Humor, language varieties, and ideology: Implications for L2 language teaching

[Umorismo, varietà linguistiche e ideologia: Ricadute per l'insegnamento delle lingue straniere]

Laura Di Ferrante[1*], Salvatore Attardo[2]

[1] Sapienza, Università di Roma
[2] Texas A&M University-Commerce

*E-mail: laura.diferrante@uniroma1.it

Original article

ABSTRACT

EN Humor and language varieties characterize everyday interactions and because of their relevance and ideological force, official guidelines and experts have advocated for them to be integrated in the language curricula. However, much work still needs to be carried out to explore ways to simultaneously implement humor and linguistic diversity in the language classroom. In particular, the hidden ideological underpinnings of much diatopically marked language humor need to be clarified. This paper suggests ways in which these issues can be integrated in curricular activities.

Key words: Humor, language varieties, ideology, L2 language teaching

IT Le interazioni quotidiane sono permeate da umorismo e varietà linguistiche; proprio per la loro importanza e forza ideologica, linee guida ufficiali ed esperti ne incoraggiano l'introduzione all'interno dei curricula disciplinari in ambito linguistico. Si rileva però la necessità di analizzare e sperimentare modalità efficienti per integrare simultaneamente l'umorismo e la diversità linguistica all'interno della classe di lingue; in particolare, appare essenziale l'esplorazione delle impalcature ideologiche connesse con l'umorismo verbale diatopicamente marcato. In questo lavoro vengono presentate alcune riflessioni e proposte su come operare tali integrazioni all'interno delle attività didattiche

Parole chiave: Umorismo, varietà linguistiche, ideologia, insegnamento delle lingue straniere

1. Introduction

Historically, the research on humor in the teaching of any academic discipline is dominated by optimistic and unsubstantiated claims that the use of humor in teaching improves learning. The empirical research however is much more cautious and shows that at best the use of humor improves the educational experience (students and teachers like humor) but it seems to have little if any effect on retention and learning (Attardo, 2020; Banas et al., 2011; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Frymier & Wanzer, 2021; McMorris et al., 1997; Martin et al., 2006). Some studies address foreign language teaching (e.g., Deneire, 1995; Schmitz, 2002; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011) directly and Vega (1989, 1990) claimed that humor should be treated as a fifth competence. Insofar as the L2 teacher wishes to provide a realistic and complete view of L2 use, obviously humor must be included, since not only all societies use humor, but it has been shown that teachers use humor frequently, albeit with significant variability (Attardo, 2020). While the mechanisms of humor are universal, each culture implements them differently, to some extent. So, while it may not be necessary to teach learners about incongruity, it would be necessary, for example, to teach an Italian learner about American knock-knock jokes, a genre of joke unknown in Italy.

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the issues that arise when attempting to teach humorous text in a foreign language (Lx) classroom. Our argument is developed with two case studies using Italian and English with a particular focus on dialectal humor, but obviously our claim is general and extends to any language. Our argument is that if we wish to teach a language in compliance with the views that suggest that humor competence should be taught as well, then it is necessary to both teach about dialectal varieties and the ideologies underlying the relationship between the national language and the dialectal varieties themselves.

Despite the scant evidence of the effectiveness of humor to facilitate learning, there is a general consensus, at least pre-theoretically, that teaching humor is a valuable activity. Furthermore, as we will show, the understanding of humor is part of the expected competence taught by teachers in a Lx situation, for example as articulated by European and American educational authorities. This provides a different rationale for teaching humor or teaching humorous materials. In the following sections, we thus assume that teaching humor is a valid use of the teacher's and the students' time. This raises the question of what kind of humor to teach. We thus show some evidence that humor and language varieties belong in the language classroom bringing forth some of the challenges learners will face (see Bell, 2007). Finally, some teaching proposals and implications will be presented.[1]

2. Humor in the language classroom

Studies on the role of humor in teaching additional languages are mostly rooted in the framework of motivation as a significantly relevant variable affecting learning (see, for example, Reddington, 2015; Tuncay, 2007) While there are no definitive findings on the relation between the use of humor in the classroom and the improvement of proficiency in the target second/foreign language, it has been shown that humor in the classroom increases humor competence in the target language/culture (see Deneire, 1995). This aspect is strongly related to a specific component of linguistic competence. The

---

[1] The present work stems from a close collaboration between the two authors. For the specific concerns of Italian academy, Salvatore Attardo is responsible for section 1, 3, 4, 4.1 and Laura Di Ferrante is responsible for section 2, 3.1, 4.2, 5. Both authors would like to acknowledge Lucy Pickering's help in the transcription and analysis of the English dialogue.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020) mentions humor competence both implicitly and explicitly several times. For example, the C1 descriptor of Reading Correspondence, placed under the umbrella of Reading Comprehension, reads, "**Can understand** slang, idiomatic expressions and **jokes** in private correspondence" (p. 54, o*ur emphasis*) and a similar reference is also present in the C2 descriptor of Understanding as a Member of a Live Audience, which is under Oral Comprehension: "**Can get the point of jokes** or allusions in a presentation." (p. 50, o*ur emphasis*).

