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Scrutinizing humorous mass culture texts in class: A critical language teaching proposal

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the ways in which dominant language ideologies of linguistic homogenization are reproduced through the representation of linguistic varieties in television. TV mass culture texts often use humor, in particular humorous representations of language variation, to reinforce the dominance of standard varieties and simultaneously to denigrate non standard ones. In this context, we argue for the exploitation of humorous mass culture texts in language teaching and we explore the development of teaching material based on the critical analysis of such texts. This material will be based on the *multiliteracies model* (New London Group 1996; Cope and Kalantzis 2000) and is intended to raise students' language awareness by enabling them to identify and reflect on the language ideologies reproduced and reinforced in media texts.

Key-words: mass culture texts, language ideologies, stylistic humor, multiliteracies, critical language awareness

1. Introduction

During the past few decades, a wealth of sociolinguistic studies has focused on language variation as represented in mass culture texts, such as TV series (see among others Geeraerts 2001; Dhoest 2004; Archakis et al. 2014; in print), advertisements (Bell 1992; Piller 2001; Van Gijsel et al. 2008) and films (Marriott

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1997). This is due to the fact that such texts often (re)construct and reframe sociolinguistic reality from a specific perspective, thus reproducing and reinforcing certain language ideologies (see among others Heller 2007; Georgakopoulou 2000; Androutsopoulos 2010, p. 754; Stamou 2012b, p. 22; Moody 2013).

In the present study, first we intend to analyze an extract from a popular Greek TV series called *Στο παρά πέντε* "At the Very Last Moment" in order to show that the humorous representation of linguistic varieties in mass culture texts contributes to reinforcing the ideology of linguistic homogeneity and relevant *metapragmatic stereotypes* (Agha 2007). Drawing on critical discourse analysis, we assume that discourse is a social practice reproducing specific values and ideologies. Our critical investigation of how non standard linguistic varieties are humorously represented on TV will take into consideration Coupland's (2007) theoretical approach to *style* and Attardo's (2001) concept of *stylistic humor*.

The second aim of our study has pedagogical implications. Based on recent research suggesting that humorous texts can be used in language teaching in order to enable students to detect subtle social meanings and implicit cultural values, we will propose a teaching model where mass culture texts including humorous stylistic representations can be used as teaching material. More specifically, following the *multiliteracies model* (Kalantzis and Cope 1999; New London Group 1999; Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Kalantzis et al. 2005), we will exploit the findings of our analysis in designing teaching activities aiming at fostering students' critical perspective on the TV series in question. Our teaching proposal is intended to help students realize the linguistic inequalities reproduced in such texts and hence to denaturalize linguistic homogeneity (see among others Blackledge 2005, pp. 65-67).

So, in what follows, we refer to the linguistic ideologies commonly promoted via mass culture texts (section 2) as well as to Coupland's (2007) definition of *style* and Attardo's (2001) definition of *stylistic humor* (section 3), which will be employed in our discussion of the linguistic ideologies emerging from our data. Section (4) includes some information on the data of the study, the criteria for its selection, and its analysis. The exploitation of humorous material in language teaching and its purposes are discussed in section (5), while section (6) is

dedicated to the development of teaching activities based on the findings of the present analysis. Finally, a summary of the aims and the results of our study is offered in section (7).

2. Language ideologies in mass culture texts

It is by now a truism that the language of mass media contributes to the (in)direct enforcement of dominant ideological beliefs. Mass culture texts frame collective memory and common experiences, thus bringing together viewers from different backgrounds (Van den Bulck 2001, p. 55; Stuart-Smith 2006, pp. 141, 148). They have the ability to merge "the marginal with the dominant, the parochial with the cosmopolitan and the local with the global" and to form the stances of the audience in relation to these concepts (Johnson and Ensslin 2007, p. 14; see also Archakis et al. 2014, p. 47).

In western nation-states in particular, the construction of a common, official language promotes linguistic homogeneity and simultaneously marginalizes and stigmatizes language variation. The desired linguistic homogeneity and monolingualism imply a consensus that languages and linguistic varieties are seen as autonomous structures used in established sociocultural frames (Heller 2007, p. 11; Blommaert and Rampton 2011, pp. 6, 8-9; Busch 2012, pp. 506-507). Powerful institutions, such as the media, can foster linguistic homogeneity via undermining linguistic diversity within a group of speakers and via underlining the linguistic 'deviation' of out-group speakers. In Greece in particular, studies on the representation of linguistic varieties in Greek television converge in revealing that Greek mass media, and mostly television, tend to confirm the dominance of standard varieties and to dismiss local ones, so that linguistic homogeneity and national unity is upheld (Archakis et al. 2014, pp. 47-48; in print; Tsami et al. in print; see also Georgakopoulou 2000; Kourdis 2004; Androutsopoulos 2010; Stamou and Dinas 2011, pp. 290-292).

