

Catalan political humor: criticism and self-criticism

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe how Catalan humor works in the context of political TV satire, where everyday references mutate in order to show hidden meanings and parallel purposes. Using mainly pragmatic and discourse analysis as tools, we will try to decipher conversational exchanges that create hilarity and promote political critique. Tokens of linguistic (or verbal) humor as well as referential (or situational) humor will be analyzed, trying to show the range of their social and political implications. Our major tenet is that political satire operates as a two-sided process: on one side, it promotes communication within a specific social network, on the other, it affords criticism and self-criticism to emerge, which serve also as a useful evaluation of everyday public themes.

Keywords: *humor, politics, Catalan media, political TV satire*

1. Introduction

Political satire is an old genre. The forgotten *troubadours* practiced it mainly with the *sirventès* against the power of Rome. In the Catalan speaking community, the closest to the old *Provençal* speaking community, satire is today performed in a television show, called *Polònia*, which derides Catalan and Spanish politicians as well as some worldwide celebrities. The aim of this paper is to describe how humor and satire work in this particular context, where everyday references and well-known characters mutate in order to show hidden meanings and parallel purposes. Using mainly pragmatic and discourse analysis as tools, along the lines sketched by Norrick (1994; 2003), we will try to decipher linguistic moves and conversational exchanges that create hilarity and promote political critique. Tokens of linguistic (or verbal) humor as well as referential (or situational) humor will be analyzed. The present study will also

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try to show the wide range of social and political implications of both types of humor. Catalan vs. Spanish identity is one of the variables to be considered, as much importance is attached to the language and the linguistic register employed by each politician. Our major tenet is that humor and political satire operates as a two-sided process: on the one side, it enhances internal communication in the social network, on the other, it affords criticism and self-criticism to emerge, which serve also as a useful evaluation of everyday, public themes. The consequence is that politics is more approachable to people and the majority of substantial affairs are considered in a milder way. However, the counterpart is the ordinary assumption of the discredit of politics, through rough judgments and derision. We consider this two-faced function of humor to be significant in order for us to understand the success of the celebrated TV show *Polònia* among Catalan TV viewers.

2. Theoretical background for our research

Surprise and incongruity are the common properties of gags. Apte (1987) pointed to ambiguity as a relevant device to produce and understand humor. Accordingly, the Frame Theory (Bateson 1972) proposed that humorous incongruity consisted in a clash of opposed frames. On that basis, Raskin and Attardo (1994) developed a General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) to be applied to verbal jokes. Norrick (2003) argued that frame or script-based analysis (i.e. GTVH) was potentially useful for conversational puns and gags. In its revised form (Attardo 1997), the script-based analysis includes the so called script opposition and the notions of salience and accessibility (Giora 2003), i.e. the idea that opposition of scripts in a joke implies low accessibility and high informativeness. As Norrick (2003, p. 1337) states it:

The initial phase of discourse interpretation is guided by the graded salience principle, which dictates that we always access salient meanings first. Salience is coded in the mental lexicon, and affected by conventionality, frequency, familiarity, and prototypicality. Less salient meanings get activated more slowly and might reach sufficient levels of activation, if the most salient meaning fails to match the context. (...) Jokes (to be precise: joke punch lines) also (1) conform to the relevance requirement; but (2) violate the graded informativeness condition in introducing a markedly too informative proposition; and (3) thereby force the recipient to go on beyond (and suppress) the unmarked interpretation in order to discover a second, less salient or marked one.

Indeed in their usual presentations, the first script / frame evoked in a joke carries the common, expected interpretation (reinforced by immediate linguistic

context), while the second or last script / frame carries the unexpected, non-habitual, non-salient meaning that causes disruption and surprise. Gags, puns and conversational humor are based on this *abrupt script reversal* (Norrick 2003, p. 1339), which challenges common sense and expected development of information. Moreover, when personal attacks or sarcasm are present, the second, non-salient script usually carries the implicatures for the potential attack to the target (Viana 2010). This canny imbalance (or asymmetry) produces the surprise effects and supports the critical stance that constitutes the main attractive force of scorn and satire.

Our political gags are straightforward samples of this distribution. As expected, we find verbal (or linguistic) gags as well as referential (or situational) ones, both carrying somehow critical implicatures hanging onto more or less broader contexts. Politicians and political activity are always the targets. The implicatures of the script unfold hidden intentions or unspeakable truths, which are the core of political satire. As Popa (2011, 2013, and references therein) has recently showed, political satire “draws attention through exaggeration and emphasis on issues that may otherwise go unnoticed” (Popa 2011, p. 157). At the same time, political satire “identifies potential errors in political life, thus facilitating the process of establishing connections between people and events in public life” (ibid.). Approaching the dynamics of humor and criticism, Popa (2013, p. 374) argues, “that satire may introduce openness to different interpretations of meaning and value that will further initiate a sudden recognition that the world is not as we expect it to be”.

In this paper, we are using the four classes of communicative functions of humor (Attardo 1994, p. 323) to analyze formally and group together our satirical fragments: social management, decommitment, mediation and language defunctionalization. Decommitment and mediation appear complementary: while in decommitment tactics speakers may back off from what they have said without loss of face, i.e. they feel free to make assessments that they shouldn't make “in a serious mode”, in mediation speakers may introduce humor to deal with potentially embarrassing or aggressive interaction, i. e. their comical moves serve to build bridges between situations. Social management is particularly interesting when we deal with political humor (Nilsen 1990), because,

It covers all the cases in which humor is used as a tool to facilitate in-group interaction and strengthen in-group bonding or out-group rejection (Attardo 1994:323).

