The (Non) Place of Humor in Political Journalistic Discourse

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The purpose of this paper is to critically reflect on the "place of humor" in political journalistic discourse. The manual of style and usage published by the major Brazilian newspaper in 2009, *Folha de S. Paulo*, explains that the genre news article implies the "pure register of facts, with no opinion. Accuracy is the key term of an article" and Van Dijk (1990) argues that the proper speech act of journalism is "to asseverate" (from *asseverare* in Latin, to affirm with certainty, seriously). When the contumacious reader of a newspaper, who is used to narrative conventions, finds news articles with prototypical examples of humor (ORING, 1992, 2003) in the political sections, his first impression is that the journalists are transgressing canonical conventions that are required for the production of reports, and are trying to mean "something else" by means of implicatures (in journalistic jargon, "between the lines").

In his mind, occurrences of humor can alternatively mean either an irony or an "odd" utterance for such context, and he moves along without thinking much of it. Austin (1990) states that the performative status of an utterance can only be understood if one considers the total discursive situation. Such totality, certainly, goes beyond the understanding of how certain conventions are invoked in the moment of production. It goes beyond the spacial and temporal coordinates one resorts to in order to define a simple context. Actually, the (non) place of humor has no object or proper question. For all language, when used outside its ordinary language game or its discourse universe, becomes something odd, if taken literally, an anecdote in Wittgenstein's terms. And anecdotes not only name, they have other usages and functions. They can be political instances when deployed as modes of subjectification, that is, an instance where the performative character of the utterance displaces or shifts a body from the place assigned to it; making visible what had no business being seen, and making heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise (RANCIÈRE, 1996:42). The methodology of this investigation is analytical-descriptive,

and the news articles were chosen randomly. The theoretical background is the one of Critical Linguistic Pragmatics (MEY, 1985, 1993; RAJAGOPALAN, 2001, 2002, 2003; PENNYCOOK, 2001; BUTLER, 1997).

Keywords: Humor – Journalism – Politics – Pragmatics.

1   The non-place of humor

This incursion won't be made with Philosopher's eyes - dynamic in perception of strange language games, but not quite intended to clarify ideas - but with Journalist's eyes, and perhaps the eyes of one who is not satisfied with day-to-day words. To think of the non-place of humor means one should look at the inaugural Platonic gesture which expelled the poets from the ideal Republic and elevated the philosophers to a superior position. This gesture is not made without irony nor, as such, without the Socratic image and the reflections that its ironic redescription has caused (ARISTÓFANES, 1996; PLATO, 1949; KIERKEGAARD, 1991; GUTHRIE, 1995; BRICKHOUSE & SMITH, 1994).

Socrates and Plato transformed the Greek routines - ruled by costumes and imbued with an intense and dramatic fantasy dominated by desires, fears and wishes. That which used to be considered inappropriate or repudiated turned out to be the new habitual action. A grammar of rationality started to claim for unity, duration, cause and the reality of the Being in the hills of Athens. The purpose was to substitute myth for logos, theater for discourse, illustration for demonstration, non-serious for serious. These narratives will delineate a fruitful trace in Western society, and inscribe convenience based on "reason" in order to seek for virtue and happiness.

As far as the man/logos relation goes, the shift in perspective constitutes the core of the Socratic redescription, and inaugurates a new paradigm. It is no longer a face-to-face God, a public spectacle, or a guessing game that rules out, but a "Perfect Man". Socrates knows that the divine delirium is nobler than human wisdom (FEDRO, 245), thereby providing the philosopher with a delirium that will lead him to the place where unintelligible realities dwell. A hallucination - which is a prohibition that cannot be extinct - is also an attribute of the "friend of wisdom" to the consecration of mysteries. This is the ethical dilemma of Socrates. The ambiguity of his approach does not distance him from the poets who will be rejected, rather it transfers him the role of someone who teaches a *phármakon*: either remedy or poison!

Plato will permanently expel the poets from the terrain of philosophy, that is, from the domain of the "serious" discourse. However, the foundational gesture that delimitates and defines this dimension of language use is both ironic and metaphoric. As Rajagopalan (2000:306) notes: "Plato defined and delimited the terrain of philosophy by expelling from his ideal republic poets and 'all the rest' who would give free rein to their imagination".