Even more, explicit references to humor competence can be found as a part of several descriptors at the C levels and in one case at the B2 level (emphases in the following citations are ours):
- "**Can exploit** idiom and **humour** appropriately to enhance the impact of the text." (p. 67, Written Production > Creative Writing > C2)
- "**Can incorporate** idiom and **humour**, though use of the latter is not always appropriate" (p. 67, Written Production > Creative Writing > C1)
- "**Can understand humour, irony and implicit cultural references and pick up nuances of meaning**" (p. 137, Sociolinguistic Competence > Sociolinguistic Appropriateness > C1)
- "**Can use with precision** colloquialisms, **humorous language**, idiomatic abbreviations and/or specialised register to enhance the impact of comments made in an online discussion" (p. 260, Supplementary Descriptors > Individual Descriptors > Online Conversation and Discussion > C2)
- **Can use humour appropriate to the situation (e.g. an anecdote, a joking or light-hearted comment)** in order to create a positive atmosphere or to redirect attention. (p. 261, Supplementary Descriptors > Individual Descriptors > Establishing a Positive Atmosphere > B2)

Similarly, in the Proficiency Guidelines of the ACTFL (2012; American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), it is specified that "**Listeners at the Distinguished level can understand language such as that found in** classical theater, art films, professional symposia, academic debates, public policy statements, literary readings, and **most jokes and puns"** (p. 16). In parallel with the C levels of CEFR, the Distinguished level represents the highest proficiency level[2]

It turns out that humor is both a means to learning and a learning goal. This is clearly related to the very nature of humor, at least in reference to verbal humor: it is an object that is linguistically marked as well as culturally, pragmatically, sociolinguistically and also individually; as Gironzetti put it, "teaching humor can contribute to train learners to become intercultural speakers and to help them develop intercultural awareness" (2010, p. 128, *our translation*).

In order for verbal humor to be effective, both interlocutors need to be equipped with a matching *humor competence* (Attardo 1994, 2001, 2020; Raskin 1985), which comprises both the cognitive and linguistic abilities to process a text and the actual performance of the humor - in production and reception. Most of the literature on humor and language teaching has therefore focused on the ways in which such competence can be taught and acquired (see, for example, Bell, 2014; Hodson, 2014). While this particular focus on humor is still in its early stages, when referring to the teaching and learning of Italian as a second language, some interesting studies have represented steps forward in the

---

[2] From bottom up, the ACTFL levels are Novice low, mid, high, Intermediate low, mid, high, Advanced low, mid, high, Superior, Distinguished; while the CEFR's are A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2.

understanding of some specific traits of Italian humor. These specific traits range from explicit pragmalinguistic expressions that clearly signal the humorous intention (see Banfi, 1995; Forabosco, 2020, pp. 22-25), to more general features which diatopically mark humor. Gironzetti (2010) analyzed a corpus of humorous texts, 30 comic strips in Italian and 30 in Spanish, and the starting episode of two TV series (one in Italian and one in Spanish). Through the analysis, she found markers of humor that were typically found in the Italian texts: the use of dialect (especially connected to exaggeration), emphatic intonation, specific topics (e.g. the carabinieri - one of the Italian police-, conflict between Rome and Milan, Vatican and politics). According to Gironzetti, these markers need to be taken into account by Italian L2 teachers who intend to teach humor to their students.

3. Humor and language (substandard) varieties

Humor is connected to the language in which the humorous text is produced: "Humour means understanding not only the language and words but their use, meaning, subtle nuances, the underlying culture, implications and unwritten messages." (Tuncay, 2007, p. 2; see also Banfi, 1995). In many cultures, dialects are used to produce humor. In the Italian language, for example, this is common to the point where it can be considered one of its characterizing elements: the funniness of some of the most famous Italian actors—from Totò to Massimo Troisi, from Franca Valeri to Checco Zalone—has been analyzed in relation to the language varieties these would use (see, for example, Cirasola, 1982; Coveri, 1992; D'Amico, 2008). This is probably in part due to the peculiar historical development of Italian, which was imposed essentially as a foreign language, onto a vital tradition of local varieties that represented the continuous evolution of post-classical Latin, relabeled as mere "dialects" and hence the prominence dialects have in everyday conversations of Italian speakers, where they often still represent the L1 of the speakers.

Romanesco has a slightly different status, in comparison to other regional varieties, because it is the dialect of the capital and, since a lot of media and journalistic production takes place in the capital, it has itself influenced the national standard. However, much like the other regional varieties, Romanesco has receded significantly in the last 70 years. Nowadays, Romanesco is fully mutually intelligible with standard Italian, with however remaining phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical differences. In fact, it has been claimed that the linguistic situation in Rome is best described as an acrolectal-basilectal continuum Italian-Romanesco (D'Achille, 2011; D'Achille et al., 2012).

In particular, the use of dialects or regional varieties of Italian to produce humor is rooted in what linguists have called "conscious bilingualism" (Sobrero, 1989, p. 210) of Italian speakers[3]: in many different contexts, in Italy, standard Italian and dialect are used alternatively and sometimes interchangeably. One additional reflection to add to this sociolinguistic picture is the fact that Italian dialects and regional varieties are local and deeply connected to the identity of the people living in those areas, which makes dialects a sort of access door to a series of attitudes and stereotypes connected to their speakers (see for example Di Ferrante, 2008; Di Ferrante et al., 2019; Volkart Rey, 1990).

