



Queering Laughter? It was just a joke!

Giuseppe Balirano

Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale

gbalirano@unior.it

Delia C. Chiaro

Università di Bologna Alma Mater Studiorum

delia.chiaro@unibo.it

Giuseppe Balirano, PhD in English Linguistics, is Associate Professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Naples L'Orientale. His current research and publications focus mainly on language, identity and masculinities within a multimodal perspective; and, varieties of English and humour within a cross-cultural perspective. He is the current director of a research consortium, *I-LanD*, which investigates identity, language and diversity in discourse. His major publications include: *Queering Masculinities in Language and Culture* (with P. Baker, 2016); *Languaging Diversity* (with M.C. Nisco, 2015); *Language, Theory and Society* (with M.C. Nisco, 2015); *Masculinity and Representation* (2014); *Variation and Varieties in Contexts of English* (with J. Bamford and J. Vincent, 2012); *The Perception of Diasporic Humour: Indian English on TV* (2008).

Delia C. Chiaro is Professor of English Language and Translation at the University of Bologna's Department of Interpreting and Translation at the Forlì campus. Her research interests in the field of Translation Studies lie mainly in the area of Screen Translation and especially issues related to the translation of Verbally Expressed Humour on Screen and end user quality. She is the current President of the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS) and has carried out large scale investigations on humour and audience perception of dubbed TV programmes in Italy, the results of which have been published internationally.



Humosexually Speaking - Laughter and the Intersections of Gender investigates the social function of humour produced *in, against* and *about* gender variant communities of speakers, in both verbal and multimodal forms. The editors' leading idea was to ignite an academic discussion on the several and often hidden ways through which humour succeeds in constantly strengthening and/or re-interpreting, but also dismantling, the social dimension of language. One of the possible results of such a political and social act is the fostering of the cultural exclusion of some gendered, or rather *de-generated* – as some discriminated groups tend to be commonly alleged to be – minority communities. Additionally, since humour may also work to signify the recurring upsetting of pre-established social beliefs through the systematic threatening of the familiar, the normative, and what is universally deemed as socially acceptable or “normal”, debates on any form of humorous self-representation of gendered identities were also vivid in the editors' minds. In particular, it seemed fascinating to encouraging a discussion on the way LGBTI communities, just like other marginalised groups, would employ humour to support and reinforce their own in-group sense of community, by mocking typically stereotyped representations of gender variant people who laugh *at* and *with* themselves. Although LGBTI humour is still a very hot topic in our western world, one reason for the lack of a real academic confrontation on its social and political mechanisms resides in the very difficult challenge of defining it. Specifically, despite a convincing semantic linguistic theory of humour introduced by Raskin (1985) and later developed by Attardo (1994; 2001), the cultural mechanisms underlying some jokes *laughing about* human relationships by *queering* the scene, for instance, are still an unexplored topic.

Historically, the dawning of a new century has marked turbulence and change throughout society and the current era is no different. In place of traditional binary conflicts, we find ubiquitous terrorism that adheres to new, different and often unintelligible rules, revolutions that are no longer simply social and industrial but above all technological, while shifts in populations have reached unprecedented numbers as human beings travel from areas of conflict and poverty towards those of affluence. Yet together with terrorism, technology and migration, another term that evokes the new millennium must surely be gender. The binary concept of gender has now pushed its boundaries way beyond traditional distinctions to include an enlarged spectrum of genders and, consequently, sexualities. Yet such radical change has occurred in the western world at the very same moment in which political correctness is not only of paramount concern, but has become so extreme as to require us to linguistically tiptoe around “delicate” concepts so as to choose our words with utmost care lest we should cause offense. With regard to political correctness, talking of gender is a minefield especially when we consider what we are permitted and not permitted to joke about and what we can and cannot laugh at.

Yet human beings do make fun of and laugh at difference. Whether that difference is skin colour, body weight or sexuality, it appears to be in our genes to make diversity the target of ridicule. Usually the joker is always positioned at the centre and the object of scorn inhabits the periphery. From Aristotle to Hobbes and beyond, humour theories assert that we tend to laugh at what we consider ugly and inferior to ourselves. Jest and joking about the cripple or the lesbian may be minimized by jokers with an “only” or a “just” (i.e., “I was only joking,” or “It was just a joke,”

etc.), but far from being innocent, such jest may well underscore societal attitudes, and, according to Freud (1960), the psychological attitude of the joker.

