

Dualities in Humor: Incongruity Meets Ridicule

Amadeu Viana*

Abstract

This paper argues in favour of a fruitful assembling of traditional dualities observed in humour (disparagement vs. incongruity, positive vs. critical aspects). After reviewing misogynistic (i.e. denigrating) and carnivalesque (i.e. enthusiastic) positions, we attempt to classify and understand both the historical alternatives and their contemporary counterparts, particularly dealing with the social vs. the cognitive divide. Here it is championed that social and cognitive dimensions must be approached in an entangled way, as part of a social semiotics. In our view, reversal theory approaches have captured the essential complication in humour, the playful mode present in interaction, plus the asymmetry implied in interpretation. Then, both the social sides of sanction and solidarity in humorous practices and the incongruous and derisive aspects of cognitive humorous triggers, show interesting correspondences and what we here have called *grid effects*, i.e. the combination of ridicule and incongruity both with humorous and less humorous counterparts. Moreover, the basic duality of the social (with its disciplinary or rebellious aspects) and the cognitive (having an abrupt imbalance at its core) presumably responds to the origin of social rules, through embarrassment and shame, on the one hand, as well as to the original conditions of the human mind, working on extended connectivity and figuration, on the other hand, as two complementary sides of social semiotics.

Keywords: incongruity, ridicule, belittlement, cognition, figurative thinking

1. Introduction

In this paper social and cognitive dimensions in humour will be reassembled and retraced to the origins and development of social rules and semiotic operations. A transdisciplinary approach oriented to build bridges between disciplines will be championed, attempting to overcome the common dualities that have permeated humour research for decades. Instead of viewing the common set (disparagement vs. incongruity, beneficial vs. critical) as consisting of rival versions, here it is attempted to use them to develop a network that makes sense of ambiguities and polarities we all

*Amadeu Viana, Professor of Linguistics, Departament de Filologia Catalana i Comunicació, University of Lleida, Catalonia, Spain. aviana@filcat.udl.cat

observe in humorous performance. By doing so, we also strive for a better, common ground of discussion among disciplines, capable of bringing them closer and fit to exchange concepts and issues. A notional grid of connections is proposed, sustaining the idea that dualities in humour can be attributed to the formation and cohesion of a social semiotics.

Firstly, Billig's (2005) serious critique against the contemporary view of humour as something naturally positive or therapeutic will be reviewed. He pointed out the insistence of contemporary research into cognitive aspects of humour, theoretically free of charge (or disengaged), at the expense of the more critical, and controversial, disciplinary and corrective dimensions of humour and ridicule. His objections, coming from arguments founded in social psychology, did not refuse to break into historical considerations to support the dialectics between humour defenders (or better, *carnavalesque* issues) and humour opponents (or rather, *misogelastic* issues).

Secondly, cognitive and linguistic approaches are succinctly examined, in addition to recent rationalistic counterparts that explore humour in evolutionary history (Hurley et al. 2011). After commenting the attributed theoretical dissociation from social and practical issues, more pragmatical and conversational programmes are explored. The next step is to overview cognitive vs. social approaches and their founding conceptions such as incongruity or bisociation vs. disparagement or aggression, seeking correlations between theories and disciplines. Then, we briefly dive into history to retrace filiations and resemblances, seeking to compare different sets of paired oppositions.

Throughout we assume that semiotic dualities underlie the articulation of humour and work as the necessary premises to produce and perceive humorous content. We also contend that abstract, disengaged approaches to humour fail to grasp the more critical, even disciplinary aspects involved in humorous performance. In order to bring the two essential domains together, i.e. incongruity and ridicule, two different issues will come under scrutiny: a) group discrimination, with its ingroup benefits like solidarity and safety and, correspondingly, its outgroup effects triggered by discipline or rebellion (Billig 2005); and b) asymmetry effects, having the abrupt imbalance between relative incongruous frames at their core, which allows extracting the critical features in humour, used to maintain both sanction and solidarity (Viana 2010). We also have resort to reversal theory (Apter 2001), which has playful arousal as its main frame, and

thus the interactive, social dimension; and relies on both incongruity and belittlement (i.e. asymmetry), on the formal, complementary, cognitive dimension, in order to explain how humour works. Finally, cohesion between levels is needed, as humour only arouses if all these dimensions show semiotic coherence, working at the same time (Viana 2006).

In this paper it is championed that this quadripartite combination can account for the ambiguities and polarities we usually observe in humour: sanction and solidarity vs. incongruity and belittlement. Some interesting grid effects follow, as incongruity and ridicule come into contact with their non-humorous counterparts. Then, after extending this network, a fair and common ground for different disciplines emerges, where research can be done and parallel concepts and issues may be explored. Lastly, seeking support for the emerging semiotic grid relating incongruity and ridicule, we turn to evolutionary arguments, just to discover that both incongruity and ridicule can be traced to the beginning of extended cognitive connectivity and the origins of social rules which characterize hominization processes (Deacon 1997). Thus, ridicule would be the humorous manifestation of sanction (and its complement, solidarity), while incongruity would underlie the expanded abstract, associative possibilities in the mind, by showing laughter automatically, the ancient reflex of play and emotion. Both, ridicule and incongruity turn out to be essential dimensions for humour to appear, working together in the social as well as in the cognitive domain, as part of a coherent social semiotics. Thus, we conclude that dualities in humour can be fruitfully reassembled and used to build bridges among disciplines along the lines advanced here.

2. A critique of positive humour

Positive psychology is the target of Billig's (2005) critique. The uses of humour and laughter, according to Billig's main thesis, show, on the one side, the inescapable character of the social construction of the mind and, on the other side, the disciplinary and corrective trend of social rules, a trait canonically displaced or neglected in positive psychology. Billig analyses the amount of contemporary studies aiming to stress the beneficial aspects of humour and play, which promote sense of humour as something desirable and worthy of being cultivated. Authors include jokes in their surveys and use them as a way to improve people's mood, accentuating the "positive" aspects (in the contemporary, moral sense of "beneficial") and trying to escape from "negativity" (again, a word imbued with moral bearing). Popular psychotherapy and health studies

are usually saturated with these sorts of considerations. Billig's critique leads him to qualify "positive thinking" as an ideological construct, where humour plays a cohesive and integrative role. As he put it:

[...] The task is to become the sort of person who appreciates joy, contentment and the rest – in short, each person has the duty to become a positive person, no matter what sort of identities they are creating for themselves. [...] Individualism remains constant as a conservative force within ideological positivism [...]. Within ideological positivism, the blame for failure and the credit for success are placed on the individual, rather than on the social processes that create the individual. Critics today have noted how the advice "be positive" can become oppressive. [...] Those who fail have only themselves to blame for inner weakness, negative mind-set and meagre production of smiles. (Billig 2005, pp. 31-32).