Here we may evoke Silverstein's (2016) notion of "enregisterment" to explicate the process whereby these attitudes and stereotypes are connected with the speakers. Essentially, each utterance indexes (refers to) implicitly the circumstances of its context (who the speakers are, when and where the utterance is produced, etc.). Through repetition, some of these circumstances become associated semiotically with the utterance, so that the utterance now means/refers to these circumstances as well. Therefore, if jokes are told about members of less well educated social strata, the attitude toward those targets of humor becomes associated with the targets, i.e., we internalize a humorous stereotype, e.g., the stingy Scots or Genovese or, more relevant to our discussion, the uneducated and poor Romanesco

---

[3] The ability to use both language and dialect in different communicative situations.

or Irish Traveler speakers, both peripheral[4] (Davies, 1990), if for different reasons. For this reason, dialects and language varieties are perfectly suited for humorous jokes. This is true across the world as *ethnic humor,* is "a type of humor in which fun is made of the perceived behavior, customs, personality, or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific socio-cultural identity" (Apte, 1987, p. 28; Davies, 1990).

3.1. Humor, language varieties, and stereotypes

In particular, this type of humor is based on shared stereotypes about specific groups of people. Given that stereotypes "arise from basic mental structures and processes that allow people to simplify the world and thinking efficiently" (Operario & Fiske 2004, p. 133), mentioning a given origin comes attached with one or multiple qualities (i.e., stereotypes), connected to such origin. These stereotypes have often been "coded" to the extent they constitute opening lines of many jokes. For example, well known opening lines based on fixed stereotypes such as, "An Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman" or "Ci sono un americano, un francese e un italiano"[5] function both as signals of the speaker's intention to tell a joke and as a predictor of the encyclopedic knowledge that needs to be activated to understand it (see Nash, 1985).

Language varieties/dialects and humor are often used together and in a variety of different texts, including audiovisual texts, which have been investigated from the perspective of translation studies and dubbing as both language varieties and humor strictly depend on the specificity of their original socio-cultural context (see Chiaro, 2004, 2008; Minutella, 2016). Kolstoff (2000) suggests that dialects are "ideologically potent" (p. 81) and strictly connected to identity, so that they are used on screen to provide information about the character in terms of heritage, socio-economic status, etc. For example, consistently with this idea, in a study on *The Simpsons,* Ferrari and Straubhaar (2010) notice that in the Italian version, one of the characters is given a "Venetian accent, a factor that both increases the humor and seems to suggest 'genuine' belonging." (p. 95). Analyzing the same animated TV series, Barra (2007) notices that the characters who had an Italian/Italian American accent in the English version, when translated to Italian were dubbed as having accent in different Southern regional varieties of Italian according to a stereotyped criterion which is indicated by Barra (2007) as an "established custom" (*our translation*, p. 214) of connecting Sicilian accent to criminal characters and the Neapolitan accent to humorous ones. This suggests that while dialects may trigger humor because of the stereotypes they elicit, sometimes being humorous may itself be a stereotype attached to people of a given origin.

Moreover, an additional reason why dialects may trigger humor relates to the type of relationships among people from different places. In the case of Italy, for example, one of the *topoi* is the rivalry between Northern and Southern Regions, rooted in historical reasons that determined a marked divide in terms of development and infrastructure: Italy's most familiar narratives, both in literature and in the media, are often based on issues of North versus South. Such a divide is often the major source of both drama and comedy, since not only the portrayed characters usually reflect the incommensurable separation between the two areas, but they also present comical stereotypical traits highlighted through the conventional use of specific regional accents and expressions. (Ferrari & Straubhaar, 2010, p. 54)

Consistently with these reflections, in her study on the Italian dubbing of the animated film *Gnomeo & Juliet,* Minutella (2016) found that the opposition between the two Shakespearean families was indeed also presented, in the animated film, by attributing the garden gnomes respectively a northern and a southern accent. This clearly points at the "us vs. them ideology" (Van Dijk, 2000). On the use of Italian dialects in film, see Grochowska-Reiter (2016, 2020), Idini (2021), and Moccagatta (2011).

---

[4] Davies (1990) notes that the targets of ethnic jokes tend to be peripheral ethnic groups, both geographically and socially. This is true of Romanesco as well, which is spoken in the less affluent outskirts of Rome.

[5] The are an American man, a French man, and an Italian man.

4. Teaching with language varieties and humor

Since dialect and regional variations are embedded in speakers' everyday exchanges, the exposure of learners to multiple language varieties has been largely advocated (see, for example, Gutierrez & Fairclough, 2006; Stollhans, 2020). Some studies have also found positive correlations between learners' exposure to linguistic diversity and language learning (see, for example, Bice & Kroll, 2019; Schoonmaker-Gates, 2017). One might play devil's advocate and ask why would the teacher tangle with what is essentially a text written and/or produced (partially or completely) in what is, linguistically speaking, a different language. That is a fair argument, but if one wants to expose the students to the reality of humor production at large in Italy, then dialectal humor is simply inevitable. As we saw, some of the greatest performers and comedians are very closely associated with regional varieties, in Italy and elsewhere.

