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WHY NOT SO SERIOUS? PRAGMATIC DEVICES IN JOKES

[POR QUE NÃO TÃO SÉRIO? DISPOSITIVOS PRAGMÁTICOS EM PIADAS]

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ABSTRACT: The fundamental question in philosophy of humor is: what makes us laugh? In this paper, we will hold the so-called incongruity theory, according to which laughter is provoked by the presentation of inconsistent features in an utterance. For that, we will analyze how pragmatics of language provides ways of presenting incongruities in written and spoken jokes and, hence, provoking a sensation of comic amusement in an audience. Our focus will be on conversational implicatures, speech acts, and presuppositions, and how they are used in joking. This is not an exhaustive analysis of all the ways incongruities are rendered in comic utterances; of course, there are other ways of presenting disharmonies, such as by means of semantic features. Finally, we will discuss whether jokes should be considered as a distinct kind of speech act, instead of just a parasitic use of language.
KEYWORDS: Humor; Incongruity theory; Conversational implicatures; Speech acts; Presuppositions.

RESUMO: A pergunta fundamental na filosofia do humor é: o que nos faz rir? Neste artigo, defenderemos a chamada teoria da incongruência, segundo a qual o riso é provocado pela apresentação de aspectos inconsistentes em um proferimento. Para isso, analisaremos como a pragmática da linguagem fornece maneiras de apresentar incongruências em piadas escritas e faladas e, consequentemente, de provocar a diversão cômica em uma audiência. Nosso foco será em implicaturas conversacionais, atos de fala e pressuposições, e como eles são usados em piadas. Esta não é uma análise exaustiva de todas as formas como incongruências são geradas em proferimentos cômicos; claro, há outros modos de apresentar desarmonias, tais como por meio aspectos semânticos. Por fim, discutiremos se piadas deveriam ser consideradas um tipo distinto de ato de fala, ao invés de só um uso parasitário da linguagem.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Humor; Teoria da incongruência; Implicaturas conversacionais; Atos de fala; Pressuposições.

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1 Introduction: theories of humor

In ancient times, humor and comedy were frequently understood as synonyms to mockery, scorn, or ridicule. According to a well-known biblical story, the prophet Elisha was mocked by a group of teenagers and, as a punishment, God sent two female bears to violently kill the kids. This was a common answer to what is today considered the fundamental question in philosophy of humor: what makes us laugh? Plato, for instance, understood laughter as an amusement coming from our perception of others' vices, and that laughter should be avoided in the education of the young Guardians in his idealized republic. Aristotle, nonetheless some of his remarks on how humor might come from the break of expectations, has a similar standpoint (Morreall, 1987, p. 10-16). This way of understanding humor and laughter is usually known as the *superiority theory* of humor, and has its paradigmatic formulation in Hobbes' claim that our perception of sudden glory triggers laughter (Morreall, 1987, p. 19). This view has the consequence that everything that makes us laugh has a target, and our laughter consists in downplaying it, be it ourselves in a past time or other people. Roger Scruton (1987) is a contemporary defendant of this theory and, according to him, evidence that laughter comes from downplaying the butt of the joke is that no one likes being laughed at, i.e., no one likes to be the target of a joke.

The superiority theory is able to explain scorn and mockery, like the humorous effect attained by the Portuguese comic playwright Gil Vicente, whose acid humor against important social and religious figures of his time is a hallmark. Lots of jokes have targets, and in such cases the superiority theory goes well. Nevertheless, we don't need to go far away to see counterexamples, and the most obvious of them are puns. Take the following pun as an example:

> Can February March? No, but April May.

The humorous effect of this pun lies only in the wordplay involving the similarities between the names of months (March and May) and verbs (march and may), in a sequence that follows part of our ordinary calendar. The focus of the joke is only in words and their similarities; no one is the butt of the joke.

Given the narrowness of the superiority theory, other alternatives were developed. One of them is the *relief theory*. According to it, laughter is the result of the liberation of some kind of energy, or dissipating built-up feelings (Carroll, 2014). This theory is commonly associated with Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud. Using the scientific jargon of their time, their explanations look like metaphors: we have some kind of energy within ourselves, flowing like water through certain channels, and being redistributed through our body according to some stimuli. Humor, then, has the power to channel this flow and, when the punchline comes and the audience notes that this accumulated energy will not be necessary, it is released by means of the characteristic respiratory and muscular movements of laughter. Of course, talking about this mysterious thing called 'energy' seems not to be the kind of discourse most of us would adhere to now, given our subsequent advances in knowing human physiology. Nonetheless, it is possible to charitably reframe the relief theory in order to make it more palatable, substituting this oracular 'energy' by the least problematic term 'expectations'. Humor, then, would come from a break of expectations. The relief theorist explains puns like (1) by claiming that they are breaks of our expectations or the liberation of energy involved in the use of polysemic words, where our expected

interpretations or the mental energy we use to understand what is being said are confronted by an unexpected use of terms.

