance of shared knowledge amongst users to create disaster humor. Yus and Maíz-Arévalo (2023) also stress that successful humor of this kind relies on the collective experience of something (in their case, also the pandemic), creating in turn a sense of shared group-bonding. They refer to this feeling as the "joy of mutuality" (Yus and Maíz-Arévalo 2023:28). Tsakona (2024:171-173) discusses a range of sociopragmatic functions of pandemic memes which have been recorded in the literature, most of which apply to the humorous examples under examination here (despite not all being memes): promoting feelings of togetherness; being used as a coping mechanism; for entertainment and distraction; as vehicles of political criticism; for sociopolitical criticism (as directed at non-conformists); and for shaping under-standing of the sociopolitical changes taking place. While the whole of Australia (and the world) experienced the pandemic, Melburnians lived it differently from the rest of the country, leading some to describe themselves as feeling part of a "team of 5 million people" (Comer 2022:150). For members of this particular (locked-down) sociocultural community, the earthquake was yet another adversity to be faced.

The fact that the earthquake took place during the city's sixth COVID-19 lock-down is highly relevant. Melbourne experienced Australia's strictest rules during the pandemic; these consisted of six periods of lockdown (some including curfews) totaling 263 days between March 26, 2020, and October 21, 2021, with many facilities remaining closed even outside of these periods (hence the coinage *Lockdownistan*). Australia's federal system of government and the constitutional division of powers is such that the states have primary responsibility for health policy and emergency response, meaning that the actions taken in relation to COVID-19 were primarily un-dertaken at the state level (Woodbridge 2023). This resulted in significant rivalry and partisanship across the various states by politicians, the media, and the public over the two years (Milner 2021), much of it providing an opportunity for humor. The Vic-torian State Premier at the time, Daniel (Dan) Andrews, exhibited strong and decisive leadership during the pandemic and was generally seen to be responsible for the strict lockdown rules, declaring a State of Emergency in Victoria on March 6, 2020. His per-sona and leadership style were divisive; however, he was seen by some as a role model of crisis leadership, but by others as overly authoritarian (Woodbridge 2023). This also provided rich fodder for humor, resulting in Andrews being described by one journal-ist as "one of Australia's most meme-able leaders," even having a novelty song written about him featuring his image and voice (May 2023). His strong leadership style also led to Melbourne being referred to as *Danistan* during the pandemic.

As Chovanec and Tsakona (2023) observed, different kinds of humor may emerge around a specific event, here the Melbourne earthquake:

- mock disaster humor (my term), given that the earthquake turned out to have very few consequences (see above);
- pandemic humor (which can be considered a type of disaster humor in itself);
- political humor – is sometimes combined with pandemic humor (see Tsakona 2024:171 for a list of studies that combine the two).

It will be seen how the earthquake was almost always reframed to allow for humorous comment on COVID-19, lockdowns, and national and local (State) politics to construct a collective social identity of Melbourne as a strong and resilient city during the pandemic. Section 2 below outlines the methodology, including the collection and analysis of the data. This is followed by the presentation and analysis of selected examples in Section 3, and the conclusion in Section 4.

2. Methodology

Humor is multifaceted, multifunctional, and often multimodal (especially when it appears online, as is the case here), meaning that several different theories and frameworks can be applied to any study of humor. For the current research, I draw on several scholars and theories, particularly Tsakona's (2024) *Discourse Theory of Humor* (henceforth DTH), which places great importance on context and highlights the centrality of incongruity (or script opposition – where two ideas appear to be irreconcilable or incompatible before a resolution is found) in humor.[6] Context and incongruity are therefore both fundamental to understanding the earthquake humor in this study (not least because the very idea of an earthquake in Melbourne is incongruous, since it is not an area prone to earthquakes). The DTH accounts for "the interplay among speakers' sociocultural assumptions, the genre where humor is attested, and the semiotics of the text intended to be perceived as humorous" (Tsakona 2024:32-33). These three interrelated Analytical Foci (AF) are at the core of the DTH, and at the basis of the interpretation of the earthquake humor here:

> AF1: Sociocultural Assumptions
> Sociocultural assumptions are the shared background knowledge necessary for processing humor. This knowledge of what is un/expected, un/conventional, or ab/normal in a specific community forms the basis for framing specific actions or people as incongruous and for humorously representing them.

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[6] See Also Yus and Maíz-Arévalo (2023) for an analysis of 150 Peninsular Spanish COVID-19 memes using the incongruity-resolution theory.

AF2: Genre
Genre refers to the types of texts where humor appears (in this case, tweets, memes, and posts circulating on social media). It also determines/is determined by the sociopragmatic goals and functions of humor, in this case, creating solidarity and a sense of community and identity.

AF3: Text
Text involves the semiotics of a text intended as humorous: the semantic content and stylistic choices (wordplay, exaggeration, etc.), and any nonverbal elements (e.g., visual) and other contextualization cues (emojis, hashtags, etc.). Recipients' reactions and interpretations of humor are also considered part of the humorous text, although these are not analyzed here.

Like Comer (2022), I approached the collection and analysis of the data (Sections 2.1 and 2.2) as both researcher and participant of the Melbourne earthquake and lockdowns, recognizing that we cannot "bracket out the ways our lives and experiences are intertwined with our research projects" (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2014:8, as cited in Comer 2022:151). Indeed, as Tsakona (2024:171) points out, collecting and analyzing humorous data was an attractive and entertaining activity during lockdowns, one in which I happily engaged.

2.1. Data collection

Over the week of September 22–29, 2021, I engaged in purposive sampling to collect all the examples of earthquake humor that I received personally via the messaging service WhatsApp and the social media platform Facebook. The examples had initially appeared on various other platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. They were shared with me by friends and/or posted in my local neighborhood Facebook group. I undertook a subsequent Google search for additional contextual information (e.g., a Reddit thread), which helped to identify or clarify some of the memes (e.g., example 4), but which are not counted as examples in my data collection. The dataset consists of seven memes, six tweets, one Facebook post, two satirical news articles, and one recipe for "earthquake cake" posted to Instagram (the latter three will not be examined here in detail for reasons of space).

While this is a limited (personal) dataset, it is illustrative of the vast amount of humor circulated in the days following the earthquake. The Reddit thread I subsequently discovered refers to the fact that 913 comments on "the earthquake thread" appeared in one hour and that the moderators removed approximately 280 posts in ten minutes. While not all these comments would have been humorous, most of those in the section of the thread I examined were intended as non-serious. When I googled "unleash the

earthquake meme" (example 3 below) on the day after the earthquake, on the first page of hits alone, I encountered: four websites which had each collected up to twenty-five different earthquake memes; three news articles (including an international one) where the report focused on the earthquake memes (rather than the earthquake); and the Redbubble merchandise site[7] advertising an array of products (T-shirts, cushion covers, notebooks, etc.) featuring the slogan "Unleash the Earthquake," designed specifically for the Melbourne earthquake.

Two other limitations of the dataset must be acknowledged. First, the memes and posts I received are all in English and did not necessarily represent – or reach – the many culturally and linguistically diverse communities that make up Melbourne. Although 41% of Melburnians identify as having English, Irish, or Scottish heritage, 23% as Australian, and 8% as Chinese (reflecting the general population trends across Australia), 40% were not born in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census) and may not have understood or appreciated the humour.[8] However, as with most examples of online humour, it is impossible to know who created it, who it was intended for, who received it, and who appreciated it; indeed, the latter can apply even within specific/intended communities. As Tsakona (2024:131) points out, "[t]he interpretation of a text including implicit or explicit intertextual references may not always be possible for all potential recipients." Second, due to the nature of data collection, I could not systematically collect reactions, shares, and/or responses to all the examples collected. However, those available indicate extremely high levels of appreciation and engagement with the examples presented below. Many were reposted or retweeted, and only positive reactions (likes, laughing face, or heart emojis, etc.) can be seen.

2.2. Data analysis

The examples of online humor collected in the week following the earthquake were analyzed using principles drawn from a range of qualitative tools and frameworks, particularly multimodal digital discourse analysis (Herring 2019), where *multimodal* is understood to refer to the combination of images, gifs, videos, text, emojis, etc., used to create and convey meaning. The analysis focuses particularly on the use of intertextuality, wordplay, and incongruity, all elements of creativity which, according to Vasquez (2019), "usually involves a tension between the known and the unknown – in other words, some kind of transformation of some existing thing, which is already familiar, or recognizable, to us."

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[7] Redbubble is a global online marketplace for print-on-demand products based on user-submitted artwork, founded in Melbourne in 2006.
[8] I am not suggesting that these communities would not understand English.

Intertextuality can be defined as the (often creative) blending of familiar and well-known knowledge and popular cultural references with current situations and experiences in unique and surprising ways (textual/visual, implicit/explicit; Aslan 2021, Shifman 2014), thereby linked to recontextualization. Wordplay is a productive source of humor manifested in a clever and witty use of words at the textual level (multiple meanings, similar sounds, spelling, puns, etc.). Incongruity arises in the unexpected combinations of two or more opposing elements (context, images, etc.; cf. script incompatibility in Attardo and Raskin 1991:293). Incongruity and intertextuality are intertwined, since incongruity or script opposition relies on intertextuality for humor to succeed. When interpreting humor, participants evoke specific scripts based on their experiences and understanding of the world. This knowledge is then used as the benchmark for the incongruous script. As Tsakona remarks (2024:132), incongruity cannot be established without reference to known contexts, which are considered as expected or normal in some way. Given that intertextuality determines what is incompatible or incongruous in a given context, "intertextuality lies at the heart of humor: there cannot be any humorous text that is not intertextual" (Tsakona 2024:132).

The analysis is based on the three aforementioned Analytical Foci of Tsakona's (2024) DTH: (Melburnians') knowledge and sociocultural assumptions, genre (online disaster humor), and the text's multimodal semiotics.

3. Examples and discussion

This section will illustrate how humor was not just performing as a response to the earthquake, but also as a creative way of engaging with current political issues and of communicating shared experiences, community and belonging, and levity, all of which become even more important during a disaster – especially when it turns out not to be too serious, as in this case. The examples are divided into the three categories of online disaster humor collected: political, pandemic, and mock disaster humor. Where an example combines two or all these categories, they appear in the section representing the primary target of humor, i.e., the person, thing, or idea that was predominantly being made fun of. In many cases, they appear in the chronological order they were received, illustrating how the humor evolved over the week, the political humor being the most immediate and prominent.

3.1. Political humor

This section contains five examples of humor where local and/or national politics were the primary target. Locally, the target was primarily the Victorian State Premier; nationally, the Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison; and/or other Australian State Premiers.

Example 1 is a tweet timestamped 9.19 am, just four minutes after the earthquake, which announced:

(1) Earthquake in Melbourne. 'Herald Sun' has already blamed Dan Andrews

The overt references here are to the earthquake and politics, the tweet seemingly suggesting that the Victorian Premier is responsible for the earthquake. The incongruity here is in the impossibility of a person being able to trigger or control a natural disaster. However, as previously mentioned, Andrews was criticized by some for his handling of COVID-19 and the strict, lengthy lockdowns. He was particularly derided by the conservative (Murdoch-owned) press, notably Melbourne's right-wing tabloid *The Herald Sun*, which is the real target of humor here. The tweet is mocking the newspaper for its persistent criticism of the (Labor) Premier, whom they often referred to as Dictator Dan, even to the point of blaming him for impossible acts.

This was closely followed by another tweet (example 2) marked 9.37 am, which combined the aforementioned idea of the Premier supposedly being responsible for the earthquake with a creative use of language. This example of clever word play converted the name of the well-known San Andreas tectonic fault line (the source of many earthquakes in California) into a simple but effective three-word post playing on the Premier's name:

(2) Dan Andreas Fault

According to Aslan (2021:51), humans use language in unexpected and creative ways, and this creative playing with the language form is undertaken "with the express purpose of bonding with others." This is evident here, since it takes the idea of Andrews' responsibility even further, going so far as to name a new local earthquake fault line after him. The name also intimates a particular affection and pride for Dan Andrews, reuniting his community of supporters. However, even his dissenters would have appreciated the word play - perhaps without realizing that they were the main target of the humor.

The recurrent idea of Andrews' responsibility is further entrenched in the following meme (example 3), which implies that he gave the order for the earthquake over the telephone.

(3)

Unleash the **earthquake**

The incongruity of the idea of being able to phone someone to set an earthquake in motion creates the humor here. Still, it again references Andrews's strict leadership during the pandemic and the idea for some people that Andrews thought that he had the power to do anything. The intertextual semiotic resources also contribute to the message of the meme: the backdrop of Tiananmen Square reinforces the idea of a powerful Dictator (cf. Dictator Dan). As Aslan (2021:51) states, "memetic humor relies heavily on the combination of familiar and well-known knowledge and references with current situations and experiences in unique, creative and surprising ways." The choice of the expression *unleash the…* is also deliberate, as it usually refers to releasing a powerful force in response to some objectionable action that warrants it, and visually, the bolding of the word *earthquake* strengthens the force of the expression.

The original photograph was a still taken from a media live cross during a trip Andrews made to Beijing in 2015 to sign a trade agreement with China. It was disseminated widely in the media to promote his visit. According to May (2023), the image became known as the "phone meme," and was circulated on several other occasions to suggest that Andrews had "deliberately orchestrated some sort of malfeasance" (Sharwood 2023).[9] It is clear that Andrews himself is not the target of these memes, but rather the people who are so focused on their dislike or disapproval of him that they blame him for everything, even that which is impossible. In mocking those who dislike Andrews, the humor unites those Victorians who support him, or at least those who might be said to have a less partisan approach to politics and politicians. Despite his dissenters, Andrews was the longest-standing and most popular Premier Victoria had seen in decades, and these memes – and Andrews' ability to embrace them – enhanced

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[9] This was aided by a meme generator website created specifically for this purpose (Imgflip Meme Generator 2025).

his popularity. Indeed, in a highly valued Australian gesture of not taking oneself too seriously (Goddard 2009), Andrews posted the same meme of himself with the caption "Hand over the password" on his final day as Premier in September 2023.

In example 4, the meme is a recontextualization of the promotional poster for the 2015 film about a 9.1 magnitude earthquake that devastates Los Angeles and San Francisco. Tsakona (2024:177) defines recontextualization as "the process of transferring a text/discourse from a specific context into another, whereby new meanings are created through selecting, repurposing, and evaluating textual/discursive elements according to the specific sociopragmatic goals set by the speakers." Even if one does not know the original film, the meme's reference to a disaster movie is visually apparent, illustrating how intertextual humor can be appreciated even if not all the references are known or understood.

(4)

The backdrop shows an apocalyptic scene of smoke and water pouring out of destroyed city skyscrapers, while the foreground is framed by what is clearly intended to be a helicopter carrying the hero on his way to save the day. The date shown in the meme is not of a movie release, but of the earthquake itself. There are several layers of humor embedded here: the Melbourne earthquake is linked to that in a movie, with the added bonus of the film's name allowing for the clever wordplay in the previously tweeted "Dan Andreas Fault"; at the same time, there is an allusion to Andrews being all powerful and the only man able to stop the anti-lockdown protests (which took place in Melbourne on the day before the earthquake). The banner along the top of the meme replaces the hero's name in the original movie poster with the type of headline often seen on disaster/action movie posters.

Example 5 is a meme combining all three humor categories: earthquake, pandemic, and political, this time referencing closed interstate borders. In Australia, closed borders were a significant part of the country's response to the pandemic, with restrictions differing across borders according to case numbers, political preferences in state governments, etc. These differences came to cause interstate rivalry and divisions in public opinion, resulting in a "rally around the flag" effect, where the public looks to the government or a particular leader (in this case, the relevant state Premiers) to guide them through the crisis (Biddle, Gray, and McAllister 2024). The target in this meme is the state of Queensland and the then Premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk. Similarly to the previous examples, the incongruity is the idea that Palaszczuk is so strict and powerful that she was able to prevent the earthquake from travelling further afield against nature.

(5)

The dataset also includes two satirical news articles (Author unknown 2021; Overell 2021). Space does not permit a complete analysis, but, as is the nature of satirical news, the articles mimic real news reports, and the targets were primarily political, in this case, the themes we saw above: the anti-lockdown protesters in Melbourne, and those who blame Dan Andrews for everything. Other targets were the then Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who was mocked for his constant denigration of Victoria, and Dan Andrews and his never-ending praise for then New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian (of the same political persuasion as the Prime Minister). The article also targeted Sky News and its host, former right-wing politician Peta Credlin, for their treatment of Dan Andrews and anyone from the political left. This supports Oring's (1987) findings, who argues that the disaster jokes about the Challenger shuttle explosion were not actually about the disaster itself, but about the discourse in the media about the disaster. The disaster targeted by the media here is, of course, the pandemic, and not the earthquake.

3.2. **Pandemic humor**

Now, we turn to the four examples of pandemic humor in the dataset.

Visual recontextualization is immediately evident in example 6. The meme is simple but effective; the creator has taken the daily Victorian government COVID-19 update infographic – which every Melburnian would instantly have recognized – and replaced the number of test results with the number of earthquakes, incongruously suggesting that figures for the number of earthquakes experienced were always included in the daily updates since they occurred so frequently.

(6)
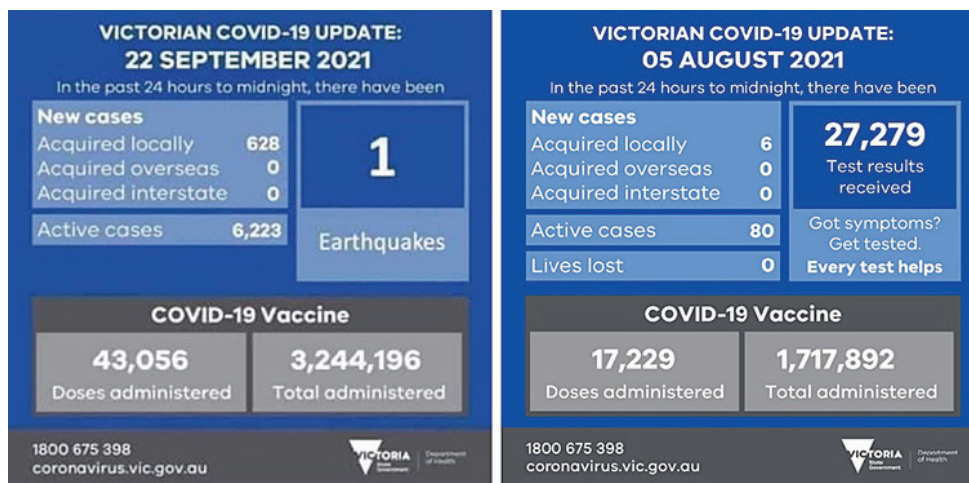
This is also an illustration of the afore-mentioned Australian irreverence, where an official government COVID-19 notification was taken and transformed for humor. Notably, the creator has deleted the box with the number of lives lost, perhaps self-censoring out of a sense of decency for any lives lost due to COVID-19 that day, and/or to avoid muddying the humorous waters with what could have been seen as inappropriate. This is supported by Tsakona's findings (2024:173) that (unlike other cases of disaster humor), pandemic memes hardly ever refer to the victims who died from the disease.

Example 7 is a tweet where the earthquake is again linked to the pandemic:

(7) Reminder: #earthquake is not one of the six reasons to leave your home

The tweet reminds Melburnians of the strict lockdown rules (as if they could have forgotten them) and that even in the case of a potentially life-threatening earthquake, one should not leave the house. This is contrary to the usual advice in the case

of an earthquake, where one should get away from buildings wherever possible. The tweet suggests instead that Andrews' strict COVID-19 rules must take precedence, implying that the all-powerful Premier must always be obeyed. The hashtag is of importance here, since it is promoting the topic to high importance and inviting af-filiative support, contributing to what Koivisto, Vepsäläinen, and Virtanen (2023:23) refer to as a sense of "online collectivity," similar to collectively performed actions in face-to-face environments, such as clapping, booing, and cheering.

Again, the following two examples of pandemic humor illustrate the intertextu-ality between the pandemic and the earthquake. The first one (example 8) shows the contradictory advice provided concerning the pandemic and the earthquake. One is ordered to stay inside for the first and advised to run outside for safety for the sec-ond, thereby creating a humorous image of confused people running back and forth.