Given the above, we will try to show how the representation of the speech produced by TV characters strengthens the ideology of pre-established boundaries between linguistic varieties and stigmatizes language variation. Our critical perspective will allow us to scrutinize how discourse contributes to the naturalization and the perpetuation of sociolinguistic equality (see among others

Fairclough 1989, pp. 90-97; Fairclough and Wodak 1997, p. 258; Wodak 2001, pp. 2-3, 9-12; Blackledge 2005, pp. 65-67).

3. In between constructing one's own 'appropriate' style and mixing 'incongruous' stylistic elements

As Coupland (2007, p. 1) suggests, style is broadly defined as the way we do something (e.g. ways of dressing, speaking, designing a building) and is shaped through certain choices. As far as language is concerned, style relates to different ways of speaking and comprises phonologic, morphologic and vocabulary features (ibid., p. 103). Coupland puts geographical, social, and functional variation under the broader category of stylistic variation which is determined by the different language choices of speakers (ibid., pp. 2, 32-37). Through our stylistic choices we manage various social identities and create our social relations (ibid., p. 18). Put differently, style consists of a series of choices that serve the purpose of identity construction in a particular communicative context; it provides speakers with the opportunity to creatively construct and synthesize the aspects of themselves they want to project at a particular time (ibid., pp. 2-9). Drawing upon a diverse linguistic repertoire, style refers to a vast array of performances in which speakers are involved (ibid., p. 146).

Nevertheless, such a creative combination of diverse stylistic resources is not always considered as expected and natural; on the contrary, it is often presented as deviant and, consequently, it is marked and may even stigmatize the speakers who attempt it. Within the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* framework, Attardo (2001; 2009) discusses the incongruous use of linguistic varieties as a means for the production of humor. Taking into account that humor is based on incongruity, i.e. the opposition between the real/expected and the unreal/unexpected, incongruity emerging from the use of diverse stylistic resources can be seen as *register/stylistic humor*.[1] Stylistic humor can be generated, for example, via mixing different varieties (one of which is unexpected or unconventional) or via replacing the expected variety with an unexpected one. In this sense, stylistic humor is based on "*a priori* assumptions about the nature of the contextual variables of register [which] predict the use of certain specific linguistic realizations" (Simpson 2003, p. 75, emphasis in the original). In a similar vein, Bell

and Pomerantz (2014, p. 36) suggest that "[m]uch humor depends on highlighting and then traversing boundaries between particular national languages, language varieties, registers, genres, and speech styles". Such a perspective is therefore compatible with conceptualizations of styles as distinct and autonomous linguistic varieties rather than as resources available to all speakers for the creation of new meanings and identities (see also Simpson 2003, pp. 35-37; Canakis 1994; Georgakopoulou 2000; Antonopoulou 2002, p. 215 note 22; Tsakona 2004, pp. 188-202; 2013, pp. 140-144; Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou 2011; Stamou 2011; 2012a; Archakis et al. 2014, p. 48-49; in print; Tsami et al. in print; and references therein).

Speakers evaluate specific stylistic choices as unexpected and incongruous based on specific ideologies concerning how language 'should' be used in each context. Such ideologies are directly related to speakers' *metapragmatic stereotypes* on language use (Agha 1998, pp. 151-152; 2004, pp. 25-27; 2007, pp. 150-151, 154). According to Agha's definition, metapragmatic stereotypes constitute internalized models of language use which guide speakers' linguistic behavior and enable them to make judgments about their own language use or that of others. Such stereotypes influence speakers' linguistic performance and interpretation of discourse in actual interactions. They are shaped by the sociocultural context speakers interact in and, more specifically, by the ways discourse is used and evaluated therein. It therefore seems that the producers of mass culture texts, and TV series in particular, and their audiences share certain metapragmatic stereotypes on stylistic use which are exploited in such texts for humorous purposes (see also Archakis et al. in print).

The following analysis reveals that the stylistic choices of a character in the TV series examined result in a humorous effect and in her stigmatization, as she does not conform to the 'appropriate' style. The analysis also brings to the surface the metapragmatic stereotypes presupposed for the evaluation of this character's stylistic choices. Thus, we will show how a TV series character is humorously targeted when her speech deviates from the dominant ideologies on language use including, among other things, the establishment and maintenance of strict boundaries between different styles.