The second, complementary set of Billig's critique is the bulk of contemporary cognitive approaches to humour, akin to ideas of cognitive flexibility, which prepare "the way for giving humour a clean bill of health" (Billig 2005, p. 65). Then, Billig's two targets are symptomatically related, as they are part of current and parallel trends of thought. Cognitive approaches are disengaged, socially neutral and demand conceptual relevance. They usually link the cognitive shift involved in humour to wit and creativity. Likewise, cognitive studies throughout assume a full or partial version of logical incongruity lying at the core of humorous competence. Koestler (1964) and his analysis of frame bisociation may be seen as the principal inspiration for current cognitive analysis of jokes, punch-lines and implicit meaning. The mainstream of recent cognitive research about humour and jokes insists on exploring how incongruity works from the psychological and linguistic points of view. For Billig's argument, this is a reductive, socially unattached working basis:

Such analysts [...] are seeking to answer the same basic question as Locke: What mental processes are required to understand [...] a witticism? Many modern analysts [...] often deduce the cognitive processes by examining the linguistic structure of the joke. Thus, jokes are said to bring together suddenly

two different, incongruous or distant ideas in the punch-line [...]. The cognitive approach [...] reduces humour to the bloodless structure of the joke. There is accordingly little attempt to explore the social nature of the laughter, for the jokes are abstracted from the social context in which they might be told [...] This cognitive approach makes no assumptions about the motives for telling a joke, nor about the emotional states of the recipients. (Billig 2005, p. 66)

Then, the two psychological and psycholinguistic trends, positive thinking and cognitive research, follow the contemporary path of favouring the beneficial and creative aspects of humour related to individual, subjective and mental faculties. Billig's serious critiques move us to ask ourselves about the implications of theoretical approaches, their respective compromises and adherences, and what we should do to improve our theories. In a complementary way, the *pars construens* of Billig's argument vindicates laughter and ridicule as constituent working pieces of social dynamics. Searching in philosophical history and anthropology, Billig argues that the disciplinary and corrective functions of humour had been pretty much identified in the past, but they have been incautiously overlooked nowadays, in spite of the illuminating works of Bergson (1900) and Freud (1960 [1905]), full of good insights but still too dependent on the intellectual adherences of his time. The second part of Billig's study is devoted to social order and the exploration of funny and non-funny humour, i.e. the social conditions for a joke to succeed, especially when things turn out to be complicated and someone may be offended. Ridicule and laughter, then, become a good indicator of how social rules work, who is prone to being the victim and who can laugh at who under which circumstances. We will return to the issue of ridicule and embarrassment in section 5.2, when we try to search for bridges between rival explanatory theories.

3. Misogelastical versus Carnavalesque issues

Defenders and detractors of humour and laughter are usually grouped under the headings of carnivalesque and misogynelastical factions, respectively. Although they offer rival versions, they may also be seen complementarily. Misogelastical or, to put in a rather descriptive form, writers or thinkers who show precautions about the indiscriminate use of humour, were common in philosophical tradition. Plato in the *Philebus* manifested one of the first and more impressive critical positions against humour in Western thought. As he put it, the combination of pleasure and pain moved

laughter and humour away from what could be considered the best ways of expression (Cerasuolo 1980). The argument that there has always been malice in amusement was good enough to encourage a prudential avoidance of humour and laughter, when civic and educated behaviour was at stake. Moreover, laughing at the ignorance of others was to be blamed. As for the ideal life, laughter “was one of the pleasures to be tightly controlled”, as Billig observed (Billig 2005, p. 41). The misogynelastical tradition was reinforced in Christianity, as it efficiently collaborated to maintain religious beliefs and social order. Somehow, a better opportunity for humour and laughter started in the eighteenth century, when social places like coffee-houses and gentleman life invoke good taste and education as the new codes. The traditional approach to humour and amusement that found justification in superiority and its complementary, degradation, still championed by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), was slowly substituted by the more neutral approach of logical incongruity, soon defended by the philosopher John Locke (1632-1704).

On the other side, carnivalesque positions constituted an unbroken subterranean drive that favoured links between humour, wit and creativity. Working against rules, mainly because the prevailing philosophical and Christian traditions tended to repress jocular manifestations, filogelastical formulae survived in Carnival demonstrations, in literature and art. Although Billig’s essay does not explore these domains, wit and humour were active and powerful in different literary genres, not only as dissidence but as a substantive part of creative imagination (Eco 1984). The centuries-old association of wit and humour with invention in different types of art sustained the carnivalesque stance along the centuries and transformed itself according to secular demands: Lucien’s amusing dialogues, Latin popular jocularities, medieval court joking, grotesque art, Rabelaisian parodies, ridicule contests in the enlightened French court or nineteenth century political satire (Minois 2000). All that diversity worked against automatism, beaten paths and conventional meanings. The literary and semiotic roads fuelled Carnival against the devout Lent, as Mikhail Bakhtin upheld. This was also the loaded weapon that Erasmus displayed in his *Praise of Folly* (1509), an entire derision of social, institutional and learned practices (Berger 2014). Carnivalesque, filogelastical domains extended and reigned in literary imagination, long before the present mainstream of positive (and neutral) humour occupies the social sphere. But things can turn the other way around, as we know, and social considerations about the scope of

amusement are no exception. The contemporary acceptance of positive humour encompasses a low tolerance of sick jokes and offensive teasing. Misogelastics and carnivalesque partisans form an odd pair and their underlying implications deserve cautious examination. Both domains suggest a complementarity: the semiotically double-sided dimension of humour, its relative congruence when we keep an eye on social critiques and derisive meaning, and its relative incongruity when we are attentive to logical and cognitive issues. A good, comprehensive approach should assemble these two poles and make sense of their conjoined work.

4.1. Cognitive and linguistic approaches

As noted above, cognitive approaches displaced the more traditional superiority theories about humour, which relied on some sort of degradation or *décalage* between the mocking and the mocked. Cognitive approaches focused on incongruity, usually described as a full or partial logical clash between forms or concepts: these were the conflicting ideas that wit and humour persistently compiled, as John Locked remarked. During the second half of the twentieth century, after the revealing study by Koestler (1961), linguistic research joined cognitive findings and a shared background of discoveries become of common use in the academic arena (Attardo 1994; Dynel 2011a). The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) included some degree of formalization and brought about a fair collection of empirical studies that tried to test the theoretical tenets. More recently, *blending* approaches coming from cognitive psychology (Coulson 2001) and linguistics (Brône et al. 2015) have reviewed the connections between figurative thinking and wit and humour, by using better assumptions and more sophisticated theoretical apparatus. At any rate, there has been an interesting expansion of concepts, methods and outcomes in different directions (Dynel 2013).

The alliance between cognitive inquiry and linguistic investigations has consolidated the study of incongruity in humour, and the particular contribution of linguistics has brought old rhetorical and semantic questions to the fore. But more especially, the development of pragmatics and conversation studies has enabled new perspectives about humour to come elegantly to the surface. From the empirical point of view, conversational data show the practical circumstances and the interactional contexts where humour is effectively put in use more or less successfully (Norrick 1993; Priego-Valverde 2003). These new data have transformed the probably too disengaged way to approach the cognitive question of incongruity. Consequently,

pragmatics has also profited from these findings, adopting more practical and analytical analysis, related to how and when, and for what purpose, humour is put to work (Dyner 2011b; Dyner 2013). Probably, theoretical pragmatics has also developed a well-equipped set of tools to study relevance under the particular conditions required by humour (Yus 2016). These approaches open the customary incongruity frame to new and interesting considerations, as they are able to detach it from neutral abstraction, and then by doing so, they presumably move towards a more comprehensive range of principles and explanations.