The strongest objection to the relief theory is also the simplest one: we can explain these phenomena in a simpler way. Indeed, polysemy has an important role in humor caused by puns; however, we can explain the role of this feature without appealing to unwarranted mental entities or processes, like mysterious energies (Carroll, 2014). Even when we adapt the relief theory in terms of expectations, we have problems when dealing with non-temporal humor, that is, cases where there is not exactly a sequence of facts involved in the cause of our laughter. When a pun is made, for example, there is no expectation to be broken, because there is not even time to formulate such expectations. On the other hand, if we account for expectations in terms of subconscious processing based on what is usual, we get back to the problem of unwarranted mental entities, such as unconscious mental states, and so on.

In order to deal with the cases explained by the previous theories without getting in the same troubles they do, another account for humor was formulated: the *incongruity theory*. According to this theory, which is the most popular and the underlying basis for contemporary stand-up comedians (Morreall, 2023), humor comes from the sudden perception of something incongruous. In this case, (1) is funny because our perception of the polysemy involving the names of the months gives rise to comic amusement. The effect of (1) is potentialized by the fact that the months mentioned are in order. Furthermore, as Carroll (2014) proposes, many incongruity theorists believe that this proposal encompasses all other cases usually mentioned as paradigmatic examples of the previous theories. Incongruity, it must be noted, is here employed in a broad sense, comprehending contradictions in classical sense but also moral, social and behavioral disharmonies.[1] It is important to highlight that, in this theory, incongruity is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for humor. As Carroll (2014) and Kulka (2007) claim, incongruities can have other effects in ourselves, such as disgust, angst or fear. There are other constraints in order to get a humorous response from the audience, such as the absence of any danger associated with the situation, or that the incongruity is easily detectable.[2]

Now, given the importance of incongruity in humor, we are going to turn ourselves specifically to spoken and written humor, i.e., we will restrict our domain of investigation to consider aspects of philosophy of language. For that, we will discuss how some features of our spoken and written natural languages work in order to show incongruities whose appraisal results in humor. Our main focus will be here in three phenomena from pragmatics, namely, conversational implicatures, speech acts, and presuppositions. They are not the only features of language used in the manufacturing of funny incongruities; we have, for instance, jokes that are based in other kinds of phenomena from the semantics and the pragmatics of language. However, given the limited extent we have for discussion, we consider that analyzing the proposed cases is sufficient to understand how humorous mechanisms usually work. We can extrapolate the conclusions drawn from this investigation to humor generated by semantic apparatus and conventional implicatures, for instance.[3]

2 Making fun from implicatures

The study of pragmatics usually comprehends the following phenomena: deixis,

(conventional and conversational) implicature, presupposition, speech acts, and aspects of discourse structure (Levinson, 1983, p. 27). As we pointed out, we will narrow our discussion down to three specific cases: conversational implicatures, speech acts, and presuppositions.

Implicatures in general are a way of explaining some cases in which we mean more than we explicitly say in the semantic content of an utterance (Levinson, 1983, p. 97). Conversational implicatures are a specific case, based on the flout of some of our usual principles of conversation for conveying other information than what is explicitly being said by the speaker. Accordingly, we have an utterance like:

> Miss Smith produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of *Home sweet home* (Grice, 1989, p. 37).

This utterance exemplifies a case where the speaker is talking in an unusual way. Ordinarily, we would just say about the performance of the song by Miss Smith that she sang *Home sweet home*. However, we infer from this convoluted formulation that the speaker wants to convey more than the literal utterance does; she wants to say that Miss Smith's performance was sufferable. This is an instance of a conversational implicature. Roughly speaking, when someone flouts some of the principles we usually follow in our ordinary conversations, but stills in a cooperative effort of communication, we are led to infer that something beyond what is literally uttered is being conveyed in order to maintain the assumption of cooperation. The Cooperative Principle (hereafter, CP) can be formulated as: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1989, p. 26). From CP we can derive maxims on the required amount of information, its relevance, the truth of such contribution, and the manner (clear, unambiguous, ordered, etc.) it is presented (Grice, 1989, p. 26-27). Conversational implicatures, then, occur when one of these maxims is flouted, but the speaker stills following CP, such that the audience must make an inference in order to understand what else is being conveyed. In the case of (2), the violation of the maxim of manner, characterized by the convoluted way of expression, brings about the inference that Miss Smith did not sing well.

Many humorous utterances are based on conversational implicatures in order to present its point without being utterly obvious. As Attardo (1990, p. 358-359; 2017, p. 186) puts it, some of the aspects of humorous exchanges should remain implicit - as is usually said, explaining the joke is killing it.[4] Conversational implicatures are a formidable tool for presenting these comic elements (given the background we discussed, for presenting incongruities) in a subtle way, since it conveys information without explicitly affirming it. (2), when understood as a mockery of Miss Smith's performance, can be counted as a case of ironic humor that benefits from a conversational implicature to preserve its subtlety. Similarly, consider the following utterance:

> My husband used to play violin a lot, but after we had kids he has not had much time for that… Children are a comfort, aren't they? (Raskin, 1979, p. 327)

In the case of (3) we have an apparent violation of the maxim of relevance, rendering the implicature that the husband in question did not play violin well;[5] so, the fact that he stopped playing the violin because of his duty with the kids turns children

into comfort. This content conveyed by means of an implicature is what turns (3) in a humorous utterance. What is the incongruity in question here? We could argue that the incongruity is between presenting children as comfort when we know that parenthood is usually laborious. However, the displeasure of listening to the husband's performance at the violin seems even greater than all the work involved in taking care of young children.