4. The selection and analysis of the data

The example presented here comes from a corpus compiled for the investigation of the representation of sociolinguistic variation in the media, and consisting of 29 texts dated from 2001 until 2012 (see also Archakis et al. 2014; in print). The example discussed here comes from a particularly popular TV comedy series titled *Στο παρά πέντε* "At the Very Last Moment" shown by the Greek Mega Channel from 2005 until 2007. Since then, the series has been repeated several times to satisfy popular demand. According to its plot, five friends try to solve a complicated detective mystery which could evolve into a major political scandal. At some point, the five protagonists, Spiros, Dalia, Zoumboulia, Aggela, and Fotis are looking for a beautiful girl to participate in a beauty contest. Spiros accidentally meets Amalia, who is impressively beautiful, but speaks a Peloponnesian dialect of Greek. One of the most striking features of this dialect is the use of the non standard postalveolar [ɻ] instead of the standard lateral alveolar [l] before [i].

In this extract, although Spiros has his doubts about Amalia's chances to win the contest, he nevertheless takes her to meet the rest of the group. The analysis concentrates not only on those utterances that constitute stylistic humor, but also on those which are intended to humorously comment on the stylistic incongruities identified, thus underlining them and pointing to certain language ideologies (see also Archakis et al. in print).[2]

Σ(πύρος): Γεια σα:ς.
Ν(τάλια), Ζ(ουμπουλία), Αγ(γέλα): Γεια::::
Ν: Αυτή είναι;
Σ: Ναι.
Ζ: Καλέ αυτή είναι κούκλα, σαν άγγελος, πώς σε λένε κορίτσι μου;
Αμ(αλία): *Αμαɻία* (1).
Ζ: °*Τι είπε;*° (2)
Σ: Αμαλία.
Ζ: °*Δεν είπε Αμαλία κάτι άλλο είπε.*° (3)
Σ: *Ναι αλλά Αμαλία ήθελε να πει* (4).
Ν: °*Και γιατί δεν το πε τότε;*° (5)

Σ: *Γιατί δεν μπορεί* (6).

Αγ: *Πλάκα κάνεις* (7).

Σ: ((κάνει αρνητικό νεύμα)) Αμαλία να σε συστήσω (.) ο Φώτης, η Αγγέλα, η Ντάλια, η Ζουμπουλία.

Αμ: *Ζουμπουλία*; (8)

Ν: *Α* (.) *να το πάλι. Πώς το κάνεις;* (9)

Αμ: *Ποιο:*; (10)

Φ(ώτης): °Τι θα κάνουμε;°

((Η Αμαλία κάθεται στο σαλόνι και βλέπει τηλεόραση, ενώ στο δίπλα δωμάτιο οι πέντε φίλοι είναι σε απόγνωση και συζητούν τι μπορούν να κάνουν με την Αμαλία. Φοβούνται ότι στα καλλιστεία, που θα μεταδοθούν από την τηλεόραση, θα την απορρίψουν λόγω της διαλέκτου της. Παρ' όλα αυτά, αποφασίζουν να τη ρωτήσουν αν θα ήταν διατεθειμένη να συμμετάσχει στον διαγωνισμό.))

Αγ: Εσύ τι κάνεις στη ζωή σου αυτό τον καιρό;

Αμ: Τίποτα (.) τη γιαγιά μου φροντίζω που είναι στο νοσοκομείο.

Ζ: Α::: τι έχει;

Αμ: *Ουρολοίμωξη* (11).

Ν: ((*γελά κοροϊδευτικά*)) (12)

Φ: ((απευθυνόμενος στον Σπύρο)) °*Το λέει και ξαφνικά δε ξέρεις από πού θα σου ρθει.*° (13)

Αγ: Από δουλειά, εργάζεσαι κάπου;

Αμ: Όχι. Σκέφτομαι όμως να *ασχολήθώ* με το *μόντελιν* (14).

Αγ: Α:::: σε ενδιαφέρει πολύ το μόντελιν; Σ' αρέσει;

Αμ: *Πολύ* (15).

Ζ: *Αχ βρε Αμαλία μου να χαρείς, μη λες πολύ* (16).

Αμ: Ε και τι να πω *λίγο* αφού *πολύ* μου αρέσει (17).

Ν: ((*γελά κοροϊδευτικά*)) (18)

Σ: ((απευθυνόμενος στους τέσσερις φίλους του)) *Παιδιά δεν υποφέρεται* (19).