Last but not least, the recent association of cognitivism with evolutionary paradigms must be mentioned. Theories are usually influenced by more fashionable theories, and so there are provisos and ideas from one domain that quickly move into other domains. The alliance between cognitivism and evolutionary research seems to provide better explanations for what we understand by “humour” and how it works in the brain (Hurley et al. 2011) but, again, social demands, the role of ridicule and the disciplinary or corrective dimensions have been elegantly put aside. Moreover, cognitivist explanations that try to match evolutionary selective pressures inevitably seek to align themselves with philosophical rationalism (a *mot d’ordre* for a substantial majority of cognitivists). Contrariwise, we argue that this is not necessarily the case, especially when social conditions and practical knowledge is introduced in the scenario. Here it is championed that semiotic approaches endorsing the creative function of social knowledge and the pragmatic implications of the human mind, while they depart from cognitive rationalism, are better equipped to explain the intricacies and polarities we usually observe in humour. But we will return to evolutionary considerations later in section 6.2.

4.2. An overview of theories

Although humour theories can be revised according to the rival explanations they intend to represent, their relative emergence in history and their usual intersections cast light on non-intended agendas as well as respective contextual adherences. We usually admit that superiority theories go back to the Platonic link between humour and malice. Superiority in humour, as described by Hobbes (its last most prominent defender), consists of “the sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with some infirmity of others” (cf. Martin 2007, p. 66). Then the superiority account relies on some form of degradation inherent to humour as

its solid counterpart. The superiority vs. degradation approach is also connected to disparagement theories, which suppose some degree of aggression at the core of humorous activity. Extending from mock-aggression to more overtly hostile joking, accounts based on disparagement have been tested on many empirical occasions and are still purported to be one of the major trends in humour research, although sometimes working under different headings and following different methods (Martin 2007, pp. 47-54; Attardo 2014, p. 858).

Somehow, Billig's aforementioned critiques again seem to situate the debate in terms of the rival factions of superiority against incongruity. Incongruity theories, as we have observed, witnessed important growth during the twentieth century (Attardo 1994; Martin 2007, pp. 62-72), favoured by their more abstract, formal and structural approach to humour and jokes. The contribution of linguistics, with its wide range of expansive theoretical growth during decades, i.e. formal semantics, the new rhetoric, pragmatics, conversation analysis and so on, has been crucial for this dazzling spread.

In the middle, and moving along the uncertainties and puzzles of the nineteenth century, release & relief theories had looked for alternative explanations, besides the secular accounts of degradation and the raising cognitive search around incongruity, creativity and figurative thinking. Release theories enjoyed their finest moment when psychology started exploring the intricacies of the human mind, followed by Freud's research about the unconscious. They assume the liberation effect triggered by mirth and amusement and its beneficial energy spreading through society and culture (Attardo 2014, p. 906). They have a stricter psychological counterpart, working under the heading of tension-relief theories, which focus on arousal and emotional response and were very popular in the nineteen sixties and seventies. Its credibility came from the study of human emotions and so it seems that, favoured by recent cognitive findings, "the emotional component of humour has gained increasing attention among researchers in recent years" (Martin 2007, p. 62), as they have ventured on the study of both positive (or filogelastic) and negative (or misogelastic) emotions associated to humour.

Books and scholars elegantly gather together these plural approaches and try to be permeable to more interrelated forms of viewing humour (Dynel 2013). Of course, different disciplines do a parallel task to build experiments and explanations; psychology and linguistics have presumably dominated the research in the last decades, and yet both have been mainly oriented at cognitive inquiry and the new avenues the

recent research about the mind has opened. But the sociology of humour has also gone a very long way in the scrutiny of humour tolerance (Mulkay, 1988; Kuipers 2015). However, each faction resists catching the demands of the other. For instance, we all avow that there is non-aggressive, white humour, as there are jokes just for fun; and correspondingly, we know that it is possible to experience ridicule without humorous implications or comical purposes. But each community of scholars tries to encompass these aspects without poking its nose in others' research. Within the ideal cognitive approach, we can posit targets to our formulae, i.e. victims that are supposed to be the butt of the jokes; or alternatively, we could do better to explore the social context, in order to understand when a joke is accepted, ignored, or simply not welcomed. Each faction has its own means to muffle theoretical troubles. Humour may have critical or corrective functions, but, can it have laudatory functions? If not, we should explain why this cannot be the case. If it can, we should explain whether or not the so called positive humour may carry out these uses. Social context seems too frail a concept to explain when and how we may venture to tell a joke. Sometimes everyone is licensed to laugh at someone else, teasing is welcomed and soft targets grow out of control. Sometimes someone become the butt of the jokes, or he is just able to make fun of himself in an apparently self-controlled process. These puzzles deserve to be theoretically explained, and probably we do not need a new explanatory theory, but a set of connected steps that help us to bring the puzzling questions closer by relating the sometimes too distant approaches. We need a better understanding of the social semiotics of humour.

4.3. Historical preferences

If we would like to ascertain where all these dualities come from, we should trace their origins back to the early explorations around what humour is. If we do so, again two different and alternative fields emerge: one related to body exploration and one related to the cognitive domain. Physical puzzles about laughter occupy treatises until the Enlightenment (Viana 2004, pp. 281-283). The etymology of "humour" clearly refers to emotional lability, and so laughter as its bodily manifestation was considered of interest when discussing health issues. Complementarily, rhetorical handbooks usually include sections about humour and the ways to produce it (Attardo 1994, pp. 26-46). Then the body and the mind were the two parallel dimensions to put wit and amusement under scrutiny. As we know, the relationship between the two dimensions was intriguing enough to draw Koestler's attention (Koestler 1964). Both natural and cultural

paradigms run hand-in-hand as founding dualities to humour approaches (Gutwirth 1993). As naturalistic paradigms developed during the nineteenth century, psychology substituted and subsumed the old physical and medical perplexities about laughter, although some interesting contemporary reflections have still explored the ancient quandaries (Fry 1963). On the other side, rhetorical studies remained in force until the Enlightenment, and their drive towards associative content, metaphorical and metonymical figurative meanings, was a proper context to scrutinize what we would today call the cognitive approach to humour; and thus, linguistic and literary research has delved into these creative and figurative domains (Milner 1972; Nash 1985; Culler 1988). As incongruity paradigms enlarged their domains at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were equally able to subsume (and sometimes improve) the ancient rhetorical work about associative meaning and figurative logic.

It goes without saying that misogelastic and carnivalesque issues interweaved with the mind-body question, producing perceptive oddities to contemporary ears: in the past, health questions involving laughter were discussed in relation to illness and rhetorical problems of cognitive relevance were approached in relation to literature. As these dimensions have been reorganised, the scope of the problems has also changed. Today health issues occupy a good number of pages in humour handbooks, covering from the positive effects of humour, to developmental psychology, mental health or different applications in psychotherapy, education or the workplace (Martin 2007, pp. 269-369); not to mention the recent neuroscientific findings concerning humour in contemporary cognitive research (Vrticka et al. 2013).