The Platonic exclusion places the non-serious (contingent, different, incomplete, ambiguous, emotive) as a category opposed to the serious, that is, reason (intellect), objectivity and literality (the original and decontextualized meaning), science (*episteme*) which are the bases for the foundational dis-

course of Western metaphysics. The ambiguity of this philosophical dichotomy creates a state of affairs where humor is displaced from the discourse of the so-called "hard sciences". Laughter, seen as an essential attribute of humor, is only acceptable as a sign of good taste and equilibrium. It has to be domesticated and reduced to "the state of audible smile and refined clucks destined to soften serious conversations" (MINOIS, 2003:74, emphasis added). When devaluated, humor becomes a sign of bad, inferior laughter. However, Isaac (literally meaning 'God laughs') reveals the other side of the dichotomy: the good, superior laughter being the expression of deity (GÊNESIS, 21). Humor belongs sometimes to inferior beings, sometimes to godly ones.

It is in this amalgam of ideas, unable to shape an identity of humor, that one entertains the idea of non-place (AUGÉ, 1994). It is necessary to consider that in the 21st there are still millions of people believing that humor is satanic and that any laughter, cartoon or gesture against the prophets can bring about a "fatwa" (a legal pronouncement in the Islamic world). Another part of the population still believes that laughter is not serious and the image of the circus clown is the best representation for this state of beliefs. The clown is an actualization of the "King's jester". At the court or in the circus, he does not have a "true" identity, since he is only one of many! The jester does not exist as a historic and relational identity, but as an excrescence, an expatriate who can be sold, lent or purchased at the will of the powerful. Everything for the jester is temporary, ephemeral, and, according to Minois (2003:228), "seen as a hybrid, the jester

is somehow part of the collections of royal beasts".

The experience of the "royal jester" is replaced by the "digital jester" who devaluates humor to an ephemeral, quick and easy configuration, ready to be used in any occasion. It is a non-place in the ephemeral and fast space of Internet, where what matters is the "here" and the "now". There is neither history nor subjects, and the texts are abstract images on the computer screen. They can be reduced, changed and created by anyone. The volatile relations do not provide shelters, although they satisfy, momentarily, the ideals of freedom of the world web users. The excess of facts as characteristic of the non-place of the cyberculture turns out to be a trap. It is in this virtual space that the text breaks with the context of production. "Facts are never just facts: they always hang together with the context in which they are found and with the people that are at their origins" (MEY, 2003:334-5).

2 The Non-Place of Humor in Journalism

When I write, the most difficult thing, what causes me the most anguish, mostly in the beginning, is to find the right tone. Ultimately, my most serious problems is not deciding what I want to say. Each time I begin a text, the anguish, the sense of failure, comes from the fact that I am unable to establish a voice. I ask myself whom I am talking to, how I am going to play with the tone, the tone being precisely that which informs and establishes the relation. It isn't

the content, it's the tone, and since the tone is never present to itself, it is always written differentially; the question is always this differentially of tone (...) (DERRIDA *apud* BRUNETTE, 1994:21).

Initially, it is important to bear in mind that journalistic practice is a complex action of mediation between facts and values in which one seeks to transmit the idea of cooperation between journalist and reader as regards the meanings of narratives. In other words, the hypothesis is that the narratives mean exactly what they say, and the communicative intention (that is inferred) is as given as the verbal form. The *raison d'être* of journalism is the news. The manual of style and usage published by the major Brazilian newspaper in 2009, *Folha de S. Paulo*, explains that the article genre implies the "pure register of facts, with no opinion. Accuracy is the key term of an article" (1992: 38). In this sense, the prevailing idea is that the right tone for this discourse genre is the one that "asseverates" a version of facts. However, an assertion (from *asseverare* in Latin, to affirm with certainty, seriously) may contain an illocutionary force (AUSTIN, 1962) that will raise resistance or distrust as regards the "truth tone" of the communicator. A contumacious reader of a newspaper (a cooperative reader in terms of GRICE, 1975)[1] can:

a) understand the journalistic intentionality, that is, the "truth tone", characteristic of the news narrative, being unable to understand the communicative intention of the journalist, which can be different;

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[1] A reader who expects the journalist to be sincere, relevant, concise and objective.

b) understand the communicative intention of the journalist and raise doubts over the "truth tone" of the narrative;

c) do not understand neither the "truth tone" of the news nor the corresponding communicative intention of the journalist.