Αμ: ((*κάνει νεύμα απορίας*)) (20)

S(piros): Hi:.

D(alia), Z(oumboulia), Ag(gela): Hi::::

D: Is it her?

S: Yes.

Z: Guys she is a doll, like an angel, what's your name dear?

Am(alia): *Amaʎia* (1).

Z: °*What did she say?*° (2)

S: Amalia.

Z: °*She didn't say Amalia she said something else*.° (3)

S: *Yes but she wanted to say Amalia*. (4)

D: °*And then why didn't she say so?*° (5)

S: *Because she can't* (6).

Ag: *You're kidding* (7).

S: ((nods negatively)) Amalia let me introduce you (.) this is Fotis, Aggela, Dalia, Zoumboulia.

Am: *Zoumbouʎia*? (8)

D: *Oh* (.) *here it is again. How do you do this*? (9)

Am: *Do: what?* (10)

F(otis): °What are we going to do?°

((Amalia sits in the living room watching TV, while in the next room the five friends are desperate and discuss what they could do with her. They are afraid that, at the beauty contest, which will be broadcast on TV, she will be rejected because of her dialect. They nevertheless decide to ask her if she would be willing to participate in the contest.))

Ag: What do you do with your life at present?

Am: Nothing (.) I am taking care of my grandma who is in the hospital.

Z: O:::h what's her problem?

Am: *UTI* ((urinary tract infection)) (11).[3]

D: ((*laughs mockingly*)) (12)

F: ((addressing Spiros)) °*She says it out of the blue and you can't tell where it comes from*.° (13)

Ag: Are you working somewhere?

Am: No. But I am thinking of going into *modeʎing* (14).

Ag: A:::: are you greatly interested in modeling? D'you like it?

Am: *GreatʎY* (15).

Z: *Oh Amalia dear please, don't say greatly* (16).

Am: And what should I say a *ʎittle* but I *greatʎy* like it (17).

D: ((*laughs mockingly*)) (18)

S: ((addressing his four friends)) *Guys it's unbearable* (19).

Am: ((*nods in bewilderment*)) (20)

Stylistic humor stems from Amalia's choice to use exclusively the non standard variety [ʎ i] instead of the standard [li], hence lines (1, 8, 11, 14, 15, 17) constitute stylistic humor. As she is supposed to come from Tripoli, a city in the Peloponnese, she transfers (and thus recontextualizes) a feature of the Peloponnesian dialect to the urban context of Athens. Her 'incongruous' behavior is underlined by two facts. On the one hand, all five friends here use standard Greek (even though Zoumboulia and Aggela do not originate in urban contexts). On the other, they want Amalia to participate in a beauty contest; Amalia is remarkably attractive in terms of external appearance, hence she is presented as entirely suitable for the contest in the first place. However, she would have to go through an interview. Using a non standard variety in such an occasion would most probably result in her exclusion, thus canceling the plans of the five friends.

Stylistic humor is highlighted and reinforced by the comments the five friends offer on Amalia's stylistic choices. Her non standard style is perceived and evaluated as first unintelligible, then laughable, and eventually ridiculous (lines 2, 3, 12, 18), and also as an unexpected, unusual, strange, and unpleasant behavior (lines 5, 7, 9, 13, 19), which would rather be censored (line 16). In particular, Zoumboulia appears not to be able to decipher Amalia's utterances (line 2), while Spiros believes that she *cannot* speak 'properly', although she may want to (lines 4, 6). Finally, her speech is characterized as *unbearable* (line 19). Amalia does not seem to understand why her interlocutors react in such an exaggerated and inexplicable way (lines 10, 20), thus defending her choices and/or conforming to Spiros' stereotypes, according to which she is in fact unable to use standard style (lines 4, 6).

Clearly, Amalia's 'incongruous' style becomes the object of exaggerated criticism and denigration. This reveals an array of interrelated metapragmatic stereotypes, that is, internalized models on 'appropriate' language use (Agha

2007; see section 3). Evaluations of language mixing and recontextualizing stem exactly from such stereotypes. In the present case, the metapragmatic stereotypes involve the following models of language use:

- Using dialectal features in urban settings and, most of all, in the public sphere is incongruous, hence humorous and laughable, especially when one is supposed to give a public performance and will be evaluated for it (lines 1-9, 11-19).
- Compared to standard varieties, dialects are characterized by 'low intelligibility', 'strangeness' and 'deviation', as they include 'unpleasant' and 'unbearable' features (lines 2-7, 9, 12-13, 18). Hence, dialects are incongruous and laughable and would rather be banned (lines 16, 19).
- Speakers not capable of using any other variety than their own dialect are linguistically and socially incompetent, restricted to particular settings and contexts, and hence incongruous and laughable (lines 4, 6, 10, 20).