(8)
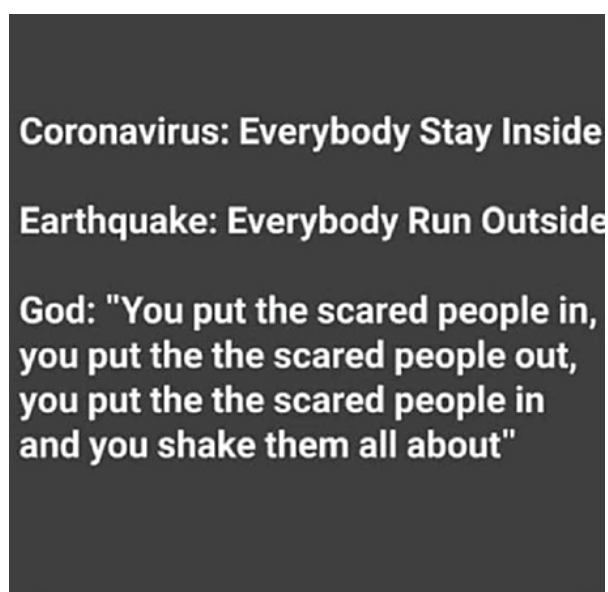
This image is then taken further with the incongruous idea of God himself inter-vening to give instructions to the tune and lyrics of the well-known participation dance *Hokey Cokey*,[10] creating a strong visual image of people being placed inside the house (COVID-19), then outside (earthquake), and then back inside (COVID-19), and then being shaken around (earthquake). The textual use of the colon suggests commands, reinforced by the use of capital letters in the first two lines, with the third command given directly by God, as indicated by the quotation marks.

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[10] Sometimes known as the *Hokey Pokey*.

Example (9) consists of two images taken from a local website (Locktown 2021) selling T-shirts, which, although not linked to the earthquake, is rich with imagery and representative of the self-deprecatory humor of many Melburnians. The first image shows a person wearing a facemask and a "Greetings from Locktown" T-shirt, standing in front of the iconic and instantly recognizable (to Melburnians) Flinders Street (train) Station, where promotional shots of the city are often taken. This is also the image reproduced on the T-shirt itself. The photograph (and the picture on the T-shirt) has clearly been taken during a lockdown period, as this is usually one of the busiest intersections in Melbourne, for both people and traffic. The textual humor is found in the wordplay that transforms *lockdown* to *Locktown*.

(9)

The back of the T-shirt announces "235 days of lockdown and counting," "Melbourne, Australia, World's Most Resilient City," with wordplay effectively and meaningfully transforming the aforementioned title of "World's Most Liveable City." The tee-shirt then lists the dates of each of the Melbourne lockdowns, where Lockdown number 6 is shown to begin on August 5, 2021, but shows a question mark for the end-date, indicating that the tee-shirts were designed and printed during the final lockdown. This is a good illustration of the highly valued Australian ability to laugh at oneself (Goddard 2006, 2009; Kenny 2022), and, while not a meme, the tee-shirt design projects an image of the mini-nation (cf. Dynel and Messerli 2020) of Melbourne and its residents as resilient and 'in this together.' This is another example of the community-building function of humor during COVID-19 (cf. Browning and Brassett 2023).

3.3. **Mock disaster humor**

The final category consists of five examples of what I have called *mock disaster humor*, where the humor focuses on the earthquake, in particular, its ultimate non-seriousness. Incongruity, the semantic mechanism central to the production of humor, is evident here. The script for an earthquake is usually a natural disaster implying destruction, death, and horror; however, this earthquake was in direct opposition to this. The term mock refers both to the fact that the earthquake was somehow not authentic due to said non-seriousness and to the fact that, for that very reason, it became an object of derision.

The first example was a tweet timestamped 9.22 am (seven minutes after the earthquake) mocking Melbourne city dwellers' lack of earthquake awareness. The tweet offered the following helpful checklist:

> (10) Melbourne earthquake determination:
>
> 1. Is the washing machine on spin cycle?
> 2. Is a big truck driving past?
> 3. Is someone moving furniture and dropped a piano?
> 4. Is blasting / drilling going on nearby?
> 5. Is it going on long enough to consider these questions?
> 6. Earthquake!

The tweet suggests that the "latte-sipping" Melburnians who are "naive to the […] realities of life outside the self-proclaimed cultural capital" (Kenny 2022) are unable to recognize natural disasters. It is important to note that a Melbourne-based author created this tweet and, as such, is an example of self-directed participatory humour; the author considers himself a member of this 'earthquake-illiterate' community.

Example 11 is a tweet (timestamped 17 minutes after the earthquake) that uses visual and textual irony to mock and exaggerate the impact caused by the earthquake when there was very minimal damage overall. It uses an image of lip balm having fallen over to suggest that this was actually the extent of the damage and the severity of the incident (which, of course, was an understatement), and a sorrowful face emoji[11] next to the promise that we will all get through this ('tragedy') together. Using *we* and *together* suggests a sense of community and shared experience.

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[11] The emoji is actually the 'disappointed face' emoji, but is likely to have been chosen to mean a sorry or sorrowful face.

(11)

It is well-known that emojis serve phatic or emotive purposes in communication (Danesi 2016). They serve a variety of roles, commonly appearing with text, where their meaning can be understood in the context of the message. The emoji here signals (imitation) sadness and sympathy for those affected, and the hashtag *#earthquake* highlights an important topic and online collectivity (Koivisto, Vepsäläinen, and Virtanen 2023).

Along the same lines, example (12) is one of several similar variations in what is known as the "We Will Rebuild" cycle of memes of minor objects that have fallen over or been knocked slightly out of place, ironically captioned with the slogan "we will rebuild" in reference to a typically insignificant natural disaster.

(12)

The earliest known instance of the first meme in its current form was posted to a US site called FunnyJunk in August 2011, the day of an earthquake in Virginia. The photograph itself is from a separate earthquake in 2010 in Canada. This photo and similar versions have been reposted extensively and applied to several other non-disastrous earthquakes worldwide. The "we will rebuild" slogan is comparable and often used interchangeably with the ironic use of "never forget," referencing the rallying cry inspired by 9/11. Melburnians did not hesitate to adapt it and join the international community of 'earthquake victims.'

At 9.23 am (7 minutes after the earthquake), the following tweet (example 13) circulated:

> (13) Well, I just ticked Earthquake on my Melbourne 2021 Bingo Card. Been a good week with Neo-Nazi Protests also marked off. #Melbourneprotest #Melbournequake

The tweet uses deadpan and self-deprecatory incongruity as the primary humor device, combining the usually innocuous game of bingo (where completely unremarkable items like numbers need to be ticked off) with an array of natural disasters and crises. It thereby creates the imaginary concept of a bingo card designed specifically for Melbourne, where such adverse events are supposedly entirely normal and predictable and can be ticked off throughout the year as they occur. The reference to 2021 indicates that this was a particularly eventful year in Melbourne,[12] but that, rather than such events being presented as overly negative, the tweeter ironically highlights the bonus of being able to tick them off their bingo card. While Melbourne is the self-directed target of humor here for seemingly attracting disasters (COVID-19, lockdown protests, earthquakes, etc.), the idea that Melbourne has its own '2021 Bingo Card' conveys a sense of ownership, affection, and even pride. It again suggests resilience and shared experiences: Melburnians will withstand whatever is thrown at them.

The textual use of capital letters indicates exaggeration and (potentially ironic) emphasis, drawing our attention and increasing the importance of 'Earthquake' and 'Neo-Nazi Protests' in particular. The capitalization raises the status of these words to distinct items to be ticked off a bingo card, inviting recognition of irony and incongruity when we realize that these adverse events are at odds with items usually found on a bingo card. The hashtags both contain the word *Melbourne*, again inviting affiliative support and a sense of solidarity.

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[12] In actual fact, September was a particularly eventful month. As well as the events recounted here, Australian Prime Minister had just announced the AUKUS submarine deal, which caused a major diplomatic incident with France (this also generated a lot of news articles and related humor).

The final example (example 14) is a post made by one of the moderators of a lo-cal neighborhood Facebook group on the day after the earthquake. It asks members, "What will today bring?" and includes the hashtag *#staystrongmelbs*. It features Godzil-la, the fictional Japanese giant monster, in a still from the 1954 Japanese science-fiction film of the same name, chasing members of the public.

(14)

The deadpan humor is along the lines of the Melbourne 2021 Bingo Card (example 12), where Melbourne should expect another (bigger) disaster anytime soon, perhaps something on the gigantic scale of Godzilla. The affectionate diminutive *melbs* for Mel-bourne in the hashtag *#staystrongmelbs* indicates solidarity, affection, and belonging, and the advice to group members to stay strong hints at resilience and having survived everything experienced so far.

4. Conclusion

This article has examined a custom-made but illustrative corpus of humor generated after a major earthquake struck Melbourne in September 2021 during the city's sixth COVID-19 lockdown. The humor was seen to reflect a sense of local identity as a mini-nation (Dynel and Messerli 2020) – a "team of 5 million people" (Comer 2022) – and to show resilience and pride in the face of adversity. This was achieved through

the speed with which the humor circulated online (cf. Smith and Copland 2022), capturing a moment of intense togetherness and light relief, ironically and incongruously caused by an earthquake during the pandemic.

Three main humor categories emerged following the earthquake: mock disaster humor, pandemic humor, and political humor. It was shown that these categories were almost always combined in any one example to construct a collective social identity of Melbourne as a strong and resilient city. National and local politics were particularly targeted in the earthquake humor, particularly the right-wing media and dissenters of the Victorian State Premier, Dan Andrews' handling of COVID-19. The pandemic was also linked to the earthquake in less political ways, employing it more as the backdrop against which (yet) another disaster was framed. The examples of mock disaster humor essentially revolved around the insignificance of the damage caused by the earthquake. Much of the humor in this category was self-deprecatory, contributing to members recognizing themselves as members of an in-group, creating a sense of online and actual collectivity reinforced every time a post or meme was shared. The multimodal, semiotic, and textual analysis revealed a creative use of intertextuality and recontextualization, wordplay, and/or incongruity in each example. This interplay of textual and semiotic elements combined to create complex meaning through humour, constructing group identity, and inviting alignment around shared values.

The analysis of the humorous examples also exemplified the importance of context (sociocultural assumptions) and incongruity, as outlined in Tsakona (2024), where the background knowledge and shared lived experiences of the pandemic formed the basis for the creation and interpretation of almost all the examples. We saw how the earthquake humor was intended to bring Melburnians together, creating a sense of solidarity and membership of an in-group because of the shared background knowledge required to understand. The ambient affiliation (Zappavigna 2014) and joy of mutuality (Yus and Maíz-Arévalo 2023) engendered by the shared humor created additional enjoyment and a sense of pride and affection when Melburnians recognized themselves as members of a new in-group – 'earthquake survivors' – as well as COVID-19 lockdown survivors. In these times of global turmoil and uncertainty, who indeed knows what today will bring? To my fellow Melburnians, I say *#staystrongmelbs*.

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AUTHOR

Kerry Mullan is Convenor of Languages at RMIT University and Chair of the Board of the Australasian Humour Studies Network (AHSN), Melbourne, Australia.

The semiotics of *barzellette* in Veneto, Northern Italy

BY: **Sabina M. Perrino**

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.

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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,

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[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).

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 in-dexing 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 hetero-geneous (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 perfor-mances (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 descrip-tion 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).

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[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."

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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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

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

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

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[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   'in Romania porcelain is more
    è più bella e valorosa   beautiful and valuable.

8. questa veneziana   this one [i.e., the one on the floor] from
    non vale niente'   Venice is not worth anything'

9. il cinese @@@ che *iera scioca'*   the Chinese [man] @@@ who *was shocked*
    dell'azione dell'amico rumeno::: @@@   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   [he] launches his cup with the saucer
    [gesture of launching cup and saucer]   in the air

12. tira fuori la pistola   [gesture of launching cup and saucer]
    [gesture of taking out a gun from pocket]   [he] takes out the gun

13. spara rompendo la tazza con il piattino   [gesture of taking out a gun from pocket]
    ancora in volo [gesture of shooting   [he] shoots and breaks the cup and the saucer
    in the air] *e::: l dise*   still in the air [gesture of shooting in the air]
                                                 he::: says

14. 'in Cina abbiamo così tanta porcellana   'in China [we] have so much porcelain of
    di qualità ottima   an excellent quality

15. che non abbiamo bisogno di quella   that [we] don't need the Venetian one [i.e.,
    veneziana'@@@@   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*   *'in* **Venice there are** *so* *many* *extracomunitari*
    tanti **extracomunitari**   [i.e., migrants from non-Western countries]

25. *che* **no gavemo** bisogno **de romeni**   *that* [we] **don't** *need* **Romanians**
    e **de** *cinesi'* @@@@@@@@@@   *and* *Chinese'* @@@@@@@@@@

    [laughing and applauding   [laughing and applauding
    from the audience]   from the audience]

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,

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[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

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.

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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AUTHOR

Sabina M. Perrino is Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics, Department of Anthropology of Binghamton University (State University of New York), USA.

Semiotic resources in multimodal sociopolitical irony

BY: **Ksenia Shilikhina**

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses multiple instances of sociopolitical irony conveyed by memes which reflect people's reactions to Russia's current internal and external policy. Despite the danger of legal prosecution, several Telegram channels, whose owners reside outside Russia, specialize in creating and spreading online memes that comment on current events and official political statements produced by Russian officials. The study is based on a collection of 124 memes posted by several oppositional Russian-language Telegram channels in 2022-2024. The complex image-language relationship in memes allows them to convey various explicit and implicit social meanings. In this research, the analysis centers around the semiotic status of verbal and non-verbal components used in satirical memes. The visual part of memes is usually an original photo, which sometimes can be edited or altered, often to make it look funny. The main function of the visual component is to create an intertextual connection with the specific person or political event. The verbal part is a concise comment that places the image in a new context. In memes, the visual part can function as a full-fledged component of the message which contributes to the creation of the ironic meaning: it triggers an intertextual connection with a well-known visual object and functions as a source of a mismatch with the verbal part of the meme.

1. Introduction

Although the term *meme* was coined around 50 years ago (Dawkins 1976), memes have become a popular research object since their appearance in the digital space (Aunger 2000; Cannizzaro 2016; Hakoköngas, Halmesvaara and Saki 2020; Kilpinen 2008; Shifman 2014). Milner (2016:2) notes that "our cultural tapestry is more vibrant because of the wide spectrum of hashtagged status updates, remixed photos, and mashed-up videos that dominate participatory media. Our public conversations are bigger and louder than they've ever been." Memes have been viewed as units of cultural evolution (Holdcroft and Lewis 2000; Situngkir 2004), as artifacts of digital culture (Wiggins and Bowers 2014), or as a cognitive mechanism which people use to transmit ideas (Aunger 2002; Dennett 1990; 1995; Miranker 2010). Because memes can take various kinds of forms and guises – from catchphrases to viral videos – scholars are primarily interested in setting the boundaries of the concept of a meme itself and in the role these units of information play in what is termed as a "participatory culture" (Gal, Shifman and Kampf 2015; Massanari 2015; Silvestri 2015; Wiggins and Bowers 2014).

The Internet has become a significant medium for the production and distribution as well as a limitless repository of memes (Shifman 2007; Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong 2015). Memes in public discourse have attracted researchers' attention due to their ability to convey explicit and implicit social meanings (Piata 2016; Silvestri 2015). Every significant event, whether a presidential election, the spread of a disease, or a military conflict, becomes a source of yet another wave of memes.

This paper presents a semiotic analysis of sociopolitical memes about Putin's external and internal policy in 2022–2024, including the war in Ukraine. The memes included in the collection circulate primarily in oppositional channels in Telegram, which are a good example of contemporary participatory culture, and demonstrate critical public reaction to the events of 2022-2024.

Memes can be analyzed from a variety of research perspectives, e.g., evolutionary (Miranker 2010), anthropological (Nahon and Hemsley 2013), or cultural (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015). As complex signs, they also deserve to be analyzed from a semiotic point of view: the semiotic deconstruction of memes involves the analysis of visual and verbal signs and their relations, as well as the technique used to create humor. This paper looks at memes from precisely this kind of perspective and addresses two questions: first, how do the verbal and visual components of memes interact to create new meanings, and, second, what possible social and cultural implications can be conveyed by memes through irony.

The paper is structured as follows: first, I will discuss the controversial status of memes as a genre of popular digital culture, focusing on their multimodal nature and the types of interaction of the verbal and visual components. Next, I will analyze several examples of sociopolitical memes about Russia's external and internal policies

in 2022-2024 and their economic and political consequences for Russian citizens from a semiotic perspective. Finally, I will show how the verbal and visual components of memes interact to create ironic meanings.

2. Memes as a genre of participatory digital culture

It has been about four decades since scholars began their attempts to define a meme (for a review of different approaches to the definitions of a meme, see, for instance, Cannizzaro 2016). Since the boundaries of what can be called a *meme* vary from catchphrases to tunes, images, and films, researchers use a range of metaphors to define memes. Perhaps, the most popular metaphors are those of "cultural genes" and "viruses of the mind," which have been widely applied to memes since the publication of Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins 1976). One can estimate the popularity of these metaphors by looking at how the titles of numerous publications echo Dawkins' work: *On Selfish Memes* (Situngkir 2004), *The Selfish Meme* (Distin 2005), etc. Just like genes are described as vehicles for transmitting biological information, memes are metaphorically categorized as vehicles that spread cultural ideas across a population (Aunger 2002; Brodie 2009; Distin 2005; Milner 2016). Following Dawkins' ideas, Brodie (2009:11) broadly defines a meme as "a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of itself get created in other minds." The definition explains the role of memes in cultural evolution, but, unlike genes, memes cannot be considered a handy unit for measuring the amount of transmitted information. Within such an approach, practically anything can be categorized as a meme. A narrower definition of internet memes is offered by Milner (2016:1), who describes them as "the linguistic, image, audio, and video texts created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants across vast networks and collectives." In this view, memes are characterized as something that has a specific form and a particular function: memes are messages that spread ideas in the digital environment.

However convenient the idea of memes as replicators of culture is, some scholars question its metaphoric nature (Clark 2008). For them, the metaphor of a meme as a culture gene obscures rather than clarifies the matter. Segmenting cultural information into memes results in an atomistic view of culture (Cannizzaro 2016).

Another reason to criticize Dawkins' metaphorical treatment of memes is that "it favors a biological or cultural determinism instead of valuing the agency of social actors" (Milner 2016:20). According to Shifman (2014:11), the metaphor "has been used in a problematic way, conceptualizing people as helpless and passive creatures, susceptible to the domination of meaningless media 'snacks' that infect their minds." Felixmüller (2017) points out that transmitting information with memes requires free will and the ability to make decisions.

Treating memes as "viruses of the mind" is also problematic: comparing the role of memes and genes, Clark (2008:12) argues that "[c]ells are not constructed out of genes, but by earlier cells, partly in accordance with the genetic 'instructions.' Minds, by analogy, are not made up of memes, even if they are often influenced or infected by them."

While scholars cannot agree on what exactly a meme is, they do agree that memes can utilize various modes of communication (or semiotic systems; Beskow, Kumar, and Carley 2020; Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017). As multimodal digital messages, memes integrate visual and verbal components, and each component contributes to meaning creation in a particular social and cultural context. The semiotic effect of their interaction and the role of visual and verbal statements in creating meaning in multimodal texts have been debated.

Researchers propose a variety of approaches to the analysis of multimodal texts. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020:2-3) suggest that "[v]isual structures [...] much like linguistic structure, point to particular interpretations of experience and particular forms of social interaction." This explains why different approaches to visual component analysis rely on linguistic analysis methods. For instance, semiotic analysis of both verbal and visual components can be performed with Halliday's framework of systemic-functional linguistics to explain how these semiotic systems complement each other in meaning construction. Using the concept of grammar to analyze the visual components of the message, Halliday (1985:101) views grammar as something that "enables human beings to build a mental picture of reality, to make sense of their experience of what goes on around them and inside them." Just like verbal means, visual choices reflect the three metafunctions – the *ideational*, the *interpersonal*, and the *textual* – proposed by Halliday (Halliday 1978; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004).

Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) suggest using ideas of cognitive linguistics and construction grammar to analyze memes as multimodal texts. In their approach, both visual and verbal components are analyzed as constructions in which "constructional meaning can be signaled even when some of the formal features of the full construction are missing" (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017:567). Their analysis of memes shows that "selected, characteristic construal features may be salient enough to prompt broader frames of constructional meaning" (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017:567).

In the sign-making process, the relations between verbal and visual parts of a message can be balanced in various ways. Barthes (1977) distinguished two types of relations between texts and images: in the first type, which he called *relay*, the verbal component complements the image; and in the second type, the meanings of the visual and verbal components are the same, and they restate or elaborate on each other.