Furthermore, unwritten social norms require us to behave in a certain manner, at least publically. The work of Goffman (1959) highlights how behaviours differ according to whether we are “performing” frontstage or backstage, in other words whether we are operating in the private sphere and in private or within a more public social sphere. In order to adhere to social norms, because laughter marks the outward display of a positive response to a humorous stimulus, care must be taken not to laugh and therefore show overt appreciation of humour that might be considered as being in bad taste. These days, bad taste in humour includes the appreciation of disaster jokes, rape jokes, sick jokes and generally ridiculing others for their ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, weight, hair loss and appearance in general. If we hear a sick joke or a rape joke and laugh, we run the risk of being judged for having done so. Yet if tasteless jokes exist, someone somewhere finds them funny. Humour of late seems to have become some kind of moral shibboleth. People divide into two camps: those in favour of freedom of speech who believe we should be able to joke about anything, and those who condemn jokes that are of dubious taste along with those who tell them and laugh at them. This is a futile debate that goes nowhere, as people will continue to talk and behave as they please.

At the time of writing TV and radio host Billy Bush lost his job after being heard laughing on tape in appreciation of a series of misogynistic remarks made by Donald Trump. Clearly “backstage” in Goffman’s terms, Bush came across as aligning himself with Trump’s sexist attitudes because he was openly laughing at his remarks (see Yuhas 2016). Would Bush have behaved in a similar fashion, had he known that the conversation was being recorded? Probably not. Significantly, Trump defended his remarks as being simply “locker room” talk, clearly signalling that for him they were “backstage”.

However, a lot of (good?) humour pivots precisely on bad taste (Kuipers 2011). Yet it is taboo to admit to engaging in such humour, let alone enjoying it. The sphere of gender, by virtue of the fact that it is inextricably linked to sexuality, is inevitably taboo which is one of the reasons why we joke about it. Joking about sex provides an arena in which we are free to discharge our unease with all that is sexual through non-seriousness. The concept “only joking” temporarily frees us from social norms. Let us bear in mind that the concept of non-seriousness, in whatever form it may occur, allows us to relax and let go of our inhibitions, say the unsayable, laugh at the unlaughable, without actually openly *doing* anything that might be socially unacceptable (Freud, 1960). If humour is the place where serious discourse takes a break and goes on holiday, if it is a sort of linguistic locker room then it is also the place where anything goes, and we can be politically incorrect.

Dirty jokes, for example, are the cornerstone of sexual humour and they are bound to involve a butt, a victim. It should come as no surprise that dirty jokes are not limited to mainstream heterosexual subject matter. In fact, venturing into what may be considered more off-limits than straight taboo (pun intended) simply makes the humour more (un)savoury. Yet by laughing at a joke about a minority – in this issue a gendered minority – may well dis-align the joker from the minority group itself. So what? After all, we are only joking! Or, are we? A man may joke about wanting to kill his mother-in-law as a way of verbalising his true discomfort with a woman he sees as a battle-axe, yet the mother-in-law in question is unlikely to fear for her life. She knows he is only joking. Yet undeniably, there is something going on below the

surface of the joke. According to Davies (1990), these jokes act as a sort of safety valve for men. He argues that women never joke about their husband's mothers simply because, more than son-in laws, they seriously suffer within a relationship in which they need to compete against the power of an entrenched rapport between mother and son. Thus, what may be going on under the surface of a sexist joke (even one told in a locker room) will nevertheless reveal the attitudes and values of the raconteur.

So how can we come to terms with the contradiction of abiding by the norms of political correctness and the existence of humour that causes tendentious offence? *Humosexually Speaking* focuses on sexist humour aimed at a number of groups that are targeted more aggressively than others. A glance at any website dedicated to jokes will reveal that there are more jokes in which, for example, wives are the butt than there are jokes in which their husbands are. And if the husband does happen to be the butt it will be due to a nasty wife who has a lover hidden in her wardrobe or freezer, so that although he is being laughed at, the real bad guy is the woman. In fact, women in jokes are devious and despicable beings who set out to marry men only to withdraw sex once they have obtained a wedding ring (see Tel Aviv women in Chiaro, forthcoming). Some are stupid promiscuous blondes or Essex Girls, depending on which side of the Atlantic the jokes are made. But that is just the wide category of "women", that includes mothers, daughters, sisters, secretaries and nuns. This issue of *de genere*, in particular, deals with humour aimed at genders that are much more peripheral than those covered by the term "women".