These examples are sufficient to show how in some cases humor benefits itself from the use of implicatures to present its incongruities in a subtle way. Sometimes, it must be considered, the linguistic incongruity itself may be used for rendering humor. We can play with language to create jokes (and this seems quite obvious), such that the implicature itself can be the source of humor. We could explain (1) in these terms, such that the ambiguity of the terms is a violation of the maxim of manner which brings about the implicature that the speaker wants us to recognize her wordplay. As we pointed out earlier, this is not an exhaustive account, and jokes may use other apparatus in order to induce comic amusement in many audiences. Conversational implicatures are just one way for jokers to present their punchlines without directly stating them. Therefore, we must highlight that implicatures are neither necessary nor sufficient for humor. They are just a possible road joke-tellers can follow in order to get to the desired perlocutionary effect. Another way of subtly presenting incongruities is by means of presuppositions, for instance. Furthermore, incongruities can be directly asserted in some humorous utterances, as Claire Horisk (2024) lets clear by her characterization of "joking remarks" as separate from "jokes". In a joking remark we have just a direct utterance taking the form of an assertion, usually said in response to a circumstantial happening, such as a previous saying or a change in the state of affairs. A joking remark states directly the comic point of the utterance, and even other effects, such as possible racist or sexist messages conveyed in these cases are not derived by conversational implicatures, but directly asserted.

3 Making fun from speech acts

A paradigmatic philosopher to the analysis of speech acts was J. L. Austin, who drew attention to the fact that, in many cases, the speaker is not just making an assertion regarding certain facts or state-of-affairs, but acting through her utterance. While descriptions and assertions are eventually characterized as types of speech acts (Austin, 1962, p. 145), just as promises and warnings, Austin's general theory is not intended to analyze our fictional uses of language. One might argue that the exclusion of fiction from the theory is due to an insufficiency of concepts that were later developed by philosophers of language such as Paul Grice (1957) and John Searle (1979). In various instances, Austin makes similar remarks about his objective being focused only on *serious* uses of language, and not on non-serious uses such as actors making theater plays and comedians making jokes on stage (Austin, 1962, p. 9, p. 22, p. 92, p. 104, p. 121).

Nevertheless, this shouldn't be seen as an obstacle to the analysis of humor through a speech-act theory approach. There are important relations between speech acts and fiction-making, such as the particular way in which assertions are made through *pretense*. When an actor playing the role of Hamlet says "The air bites shrewdly, it is very cold", his utterance would indicate that what is occurring is an

assertion. Yet, the actor does not believe in the content of his statement, and neither holds it to be true. Thus the utterance is not an assertion, even if it seems a lot like one. The same situation occurs in comedy. In one of *Curb Your Enthusiam*'s early episodes, Larry says "I made a left on the gas station a couple of miles back". Again, the utterance resembles an assertion, but there is no belief that such a situation has ever happened, and neither an attempt of establishing a correspondence with facts. The comedian just seems to be "describing" the fictional state-of-affairs with the purpose of setting up an incongruous situation, for the sake of making his audience laugh. Thus, what is the actor or comedian doing through their utterances, if not making various assertions?

A solution to this puzzling case was developed by Searle (1979), and is based on a conventionalist approach. In the third chapter of his *Expression and Meaning*, the philosopher attempted to analyze the logic behind *fictional discourse*. His main thesis is that this specific type of discourse is a different *language game* than serious discourse that suspends certain basic presupposed rules in the ordinary way we tend to use illocutionary acts.[6] Thus, fictional discourse occurs when the conventions that are associated with the serious use of language are suspended, due to some common acceptance of the audience. But, once speech acts can be seen as functions of the meanings of utterances, how can we distinguish between non-fictional (serious) and fictional (non-serious) discourse? Searle's idea is that when we say something fictional, we act *as if* we were committed with the serious uses of speech acts - we are *pretending*. Now we need to see the two possible senses of pretending. Suppose someone tries to act as if I were Joe Biden to fool the secret service to get me into the White House. Then he'd be pretending in the first sense. Now if someone pretends to be Biden "as part of a game of charades", he will be pretending in the second sense. Searle describes that, while engaging with fiction in the second sense, we are doing "a nondeceptive pseudoperformance which constitutes pretending to recount to us a series of events" (Searle, 1979, p. 65). Thus, the typical speech acts involved in fiction are *assertions*.