This is precisely the case, when humor is used as a social corrective, or alternatively, to build consensus and strengthen comradeship. However, not necessarily all political humor can be defined as “political” in its purpose. Sometimes, as our excerpts show, humor intends only to break the routine, to de-automate meanings, in order to put forward a mild critique. This operation is called linguistic defunctionalization. It occurs when language is used for playful purposes, in order to break verbal conventions, which indirectly could display the weakness of the involved participants. It is supposed to be “only entertainment”, but it turns out to inevitably be intermingled with social attitudes and presuppositions, especially when powerful media are implied. The “non-political” play on words turns out to be political because of the importance attributed to the participants and the situations.

As we will see, *Polònia* serves to manage social discontent, both by distance (decommitment) and mediation (compromise), but this is not all: here we should lastly recall a relevant secondary function for humor mentioned by Attardo (1994, p. 329), the informative one. The audience may learn through the gags the ongoing state of affairs concerning Catalan political news; indirectly, the jokes and gags always show pertinent and actual information that has to be considered in order to understand every sketch. Information is then a by-product of humor creation. Describing political satire, Popa also highlights “the message transmission” function of the satire TV genre, as these type of shows help “the audience perceive and comprehend the implications of certain political acts performed by the politicians” (Popa 2011:157).

Our working statements are the following:

1. S1 The comical structure of gags matches (roughly) script-opposition.
2. S2 We will find verbal (or linguistic gags) as well as referential (or situational) ones, serving the main criticizing purposes.
3. S3 Characters manage their humorous moves in order to fit the desired critical pattern.

We assume throughout this paper the already mentioned multifunctionality of humor, including the relevance of the ongoing information for the correct

understanding of gags. Thus, we will try to test the three precedent statements using pragmatic and discourse analysis as practical tools. As for the particular languages present in the corpus, it should be mentioned that both Catalan and Spanish are used by the participants in the *Polònia* show, a circumstance that corresponds to current Catalan sociolinguistic setting and intervenes significantly in the making of humor. Correspondingly, the respective identity signals that match Catalan / Spanish affiliation play a pivotal role as both criticism and self-criticism (self-derision) arise throughout the gags.

In this paper, we do not intend to carry out a quantitative study of the show: rather we aim to discover the qualitative strategies that pervade it, as far as its humorous effects are concerned. Following a casual period of observation, our main corpus spans from September the 25th (2007), when a new period of episodes started, until October the 30th (2007). That means six programs, one per week. We have combined the observational corpus with the sketches from the DVD included in Soler et al. (2007), where a choice of “best gags” was already made by the production team. We have done a previous work of discussing and analyzing a first rough collection of humorous sequences from both corpuses along the lines of pragmatic and discourse analysis (omitted here), before proceeding to our final selection. The filter for choosing the gags that are presented and analyzed here seeks mainly their quality of being somehow representative of sheer incongruity. In our selection, we have chosen a balanced proportion of verbal and non-verbal gags, although we do not hold that such a proportion is maintained throughout the TV program. It is quite clear that a different target-oriented research should have produced another array of results, as the particular aims would be different. The gags are transcribed in a suitable way, according to grammatical and conversational conventions, as if they were fragments of a screenplay. A short character identification precedes each fragment, in order to provide the relevant context. Gags are made up of different moves: the final one introduces a new script (or interpretation frame) into the exchange.

3. The *Polònia* show

The modern Catalan satirical tradition concerning politics began with 19th century illustrated magazines, as a result of social and political transformations conveyed by

the industrialization process. The new purchasing power of working classes and the demands of literacy favored the emergence of those forms of communication that combined adhesion and distance to political activity. That was the original niche for political satire to occur. From 1868 to 1874, satirical magazines became extremely popular, and their success spread fairly under liberal and conservative (and republican!) power alternation until the abrupt change of the political regime in the end of the 30s as a consequence of the Spanish Civil War. After the Civil War (1939), as Solà i Dachs (1978) points out, Catalonia survived thirty-seven years without a Catalan journal, twenty-five without a magazine, and almost ten years with clandestine publications. Democracy after 1978 (and some previous essays with free speech in the preceding years) finally provided the right context for new manifestations of satire to occur. In our day, we would turn to TV programs in order to look for a popular and successful satirical genre concerning politics.

In 2007 Toni Soler, a journalist and occasionally a scriptwriter, had the idea of creating a politic satire like *Spitting Image* or *Guiñol* (in Canal Plus, Spain): in fact, it was in a radio program, *Minoria Absoluta* (RAC1, 2000-2009), where Toni Soler tried to develop his project for the first time, with a chat about current politics. His program, *Set de notícies*, became the first parody about political news aired by the *Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals*, the public Catalan Media and Broadcasting Company. Later on, *Set de nit*, a show which included some politician imitations, was also issued by Catalan Television (TV3). We can consequently state that these programs were a reasonable basis for *Polònia*. Nevertheless, we should recall that similar programs had already been produced and broadcast in other countries, like the long-running American series *Saturday Night Live* (USA, NBC, 1975-present) or the mentioned *Spitting Image* (UK, ITV, 1984-1996), which, although performed by puppets and puppeteers, satirized British and American politics and the British Royal Family. *Polònia* could also be compared to the Italian parody *Striscia La Notizia* (Canale 5, 1988-present), which pokes fun at the Italian journalists and politicians. In rigor, political satire goes back to Monty Python's *Flying Circus* in the sixties, a program that had a massive influence on the ideology and discourses of numerous sketch shows that followed. Although we are not dealing here with this issue, it seems quite clear that *Polònia* is not alone in the promotion of political satire in the media.