The corollary is that severe shifts in focus are able to reorganize contextual binds, scholar adherences and research choices. Among the consequences, we should note that disciplines diversify, humour studies turn out to be more specific, and correspondingly, perceptive changes affect our practices. But dualities in humour remain at the core of the questions, and they would deserve some attention, even if it were only because mind-body relationships still keep their puzzling character, one that disseminates itself among natural and cultural fields and permeates our ideologies and disciplines.

5.1. Constituent dualities: Incongruity and ridicule

Here it is assumed that dualities are constituting and fundamental pieces of how humour works. The interesting question is to find ways to connect the relevant dimensions.

From the perspective of cognitive semiotics (Zlatev 2012), the human mind is built in action, natural and cultural domains articulate in a continuum, signs mediate between domains and facilitate inner and outer (both natural and cultural) communication. Then, for semiotic cognitivists, dualities are part and parcel of human semiosis, working in an integrative way to produce meaning. Interactional and cognitive dimensions work together, as constitutive segments of perceived and constructed reality. Thus, the polarities we all recognize in humour, like disparagement vs. incongruity, social vs. cognitive or beneficial vs. critical, should be explained through integrative procedures that enable a better dialogue between academic fields. That is what sociolinguistics was about at its very beginning, putting together sociological demands and linguistic findings, and also probably what the more social and interactional positions in pragmatics are about today, according their proven practices. And both disciplines somehow are akin to research in cognitive semiotics.

We agree with Billig's critiques of disengaged and too abstract approaches to humour. Along lines and lines of analytical work, incongruity studies avoid the more troubling aspects of jokes: who could rightly enjoy them, who could be poked fun at, or who could find them too rude for educated ears. Embarrassment and ridicule are always latent possibilities, and we should ascertain where and how they may arise. But Billig's analysis also obviates the bonding functions triggered by wit and amusement, while he turns against ideological uses of positive humour. Bonding and beneficial aspects of humorous interaction have been underscored in common research (Morreall 1983), and thus the two complementary aspects of social relevance, sanction and solidarity, need examining.

Conversely, social analysis take for granted that disparagement and derision arise, or at least they are usually latent, in humour interaction, but they do not care very much about how this task is accomplished from the perspective of joke structure. Is there any particular feature in joking structure that endorses derision? Where do targets come from? Can humour be laudatory? In which sense does the so called positive humour work in favour of creating bonds? Again, is there any particular feature in joking structure that endorses bonding? The answers cannot be simple, and probably both incongruity and derision should be deemed as being embedded in joke structure.

Then, the two complementary dimensions involved in humorous performance, the social and the cognitive, happen to be the organizing vectors to make things come

about. The social dimension works through both sanction and solidarity; the cognitive dimension works through both incongruity and belittlement. Both are part of a productive social semiotics. In the next two sections we will be discussing sanction and solidarity on the one side, incongruity and belittlement on the other. The two framing dimensions, perhaps too simplistically, are usually recalled as incongruity, involving the cognitive aspects, and ridicule, involving the disciplinary ones. But an integrative solution should take in their minimal complexity, as the only way to show how they act in an interwoven manner. By all means, we are not aiming to postulate any new research subfield. On the contrary, here it is claimed that it is possible to build a semiotic map for transversality; what follows in the next sections is not a theory, but a set of stepping stones to bring too distant fields closer, to fill the respective gaps or just to lend coherence to separated approaches.

5.2. Group discrimination

The sociology of humour has been attentive to group discrimination and how humour contributes to building borders, consolidating bonds and expelling despised people (Mulkay, 1988; Billig 2005; Kuipers 2015). Good and bad taste have been deemed as filters to assess the relevance of a joke. Ridicule has been studied as a primary factor in humour discrimination, and its disciplinary value has been claimed as being a powerful tool for examining humorous performance and its social relevance. We follow Billig (2005) in his approach to shame and embarrassment as the founding motives of social life:

Embarrassment, then, can be seen to possess a universal role in supporting the moral order of everyday life, whatever the nature of the moral order. What this suggests is that the social patterning of embarrassment may provide the answer to the big question about the continuation of the social life. The short answer is that fear of embarrassment keeps us on the track. [...] In his brilliant essay “On face-work” Goffman argued that people tend to stay away from socially difficult situations and they cooperate to save their face “finding that there is much to be gained from venturing nothing”. (Billig 2005, p. 219)

Then, the connection between embarrassment and humour, which Billig assumes as basic in children's behaviour, also become a founding one, as humour may be considered as a protomarker, an early indicator, of social rules and social organization:

The matter can be put simply. Embarrassment may be painful for the one who is embarrassed, but it is frequently funny to onlookers. Tricky situations provide the subject matter for comedies: bosses are inadvertently as if they are underlings; prospective parents-in-law as if they are prying strangers; former lovers arrive on the scene when least wanted; parents unwittingly expose the ill-founded social pretensions of their offspring and vice versa etc. The possibilities are endless. The audience enjoys the discomfort of the characters. It is the same with gaffes. As William Hazlitt remarked, "we laugh at those misfortunes in which we are spectators, not sharers". (Billig 2005, p. 222)

We should draw the right conclusions from these lines. The distinction between spectators and sharers is illuminating. Humour is enjoyable in safe contexts, where ingroup relationships are reinforced. More precisely stated, ingroup relationships constitute the positive, bonding side of humorous performance. Arousal expands in safe contexts where internal relationships are not at stake. Complementarily, ridicule is the loaded weapon against those who are not supposed to belong to the group. More precisely stated, outgroup relationships found the critical, sanctionatory side of humorous performance. Both dimensions happen to act at the same time, but in complementary directions: solidarity works internally, while sanction operates externally. Both can be seen as the origin of social rules and social behaviour, as well as an answer to the question about the continuation of the social life, where humour takes a clarifying role.

Billig goes on to develop a useful distinction in the sanctionatory domain, according to the disciplinary character of sanctions, related to shame and embarrassment, or alternatively, their rebellious nature, working against established but unmanageable rules. According to this partition, we might say that disciplinary humour engenders embarrassment in those who are the object of ridicule and yet, conversely, rebellious humour reacts against embarrassing rules. The disciplinary vs. rebellious nature of humorous performance crisscrosses early distinctions like misogynistic styles (sometimes aligned to discipline) and carnivalesque styles (sometimes aligned to

rebellion). We consistently speak of sanctions in the two directions, the disciplinary or corrective direction that supports rules by producing embarrassment, and the rebellious or critical direction that opposes unfair rules by laughing at them. Here “sanction” always refer to the fulfilment of social order, whether in the disciplinary or in the rebellious mode. Note, moreover, that both the “corrective” and the “critical” aforementioned terms may be used to encompass the respective opposite direction, as part of their ambiguous values. Simplifications about what critical humour is and what it usually implies have probably sometimes led to theoretical confusion.