We laugh and ridicule others and otherness. We tend to erect walls between ourselves and our diverse counterparts, often separating "the normal" from "the abnormal". This is especially the case if that *Other* is in some way miserable or abject, as happens with women in patriarchal societies but also, as this issue hopes to show, to ethnic "others", whose stereotypical representations are often the butt of politically incorrect jokes. The intersection between these two forms of hegemonic representation – gender and race – is at the core of this issue, where race often works as an interruption of gender as a general framework for highlighting the social impact of humour. The "abject", in Butler's terms (2004), includes any form of non-binary representation of gender. There is a wide spectrum of gendered jokes in which passivated social actors are the butt. Such jokes (using Butler's terminology) span non-hegemonic representations of masculinities, including feminised men and masculine lesbians, and proliferate to the point of becoming much more popular and frequent as the butt moves closer to the feminine world. Rather than the fluid categories of gender which many marginalised groups now adopt, the rigid binary categories of gendered jokes shifts the butt from men to women, who are the most popular underdogs of sexist humour. Humorous texts produced by some gay communities in western contexts mirror and distort these rigid binaries and produce playful effects.

Playing with non-binary gender representation is a very common humorous ploy which sometimes blurs the female underdog with the very concept of being gay, as we can infer from the following "gay joke" where the underdog "wife" triggers a heterosexual man's unhappiness:

Son: Dad, what does "gay" mean?

Father: It means "to be happy".

Son: Are you gay?

Father: No, son. I have a wife!

Sexist humour negatively reflects and affects the way people perceive discrimination against LGBTI people and encourages a tendency to discriminate against everyone who falls into the category of the “abnormal”. Some gay men, in fact, tend to stigmatise drag queens as sexually promiscuous and drug-addicted by showing their hatred towards other gay and effeminate men who embody femininity, a negatively perceived stigma several gay men struggle against in order to dissociate themselves from it. Femininity in manhood is still identified with the perpetuation of the view that gay men are unsuccessful at doing masculinity.

Humour is also a strong basis for political activity. Humour against LGBTI people is, in fact, very frequently found in other-representations of political enemies. Queer images of Putin, Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, which jam several US web-pages as contemporary memes of terror, are a clear attempt at queering the beast, or rather, dehumanizing the queer. Indeed, the rhetorical use of anti-gay concepts, universally associated with the hetero-normative conundrums of procreation, nation and apocalypse, is a very distinctive trait in homophobic humour since they can be straightforwardly applied to the creation of non-human or less-than-human categories of “de-generated” people. In particular, the idea of portraying the political enemy as a gay icon goes back to the conservative religious concerns of construing the image of the antichrist, someone endowed with an abnormal spirituality distinctive of the non-human. As Runions aptly points out:

In conservative Christian discourse, the antichrist’s probable homosexual orientation is derived from a particular way of translating Daniel 11:37. Some translations render the middle part of the verse as follows: “He will show no regard for the gods of his fathers or for the desire of women” (*New American Standard Bible*). The antichrist’s lack of interest in women allows for the suggestion that the antichrist may be homosexual. (2008, 87)

As we can see, queering the beast is a concept filtered through a religious lens, thus religion becomes the gatekeeper of what counts for morality and ethical values.

Engaging with the crusade against the blurred dichotomy between the much debated “laughing with” and “laughing at” jokes in humour studies (Chiaro, 2010), *Humosexually Speaking* will negotiate the possibility of laughing “about” (Balirano, 2007) gendered humour. Our key ambition here is to voice other forms of humorous representations: those that seep through the construction of contemporary forms of other identities allowing the “unspeakable” to be heard.

The chapters in this volume do not fall precisely into separate topics naturally suggesting distinct sections, but instead each chapter references multiple themes: intersectionality, hegemonic masculinity, marginalisation, trans and intersex identities, homophobia, and LGBTI subordination and stereotyping. Additionally, the authors draw on examples from novels, films, television episodes, dramas and docudramas, advertising campaigns and jokes, making this a collection that broadly covers a range of different ways of queering laughter.