Searle briefly considers the hypothesis that the illocutionary act of making a fictional assertion may be *storytelling*, i.e., the act of telling a story. But he deems this alternative wrong. His rationale is that there is a great problem in considering telling stories as illocutionary acts. When we talk about speech acts, we usually treat them as functions of words to meanings. Thus, both acts of asking a question and asserting a fact can have the same propositional content, but with different associated meanings. Many times we tell stories that associate words with meanings in the conventional way, without the purpose of doing a different speech act. Then, if we consider that while uttering an assertion in a fictional context we mean something different than while uttering it in a conventional context, telling stories can't be the core act involved in fiction.[7] As an intentional verb, S *pretends* that P implies that S has some illocutionary intentions through P. There is nothing that distinguishes, for Searle, a fictional text, such as a novel, from a regular text. Suppose you found a bottle in the ocean with a series of details about the life of a man who is isolated on a distant island due to a mysterious shipwreck. There could be no way of deciding whether the discourse is serious or fictional, based on the text alone. To assert something, we must comply with a set of rules that determines an assertion, and if we have no indication of a non-serious context, we typically just regard the language as being used seriously. However, as Searle suggests, these rules are suspended when a set of *extralinguistic*, *nonsemantic* conventions is present, which turns the assertion into a fictional assertion.[8]

It is interesting to see how Searle analyzes the context of fictional discourse,

even in an art that requires an audience to be performed, such as theater plays, only analyzing the actor's discourse as fictional assertions and the script as a series of *directive* speech acts (such as orders and requests). Yet, if we are looking at the idealized phenomenon in which the crowd's responses do not affect the artist's behavior in some way, we are unable to draw a series of important conclusions about comedy. It is relevant to notice how the comedic fictional assertions are typically made with the purpose of making the crowd laugh.[9] Thus the comedian requires a crowd to assess the joke as funny, and must judge whether most people are laughing when the punch-line is uttered. If they are not laughing, something is going wrong. Maybe the comedian was offensive to the crowd and will need to improvise, leaving her text behind to make the audience perceive the context as non-serious once again. The suspension of serious conventions is required in comedy, but also in other forms of fiction. But one feature that distinguishes comedy is the intent of expressing an *incongruous situation* through the suspension of conventional rules.

The gap in Searle's view is the absence of a relation between actor and audience. It almost seems as if Searle is investigating fictional assertions and the actors on stage, and behind it, the director and script, without turning his head to see the audience and their reaction in front of the stage. Nevertheless, his conventionalist approach is certainly fruitful in defining fictional discourse as the kind of speech in which assertions are only pretended to be made, due to the emergence of alternative conventions. In a serious context of discourse, a speaker whose intention is to pretend that she is asserting might face a lot of different kinds of difficulties. Suppose that Mary, a worker in an office, tries to tell her coworkers a joke in the middle of a serious meeting. Without any indication whatsoever, the other people in the meeting would simply not understand the fictional aspect of Mary's assertions. Once the speaker is trying to express an incongruity, interpreting her assertions as bound by the ordinary conventions would either result in the coworkers deeming it as some kind of nonsense or being awfully confused. Therefore, when speakers make jokes they need to be understood as making fictional assertions. This requirement is quite similar to the concept of *uptake*. In Austin's theory, uptake is an essential effect that a speaker must achieve while making speech acts, that consists in the hearer being able to understand the *meaning* and the *illocutionary force* attributed to the utterance (Austin, 1962, p. 116). Even if we admit Searle's position regarding fictional discourse, and thus accept that no speech act is, strictly speaking, involved in comedy, a notion that is akin to uptake is required.

So there is something that the coworkers must understand on Mary's utterances to get that it is a joke, and not just a series of ordinary assertions. Austin's characterization of uptake tells us that the objects of understanding are meaning and force. But as we saw, there's no difference relative to meaning between serious and fictional discourse: a letter that's inside a bottle can be either serious or fictional. And what about the illocutionary force? Taking what Austin has written very restrictively, it seems that the hearer is just recognizing which illocutionary force, associated with a definite set of linguistic conventions, is being attributed by the speaker to the utterance. An important comment has to be made regarding this restrictive view. If we intend that our analysis of language and speech acts only accounts for serious discourse, then to acquire uptake is simply to make a hearer understand the meaning and force attributed to the locution. But, as Searle said, no speech act is being done at fictional discourse - it is all based on pretense. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to think that making the

meaning and the force associated to the locution understood involves both *propositional* and *illocutionary indicators* occurring on the deep structure of sentences (Searle, 1969, p. 30), respectively.[10] But could there be any types of terms or expressions that can indicate a change in the set of conventions associated with discourse? And if so, which alternative notion of uptake would be necessary for the accommodation of Searle's view on fictional discourse?

There are some strategies usually applied by speakers to indicate their comedic stance that can point towards a *comedic indicator*. First, the speaker can say things such as (a) "I know a good joke about", (b) "Do you guys want to hear a joke?" and (c) "Hear this funny joke I got" to clarify that the conventions of assertions are about to be temporarily suspended. Notice how all of the examples above are speech acts combined with the word 'joke'. In the first example the utterance is a serious *assertion*; in the second it is a *question* and in the third example it is a *request*. Hearers are being indicated that the speaker wants to use non-serious discourse by the employment of the term 'joke', and once they know that while joking we suspend the rules of asserting, they can accept or refuse the speaker's intention of adding a new proposition on what Stalnaker calls a nondefective context, i.e., the situation in which all participants of a conversation have the same set of presuppositions (Stalnaker, 1999, p. 85).[11] Thus, an assertion, a question and a request can both be seen as moves that a speaker does in a conversation to alter the set of presuppositions. In joke-telling, the speaker intends to add the presupposition that whatever he is going to say next is not meant seriously, but is only meant for comedic purposes, in the nondefective context of discourse. Thus, incongruent scenarios, such as chickens crossing roads or people slipping in banana peels, are not being told as serious events, but as works of fiction. This approach is also useful because oftentimes people refuse to being told a joke, by saying things such as, in relation to our previous examples, (a') "That's great, but I'm in a bad mood", (b') "Actually, I'd prefer not to" and (c') "Your jokes are terrible! Don't do that!".