Then, the minimal complexity is twofold: humour effectively entails group discrimination, having ingroup benefits like solidarity and safety, and outgroup effects like discipline or rebellion. At the interactional level, two different domains have also been identified, one self-centred, with positive or negative outcomes (self-enhancing vs. self-deprecating), the other covering the affiliative vs. aggressive modes (Martin 2007, pp. 210-226). This twofold complexity encompasses beneficial as well as critical functions, as one would expect if dualities in humour are semiotically constitutive, as is upheld here. Humour discriminates through ridicule and embarrassment but also by creating bonds and solidarity, as shown by the colloquial difference between *laughing at* and *laughing with*. Ridicule, in turn, can be experienced as a shame in the disciplinary mode, but it is enjoyed when someone uses forms of mockery against troublesome rules. In all cases, humour seems to highlight how social order works and which are its tacit assumptions. In this way, it may be deemed that it surprisingly unravels the origins of social rules, as suggested above.

5.3. Asymmetry effects

Incongruity studies rightly assume that not all humour is aggressive. Derision emerges when a target can be identified as the butt of the jokes. There is all over white humour which only aims to spread mirth and amusement. Of course, there is also black humour (or gallows humour) based on the dark or suffering sides of experience, fed by malice, morbidity or sarcasm. In incongruity studies, derision-driven trend in humour is seen as a property added to the main pattern: the collapse of two different frames looking for partial resolution (Attardo 2014, pp. 383-385). Derisive power, malice or morbid drive are aspects to be deduced from different adhered formulae: social setting, the manifestation of targets or the particular content of the logical opposition. On the whole,

frame collapse (sometimes called more precisely “script opposition”) holds as the main, abstract (and theoretically disengaged) device lying at the core of humorous activity.

But also asymmetry effects have been described. The two collapsing frames that produce incongruity do not operate at the same perceptive level. Bisociation does not only seem to be the cold scheme Koestler had discovered, but a substitution tool, as one overt frame is subtracted to yield precedence to an unexpected one elicited by tacit assumptions. The contrast between overt, narrative assumptions displayed by explicit elements in humour and the surprising relevance of an unspoken topic may be attributed to asymmetry effects, a property latent in incongruity (Giora 2003; Viana 2010). Asymmetry effects are responsible for different perceptive lags described by Giora (2003), and their main consequence of interest is that we cannot henceforth envisage frame collapsing (i.e. incongruity) as only a logical (total or partial) clash between meanings, but we should include a perceptual *décalage* in the scenario.

Interestingly enough, perceptual asymmetry, the sudden imbalance between frames, entails a salience reversal and then the semantic diminishment of the first, overt frame in favour of the second, tacitly emerging one. Thus, when targets or derision are involved, targets usually appear in the first, overt frame, while negative or critical assumptions are implied from the second, tacit frame (Viana 2010). This seems to be the case even when informal, spontaneous joking is at work, and it seems also to be the case when cartoon humour is decoded. The second, tacit frame which takes prominence carries on the inferential power to display critical assumptions against targets or contents displayed on the first, narrative segment of humorous activity. This seems a logical consequence of salience reversal, as one frame turns out to be semantically substituted by the other. Thus, the emerging features gain relevance and critical assumptions rise to the surface, as part of the asymmetry effects.

Here we have an appealing connection between uses and structure. Firstly, even if no one is to be hurt, if derisive humour is not at stake, salience reversal always warrant a certain perceptual asymmetry between meanings. Colloquially, we should say that one meaning threatens the stability of the other. Playing with words besets reliable meanings and routine phonetics. Subverting standard situations undermine our security in conventional practices. The emerging frame involves the diminishing value of the previous frame, even if overt targets cannot be located. Then, again, the minimal complexity must be twofold: incongruity and diminishment come on a par.

Diminishment or belittlement has to be taken as an essential, complementary property allied to incongruity, in humorous performance.

However, as a sociologist would say, no one is ever perfectly safe, we do not know when somebody may be hurt. Targets and negative implications are not forever encrypted in the joke sequence, but may arise in the course of humorous performance. If they effectively do, if derisive humour comes out, it will do so starting from perceptual asymmetry: then, critical inferences will be activated from tacit, emerging meaning coming from salience reversal. This is also the path that explicit, critical humour follows, when targets are identified from the very beginning and negative inferences do not appear until the end of the joke. A sociologist would deem that targets and critical humour are always properties of performance, as an outcome of interaction and interpretive possibilities. But derision is certainly latent in joke structure, as diminishment comes as a substantial part of incongruity. Whether targets are overt or not, be that as it may, diminishment or belittlement is definitely a property of perceptual reversal. Its scope and consequences, of course, will depend on practical circumstances and perhaps on unexpected factors.

That being so, asymmetry effects furnish us with a valuable way to connect dimensions and to explain the usual polarities we detect in humorous activity. Diminishment or belittlement encompasses incongruity. There would seem to be no laudatory humour, because tacit positive inferences might not be displayed against a semantically diminished narrative frame. Instead, positive, affiliative humour would gain its power from common assumptions shared by participants and insiders. *Laughing with* and *laughing at* create the right domains for positive (beneficial) and negative (critical) modes to appear. Moreover, we should take care when embarking on joking, in order to avoid confusion between the due discipline and the demands of subversion. At any rate, asymmetry effects, with their proportion of shared assumptions and emerging features, assure a reasonable connection to sanction and solidarity. Derision is always latent, as a more or less harmful outcome of humorous play. The two dimensions, ridicule, with its ingroup and outgroup effects, and incongruity, pairing with perceptual asymmetry, derisive or not, may be considered as complementary, and forming a founding duality in terms of social semiotics, as is championed in this paper.

5.4. Reversal theory and the coherence rule

Reversal theory is a structural and phenomenological approach to emotions and personality. It is not a theory specifically dealing with humour, unlike the aforementioned approaches. However, it includes a particular chapter where art and music, ritual celebrations, playing and joking are fruitfully discussed. The theory proceeds along structured pairs of opposition that activate intertwined relationships, sufficiently able to explain the complexities of motivation and emotion. Some of its structuring pairs are telic-atelic, mastery-sympathy or autic-alloic (Apter 2001). The fact that the theory works by uniting opposite pairs and extracting new compositional meaning is very much in our interest. But our great concern lies in the way reversal theory assembles a similar set of questions to those we have been dealing with here, in an elegant and comprehensive manner.

The theory has been reviewed several times in humour research (Martin 2007: 75-81; Attardo 2014, p. 906). It is to believe that, since it comes from a quite different academic subfield, the regularities it presents have had little chance for comparison with those displayed in classical humour research. To start with, its application to humour covers the telic-atelic dimension. Humour, like other forms of play and art, unfolds under the atelic pole, described as “activity oriented” (against the “goal oriented” or telic mode), “looking for fun and immediate enjoyment, adventurous and thrill seeking, spontaneous and open, valuing stimulation and intensity” (Apter 2001, p. 12). The atelic mode matches the playful tone, suitable in humour and fantasy, but also present in art and special commemorations. Although here we are surely simplifying the intricacies of the theory for the sake of rendering a serviceable comparison, playful mode reminds the *non-bona fide* mode usually invoked in humour research. In anthropology, playful tone is deemed as necessary when joke, representation and some forms of ritual are cultivated. There is no doubt that a sort of paratelic state is at work when someone is playing a joke on someone else and switching frames are involved, as Bateson (1985) upheld, keeping in mind a semiotic perspective.