The first essay in our collection is evocatively about men: “Of Masculinities, Men, and Mockery in the ‘Get a Mac’ Campaign: Gendered Derision as a Rhetorical Tool” by Mostafa Abedinifard. This contribution starts from the premise that in advertising discourse, brands signify powerful cultural ideas that do not only publicise products, but also speak to familiar cultural icons, ideals, and values, and moves on to examine a renowned 21st century US advertising campaign – Apple’s “Get a Mac”

campaign – as a pop cultural text that deploys ridicule to capitalise on subtle gendered relations. The campaign, featuring men as lead characters, taps into the contemporary Anglo-American gender order to reinforce a positive brand image. In doing so, Abedinifard argues, the campaign takes much of its primary force from the punitive use of ridicule within a patriarchal economy of power, in which hegemonic masculinity is exalted at the expense of non-hegemonic gender performances. From this perspective, the author debates the implications of the main argument for further, related research, while also tackling the ensuing question of whether commercial advertising can ever be expected to resist hegemony effectively.

In “Hetties, queens, and fag hags: ironic name giving in LGBTIQ+ discourse”, Eva Nossem analyses linguistic instantiations of humour and irony in LGBTI designations. In particular, the author looks at the linguistic practice of naming LGBTI people and the terms about them. Nossem’s analysis focuses on the personal nouns used in a humorous way both for LGBTIQ+ persons and straight/heterosexual persons, both employed within LGBTIQ+ communities to refer to other group members, or to outgroup persons as well as frequent in heterosexual/heterosexist/homophobic discourse. The author examines instances which are structured by heteronormativity, as well as cases in which heteronormative thinking is overcome or deconstructed, also aiming to identify who is targeted and in what ways humorous designations are used to downplay persons. Not surprisingly, Nossem individuates similarities between humorous personal nouns used in heterosexist/heteronormative discourses and those used within LGBTIQ+ communities, in order to show how the humorous aspect of such personal nouns is construed and the role it plays in transmitting and understanding certain semantic aspects.

While some contributions focus on instances of “language in use” others, such as “Putting the ‘cis’ into ‘sissy’: Humour, Sexuality and Contemporary Cabaret” by Will Visconti, take as case studies artists and performers who have confronted the issue of humour in their work. Visconti discusses the ways in which two Australian cabaret performers – Dusty Limits and Meow Meow – use humour to communicate ideas about sexuality, and as a means of challenging commonly-held attitudes. Through the use of “contestive humour” (Holmes 2000, 165) to signify and perform an act of protest, and by combining humour with social commentary, Dusty and Meow encourage audiences not only to think critically, but to laugh at themselves and to recognise the ridiculousness in situations around sex and sexuality.

Nicoletta Vallorani provides a fresh outlook at intersectionality while focusing on a number of humorous features in literature, films, visual and performative arts involving transgendered characters. Applying Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, the author explores the force of subversive laughter arguing that when humour arises from the margins, it challenges and subverts the established orthodoxies, authorities and hierarchies. Yet, Vallorani also posits that the same tools exploited to resist and react to the pressures towards normalization are now being transformed into a strategy to keep both the sexual and the colonial Other on the bridge, in the ghetto of a carnival that, being marked as an exception to the social rule, fails to be dangerous. The author shows how the disruptive power of the grotesque/carnavalesque body, with reference to both postcolonial and LGTBI “otherness”, has gradually gone lost, to be replaced by the reassuring feeling that these kinds of difference do not belong with the real world and therefore do not imply the actual revision of social and political practices.

A focus on the Butlerian performative in relation to the intersection of gender and race is offered by Paola Bono's contribution, on Caryl Churchill's 1979 play *Cloud Nine*. First performed by the Joint Stock Company in 1979, the play focuses on two crucial moments of British history, the heyday of Victorian imperialism, and the late Seventies: the challenges the second setting brings to the worldview sustained in the first are brought to life by the experimental strategies put into practice by Churchill, and especially by the use of gender and racial cross-dressing to expose the constructed nature of social roles and personal identities. The heightened artificiality of the *dramatis personae* is superimposed on the *mise-en-scène* happening in the theatrical space to create dramatic but also often grotesque situations, commenting with bitter irony on how the characters' discordant bodies show the constructedness of supposedly natural identities.

"A stand-up comedy routine, until it's not'. Brahman/i: a One-Hijra Stand-up Comedy Show" by Angela Zottola is a reflexion on the difference between "laughing with" and "laughing at" someone, when humour is performed *in* and *by* a multi-cultural and multi-gendered setting. The author conducts an analysis of a stand-up comedy show/play: *Brahman/i: a one-Hijra stand-up comedy show*, followed by an original interview with the playwright Aditi Brennan Kapil. In her work, Kapil puts together humour, post-colonialism, gender issues and the struggles that sometimes life can generally put people through; Zottola's analysis, in its turn, aims at highlighting the way in which verbally expressed humour becomes a means to represent an intersex identity which not only does not conform to the binary and heteronormative definitions of gender as imposed by society, but, at the same time, is also situated in a cultural and geographical limbo.