Catalan Television (TV3) has broadcast *Polònia* once a week from February 2006. The promoting team (commanded by Toni Soler) was already well-known for their radio and TV parodies in the aforementioned programs. The show consists of a series of gags, conducted by different characters in situations related to everyday public actions by politicians. This results in mock exchanges between characters originating from opposite political factions. Metacommunication is introduced by the director's appearance in the scene, who cries *Talleu, és bona* [Stop, it's ok]: then a direct dialogue between the director and the characters starts and viewers are allowed to see the backstage. The program usually closes with a satirical speech by the current *President de la Generalitat* [President of the Autonomous Government], and also with "appearances" by former *Presidents* that allegedly spend their days in an old people's home.

The repertory of characters is continuously evolving, according to social and political circumstances. The show is particularly attentive to the news of the week; hence the characters appearing in the show tend to be the same as the ones appearing in the news. Both Catalan and Spanish politicians are parodied, and latterly some media characters have also been added: the Catalan singer Llach, the well known cuisine chef Ferran Adrià, the current (the "actual Pope" means the real Pope appeared on the show!) Pope, and some popular TV journalists. The old dictator, Franco, is humorously represented in a speaking equestrian statue, and the actual monarch, the king of Spain, Juan Carlos, is portrayed among his family members and his everyday activities almost as an ordinary citizen. Each character tends to be stereotyped according his/her particular features: The republican leader looks moody, the Catalan Minister of Health wearisome, the Spanish President a sweet liar, a well-known Catalan writer, Quim Monzó, a stammerer and tortuous. The gallery compounds a cheerful picture of current Catalan public imagination, where humor as a specific device tries to unravel problems and suggest creative alternatives to situations.

The show has inspired some media books. In 2007, the team produced its own book, *El llibre mediàtic de Polònia* [The Media Book of Poland] (Soler et al. 2007), where they explain the trajectory they have experienced, to their present success. There we can find not only descriptive schedules of the characters but good work-in-

progress explanations and emails showing audience reactions. One year later, they released *Cabòries. La volta al Polònia en 80 gags* [Worries. Around Poland in 80 Gags] (Soler et al. 2008), where, as stated in the title, one can find original screenplays for the gags, each one accompanied with a useful introduction that allows us to put it in its proper context of interpretation. The gags are compiled in different sections: a) borough politics, b) politicians that are replaced, c) the most intricate gags, or d) the most viewed gags. In an effort to explain the success of the show, Montserrat Martí (2008) has been searching for fruitful comparisons with satirical illustrated press, humorous monologues, and radio sketches.

The characters appear conveniently disguised and made-up. Balló (2007) has showed the relevance of Carnival mechanisms for the success of the program. Indeed the marionette's look of the sequences contributes to their fictive condition, allowing the hidden and gross truths to arise. The politicians in the show look like a deformed stereotype of themselves. The fancy make-up for each one of them creates a kind of double character, a kind of *mutant* with new attributions to recontextualize the ordinary prefabricated language of politicians. Not far from this question, the clear manifestations of surrealistic comedy and slapstick (unfortunately, not approached here), with their long tradition in satirical shows, contribute also to this outspread carnivalesque atmosphere.

Finally, why *Polònia*? What is in a title? The show's graphics present icons and symbols imitating the old Soviet era. Poland serves as a background reference, which stands for repression and foreign dependence. Moreover, *Poland* and (mostly) *Poles* (*polacos*, in Spanish) have been used from outside Catalonia as a detractive designation for Catalonia and Catalan people, so that the reference to this country allows both a self-critique and a broader (pseudo-external, ironical) perspective on Catalan topics. Consequently, *Polònia* looks like a correct title: everybody can understand that the show deals with denigration and ridicule. The fact that it involves self-inflicted ridicule is still contributing to its merit. If politicians are the target, ethnic and social factors contribute for a very successful satire.

4. The gags:

4.1. Verbal humor

Our first excerpt includes metacommunication. The Catalan Minister of Education refers to *Polònia* in the dialogue:

1) E. Maragall [Minister of Education of the Autonomous Government], Soler [show director], Montilla [former President (of the Autonomous Government)]

E. Maragall: I segur que això és el *Polònia*? Perquè... i si ens han gravat d'incògnit i el YouTube està ple d'imatges nostres en pilotes...

Soler: En pilotes? Però és que fan les reunions de govern despullats?

Montilla: A les del govern no, però a les del PSOE més d'una vegada m'he hagut de *baixar els pantalons*.

E. Maragall: Are you sure that we are in *Polònia*? Perhaps we have been recorded incognito, and now Youtube is full of our naked pictures ...