Dancygier and Vandelanotte view the relations between the visual and the verbal components as a spectrum on the one end of which

the image – whole relevant and tightly integrated in the meme's setting up of mental spaces – is less in focus. At the other end of the spectrum […] there would simply be no meme (and no meaning) without the image, the mere text of the meme being incomplete or even ungrammatical on its own. (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017:566-567)

A more elaborate classification (Chan 2011; McCloud 1994) of verbal-visual components relations includes the following options:

- visual images illustrate the text but do not add significant information to the text itself;
- visual image dominates, and the words do not add substantial information to the image;
- words and images work together to deliver the same content;
- words elaborate on the image or vice versa;
- words and images are parallel and do not intersect semantically;
- words are an integral part of the image;
- words and the image convey an idea that could not be conveyed by either element alone.

In my further discussion, I will apply this taxonomy to analyze the interaction between words and images and their effect on the emergence of social implications, irony in particular.

3. Data

As mentioned above, this study aims to analyze memes with the common theme of the external and internal policy of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, in 2022-2024. The memes included in the corpus were shared by the oppositional Telegram channels after February 22nd, 2022, as a reaction to the invasion of Ukraine. The memes included in the corpus were chosen on a thematic basis: all of them refer to the political events or statements made by official propaganda in 2022-2024. A total of 124 memes were included in the corpus during this period.

The memes demonstrate a counter-reaction to the official propaganda, which persuaded people that the war on the so-called "Ukrainian nationalism" was a necessity, justified the presence of Russian military forces in Syria and giving asylum to Bashar Asad and the former Ukrainian president Vladimir Yanukovich, and the tightening of the internal political regime which included harsher punishment for public critique of Putin's internal and external policy. While the memes devoted to external affairs are

mostly connected with the Ukrainian war and the ongoing conflict in Syria, the memes that cover various aspects of internal policy reflect the results propaganda has on people's minds and their perception of events. Even though Wiggins (2019) suggests that by creating and spreading memes "people are overwhelmed with the challenges of the modern world, and they seek comfort away from political and socio-cultural alienation in online spaces," that is, they find a quick and easy way to escape from reality, the spread and popularity of these memes demonstrates the opposite: people inside and outside Russia express their concern about the real state of affairs despite official propaganda. They employ visual and verbal means to create ironic messages that go against the official point of view. Irony as a mode of expression emerges due to incongruity between appearance and reality, expectation and outcome, or what is said and what is meant (Hutcheon 2003, Pattison 2023). The verbal and visual components of memes interact to create this incongruity, that is, a lack of consistency or appropriateness between the elements that are expected to fit together.

In the next section, a semiotic analysis of memes will be presented to demonstrate incongruity, that is, the state of being out of place, inconsistent, or not fitting with expectations, context, or logical patterns, as the source of irony.

4. Semiotic analysis of memes about Russia's external and internal policy in 2022-2024

In this part of the paper, I will analyze several examples of memes that employ only visual modality and memes in which verbal and visual components interact to convey an ironic evaluation of various political events that happened in Russia in 2022-2024. Irony is understood as a meaningful mismatch between words, actions, or situations and the reality behind them (see section above). This mismatch is purposefully created to ridicule social and political shortcomings and flaws and provoke critical reflection.

I will start my analysis by looking at the meme that is not multimodal and does not include a verbal caption. However, it serves as a good illustration of how the characters' setting, positions, and body language can convey meaning. The *mise* en scène of purely visual memes includes the choice of characters, their positions and body language, and also the framing (or setting) of the image, i.e., other objects used in the picture and the location of the image. These elements can also influence the interpretation of the image.

In Figure 1, Putin is sitting in a spherical capsule which resembles a spacecraft in the company of Stoned Fox and Homunculus Loxodontus (or, in Russian, *Zhdun* – 'the Awaiter') – the two characters hugely popular in RuNet (i.e., the Russian segment of the internet). Originally, these two creatures appeared as photos of an anthropomorphic taxidermied fox produced by Adele Morse, and a statue that symbolized

Figure 1. Putin with the Stoned Fox and Homunculus Loxodontus

a patient waiting for their diagnosis created by Mardriet van Breevoort. However, since their photos were published online, both the Stoned Fox and Homunculus Loxodontus have been edited into various visual images and widely used in memes. Both creatures express a state of being deeply relaxed and blissfully detached and are perfect examples of the absurdist acceptance of a chaotic situation. Their frequent appearance in memes reflects Russian culture's appreciation for absurd and dark humor.

The irony of the image comes from the contrast of the three figures: the Stoned Fox is ironic because it is a profound failure of its original purpose – to present a wild animal realistically. The Stoned Fox's face demonstrates the expression of confusion and, possibly, inebriation. This bizarre, inanimate creature is placed between Vladimir Putin and yet another strange-looking character, Zhdun ('the Awaiter'), whose face expresses endless waiting with a sense of hopefulness. The juxtaposition of a serious political leader with these surreal, nonsensical objects creates a deeply ironic and absurd situation.

The visual setting of a meme demonstrates a closed space in which Putin and his companions are waiting for something to happen. Dressed in a grey jacket, Putin mirrors the figure of Zhdun. His low shoulders and the head held low indicate Putin's disappointment. The irony emerges from the mismatch between Putin's status as a political leader and the company he keeps: the meme puts Putin on a par with the two surreal, nonsensical creatures. Although the meme does not contain a verbal caption, this social meaning can be easily understood without further comments.

However, memes that contain only a visual component are infrequent. In most cases, visual images are accompanied by verbal comments, and to understand irony, one needs to find incongruities between the meme's two "ingredients." Let us now move on and look at the distribution of meaning across the verbal and the visual modes, which leads to the emergence of irony.

The meme in Figure 2 is divided into three parts: two portraits with smaller captions juxtaposed against the central vertical line and a larger caption below, which visually unites the meme. The portraits oppose each other and, obviously, invite the comparison of the two leaders. The caption under the image of Peter the Great says "[He] opened the window to Europe." The phrase itself is an intertextual reference to Pushkin's poem "The Bronze Horseman" about the history of the establishment of Saint Petersburg by Peter the Great in 1703: the city was constructed on the territory regained from the Swedes and provided the Russian Empire with access to the Baltic Sea and further to the Atlantic and Europe. Traditionally, Peter the Great is portrayed as a political leader who changed the political landscape, but also brought overall progress to patriarchal Russia by importing technologies from European countries,

Figure 2. "[He] opened the window to Europe. [He] closed the window to Europe. Got some fresh air, now, that's enough."

hence the metaphor "[he] opened the window to Europe." Modern propaganda presents Putin as the political leader whose ambitions and impact on Russian history are comparable to Peter I. The caption below Putin's portrait says: "[He] closed the window to Europe," hinting at the political and economic sanctions imposed on Russia in the past ten years after the annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the war against Ukraine. The two captions contrast the two leaders, making it clear that Putin's ambitions, in fact, cut the country off from modern technologies and progress, and destroyed the political interaction between Russia and Europe. The visual juxtaposition of the two leaders is accompanied by the larger caption "Got some fresh air, now, that's enough!" which is an ironic metaphor – now, due to sanctions, European technologies and goods will not be available in Russia. The layout of the meme certainly plays a role in the creation of irony. While the juxtaposing images present the two leaders as equally important for the history of Russia (and this reference to Peter the Great is common in official propaganda), the verbal messages contrast them, and this 'compare and contrast' mode of interaction of the verbal and visual components creates the ironic effect. In this meme, the visual and the verbal components work together to create ironic content that cannot be understood if any of the components is missing.

The visual part of the meme portrays profiles of Putin and the former Minister of Defense of Russia, Sergei Shoigu, both looking in the same direction, as if they are at a military parade. Their solemn, straightforward gaze supports their leadership status. However, the background – a destroyed block of flats – and the caption, a dialogue between Putin and Shoigu, disrupt the solemnity of the images. The photo of the destroyed building symbolizes the ruined city of Kherson. The verbal component is based on the word play: the first syllable of the city name (Kherson) sounds the same as the euphemism for male genitals. This wordplay brings in the tabooed sexual reference, as the answer to Putin's question literally means "We have only gained control over a penis," which in colloquial Russian is equal to "We have not achieved anything." This goes contrary to official propaganda which convinces people of the military success of the Russian army. The incongruity between the high expectations and promises made by the politicians at the beginning of the war and the real outcomes creates an ironic effect.

Figure 3. "Have we gained total control over Kherson? No, just over kher."

Figure 4 was posted by several oppositional Telegram channels a few days after Ukrainian troops crossed the Russian-Ukrainian border and occupied a significant part of the Kursk region in August 2024. The Russian authorities gave very brief accounts of what they preferred to euphemistically call "a situation." Still, since the introduction of the law against the "discrimination of the Russian Army,"[1] neither journalists nor politicians dared to criticize Putin and the government or to openly talk about military failures, as such talks could be subject to fines or imprisonment.

The meme shows the Ukrainian flag sticking from under the Russian flag, and the caption says, "Your Kursk has come unstuck." The meme appeared and started circulating online after the Ukrainian troops had unexpectedly gained control over a part of the Russian territory in the Kursk region. Here, the visual and the verbal components work together, conveying a complex of ideas. Firstly, the visual part – the Ukrainian flag sticking from under the Russian flag – is an ironic reference to the presence of the Ukrainian troops on the Russian territory. The irony comes from the contrast between claims made by the official propaganda and the reality in which the Russian forces could not protect the state border. Secondly, the caption is an easily recognized intertextual reference to a catchphrase from the classic Soviet comedy "The Diamond Arm,"[2] in which a group of criminals tries to smuggle jewelry and, as the plot unfolds, one of the criminals chases a gullible character who got the precious stones by mistake. The man realizes he has been chased by the criminal when he sees the criminal's false mustache come unstuck (see a screenshot from the movie in Figure 5) and comments, "Your mustache has come unstuck!"
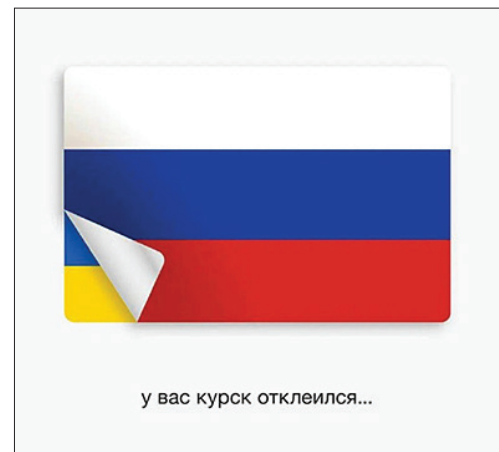

Figure 4. "Your Kursk has come unstuck…"

Figure 5. "Your mustache has come unstuck."

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[1] In March 2022, several Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation were made, and a number of federal laws were backed by the Russian Parliament. These laws established administrative and criminal punishments for "discrediting" the Russian Army by spreading false or "unreliable" information about it. In March 2023, the laws became even harsher: "discrediting" the army can currently be punished by up to five years in prison.

[2] The *Diamond Arm* is a 1968 Soviet comedy directed by Leonid Gaidai. In the movie, an ordinary Soviet citizen accidentally becomes involved in a large operation to smuggle jewelry. During a cruise abroad, he slips and breaks his arm, so it gets bandaged with gold and diamonds. After he returns home, the gangsters want the jewelry back, while the police go after the criminals, using the honest but gullible main character as bait.

This kind of intertextual reference to both the visual image and the easily recognized phrase creates irony: the truth is suddenly revealed in both situations. In the movie, the unstacked mustache reveals a criminal. In the meme, the "unstuck Kursk" reveals the lies about the successful military actions of the Russian troops. The meme implicitly parallels Russian propaganda with the gang of criminals who disclosed themselves while trying to illegally get hold of what did not belong to them.

Official propaganda is a frequent target of ironic memes. The following three examples show how propaganda is satirized in memes – the verbal parts echo statements repeatedly made by journalists and politicians on TV and online. In Figure 6, the meme refers to TV propaganda's impact on people's perception of the world. One of the main topics of political talk shows is the so-called desire of Western countries to slow down the development of Russia and prevent it from becoming the world's economic and political leader. Failures in internal and external affairs of Russia have been ascribed to the nefarious practices of dishonest Western politicians, whose sole desire is to turn Russia into a third-world country. The ironic interpretation of the meme relies on the incongruity between the photo of two typical jobless drunkards dressed in cast-off clothing and the verbal message "The West wants to limit our development."

Figure 6. "The West wants to limit our development."

The phrase echoes one of the headline topics discussed by politicians and journalists in everyday TV talk shows – the animosity of Western countries and their desire to prolong the war and provoke Putin to increase military expenses. In the meme, the caption contrasts the visual image of people at the social bottom with the topic of their discussion. Such people cannot control their own lives, let alone change them for the better, but they are deeply concerned with the politics of other countries. It is the contrast between the caption and the visual image that creates irony.

Figure 7. "You know, I wouldn't be surprised if Biden grants his permission to strike Moscow tomorrow…"

Figure 7 is yet another example of an ironic evaluation of lay people's reactions to ongoing political events. The meme uses a screenshot from the popular 1969 Soviet comedy film *The Diamond Arm*, but the words refer to the current political situation. The meme shows two women talking, with one telling the other, "You know, I wouldn't be surprised if Biden grants his permission to strike Moscow tomorrow…"

In the meme, no changes are made to the image, and the caption modifies the original words from the movie in which the speaker accuses the husband of the second woman of a potential love affair by saying: "You know, I won't be surprised if tomorrow it turns out that your husband is secretly visiting his mistress." In the movie, the woman plays the role of a Soviet official whose duties should be limited to organizing technical maintenance of the apartment block. Still, her official status allows her to unceremoniously ignore people's privacy and control her neighbors' private lives as well. In the meme, the woman's words echo the phrase from the movie. The echoic reference of the "mock quotation" to the Soviet comedy uses analogy as the constitutive principle: the implication here is that lay people are more concerned with global problems instead of their own lives.

The meme in Figure 8 is an example of irony targeting the ignorance of laypeople who cannot evaluate Putin's regime critically. The visual component of the meme demonstrates a young woman, Sveta Kuritsyna, from the city of Ivanovo, an average "Russian citizen" who became famous after giving an interview in support of the political party Edinaya Rossiya ('United Russia'), infamous for the involvement of many of its members in various corruption scandals. In the interview, she made several grammatical mistakes (her words "we started to dress better" became a catchphrase). In the meme, Sveta proudly boasts that under Putin, a dollar costs more

ПРИ ПУТИНЕ
за доллар стали давать более больше рублей

Figure 8. "Under Putin, they are giving a lot more rubles for a dollar."

rubles. The phrase in Russian echoes her words from the interview (the caption actually says "Under Putin they are giving a lot more rubles for a dollar"). In Sveta's twisted worldview, economic failures of the Russian government are perceived as achievements in which lay people, who tend to believe the official propaganda and care more about global economic and political processes, take great pride. Stereotypes are used in memes because they "are metonymic and, more precisely, based on synecdoche, in which a part is used to stand for the whole" (Berger 2020:92). The aim of such stereotypical representation is, on the one hand, to criticize the ignorance of lay people who unquestioningly support Putin, and, on the other hand, to target the official propaganda which presents this ignorance as a norm.

In Figure 8, the verbal component dominates over the visual image – any other image of a stereotypical "average supporter of Putin" could be used as an illustration, and the irony is created chiefly by the meme's verbal component.
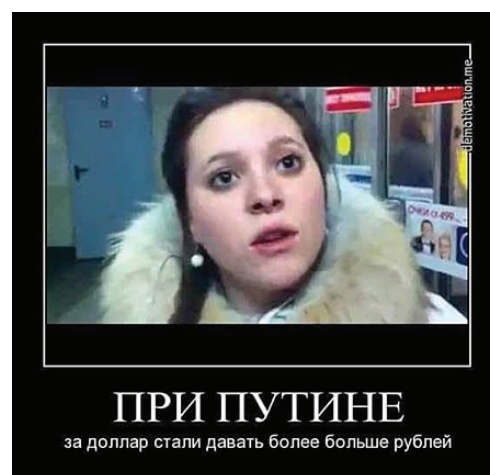
Figure 9. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has made an official statement that if a single NATO rocket reaches the territory of Russia, we will have to move the red lines to the Moscow Ring Road!"

The meme in Figure 9 aims at one of the officials whose words are often cited in political talk shows and newsreels – Maria Zakharova, press secretary of the Russian Ministry of External Affairs. Zakharova is infamously known as a public figure whose aggressive rhetoric, despite her official position, can hardly be considered diplomatic. The threats she has been making after the annexation of Crimea have become the targets of many jokes.

The visual component of the meme contains two images: the photo of Maria Zakharova in the foreground. In the background, there is a schematic plan of the Moscow Ring Road. At first sight, the images have little in common. However, the verbal component establishes a connection between the two images: in the meme, the caption parodies official statements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, saying "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has made an official statement that if a single NATO rocket reaches the territory of Russia, we will have to move the red lines to the Moscow Ring Road!" The road mentioned in the mock statement is a highway that loops around Moscow, so the borders of Russia worth defending are limited to the borders of Moscow. The reference to the "red line" is a signal of irony since it is one of the phrases regularly used by Zakharova as the reason for Russia to threaten the world with another round of escalation of the conflict. The caption clarifies the connection between the press secretary and the visual content. Put together, the visual images and the verbal caption create an ironic effect, with irony targeting the poor rhetoric of the diplomats.

Figure 10. "Putin helped us so much indeed! A geostrategist!"

The meme in Figure 10 is a photoshopped screenshot from the Oscar-winning film *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*.[3] The meme appeared in Telegram after the ousted ex-president of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, fled from the country in December 2024. The meme shows Asad in the company of another ex-president, Viktor Yanukovich, who fled from Ukraine in 2014. Putin supported the two ex-presidents while in power; after the fall of their political regimes, they got political asylum in Russia. In the meme, the faces of the two characters from the film are substituted with the faces of the two former presidents: Viktor Yanukovich and Bashar al-Assad are sitting in a communal apartment (that is, the apartment shared by several people or families with a shared kitchen and toilet), drinking vodka. In the foreground, one can see several bottles which, apparently, contain alcohol; in the background, the curtains on the window are missing, and the whole scene contrasts with our knowledge of how luxurious the life of the two ex-presidents used to be. The film *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* is repeatedly shown on TV, so it is easy for people to recognize the intertextual reference to the scene where the two characters meet for the first time and discuss the issue that is going to influence their further relationship. Pouring vodka, Asad says, "Putin helped us so much indeed!" and Yanukovich replies, "A geostrategist!" The remark echoes official Russian propaganda, which keeps telling people of Putin's visionary external policy. The irony emerges from the incongruity between the former and the present status of the two ex-presidents, on the one hand, and the incongruity between the words about Putin's help and their current state as two typical drunkards who spend time in excessive drinking and discussing world affairs.

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[3] *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* is a 1980 Soviet romantic drama film directed by Vladimir Menshov. It won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1981. The film tells the life story of a young Russian provincial girl who came to Moscow to study at a university. After many failures, she becomes the CEO of a large factory and finds happiness in her private life.

Memes can also come in cycles. The following examples (Figures 11-13) demonstrate how the same visual component can be used in a variety of contexts and adapted to new events. In the example, the visual component consists of a digitally manipulated photo of Putin working with documents. Melisandre – a fictional character from a series of fantasy novels and its screen adaptation *Game of Thrones* – stands behind Putin's shoulder. The duet of a magician who can predict the future and influence people, and the Russian president, creates a comic effect, and the caption connects the meme to a particular event. Just like Melisandre's prophecies guide the narrative in the books, her words whispered in Putin's ear can supposedly influence the course of world history.

In the meme's caption in Figure 11, Melisandre tells Putin to take radical steps in managing the state: "Burn everything! Burn cheese and sausages, cut off the Internet, as it is dark and full of blackmail. Raise taxes and retirement age. They do not respect you, pass the law on showing respect for you." All these pieces of advice refer to the internal policy of the regime: for instance, in 2014, Russia imposed sanctions on the import of European food, including cheese and meat. However, people continued to smuggle and sell European produce. The owners were heavily fined, and the food was publicly liquidated whenever banned cheese or meat was found in stores. The videos showing tractors destroying fresh food were broadcast on national TV. The advice to raise taxes and the retirement age refers to Putin's promises, which he never kept.

The image suggests that Putin does not make his decisions independently but acts under the influence of supreme forces. The implication behind the image is that a normal person who is not influenced by dark magic will never make such decisions.

The same image of Melisandre as Putin's advisor in Figure 12 is, once again, a reference to Putin's words and actions. The phrase that she is whispering in Putin's ear is an intertextual reference to one of Putin's comments on the origins of Ukraine. In December 2021, during his press conference, Putin was asked a question by an American journalist about Russia's demands for its safety. In his reply, *inter alia*, Putin mentioned that Lenin created Ukraine when the Soviet Union was formed. It follows that if a Soviet leader artificially created this country, it has no historical right to exist.