Furthermore, speakers also indicate jokes through special terms and expressions. A paradigmatic case in the English language is the expression "knock-knock", an indication that what will be said next, during a brief period of time, is not serious.[12] Knock-knock jokes are interesting cases because the indication that the set of rules of discourse will be altered is derived from the existence of a huge variety of jokes that share a common structure and also begin with the expression "knock-knock". The same phenomenon occurs with "Why did the chicken cross the road?" jokes, "A (or three) *X* walks into a bar" jokes and with "How many *Y*'sdoes it take to change a lightbulb?" jokes. But this type of indicator also points to a broader sense in which an audience is able to understand an utterance as non-serious. Sometimes a specific recurring topic or situation on a great deal of jokes also indicates the fictional character of discourse. This is evident, for instance, in jokes involving stereotypes, but can also occur with a great deal of situations that are the objects of some commonly known type of joke. It could be rightly argued that in these cases the speaker is very susceptible to failure in the achievement of uptake. We must grant that in a lot of times people don't understand that something being said is a joke, and this can lead to the production of all sorts of unexpected misunderstandings.

A final indicator is the use of laughter during speech. Laughter can be understood as an *expressive* speech act, i.e., a type of speech act in which the speaker expresses a psychological state about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content (Searle, 1975, p. 353). Searle also says that the propositional content of

expressives consists of the association of a property to the speaker or the hearer. *Plain laughter* is an expressive speech act that usually conveys the psychological state of amusement or joy. In the context of joke-telling, the hearer or the audience will typically laugh to express joy and also attribute the property of "being funny" to the speaker. In turn, *speech-laughter* occurs when there is a simultaneous expression of articulated speech and laughter (Dunbar, 2014, p. 2). Oftentimes, participants of a conversation will use speech-laughter with specific functions, such as conveying a joyful feeling. In his study, Dunbar suggests two main communicative functions of speech-laughter. In the first category of function, this type of speech provides, in the author's own words, "an extra degree of freedom with which to express an attitude towards what is said"(Dunbar, 2014, p. 10). The two main attitudes expressed are *humor* and *tentativeness*.[13] In turn, the second function of speech-laughter is signalizing the end of a conversational turn, the acceptance of a topic and also the congruency of the speaker with the rest of the participants. Now, dealing only with joke-telling contexts, the audience might express amusement through plain laughter, or may use speech-laughter to simultaneously indicate a congruence with the speaker (in the sense that they accept the non-serious discourse) but also a joyful expression. More interestingly, the speaker may also use speech–laughter as a comedic indicator of an utterance being non-serious. Then it seems evident that using speech-laughter while telling jokes is able to facilitate the sudden suspension of the basic rules of assertions through an explicit indication. For instance, Blanco Salgueiro (2024, p. 54) distinguishes between illocutionary and perlocutionary laughter. In his analysis, a participant of a conversation can either laugh as a way of *accepting* the joke (i.e., illocutionary laughter) or as an indication that the hearer *understood* the joke (i.e., perlocutionary laughter). Considering this distinction, it seems that laughter, and perhaps also speech-laughter, can pose at least two distinct functions, i.e., (i) to express understanding of the comedic character of an utterance or (ii) to express acceptance towards the content of the joke.[14]

At least through the three strategies previously analyzed, a speaker is able to indicate that her assertions are not ordinary, but fictional. We have suggested that in the first cases, where a person uses speech acts in combination with the term 'joke' as a comedic indicator, the speech acts can be seen as moves to add a new proposition on the set of presuppositions shared by all participants. But isn't this happening also in the second example of comedic indicators? Many of them required responses from the other participants (*S*: Knock-knock? - *H*: Who's there? and so on) to adequately suspend the rules of asserting.[15] This fact evinces that this kind of comedic indicator requires some sort of participation from the audience to make the alternative conventions take effect. If a hearer engages in the activity, then we can say the proposition that what the speaker is saying is not serious is evidently part of all participant's presuppositions, in a nondefective context.