Soler: Naked pictures? Are you holding your meetings undressed?

Montilla: Not government meetings; but in the PSOE [socialist party] meetings I must sometimes *take off my trousers*.

The utterance *baixar-se els pantalons* [take off the trousers] that closes the fragment is an idiom for “being a coward” –here, a contextually non-expected script. By contrast, its literal meaning fits well with the former context about undressing, something that entails an idiomatic breaking. *Baixar-se els pantalons*, then, is taken as “to undress”, free from its idiomatic sense, but at the end the /cowardice/ script imposes itself, as part of the grammatical chunk. We should note that implicatures against President Montilla emerge from this idiomatic, here non-expected, meaning of the utterance. In the excerpt (and so in the show) the President looks like a timorous man in the face of his own party's claims.

In the next excerpt, Montilla uses motion in order to create a pun based on the idiom. Again, he dialogues with Soler, the show's director:

2) Montilla [former President], Soler [show director]

Montilla: sabeu que la Milà es pixa a la dutxa? Quin *asc!* Quan queda per acabar això?

Soler: deu segons.

Montilla: Dic alguna cosa interessant? Sabíeu que la Milà es pixa a la dutxa? Quin *asc!* Faig *el compte enrere* perquè queden tres segons (camina enrere), un, dos tres.

Montilla: Do you know that Milà [a journalist] pisses in the shower bath? It's *disgusting* [for "disgusting"]! How long are we going with that?

Soler: There is ten seconds left.

Montilla: Should I say anything interesting? Do you know that Milà [a journalist] pisses in the shower bath? It's *disgusting* [for "disgusting"]! I will do *the count-down* (walking backwards), one, two, three.

Montilla is trying to gain the audience's attention by looking for striking topics: that's why he refers to journalist habits; but suddenly he is bored and asks for the program to end. His dumbness manifests itself when he repeats the same utterance in his search for something interesting to say. Then comes the idiom, *compte enrere* [count-down], and he seizes the opportunity to de-automate it: he uses movement to represent its literal meaning (*enrere* means *backwards*). Here, as in the most usual cases, the inability to grasp the literal meaning counts as clumsiness. Montilla falls down into literal significations as part of his general ineptitude (he doesn't even know the right grammatical form of the words, as we see in his mispronunciation of "disgusting"). Then a less-salient script emerges (the literal counterpart for *compte enrere*), creating the usual negative implications against the target.

In the next excerpt, two rival politicians from the same party go to see the psychologist. They are allegedly discussing possible issues, but then the conversation collapses:

3) O. Pujol [young conservative party member], Duran Lleida [leader of the conservative party], psychologist

Psicòloga: Bé, vaja, veig que hi ha dos *fronts clars*, no?

O. Pujol: I sobretot aquest (s'alça i dóna un cop al front de Duran Lleida).

Psychologist (a woman): OK, there are two *clear fronts*, aren't they?

O. Pujol: Particularly this one (he stands up and touches Duran Lleida's bald-head).

The leader Duran Lleida is bald-headed. His young rival, O. Pujol, usually searches for an opportunity to bypass him. He uses the ambiguity of a *clear front* to mock Duran Lleida's look. The first, expected script related to politics is /front line/; the second, unexpected and non-salient one is related to /forehead/, and by extension in this particular context, to his rival's baldness. Both politicians are mocked here: the young one that fails to understand the relevant meaning, and the senior, whose look is

mocked by implication. Here we have a simple device that distorts rivalry and turns it into absurdity.

The next fragment occurs in a press conference given by the corresponding Catalan Minister. The sign interpreter has “entangled” herself physically with her hands and arms:

4) *Sign interpreter, policeman, Minister*

Mosso (després de mirar la intèrpret): Si us plau, Conseller, hem d’aturar la roda de premsa perquè [vostè] ha fet tantes subordinades juntes que la intèrpret s’ha *embolicat* els seus braços sobre si mateixa, s’ha plegat i no pot continuar.

Conseller: Òstia, però ajudin-la! Tranquil·la, noia, ara estàs feta un embolic, però segur que te’n sortiràs, guapa.

Policeman (after looking at the sign interpreter): Please, Minister, the press conference has to be cancelled, because you have made so many subordinate clauses that the sign interpreter has got herself *entangled* with her hands and arms, she is curled up and is unable to go on!

Minister: My God, help her! Be calm, girl, you are embroiled now, but I’m sure that you can get out of there soon.

Both literal and figurative meanings of *embolicar-se / get entangled* are implied here. Being a sign interpreter, to “get entangled” can easily be understood in its Catalan literal sense, i.e. physically –a meaning pattern (or script) that is reinforced by the camera’s shots. However, the policeman’s grammatical references call for its figurative meaning also, i.e. to be puzzled. Then the negative implications arise: the politician’s language is complicated enough (“so many subordinate clauses”), without a clear purpose and confusing, so that it is difficult to grasp it or to translate it. Laughing emerges from the overlapping scripts. One of them is developed mainly by the physical disturbances that we see in the show and the policeman’s complaint. However, the critical point of view is maintained from the /puzzling/ script, which constitutes a critique of the Minister because of his incomprehensible utterance.