Figure 11. "Burn everything! Burn cheese and sausages, cut off the Internet, as it is dark and full of blackmail. Raise taxes and retirement age. They do not respect you, pass the law on showing respect for you."
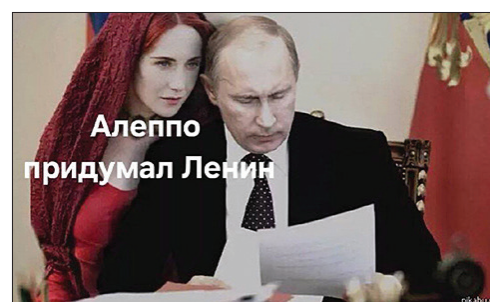

Figure 12. "Lenin contrived Aleppo."

In Figure 13, Melisandre is talking Putin into buying a pager. The meme was posted by several oppositional Telegram channels a few days after Israel started its war on Hezbollah in September 2024 by attacking its members in simultaneous explosions of pagers. The idea of getting a pager contains at least two implications: first, it refers to Putin's reported reluctance to use smartphones or the Internet for security reasons, and second, the intertextual reference to Israel's war against Hezbollah equates Putin to members

Figure 13. "Buy a pager!"

of Hezbollah who were punished for their actions against Israel.

The memes of Putin being advised by Melisandre form a memetic cluster in which the image and its implications remain constant. The verbal part connects the new variations of the meme to the current situation. In all three examples, the visual component with its implications plays a very important role, and the verbal part elaborates on the message.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have combined some ideas and observations about memes as a genre that allows Internet users to freely combine elements from visual and verbal semiotic systems. The verbal and visual components are relatively independent until, when combined, they create new joint messages. Moreover, these meaningful combinations of the verbal and the visual make memes complex signs that are both motivated and conventional from a semiotic point of view.

Memes, as an instant public reaction to unfolding events, have become an ideological practice. In Milner's (2016:14) words, "[t]hey're small expressions with big implications." By addressing important events, memes construct their own narrative, which consists of semiotic and intertextual references to the current agenda. Political actions bring to life new memes that suggest an alternative interpretation, opposing the official propaganda. In the case of anti-Putin memes, they often demonstrate intertextual awareness of other forms of media, including Soviet films and books: by using screenshots from the movies, the visual components place modern political events in broader historical and cultural contexts, and modified but easily recognized catchphrases create intertextual parallels between the current situation in Russia and narratives of the past.

Memes are an essential constituent of the modern participatory digital culture as they disseminate ideas and images, especially those that cannot be expressed freely.
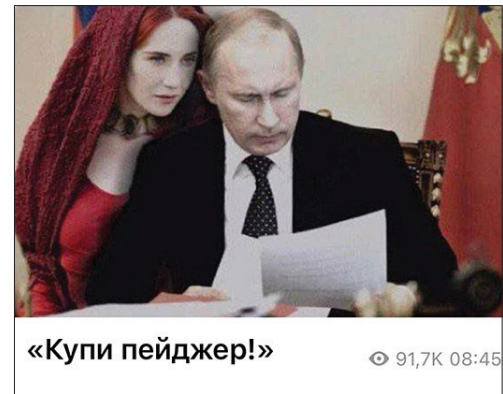
The only allowed reaction to Putin's political regime is praise, and the propaganda aims at convincing people that the support of external and internal policy is the only normal behavior. In this context, anti-Putin memes and memes that laugh about lay people's bigger concern about foreign countries than about their own life constitute an alternative reaction to the official propaganda. By creating and disseminating oppositional memes, people get a chance to participate in political processes even when there seems to be no opportunity to express critical ideas.

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AUTHOR

Ksenia Shilikhina is an independent researcher whose research interests include verbal humor and irony.

A semiotic analysis of humor in K-drama memes

BY: **Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi** and **Lily Kahn**

ABSTRACT

This study is a qualitative semiotic analysis of the humor in 13 representative K-drama memes drawn from a corpus of approximately 200 memes bearing the hashtag *#kdramameme*. K-dramas are one of the key aspects of the global Korean Wave, and there is a thriving body of memes created by and for the global K-drama fandom. Despite the centrality of humor to the meme genre and the fact that memes constitute a prominent form of 21st-century expression, K-drama memes have not previously been analyzed from a humor theory perspective. We analyze the humorous element of the K-drama memes in our corpus according to three semiotic theoretical mechanisms, namely the concepts of meme templates, blending, and benign violation. We argue that these three semiotic mechanisms feed into two overarching functions of K-drama meme humor, i.e., a social function (construction and enhancement of in-group identity and belonging), and a psychological one (expression of emotions). Our study shows that the K-drama memescape is multifaceted and connected to K-drama and real life in complex ways.

1. Introduction

A meme is a humorous digital text typically incorporating one or more images accompanied by written captions. Memes are a central form of global 21st-century creative expression, and offer a vibrant repository of material for humor studies because humor is an intrinsic element of the genre. Because of their online nature, memes are the subject of a rapid and ever-shifting

process of sharing and adaptation, serving as a flexible vehicle for strengthening in-group identities in the context of internet communities devoted to a shared interest (e.g., Shifman 2013; Wiggins 2019).

Our study is dedicated to the shared-interest internet community comprising Korean television drama series fans, commonly known as K-dramas. In recent decades, the popularity of K-dramas worldwide has led to a concomitant emergence of a large body of memes based on the genre. These memes comprise a rich source for humor analysis, yet they have not yet been studied from this perspective despite the flourishing bodies of scholarly literature devoted to K-drama and the Korean Wave (e.g., An 2022a; Kim K. H. 2021; Kim Y. 2013, 2022; Lee and Nornes 2015; Love and Kim 2022; Samosir and Wee 2023). Our study seeks to fill this gap by providing a semiotic analysis of the humor in K-drama memes. Our analysis is important first because it can enrich humor scholarship by offering insights from a widely popular, globally engaged pop culture genre, and second because it can offer a new, humor-centered perspective on K-drama memes, particularly the Korean Wave, more broadly. It can contribute to our understanding of the meaning of K-drama to viewers and fans and shed light on group identity formation in digital media through semiotic means.

We begin our study with a contextualizing overview of Hallyu and K-drama (section 2). We then present the theoretical frameworks relevant for our analysis of K-drama memes (section 3), against the background of which our research questions are: a) What makes the K-drama memes funny? and b) What are the social and psychological functions of the humor of K-drama memes in the context of the K-drama fandom? We subsequently detail our methodological approach and dataset, a corpus of approximately 200 K-drama memes purposively sampled from the hashtag *#kdramameme* (section 4). Our analysis of the memes focuses on the three semiotic mechanisms underlying K-drama *meme humor, namely meme templates, blending,* and *benign violation* (section 5.1), followed by an examination of the two overarching functions of the humor, namely the social function of group identity and cohesion and the psychological function of articulating fans' internal emotional landscapes (section 5.2). The conclusion (section 6) summarizes our findings and discusses potential avenues for further research.

2. Hallyu and K-drama

The initial wave of international popularity of Korean television and music, known as *Hallyu 1.0*, began in the 1990s when K-dramas and K-pop spread from Korea to East and Southeast Asia. In the 2000s, *Hallyu 2.0* became a global phenomenon, thanks to social media and the internet, as well as the support from the Korean government (Jin 2016; Walsh 2014). Hallyu's soft power has had various effects. It has not only increased K-pop

album and concert ticket sales and the streaming of K-dramas on global platforms but has also stimulated associated phenomena like the study of Korean as a foreign language (Curran 2024) and the popularity of Korea as a tourist destination (Bae et al. 2017; Lee and How 2022). This is especially so among female audiences, fans, and consumers (e.g. Chan 2007; Hirata 2008; Shin 2014; Tilland 2017; Wang and Pyun 2020).

It has been noted that newer waves of Hallyu involve multidimensional and multidirectional transnational cultural flows (Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021; Ono and Kwon 2013) and networks in the social mediascape (Jin and Yoon 2016), which the present study also clearly shows. In other words, Korean culture is consumed by "omnivorous audiences" also in the digital sphere (Hong-Mercier 2013), and is characterized by contextual hybridity (Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021). Using social media allows Hallyu fans opportunities to participate and network, thus gaining agency in the social mediascape (Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021:71), which our analysis highlights.

The cornerstones of Hallyu are K-pop and K-drama. The addictive power of the latter has been noted by Jo (2022:201), who attributes the popularity of K-drama to the themes listed in Larsen (2008), namely (1) human themes, including family, friendship, relationships, loyalty, respect, and true love; (2) high production values (including cinematography, locations, and costumes); (3) well-written scripts, good dialogue, and excellent acting; (4) portrayal of love and affection that is not centered around sex; (5) emotional soundtracks; and (6) insights into Korean culture. In addition to these homogenizing themes, K-drama includes heterogenizing factors that stem from traumatic collective memories and the political and economic situations in South Korea (Yoon and Lee 2025; see also An 2022b).

A prototypical K-drama is still a melodramatic story of beautiful young people trying to achieve true love despite all obstacles in a fictional yet contemporary version of Korea, where conservative family values and society prevail (Kang 2023:175). There is often a fairytale or supernatural element. Still, even in these cases, the setting is made unoffending and unthreatening, and suitable for a wide range of global audiences (cf. Glynn and Kim 2017). The universal appeal is demonstrated by the fact that K-drama is consumed on all continents, including, e.g., Latin America, the Middle East, Morocco, Nigeria, and India (Jang, Kim, and Baek 2024:154). The most extensive viewership of K-drama is still in East Asia (Jang, Kim, and Baek 2024). Recent studies on K-drama include gay representations (Glynn and Kim 2017), feminist perspectives (Boman 2022; Wall 2019), and an analysis of K-drama as a decolonial third space (Yuan 2023).

Fans' affective connections to K-drama are obvious online and offline. Samosir and Wee (2023:88) perceive social media as a space where fans of K-drama can share emotional reactions to the shows, thus creating a sense of community. Jo (2022:209), on the other hand, notes that images are circulated through digital spaces by fans in "digital assemblages." Jo (2022:209-210) sees the proliferation and sustainability of these

digital assemblages as dependent on the K-drama fans' affective labor (e.g., collection and dissemination of relevant information, translation), which then creates affective connections to South Korea.

Our study complements these examinations of Hallyu by analyzing memes relating to K-drama fandom through the lens of humor theory. In our research, Jo's (2022:209) "digital assemblages" serve as a way of strengthening in-group community identities, a la Samosir and Wee (2023:88), and processing emotions by means of humorous mechanisms, which we will outline in the following section.

3. Semiotic mechanisms and functions of humor in K-drama memes

In our study, we rely on three semiotic mechanisms that make humor possible (meme template, blending, and benign violation), and two main functions (one social, the other psychological). In other words, humor created through meme templates, blending, and benign violation contributes to the maintenance of a strong online group identity and is used to achieve well-being and express emotions within the group (see Figure 1). We should note that by doing this, the creators and sharers of the memes are participating in Hallyu themselves as active participants (cf. Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021:71; see also Cheoi 2023). In line with Hallyu's multimodal, networked, transnational, and multilingual nature, these memes combine K-drama and real life in complex ways (cf. Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021).
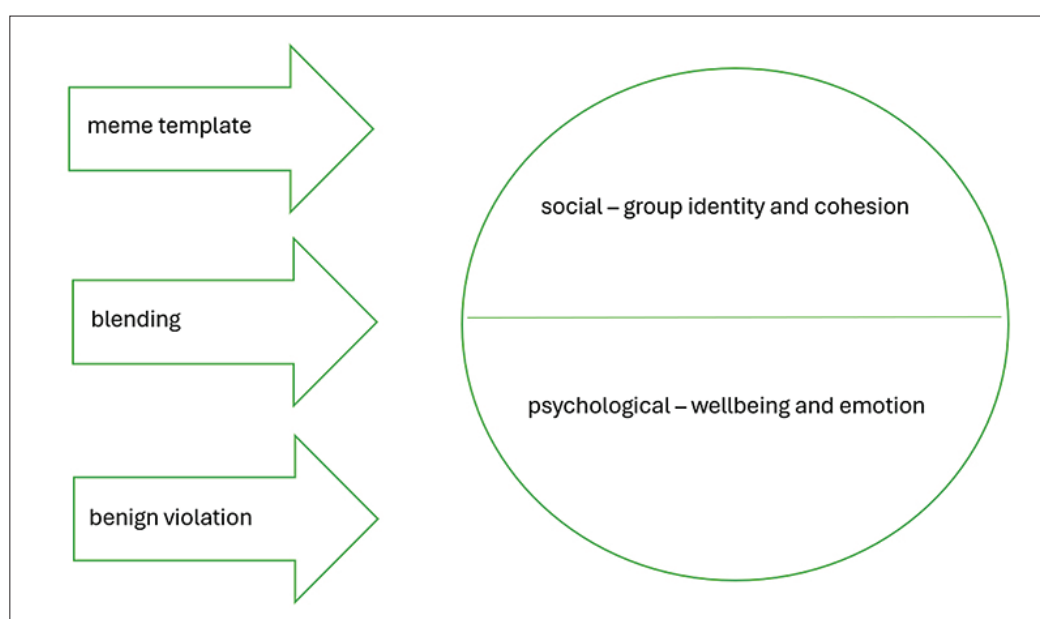

Figure 1. Mechanisms and functions of humor in K-drama memes

The first semiotic mechanism is the use of templatic meme structure harnessing "vernacular creativity" (Burgess 2006), according to which memes can be seen as a type of modern folklore that is shared online (cf. Oring 2016:129-146). The use of this mechanism in K-drama memes is discussed in section 5.1.1. Shifman (2013:99-118) roughly divides these meme folklore templates into three categories: 1) genres that are based on the documentation of "real-life" (e.g. recurring photos); 2) genres that are based on explicit manipulation of visual or audiovisual mass-mediated remixed content (e.g. misheard lyrics and repurposing of news); and 3) genres that evolved around a new universe of digital and meme-oriented content (e.g. LOLCats and stock character macros). Within these broad categories, when creating a K-drama meme, one can substitute a favorite actor or scene, and the meme is still easily understood by virtue of being a meme.

The second mechanism is blending, which has been extensively studied in cognitive linguistics and constitutes an extension to metaphors. The use of this mechanism in K-drama memes is discussed in section 5.1.2. The characterization of blending as an extension of metaphors is rooted in the fact that metaphorical constructions often result in an *emergent structure*, something that is not present in either source (Fauconnier 1997:150-158), i.e., these structures merge from the blending of elements from different conceptual domains (Fauconnier 1997; Oring 2016:33-56). In our data, the real-life realm and the K-drama realm together form a blended domain within the meme, and are funny to the viewer for this reason.

The third semiotic mechanism is benign violation: humor is derived from the assumption of violating a moral principle, but one benign enough to be acceptable (McGraw and Warren 2010:1142). The use of this mechanism in K-drama memes is discussed in section 5.1.3. One relevant example of humor deriving from benign violation is the comparison of K-drama to a drug (see Figure 4). This addiction is mild or benign enough to be funny despite the moral violation. Another example of benign violation is the expression of an extreme negative emotion, which would be perceived as aggressive or otherwise inappropriate in most circumstances, but is permitted and indeed amusing within the context of a meme, because the extreme emotion is placed within an obviously absurd context (as in the bride crying on her wedding day in Figure 13).

These three mechanisms feed into the two overarching functions of K-drama meme humor. The first is their role in social organization, i.e., establishing and reinforcing group identity. Shifman (2014:100) notes that memes "play an important role in the construction of group identity and social boundaries." Many of the K-drama memes in our dataset assume extensive knowledge of K-drama, and in this way, the appreciation of K-drama meme humor functions as a form of social organization. More specifically, humor serves a communicative process that establishes the

group's boundaries and the overall identity of the group members. This applies whether the communication in question constitutes banter between mushroom collectors and jokes between weather forecasters in real life (Fine and De Soucey 2005) or memes between fans of K-drama online. Blake and Mouton (1964) called this use of humor relational, as it serves to increase social connection within the in-group. Relational humor has been studied mainly in workplaces and among professionals (e.g., Crowe, Allen, and Lehmann-Wllenbrock 2016; Lynch 2010; Tracy, Myers, and Scott 2006), but also in activist groups (Fominya 2007) and as a marker of ethnic belonging (Holmes and Hay 1997) or national affiliations (Fiadotava and Chłopicki 2025). Through humor, "in- and out-group boundaries are (re)produced by excluding individuals (or groups) who do not have the stock of the in-group's references, skills, language, and sensemaking process" (Lynch 2010:130-131; see also Gheorghe and Curșeu 2024).

In some cases, this group identity is created through shared criticism (Tsakona 2024:127-130), but in the K-drama meme context, it is shared experience and expertise that make the group. For the viewer to understand the humor in the memes, they need to have watched hundreds of hours of K-drama, know the actors (e.g. Byon Woo-seok, shown in Figure 13), be familiar with individual dramas (e.g. *Sky Castle*, shown in Figure 6), and understand the typical plot structures and stock characters (e.g. the undercover *chaebol* 'rich business conglomerate' boss or the 'second male lead,' shown in Figure 5), and have at least minimal familiarity with the Korean language. This expert-knowledge humor is the foundation of the online K-drama fandom in-group on Instagram, in general, and is also prominent more specifically in the K-drama memes: the recurring categories and components show a cohesiveness typical of the group (cf. Gal, Shifman, and Kampf 2016).

The second function of humor in K-drama memes is psychological, which partly overlaps with social. Humor has been described as an affiliative and self-enhancing mechanism (Martin and Ford 2018:122-123). In the K-drama context, the memes' creators and consumers joke among friends to relieve tension and bond with their group members. Simultaneously, they use humor "to enhance and maintain positive psychological wellbeing and distance themselves from adversity" (Martin and Ford 2018:122). Thus, K-drama and the associated memes become a way to distance oneself from one's problems. While some of the memes are instances of self-defeating humor as the creators and consumers poke fun at their own weaknesses, mainly their K-drama obsession and their yearning for the actors or characters (cf. Martin and Ford 2018:123), overall the memes are likely to have a positive effect on their mental health (cf. Martin and Ford 2018:283-318) by providing an emotional community and a safe space for the fans (cf. Barclay and Downing 2023:14-15). In this way, watching

K-dramas and enjoying K-drama meme humor are connected in a recursive pattern that enhances positive emotional experience and enjoyment. The humor in the memes can also be used to acknowledge and process adverse emotional reactions to, e.g., plot twists, drama endings, or having to wait for the next episode. Hence, the memes function as psychosocial entities that allow digital media users to unify individual and collective emotions (Davison 2012; see also Barclay and Downing 2023).

4. Method and data

Our study is a qualitative corpus-based analysis. The corpus consists of approximately 200 memes hashtagged *#kdramameme* on Instagram (cf. Tomlinson 2022), from which we have selected 13 representative examples to illustrate our analysis. Our choice of *#kdramameme* is based on the considerations that a) sharers employing this hashtag have themselves identified the content in question as a meme, and b) they have a specific interest in, and knowledge of K-dramas as opposed to Hallyu more generally. This decision is linked to Shifman's (2013:100) point about different levels of literacy that are required to understand and create memes: some can be made by anyone, whereas others require detailed knowledge about the meme subculture.

While the K-drama memescape is multilingual, most of the memes hashtagged *#kdramameme* were in English, and therefore, we have limited our corpus to memes in this language. Spanish memes are also widespread under this hashtag, but they are beyond the scope of this study. Some other languages also appear under *#kdramameme*, namely Turkish, Arabic, and Portuguese, but they are marginal in number compared to English and Spanish. The English used in the corpus is typically very informal in register, as is usual for the meme genre in general, and reflects varying levels of fluency as the memes are composed by a highly international fandom. There is very little Korean-language content in the text of the memes, except certain extremely high-frequency words familiar to K-drama fans, in particular *oppa* (literally 'older brother', but used with reference to a male love interest).

We used purposive sampling to select the most illustrative examples of memes in each category (Palinkas et al. 2015; Patton 2002). We identified the meme categories through saturation, i.e., we obtained a comprehensive understanding by continuing to sample memes until no new substantive information appeared (Miles and Huberman 1994). Based on our knowledge of the corpus, we selected 13 representative memes to illustrate our main points to those unfamiliar with the setting (Patton 2002; Palinkas et al. 2015). We have omitted the names of creators and sharers of the memes to ensure anonymity.

5. Analysis of the K-drama meme corpus according to the relevant theoretical frameworks

In this section, we analyze the chief formal mechanisms for conveying humor through K-drama memes (5.1) and the overarching functions into which they feed (5.2). As mentioned above, we have identified three overlapping semiotic mechanisms, namely the use of meme templates (5.1.1) combined with the harnessing of blending (5.1.2) and benign violation (5.1.3). These three mechanisms of humor serve two main social and psychological functions: the construction and reinforcement of group identity (5.2.1) and the role they play in the emotional life of meme creators and consumers.