But the main architecture of reversal theory which is relevant for our discussion is the notion of cognitive synergy plus the included idea of identity diminishment. Cognitive synergy in the atelic mode proper to humour (as there may be other uses of the notion) matches the current idea of “assigning mutually exclusive qualities or meanings to some identity (person, object, statement, etc.)”, i.e. sheer incongruity

(Apter 2014, p. 641). Apter explicitly states that cognitive synergy “escapes from logic, and more specifically from Aristotle’s law of identity” (Apter 2014, p. 641), a point we will be resuming in section 6.3. Furthermore, incongruity in humour involves downgrading the identity concerned, what here is simply called “identity diminishment”. As the collapse takes place, a new identity replaces the previous presumed one or simply distorts it. Reversal theory seems to extract its idea of diminishment or belittlement from classical rhetorical approaches, which had spoken of deformity as a main structural cause of humour. Somehow, here cognitive synergy and diminishment are part and parcel of humorous playing. Belittlement is included in the formula, irrespectively of the more or less derisive drive taken in humorous performance.

As already stated, here we are not aiming at championing a new subfield, but our aim is only to present relevant similarities that help cast light on the cohesion of fundamental dualities. Reversal theory relies on the atelic or playful mode, a necessary step to set the right interaction conditions for humour to take place: who are the insiders and who are the outsiders, who is playing with whom. In addition, the theory compiles the incongruity-derision pair, finding an elegant solution respectful of humour structure and, in turn, flexible enough to deal with derision and disparagement when necessary. In a nutshell, these are the points that best fit our purposes of giving cohesion to the substantive dualities we observe in humorous performance.

Last but not least, we should add what we might deem as *the coherence rule*. The former architecture does not explain a crucial intricacy of humorous activity. Neither does the fact of sticking one concept besides the other. Ridicule on one side and incongruity on the other do not make a joke. Participation or exclusion need something more to match humour requirements, just as, likewise, incongruity and belittlement call for something else for things to run well. Douglas (1975b) referred to this question in terms of the coherence problem. She maintained that for one situation to be perceived as humorous, the structure of the joke (in our parlance, incongruity plus belittlement) has to match the situational setting (in our parlance, ingroup and outgroup dimensions). Making jokes about bishops in a lift where one of them has joined us is a risky affair. On the other side, irrelevant allusions uttered in a cumbersome tone can spoil a possible joke. Subversion has to meet inversion to make things come about (Viana 2006); we could term this requirement “the coherence rule”, as it would work across the relevant

social and semiotic dimensions and would force them to proceed conjointly. Douglas (1975a) added a third relevant domain: the body. Laughter embodies the relevant coherence between the dimensions, and this could be the real semiotic background for the coherence rule. Things must happen surprisingly, without previous warning. Happening suddenly is necessary for embodiment. Laughter shows the unexpected intrusion of uncontrolled references. Both cognitive and social dimensions have to operate conjointly for the outburst of laughs.

6.1. Grid effects

As announced, some interesting grid effects follow from the interweaving of basic dimensions. If the cognitive and the social domains must work together for humour to appear, it is likely we could scale the dimensions in order to explore network effects, the particular circuitry they are involved in. Scaling and networking solutions would serve as a ground to exchange concepts and to build better relationships among as yet unrelated subfields. The relevant dimensions to explore will be ridicule, as the marked pole of the social domain, and incongruity, the marked pole of the cognitive domain. Note that solidarity, as the complementary pole of the first domain, by inversion matches belittlement, the complementary pole of the second domain. Thus, ridicule and incongruity seem the best candidates for fruitful scaling. Crucially, we will be considering humour in a phased manner, one pole being the absence thereof and the complementary pole its outbreak or manifestation. The grid will show only the emerging corresponding polarities, but a myriad of common, intermediate or ambiguous cases can also be considered. Grid effects show the inner critical circuitry that relates the fundamental dualities, a circuitry we often face unawares when engaged in humorous activity. The four resulting cases are plotted in Figure A.

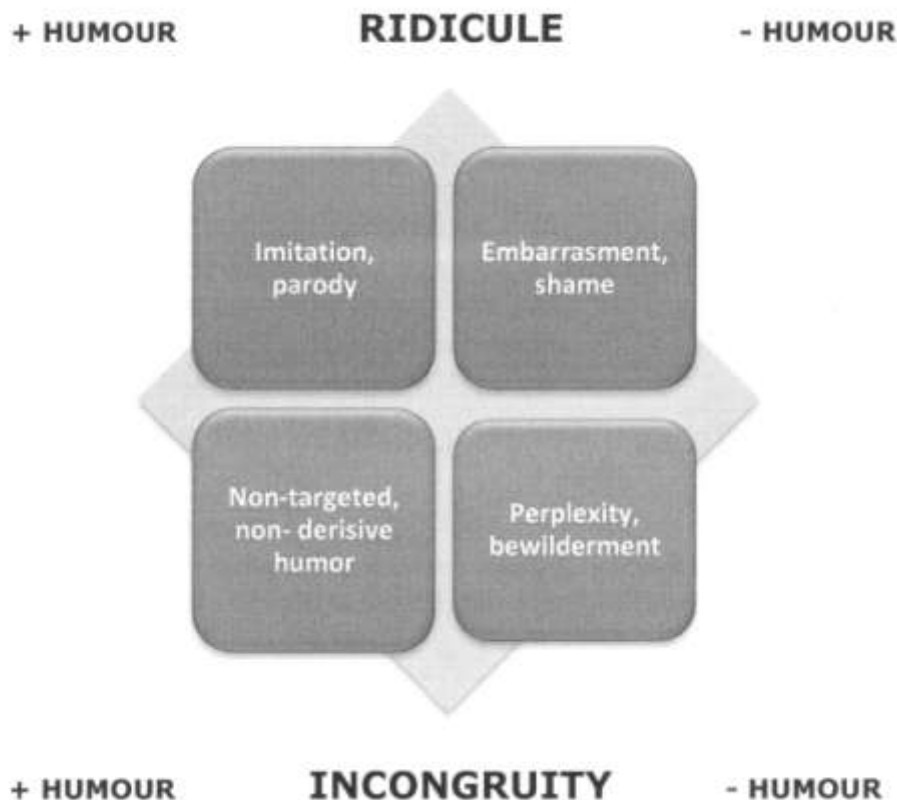


Figure A. Grid effects

Here we entwine ridicule and incongruity with a continuum of variable humorous possibilities. Ridicule and incongruity, i.e. the constituent dualities belonging to social and cognitive domains respectively, appear in the chart on the vertical axis. Ridicule at one end represents the social sanction, either in the disciplinary or in the rebellious mode; incongruity at the other end represents the cognitive clash, tacitly including diminishment. The vertical axis covers this continuum. On the horizontal axis we start from overt humour on the left and then move to the absence of humour on the right. The first square on the top left shows imitation and parody: the original possibility of producing ridicule implying humour, but not necessarily incongruity. Imitation furnishes comical ridicule and targets without any special cognitive work. The second square on the top right shows sheer ridicule without necessarily implying humour: it is the case of embarrassment or shame. Again, no special cognitive work is required: just the subversion of social rules. Of course, natural opportunities develop under multifarious circumstances, but, as stated, the network presents the basic semiotic issues. As we travel down through the vertical axis, incongruity gains importance over

ridicule. The third square on the bottom left represents white humour, sheer incongruity without necessarily implying ridicule; as we know, it is the preferred case for incongruity theories, where nobody is hurt by an inconvenient joke. Since it shows the humorous pole of incongruity, it must be contrasted with its non-humorous counterpart, the non-funny cognitive collapse on the bottom right, which encompasses perplexity and bewilderment. Besides this chart, other connected possibilities arise: parody may be produced for artistic purposes only, as bewilderment may be the outcome of ignorance, without involving framing collapse. Correspondingly, there may also be shame without ridicule, when someone feels guilty, as well as conventional amusement in playing, without involving logical incongruities.

