

Humour and the Media

Definitions, Genres and Cultures

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This English translation has not been published in printed form/Cette traduction anglaise n'a pas été publiée sous forme imprimée.

- 1 In order to discuss humour in the media, the field has to be restricted to intentionally humorous output. This immediately excludes, as pointed out by Patrick Charaudeau and Anne-Marie Houdebine, the more general question of laughter and the laughable. Obviously, the recipient may not recognise the humorous intention (misappreciation), or not grasp it (incomprehension), or even reject it (normative reduction), for reasons we will discuss below. A further point is that humorous communication is rarely homogeneously or continuously humorous: barring a few exceptions, conversations that comprise nothing but an exchange of jokes, witticisms or mocking rejoinders are rare indeed outside the theatre or cabaret.
- 2 The subject of discussion here, therefore, is communication aimed at one or more recipients that tends, through a complex semiotic construction in that it often plays on several substances (words, icons, sound effects), to bring about a local "perlocutory" effect of connivance based on the frequently off-beat characteristics of the enunciation and what is being enunciated. The aim of connivance necessarily prevails over any hostile or aggressive intention, because it is assumed that the author or speaker cannot afford to offend the reader or to undermine his or her own beliefs and deep-rooted values. Here, the target, the victim and the recipient are, by definition, different. We are referring here to, as Patrick Charaudeau puts it, humorous enunciation as "a certain way of saying things, in different situations, for the strategic purpose of making an accomplice of the listener". An act of humour, like any speech act, is the result of the interplay that becomes established between the partners in the communication

situation and the protagonists in the enunciation situation. Therefore, in order to analyse an act involving humour, we need to “describe the ‘enunciation situation’ in which it occurs, the ‘theme’ that it addresses, the ‘language processes’ that bring it into effect and the ‘effects’ it can produce on the audience”.

- 3 This does not mean that humour is a deliberate “speech act” in the strict sense (Austin, 1970; Searle, 1977: 27-45; Chabrol, Bromberg, 1999), because the point may well be to, for example, inform, evaluate, identify, persuade or regulate on a humorous note. The illocutory purpose of the act may therefore vary, while the humorous dimension draws its force upwards (sarcastic strategy) or downwards (irony). An enunciation of this type can even interfere with the illocutory purpose to the point of overwhelming it entirely. This is especially evident in gratuitous humour that manipulates rules of language and rational points of view about the world in order to produce a (perlocutory) effect of jokey connivance, as already noted by Sigmund Freud (1905) in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, which brings it close to a sense of omnipotence linked to narcissism and a sense of the invulnerability of the self. The author-locutor in this instance proposes a scenario for action that the listener can share and make “real” by co-enunciating and playing it out in the ritual of a language game. Some forms of self-mockery or black humour, for example when the author uses his own work or group or message as a target, may be cited in this context (see *Les stratégies humoristiques dans le discours publicitaire* [Humour as strategy in advertising discourse] by Jean-Claude Soulages and *Dessins de presse* [Press Cartoons] by Anne-Marie Houdebine and Mae Pozas).
- 4 The difference between an act of humour and John L. Austin’s “speech act” would seem to be the predominance of the “perlocutory” effect aimed for, which is the mental state of connivance - often linked to affects and emotions - that the humorist seeks to produce in others. It differs from the illocutionary act performed by speaking (informing, assessing, ordering, etc.) and from the phrastic locutionary act performed by producing an utterance with a given linguistic, syntactic and lexical structure. As Patrick Charaudeau suggests, an “act of humour, as an act of enunciation, brings in three protagonists: the “locutor”, the recipient” and the “target”, and will depend on the roles taken up by each of these in the communication situation. Analyses are thus put forward here of the production of supposedly “legitimate” locutors in the media, including cartoons about September 11th (Anne-Marie Houdebine, Mae Pozas), opinion pieces about social issues or politics (Manuel Fernandez, Maria Dolorès Vivero Garcia), television programmes that provocatively challenge the words and deeds of politicians and artists (Guy Lochard), or advertising texts that attempt to capture the sympathy of potential clients/readers with messages that often have nothing to do with the qualities of a product but aim first and foremost to promote the brand (Jean-Claude Soulages, Montserrat López Díaz). All these are distinct communication situations in which acts of humour appear without necessarily being the purpose of these forms of communication, come under media genres or sub-genres governed by explicitly different contracts, and which, furthermore, follow allegedly “cultural” patterns of variation of which certain points of contrast between the French and Spanish corpuses analysed in this issue are a good illustration¹.
- 5 With press cartoons, the contract requires the cartoonist to deliver information and fictional iconographic entertainment about topics in the news. With opinion pieces, the contract requires a stance reflecting the commentator’s personal take on reality.