The third type of comedic indicator are plain laughter and speech-laughter. Plain laughter is an expressive speech act that typically conveys joy or amusement, while speech-laughter seems to be a combination of an expressive speech act with other speech acts (*e.g.*, assertions, requests and questions).[16] When the audience laughs at the joke, it is usually expressing that the speaker made a funny joke. But it also confirms that all participants understand that the discourse was non-serious. Now, if the speaker uses speech-laughter to make a joke, then it seems that her purposes are to express joy while saying something. It would be strange if someone was using speech-laughter all

the way while uttering a series of serious assertions. A participant may even be willing to ask "But what was funny about that?" or "Shouldn't it be funny?". So it is reasonable to think that a hearer is presupposing that, after a speaker uses speech-laughter, what follows are non-serious utterances. Thus, the three comedic indicators affect the common presuppositions in the context, and can be used in combination to provide even stronger clues of the speaker's comedic intent.

Considering the way these comedic indicators function, we are able to draw a conclusion regarding the uptake achieved while a speaker tells a joke. Certainly, the meaning of the words can be relevant for the indication of a joke, when there is a clear proposal of suspending the rules (such as speech acts accompanying the term 'joke'). But there might also be no clear indication, on the semantic level, of such suspension ("Why did the chicken cross the road?" jokes). Therefore, meaning alone is insufficient. In turn, illocutionary force could be a viable option, but there are some complications. First, there is no explicit performative verb, such as "I *promise*" or "I *order*", that describes the present act of telling a joke.[17] But this problem only arises if performative verbs are required for locating illocutionary forces. The difficulty in distinguishing ordinary and non-serious discourse also points to another complication: there are no illocutionary indicators of fiction-making whatsoever. Finally, another complication is that jokes tend to be less like actions and more like stances that we take toward utterances, in the sense that we can report (4) or even (5):

> Mary *asked* me "Why did the chicken cross the road?", but she was just making a joke.
> Steven *asserted* "The priest and the rabbi went into a bar" but he was only joking, so obviously none of that is true.

It isn't strange to say that Mary seemed to be asking a question and was also joking or that Steven seemed to be making an assertion but he just did a joke, because jokes are essentially based on what participants presuppose in a conversation. If we ignore the presupposed comedic stance, then Mary is just asking and Steven is only asserting.

Furthermore, we have previously suggested that joking involves some sort of uptake. But oftentimes there is no indication that a joke is being done, and the recognition of the meaning of an utterance and the illocutionary force attributed to it is not sufficient for making it count as a joke. What seems necessary is the common acceptance and recognition of the presupposition that a speaker is not using the usual conventions, but saying such words only for the production of joy and amusement in the audience. In this sense, a speaker achieves what we could call *comedic uptake* if she is able to alter the context by adding this very proposition to the set of presuppositions, sometimes through the aid of comedic indicators.

We have spent most of this section discussing the relation between speech acts, presuppositions and jokes in ordinary language. In such instances, speakers must be able to suspend the conventions that are taking place and add a new presupposition to the context, a condition that many will undoubtedly fail to achieve. But what about the situations in which the conventions are in favor of the comedian? Certain highly-conventional contexts, such as *circuses* and *stand-up pieces*, are made with the sole purpose of entertaining audiences through the suspension of serious conventions. Under such circumstances, comedians don't have to achieve comedic uptake because the audience is already expecting that there won't be any serious discourse happening. People might not like some jokes for all sorts of reasons, but they can't say that the

comedian wasn't joking. We may even say that in such contexts the comedian has some kind of authority to speak without the usual commitments, and in some instances the members of the crowd may try to contest it. People may even want to assess certain jokes as unethical, harmful, and penalizable (Horisk, 2024). Therefore, such as in serious contexts speakers may make non-serious statements, speakers in non-serious contexts might want to talk seriously about the harmful effects that a joke might produce.

4 What about commitments in jokes?

We may get from the previous discussion on speech acts and (fictional) assertions to the following question: can we, unlike Searle, claim that jokes are a speech act of a special kind? For that, let's turn ourselves to a picture where we consider both the comedian and the audience. According to Blanco Salgueiro (2023), we have at least three reasons for counting jokes as some kind of speech act. When someone tells a joke, her intention is making those to whom the joke is directed laugh. In other words, she has an intended perlocutionary effect which is making people laugh, or, in a weaker sense, to induce comic amusement in an audience.[18] This is the first reason. Furthermore, jokes have a deontic dimension, that is, there are some commitments attributed to jokes and to whoever is joking, in many cases there is also a permission by the audience for the joke to be made (think on a standup comedian on the stage, for example, who has the authorization of her audience). Plus, some would claim, we could add the deontic requirement that the audience does not get offended by the joke (Blanco Salgueiro, 2023, p. 76). Although this last commitment is debatable, the other two are at least good examples that could be expanded. The third reason is that jokes, as many other kinds of speech acts, demand uptake by the audience (Blanco Salgueiro, 2023, p. 79-81).