Both squares on the right side of the grid show the non-humorous alternatives: embarrassment for the social domain, bewilderment for the cognitive. Complementarily, both squares on the left side show the humorous options, the display of ridicule through social basic action in imitation or parody or the uncommitted but still funny play on collapsing frames in non-derisive humour. Intermediate and more nuanced cases like teasing, mockery or sarcasm can be easily deduced from the basic matrix presented here, just moving along intermediate steps on one axis or the other. At any rate, the four squares involve the social and semiotic conditions invoked in this paper: sanction and solidarity, beneficial vs. critical sides of humorous practices, cognitive provisions at one end and social conditions at the other, plus the coherence rule claiming laughter to appear. They cover a fair range of possibilities, but their main virtue is the potential to reassemble our founding dualities and to make them truly productive. The categories resulting from the motion along the polar axis could be used in different research subfields, in order to explore a diversity of cases, complex situations or their possible links. In the next section we will review some evolutionary arguments looking for historical support in favour of the foundational character of the constitutive sociosemiotic dualities examined in this paper.

6.2. Evolution matters

Humour and laughter in evolution are usually described as linear adaptive processes towards better cognitive faculties and scholars have usually searched for selection criteria to match incongruities with human extended thinking abilities, looking for some sort of agreement: for example, the selective value of the formers would be related to the improvement of human reasoning (Hurley et al. 2011). But perhaps the story does

not run in such a linear way. Instead of adaptive procedures, we could probably have had *exaptations*, things that first serve one purpose and then are used in new contexts for new, as yet inadvertent ends. Furthermore, perhaps rationality is not a question of having it or not, but a process that expands gradually under certain circumstances and contexts, as something related to activity, as pragmatics and cognitive semiotics usually uphold.

If laughter is the embodied sign of the coherence rule, marking the intrusion of uncontrolled references, its evolutionary history does not show selective linearity. It has been widely acknowledged that laughter is an ancient reflex of play and amusement, close to emotional vocalizations already present in primates and other mammals (Davila Ross et al. 2010). Considered in this broad bioanthropological time span, the ancient reflex has certainly preceded the spread of articulated language. The distinctive way laughter adopts in the human species must be related to bipedalism and the emerging, new possibilities for running and breathing (Provine 2000).

Interestingly enough, human laughter consists of exhalations only (unlike similar vocalizations in primates), a feature that matches linguistic activity (Chafe 2007), although, as stated, the former has unequivocally predated the latter, under its modern, articulated varieties that are characteristic of *Homo sapiens*. The alliance of humour with cognition and language forming a consolidated semiotic triad is supposed to have gone through two different and meaningful stages: a) the functional extension of uses and effects of laughter after thousands or years of social adaptation through bonding and group discrimination, and b) the rewiring of the ancient reflex of laughter to the new, widened cognitive connectivity proper to modern man, in order to signal uncontrolled associations.

As for the functional extension of uses and effects, scholars have highlighted the relevance of the distinction between Duchenne laughter and non-Duchenne laughter (Duchenne 1990; Wild et al. 2003; Gervais and Wilson 2005): the former responds to the old, spontaneous reflex of play and amusement, while the latter displays the conventional, imitative behaviour of confidence and solidarity, and also of irony and derision. Although both types merge in everyday interaction in modern man, the latter, more socially driven, could be traced to the spread of mimicry and the social abilities specific to *Homo ergaster* and *Homo erectus* more than one and a half million years ago. This imitative laughter is supposed to have acquired new social functions, linked to

group solidarity and discrimination, thus gaining survival interest (Ramachandran 1998; Weisfeld 1993; Scott et al. 2014).

As for the reusing of the old reflex of laughter in order to signal the mind's widened connectivity, this looks a much more recent drift related to the rich associative potential only acquired in the last phases of human evolution (Fitch 2010). Human symbolic, unbounded connectivity kindled by articulated languages involves a productive network of association types (metaphorical, metonymical, concerning form or content) which are the background of humorous performance (Deacon 1997; Bateson 1985). Humour and laughter mark the unleashing of uncontrolled associations suddenly perceived whether in situations or in discourse. Symbolic communication entails group dimensions and social structure, as there are no "individual" languages. Both the symbolic and the social lie at the heart of cultures and human groups all around the world; the consequence is that cognition hinges on the social domain to expand and cultivate, and so humour does so, as a primary qualification for social semiotics. This is a good reason to understand the intriguing connection between the early developed imitative laughter and the new possibilities of expanded connectivity.

Here we have the three relevant levels interconnected through different evolutionary steps: a) an ancient vocalization reflex gaining new uses, b) the discriminating social functions of sanction and solidarity through imitative laughter, as humour was used for discipline or rebellion, and c) the expanded human symbolic abilities reusing the social potential of laughter in order to highlight unintended associations. What here we have named "the coherence rule" is not an intentional step but the outcome of different nonlinear evolutionary stages. The rich possibilities, both social and cognitive, opened by this powerful (and ancient) alliance of the discriminatory or regulatory dimension and the symbolic, but always shared, unbounded cognitive dimension has had an enormous adaptive value, since laughter and humour still stay with us permeating everyday interaction. Its dual origin may be related, on the one side, to the origins of social groups, with bonding and exclusion as defining features, and on the other side, to the origins of the mind's enlarged connectivity, with its rich associative capacities.

6.3. Social order and social cognition

The positive alliance of humour, social rules and cognition has been largely deemed as one of the triggering factors of the modern human mind. Dreaming, play and fantasy

were viewed in the mid-20th century as evolutionary precursors of symbolic and linguistic capacities (Bateson 1985). Furthermore, the slow evolutionary development specific to the human species was linked to the persistence of juvenile features throughout adult life, a property that has been considered the main reason for cognitive flexibility, invention in art and sciences, and forms of play and humour (Montague 1981). More recently, Dunbar (2004) has underscored the role of play and humour in social interaction as one of the cohesive factors that may have moulded the development of language. As he sees it, conversational interaction is the context where smiles and laughter arise (both of inclusion and exclusion), besides more elaborated forms of communication: namely, he emphasizes that linguistic activity represents the surface, and interaction and play are the grounding communicative forms (and not the other way around).