Television anchors and their teams have a contract whereby they engage in entertaining and informative polemical conversations where they intermingle the public and private spheres of their guests. As for advertisers, they have to capture first the attention, then the sympathy, of potential customers by establishing a sense of direct complicity with the brand they represent in order to promote a product that features merely in passing. But all of these contracts operate on a common basis of off-beat enunciation whenever an act of humour is actualised.

- 6 This off-beat humour seems to trigger a suspension of Grice's conversational maxims of relevance, informativeness, sincerity and absence of ambiguity. This strongly challenges the usual claims to veracity in what is said and even, initially, in the saying of it (Vernant, 1997 61 -85), because the act of humour itself is capable of multiplying semantic ambiguities and equivocal references and, by bringing together world views and experience that are not really comparable, of establishing a (fallacious) sense of coherence between dimensions or isotopies that would normally be considered too distant to support immediate comparisons without violating the principle of relevance, let alone of informativeness. Therefore, we will refer to descriptive processes involving "droll, absurd or peculiar and paradoxical incoherence", as defined by Patrick Charaudeau (see *Des catégories pour l'humour?* [Categorising humour?]).
- 7 Concerning sincerity, it is obviously not easy to judge up to what point an author-locutor really agrees with what is said by the author-characters or enunciators to whom he lends his voice. Any enunciation proffered on a jocular note will suspend ordinary responsibility. When an enunciator is "being funny", he is not expected to take upon himself any implicit serious interpretation of what is enunciated. Nevertheless, could the scepticism, the aggressiveness, the challenge to logical or social norms, the critical questioning of traditions and conformism through characters and values that embody them, not be understood as the particular form of hidden content analysed by Oswald Ducrot (1972 1 32)? Interpretations would then be derived from a process of reasoning on the following lines: "If x has chosen to say Y (on a humorous note), then what x really (seriously) thinks is z". The laws of discourse can also be referred to: "understatement" to interpret an "ironic" enunciative process where it assumed that the speaker means a lot more than s/he has said, or "hyperbole" to refer to the sarcastic process where more is said than what is meant.
- 8 Take for example the cartoon by Plantu cited by Anne-Marie Houdebine, which shows an American Marine shouting at Osama bin Laden through a megaphone: (1) "Osama! Come out of there or I'll send the "Charles de Gaulle!" "Oh no! Not the "Charles de Gaulle!" cries Osama bin Laden in reply. Of course it might be considered that Plantu, the author-locutor, wanted to bring out the moral of the story on an ironic note: (2) "A weapon like that is hardly likely to scare the enemy and help the Americans fight him!", which produces a derisive effect. But then, contextual conditions (but which?) would be needed to explain what Plantu could not allow himself to do (2), i.e. make a judgement that is not humorous at all and can only be linked symbolically and at a distance with the situation devised in the iconic vignette. If this were indeed the case, then humorous communication could only be a matter of implicit enunciation, hidden meanings - or at least insinuation - made necessary by social censure in its different forms. To be plausible, for certain historical situations involving objects of certain types and the specific form of cartoons, satirical pamphlets, etc., this hypothesis cannot be applied as a general rule to contemporary production in the western societies we are

concerned with here. A cartoon such as this can obviously give rise to an “associated idea” such as (2), but also to others, for example: (2'): “Sending such pathetic weaponry to the Americans would actually be a good thing” (opponent of the Iraq war), or (2''): “Well, yes, that’s the only kind of weaponry France is capable of deploying these days” (self-derisive pessimist), or again (self-derisive optimist): (2''') “With weaponry like that, it’s a good thing France can’t play that kind of game any more!”