Let us then consider a couple of examples, from *Un Americano a Roma* (An American in Rome), a film directed by Steno in 1954, and from *Snatch*, a film directed by Guy Ritchie (2000). Both are popular, mainstream movies, with wide audiences, which learners could reasonably encounter outside of a classroom setting. Before we turn to analyzing the passages, we must remember that humor is often hyperdetermined (Attardo, 1994, p. 267; 2021, p. 145); in particular, multimodal humor is by definition not restricted to a single modality. A common occurrence is that a multimodal humorous text presents several concurrent sources of humor which support and enhance each other. Let us consider an example from *Un Americano a Roma*: during the famous "maccaroni" scene, we see Alberto Sordi's character putting jam, mustard, yogurt, and milk on a slice of bread and then reacting with predictable disgust to the taste of this concoction. He also pronounces the names of these foodstuff with an "American" accent and produces an "English" sentence "What's the name of the mostarda" however code switching to Italian for the "mostarda" noun ("mustard"). He also comments in Romanesco: "Questa è la robba che magnano gli Americani, vedi?" ["This is what Americans eat, see?"] and in accented Italian "Robba sana, sostanziosa" [Italian: "Roba"; "Healthy stuff, substantial."] Visually the grimaces of disgust are impossible to miss and obviously humorous. After spitting the food back onto the plate, he comments in Romanesco: "Ammazza che zozzeria!" ["What a dirty thing!"] and then begins to eat the pasta on the table. Here we can identify at least the following sources of humor:

1. The incongruous combination of foodstuffs;
2. The incongruous attribution of the combination to the Americans;
3. The incongruity between the early positive comments (healthy, substantial stuff) and the latter negative ones ("what a dirty thing!");
4. The visual incongruity between the expected behavior of one eating and spitting the food in the plate as well as the grimace soft disgust [visual humor];
5. The shadow opposition (Chlopicki, 1987), i.e., an opposition that underlies the entire text, between the desire to be American and the Italian/Roman identity of the main character. This opposition is manifested in different ways, for example in the use of English during a self-directed monologue (the character is alone in the room when uttering the sentences).

4.1. Me ma needs a caravan - Snatch

The following scene from the film Snatch (2000), directed by Guy Ritchie, features a conversation between Turkey, a small-time illegal boxing promoter from East London, played by Jason Statham, and Mickey, an Irish Traveller, played by Brad Pitt. Turkey is trying to convince Mikey to do another match, but Mikey asks for a better caravan for his mother. The two are facing each other in a meadow: Turkey is with one associate whereas Mikey has several other men with him; the following dialog ensues:

Turkey: Do you want to do it?
Mickey: That depends.
T: On what?
M: On you buying this caravan. Not the rouge one. The rose.
T: It's not the same caravan.
M: Not the same fight.
T: It's twice the size of the last one.
M: Turkish, the fight is twice the size. And me ma needs a caravan. I like to look after me ma. It's a fair deal. Take it.
T: You're lucky we aren't worm food after your last performance. Buying a tart's mobile palace is a little fucking rich. (Mikey looks angry) I wasn't calling your mum a tart. I just meant...
M: Save your breath for cooling your porridge. And look she wants the Hector-2 roof lights, ah, the stylish ash-framed furniture and the scatter cushions with the matching shag-pile covering (inaudible whispering) Right. And she's terrible partial to the periwinkle blue. Have I made myself clear?
T: Yeah, that's perfectly clear, Mickey. Just give me one minute to confer with my colleague. (They turn around) Did you understand a word of what he said?

The example is particularly relevant for our analysis because Turkey, in the last line, reveals being as baffled by the speech of Mickey as the viewer is likely to be. Indeed, Pitt's performance is linguistically remarkable because the stylized Irish he is using, combined with the odd lexical choices borrowed from the caravan's brochure, would probably be hard to understand to most English speakers. Indeed, Mr. Pitt said so himself in an interview[6]: "I play this Irish gypsy, and the dialect is unintelligible, contrary to being trained to be clear and understood (…) I called and woke Guy [Ritchie] up and I said, 'Are you okay, if you can't understand your beautifully written dialogue?' And he said, 'Yep.'" (A clip from the movie can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySyBMTo-1sc). The irony of course is that Turkey's English is itself accented (Cockney), but it is clear that Ritchie is making fun of Mickey's speech. A further dimension is added by the fact that Mickey and his companions are Irish Travellers (an Irish nomadic group similar, but unrelated to, the Roma), which explains their interest and expertise in the caravan. In conclusion, here too we find an opposition between a variety (closer to) the standard and a non-standard, peripheral variety, that is made fun of as incomprehensible. While there is no wordplay per se, unlike in the Italian example, the linguistic exuberance of Pitt's caravan monologue clearly hyperdetermines the humor, adding a second layer of play.

Since the dialect used in this scene is very hard to understand, it might look an odd choice for a language classroom. On the contrary, this seems a perfect example to accustom students with prosody and accent of these varieties that while hardly intelligible, can be still recognized and distinguished from others. The point is that by exposing students to these varieties, they will learn to recognize them and discriminate among them, broadening their overall linguistic competence (Di Ferrante et al., 2019).

4.2. The Maranella ravine - An American in Rome

When showing students isolated scenes from a longer film, some contextual information is necessary. In the example below, it is presented a scene from the Italian classic film *An American in Rome* (1954) (the same film of the macaroni scene described above). The protagonist of the example is Nando Mericoni, played by a famous Roman actor, Alberto Sordi. Nando is a young man who lives in Rome, in a low-income neighborhood, but he wishes he were born in Kansas City and he dreams about living in America one day. He (unsuccessfully) tries to eat, dress, and speak like an American. He acts as if he were an American – or, more precisely, according to a stereotyped ideas of Americans generated by Hollywood movies.

---

[6] Brad Pitt's interview: https://www.landmarkcinemas.com/movie-news/brad-pitt-panicked-about-his-dialect-in-snatch

In the scene we are going to analyze[7], Nando wears some accessories which are typical of an American sheriff: the star positioned on the shirt and an American police hat with a badge. He is riding a motorcycle and both the outfit and his ride match the iconic image of Marlon Brando in the movie *The Wild One* (1953).