We could push these ideas lightly further. Frame collapse works on the same basis as the primitive mind. The earliest forms of thinking relied on metaphors, metonymy and figurativeness; participation (i.e. the blurring of borders between inner and outer experience; Cassirer 1955) works by blending cognitive frames, the same way that recent research has pointed out for humour and creativity (Brône et al. 2015). The contention that invention and humour were primitive stages of cognition, fuelled by enlarged neural connectivity, is very suggestive. Incongruities (i.e. frame collapsing) are unintended connections against the more general background of extended associative potential. Kant once remarked that in humour and laughter “there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction)” (Kant 1914 [1790], p. 222). As a sheer rationalist, he figured that incongruities, although pleasant, worked on the non-logical, non-comprehensible side of the mind. Also the primitive mind flowed through fantasy and figurative thinking (with pragmatic and social consequences), bypassing rational logic. More recently, the philosopher E. Cassirer pointed out that comic art possessed “sympathetic vision” (Cassirer 1944, p. 150), which is to say, the capacity to blur frontiers between inner and outer worlds, and to combine apparently incompatible frames.

On the other side, we have a bodily sign for embarrassment, already commented by Darwin (2012 [1989]), i.e. blushing. Blushing is the earliest mark for the emergence of what we call today a *theory of mind* or developed empathy, the capacity of seeing ourselves through the lens with which the others see us. Blushing is not funny for the

one who is suffering the shame, but it can be for the observers. Note that blushing looks like the inner, involuntary reflex of intimate social transgression, while laughter, on the other side, looks like the outer, involuntary reflex of a more or less shared frame collapse. And again, laughter is funny for participants, but can be abusive for foreigners. Both are non-voluntary reflexes, vestiges of early phases of hominization imprinted in common behaviour (for “vestiges” in this sense, cf. Donald 2002). Finally, note that blushing, being an inner sign, responds to social bonds, while humour and laughter, being a shared sign, also respond to cognitive demands. Interestingly enough, both signals combine the social and the cognitive dimensions. It is tempting to qualify the former as the negative (or inhibitory) sociocognitive embodied mark, while the latter would be its positive (or exciting) counterpart, also embodied, and still unleashing large sociocognitive effects. Laughter and humour are entangled in different sociosemiotic domains, from art and play, to critical discovery. It is arguable that the latent similarity of humorous procedures with early forms of figurative thinking, working on the associative potential of metaphor and metonymy, mirrors the growth of neural connectivity, the unbounded possibilities of meaning and interpretation, humour being the mark of unintended association, in an increasing context of rich symbolic activity.

There is no point in separating the symbolic from the social. The social dimension is the logical and evolutionary background from where the symbolic dimension arises. Moreover, there are no languages and no symbolic information without social bonds. Individual languages are an oxymoron. Interpretation always involves people to interpret. All symbolic information belongs to the social domain: something is shared or is not shared. These are the grounds for social semiosis. Shared assumptions in humour are the ground for positive jocularity. Conversely, non-shared assumptions are the basis for ridicule and exclusion. The clash of frames that we call incongruity entails a tacit diminishment of meaning from where derision arises, a diminishment that must be shared and accepted by the participants. Cognitive incongruity does not make complete sense without the potentiality of ridicule, its necessary social counterpart. This curious alliance has been furnishing cultural content for centuries, in its double (or quadripartite) dimension, the cognitive clash (or unintended association), including diminishment, and the derisive drift (feeding solidarity or exclusion), in its disciplinary or rebellious forms.

7. Conclusions

In this paper it has been argued that the dualities we usually observe in humorous performance, like disparagement vs. incongruity, positive (or beneficial) vs. negative (or critical) sides of humour, can be fruitfully examined as founding pairs that give content and structure to humorous activity. Firstly, Billig's (2005) recent approach to discipline and ridicule has been assessed, and particularly his attacks on the ideological uses of what has been called positive humour, along with his critiques of contemporary, linguistic and disengaged perspectives on the topic. Secondly, we have surveyed defenders and detractors of humour, trying to classify and understand both the historical alternatives and their contemporary counterparts. Thirdly, cognitive and linguistic approaches have been reviewed, as well as the main bulk of humour theories and the way they deal with basic dualities, i.e. mainly the social and the cognitive domains we are trying to relate here. The review has sought both strong points and theoretical lags, and current approaches have been connected to natural and cultural paradigms respectively, lying at the origins of humour studies.

Then, it is championed that the basic duality of social vs. cognitive dimension needs to be approached from an entangled perspective, as part of a social semiotics. The social dimension has to rely on both solidarity and sanction. Humour only develops in safe and affiliative contexts, which is the solidarity side; but it is also fed by derision and ridicule, whether disciplinary (i.e. corrective) or rebellious (or critical), which is the sanctionary side. Sanction and solidarity are the two pillars of social order, one acting internally, the other externally. But the cognitive dimension in humour is also twofold: it entails both incongruity and diminishment (or belittlement), as a result of perceptive asymmetry. It is from this asymmetry that derision arises, when critical or corrective humour is at stake. Thus, group discrimination and asymmetry effects form the right pair, in order for us to grasp humorous activity in its proper dimensions. As we have shown, reversal theory summons up the playful (or atelic) mode (necessary in the social domain), and the conjunction of incongruity and perceptual asymmetry, what it is referred to as cognitive synergy. To this quadripartite pattern, we should add the coherence rule, which relies on the embodiment of laughter as a solid support for semiotic matching and coherence between levels.

From this operational interweaving, some interesting grid effects emerge, which allow us to relate ridicule and incongruity to their non-humorous counterparts: shame

and guilt on the one side, perplexity or bewilderment on the other. As we have shown in Figure A, ridicule and incongruity meet each other but also display a set of possibilities that could be used as stepping-stones for different disciplines, in order to build a better common ground for discussion: i.e. white humour against derisive, nearly harmful humour, or simple comic mimicry against logical puzzles or perplexity; here it is assumed that these relationships come up from partial semiotic networks founded on our elementary dimensions.

Lastly, we resort to evolutionary arguments in order to underpin the claim about the fundamental dualities. The gradual emergence of human laughter (first, long before the spread of articulated languages) and its extension to a diversity of social uses reinforce the issue of social discrimination, ingroup bonding and outgroup sanction. Secondly, the expanded neural connectivity that characterizes the modern human mind (allegedly a more recent acquisition) should be presumably related to the unbounded capacity of association through metaphor, metonymy and symbolic thinking. In this emerging context of rich associative potential, humour and laughter mark the unleashing of uncontrolled connections, whether perceived in situations or in discourse. Furthermore, it is arguable that the similarity of humorous procedures with early forms of figurative thinking, working on the associative possibilities of metaphor and metonymy, mirrors the growth of cognitive capacities, where humour would represent the unintended counterpart of intentional symbolic thinking.

As stated, there is no point in separating the symbolic from the social. The former constitutes the right background for the latter, also when humour is involved. Shared assumptions in humour are the ground for positive jocularity, while non-shared assumptions set the basis for ridicule and exclusion. Cognitive incongruity does not make complete sense without the possibility of ridicule as its necessary social counterpart. The cognitive clash or unintended association (which entails diminishment) and the derisive drift (feeding ingroup bonding and outgroup exclusion) work together as an essential and productive sociosemiotic pair.

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