Our next excerpt portrays the President of Spain, Rodriguez Zapatero, who arrives at the UN reception desk, and waits for his allocution at the General Assembly. The dialogue is the following:

5) *President Zapatero, hostess, Raquel S. [journalist]*

Raquel S. [transmetent]: Tenim les imatges de l’arribada de Zapatero a l’Assemblea General de l’ONU.

Zapatero: *Very welcome. To entry, please?*

Recepcionista: *Name?*

Zapatero: Zapatero, Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.

Recepcionista: *Country?*

Zapatero: Me encanta. "No rompas más... mi pobre corazón" (cantant). Ah – ¡"Country", de país! Perdón. España.

Recepcionista: OK, España.

Raquel S. [giving a report]: We've got the pictures of Mr. Zapatero's arrival at the General Assembly of the UN.

Zapatero: *Very welcome. To entry, please?* [sic]

Hostess: *Name?*

Zapatero: Zapatero, Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.

Hostess: *Country?*

Zapatero: I love it. "Don't break any more... my poor heart" (singing). Oh –"Country", my country! Sorry. Spain.

Hostess: OK, Spain.

Zapatero's English is mocked, as we can see from his first words. Given the circumstances, namely that he has to deliver a speech before the General Assembly, ridicule is waiting for him. He confuses the expected, ordinary meaning of *country* for its special meaning in musical field (available in Spanish as a loan), *country music*. The fact denotes not only a poor linguistic competence but also communicative incompetence. Zapatero starts to sing, ignoring the particularities of the context. The new emerging frame results in a loss of face for the President. An innocent wordplay turns to be the unfolding of ridicule. The gag uses Zapatero's poor command of English to denigrate him, through absurdity and misinterpretation.

Our last fragment deals with the name of one of Franco's general from the Civil War. Two journalists are reviewing this particular piece of news, when something unexpected occurs:

6) Raquel S. [journalist], R. Pellicer [journalist]

R. Pellicer: El jutge Baltasar Garzón ha decidit imputar el General Franco per crims contra la humanitat; a Franco i als seus amiguets, com el general...

Raquel S. : Mola.

R. Pellicer: Mola?

Raquel S. : El general Mola.

R. Pellicer: Raquel, Franco era un dictador, no mola gens. Perdonin-la, és que li queda tant per aprendre.

R. Pellicer: The judge Baltasar Garzon has decided to accuse General Franco for crimes against humanity; Franco and his friends, like the general...

Raquel S. : Mola.

R. Pellicer: You are fond of it? [= *mola*?]

Raquel S. : General Mola [also, *I'm fond of the general*]

R. Pellicer: Raquel, Franco was a dictator, you can't be fond of him. Please, apologize to her, she still has so many things to learn.

Here a casual homonym does the work. Mola was, besides Franco, a well-known general who participated in the fascist rebellion that caused the Civil War in the 30s. But in Spanish the new verb *molar* has recently become a synonym to *gustar*, “to like”, or better, “to be fond of something”. So, the third singular person of the verb, *mola*, is homonym to the general's name. The first journalist, an arrogant and pretentious character (in the show), pretends that his colleague has introduced a new, colloquial, positive appraisal in the discourse (*el general mola*, *I'm fond of the general*), which looks irrelevant to this context. Hence, he fails to understand the correct historical reference made by his colleague to General Mola, the fascist military man. In the context of the news, only this meaning is expected. However, Pellicer interprets the utterance using a new colloquial meaning (*molar*) that turns to be inadequate and thus a humorous effect is created. In attributing the error to Raquel, his mistake ridicules himself: he seems to be incompetent in evoking the relevant piece of information. The whole piece has a typical pun structure, which allows inferences against the target (or the targets), because of its pure inadequacy. Both meanings tend to be opposite here (the fascist implicatures [Mola] and the positive appraisal [*mola*]), and it is easy to derive a script overlap with humorous consequences.

To sum up, in verbal humor we always find a word or expression that precipitates the scripts' opposition. Sometimes we face a kind of light, non-aggressive humor, with mild implications. In addition, sometimes, the load against the target comes mainly from our current presuppositions about him, but the verbal joke or the pun *per se* does not carry serious implications. Instead, *the uses* of the pun are more revealing. Puns can be used to disparage their users, or alternatively, to tease opponents. In our excerpts, voluntary or involuntary puns are used mainly to denigrate their users. It is amusing, but the intentionality is light. It is against politics without using politics overtly. The usual critical presuppositions about the politicians' ineptitude and the uselessness of politics arise as well, but through the light procedure of language misuse. Zapatero doesn't master English, Montilla counts down by

retracing his footsteps, a journalist pretends to ignore basic historical references, the Catalan Minister of Information “entangles” himself with the syntax, and so on. Here we have an odd gallery through the looking glass of language.

4.2. Referential humor

Samples of referential humor work similarly to the former ones, but their devices appear to be fuzzy, because they do not have a *disjunctive*, i.e. a word or expression that precipitates script opposition. Yet we still encounter a kind of referential script opposition, as the expected critical implicatures against a target –a politician, or politics– arise from a less obvious frame that overlaps with the main one. As no particular grammatical trick is exploited in such cases, the visual and situational field, as well as the pragmatical one, become more relevant. Gags usually carry a situational confusion or a misinterpretation, and negative implications are deduced from there.