It's a Sunday and Nando is riding toward the seaside with his girlfriend, Elvira. A middle-aged couple of elegantly dressed American tourists is traveling on the same road in a convertible car. They stop and attract Nando's attention to ask for information.

Table 1.

Speaker	Dialogue Transcription	Translation
Elvira	Nando andiamo non perde tempo. Mariuccia c'aspetta a Castel Fusano	Nando, come on, Mariuccia is waiting for us in Castel Fusano
Nando	Modera modera modera Elvi modera. Ma come abbiamo la fortuna di conoscere due americani, questi c'hanno pure la bandiera questi vengono da Washington. I wanna take plain again [FAKE AMERICAN] ammazza che macchina oh Freccia d'argento. Hallo you comanda [TRANSLANGUAGING] agli ordini americà. Polizia del Kansas city.	Relax, Elvi, relax. We have the opportunity to meet two Americans, these even have the flag, these come from Washington. I wanna take plain again [FAKE AMERICAN] WOW what a car! Silver arrow! Hallo, you command, American! Yes, sir. Kansas city police.
American	uh we want to look for a little place to good fish fish.	
Nando	io non capisc americà [FAKE AMERICAN].	I don't understand, American.
American	we are looking for a good place for fish.	
Nando	fi- adesso t'ho capito amerecà io ti adoro ti voglio bene ma questa confidenza non te la permetto ma chi è fesso, oh qui ci sò le donne modera americà modera	Now I understand you, American, I adore you, I love you, but this familiarity is too much, who's an idiot? [fish - fesso pun]; there are women around, take it easy American.
American	fish [IMITATES FISH]	
Nando	Ammazza come sei brutto americà. Ho capito americà.	Wow. you're very ugly, American. Now I understood American
American	fish	

---

[7] The scene can be retrieved at the 40th minute of the film. The scene analyzed here can also be retrieved at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DT8mIeBws_w

Nando	pesce il pesce tu vòi il pesce vòi magnà er pesce vòi magnà.	Fish, fish, you want fish, you want to eat fish.
American	Go… [READING ON A PIECE OF PAPER] Fiumicino [pronounced with American accent]	
Nando	Fiumis--- pesce de fiume pesce de fiume te vòi magnà mò t'o… mo te spiego americà	River- fish from a river, you want to eat fish from a river; I will explain it to you, American
Elvira	Nando ma te vòi spiccià ma che stai a fà, l'imbecille?	Nando, hurry up, will you? What are you doing? The imbecile?
Nando	Americà io esplic you. [FAKE AMERICAN] Attention attention. You take la tua street e segui sempre la tua main e non te poi sbaglien alright alright [TRANSLANGUAGING]	American, I will explain it to you. Attention, attention. You take your street and you follow your hand and you will not get it wrong, alright alright
American	All I got from that was *right,* honey but it must be turn right	
Wife	Alright	
Nando	In quella localization c'è l'Osteria del Zozzetto attention non annà a destra perché c'è il burrone della Maranella. Alright alright [TRANSLANGUAGING]	In that location is the Osteria del Zozzetto, attention, don't take a right, because there's the ravine of the Maranella, alright, alright
American tourist	That got past me, but there's two right turns, two right turns	
Nando	two… alright alright. I riepilogation americà. You take la tua street e segui sempre la tua main e non te poi sbaglien. Alright alright. [TRANSLANGUAGING]	two… alright alright. I summarization, Americà. You take your street and always follow your hand and you can't go wrong. Alright alright.
American	I don't know how many rights, this fella is putting over. Anyhow, regardless we keep right	
Nando	Alright alright Americà in quella localization c'è l'Osteria del Zozzetto. attention non annà a destra c'è il burrone della Maranella. Alright alright. [AMERICAN OFFERS CIGARETTES]. Thank you very much, non fumo in servizio. La polizia del Kansas city non fuma in servizio. Grazie dell'intenzione.	Alright, alright, in that location is the Osteria del Zozzetto. Watch out, don't take a right, there's the ravine of the Maranella. Alright, alright. [AMERICAN OFFERS CIGARETTES]. Thank you very much, I don't smoke on the job. The Kansas city police does not smoke on the job. Thank you for the thought.

In the scene transcribed above, multiple semiotic, linguistic, and pragmatic are at play simultaneously. As we saw, the Romanesco dialect is easily intelligible by Italian speakers, which makes it particularly suitable to be used in films and to be taught in the classroom. The language instructors who wish to show their students some typical traits of Romanesco, have plenty of material from this scene. They might focus on the definite article *er* in place of the Italian *il* when Nando says *er pesce* (the fish). From there, the way the article varies according to gender and number can be shown. Moreover, like Italian verbs, Romanesco verbs have three conjugations, but unlike Italian, the infinitive does not have the ending *-re,* as in *mangia-re, anda-re, spiccia-re, perde-re*. It turns out that the conjugations look truncated compared to Italian and have the tonic accent on the final syllable: *magnà, annà, spiccià, fà, piacé, finì*.[8] Students may also be prompted to observe how, when conjugating some verbs, like *potere* (can) and *volere* (want), Romanesco's forms are monophthongized: they lack the *u*, so that, for example, the Italian *puoi* is *pòi* and *vuoi* is *vòi*. The scene includes several such examples: *pesce de fiume te vòi magnà; non te poi sbaglien*. Clearly, from here students can be offered the possibility to use the Romanesco pronoun *te* with these verbal forms and generate novel sentences. In terms of vocabulary, the scene is also rich in words that occur very frequently in the Romanesco dialect as it is (re)presented[9] in the *Commedia all'italiana: ammazza* and *zozzone -- zozzetto in our scene*, which is a variant of zozzone, with a different suffix *(-etto* in place of *-one)*-- have been recorded also by Grochowska-Reiter (2016) as typically present in the cinematic representation of the Romanesco dialect.