To sum up, the language ideologies emerging from this example suggest that *dialects are not supposed to be spoken in urban and public settings; otherwise, their speakers will be considered unintelligible, deviant, laughable, and limited to their own 'inappropriate' style from which they cannot escape even if they want to*. Such ideologies are not compatible with speakers' practices of combining and recontextualizing diverse stylistic resources, so as to address multiple audiences and communicative needs (see section 3). They are, however, compatible with homogenizing language ideologies favoring a 'single', 'appropriate', 'correct' standard variety, which is deprived of features with non urban connotations.

Humorous mass culture texts can be used for language teaching and such metapragmatic stereotypes can be scrutinized in class. In what follows, we will discuss the (often perceived as incompatible) relation between humor and (language) teaching. More specifically, we will argue for the exploitation of teaching material from humorous mass culture texts which will allow students and teachers to explore sociolinguistic phenomena and their connotations and hidden meanings. It should be noted at this point that, even though the data discussed here come from Greek, the emerging (or more or less similar)

metapragmatic stereotypes may be relevant to other languages and their dialects/stylistic varieties. Hence, both the analytical tools and the (following) teaching proposal could be exploited in data coming from different linguocultural contexts.

5. Teaching with and about humorous texts

The position of humor in teaching, and language teaching in particular, has for a long time been a controversial issue. Until recently there has been a bias against the use of humor in class and the exploitation of humorous teaching material. The ostracization of humor from education seems to originate in widespread assumptions promoting 'seriousness' as the only 'appropriate' mode for teachers and students in class, and hence dismissing humor as 'not serious' enough to be used in class or to become part of (language) teaching material (see among others Cook 2000, pp. 158-160, 185-187, 193; Bell and Pomerantz 2014, p. 32). This is about to change as the use of humor in educational settings is positively evaluated nowadays, while at the same time humor has already infiltrated classroom discourse, language textbooks, and teaching material in general (see among others Pomerantz and Bell 2007; Norrick and Klein 2008; Bell 2009; Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2008; 2011; Forman 2011; Archakis and Tsakona 2012, pp. 155-163; 2013; Tsakona 2013, pp. 283-333; Bell and Pomerantz 2014; and references therein). The present discussion will concentrate on some recent studies concerning the exploitation of humorous texts for language teaching. Although, to the best of our knowledge, such studies are not numerous, they could contribute to the construction of the model we would like to propose (in section 6).

Since humor is a common discourse strategy in everyday interaction and, most importantly in the present case, an important tool for promoting linguistic (or other) stereotypes (see section 4), it cannot be omitted from the compilation of teaching material. On the contrary, students are expected to be familiar with how humor works and to be able to trace its (overt or covert) social meanings and connotations. When it comes to sociolinguistic variation, students may not be capable of identifying the ideological positioning(s) towards stylistic variation put forward via humorous lines and comments (such as the ones analyzed in the example in section 4). As a result, they could easily naturalize and take for granted

values and views perpetuating sociolinguistic inequality and ridiculing not only the users of non standard styles but also speakers' common attempts to mix and recontextualize stylistic elements. Following Bell and Pomerantz (2014, p. 34),

> we are advocating for an approach to pedagogy that recognizes characteristics like variability, dynamism, dialogism, and situatedness in its underlying conception of language and aims to help learners develop this kind of metalinguistic awareness.

In this context, stylistic humor "presents learners with opportunities to play with the boundaries between registers and to *re-examine some of their ideas about [stylistic] constructs*" (Bell and Pomerantz 2014, p. 37; our emphasis).

It has been suggested that humorous discourse constitutes an appropriate means for presenting information on pragmatic and cultural particularities during language teaching (Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2008; 2011; see also Pomerantz and Bell 2007). Building on such an assumption, Archakis and Tsakona (2012, pp. 155-163; 2013) maintain that humorous texts can be exploited in class to raise students' language and cultural awareness. Their proposal involves the comparison of humorous oral narratives with similar content but coming from students/speakers belonging in different sociocultural communities. The incongruities identified in such narratives bring to the surface the different values and attitudes endorsed by the members of each community, thus familiarizing students with different value systems. Thus, as Archakis and Tsakona (2012; 2013) maintain, humor could become a tool for exploring sociocultural diversity and those meanings which remain hidden to out-group members but bring in-group members together. Elaborating on this proposal, Tsakona (2013, pp. 283-333) explores the use of humorous fairytales, cartoons, jokes, and novels to help students realize how humor is employed for the construction of various sociocultural identities and for (implicitly) conveying culturally-relevant meanings.