Our next excerpt shows Montilla as a former socialist leader, who is negotiating new conditions for the party’s credit with a Catalan savings bank. Politics is becoming a hard affair, and the bank will not financially support the socialist faction as they did before.

1) Clerk, Montilla [as leader of the Catalan socialist party]

Empleat: Miri, hem de renegociar el crèdit que tenia el PSC.

Montilla: A l’alça o a la baixa?

Empleat: (Riallles) Vostè sempre tan graciós, senyor Montilla. A l’alça, evidentment.

Montilla: Agafaré un caramel.

Empleat: Un euro!

Montilla: No hi ha caramel (el torna).

Empleat: (...) I dels Punts Estrella oblidi-se’n.

Montilla: Ah sí?

Empleat: Sí, l’aspiradora.

Montilla: S’ha de tornar, no?

Empleat: Exacte, sí, molt bé.

Montilla: (traient-la) Si la porto sempre a sobre...

Empleat: (...) I la bateria de cuina.

Montilla: També s’ha de tornar, oi? Al partit anava molt bé, aquesta.

Empleat: (...) M’hauria de signar aquí conforme està conforme en tornar tot això.

Montilla: O sigui això és torna... (treu un bolígraf)

Empleat: Ui, aquest bolígraf, l’hi vam regalar el dia dels enamorats... Molt bé, doncs, també me l’ha de tornar, eh? (L’hi pren).

Clerk: Look, we must renegotiate the credit with the Catalan Socialist Party.

Montilla: On a rising or on a fall in prices?
 Clerk: (Laughing) You are always so funny, Mr. Montilla. On a rising, of course.
 Montilla: I'll take a toffee.
 Clerk: One euro!
 Montilla: No toffee (he brings it back).
 Clerk: (...) And forget the Star Points [special offers].
 Montilla: Oh really?
 Clerk: Yes, the vacuum-cleaner.
 Montilla: I have to bring it back, don't I?
 Clerk: Yes, all right, it's fine.
 Montilla: (He brings it out) I carry it always with me.
 Clerk: (...) And the kitchenware.
 Montilla: We have to bring it back as well, haven't we? It was so useful for all of us!
 Clerk: (...) You should sign here, as a proof you agree in bringing us back all those things.
 Montilla: (Taking out a pen) So everything is back...
 Clerk: Oh, the pen! It was given to you as a birthday present! Indeed, you must also bring it back to us (he takes it).

In this excerpt, the usual balance of power is inverted. Instead of a powerful and wide-spread regional party negotiating with a bank, a poor customer is spoiled by a bank organization. The first, expected script, /negotiation/, is replaced here by /downfall/, resulting in a loss of face for the leader. The scene amounts to ridicule when even the pen has to be returned. The negotiation turns into spoiling, and the leader (in the fiction) becomes miserable. The bank shows its power, perhaps as a way to mean that economics has overcome politics. Referential humor uses script overlap in order to display its critical load, which is not as "light" as the linguistic humor.

The next fragment teases Spanish Princes, Felipe and Letizia, who live in a new house. Unlike the previous extracts in Catalan, this sketch is in Spanish, namely the ordinary language of the Prince and Princess. Suddenly a group of three squatters occupies the living room. Letizia becomes very angry, but Felipe (the son of the King Juan Carlos) decides to talk with them, "because we are in a parliamentary democracy", as he claims. The situation is the following:

2) Princess Letizia, Prince Felipe, three young squatters

P. Felipe: Bueno, así que ustedes son okupas, verdad, este, colega?
 Joven 1: Guai!
 P. Felipe: Guai! Su filosofía de vida cuál es?
 Joven 1: ¿Quiere saberla? Nunca compramos viviendas, las ocupamos. Sin hipoteca ni nada.
 P. Felipe: Nosotros tampoco.
 Joven 1: Tercero –digo, segundo: estamos en contra del capitalismo.
 P. Felipe: Anda, se vive mucho mejor en el campo, desde luego.

Joven 1: Cuarto –digo, miércoles: estamos a favor del mestizaje.
 P. Felipe: Anda, mi jardinero es bieloruso!
 Joven 1: Séptimo –digo, agosto: cuando viajamos en metro, nunca pagamos.
 P. Felipe: ¡Nosotros tampoco!

P. Felipe: So, you are squatters, aren't you, mmm, you guys?
 Young 1: Wow!
 P. Felipe: Wow! What is your life's philosophy?
 Young 1: D'you want to know it? We don't buy flats, we take them up. No mortgages, nothing.
 P. Felipe: We haven't any, either.
 Young 1: Third –I mean, second: we are against capitalism.
 P. Felipe: Oh yeah! One lives much better in the countryside!
 Young 1: Fourth –I mean, Wednesday: we support the racial mixture.
 P. Felipe: Wonderful, my gardener is Belarusian!
 Young: Seventh –I mean, August: when we take the underground, we don't pay at all.
 P. Felipe: Neither we do!