The case of uptake is the most paradigmatic one. We presented arguments against counting it as an argument in favor of jokes as speech acts, now we will take the arguments for this stance. We could say about a joke that is not perceived by the audience as a misfire. Jokes can fail, of course, but, beyond that, a misfire is not that the audience caught the punchline and did not find it funny. Rather, a misfire occurs when the joke is simply not understood as having this character or when the audience actively refuses to accept the attempt of joking, for reasons such as the offensiveness of the propositional content or the inadequacy of the joke for that occasion. The uptake of a joke involves, then, in a stronger sense, the acceptance by an audience (Blanco Salgueiro, 2024), such as the act of betting requires the acceptance of the bet by an audience, otherwise, the attempt to bet misfires. Now, Strawson (1964, p. 440) highlights that "The performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of uptake". Blanco Salgueiro (2023, p. 79) adds that there is an aggravating factor: when a misfire occurs (because of the lack of either understanding or acceptance), the audience takes the utterance at face value, which, depending on the joke, could be understood as an insult, for example. These cases also affect the deontic effects attributed to that illocutionary act, since a joke may have some loose constraints on what is being said in comparison to an assertion. Of course, there are some features, external to the utterance itself, that affect the ability of an audience to refuse an attempt to joke and, hence, guarantee the success of the proposed speech act, even when the hearers did not want to

accept it. An example is the case of social asymmetries (Blanco Salgueiro, 2024). Take hierarchy as an example. A boss who tells a racist joke might be successful in the performance of this speech act, even if the audience does not agree with the content of the joke, since they are unable (for many reasons) to counteract their boss.[19]

Austin had a good reason for counting jokes (along with poems and other specific cases) as parasitic uses of language; nonetheless it is also clear that we have good grounds for considering jokes within the framework of speech acts as well. Austin's most compelling argument for that exclusion is that jokes do not carry commitments in the same way other illocutionary acts do. An utterance within the scope of a joke is an empty one. We (at least usually) do not take a joke as a serious assertion, or a serious command, even when apparent assertions or commands are made during the storytelling. As we pointed out previously, Searle's argument is that, in some particular cases (jokes included), we have the suspension of rules for usual speech acts because of extralinguistic conventions. On the other hand, as we already draw from Blanco Salgueiro's argumentation, it seems that jokes have another set of deontic commitments attributed to them; hence, they would not be a parasitic use of language, but just another kind of use with its particular rules, sharing some general features of speech acts. We could even consider the suspension of the status commonly attributed to some illocutionary acts within the scope of jokes as a consequence of the deontic dimension of joking itself. Furthermore, there is an ongoing debate on whether jokes are exempt from all kinds of commitments. There are sound arguments for questioning whether prefixing utterances with "it's just a joke" is enough for getting rid of any consequences a usual "non-parasitic" utterance would have (Camp, 2022; Horisk, 2024). We will not address the question on moral liability and commitments associated with jokes here.

At least some commitments, however, are absent in jokes when they are compared with other kinds of speech acts. During a joke, for instance, even when we make an apparent sequence of assertions in its storytelling, the audience does not require that the semantic content of our utterances is true. Someone can make jokes on aliens, the present king of France, the ability of months marching, and so on, without being committed to the truth-value of these statements. So, at least to some extent, jokes are void of commitments attributed to similar semantic contents within the scope of other illocutionary acts. How can that be the case? As Blanco Salgueiro argued that jokes create an entirely distinct deontic apparatus, we could claim that this deontic status of jokes preempts the utterances within its scope of these commitments. We already have cases like this in indirect reports, for instance:

Stanley said he would break your legs if you keep refusing to pay him.

The speaker, in this case, is asserting something; but she is not - at least if none additional contextual information is given - actually threatening the audience. It is Stanley himself, not the speaker, who took the commitment to act violently against the addressee given the debt. In this case, we have the mention of another speech act within the scope of the main illocutionary force, namely, the assertion. So, it is not so unfamiliar that a speech act may occur within the scope of another without the usual commitments attributed to it.

Someone who agrees with Blanco Salgueiro (2023; 2024), therefore, could claim that within the scope of a specific illocutionary force (say "Joking") at least some commitments of other illocutionary forces are discarded. This could be considered as a

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consequence of the deontic dimension brought upon by the act of joking itself, according to which other illocutionary forces within the scope of the joke do not need to bear some of the usual commitments attributed to them. Notice that it is not mandatory that they *do not* fulfill these requirements; someone could tell a joke about a true event and the truth of (part of) the propositional content would not undermine the performance. The act of joking itself has its commitments, that is, if someone tells a racist joke, for instance, this can count as a racist act. Maybe someone could do the same for other cases, such as fiction or acting, where the utterances do not exactly carry the commitments usually attributed to them. Someone could even amalgamate all (or most) of these so-called parasitic cases within a comprehensive label according to which utterances obey to some rule to get their illocutionary forces ripped out.[20] Jokes, therefore, can present even incongruities without any further pressure for explanations. If someone utters a contradiction in an ordinary conversation, the audience gets puzzled and there must be some explanation for that, like the clarification that the speaker is making a supposition, not a full-blown assertion. Now, since jokes have this deontic status permitting the speaker to utter sentences that are not attached to usual commitments, such as the truth of the propositional content or the presence of a specific propositional attitude, there is freedom for saying what is false or what is incongruous, in a wide sense and, hence, provoke comic amusement. Against Austin and Searle, therefore, it seems we have arguments for claiming that jokes are not just a parasitic use of language. Rather, given our usual attempts to get a perlocutionary response from the audience, the deontic status involving the utterances of jokes, and the need for audience's uptake, we can count jokes as a *sui generis* kind of speech acts that is not comprised by Austin's taxonomy.