The criteria for the selection of humorous teaching material are significant. It has often been suggested that short, autonomous texts such as (canned) jokes are preferred for language teaching as they are easier for students to understand (see

among others Schmitz 2002). Such decontextualized texts, however, do not always help students understand how humor works in interaction and how it contributes to the positive or negative evaluation of specific sociocultural values and stereotypes (Bell 2009, pp. 243-244, 246-239; see also Archakis and Tsakona 2013, pp. 18, 20; Tsakona 2013, pp. 294-295). Furthermore, the selection of humorous texts for language teaching by the teacher him/herself (Schmitz 2002) could result in the compilation of teaching material that is uninteresting and unintelligible to the students. Teachers' perceptions of what is or is not humorous do not always coincide with students' ones.

Humorous mass culture texts could provide a solution to the problem of finding appealing material to teach about/through humor, in particular about how humor can foster specific language ideologies and perpetuate sociolinguistic inequality. In fact, such texts (whether with or without humor) have recently been introduced in school textbooks (Alvermann et al. 1999; Stevens 2001; Morrell 2002) and students' everyday experiences with them are exploited in language teaching, thus increasing their interest for the course and their creativity (Duff 2004; Bulfin and Koutsogiannis 2012; Stamou 2012a). At the same time, mass culture texts could be considered most suitable for a critical approach to language variation, as they do not simply reflect sociolinguistic reality, but they also (re)construct it from a specific perspective, thus reproducing and reinforcing certain language ideologies or metapragmatic stereotypes (see among others Georgakopoulou 2000; Coupland 2009; Androutsopoulos 2010, p. 754; Stamou 2012b, p. 22; Moody 2013; also section 2 in the present study). In other words, mass culture texts could help students to become familiar not only with linguistic varieties *per se*, but also with their sociocultural meanings and connotations (Tsiplakou 2007b; Godley and Minnici 2008).

In the following section, we will propose specific teaching activities exploiting the analyzed extract and the emerging metapragmatic stereotypes, so as to incite students to scrutinize such stereotypes in class. The basic aim of our proposal is to make students aware of the sociolinguistic inequality between different styles and their users via the exploitation of humorous mass culture texts which will attract their interest in the course.

6. Designing a critical teaching proposal

In the present section, we propose some tentative activities for the critical analysis of humorous mass culture texts (such as the one presented in section 4) in class. The activities are designed for students attending the 5th and 6th grades of the Greek primary school (11-12 years old). The aim of these activities is to raise students' critical language awareness via the revelation of hidden and normalized language ideologies which are inherent in the representation of linguistic varieties in such texts. Critical language awareness involves students' realization that social -and sociolinguistic- reality is diverse, constantly changing, and shaped -to a considerable extent- by the (linguistic or other) ideologies and views in wider circulation (Fairclough 1992a, pp. 87, 92; Fairclough 1992b; 1995, p. 217; Godley and Minnici 2008; Archakis and Tsakona 2012, pp. 125-128; Stamou 2012b, pp. 23-24).

The enhancement of students' critical language awareness is among the main goals of the *multiliteracies model* (Kalantzis and Cope 1999; New London Group 1999; Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Kalantzis et al. 2005). The model is also intended to cultivate students' communicative competence through the analysis of diverse genres (see also Tsiplakou 2007a, p. 484; Silvers et al. 2010; Archakis and Tsakona 2012, pp. 141-163; Tsakona 2013, pp. 283-333) via four stages:

1. the *situated practice* involving the exploitation of texts brought to class by students and belonging to their sociocultural experiences;
2. the *overt instruction*, which helps students to realize the linguistic and textual mechanisms used for the production and interpretation of texts;
3. the *critical framing* referring to the critical interpretation of a text, based on the sociocultural context of its production;
4. the *transformed practice*, that is, the reframing of discourse and the transference of meaning from one context to another.

Following the multiliteracies model, here we present some teaching activities enabling students to reach a critical interpretation of mass culture texts such as the one analyzed above. Our proposal aims at helping students:

1. to identify language variation;
2. to become aware of the dominant ideologies concerning linguistic varieties, their mixing, and their speakers; and
3. to realize the hidden and naturalized ideologies expressed through the humorous representations of language variation on TV.