Finally, we move on to three contributions which examine different instantiations of lesbian humour through different analytical tools, shaping a debate where in some ways each chapter acts as an inverse image of the other. First, we have Corinne A. Seals's "The contrastive use of humour by a lesbian comedian for LGBTI and general audiences", where the author applies the theories of intertextuality, indexicality, and audience design to contrastively analyse a case study of how a lesbian comedian uses humour in two settings. Seals first presents an analysis of how humour functions when used for a known LGBTI friendly audience; this is then contrasted with a discourse analysis of how humour is used when the same lesbian comedian performs for a general (i.e. not explicitly LGBTI) audience. The article provides insight into how intertextuality and audience design can be useful tools for LGBTI performance when used in a "safe space" versus a general arena by expanding the studies of humour to include marginalised sexual identities.

The contribution by Christie Davies is a chatty, almost informal discussion on political correctness within humour that especially concerns lesbian humour while more generally pointing a finger at the "foolishness" of politically correct objections regarding humour tout court. According to Davies, lesbian humour is for anyone with a sense of humour and needs to be defended against the ideology of political correctness. Looking at a broad selection of lesbian humour created by lesbians at the expense of lesbians themselves, Davies sets out to show that a significant portion of it is deliberately politically incorrect. In particular, lesbian humour makes use of scripts related to a number of negative stereotypes about the internal minorities of butch, femme, and fannies. Like so many other types of anti-different or anti-outsider humour, much lesbian humour ridicules the excluded and those of lower social status,

thereby endorsing narrow and limiting views of what it is to be a lesbian. In this lively article, Davies defends the freedom of saying the unsayable within non-serious speech to the hilt.

The third chapter on lesbian humour is Don Kulick's famous discussion on humourless lesbians, here published both in the original and, for the first time, in Italian translation. The author's approach, which differs from the previous one in several ways, provides an enthralling discussion on the predominant view that lesbians are often perceived as humourless. Kulick discusses earlier research on lesbian humour by reflecting on how common stereotypes of humourless Germans, Jews, and contemporary Muslims have been represented in the media. According to Kulick, the influence of gender hierarchy establishes the fundamental rules of men's behaviour so that masculinity results in an essentially trouble-free stance, while femininity is inevitably performative. Kulick's analysis suggests that the serious "failed masculinity" of butch lesbians can easily offer interesting sources of humour. This chapter, which first appeared in an edited volume called "Femininity, Feminism, and Gendered Discourse" by Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra (2010), is translated into Italian by Antonio Fruttaldo whose admirable and thorny linguistic effort concludes our journey into the difficult and almost unexplored realm of LGBTI humour. The editors hope that the reflections in this second issue of *de genere* will provoke debate, inspire further scholarly interest and particularly shed new light on the ways *queering* laughter may be just another aspect of engaging with social and political practices which work effectively towards the full appreciation of diversity.

Works Cited

- Attardo, Salvatore. 1994. *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Attardo, Salvatore. 2001. *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatics Analysis*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Balirano, Giuseppe. 2007. *The Perception of Diasporic Humour: Indian English on TV*. Catania: AG Edizioni.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Chiario, Delia. 2010. "Laughing at or laughing with? Italian comic stereotypes viewed from within the peripheral group". In *Hybrid Humour: Comedy in Transcultural Perspectives*, edited by Graeme R. Dunphy and Rainer Emig, 65–84. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Chiario, Delia. Forthcoming. *The Language of Jokes in the Digital Age*. London: Routledge.
- Davies, Christie. 1990. "An Explanation of Jewish Jokes about Jewish Women." *Humor: International Journal of Humor* 3: 363–378.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1960 [1905]. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Holmes, Janet and Marra, Meredith, eds. 2010. *Femininity, Feminism and Gendered Discourse*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.
- Yuhas, Alan. 2016. "Billy Bush Dropped by NBC after Trump Tape about Groping Women Leaked." *The Guardian*, 18 October 2016. Accessed October 25, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/17/billy-bush-fired-nbc-donald-trump-tape-groping-women-leaked>.

- Kuipers, Giseline. 2011. *Good Humor, Bad Taste. A Sociology of the Joke*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Raskin, Victor. 1985. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: D. Reidel.
- Runions, Erin. 2008. "Queering the Beast; The Antichrists' Gay Wedding." In *Queering the Non/Human*, edited by Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 79-110.