This carries out a dilemma over what one means and what one said. In other words, how does the journalist want to make himself understood by what he said? What is the "tone" to be adopted by the journalist so that the reader legitimates his narrative as "true"? The answer does not imply the adoption of a heuristic schema of division between sentence meaning, utterance meaning and speaker meaning (DASCAL; BERNSTEIN, 1982) in order to "reveal" either the journalistic intention (what is canonical for the activity) or the individual intention of the journalist. Rather, one should consider Rajagopalan's (2002:23) remark, "that the linguistic practice is characterized by stumbles, hazards, unpredictable and singular events, attributes that defy the very desire to tame, domesticate - in a nutshell, to theorize about the object of study, namely, praxis". Austin (1962) states that the perfomativity of an utterance can only be understood in the total discursive situation. Certainly, this totality goes beyond both the understanding of how certain conventions are invoked at the moment of production and the special and temporal coordinates used to define a simple context. In such domain it is important to consider that both the production and the reception of journalistic texts will involve more peoples and circumstances than merely reporter and reader. It will involve, therefore, different attitudes and social positions,

expressed by different language games that embody expectations, wishes, claims, fears, jealousy, attitudes towards the Other and the world, lies, hatred, power, etc.

Before digging into the non-place of humor in journalism, we have to spell out the conception of "intentionality" that is here deployed. To think is to intend, an action intertwined with the concrete existential conditions of humans. There is no pre-social intentionality, some sort of a-historic will instilled within individuals, who in turn would act according to metaphysical wishes. Intention is always the desire to change either the subject's mental states or states of things in reality. There is no intention *per se*. Intention is not an interior state that purportedly unfolds in causal terms. It must be understood, rather, as an active and singular process of the individual in responding to the social and body conditions. To state that there is intention is to state that the agent and the action are intelligible; "intention acquires meaning from the context and the operational situation in which it is used" (SHIBLES, 1974:121).

Now we need to "play" a bit with the tone to understand that the Platonic serious versus non-serious dichotomy is part of the rhetoric that instituted the hegemony of Objectivity, Seriousness and Truth in journalism, and leaves a trace of investments and concerns about humor in this field. Particularly, the displacement of humor, through a ritual bearing a political meaning, to a liminal space, a non-place. This destination is not tied only to past interpretations, but also to the present moment, to dynamism, that is, the immediacy, the "here and now". Traquina (2005:38) argues that "the value of immediacy expresses how time constitutes

the central axis of journalism (...) almost like an act of faith in a god named *Kronos*". The fight over time is pervasive in news articles, revealing an effort to make these narratives circulate everywhere, as if they carried in themselves the keys to their own interpretation.

The fact is that the tone of the published articles is nearly always the result of a selection between "main" text and its "complements" which presupposes classical dichotomies, such as inside/outside, good/evil, principal/secondary, serious/non-serious (news/humor). The hierarchy that dislocates humor to the outside of "serious" narratives and transforms them in a sort of (transitional, momentary, liminal) non-place is disguised in current journalistic ethos as ornament. The rush to publish the last news is so irresistible that the contextualization and judicious explanation of facts is of little interest. What matters most is that the news be quickly read and that the limitation of the texts contrasts with the exuberance of graphics, cartoons, pictures, maps, illustrations, boxes and sides. The huge amount of ornaments may not inform, but they beautify the news. In this endless flow of news, the text writers have little concern over the limitation of inferences. Rather, they open as many inference lines as possible, in order to make sure the reader will occupy a position of permanent consumer of everything that is published, no matter if that position lead him or her to the opposed direction than the one of what was said (OLIVEIRA, 1999).

In short, there is a double exclusion of humor in the journalistic account. First, it is considered non-serious, therefore it cannot be placed among the canonical informative genres. Second, the obsession for speed and

the temptation to explain everything transform it in "ornament". The ornament is almost a cliché, that is, a ready formula, a mechanical idea about peoples, activities, professions, political positions, stereotypes, value judgments etc. (MARCONDES FILHO, 2000:118). This reduction does not do justice to humor and refers itself to the question of what is the right tone, or if even there is a correct tone to be used in the journalistic text, especially in the political journalism sphere.

The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that. The realization that the world does not tell us what language games to play (like those that lead us to reality or fiction, *seriousness or jokes*, my observation) should not, however, lead us to say that a decision of which to play is arbitrary, nor to say that it is the expression of something deep within us. (RORTY, 1989:6).