Needless to say, mass culture texts coming from different linguocultural environments may involve different kinds of (stylistic) humor and may point to different metapragmatic stereotypes on stylistic use. The activities suggested below could, in our view, be adjusted to fit different texts and teaching goals.

Situated practice

A survey conducted on students of the 5th and 6th grades of Greek primary schools (Tsami et al. 2014) has indicated that students show a pronounced preference for comic TV series; the one analyzed here, that is, *At the Very Last Moment*, was among the most popular of them. Given that diverse linguistic varieties are represented therein, extracts from this series could be exploited for our purposes. In general, teachers are encouraged to explore their students' preferences concerning humor and/in mass culture texts to collect relevant and attractive material to be analyzed in class.

Overt instruction

Overt instruction aims at helping students to identify the linguistic features of the Peloponnesian dialect as used by Amalia. Concurrently, students and teachers collaborate to find the humorous utterances of the extract, the incongruities humor is based on, and the targets criticized via humor. Questions such as the following could be discussed in class:

- In the extract you watched, do all the characters speak in the same manner? If not, who speaks differently?
- Which characteristics of his/her speech led you to the conclusion that s/he speaks differently?

- Are there any phrases creating a humorous effect? If yes, which are they and which character(s) do they come from?

In other words, at this stage, students are incited to identify the stylistic/dialectal features of the text under scrutiny and to explore how humor is built around them.

Critical framing

After pointing out the humorous utterances of the text, students and teachers work together to detect the language ideologies reproduced and reinforced through humor. Particular emphasis is placed upon the activities which focus on the critical interpretation of TV texts, since at this point our main aim is to help students realize (1) that such texts often reinforce sociolinguistic inequality and (2) that humor promotes linguistic homogeneity via indirectly undermining stylistic variation. Questions such as the following could be discussed in class:

- Describe Amalia's appearance (e.g. her hair, clothes, age, looks). When we see her, is it expected that she would talk differently than the other characters? Justify your answer.
- What do the five friends think about the way Amalia speaks? How would you interpret their way of thinking?
- Even though Amalia is impressively beautiful, why are the five friends afraid that she will be excluded from the beauty contest?
- What is your personal opinion about the five friends' attitudes towards Amalia's potential participation in the beauty contest? Is the way someone talks (e.g. using a dialect) more important than the content of his/her speech?
- Why do you think the script writer made Amalia look so beautiful? Would someone expect a girl so beautiful to use a dialect? Does this seem uncommon?
- Which, in your opinion, was the intended effect the script writer wanted to cause to the audience? Did he succeed in his effort?

- Do the humorous utterances of the text target a specific person? If yes, who is s/he?
- Why do you think Amalia's way of speaking and behaving generates humor?
- In your opinion, what will the TV audience think about the way Amalia speaks? Why? What views about dialects form the basis for the audience's reactions to Amalia's speech?
- What is your personal evaluation of Amalia's non standard, dialectal speech? For example, would you evaluate it as 'funny', 'strange', 'wrong', or 'great'?
- If you know someone who speaks a non standard dialect, describe the way(s) other, standard dialect speaking people treat him/her.
- Would you like to be(come) a speaker of a non standard dialect? Justify your answer.
- Try to imagine the social characteristics (e.g. profession, age, education, place of origin) a person talking like Amalia would exhibit. Would that imaginary person look like Amalia? If not, why would s/he be different than Amalia is?
- Do you think we can make assumptions about someone's social characteristics (e.g. his/her place of origin, age, profession, education) based on his/her speech? Justify your answer.
- Do you think it is justified/expected to evaluate negatively someone who speaks a non standard dialect? Justify your answer.

Via pointing out and critically analyzing the diverse ideologies and attitudes concerning linguistic variation, students could enhance their metalinguistic awareness (Bell and Pomerantz 2014; see section 5) and, most importantly in the present context, their critical perspective on sociolinguistic inequality phenomena, so as to denaturalize them.

Transformed practice

Students could be asked to produce a videoclip in which they would deliberately avoid to frame dialectal (or other) variation in a humorous manner. Watching TV

extracts with non-humorous representations of linguistic varieties could assist them in completing this task.

It should be noted here that these suggestions formed the basis for a pilot study performed in March 2014, in order to assess the relevant teaching material. Then this teaching material was revised according to the feedback obtained from both the students and the teachers participating in the pilot study and was used as part of a 3-month-long experimental research in class (from mid-October 2014 until mid-January 2015). Both the pilot study and the subsequent experimental intervention were performed by trained teachers working in two state elementary schools in the prefecture of Achaia, Greece.