As we can see, the Prince and Princess and squatters appear to be less different than expected. Actually, they agree on substantial topics. However, this is the core of the farce: when we expected only /dialogue/ as a way to overcome the differences, /fellowship/ emerges, blurring all divergence and opposition. Again, their similarities and common values count as a loss of face for the Prince: conventional, negative implicatures from being a squatter and their obvious incompetence (they don't even list the themes in their right order) damage this friendship. But then humor crops up, /dialogue/ and /fellowship/ scripts overlap and the sketch works successfully. Pleasure and critique have gone together. The Prince and Princess and the squatters blur their differences and people laugh at this lack of distance between them. The second, unexpected script, /fellowship/, has transformed the set and imposed its political critique, through the assumption that Princes and Princesses do not have mortgages, dislike capitalism's complications (probably they understand it as living in a *capital city*), and do not pay when they use the underground.

The next excerpt deals with the clash of civilizations and also involves metacommunication. An Imam invades the stage set asking for the director. When he finds him, he starts complaining. However, the reason turns out to be a weird one, as we can see:

3) *Imam, Soler [show director], a technician*

Iman: Vinc a protesar pel gag sobre el Papa, trobo que és una ofensa per a la meva religió.

Soler: ¿Un gag sobre el Papa, però si no n'hem fet cap!
 Iman: No, però el fareu.
 Soler: Ah sí? Rufes! (s'adreça al tècnic) Escolta, fem un gag sobre el Papa?
 Tècnic: Doncs sí.
 Soler: Però va d'això del conflicte amb l'Íslam i tal?
 Tècnic: Sí, sí, va d'això.
 Soler: Doncs, quina gran idea!
 Iman: Gran idea no, gran ofensa per a l'Íslam.
 Soler: Bueno, no l'he fet encara, no? Doncs, per què no el veiem abans? Vingui amb mi...

Imam: I want to complain about the Pope's gag, I find it offensive for my religion.
 Soler: A gag about the Pope? We haven't made any!
 Imam: Not yet, but you will do it.
 Soler: Really? Rufes! (to the technician) Listen, are we going to do a gag about the Pope?
 Technician: Yes.
 Soler: Does it deal with Islam conflict and all that?
 Technician: Yes, indeed.
 Soler: What a great idea!
 Imam: Not a great idea, but a great offense to the Islamic people.
 Soler: Well, I haven't made it yet, right? Why not first go and see it? Come with me...!

Here the normal temporal sequence is inverted. Complaints usually appear after the facts, not before. In a very heated context, the temporal sequence can be inverted, as we have in the excerpt. The second, inverted pattern implies this heated context, the intensity of grievance on behalf of Islamic representatives –a situation usually known in western countries. The first script presumes only /complaint/ as a background reason. The second, new and unexpected, assumes /zeal/ as a basis, through the inverted temporal sequence. The negative implicatures arise from the /zeal/ script, which amounts even at the forehandedness of future offenses. A mild critique is brought forward here, resting on the force of the absurdity and modulated by humor.

Our last fragment deals with Catalonia's struggle for independence. It displays an odd proclamation of independence, which actually is parodying a proclamation by President Macià in the 1930s, during the Spanish Republic. *Polònia* shot it in black-and-white and the gag involves a Macià imitator at the beginning of his discourse, which turns out to be a weird one:

4) *President Macià*

Macià: (Fent la proclamació) Catalans, d'això... que si us va bé, faríem això de la República Catalana... Que? ¿Ho tirem endavant o no? A mi... tant me fa... Però com que vam dir que ho faríem... No sé...

Macià: (In a proclamation) Catalan people, listen... --I... If it is suitable to you, we should do this thing, the Catalan Republic... So then? Are we going ahead with that or aren't we? I... I really don't mind... But we have said that we should do it, isn't?... I don't know...

Here the rules of discourse are distorted. A proclamation avoids hesitations and does not wait for other people's consent to bring forth its decisions. *Polònia* here laughs at Catalan's own hesitations and lack of determination. By distorting President Macià's discourse, as well as by distorting some of Franco's speeches in other sketches, the program highlights and ridicules the fears and the weaknesses of the speakers and their addressees. First, the expected script, /proclamation/, alluding to the Catalan historical struggle for independence, is replaced by /distrust/ from the very beginning of the speech. Hesitations and uncertainties invade the intended proclamation, so that it becomes useless and deceitful, cancelling its perlocutionary effect. We infer negative implicatures from /distrust/, which feed the critical stance, and the script's overlap does the rest, requiring our smile and complicity.

This is how referential humor works. Incidentally, note that referential humor in some way needs time to develop: it is diffuse, needs several utterances to unfold and takes the time of the dialogue to emerge. Unlike verbal humor, it does not evolve around a specific linguistic element. It spreads all over the text, building a script opposition which involves the interpretation of the whole. It works through a) pragmatic distortion, b) the inversion of temporal sequencing, c) the politeness rules, d) the incongruence between verbal and oral channels, e) the core meaning of the situations, and so on. The expected criticism against politics and politicians, national or international, arise due to the necessary implicatures that are driven from the niche of distortion and change. Politicians are not trusted, ideologies are overzealous, Princes have similarities to squatters (and apparently abuse), party leaders are not as powerful as they seem to be.

5. The interaction of politics, humor and society

Fictional characters play an active role in the production of jokes. This is part of the social management of humor. Actors participate in the comical resolution of the pun, sometimes by laughing themselves, and sometimes by bringing the second meaning of the pun to the surface. As a result, they present themselves in the show as a people having a sense of humor, similar to their target audience. The violation of the cooperation principle (Attardo 1994: 271-276), the distortion of a referential frame, the inversion of the temporal sequence, as we have seen in the previous section, all these speech events are recognized by the actors in an overt metacommunicative exercise, as part of their purposive management of humor. Their effort is a sign of self-inflicted ridicule, a feature that fits the show's intentions well.