5.1. **The three semiotic mechanisms for conveying humor through K-drama memes**

5.1.1 *Meme templates*

K-drama memes are templatic in nature, conforming to the stylistic conventions of the meme genre (Shifman 2013:99-118). In terms of composition, they consist of either a single image or several images presented in split screens like comic book panels, with accompanying text that gives the images a new and humorous twist. Most memes in the corpus are based on images from K-dramas (e.g., Figures 5-6). Still, certain memes are intertextual in that they exhibit images which are instantly recognizable as stock elements of global meme culture (cf. Wiggins 2019). For example, Figure 2 contains an image from the iconic US children's show *SpongeBob SquarePants*, which is in widespread circulation in meme format. Similarly, the stick figure in Figure 4 is a familiar character from the meme sphere. In contrast, the glamorous young woman in Figure 10, enjoying K-drama in front of a burning building, replicates a well-established fire meme, which consists of a person in the foreground who is totally unconcerned by the burning fire immediately behind them. It is also reminiscent of the famous "disaster girl" meme, in which a little girl smiles in front of a burning building (see Attardo 2020 for discussion of this meme).

Figure 2. K-drama meme based on an image from the US television show SpongeBob SquarePants

Figure 3. K-drama as a fantasy world

5.1.2 *Blending*

The second mechanism the K-drama memes in our corpus harness to convey humor is blending, whereby structures merge from the blending of elements from different conceptual domains (see Oring 2016:33-56). In our case, the domains of real life and K-drama merge in an unexpected and funny way. For example, the meta-meme in Figure 3 represents this blending by centering around the concept that K-dramas constitute an alternative reality that exists in parallel with the one that fans actually inhabit. These memes present K-drama stars as mythical beings and the world they inhabit as a fantasy realm. In Figure 5, the real world of a lecture or a school lesson is combined with the insider knowledge about the "second male lead" role in K-dramas. The fact that this is not usually a real topic in education, combined with the very specific information being taught about a niche aspect of K-drama fandom knowledge, create a blended space that is funny. An equally complex blending of fictional and real-life domains can be found in Figure 8, where the K-drama consumer's expectations of romantic relationships, English literature, and the specific K-drama plot and couple are combined to create a blended space where the fictional love in K-dramas is more coveted than the love in the classic dramatic work *Romeo and Juliet*. In Figure 9, the funny fact that K-drama and your bed will comfort you when you are sad is expressed using a screenshot from a K-drama where the two comforting things are hugging you as the protagonist. Your feelings, the function of K-drama, and the K-drama image blend into one humorous domain.

5.1.3 *Benign violation*

The third mechanism the K-drama memes in our corpus employ to create a humorous effect is benign violation, whereby a moral principle is violated enough to be acceptable (McGraw and Warren 2010:1142). Examples of memes in this category are those that portray K-drama as an addictive substance. In these memes, fans of K-drama struggle to perform their daily activities, such as going to school or work, because of their intensive K-drama watching schedules. This is comparable to the way in which an individual with a serious substance abuse problem may be unable to function in their everyday life because of their addiction. Certain memes in this subset are more direct in drawing the parallel between K-drama addiction and substance abuse, for example, by presenting the K-drama addict as desperate for their next fix, or by highlighting the disastrous effects on the addict's mood when their K-drama supply is cut off. The meme in Figure 4 is the most explicit in its framing of K-dramas as an addictive substance, making a direct equation between K-dramas and drugs. A similar violation occurs when difficult emotions, such as stress, are portrayed through and dealt with in K-dramas. In Figure 10, worries or even disasters cannot touch you when you are enthralled by a K-drama. In contrast, in Figure 13, the image of a bride weeping on her wedding day (which in most contexts would be highly upsetting) is explained as stemming from the bride's unfulfilled desire for a K-drama actor, thus making the violation benign. Expressing extreme negative emotions would typically be taboo, but when such emotions are placed in an absurd or trivial K-drama meme template, the violation becomes benign and therefore humorous.

Figure 4. K-drama is directly equated with drugs

5.2. The two functions of K-drama meme humor: Social and psychological

The three semiotic mechanisms discussed in section 5.1 contribute in overlapping ways to the two main functions of K-drama meme humor. The first of these functions is social, namely the construction and reinforcement of group identity, while the second is psychological, relating to acknowledging and managing emotions. The following subsections will discuss these two functions in turn.

5.2.1 *Social function: group identity*

A powerful function of K-drama meme humor is creating and reinforcing group identity. K-drama memes serve as a way of highlighting the differences between the in-group (K-drama fans) and the out-group (non-fans). Humor is based on shared identity and insider knowledge that stems from the common experience of consuming large quantities of K-dramas. In-group jokes may set out the difficulties of explaining insider knowledge to outsiders, as in Figure 5, which underscores the complexity of the material and the concomitant challenges of conveying it to the baffled non-fan with the caption *Have a seat, it'll be a while*. Certain memes reinforce the in-group / out-group dichotomy through scenarios in which insiders use their niche K-drama expertise as a playful way of tricking innocent outsiders into unwittingly partaking in a K-drama-informed worldview. A case in point is shown in Figure 6, in which a K-drama fan presents their humorous plan to tell their children that the cast of the K-drama *Sky Castle*, set in an exclusive gated community in Seoul, are the Real Housewives of Orange County.

Figure 5. Explaining the role of the second male lead to an outsider unfamiliar with K-drama tropes

Figure 6. A K-drama fan's humorous plan to trick their children into a K-drama-informed worldview
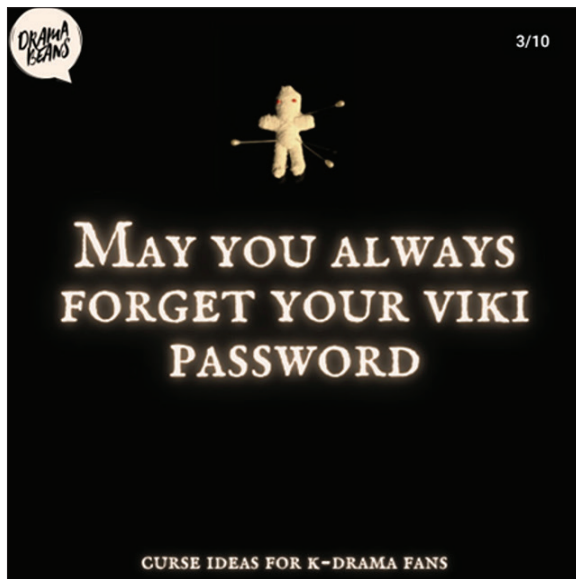
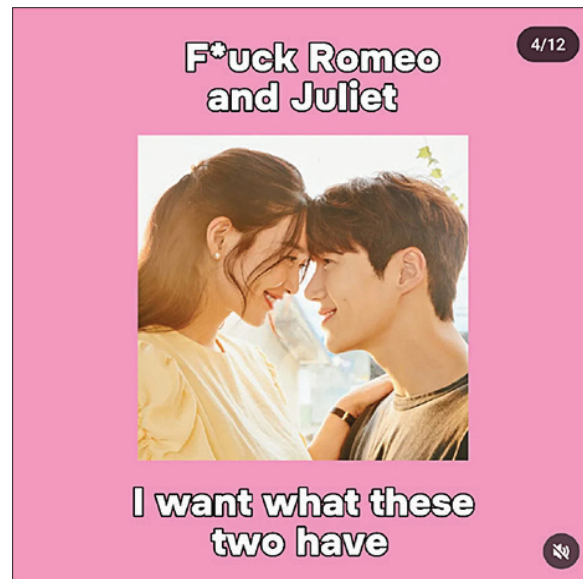**Figure 7.** A "curse" which applies only to K-drama fans

Figure 8. Insiders view K-drama couples the way outsiders view Romeo and Juliet

Similarly, memes may center around insider experiences to which all K-drama fans can easily relate but which would be meaningless for outsiders. For example, the curse in Figure 7, *May you always forget your Viki password*, derives its humor from insiders' dependence on the streaming company Viki, which is considered the best platform for K-drama content, but which is largely unfamiliar to those who are not part of an Asian drama fandom. The insider / outsider dichotomy is also in evidence where romantic love is concerned, with K-drama fans represented as having a different list of priorities for romantic partners and a different canon of romantic archetypes than their non-fan counterparts. This is illustrated in Figure 8, in which the in-group member eschews outsiders' idealization of the *Romeo and Juliet* model of romantic love in favor of that depicted in a K-drama.

5.2.2 *Psychological function*

The other major function of K-drama meme humor is psychological, with the memes articulating and validating the emotional world of K-drama fans. The meme corpus shows us that one of K-dramas' key roles is to comfort and soothe their viewers, as a balm for stressful and challenging life experiences. This point is illustrated in Figure 9, which highlights the central role of K-dramas to calm someone when they are feeling low, and, in a more extreme way, in Figure 10, which depicts K-dramas as a panacea with the ability to keep the protagonist happy even though their life is burn-

Figure 9. K-drama as comfort on a bad day

ing down around them. Conversely, memes also acknowledge that K-dramas are not only a remedy for life's stresses and disappointments but may also *cause* distress to viewers who get emotionally invested in the heartbreak experienced by characters onscreen. A case in point is Figure 11, which highlights the emotional lows suffered by K-drama fans. The humor conveyed in Figure 11 serves as an in-group, affiliative means to deal with their favorite drama ending. The memes can also serve as a humorous way to express fans' disappointment with their romantic relationships, which are regarded as inadequate compared to the ideal partners portrayed in K-dramas.

Figure 10. K-drama as a protective factor against adverse life experiences

Figure 11. K-dramas have the capacity to cause emotional distress in viewers

Figures 12 and 13 illustrate this type of meme. In Figure 12, the text highlights the inadequacy of a real-life boyfriend who claims to be too busy to answer his partner's text by pointing out that the protagonist of the K-drama *Vincenzo* can make romantic gestures while running an international crime syndicate. Likewise, in Figure 13, a bride mourns that her real-world groom will never live up to the K-drama actor of her dreams. These memes function as tongue-in-cheek, absurdist vehicles to elucidate true yearning.

Figure 12. The inadequacy of a real-life partner compared to the K-drama hero Vincenzo
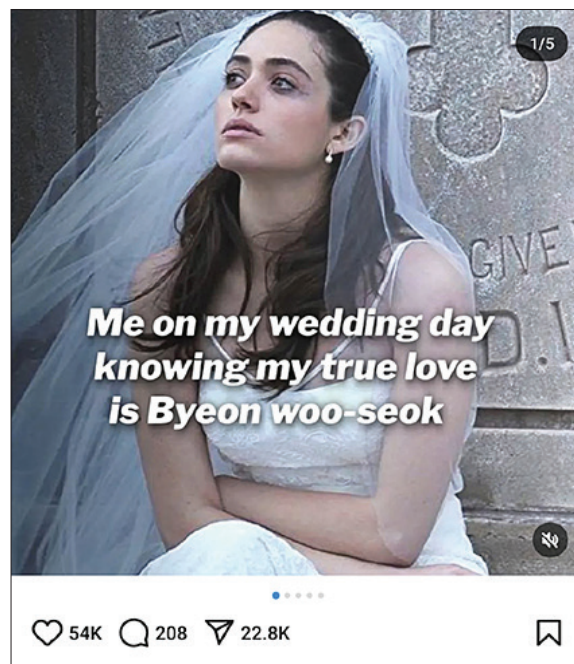

Figure 13. A bride laments the fact that her husband-to-be will never live up to her dream partner, the K-drama actor and model Beyon Woo-seok

6. Summary and conclusions

Our study has shown that K-drama memes constitute a rich source of online 21st-century humor within the broader context of the Korean Wave and global digital culture. We used a qualitative, corpus-based approach to answer the research questions of a) what mechanisms generate the humor in K-drama memes and b) what are the overarching functions that humor serves.

We answered the first research question by arguing that humor in K-drama memes is constructed via three semiotic mechanisms: meme templates, blending, and benign violation. The fact that K-drama memes are based on meme templates means that their semiotic and humorous conventions conform to those of the wider global memescape; this templatic format ensures that creators of K-drama memes have an easy, ready-made vehicle at their disposal for the expression of humorous content, and similarly that consumers of K-drama memes are primed to instantly recognize these creations as humor, because they are already aware that the genre as a whole is a humorous one. Blending is a fruitful conceptual tool for producing humor because the fusion of real life and the world of K-dramas creates a blended space, which is surprising and therefore generates humor. Intertextuality is another element of the humor produced by the blending mechanism, whereby reference can be made to other fictional worlds outside the realm of K-drama (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet* or *SpongeBob SquarePants*). Benign violation serves as a third mechanism by which humor is created in our corpus: humor results from placing a typically taboo topic, such as substance abuse, in a benign situation. This type of unexpected juxtaposition (e.g., equating K-drama fandom with drug addiction) neutralizes the taboo and allows the audience to laugh.

We answered the second research question by pinpointing two overarching functions these humorous mechanisms contribute to. The first is a social function: constructing and reinforcing group identity and belonging and highlighting the contrast between in-group members and outsiders. The memes in our corpus draw on the niche viewpoints, preferences, and specialist knowledge of K-drama fans (e.g., the names, plotlines, actors, and stock characters of individual K-dramas) to express their sense of distance from those outside the fandom. The situations portrayed in the memes provide K-drama fans with a humorous way to bond virtually with other members of the in-group over their shared identities and experiences, in contrast to the outsiders in their everyday life who cannot relate to them. This can provide K-drama fans with an online social network and help promote well-being by combating feelings of isolation. The second function is psychological: not only do the memes pinpoint the role of K-dramas in their fans' emotional lives, highlighting their unique ability to comfort them during difficult periods (and conversely to trigger emotional distress), but they also act on the metalevel as conduits of mental wellbeing by reassuring fans that they are not alone in their feelings (e.g. that any real-life husband is bound to be

a disappointment when compared to a favorite K-drama actor or character). As such, the humorous mechanisms underpinning the memes are harnessed to play a decisive role in negotiating K-drama fans' identity and inner world.

Our study has focused on an understudied aspect of the Hallyu scene, demonstrating that K-drama memes forge and strengthen the ties between members of the global K-drama fandom through humor. Further research on this topic, including quantitative analyses, a comparative study of English- and Spanish-language memes, the examination of production and reception of K-drama memes by geographic location, and linguistic analysis of K-drama meme content, could yield more in-depth and wide-ranging findings on the role of K-drama memes at the intersection of humor, semiotics, sociolinguistics, and cultural studies.

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AUTHOR

Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi is Associate Professor of Finnish and Minority Languages, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, UK.
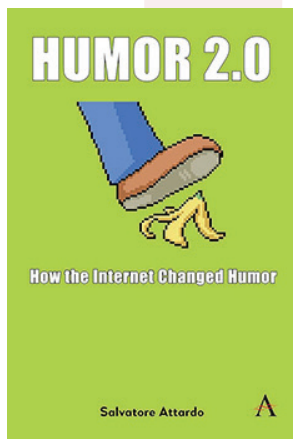
AUTHOR

Lily Kahn is Professor of Hebrew and Jewish Languages and Head of the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University College London, UK.

New dimensions of humor:
The online world

BY: **Bianca Alecu**

Attardo, Salvatore

Humor 2.0: How the Internet Changed Humor

London: Anthem Press, 2023, 294 pp. $35.00 (pbk, ISBN 9781839993626), $110.00 (hbk, ISBN 9781839988561)

Salvatore Attardo's most recent book on humor is an insightful case-by-case study of several digital entertainment contexts, from memes to videos, from imagined communities to political movements. The reputed linguist applies qualitative and quantitative research methods in analyzing how digital media and humor interact to form a complex social phenomenon. As the fourth book-length study solely authored by Attardo in the field of humor studies (see the major theoretical works in Attardo 1994, 2001, 2020), *Humor 2.0* is a necessary book that addresses one of the most salient – and unpredictable – forms of humor to surround us on a day-to-day basis: digital humor.

Written in a familiar, yet eloquent and theoretically rich style, with humorous and reflexive adagios, this book is the work of a master of humorous theory at play. A useful resource for students of the linguistic theories of humor or curious internet users, this volume features a rich bibliography, author, and subject indices. Moreover, internet researchers will find the book to be an indispensable reference for understanding various digital phenomena, from the most popular (i.e., memes) to the relatively more obscure ones (*Boaty McBoatface*). The key concern of this book, as the author states several times, is to offer an answer to the question: how does

the internet affect how we produce and consume humorous discourse? (p. 18). The answer, as highlighted in the well-articulated introductory remarks, is that humor has changed… a little, yet not so much, due to the internet, despite what many might think:

> There is a widespread perception that humor on the internet is different than it was before […]. The internet has obviously brought changes, such as references to spoilers, emojis and memes, but at a deep level, the deep semantic mechanisms of humor are universal and do not change. (Attardo 2023:14)

Four major themes emerge to document this observation, giving way to the four parts that structure this book. To begin with, the internet is characterized by *new genres of humor* (Part I), from which memes are considered to be the most important semiotic form (Part II). A core feature of digital humor is *multimodality* (Part III), which is explored through detailed analyses of images and videos. The discussion is extended to the relationship between the content and its consumers (photobombing, cringe humor). In this vein, a bigger picture is provided to account for using digital humorous media to propagate political agendas, especially agendas of the far-right political groups in *the dark side of internet humor* (Part IV). It is worth mentioning that this book is US-centric, a fact acknowledged by the author, leading to an inevitable discussion of mostly English-language, US-relevant online phenomena (p. 1). However, as noticed from the study of what may be considered local humorous products (Romanian memes, for instance), the analyses presented in this book highlight global trends useful for the successful problematization of other particular geopolitical and social spaces.

The introductory chapters are focused on establishing the terminology, theoretical concepts, and main ideas behind a linguistics-based theory of digital humor.

Chapter I, 'Humor and the Internet,' is the *locus* of a historical and theoretical account of the evolution of computer-mediated communication. The author stresses that the adoption rates regarding mediated communication vary across time and space. People interact differently not only *on* the internet, but *with* the internet, as different generations seem to use the web in their own, particular ways (see also McCulloch 2019). This individual and social variation consequently affects how people produce and consume humorous discourses online.

While the first chapter is essentially an overview of the book's central themes, Chapter 2, "Memetics," focuses on the forms, functions, and historical transformations of memes. Starting from the Dawkinsian original meaning of the word *meme* (Dawkins 1976), the author presents a conceptual toolkit for handling the shapeshifting of online memes. This theoretical kit includes: *produsage* (Bruns 2008) and *affordance* (Gibson 1979), *user-generated content, memetics, memeiosis* (i.e., meme production), and *anchor meme* (i.e., the original meme of a series). Digital memes are the product of memeiosis,

the process by which a meme is created or an anchor meme is remixed (modified) and further shared online. For instance, the affordances of a visual element in memes (a gesture, an index or a symbol, a still-frame, or a color) stimulate memeiosis, i.e., help with the production of different connotations.

An introduction to analyzing online humor would be incomplete without a friendly, easy-to-follow overview of the main theories on humor (Chapter 3, "Humor theory"). The reader is gradually acquainted with release, superiority, and incongruity theories. A demonstration of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (Attardo & Raskin 1991) as a version of incongruity theories is applied to memes and a popular fad (*getting rickrolled*, pp. 44-45). Very briefly, as one may expect from a book on humor that projects a larger, more diverse audience, the social and cognitive aspects of non-bona-fide interactions are also summarized.

The first part of the book (Chapters 4 to 10) provides an overview of loosely defined internet genres, including *spoiler alerts, compilations,* and *humorous digital currencies*. The six case studies reviewed in this part are some of the most spectacular recent internet phenomena, characterized by heterogeneous themes, multimodality, and creativity.

Chapter 4, "The new language of humor," acts as a "bridge" between the theoretical introduction and the rest of the book (p. 49). Echoing other internet researchers who take a descriptive, functional approach to broad linguistic topics (Crystal 2001; 2018; McCulloch 2016), Attardo aims to reassure the nonspecialist reader about the negative effects of mediated interaction on talk and language in general (p. 51). Although online communication might initially seem very different from spoken or written communication, it does not signify the "death" of language as we know it. Online communication mainly depends on graphical and lexical elements. Internet slang is a mix of informal language, computer jargon, abbreviated patterns (e.g., *OMG*), and emoticons. Since humor is part of interaction, this chapter discusses verbal and visual "markers of humor" (p. 53), such as the smiley face or Internet slang words (e.g., *lol*).