Looking at the humor in this scene, it is generated through multiple strategies, including the translanguaging between English and Italian and the creation of new words that mocks English morphology and pronunciation. For example, there are at least two occurrences of wordplay based on the two languages. The first, based on an assonance, when the American says *fish* and Nando understands *fesso* (stupid), probably under the assumption that he can understand American and that if a word is pronounced similarly to Italian, then the two words must be the same. The second wordplay is based on the American saying *Fiumicino*, which is a town close to Rome, famous for fish restaurants. The tourist pronounces *Fiumicino* as if it were an American word, so that the syllable *-ci-* is pronounced /sai/ instead of /tʃi:/ Nando probably only grasps the first part of the word and assumes it's *river* (*fiume* in Italian). These two examples also contribute to reinforce the representation of Nando's lack of education and its non-familiarity with foreign languages.

Nando embodies many stereotypes associated with being Roman along with those linked to low income and uneducated people. He is quite informal, he addresses the tourist with *americà,* which is the dialectal version for *American*; he is quite arrogant and bossy: *ammazza quanto sei brutto, americà* [American, you are very ugly!] but perhaps he is unaware of his ignorance. When providing directions, he mixes Romanesco with fake American based on morphosyntactic play where English suffixes are attached to Italian words: *riepilogation* (riepilogo + -tion), *localization* [località + -tion] *sbaglien* [sbaglià + -en] or words are just modified to mimic an English sound: *I esplic you* for *I am going to explain to you* (Italian = io ti spiego). Finally, he connects a few English content words with Italian solutions to fill the gap for the English words he does not know: *you take **la tua** [your] street **e segui sempre la tua** [and always keep your] main **e non te pòi** sbaglien* [and you can't go wrong].

---

[8] Those verbs whose tonic syllable is followed by the endings *-ne* and *-ce* and those verbs that are slippery words in Italian constitute an exception: *perde, rompe*.

[9] ". . .we can't expect that cinema would completely rely on the dialect which is a limited and circumscribed code. It is necessary to find the right balance between expressive values and communicative reasons, namely **between dialect and its representation"** (*our translation and our bold*, Grochowska-Reiter, 2016, p. 66)

As we mentioned earlier, several sociolinguistic studies found that dialect speakers (as opposed to speakers of standard or near-standard varieties) are perceived as linked to low socio-economic and socio-cultural status: "the way in which a character speaks will correlate directly with their social and geographical background, and as audiences or readers we are accustomed to using these clues to help us understand the film or novel" (Hodson 2014, pp. 5-6). Interpreting Mericoni as a "connoisseur of the American world as represented in American cinema of which he is fervent devotee." (Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_American_in_Rome, accessed Sept. 25th, 2021) is to distort the parodic subject: the film portrays a bitter representation of Nando Mericoni as a naive, poor, uneducated provincial who tries to pretend that he knows English and the mores of Americans (specifically, of Kansas)[10], while he speaks no English and his experience of Americans is limited to watching American films. Part of the hilariousness of this scene depends on the translanguaging that Nando uses by mixing dialect, fake American English, and English. While he gives direction, the only English words that are actually intelligible are *street,* and *alright*. Twice Nando warns the tourists not to turn right because there is the Maranella ravine and it is dangerous; unfortunately, the warning is totally conveyed in Romanesco: *attention non annà a destra che c'è il burrone della Maranella*, which makes it impossible for the monolingual American to understand it. Ironically, in fact, he tells his wife "all I got from that was *right*, honey, but it must be *turn right*". Nando pronounces the pair *alright alright* six times in this short scene and as he is giving directions, the poor American tourist cannot be blamed for believing that the direction to take is the opposite of what he is actually told. The miscommunication will result in the American tourists turning right and injuring themselves.

In sum, it should be clear that the Romanesco in this scene can be observed and taught at a plain linguistic level but for the scene to be really understood and the humor competence to be fully acquired, it is necessary to also show the ideological level. Not to take this into consideration would result in the mis- or null understanding of the scene and its humorous component. Nando Mericoni is poor (his motorcycle was acquired from a wrecker), uneducated (he does not speak a foreign language or Standard Italian, for that matter), but at the same time he pretends to be a Kansas city police officer (in Rome!) and that he speaks English. The Americans are similarly presented as stereotypically rich (they drive a fancy car) and rigidly monolingual expecting Italians to speak English. The only character that is not presented parodically is Mericoni's girlfriend, Elvira, whose only line is pointedly to remind the audience that Nando is acting like an idiot.

5. Final remarks

This work is based on three fundamental factors: (1) Official agencies that both in Europe and in the United States regulate the standards for language teaching include humor and language varieties among the competences to be acquired by Lx learners. (2) Humor and language varieties are often used simultaneously and interdependently. (3) In addition, they both are implicitly attached to a series of connotations and ideologies through a series of semantic and pragmatic relations.