5 Concluding remarks

The notions of conversational implicatures, uptake, illocutionary force, presupposition and nondefective contexts proved to be certainly useful in the analysis of jokes and laughter. Even though we agree with the incongruity theorists on the nature of humor, the relationship between language and jokes is certainly a topic worth discussing to all philosophical accounts of humor and comedy. One could say that we weren't interested in presenting a final perspective about humor in language, and we must agree. There seems to be such a grand variety of details and subtleties that providing a theory able to successfully embrace each and every comedic case would be an unfruitful herculean task. Therefore, we intended to expose in detail the relations that can be possibly drawn between pragmatic features of language and humor, both as an inquiry regarding the possible perspectives that can be followed and also as a way of encouraging the curiosity of other philosophers to this field.

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Notas

1 For more thorough discussions on the incongruity theory and some objections to it, see Kulka (2007), Carroll (2014), Morreall (2023).

2 For a thorough survey of other requirements, see Carroll (2014).

3 Furthermore, presuppositions and conventional implicatures demand an extensive discussion, since the nature of these phenomena is still disputed both among philosophers and linguists, especially because there is an overlap between what some semanticists call presuppositions and others call conventional implicatures (Karttunen, 2016, p. 725). For a survey on these topics, see Levinson (1983, p. 97-225).

4 This claim is in general correct, but there are some counterexamples. For instance, internet humor is usually permeated by the ostensible lack of subtlety in some cases. Post-irony is grounded on ostensibly presenting an ironical structure to tell the truth. So, not all humor (but we may think that most of it) needs its elements to remain implicit to work.

5 We will not get into the discussion on whether or not we are able to flout the maxim of relevance. Relevance theorists claim we cannot; therefore, we recognize that these theorists could provide another compatible explanation for the humor in (3).

6 The four rules of assertions are the following: (i) "The maker of an assertion commits himself to the truth of the expressed proposition"; (ii) "The speaker must be in a position to provide evidence or reasons for the truth of the expressed proposition"; (iii) "The expressed proposition must not be obviously true to both the speaker and the hearer in the context of utterance", and (iv) "The speaker commits himself to a belief in the truth of the expressed proposition" (Searle, 1979, p. 62). Following Searle's analysis, a fictional assertion doesn't follow any of these constitutive rules.

7 But even if storytelling could not be considered a type of speech act, it could be argued that jokes themselves constitute a *sui generis* type of speech acts. We will consider this approach further on.

8 It should also be mentioned that when, for example, an actor in a theatrical play asserts something, he is not only pretending to assert, but also pretending to be a character. What determines the fictional character is, so to speak, the *illocutionary stance* a speaker takes towards the performance of a speech act (Searle, 1979, p. 65).

9 Following Austin's vocabulary, we could say that laughter constitutes the *perlocutionary sequel* (Austin, 1962, p. 116) of the act of joking. A perlocution (*e.g.*, a consequence or an effect) is considered a sequel of an illocution if the act either invites a response by the hearer (*e.g.*, offering and asking 'Yes or no?') or if it invites a response and also a subsequent action (*e.g.*, arguing and ordering). Under this distinction, laughter would be considered a case of the first type of perlocutionary sequel.

10 In Searle's view, propositional and illocutionary force indicators are the two types of terms and expressions that can be distinguished in relation to semantic content in the syntactical structure. The first type expresses a meaning, while the second one expresses an illocutionary force. Some examples of the second type are word-order, the mood of the verb, intonation contour and *explicit performatives* (Austin, 1962, p. 32).

11 In Stalnaker's account, a presupposition is a proposition whose truth the participant

takes for granted as part of the background of the conversation (Stalnaker, 1999, p. 84).

12 A knock-knock joke also has the perlocutionary sequels of (i) making the hearer say "Who's there?", and after hearing the next line of the speaker, (ii) saying "*X* who?".

13 It is worth mentioning that other researchers also suggest that speech-laughter is linked with *contempt* (Schröder, 2000) and even with *sadness* (Stibbard, 2000), and not only with amusement or joy.

14 Blanco Salgueiro associates illocutionary laughter with the classical notion of uptake, while perlocutionary laughter is associated with a weaker sense of uptake. We will analyze this distinction in the next section.

15 With the only exception being the "A (or three) *X* walks into a bar" type, that can be easily interpreted as a serious assertion.

16 It is worth noticing that this last indicator can express a wide range of psychological states, but the humoristic uses tend to be more similar to plain laughter (Dunbar, 2014, p. 10).

17 Notice how "I *joke*" isn't itself an act of joking, and can only be used as a description of a previous act, *e.g.*, "In saying *X*, I was joking".

18 This is a weaker formulation because it widens the scope of humor. Indeed, someone can find something funny and still not laugh at it.

19 Horisk (2024, chap. 11) also discusses some situations in which negative reactions against belittling jokes are inefficient because of personal relationships, familiar hierarchies, and even safety against aggression.

20 We are not so sympathetic to that alternative, although it would require a more thorough argumentation for discarding it, since what we presented here lets it open.

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