Turning to the case studies presented as "new genres" of humor, we notice their most defining features: they are multimodal objects shared on the internet, having some degree of historical precedence in the shape of traditional media, and are at the core of specific sociocultural trends. Moreover, the author provides different case studies to explain the inner workings of humor in each case. For instance, "The compilation" (Chapter 5) of failed videos on Vine and other networks has had a television counterpart. Incongruity theory is called to explain laughter due to watching fail videos. Chapter 6, "Internet cartoons", introduces the term *narrowcasting* (Licklider 1967), an antonym of broadcasting media, i.e., spreading content to niche groups. The author believes most internet cartoonists (authors of *webcomics*) create a particular audience for themselves in the digital age, with the help of editing and web affordances. "Stuff

white people like" is the title of Chapter 7, referencing the eponymous blog (SWPL). The author discusses racial stereotypes, one of the most salient resources of verbal humor, in the blog context. In our view, the highlight of this analysis is the recuperation of classist themes hidden behind the classical rhetoric of race (p. 78). The author contrasts excerpts from the SWPL blog with a stand-up comedian's piece on race to further deliver his point. Both discourses use the pretense of a specialized voice (the anthropologist vs the nature documentary) to comment on the target of humor.

Chapter 8, "Dogecoin, the joke currency", delves into a massive sociocultural phenomenon by which a meme, Doge (a dog with humorous inner speech), became the symbol of a make-believe cryptocurrency, *the dogecoin*. At the core of humor is incongruity on multiple levels: between an animal and its anthropomorphic reflexive speech, on one hand, and between the world of memes and the world of finances, on the other. "The spoiler alert" (Chapter 9) is originally a form of letting the addressee know that the author / speaker is about to reveal important plot points in discussing a fictional product (movies, series, books). Gradually, it became arguably more of a discursive practice than a genre, since it is now used conversationally, as the author highlights in his analysis of a *Key & Peel* skit. This practice may be used as a humorous resource of metadiscursive commentary. Finally, Chapter 10 "Satirical news websites and fake news" comments on the historical vein of humorous fake news in satirical print media (e.g., *The Onion*). This case study is a lesson in establishing the cues for satirical news, such as exaggeration, press clichés, real-life or life-like details (data, location), and incongruity.

In the second part of this book, "Memes and More Memes," four memes are examined in detail: *Boaty McBoatface, Grumpy Cats, Pastafarian memes*, and *Chuck Norris* memes. An insightful theoretical discussion on meme cycles (similar to joke cycles) and the semantic bleaching of meme verbal affordances is central in Chapter 11, "Memetic drift or the alliteration arsonist." Humor on the internet may develop many forms, from the distinct semiotic ones (memes) to shared discourse practices, such as collective pranks. Users join to create several collective digital products, from Wikipedia pages to "joint fictionalization" (Tsakona 2018). Chapter 12, "The saga of Boaty McBoatface," is a commentary on how memes can have real-life consequences: an expensive British polar research ship was to be named Boaty McBoatface, as per the wish of thousands of Internet users. This is a collaborative prank on a collective agent of authority, the British Natural Environment Research Council, which eventually named the ship after Sir David Attenborough. An interesting (unintended) result of the prank is creating a linguistic pattern, which intertextually refers to the original Boaty McBoatface: Horsey McHorseface, Trany McTrainface, and so on (p. 125). In Chapter 13, "A General Theory of Grumpy Cats," Attardo discusses *anthropomorphism* as the leading resource of Grumpy Cat humor after providing the reader with an account of the phenomenon.

As cats took over the internet (see also *LOLCats*), the author suggests that the internet serves an inevitable lucrative purpose (pp. 135-136) as a means of spreading the popularity of cute-looking (i.e., human-looking) cats and animals in general.

In Chapter 14, "The Pastafarian memeplex: Joke religion as a system," Attardo introduces the memeplex to explain a cluster of memes on the same topic. Pastafarian memes are based on a humorous parody of religious discourse. The illustrations provided by the author in this chapter are essential for understanding the entire socio-cultural phenomenon that Pastafarianism involves, from a fundamentally irreverent parody (see Figure 14.1, p. 141) to a collective protest and spiritual experience (see Figure 14.2, p. 142). Moving to the final case study in this section of the book, Chapter 15, "When Chuck Norris is waiting, Godot comes," bears the title of a joke the author himself creates (and analyzes on p. 159) based on Chuck Norris memes. The rhetorical trope of the all-powerful Chuck Norris, a symbol of boundless masculine strength, is actually a remake of a pre-digital storytelling pattern: the "tall tale." A somewhat worn-out meme nowadays, this example is used to introduce and analyze *dank memes* as memes that have reached the final stage of their popularity and spread, possibly due to overuse (p. 153). Dank memes are the focus of theoretical discussion in Chapter 16, "The half-life of a meme: The rise and fall of memes."

The third part of the book, "Multimodality," highlights the interaction between different affordances of digital media, including visual and verbal cues and more complex elements. For instance, in Chapter 17, a common feature of foreign-language movies, the subtitles, becomes a resource for digital humor. By decontextualizing a scene from a German-language movie on Hitler's defeat in the battle of Berlin, users can provide "fake" subtitles that create an incongruity with the selected visuals. Chapter 18, "Photobombing as figure ground reversal," is, in our opinion, a well-rounded theoretical treatment of a complex physical and cultural action: the disruption of a picture, willingly or unwillingly, by a third actor (person, animal, or object). The author effectively discusses Gestalt psychology concepts of *figure* and *ground*, two entities that account for how the mind perceives important versus background information.

Chapter 19, "'Hard to watch': Cringe and embarrassment humor," offers readers an overview of humorous discourse that, aside from eliciting mirth and laughter, also provokes feelings of embarrassment and inappropriateness. While cringe humor has only recently become a formal term among humor scholars (Tsakona 2023: 115), the examples chosen by the author demonstrate a consistent set of features. Therefore, cringe humor relies on the social contagion effect and involves the vicarious experience of embarrassment on behalf of the humor source or other participants (see the definition on p. 190).

Keeping in the realm of multimodality, Chapter 20 "Humor videos" comprises the ubiquitous video forms popular on the internet, from the short Vines (under 10

seconds) to Reels or longer parodic outputs. A highlight of this chapter is the analysis of music excerpts and decorum as resources for humorous discourse (see the Lego Rammstein example). "Reaction videos" (Chapter 21) form a subgenre of digital videos based on both visual and verbal affordances: on one hand, the screen of a reaction video contains both the objection of reaction and the "reactor"; on the other hand, the commentary is attuned to verbal descriptors of race, sex or gender, aiming to attract the attention of the audience, albeit in a polemic way.

The fourth and last part of the book, "The dark side of internet humor," is an exploration of "the darkest, most disturbing corners of the internet" (p. 217). Chapter 22, "The use of humor by the alt-right," presents several instances of covert propaganda stemming from the extreme right of American politics. The "cover" of this ideology is humor and, more precisely, one of its properties: the ability to "take back" a joke or a comment (called the "retractability" of humor by the author, p. 219). The alt-right movement has gained an audience via activity on platforms such as 4chan, Reddit, and Facebook, with little to no repercussions. Discussing the "just joking" argument (p. 221), the author suggests that accountability in the case of political humor must be at the forefront of the debate on freedom of expression. Furthermore, Chapter 23 explores "4chan, trolls and lulz" in the context of fascist propaganda. *Trolling* is an antisocial behavior, "disruptive, deliberate and antagonizing" (p. 228), which may use aggressive and disaffiliative forms of humor to radicalize users on various topics. An especially important point of discussion recalls the concepts of Ur-fascism (Eco 1995) or *generic fascism* (Griffin 1993). These terms describe an abstract, over-arching ideological movement, the matrix of different "historical" fascist movements that are actualized at various points in time and via different mechanisms. Forums such as 4chan are an outlet for the surge in contemporary fascist discourse, as well as for antisocial interactive behavior. Some of these discursive phenomena that channel destructive ideologies are, apart from trolling, *shitposting, flaming, hate-watching,* and *cyberbullying*.

Finally, Chapter 24, "Pepe, Kek and friends," highlights the mythical figures of far-right propaganda, born and popularized by meme culture. One may draw a parallel between the satirical cult of Kek and Pastafarianism: both can be seen as collective parodies of religion, using different concepts and unlikely scenarios to mimic the elements of a cult that is shared and grows on the internet. However, only the cult of Kek is linked to right-wing propaganda. Humor plays a crucial role in this phenomenon, since memes featuring Pepe, the avatar of Kek, are used to recruit new followers and influence opinions (see also Trillò and Shifman 2021). The author highlights the "cast of characters" in these memes: Pepe, Chad, Wojak, and his alternates (NPC Wojak, SoyJack). We are thus reminded of the insightful introductory remarks on how memes feature a variety of changing faces, much like the "maschere" of commedia dell'arte (p. 18).

As a conclusion (pp. 249-225), Attardo reviews four ways in which humor has been changed, or at least shaped, by the advent of the internet: the creation of the humorous meme, the emergence of cringe humor, the "destabilization of the boundary between play and real-life aggression" (p. 250) and, lastly, the growing role of the crowd in creating collective pranks and other shared humorous experiences.

The diversity of case studies in this book is essential to discussing how the Internet changed humor. In considering novel ways of approaching contemporary humor and humor studies, Tsakona (2020) discusses online humor as a rich ground for collective practice and joke cycles. The online world of humor seems to emerge as a distinct genre or, at least, a distinct medium in which digital affordances shape how humor is produced and consumed. Memes are the prototypical humorous product associated with the internet. Like other recent works on internet humor (Chiaro 2018, Yus 2023), this book offers a plethora of applied discussions on different humor and media genres. However, memes shine throughout any book on digital humor, and Attardo's study is no exception.

We are in awe of the diversity of applied linguistics approaches that are showcased in most of the chapters. Complementing the theoretical discussion, the qualitative analyses using incongruity theory and script opposition to explain the mechanisms of humor (see p. 160) are thoroughly welcomed by both students of humor theory (this author included) and the general public. Moreover, the author uses quantitative analysis and novel annotation models, from the most descriptive (failed compilations, pp. 65-67) to the most complex approaches. From a methodological point of view, these latter approaches are closer to corpus linguistics: see, for instance, the empirical test for cringe humor (p. 192) involving sentiment analysis of comments on a YouTube video.

Last, but not least, the "voice of the author" is revealed to be a particular spirited disposition – jocular and knowledgeable in "all things internet," yet competent and authoritative in theoretical discussions. These latter instances are mostly on linguistic and social topics. However, explanations on extralinguistic topics, such as the world of finance (p. 87), provide necessary contextualization for analyzing the *dogecoin*, in this case. As a researcher of internet communication phenomena, I deeply feel the tension between contextualizing the object of study and articulating its analysis, emerging from the particular "niche" or "trivial" nature of the topic. Especially in the world of Advice Animals and Doge, researchers need to be able to shape-shift into a competent, yet worldly storyteller to deliver their interpretations of internet discourse and interaction. The breadth of cultural and linguistic topics this book tackles involves a lot of historical and cultural background knowledge, which needs to be distilled for the audience for each case study. The way the author delivers this contextualization, rich in detail and balanced in narrative, is to be appreciated.

Another highlight of the author's style is the metadiscursive and humorous reflexive commentary. As Tsakona (2023: 118) points out, the "funny asides" emerge from the research topic. Most of these comments involve the author, employing a postmodern "breaking the 4th wall" technique: a humorous take on digital and real selves (p. 20), a meme created by the author (p. 24), a picture of the author's family being photobombed by a stranger (p. 188). By subtly self-disclosing at times while emphasizing the task at hand, the author creates a book that is both engaging and insightful. The audience and the researcher share the initial goal of the project: to explore how the internet has changed humor. We look forward to the scholar's future work in the online realm. Given that most humorous genres resemble pre-digital discourse (see satirical news, compilations, and others), memes and cringe humor are likely to remain topics of interest for the author, as they are, at least in part, products of the digital environment and its possibilities. Considering the "fast pace" of humor on the internet (p. 16), we are compelled to echo the author's sentiment: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose...*

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AUTHOR

Bianca Alecu is Assistant Lecturer (PhD) in the Faculty of Letters of the University of Bucharest, Romania.

Narrating the past in the present

BY: **Mary Bairaktari**

Paul Bouissac

The Semiotics of Performances

London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025, 184 pp. (hbk, ISBN 9781350372665, £52.50, pbk ISBN 9781350372658, £16.79, ebk ISBN 9781350372672, £21.59)

1. Intersections of performance, culture, and artistic practice

Paul Bouissac, Professor Emeritus at Victoria College, University of Toronto, has recently published *The Semiotics of Performances*, an engaging and intellectually rigorous contribution to Performance Studies. The book traces the complete trajectory of live performance, from its initial conception through its realization, promotion, and subsequent critical analysis. The subtitle, *An Introduction to the Analysis, Interpretation, and Theory of the Performing Arts*, aptly reflects its scope, guiding readers through a cohesive exploration of performance semiotics and providing a concise yet comprehensive overview.

Across 170 pages, Bouissac offers a synthesis of his extensive scholarship, presenting a lucid, exploratory, and critical account of performance as a semiotic phenomenon. The book demonstrates the refined perspective of a scholar widely recognized as a pioneer in circus studies. Bouissac's previous works – *Circus as Multimodal Discourse, The End of the Circus, The Meaning of the Circus, Saussure: A Guide For The Perplexed and The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning* – have established him as a founding figure in the field. In this latest volume, he distills decades of research into a profound and accessible framework, offering both a theoretical foundation and an analytical toolkit for examining performances across diverse cultural and artistic contexts.

2. Semiotics of the ephemeral 'here and now' of performances as multimodal 'texts'

In twenty-first-century scholarship on the semiotics of performance, the concept that immediately comes to the fore is mainly the multiplicity of performance forms that rely on the actor's body and incorporate cutting-edge technological means to produce multimodal results in various indoor and outdoor spaces. These may include artistic events or even pure improvisations that semiotics approaches from its transversal and cross-sectional perspective. Bouissac's study applies a lens that is at once sharply focused and broadly inclusive, generously integrating interdisciplinary approaches.

More specifically, *The Semiotics of Performances* innovatively supplements foundational 20th-century studies on the subject (Elam, 1980; Fischer-Lichte, 1983; De Marinis, 1993) with examples drawn from our contemporary performative present, focusing on live performances conceived as multimodal 'texts'. The book provides readers with the conceptual tools necessary for a systematic semiotic interpretation and addresses a wide range of potential audiences – students, practitioners, and researchers in Theatre, Performance, and Cultural Studies – engaged with or interested in analyzing performance. Bouissac's perspective simultaneously opens the discussion to interdisciplinary approaches, including pragmatics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. This analysis is combined with his guidelines for understanding the communicative processes through which the "here and now" of the ephemeral performative event is captured, opening further possibilities for interpretation. His perspective is articulated within the framework of a semiotic approach that draws on seminal linguistic models, including those of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and Karl Bühler.

3. A valuable twist: From top-down to bottom-up study in Performance Semiotics

In this interpretive framework, as explicitly stated in the Preface, the structure of each chapter is based on a precise perspective that overturns the established "top-down approach" long regarded as the dominant method in semiotics. Instead, the author proposes a "bottom-up approach," which structures the chapters by beginning with concrete examples of live performances in recorded form and then proceeding to their analysis through appropriate theoretical models (e.g., Jakobson's, Shannon and Weaver's, Greimas's narrative schema, etc.). More precisely, chapters have an internal division into four parts: "the basics", an "advanced discussion" that interconnects praxis and theory, a short "bibliography", and supplementary texts for additional reading, suitable for both individual engagement and collaborative discussion within pedagogical settings.

The "bottom-up approach" represents a valuable innovation for the reader. It is inspired by Bouissac's *teaching* praxis, specifically his syllabus for the course *Understanding the Performing Arts*: *Interpretation and Expression*, taught at Victoria College, University of Toronto, in 2020. Yet this reverse tactic proves valuable for readers from any disciplinary background, not only because it operates synthetically, moving from the specific to the theoretical, but also because it begins with paradigms familiar to the reader (examples of performances selected and made available online by the author) and proceeds toward the presentation of a holistic conceptual framework of analysis, focusing on the microstructures that shape any kind of live performance.

In this respect, the companion website accompanying the book provides an additional resource and links to supporting audiovisual material and exercises suggested for each chapter.

In this sense of expansion, applied to the performances under study, Bouissac employs diagrams and schematic guidelines that engage with the practice itself: the human being as actant. Extending his reflection further, every bipolar approach in the performing arts –such as the much-discussed diptych "performer–audience"– is analyzed into its components based on the different factors that define the relationship between addresser and the addressee (communication process and feedback, emotions, cultural devices, etc.) within the shared cultural rules (code) in a concrete context (e.g., space and time as determining factors).

4. Narrating the Past in the Present

The ten chapters of the book begin with an examination of performances as communication (Chapter 1) and as creative process (Chapter 2), introducing both expert and non-expert readers to the two-way relationship between performer and audience, while also emphasizing the dual nature of the performer (person and persona) and the construction of performing identities (Chapter 3). The first example offered is the clown, as an homage and a recognition of his value by a scholar who has dedicated more than half a century to studying circus performances, investigating human internal and emotional labor, melancholy, and loneliness in their deepest forms. Bouissac highlights the profound but semiotically formulated tension in the clown's face: the need to break the bonds of the laughing mask. This façade conceals another self even as it seeks to amuse audiences of all ages.

From this starting point, the book explores the dimensions of performances as social processes (Chapter 4) and as affective (Chapter 5) and cognitive experiences, discussing the narrative structures and relevance (Chapter 6). Through this theoretical lens, performances are regarded as holistic texts and are examined in terms of metaphor and through the roles enacted in everyday life. Chapter 7 presents models for the

analysis and interpretation of live performances, taking as its point of departure the performance conceived as a multimodal and multisensorial "text" situated within its context. The chapter includes a subsection entitled "How to make a verbal copy of a performance," which provides a clear and concise descriptive guide to this process.

At this stage, the author broadens his reflection into fields such as social impact, reflexivity, and transformative experience. The range of semiotic objects widens further, encompassing contemporary forms such as drama, opera, circus (clowns and acrobats), ballet, concerts, stand-up comedy, fashion shows, and the Street Play Movement, among others. These forms are analyzed through their political, social, moral, and cross-cultural dimensions. For instance, in addressing the transformative power of performance and drawing on the work of Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), Bouissac approaches the phenomenon of emblematic "extreme performances" taking Marina Abramović as a key example (Chapter 9, pp. 150-152). Special attention should be given to one of the book's most notable strengths: the supplementary readings, among which stand out the author's field experience in Mumbai (91-92), «A Clown Performance» (pp. 119-126), and, perhaps most significantly, «Performance Poetry: Practice» (pp. 75-78) –a personal communication with Chris Arning. The latter lends itself to being read as a theatrical autobiographical monologue, or a statement of a poet's analytical reflections on the performer's own struggles. Unlike the performer, whose role is directly tied to enactment, the poet's direct exposition to the audience may appear unfamiliar. In this narration, body (performer) and soul (poet) converge into a single entity: the exhibited presence of the poet-performer-creator (from the ancient Greek verb *poieō*, "to create").

But how is it possible to narrate the past in the present? What makes a performance successful or disappointing? And, at a deeper scientific level, what accounts for the difference between a positive and a negative audience experience? (Chapter 10, p. 157). The final chapter, entitled «The Roles of Performance: The Felicity Conditions», provides a "conceptual toolkit" and "practical guidelines" for performers, critics, and spectators, along with their "insightful diagnostic" (p. 158). The book concludes with an examination of the rules of performance (the Felicity Conditions) presented as practical guidelines for effective performance: be accountable, communicate effectively, be relevant, and be proper.

Overall, *The Semiotics of Performances* examines contemporary live performances with a forward-looking perspective, presenting a holistic account of the enacted experience that foregrounds the dynamics of the body-sign. In this respect, Paul Bouissac offers a thought-provoking textbook that equips readers with extensive theoretical tools and analytical models to foster critical thinking.

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AUTHOR

Mary Bairaktari is Assistant Professor of Literary Translation, Department of French Language and Literature, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

Semiotics and translation:
Applying translation theory to musicological research

BY: **Lucile Desblache**

Małgorzata Grajter

Applying Translation Theory to Musicological Research

Cham: Springer, 2024, 153 pp. (hbk ISBN 978-3-031-56629-5, €128,39, pbk ISBN 978-3-031-56632-5, €128,39, ebk ISBN 978-3-031-56630-1, €102,71)

In *Applying Translation Theory to Musicological Research*, the musicologist Małgorzata Grajter aims to answer the question: how can music understanding and musicology benefit from translation theory? Therefore, the aim is to infuse music research with methodologies explored in Translation Studies to consider musical works in a new light. This is a brave and worthy undertaking. While interdisciplinarity is, in principle, viewed positively by researchers, in practice, it is often challenging to break barriers across different fields. For instance, many Translation Studies scholars still feel that the notion of translation can be diluted into the more general one of transformation, particularly when it is used in the context of artistic ekphrasis. Still, both Musicology and Translation Studies have a solid base for building bridges across different fields, and more specifically across each other's fields. For more than a century, most musicologists have considered music as part of language and culture rather than a discrete abstract art form, emphasising its protean nature, favoring alliances with cultures, words, shapes, and colours. Similarly, since the beginning of the 21st century, many Translation

Studies scholars have lamented that specialised areas of translation, including audio-visual translation, which comprises musical translation, were not more solidly rooted in transdisciplinary theory. So, it is pleasantly unexpected to see contemporary musicology infused and inspired by translation theory.