The objective of this work has then aimed at answering a fundamental question: How to teach humor competence under the full-fledged definition presented by CEFR and ACTFL, and discussed above? We have argued that in order to be able to fully understand humor produced in a foreign language and culture, learners should be exposed to the linguistic features of humor and language varieties as well as to the stereotypes and ideologies they carry. This is necessary not just not to lose

---

[10] Interestingly, in 1955 Alberto Sordi, the actor who played Nando Mericoni, flew to the United States and was given Kansas City honorary citizenship

linguistic material in translation, but also to make the new users of a language acquainted with content that is not explicitly expressed because it is an inherent part of the encyclopedic knowledge and culture of the native speakers of that language.

Our examples from two different films, one presenting varieties of English and the other a variety of Italian with some translanguaging with (fake) American English, represent two instruments that could be effectively used in the language classroom to raise issues of language varieties and their relations with humor. We further suggest that teaching the language alone, even providing translations and grammar information does not suffice to grant a full understanding of the communicative event. Using the dialect is a precise choice, which is inherently contrasted with using the standard language and it is necessary that teachers involve the students in discovering and interpreting the entailments of such contrast. In particular, the ideological undercurrents vehiculated by the humorous stereotypes need to be made explicit, lest the learners misunderstand some of the points of the humor: in our examples, the casting of characters such as Nando Mericoni and Mickey as peripheral and thereby as others that can be mocked for their poverty and lack of education.

References

ACTFL (2012). *ACTFL proficiency guidelines 2012*. American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

Apte, M.L. (1987). Ethnic humor versus "sense of humor" an American sociocultural dilemma. *American Behavioral Scientist, 30*(3), 27-41.

Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic theories of humor*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Attardo, S. (2001). *Humorous texts*. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.

Attardo, S. (2020). *The linguistics of humor: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Banas, J. A., Dunbar, N., Rodriguez, D., & Liu, S. J. (2011). A review of humor in educational settings: Four decades of research. *Communication Education, 60*(1), 115-144.

Banfi E. (1995) (Ed.) *Sei lezioni sul linguaggio comico*. Dipartimento di Scienze Filologiche e Storiche, Trento.

Barra, L. (2007), Springfield, Italia. Slittamenti e conversioni di senso nell'adattamento italiano di una serie televisiva statunitense. *Studi culturali IV*(2), 207-231.

Bell, N. D. (2007). How native and non-native English speakers adapt to humor in intercultural interaction. *Humor, International Journal of Humor Research, 20*(1), 27-48.

Bell, N. (2014). Second language acquisition. In S. Attardo (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* Vol. 2 (pp. 672-273). SAGE Publications.

Bell, N. D. & Pomerantz, A. (2016). *Humor in the Classroom: A Guide for Language Teachers and Educational Researchers*. Routledge.

Bice, K., & Kroll, J. F. (2019). English only? Monolinguals in linguistically diverse contexts have an edge in language learning. *Brain and Language,* 196, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bandl.2019.104644

Chiaro, D. (2004). Investigating the perception of translated verbally expressed humour on Italian TV, *ESP Across Cultures*, 1*,* 35–52.

Chiaro, D. (2008). Where have all the varieties gone? Chiaro, D. (2008). Where have all the varieties gone? The vicious circle of the disappearing act in screen translations. *Dialects for All Seasons*, 9-25.

Chlopicki, Wladyslaw. 1987. An application of the script theory of semantics to the analysis of selected polish humorous short stories. Unpublished M.A. Thesis. Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN.

Cirasola, N. (1982). *Da Angelo Musco a Massimo Troisi: il cinema comico meridionale*. Bari: Edizioni Dedalo

Council of Europe (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, available at www.coe.int/lang-cefr.

Coveri, L. (1992). I dialetti della "Nuova commedia all'italiana". *Italianistica Scandinava, 2*(4), 75-96.

D'Achille, P. (2011). Italiano di Roma. https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/italiano-di-roma_%28Enciclopedia-dell%27Italiano%29/

D'Achille, P., Stefinlongo, A. & Boccafurni, A. M., (2012). *Lasciatece parlà: il romanesco nell'Italia di oggi*. Carocci.

D'Amico, M. (2008). *La commedia all'italiana. Il cinema comico in Italia dal 1945 al 1975*. Il Saggiatore.

Davies, C. (1990). *Ethnic humor around the world: A comparative analysis*. Indiana University Press.

Deneire, M. (1995). Humor and foreign language teaching. *Humor, International Journal of Humor Research, 8*(3), 285-298. https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.1995.8.3.285

Di Ferrante, L. (2008). *Spazi Linguistici in cambiamento. Un'indagine di matched guise a Milano, Napoli e Roma.* Tesi di Dottorato. Università per Stranieri di Siena.

Di Ferrante, L., Pizziconi S., Ferrarotti, L. (2019). Language perception of foreign and local accents. The linguistic field theory. In C. Ruggiero, H. Arslan, & G. Gianturco (Eds.) *Contemporary Approaches in Social Science Researches.* E-BWN.

Ferrari, C., and Straubhaar, J. (2010). *Since When Is Fran Drescher Jewish? Dubbing Stereotypes in The Nanny, The Simpsons, and The Sopranos.* University of Texas Press.

Forabosco, G. (2020). *Il settimo senso. Psicologia del senso dell'umorismo (con istruzioni per l'uso).* Tarka.