- 9 We would say, then, that although it is not infinite or entirely open, the list of implicit ideas that could be associated with a humorous message is usually long and will vary with the attitudes, knowledge, involvement and motivations of the recipients (Anne-Marie Houdebine). To summarise, as we will see from the survey described in this issue (Claude Chabrol, Vrignaud), it is possible to discern inter-topic and even intra-topic variability in discursive strategies of this kind. Humorous enunciation does not mask a particular implicit meaning in an utterance which, taken literally, is “unfortunate” but funny. Rather, it gives rise to various impressions of “poetic” meanings or effects (Sperber, Wilson, 1989: 326-384). More specifically, we would say, with these authors, that an act of humour, like a metaphorical or ironic utterance, consists of saying, and getting across, much more than the equivalent semantically minimal synthetic utterance: (2) for example. We would say of this kind of cartoon that it is “strongly implicit and that, as always, an indirect means of expression must be compensated by supplementary contextual effects” (*ibid.*: 352). We would add that, in expressing a meaning by means of this cartoon, “the author encourages (the reader) to look for supplementary contextual effects and to assume that some of these effects were intentional on the part of the locutor. The weaker the implications, the wider the range of possible conclusions will be, and the more responsibility the recipient will bear by adopting them as his own” (*ibid.*: 352-353).
- 10 What sort of effects might Plantu have wanted to get across? He chose a descriptive process based on incoherence, playing partly on the absurd (threatening an enemy in terrestrial hand-to-hand combat with an aircraft carrier) and partly on paradox (trying to scare the enemy with a non-functional warship), and using a sarcastic enunciative process (symbolising the absurdity of the true story of the warship with no place to go with an imaginary situation which is even more absurd). We will suppose that what he wanted to communicate implicitly was precisely the sense of extreme absurdity, and therefore of derision, that the pathetic spectacle of the French navy’s flagship in such dire straits might inspire in French people, but especially in Americans. But because it is formulated in a humorous way, this sense of absurdity cannot be attributed to the author because, as with irony, “the locutor’s thinking interpreted by the enunciation (text or cartoon) is itself an interpretation by somebody else (or by the locutor in the past). [...] [But] an enunciation used as an interpretation of a third party’s thoughts is always, and first of all, an interpretation of one’s understanding of the thoughts of that third party” (*ibid.*). This could be called “echoed” or even “polyphonic” enunciation. In his enunciation, Plantu has in effect echoed the sense of absurdity and derision that he assumes is present in many of his readers, but there is no way of knowing whether he really senses that absurdity himself.
- 11 Of course he does not signify this sense of absurdity in a literal way; he actualises it by representing it in a funny little story which, like many of his cartoons, is dominated by humorous incoherence. The incongruity of the storyline is emphasised by the lightly drawn lines that sketch out almost childlike characters. The effect is to create a

distance from drama or shame and induce light-hearted self-derision that in turn suggests responses on the lines of: “as we’re faced with this sort of absurdity, which is not really all that serious, better to laugh it off here than seriously cry about it everywhere else”, in which some may discern a call to order to journalists and politicians who focus too heavily on anything that might suggest “the current decline of France”.

- 12 This kind of exegesis – because humorous communication forces its recipients into endless and always inconclusive interpretations² – can often be repeated, as long as the “pathemic” quality of the connivance aimed at with the recipient is underlined: this may be euphoric or “tender”, as suggested by Anne-Marie Houdebine and Mae Pozas, or disphoric or “black”, in other words tending towards the tragic, as in Willem, for example, or El Roto (see the analysis of “In Gas we trust” in « *Dessins de presse*). No doubt there are correlations to be drawn between types of connivance and pathemic states, processes and themes. The analyses of the different media genres in this issue suggest hypotheses that need confirmation. The playful type of connivance in the Spanish advert for AUDI, which compares the exciting life of the four wheels of a car to the (implicitly) more banal life of the four wheels of a supermarket caddy, is supported by an ironic enunciative process and incoherence of the incongruous type to address a theme where attitudes are not an issue. The pathemic state it tends to induce is one of simple euphoria. The cynical connivance in the French advert for ERAM, which shows a naked man wearing women’s shoes with a provocative slogan (“No female body was exploited to produce this advert”) is supported by a sarcastic process and paradoxical incoherence to address an ideologically charged feminist theme where attitude is very much an issue. This tends to induce a more disphoric pathemic state, or at least a forced laugh. The advert for an LG vacuum cleaner, showing a muscular naked man with an oiled, athletic body brandishing a pot like a trophy, with the legend: “No, Jonathan, that is not a coffee pot, it’s the dust collector for our bagless vacuum cleaner”, produces a critical type of connivance. The enunciative process is sarcastic and the incoherence based on absurdity, because there are already various relationships, for example between the shape of a dust collector and a cup, while the theme of men’s domestic uselessness is loaded with ambiguities. This advert tends to induce a pathemic state of mixed euphoria, associated with the disqualification of modern men of good will who get completely lost in a female area of competence, i.e., house-cleaning. Without going into more detail, we put forward several hypotheses that are analysed in depth by Claude Chabrol and Pierre Vrignaud:

- the positive correlation (C.+) between a playful aim and a thematic object where pro/anti attitudes are not really an issue and, *a contrario*, the highly charged nature, from the point of view of attitude, of the thematic objects used to serve the other two aims. The “critical” aim may be considered to support objects where attitudes conform to emerging contemporary norms and values and to disqualify earlier, obsolescent norms and values, while the “cynical” aim attacks these;
 - (C.+), again, between playful connivance, ironic processes and incongruity, while the “critical” and “cynical” aims tend to prefer, though not systematically, the “sarcastic” process, and in any case with incongruous or paradoxical forms of incoherence that are more effective in inducing the desired effects.
- 13 In any case, acts of humour depend for their ultimate effects and interpretations on the particular media contracts and means that bring them into play. What we will now

examine is the influence of genre-linked constraints and the way they are brought into cultural inter-discourse, because these provide the context for all the acts of humour investigated.

Media genres and cultural inter-discourse

- 14 The press and audiovisual media differ substantially from the point of view of genres and use of humour. Before making any generalisations, we must obviously make a careful description of this diversity, and all the more so in order to discern the influence of any “cultural” stamp. This explains the attention given to the detailed analysis of the corpus of French and Spanish opinion pieces by Maria Dolorès Vivero Garcia, Manuel Fernandez, of French and Spanish cartoons about September 11th by Anne-Marie Houdebine, Mae Pozas, of French and Spanish advertising messages that appear to abandon product arguments in favour of inserting a brand into the social-discursive imagination, where humour is of the essence (Jean Claude Soulages, Montserrat López Díaz) and, finally, of television programmes that challenge politicians both as personalities and in their personality, using highly multivalent means as regards contracts, serious and non-serious enunciation and informative and entertainment goals (Guy Lochard). The diversity is considerable, but several trends can be discerned nevertheless.
- 15 The most important, since it has considerable implications from the point of view of communication and society, is the sense, already clearly identified by numerous authors, of a tendency towards “genre confusion and subversion of pre-established contracts”. Guy Lochard’s contribution offers a highly relevant illustration in the treatment of politicians in television. According to Guy Lochard, new programmes like *Vivement dimanche* [Roll on Sunday], *Tout le monde en parle* (France 2) [Everyone’s talking], *On aura tout vu* [Whatever next] (France 3) or *Le Vrai Journal* (Canal +) [The Real News] “bring a fundamental ambiguity to the situations established between politicians and their television hosts, as well as to the aims pursued”. In these programmes, unlike earlier satirical programmes like *Le Bébête show* and *Les Guignols de l’info*, politicians become the target of humorous commentaries and questions that mix up the private and public spheres and create an open-ended, interactional interplay in which the multiform and polylogal anchor alternates serious questions with provocative or mocking repartee and sarcastic rejoinders bordering on insult, often without ever clearly stabilising one dimension rather than another. A second and less spectacular trend is also emerging, in which self-derision becomes the rule and reaches not only its targets but also its authors. This is the case with advertisers, as JeanClaude Soulages finds, “whose self-derisiveness, while seeming to disqualify locutor-advertisers as not to be taken seriously - in part because they make no bones about their poor arguments - in fact establishes a relationship of potential connivance with recipients who might have the same opinion about advertising communication as not to be taken seriously, and as an area where oblique challenges can be levelled at values and taboos that weigh too heavily on our society”. This tendency emerges quite clearly in some of the programmes analysed by Guy Lochard (*Vivement Dimanche*) and in the contributions from Manuel Fernandez and Maria Dolorès Vivero Garcia, who note it among columnists and commentators, although it is far more evident in Spain: “While the target in France is always construed as an other, an adversary stigmatised through

traits of identity, targets in Spain can be embodied by a representation of the journalist himself. Self-directed sarcasm seems to be a Spanish phenomenon". Self-derision is also present, as shown in the corpus of cartoons studied by Anne-Marie Houdebine and Mae Pozas, and in their analysis of the El Roto's "black" vignette, "In Gas, we trust", which is probably not only a denunciation of American power but also, possibly, of everyone, ourselves included, for whom oil has taken the place of God.