One hundred fifty-three pages long, this book is structured in four chapters, topped and tailed by an introduction, a conclusion, and an index. The author, who humbly describes herself as 'a native speaker of a language as internationally obscure as Polish' (p. xix) is truly multilingual in her approach and, at a time when English dominates publications, even in an area such as Translation Studies, it is refreshing to see many examples and quotes in a range of languages, some of which are of lesser use. The book is aimed at both Music and Translation Studies scholars. Still, it is slanted towards musicologists for three reasons: first, because '[o]ne of the principal goals of this study is to allow the new methodologies derived from translation theories to permeate the research into musical works' (ibid.); second, because some of the definitional sections, essentially in the initial chapter, go back to etymologies, histories and definitions that might be a little basic for Translation Studies scholars. From a Translation Studies perspective, the limits of translation have long extended beyond Nida's views (see, for instance, Pym, Robinson, Blumczynski, Scott, Chaume, and Boase-Beier). Since the author's approach later on in the volume is slanted towards semiotics, which is an entirely justified perspective, why not stress the dyad semiotics / translation from the start, which would guide readers towards the chosen approach? Equally, the general history of Translation Studies, necessarily skeletal in a relatively short volume, might be of more interest to translators if directly linked to music? Finally, most Translation Studies scholars and translators associate music translation primarily with the translation of song lyrics. They might find it puzzling that the book is mainly about instrumental music. Nevertheless, Translation Studies scholars will learn from the theoretical framework proposed, which straddles the two disciplines efficiently and imaginatively.

The book evolves coherently: chapter one, devoted to the notion of translation within the disciplines of Linguistics and Translation Studies, gives a starting point from which further concepts can be set forth, and leads to an overview of key concepts in Translation Studies. I found the (linguistic) notions of invariance and variability, defined in this second chapter and later explored through musical analysis in Chapter 4 as musicological tools, particularly interesting. They allow an expansion of Peter Szendy's (2008) views of arrangements and transcriptions as complements to original music. A 'passing note' about this second chapter: given that a 40-page chapter entitled 'How is music translated' is included in my book, I found the remark concerning the fact that the question of how music is translated is not

addressed in it unfounded (p. 64). In Chapter 3, the author, who refers to relevant and recent publications in semiotics and multimodality (for instance Marais 2019; Julia Minors 2021), explores the semiotics frameworks that she will later use in her analyses in depth, and shows awareness of interdisciplinary challenges when she states that "[a]s opposed to translation theory, which has attempted to include music into the scope of translation, academic musicology, as a highly specialised and independent discipline, has developed its own vocabulary used to describe translational phenomena in music with absolutely no connection to translation theory. Consequently, a lot of terminological chaos and inconsistency arose, ensuing from the discrepancies between different languages and traditions." (p. 61) Yet Translation Studies, at the end of the 20th century, was also struggling with terminology. This comes with stretching the borders of any field, and is inevitable when attempting to find common definitional ground between two disciplines. Chapter 4 frames its analyses around Marais' concepts of intra-music transfer ("all music which is translated into other music," (p. 91) "inter-music translation," "between different musical sub systems such as styles, instruments, and genres" (p. 111) and "extra-music translation," "occurring between music and other non-musical semiotic systems; in other words, an extra-systemic translation of which music forms part either as a source, or target text" (p. 122). The author herself acknowledges that this framework requires caution, distance and flexibility in its approach because in music, there can be overlap between intra- and inter-translation, but also because the notion of translating music into other semiotic systems is controversial in musicology. Within this careful proviso, music analysis, both in scores and in performative interpretation, is offered. The notion of potential equivalence across and beyond musical and non-musical systems needs to be circumnavigated carefully by musicologists. I wonder, reading this chapter, whether the notion of variation, essential to music, would be more useful than those of translation, transmutation, or transduction. However, this fourth chapter is explorative and original in offering new methodologies for compositional and performative analysis. As the author notes in her concluding remarks, in a fast-changing world, both translation and music are constantly evolving beyond the familiar, and within this context, taking musical analysis methodologies beyond their established frameworks is in itself a process requiring adaptability and imagination, two qualities essential to both music and translation.

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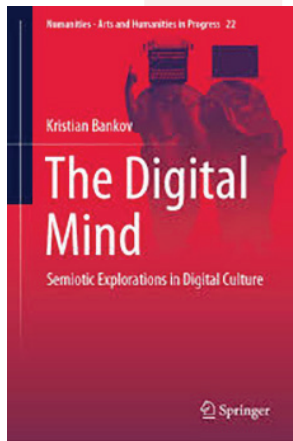
AUTHOR

Lucile Desblache is Emerita Professor of Translation and Transcultural Studies at the Centre for Research in Arts and Creative Exchange, School of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, University of Roehampton, England.

Digital minds for analog experiences

BY: **Konstantinos Michos**

Kristian Bankov

**The Digital Mind:
Semiotic Explorations in Digital Culture**

I n an era increasingly preoccupied with artificial intelligence, *The Digital Mind: Semiotic Explorations in Digital Culture* reminds us that digitalizing our cultural practices predates the current AI surge. The book – part of the *Numanities*: Arts and Humanities in Progress series from Springer – offers a compelling and methodical exploration into the semiotic dimensions of digital culture, with one overarching argument: the digital semiosphere is shaped not only by cultural forces but also by deeply embedded economic structures. The cover, a digitally edited detail from *The School of Athens* – with Plato and Aristotle reimagined as a typewriter and a laptop – encapsulates the book's ambition: to bridge the classical and the contemporary, the philosophical and the technological.

The Introduction bridges the semiotic tradition of the past and the challenges that have emerged with the appearance of digital media. A significant part is dedicated to reviewing a substantial body of work on the subject within semiotics, noting the main omissions observed. However, while some of the proposed ideas have surfaced in prior work (the author points out *On the Digital Semiosphere* by Hartley, Ibrus, and Ojamaa 2020), this volume presents them with unprecedented confidence and clarity.

The book is divided into three parts. The first (comprised of Chapters 1 & 2) lays the theoretical groundwork, examining the convergence of digital culture and economic behavior. Chapter 1 proposes that the internet – particularly in its Web 2.0 phase – resembles Juri Lotman's concept of the *semiosphere*, complete with peripheries, center, and boundaries. Although Lotman's definition remains broad, the analogy is persuasive: online interactions mirror these structural features. The author acknowledges critiques of this metaphor (such as those by Bruni, 2011, 2015), but notes that their objections tend to target ethical arguments (regarding the inclusion of economic constituents into discussion) rather than theoretical. Ultimately, our everyday digital routines seem to verify the model: user-generated content stems from the periphery towards the center (the actual code of the internet, as the author suggests), transforming it, in a similar fashion to *metabolism*, after being filtered through the various platforms and their interfaces.

After establishing the fundamental framework, Chapter 2 critiques the persistent textualism in digital media analysis, rightly arguing that it obscures the medium's inherent interactivity. According to the author, interactivity is the core feature that transforms digital information into experience – and experience, in turn, a commodity. This is the starting point for what the book terms the "experience economy." Online behaviors, from browsing to socializing, are negotiations of resources, with time being the most valuable. Interactivity transcends both enunciation and ludic production. In this context, the shift toward algorithmic communication doesn't necessarily imply a paradigm of absolutely calculable parameters and outcomes; rather, it signals a transformation in semiotic practices that we are only beginning to grasp.

Chapters 3 through 8 deepen this investigation into the economics of digital culture. As discussed in Chapter 3, copyright is portrayed as both a legal and semiotic concept that originates from a fixation on the text. The historical link between copyright and monetary authentication – comparable to the advent of paper money – reveals an early intersection of value, authenticity, and reproduction. This parallel is not coincidental but structurally significant, as both systems emerged alongside the standardization of language and the rise of national ideals.

The sensorimotor dimension of digital goods is touched upon in Chapter 4. Several aspects of digital media, such as special effects, play a significant role in the viewer's suspension of disbelief, an absolute necessity in the digital world. These effects reinforce the central tenet of experience consumption, where realism is not an ontological goal but a semiotic strategy. The experience economy, as the author repeatedly emphasizes, caters to the desire for effortless and immersive consumption.

The following two chapters apply this framework to case studies. Football, as explored in Chapter 5, emerges as a prime digital good: widely consumed online, intricately tied to betting cultures, and imbued with affective significance. Chapter

6 turns to sex and love in the digital age, highlighting how swipes, likes, and dating apps transform intimacy into a semi-commercial activity, further substantiating the book's central thesis.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal directly with money as a sign. Drawing on Rifkin's idea that money is "trust inscribed" (2000), the book presents cryptocurrency as the culmination of this logic. The author identifies three types of money signs – commodity, representative, and fiat – each with its own semiotic function. Baudrillard's notion of *semiocracy* is invoked (1976), suggesting that digital capitalism is built on "semiotically manipulated wealth." A particularly insightful point is made: it is not the scarcity of production but consumption that threatens the system – especially in an economy driven by attention and engagement.

The third part of the book focuses on digital identity. Chapter 9 examines the symbolic use of the Bulgarian flag and national emblems in online discourse, arguing that such signs generate recognition – a scarce and highly valued digital currency. This is followed by a discussion of the encyclopedic nature of the internet in Chapter 10, referencing Umberto Eco's idea of the encyclopedia (1984). The author contends that digital memory is no longer about storing facts but mastering retrieval. As search engines become smarter, our questions grow blunter, resulting in a diminished capacity for structured reasoning.

Chapter 11 provides a case study on the politicization of sex and gender in Bulgaria, showing how satire and pseudo-science can amplify ideologies. This leads into a discussion on memes and emojis – digital phenomena that serve as semiotic shortcuts, both dense and easily consumable. Chapter 12 revisits textualism and emphasizes the shift from author to reader, suggesting that meaning is now co-constructed in dynamic, hypertextual environments. If we accept that textualism is roughly divided into two main directions – *euphoric* and *methodological*, as the author suggests – then hypertext here refers to the domination of the former, where multimodal narrative experiences gradually substitute texts.

The final Chapter 13 looks at Facebook's rituals – likes, shares, comments – as participatory acts within the experience economy. Though Facebook may no longer be the dominant social media platform, the semiotic mechanisms it exemplifies remain relevant across digital media. McCracken (1988) explores four types of rituals (possession, exchange, grooming, and divestment), and perhaps not surprisingly, they find their digital analogues on social media platforms. Naturally, these modes of meaning transfer exist only because software engineers allow them to exist, showcasing that the semiosphere's center (the code), in turn, affects the flow from the periphery, resulting in a fully dynamic system.

A brief epilogue considers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated many of the phenomena the book analyzes. Physical distancing intensified our

dependence on digital communication, inadvertently validating the book's framework. Likewise, the rise of AI – though not its primary focus – figures throughout the text, suggesting that many of today's semiotic questions (real vs. fake, monetization vs. access, data as capital) were anticipated.

This proves to be the book's strongest asset. Despite being written before the popularization of Artificial Intelligence, it provides us with all the relevant framework to begin assessing its semiotic aspects. Most chapters are more or less directly linked to matters that AI brought to the surface. The issue of textuality is again brought into the spotlight in the case of LLMs, where the training of models is based on text, but the retrieval of information is also based on verbal prompts. Misuse of content on behalf of AI companies has already caused a significant stir in the field of intellectual property rights, where the lack of a comprehensive legislative model leaves a blurred image. Suspension of disbelief, aiming to engage users-consumers, does not lie solely on sensorimotor experience, but on Touring-successful algorithms that imitate human behavior and interaction. Developments of generative AI allow it to be used to a greater extent to produce spectacle content, with the first official music video already presented (Han 2024). Intimate relationships might go through a crisis, as signs of chatbot addiction are already being documented (Jerlyn et al. 2025). In the center of all this discussion lies the debate on the impact of AI on the economy. While an undeniably incredibly versatile system, it requires tremendous energy to operate. In the meantime, the possible threat of replacing human labor gave rise to discussions about Universal Basic Income and Universal Basic Compute (Bélisle-Pipon 2025). If search engines impacted our way of learning and memorizing knowledge, AI goes a step further, depriving us of valuable cognitive potential. Most importantly, the widely available ability to "fake" content will require reconsidering the digital identity.

Despite its many strengths, the book is not without limitations. The pace of technological change means that some examples – such as Facebook – already feel outdated, particularly in light of the rise of new social media platforms (like TikTok) and generative AI. The book does not deeply engage with emergent technologies such as Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, or Non-Fungible Tokens. Still, this absence is understandable since the book does not aim for exhaustive coverage but to equip readers with conceptual tools to approach these new developments.

The Digital Mind is a thought-provoking and significant contribution to digital semiotics. While not conclusive – and perhaps necessarily so – it lays a solid foundation for future research into digital media's semiotic and economic dimensions. Its greatest strength lies in its ability to anticipate and interpret the evolving interplay of sign, economy, and culture in the digital age. In this respect, it makes a bold and valuable statement in a field that, as the author suggests, is still in its early stages.

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AUTHOR

Konstantinos Michos is a Teaching Fellow specializing in Semiotics of Scientific Advertising, PhD School of Architecture, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.
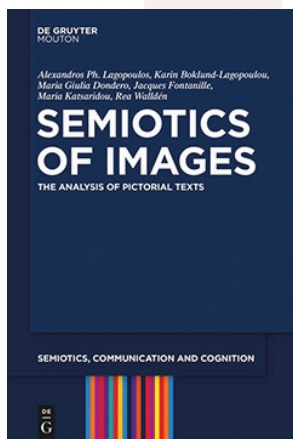
Semiotics of images. Effectiveness and promises of the structuralist paradigm

BY: **Tiziana Migliore**

Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos, Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou,
Maria Giulia Dondero, Jacques Fontanille, Maria Ilia Katsaridou,
and Rea Walldén

Semiotics of Images. The Analysis of Pictorial Texts

1. A defining moment in literature

The book under review marks a major advance in scientific research on images, in the sense that it is an essential point of both arrival and departure. Specifically, it marks a defining moment in the literature on the semiotics of images, as it reconceives and treasures the investigations conducted over the years while also providing groundbreaking insight into the challenges raised by new visual experiences.

The book is divided into three parts: I. *Theoretical issues*, II. *Interpreting the static image*, and III. *Interpreting the dynamic image*. In the first chapter, Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou discuss the approaches to the semiotics of images regarding the theoretical premises and the visual aspects of the objects of study. The same authors' second and third chapters concern the developments in the semiotics of the static (drawing, painting, mosaic, sculpture, etc.) and dynamic images (above all cinema and digital games). In addition to exploring the manifestations of temporality and narrativity in images, Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou discuss various theoretical models, such as those of Group μ on the visual signs, James Elkins on modern art, Umberto Eco on cinema as

langue, Christian Metz on cinema as *parole*, and revisit several in-depth analyses, such as that of Jacques Fontanille on the painter and composer Mikalojus K. Čiurlionis. In the following two chapters, Fontanille and Lagopoulos return to the iconic and plastic dimensions, focusing on the function of aspectualisation and the expression substance of the plastic signifier. As for the material turn of big visual data, Maria Giulia Dondero deals with enunciation, the metavisual, and gestures of inscription in the digital image. The second part of the volume is opened by Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, who examines isotopies in painting through specific examples. Fontanille then analyzes the seriality of the pictorial work, while Dondero directs attention to the semiotics of photography. In the third part of the book, centered, as we have said, on "dynamic image," we have four chapters on the semiotics of cinema. Rea Walldén is the author of chapters 10 and 12, which look at light, shadows, and revolution in avant-garde art, and Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957 respectively. Chapter 11, by Boklund-Lagopoulou, reveals the structure of the isotopies in the film *Arrival* (2016), while in Chapter 13, Maria Ilia Katsaridou delves into the semiotic analysis of animation films through the case study of *Ratatouille* (2007). In the closing chapter, as Katsaridou and Kosmas (Makis) Stergiou focus on digital games, Katsaridou again proposes a semiotic methodology for the script creation based on an interactive narrative.

2. Not Just a Statement

The volume's introduction, signed by all the authors, is impressive due to its clear position. Semioticians tend to mediate between their own perspectives and those of others; they are prone to incorporate and mix different theories and methodologies. This attitude certainly encourages dialogue with other schools and disciplines. Still, it runs the risk, by seeking analogies between fields of knowledge, of creating a soup of ideas, of overshadowing specific tools and concepts or, worse, of focusing on advances in other fields while neglecting to develop one's own. *Semiotics of Images* distances itself from this trend. Here, the authors convincingly assume that the Greimassian *modus operandi* is "the most appropriate approach to the vast universe of images from the point of view of their signification" (p. 7). By making this statement, they are saying something that is verifiable and that they verify. Indeed, their position is not a question of principle, of 'fundamentalist' loyalty to the system to which they belong. Rather, they present, examine, and compare several theories. The most relevant ones can be traced back to Halliday's social semiotics, to cognitive semiotics (Göran Sonesson, Warren Buckland), and Michel Foucault's epistemology, to the Visual Studies, with the "iconic turn" and the "pictorial turn" by Gottfried Boehm and W.J.T. Mitchell, all via Gillian Rose's viewpoint (pp. 1-6) and the Peircean visual semiotics by Tony Jappy (chapter 1, Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou). A strict comparison allows the authors to

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infer that "the French school of semiotics of the Saussurean–Hjelmslevian–Greimasian tradition is the strongest, best developed theory we have for the study of signification, including the signification of images" (p. 7).

One might wonder why. Some approaches are unsatisfactory when it comes to analysing and understanding pictorial texts and images, but it should be demonstrated that Greimas's approach is unique in this regard. Alongside the evidence for the effectiveness of this paradigm that the authors provide, we can highlight how the great force of the Structuralist tradition lies in the reciprocal presupposition between the "plane of expression" and the "plane of content". In Greimassian semiotics, any syntactic articulation implies a semantic articulation, and vice versa, as in Saussure's famous metaphor of the sheet of paper. A perceptive form of the natural world is, first and foremost, something that is already charged with cultural meaning, and it generates new signification every time it encounters a new gaze. The conception of semiosis as a coupling between forms (and substances) of expression and forms (and substances) of content, concerning the competence of the subject that experiences meaning, is specific to the Greimassian approach and makes images more intelligible.

3. Delimitations

In an attempt to circumscribe the field of the semiotics of images, Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou set the criteria for the systems to be included:

First, they should be among the systems that Hjelmslev calls connotative semiotics, and thus (spontaneous cultural) communication systems. Second, they should be "visual", that is, addressed to the eye. Third, they should be structured by geometry. Geometry is not only concerned with the well-known elementary forms, such as circles, squares, spheres, or pyramids, but in general "with questions of shape, size, relative position of figures, and the properties of space" (Geometry, *Wikipedia*). It thus covers any visual semiotic system, from so-called primitive art to realism to non-representational abstract art. From the slightest line to the most complex form, all forms are "geometry" (Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou, Chapter 1: 43-44).

So, they begin with what should not be taken into consideration. The two authors then follow this by indicating their focus on the major visual systems – both historical and contemporary - and the exclusion of "metalanguages such as diagrams and maps, nor functional objects such as toys and architecture" (ivi: 45). They also inform the reader of their preference for the term "visual systems" over that of "visual arts", which would be "Eurocentric", implying a hegemonic Western idea of aesthetics (ivi). On this second point, a commentary will prevent misunderstandings. We agree that the objects of the concerned field must be "visual". However, images always involve not a single channel, but sensomotricity. In the mid-1990s, French scholars proposed to move from a visual

semiotics to a *semiotics of the visible* (Fontanille 1995), by rejecting the dominance of the optic. Indeed, images consist of heterogeneous and mixed syntaxes, made of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. Whether analogue or digital, they are produced by the senses working together. The intervention of sensible and synaesthetic processes in images is quite normal. Again, it is not a matter of pure impression. According to the main Greimassian epistemological minimum, perception is overflowing with signification and cultural construction of the world (Greimas 1966), with "soma" and "sema" intertwined (Fontanille 2004; Marrone 2005). This belief stems from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and has never been abandoned.[1] In the structuralist paradigm, there is no semantics, there are no meanings, without people who are committed to them.