Frymier, A. B., & Wanzer, M. B. (2021). Humor competence in the classroom. In Strick, M. & Ford, T. E. (Eds.). *The Social Psychology of Humor,* (pp. 130-147). Routledge.

Gironzetti, E. (2010). L'umorismo nella didattica dell'italiano per stranieri: proposte didattiche. *Italiano LinguaDue 2.* Università degli Studi di Milano.

Grochowska-Reiter, A. (2016). C'era una volta un milanese, un romano e un siciliano, ovvero come parlava il cinema italiano degli anni del boom. *Studi@ Naukowe 35*, 66-72.

Grochowska-Reiter, A. (2020). La commedia italiana come specchio di lingue e dialetti. *Quaderni del CSCI: rivista annuale di cinema italiano*, (16), 17-25.

Gutierrez, M., & Fairclough, M. (2006). Incorporating linguistic variation into the classroom. In R. Salaberry & B. Lafford (Eds.), *The Art of Teaching Spanish.* Second language acquisition from research to practice (pp. 173-191). Georgetown University Press.

Hodson, J. (2014). *Dialect in film and literature.* Macmillan International Higher Education.

Kozloff, S. (2000). *Overhearing film dialogue.* University of California Press.

Idini, M. (2021). Travolta da un insolito destino: la lingua filmata nell'azzurro mare del cinema, oggi. *Lingue e culture dei media, 5*(1), 57-114.

McMorris, R. F., Boothroyd, R. A., & Pietrangelo, D. J. (1997). Humor in educational testing: A review and discussion. *Applied Measurement in Education, 10*(3), 269-297.

Martin, D. M., Preiss, R. W., Gayle, B. M., & Allen, M. (2006). A meta-analytic assessment of the effect of humorous lectures on learning. In B. M., Gayle, R.W. Preiss, N. Burrell, & M. Allen (Eds.), *Classroom communication and instructional processes: Advances through meta-analysis,* (pp. 295-313). Earlbaum.

Minutella, V. (2016). British Dialects in Animated Films: The Case of 'Gnomeo & Juliet' and its Creative Italian Dubbing. *Status Quaestionis*, (11).

Moccagatta, R. (2011). La lingua salvata: dialetti, gerghi e umori regionali. In Canova G., Farinotti L. (Eds.), *Atlante del cinema italiano. Corpi, paesaggi, figure del contemporaneo,* (pp. 285-299). Garzanti.

Nash W. (1985), *The language of humor.* Longman.

Operario, D., & Fiske, S. T. (2004). Stereotypes: Content, Structures, processes, and context. In M. B. Brewer & M. Hewstone (Eds.), *Social cognition* (pp. 120–141). Blackwell Publishing.

Reddington, E. (2015). Humor and play in language classroom interaction: A review of the literature. *Studies in Applied Linguistics and TESOL, 15*(2), 22-38.

Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic mechanisms of humor.* D. Reidel

Tuncay, H. (2007). 'Welcome to HELL: Humour in English language learning'. *Education Resources Information Centre Online submission* (ED499225), 1–11.

Schmitz, J. R. (2002). Humor as a pedagogical tool in foreign language and translation courses. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research, 15*(1), 89-114.

Schoonmaker-Gates, E. (2017). Regional Variation in the Language Classroom and Beyond: Mapping Learners' Developing Dialectal Competence. *Foreign Language Annals, 50(1*), 177–194. https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12243

Silverstein, M. (2016). The "push" of Lautgesetze and the "pull" of enregisterment. In N. Coupland (Ed.), *Sociolinguistics. Theoretical debates* (pp. 37–67). Cambridge University press.

Sobrero, A. A. (1989). "Diamo acqua" al bilinguismo consapevole. *Italiano e Oltre*, IV(5), 210.

Stollhans, S. (2020). Linguistic variation in language learning classrooms: considering the role of regional variation and 'non-standard' varieties. Languages, Society and Policy https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.62274

Van Dijk, T. A. (2000). Ideology and discourse. English version of an internet course for the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC). July 2000. Retrieved from: http://www.discourses.org/download/books/

Vega, G. (1989) Humor Competence: The fifth component. Unpublished master's thesis. West Lafayette, Purdue University.

Vega, G. (1990, March). Humor competence: The fifth component. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, San Francisco, CA.

Volkart-Rey, R. (1990). *Atteggiamenti linguistici e stratificazione sociale. La percezione dello status sociale attraverso la pronuncia. Indagine empirica a Catania e a Roma.* Bonacci.

Wagner, M., & Urios-Aparisi, E. (2011). The use of humor in the foreign language classroom: Funny and effective? *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 24(4), 399-434.

Bionotes

Laura di Ferrante

Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of English at Sapienza University of Rome. Founding editor and co-editor in chief of E-JournALL, EuroAmerican Journal of Applied Linguistics and Languages, her education background and work experience have been carried out both in Italy and the United States. Her research interests focus on workplace and media discourse, intercultural pragmatics, and applied linguistics.

Salvatore Attardo

PhD, Purdue, 1991, teaches Linguistics at Texas A&M University-Commerce. He has published over 100 articles and over 10 books. His recent books include *Introduction to the Linguistics of Humor*, (Oxford, 2020), and *Pragmatics and its applications to TESOL and SLA*, (Wiley, 2020) and *Eye tracking in Linguistics*, both co-authored with Lucy Pickering, (Bloomsbury, 2022).