- 16 On this subject, should we follow Sigmund Freud (1929) by concluding as to the "discontents of civilisation", and generalise by attributing a single predominant trend in all of the societal phenomena targeted by humour? This would point to a crisis reaching the very foundations of the sense of identity of citizens and modern subjects in both private and public spheres, a crisis affecting social ties, gender role systems, political and economic institutions and their representatives and the sense of cultural belonging (West/East, West Asia/East Asia, North/South). Such a generalisation would no doubt be too simplistic, and many of the analyses in this issue suggest the need for caution and respect for the complexity and diversity of media phenomena involving humour. What is clear from the outset is the range of variation within the same media genre, in France as in Spain, and naturally the differences, as well as the similarities, between two countries that are socio-economically and perhaps even politically close. These differences suggest temporalities and inter-discourses that may be dissimilar, such as the legacy of irony *à la française* versus the Hispanic sarcasm pointed out by several authors. Nevertheless, general conclusions on cultural lines, which would tend to establish "Frenchness" and "Spanishness" as a socio-historically fundamental, should be considered with the utmost reserve³. In our view, the comparisons presented here tend, instead, to broaden the media corpus that provides the material for discussion on humour in the media; the reasons for limiting the comparison to two countries are purely a matter of contingency, to be overcome through studies of other press material from around the world.

Conclusion

- 17 These so-called intra- and inter-cultural variations plead in any case in favour of much more elaborate models to bring out the plurality of linguistic forms, of which plays on words and images are just one instance (see *L'humour en publicité: jeu, provocation et accusation* [Humour in advertising: game-playing, provocation and accusation] by Montserrat López Díaz), as well as the semiotic aspects underlined by all the contributors, and thus bring out the existence of sub-genres within each media genre. These could correspond to distinct temporalities and forms of inter-discourse, which, according to circumstances, develop to a varying extent and are variously appraised in the different press contexts. Finally, these questions suggest the need to fully appraise not only the effects aimed at but also the effects produced. The contribution from Claude Chabrol and Pierre Vrignaud tends to provide pointers in this direction from a quasi-experimental "survey" on the effects produced at the receiving end by French and Spanish adverts. This survey on a particular genre tends to confirm the hypotheses made by most of the contributors: using acts of humour opens up a very broad area for interpretations of discursive sequences at every level. This is illustrated in the multiple meanings of an enunciation, the attribution of opposite, positive or negative intentions to the same enunciation - which may be judged as paradoxical in itself (Berrendonner,

1981: 216, in: Maingueneau, 2002: 330) – the ambivalent and multivalent judgements of the enunciator and the marked acceptance or rejection of the connivance proposed, which often depends on the recipient's representation of the enunciator (Schoentjes, 2001: 140-157).

- 18 Results like these obviously invite more collaboration in the field of communication between the sciences of language and the social sciences (sociology and social psychology) (Chabrol, Courbet, Courbet-Fourquet, 2004), because in order to make progress, the semiographic models described here need to be supplemented by models of the social and psycho-social subject – social positioning, group norms and membership, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and motivations, etc. This would allow a closer appraisal of the as yet unresolved but crucial question of the variety of interpretations of humorous discourse, in other words of the active and decisive part played by the recipient in the production of meanings through humour.

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NOTES

1. These contributions follow on from the work carried out under an research agreement by a Franco-Spanish research group (PICASSO), which organised seminars in Paris (2000) and Madrid (2004), directed by J. Bustos and P. Charaudeau, for teacher-researchers from several Spanish universities and members of the Centre for Discourse Analysis (CAD) of the University of Paris 13).
 2. Interpretations of an act of humour depend, like those of any speech act, on previous and subsequent contexts and on the situation. A joke made in passing in a “serious” speech does not have the same effect as it would in a non serious speech full of jokes, mocking repartee and semantically incomplete episodes. Ultimately, the decisive points are the aims of the action in the ongoing situation and the usual communication contracts (see G. Lochard’s analysis of the new “infotainment” programmes).
 3. It will always be quite easy to “discover” cases of inter-discourse or intertextuality between certain (unquantified) “humorous” tendencies in the media in corpuses of work that are compiled solely for the purpose of advancing (and not for verifying) a hypothesis, without the random sampling required in this case, and between emblematic writers, artists or thinkers, or between certain events, all “carefully” selected for the occasion. These are deceptive correlations, and what they mainly demonstrate is the strength of our “societal” expectations as recipients, in other words, an effect of naturalisation of the “national spirit”.
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