The program displays Catalan characters who laugh at their own weakness, but also at Spanish politics and politicians, who are in turn portrayed as criticizing Catalan politics and the Catalan way of life. Indeed, the contrast between Catalan and Spanish identity meets the social management of humor through this virtuous circle. As we have seen in the excerpts, everybody laughs at everybody. The contrast between identities is respected to the extent that each ethnic group (Catalan, Spanish and so on) is portrayed under its own stereotypes. Cross-criticizing is part of the game. The groups manage their sense of humor by recognizing their weakness. Humor works through this indirect way and helps its users to explain themselves.

The humorous situations presented tend to be less offensive due to the complementary functions of decommitment and mediation. Both procedures collaborate in the modulation of the satirical load. As we have seen in the previous excerpts, actors may back off from what they have said, by disclaiming all responsibility since their discourse was not serious. At the same time, they can introduce potentially embarrassing matters and minimize their effects. Linguistic defunctionalization plays a major role in displaying the non-serious nature of the whole episode. When linguistic humor is absent, the stage set and the overt mimics do their work, conferring a powerful carnivalesque, parody-like aspect to the show.

However, the informative side is also relevant, as Tsakona & Popa (2011) have showed when they discuss the "inherent ambiguity of humor" and the "recycling of dominant values". The jokes' argumentative target is always current politics. We can assume that people watch the show to stay in touch with it. One can only fully

understand the show's jokes if one is up-to-date with current relevant information concerning Catalan and Spanish politics. As a consequence, facts that could otherwise be distant or emotionless become close and amusing. Probably, viewers also have the opportunity of acquiring new perspectives on past events through the alternative (and sometimes subversive) point of view that humor brings to the surface, and these new patterns could be used to support alternative political realities, as a Reception Analysis would probably show, by approaching these sociological, broader questions. In our previous presentation of the sketches, we have mainly confined ourselves to show how the gags work, without entering a full interpretation work. This fully interpretative task should be related to expectancies and preferences of different segments of the audience, and should be reinforced by suitable field work and probably different research data. Under a more precise scrutiny, a single piece of humor could be viewed (starting from the presented *structural devices*) from many political stances and might encourage the most curious or audacious associations. But again, *available humorous information* is the starting point from which interpretation begins.

One intriguing question is whether children or people who are not familiarized with politics follow the program as well. That would mean that the show could be a way to convey information as well as humor: indeed, these people would choose the program in order to have fun, but they would receive the relevant information in an indirect way, as Tsakona and Popa (2011) maintain, describing "the (side-)effects" of political humor. Indirectness should be here *le mot d'ordre*, as humor would provide the opportunity to learn. Again, this question could be fruitfully approached under empirical research (cf. Tsakona and Popa 2011: 10-14, and references therein). The relevant informative side of humor works implicitly, and viewers should have to recur to implicatures and presuppositions to work it out, in those cases. If one has the right information at hand, the process goes fast; if not, it becomes a kind of play that one brings forward against relevance and reality.

6. Conclusions

Polònia brings the political dimension near to everyday, customary experiences, through the appearance of everyday, humorous conversation. Its main consequence is

that the majority of substantial affairs are viewed in a milder way, and problematic issues are discarded or reconsidered. Its negative counterpart is a light discredit of politics as a crucial enterprise, *via* rough judgments and derision. This double-faced operating way is essential in humor and has to do with its potential *ambiguity*. However, we should consider this powerful and potential dimension, related to possible interpretations, besides its *satirical* force. Political satire has definite targets. As we have seen, the gags are structured in a direct and precise way against somebody or some ideas. The critical and satirical implications are a clear consequence of joke structure and its development. Although the necessary latent ambiguities, the gags' satirical value and orientation keep their force and viewers are subtly invited to make their own inferences about the gags' critical load and derision.

Our two previous statements about the structural composition of the gags and its satirical force have been developed through our article. We have also explained how characters manage their humorous moves in order to fit a desired critical pattern, usually according to their particular attributed trends. We have assumed that mediation and distance are a way to manage social and political realities, and also to represent controversial identities (Catalan vs. Spanish affiliation). Identity affiliation is a core value that is being distorted through jokes and self-derision from both sides. Finally, indirect information takes part in the interpretation by confirming the everyday, standard approach to news and reality, and by claiming their presence and power indirectly, because available information is the starting point from which humorous interpretation begins.

To sum up, *Polònia* breaks routines in a fruitful way: it establishes a close relationship between political action and everyday knowledge, as pragmatic and discourse analysis have showed; the program serves also as efficacious entertainment, as it changes and distorts discourse patterns and references by proposing new contexts, and reinforces internal communication in the social network through the flux of information, humor and common presuppositions, a point that should be explored in future research. As we read from time to time in Catalan newspapers, politicians, artists and journalists allegedly want to be represented by a character in the show. The media's possibility of reaching a wide audience with a show about politics probably changes our habitual ideas about what counts as decisive (and derisive) and what not,

beyond the experience of everyday political conversation. The consequence is that the vague world of politics become more real and current, thanks to the fictional creatures the show launches.

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