During the 3 months of the experimental research we have tried to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention based on this material. Our primary results show, among other things, that this kind of teaching material helps students to improve their skills in:

1. recognizing different linguistic varieties;
2. refraining from attributing specific (negative) social characteristics to speakers who use non standard varieties;
3. in identifying jab lines; and
4. in understanding the reasons why linguistic varieties are employed for the production of humor in mass culture texts.[4]

More -and perhaps improved- material will be developed after taking into consideration the feedback and the results obtained from the experimental intervention.

7. Concluding remarks

The goal of the present study was, first, to analyze a TV text where language variation is represented and, second, to argue for the use of humorous mass culture texts in language teaching and to propose relevant activities.

The analysis of the humorous extract reveals that TV producers create humor via constructing characters who disregard sociolinguistic boundaries and blend

elements associated with different, 'incompatible' styles. In Greek mass culture texts in particular, the ideology of linguistic homogeneity prevails and hence speakers assume that the 'appropriate' stylistic choices can easily be predicted by the context of interaction and/or the social characteristics of interactants. As a result, in mass culture texts, the characters are expected to conform to linguistic homogeneity and the ensuing stereotypes. If they attempt to renegotiate the pre-established sociolinguistic categories via mixing or recontextualizing different styles, they are framed -and more often than not perceived- as incongruous and hence laughable (see also Archakis et al. 2014; in print).

Humorous mass culture texts not only reproduce metapragmatic stereotypes concerning the 'appropriate' stylistic use, but at the same time appear to be most popular among students (Tsami et al. 2014). Hence, they could become part of the teaching material used to familiarize students with stylistic variation and the ensuing evaluations and stereotypes. Such an approach to language teaching is compatible with recent research suggesting that humorous texts are suitable for enabling students to detect (and perhaps embrace) sociocultural variation and respective values (see section 5). Given the above, in the framework of multiliteracies, we proposed some teaching activities aiming at raising students' critical language awareness, so that they are capable of tracing and resisting the language ideologies disseminated via TV mass culture. At the same time, we tried to come up with some tentative questions which will allow students to contemplate and elaborate on the ideologies lurking in the humorous representation of linguistic variation in TV texts. Although here we concentrate on the analysis of a Greek text, the analytical tools and the teaching proposal put forward could also be used to data coming from other linguocultural communities. The exploitation of such analytical and teaching methodology in different (con)texts could yield more insights on the metapragmatic stereotypes concerning stylistic variation as well as more activities and questions to be explored in class during language teaching.

Needless to say, more research is required along these lines. Even though humorous texts are increasingly accepted as teaching material in class, they are not always analyzed in depth: teachers often employ them to attract students' attention to the course and to create a pleasant atmosphere in class, without

delving into the social meanings underlying the humorous content. Humor research is expected to explore more ways of using such humorous texts in class, which could enhance students' and teachers' interest and would help the latter overcome their reluctance to add a humorous tone to their courses.

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Endnotes

[1] *Register humor* refers to humor that is generated by the mixing or replacement of *functional/register varieties* only (Attardo 2001). Attardo later proposes the term *stylistic humor* to expand the field of its usage so as to also include stylistic varieties, too (Attardo 2009, p. 315). Stylistic humor is thus the term we use in the present study.

[2] The analyzed extracts are translated into English by the authors for the purposes of the present study. Stylistic humor and characters' comments are marked in italics and numbered. The following transcription conventions are used:

xxx= : latching of one's utterance
(…) : extracts omitted by the authors
((xxx)) : comments and information added by the authors
[xxx] : overlapping utterances
xx/x : self-correction
<u>xxx</u> : stressed utterances
xxx: : prolongation of a sound
°x° : talk spoken noticeably quieter than previous talk
. : falling intonation
, : ongoing intonation
; : rising intonation (in the Greek text)
? : rising intonation (in the English text)
(.) : pause

[3] The non standard feature [ʎ i] could not be reproduced here in the English translation. *UTI* in Greek is *ουρολοίμωξη* (standard [urolímoksi], non standard/dialectal [uroʎ ímoksi]).

[4] The assessment of the effectiveness of the intervention in class involved a pre-test before the students were exposed to the relevant material and a post-test after the intervention was complete. At the same time, observation sheets and journals were kept and teachers were interviewed on their perceptions and evaluations concerning the teaching process. Our aim was to record the ways students developed their critical language awareness. Nevertheless, a detailed presentation of such issues lies beyond the purposes of the present study and will be addressed in the future.

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