4. Systems of Value and Valence in Images

Technically, according to Saussure, semiotics is "the science that studies the life of signs within society" (*au sein de la vie sociale*, Saussure 1916, Engl. Transl.: 16). And the challenge posed by Hjelmslev's structural semantics was to study the "collective appreciations" through the study of the form of signs (Hjelmslev 1957). Meanings and significations, already in Saussure and Hjelmslev, later in Greimas, underlie values and valences. Greimas conceived semiotics as an "axiological adventure" or a 'search for values' by grasping how things matter to groups of people and to individuals and how they are conjoined with or dislocated from them.[2] The small scale of daily village life in *The Census at Bethlehem* (1566) by Pieter Bruegel, well highlighted by Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou in the book (pp. 201-207), leads us to clarify this issue. It conveys meaning directly via its plane of expression. In the lower right corner, the miniature of Joseph and Mary marks their adherence to a perspective and a world that is not that of the ruling class, but of the governed. The Holy couple stands here on the side of the subordinates. Exceptional dimensions, for the two characters or the painting, would have instead communicated an 'empathy' with the majestic and royalty. The nexus between meanings and values is essential: things do not signify in themselves, but in relationship with subjects to whom they belong and that struggle to defend or conquer them. As a new category for analyzing figurative and plastic language (Migliore and Colas Blaise 2022), size enables us to see how images articulate these connections. In Western cultures, physical dimensions are often correlated with political or moral positions, in a fairly fixed scheme: big indicates hierarchical superiority

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[1] The semiotics of cinema, which is widely practised in Italy, has maintained this foundation and made significant progress in research. About *Ratatouille* see for instance Marrone 2022.

[2] "Future generations have to elaborate discursive semiotics, and also the 'expression', which has not been studied semiotically yet. So far, discursive semiotics has dealt with the content plan. The next step will be the 'axiological adventure': the epistemic, ethic, and esthetic axiology required for the discovery of the systems that exist culturally and transculturally – in other words, we must give semiotics the ideological mission 'to give value to the world. Le fin mot de l'histoire est *l'aventure axiologique*'" (Greimas 1986:57, Engl. Transl.: 33).

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versus small, which indicates hierarchical inferiority. *The Census at Bethlehem* is the perfect candidate for reversing this stable formula. In Bruegel's painting, "God is in the details" (Flaubert). Small means magnificence, grandiosity, and extraordinary events, while big means ordinary life. In the system of values this new family belongs to, the smaller and more invisible you are, the greater you are.

Does this conception, for which the painter is responsible, affect, at a higher level, the posture of the researcher? Do the objects of our analyses challenge us and transform common ways of thinking and behaviours? Actually, the *Census at Bethlehem* leads the viewer to become aware of a different axiological scale that can be adopted in their form of life. Following in the footsteps of Paolo Fabbri, Gianfranco Marrone, and Isabella Pezzini, Italian semiologists attempt to discover values and passions in the texts, discourses, and practices they analyze. Still, they also know that there is a passion in researching. "Text and receiver are constituted in their mutual relation, in other words, the text is valorised by the practice of the receiver, but in return, it is the text which has the power to orient the receiver towards a certain practice" (Dondero, Chapter 9: 252).

Fontanille's analysis of seriality in the pictorial work (Chapter 8) is suitable for a re-reading in this sense. First of all, the way he approaches intertextuality differs from that of Floch with *Composition IV* (1911) by Kandinskij. In both cases, we deal with an identical genre, the series: a class of texts. However, Floch tracked down the variants and variations associated with *Composition IV* to explain the signification processes of this specific work of art. In Floch, the series is functional in explaining a single text. Conversely, Fontanille starts directly from the series of two artists, Mehdi Sahabi and Georges Laurent, and considers the "trans-sensible dimension" that one can grasp in the interstitial space-time of some groupings of paintings. The level of pertinence is not the same: the series is just a means for Floch, while it is the object, the goal of Fontanille's study. Yet, the interstitial space-time of the series in which Fontanille is interested cannot occur without the "cooperation" of the spectator, also in the Echian sense of the term (Eco 1979).

A degree of competence is required to find the similarities, grasp the orientations and the diachronic transformations, and fill the gaps. Then, when it comes to the internal rhythm and tension of the two series, the value of repetition does not exist in itself. The return of the identical can either comfort the viewer and lead her/him to engage with the series, or render it boring. Last but not least, the pictorial technique seems quite different. That of Georges Laurent appears flatter, while that of Mehdi Sahabi, aptly titled *Graffiti*, shows thicker layers and actantial strata, between the poles of ostension and concealment. Together with the cognitive reactions that can be useful when reconstituting the series, the expressive substances produce aesthesic and aesthetic effects on the receiver, likely inviting her/him to move closer and touch the paintings. A second volume of *Semiotics of Images* could cover the theme of the artistic strategies for attractiveness. Images attain a mode of existence realised only in cooperation with the analyst/interpreter.

5. Methodological outcomes

The three-fold ambition of the book, "first, faithfully applying the foundations of Greimasian theory, second, extending it in new theoretical directions, and third, expanding and adapting it to new fields of investigation" (Introduction: 9), is largely fulfilled, grounding the theory at a methodological level. In its own way, every contribution improves the skills of academics in image analysis. One of its main achievements is the thesis stating that forms result from inscriptions of forces (Dondero, Chapter 6). René Thom, who investigated the mimicry dynamics between predator and prey in the animal kingdom, insisted that there are hidden forces in forms (Thom 1988). Also highly valid are the identification of isotopies (Boklund-Lagopoulou, Chapter 7) and the icono-plastic rhetoric - the tension between iconic and plastic language (Fontanille, Chapter 4).

However, a semi-symbolic homologation should complete the analysis in the case of the individual texts. This is especially the case if the aim is to understand them better and to avoid that semiotics "splits into two different approaches, one concerning depiction and connotation, and the other concerning syntax" (Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou, Chapter 1). In fact, as Jean-Marie Floch masterfully demonstrated in his study of Kandinsky's *Composition IV* (Floch 1985), the plastic contrasts manifest themselves only in the syntax of the visible, and it is through the visual syntax that semantic, thematic, and narrative trajectories can emerge. To quote Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou, "depiction, connotation and syntax are all factors of the same semiotic system. A semiotic theory of the image must be one and unified" (Chapter 1: 33). Besides, Greimas (1984) not only suggested a series of tools and categories to describe the figurative and plastic dimensions, but indicated a procedure, a path of activities (Migliore 2021) from the identification of an ideal or a concrete frame that separates what is inside and what is outside the image, to the correct semi-symbolic correlation. This final act can never be the application of a mechanical formula, but it requires reasoning on the correspondence between surface manifestations and depth values. Clearly, as the significance of images is culturally determined, "the analyst must be well acquainted with the semiotic universe of the culture in which it was produced" (Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou, Chapter 2: 64).

6. Image and language: Opposed "de iure", United "de facto"

Finally, one of the most recurrent problems discussed in the book is the relationship between natural language and images. This issue deserves separate consideration. By revolving around the conceptions of other scholars, the authors of *Semiotics of Images* admit that "the linguistic model cannot be transferred tale quale to visual analysis, i.e.,

to their search for a visual grammar focused on major compositional structures" (Lagopoulos and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, Chapter 1: 28). They reveal a thorough knowledge of the latest theories on the subject, especially on those of Mitchell and Boehm, for whom the new status of the image replaces the role of language (Introduction: 5). But once again, they take a clear stance on the topic and they do not hesitate to emphasize the consequences of the "exaggerated views of an assumed independence of images" (*ibidem*). The rendering extreme of the "iconic turn", as an "iconic intelligence, leading to a pure iconic meaning" (Boehm 2009:106), and the opposition between "text" and "image" based on the strict and old definition of the text as a "linguistic expression" (Mitchell 1994:83), risk "the rejection of any linguistic, more specifically textual, background for the interpretation of images and any linguistic – and by extension, semiotic – foundation for the theory of images" (*Semiotics of Images*, Introduction: 5).

Indeed, the visual system has its own autonomy of organisation and cannot be overwhelmed by the verbal system. Still, the two often function together in the production or consumption of communication. An image is usually combined with natural language to express meanings drawn from a common cultural source. Relations between images and written language are more frequent than one might think: in painting and sculpture, on ancient and contemporary urban walls, in any form of advertising, and in social networks. From antiquity to the nineteenth century, the visual tradition of European art is full of "verbo-visual" processes. The memorable research by Meyer Schapiro, 'Words, Script, and Pictures', shows how and to what extent these intersections are a historical reality. And, as the authors point out, if in abstract art the presence of language is diminished, "there is a factor structurally integrating the image within a common universe with language, namely semantics. The semantic micro-universe of images is […] integrated within the culture to which it belongs, of which language is also a part" (*Semiotics of Images*, Introduction: 7).

In the challenge of building a general theory of the image, we need to estimate the specific visual ways of signifying without artificially isolating what is verbal and what is picture. Emblematically, writing, whether calligraphic or typographic, presents itself as a mixed system. The question of whether it is visual or verbal is misplaced.

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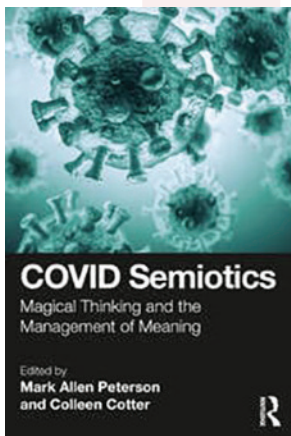
AUTHOR

Tiziana Migliore is Associate Professor of Semiotics, Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities, International Studies, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Italy.

Magical thinking and discursive contagion during the COVID-19 pandemic

BY: **Sebastián Moreno**

Mark Allen Peterson and Colleen Cotter

**COVID Semiotics:
Magical Thinking and the Management of Meaning**

New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2024, 188 pp. € 36.54
(pbk, ISBN 9781032462424), € 136.00 (hbk, ISBN 9781032462417)

T he COVID-19 pandemic was, as Eric Landowski (2021:87) accurately described it, a "total crisis of sense," meaning "a general upheaval in knowledge, beliefs, expectations, and value systems." In response to this crisis of sense, from the early months of 2020, scholars from various disciplines concerned with discourse, language, meaning, and social practice began studying the many phenomena linked to the (at the time unfolding) health emergency. These studies demonstrate that, besides being a biological and natural event, the COVID-19 pandemic was above all a sociocultural phenomenon, constructed in and through discourse and on different media supports and platforms.

The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to societies prompted different ways to manage the resulting crisis of sense. As Landowski (2021:89) claimed, "even if, biologically, everyone is dealing with the same microorganism, the way it challenges us, how we experience and respond to it, varies enormously". In a similar line of thought, but more than 20 years earlier, Charles E. Rosenberg (1989:2) wrote in a 1989 paper on epidemics that "just as a playwright chooses a theme and manages plot development, so a particular society constructs its characteristic response to an epidemic.

The book COVID Semiotics: *Magical Thinking and the Management of Meaning*, published by Routledge in 2024, was edited

by Mark Allen Peterson, Professor of Anthropology and Global and Intercultural Studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, US, and Colleen Cotter, Professor of Media Linguistics at Queen Mary University of London, UK. The book is a representative example of the academic work produced since the early months of 2020 that seeks to understand and unveil the processes of sense and meaning-making during the pandemic years. In fact, given the book's broad and somewhat ambiguous title – *COVID Semiotics* –, its subtitle helps indicate its thematic focus and intended readership.

The book comprises an introduction, six analytical chapters, and a conclusion. Its twelve authors are researchers and scholars in linguistics, language studies, and anthropology, based in or affiliated to UK or US institutions. Each chapter centers on a specific case study and addresses some form of magical thinking, which editors define as a sociolinguistic phenomenon consisting of "heterodox or alternative causal explanations that are used instead of orthodox socially sanctioned authoritative rational explanations" (p. 171). Moreover, they claim that magical thinking "allows people to explain the world in ways we believe it should be, or must be, based on our social and culturally shaped subjectivities rather than on rigorous inferences from experimentation and aggregated empirical evidence" (p. 171).

In the Introduction, titled "COVID-19, Semiotics, and Magical Thinking", editors Mark Allen Peterson and Colleen Cotter introduce some of the book's key concepts, such as *semiotics, pandemic, magical thinking,* and *contagion.* These are retaken in a helpful glossary, which is included at the end of the book and aids in understanding some of the concepts shared across the different chapters. Peterson and Cotter indicate that the book focuses on *magical thinking* and hence is "a study of how people create meaning out of science in their everyday lives" (p. 3). Moreover, they explain that the tools that authors use "for exploring, interpreting, and understanding these phenomena are derived from linguistics, pragmatics, and semiotics more generally" (p. 3).

Curiously, for a book called *COVID Semiotics*, the introduction's section on semiotics does not cite or mention a single theoretical reference. The editors define semiotics as "the scientific study of how people communicate through *signs,* things that stand for something else to someone in some context" (p. 3). However, key figures in the field are noticeably absent: C. S. Peirce is mentioned only once, and the work of Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge on images is mentioned in one of the chapters. There are no signs of R. Barthes, U. Eco, A. J. Greimas, or J. Lotman, let alone of more recent semioticians, many of whom have studied the semiotics of the pandemic. A single reference to Ferdinand de Saussure was found upon a detailed search.

Nor are special issues of semiotics journals cited, such as *Punctum* 7(1), "Semiotics of contagion: Models and media in a synergistic epidemic" (edited by Gary Genosco, 2021); *Degrés* 182-183, "Crise sanitaire et marqueurs sémiotiques. La variation" (edited by André Helbo, 2020), or the dossier "La pandémie: hassard ou signification?" (edited by Eric Landowski, in 2020, and included in the first issue of *Acta Semiotica*).

This raises questions about the editors' understanding of "COVID Semiotics", the name they chose for the book's title. Perhaps "magical thinking" and "contagion" would have been more helpful choices for the title to guide readers on the book's content and approach. While the studies included do address sense and meaning-making, and are therefore of interest to semioticians, they are not approached from the discipline we could call *Semiotics*, with a capital S, with its specific concepts, theories, models, and analytical instruments, but rather from other language-based approaches to discourse, sense, and meaning. This reflects the existing challenges of delineating what Semiotics consists of and does as a specific discipline, even if it is clear what the semiotic dimension of social phenomena is.

Despite this issue, the six chapters are insightful, well-written, and well-documented contributions to understanding the sense and meaning-making dynamics and practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on magical thinking and discursive contagion. As the editors write in the introduction, "the case studies described in this book offer concrete descriptions and analyses through which to think about these issues, and to consider the place of science, magic, and meaning in modern life" (p. 13). They conceive magical thinking as "a semiotic and sociopragmatic operation, which involves the deliberate, although perhaps not fully intentional, effort to maintain ideologies that obscure or erase orthodox or accepted notions of facts- on- the- ground while presenting participants in the discourse with a seductive illusion of safety and control, an inhabitable stance from which to view a pandemic or other dangerous circumstances with relative equanimity" (p. 9).

In Chapter 1, titled "'Culling the Herd': Discourses of COVID-19 Denial among the Irish at Home and Abroad", linguistic anthropologist E. Moore Quinn presents fieldwork conducted in Massachusetts, USA, and Irish towns. Through everyday conversations with Irish and Irish American men in a variety of settings, Quinn explores parallels between their views about the pandemic and the denialist rhetoric of Donald Trump, expressed in statements such as that it would "disappear like a miracle" and would eventually "go away". Quinn concludes that "the language of COVID-19 hesitancy, denial, and refusal was echoed and publicly reiterated" (p. 33).

Chapter 2, "'Crown Jesus, Not the Virus': COVID-19 Denial, Catholic Conspiracist Thinking, and Rightwing Nationalist Populism in Poland", written by Dominika Baran, Associate Professor of English and Linguistics at Duke University, examines conspiracy discourse and magical thinking around COVID-19 in Poland, with a focus on the Catholic Church and ultraconservatives within it. Baran demonstrates that this type of conspiracist narratives aligns with Polish right-wing politics and integrates "ideas from globally circulating COVID-denying and anti-vaccine discourses […], as well as other seemingly unrelated ultraconservative discourses including anti- genderism and anti-ecologism" (p. 41). Her departure point is the YouTube series created by ultraconservative Salesian priest Reverend Dominik Chmielewski, where the slogan "Crown Jesus, not the virus" used in the chapter's title originates. Baran

concludes that "the COVID-19 pandemic presented a new opportunity for Poland's Catholic Church to position itself as the defender of the Polish nation, and to reinvigorate nationalist sentiments around Polish identity as inherently Catholic" (p. 59).

In Chapter 3, "COVID-19 and the Middle East: Social Media Analysis", Camelia Suleiman, Ayman Mohamed, and Amr Madi present a comparative analysis of discourse related to the pandemic in three Facebook groups from Egypt, Jordan, and East Jerusalem. Their study demonstrates that "Facebook content reflects users' social and political imaginaries, reflecting contextual realities of their lived experience under different political regimes" (p. 62). Moreover, they conclude that "the different localities and political cultures allow for variations in how the memes express public discourse of COVID-19" (p. 84).

Chapter 4, "The Use of Memes in Communication about COVID-19 in a Chinese Online Community", by Songyan Du and Adrian Yip, draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar to study meme creation and circulation on Zhihu, a Chinese platform, which "facilitates knowledge sharing by encouraging anyone, including subject matter experts, to provide high-quality answers to user- generated questions" (p. 91). The authors focus on the sense-making dynamics of entextualization and resemiotization on the platform and propose a model for decoding how visual and textual resources are mobilized by Chinese "netizens" in meme production and reproduction. They conclude that "meme producers have the social power to legitimately and competently reuse and recycle semiotic resources in their creative work" (p. 104).

In Chapter 5, "My Body My Choice: Magical Thinking and Discourses of Bodily Autonomy in Anti-Mask Rhetoric", Louis Strange – Lecturer in Sociolinguistics in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Glasgow – draws on the concept of discursive grafting to study how anti-mask rhetorics appropriate pro-choice slogans and discourse. Strange claims that "anti-mask advocates appropriate the bodily autonomy discourse" (p. 110) and examines how the slogan "My Body My Choice", closely identified with pro-choice and abortion rights campaigners, was used by the anti-mask political right to produce sense. This supposes a contradiction, considering that they often oppose abortion rights. In her analysis, Strange draws on the distinction between progressive and reactionary strains of neoliberalism to contextualize and explain this discursive move.

In chapter 6, "Social Signage: Collective Responsibility in Public Retail Space", Colleen Cotter and Matilda Vokes study social signage practices during the pandemic in a selection of shops from East London to demonstrate "how commerce and public-health messaging intertwined during the pandemic and affected everyday actions in one corner of the UK" (p. 126). Their comparative study shows different strategies sustaining social signage, making of this semiotic practice "a point of comparison to understand how action, reaction, solidarity, and some 'magical thinking' about what is safe […] can be differently realized and mean different things across different contexts" (p. 126). As the authors demonstrate, these practices evidence the interplay between "a

consumer-capitalist-business economic frame" and that of the pandemic (p. 154), and hence reflect varying cultural logics and degrees of magical thinking about risk.

The book concludes with a chapter titled "Semiotics in the Classroom and Beyond", co-authored by editor Mark Allen Peterson and Judith M. S. Pine. In the chapter, the authors share and reflect on some anecdotes related to mask-wearing in classrooms and other spaces, invitations to get vaccinated, and the use of signs in online media. Drawing on these examples, they argue that "semiotics offers a powerful set of tools that can be used to analyze one's own life and situation", and that it can "be employed to better understand social and cultural change" (p. 162). Peterson and Pine claim that magical thinking can be harmful and toxic and argue that "it becomes vital that we reflect carefully on what happens to meanings and contexts in conditions of crisis" (p. 166). This evidences their critical stance towards their object of study: these structures can be recognized, "disrupted and disassembled, aided by a clear-eyed, theoretically informed, semiotic gaze making space for hope and possibility" (p. 166).

To sum up, COVID Semiotics: *Magical Thinking and the Management of Meaning* is a valuable and timely contribution, particularly thanks to its general approach to sense and meaning-making, and most notably to the diversity of case studies it presents. These are informative and rich empirical materials for scholars interested in the dynamics of sense and discourse of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, this reviewer wishes the book had been available when working on his semiotic study of the pandemic (Moreno, 2024), as its insights would have been highly valuable and relevant to that research. While the book might interest linguists, discourse analysts, and anthropologists, scholars trained in Semiotics, understood as a discipline with well-established theoretical foundations, concepts, and analytical instruments, may find its scope and grounds somewhat limited.

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AUTHOR

Sebastián Moreno is Associate Professor in Culture and Society at the Department of International Studies of the Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Universidad ORT Uruguay.