Strictly speaking, the place of humor is void of object or proper question for every language. When used outside its ordinary language game or its discourse universe, it turns out to be odd. If taken literally, it is an anecdote in Wittgenstein's terms (*apud* Shibles, 1974). Anecdotes are not always intended to name, but to other ends; they can be used even to communicate or to be an expression of the current social configuration which is defined by the excess of facts and individualization of references (AUGÉ, 1994). Anecdotes are political acts when uttered as subjectivation, that is, an instance where the performative character of the utterance shifts or change a body

from the place assigned to it; "when it makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise" (RANCIÈRE, 1994:42). Anecdotes[2] can be the expression of superiority (Hobbes), aggression (Freud), mechanical rigidity (Bergson), and appropriate incongruity (Beattie). From a Pragmatic perspective, the meaning of an anecdote or, generically, the place of humor is related to its use! This will mean either use in a given linguistic system or use in a particular physical situation. Use is primarily a choice, and the individual is not, necessarily, the "producer or originator of meanings", a task for God himself. As Rajagopalan (2003:121) states, "Human beings are performers. Not quite *homo faber*, I would say, but *homo depictor*. It's the peoples who make the representations". The individual participates with his peers in a historical collective experience, where cognition and ethics go hand-in-hand. From this union, representations are born, the "meaning politics" or "political senses" that are nothing but individual glances to/in the world. The presupposition of this claim is that people, when playing a language game, intend to orient themselves in the cultural universe of meanings, and also to assume a strategic position towards other value attitudes.

3 The Place of Humor?

When we think of the game of symbolic relations established between the newspa-

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[2] "Humor" and "anecdote" are used here as interchangeable words.

per and its reader, it is unlike that one can sharply define the boundaries of strategic events that lead to the desired goals in the context of production. This reminds us of Austin (1962:8): "Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*". We are then faced with three questions:

a) the convention routinely used to write a news text can be deployed by the journalist in order to convey a humor "effect" if, technically, such deployment is not foreseen and/or authorized by the canonical forms of the genre;

b) the journalist is authorized to transgress it, bearing in mind the fact that generally he does not hold a hierarchical position at the enterprise that enables him to say "how" the texts will be edited;

c) the circumstances invoked by the journalist to write the narrative/utterance, considered humoristic, are satisfactory or felicitous, that is, they cause the performative to be a happy speech act.

Obviously, the utterance's humoristic illocutionary force will only be understood in a wide discursive situation, in a macropragmatic context (OLIVEIRA, 1999). But one should be cautious, since, however the good intentions, it is impossible to rescue all the involved beliefs and objectives and make all the necessary inferences in order to approach the communicative intentionality of the journalist when he or she uses language in the news genre. Anyway, one has to consider that the utterance or narrative seen as humoristic in the political section of a newspaper may reveal either what the journalist

has not investigated or what he or she is hiding. That is, what are the mediations at stake and what is really happening but is not being made explicit for whatever reasons. This does not forbid that, under certain circumstances, the language use seen as humoristic might have extraordinary effects or a broader repercussion than the so-called main text.

To edit means to select and make options so as to highlight a complete and hierarchical frame of journalistic facts. It also means to display, around the news article, support texts and iconographic material that contextualize the article to the reader. (MANUAL FOLHA, 1992:121).

Having understood the hierarchy of facts in the context of production, we should investigate the relation between the "main" narrative (news) and the "complement" (humor). Although they both deal with the same subject, they might mean different, opposed or contradictory things. However, they should not be put in the unsaid domain. The logic of complement requires that, in order for its values to oppose one another, every term must be exterior to the other; that is, one of the oppositions must already be marked as the matrix of all possible opposition. What was not said in the news (main text) has to be said in another way as complement. This entails the dissemination of ornaments and resources (figures of excess), which does not help to withdraw humor from the transitory place (non-place) in which it was philosophically placed.

3.1   In Political Journalism

On November 11, 2009, Brazil's president,
Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, received Shimon
Peres, Israel's president. The day before,
Brazil had suffered the worst blackout of its
history, cutting off energy to more than 60
million people.

(...) Peres complimented the disposition
of Itamaraty in participating in Middle East
peace talks. He invited Lula to visit Israel
and Palestinian territories, and to intensify
relations with the president of the Palestine
National Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, who
will visit Brazil on the following 20th. Peres
appealed to the diplomatic role of Lula by
using a metaphor that turned out to sound as
a gaffe: [Lula] initiated the Luz para Todos
[Light for All] program (a program of ru-
ral electrical transmission intending to bring
light to 10 millions rural Brazilians, my ob-
servation). *Mr. President, come and light
the lights in the Middle East* (Folha de S.
Paulo, November 12, 2009, p. A14, empha-
sis added).

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Shimon Peres and president Lula

Gaffe means a disastrous remark. Accord-
ing to the criteria that define the importance
of an article (MANUAL FOLHA, 1992:35), a
gaffe at a meeting of heads of State is some-
thing unusual, therefore of journalistic in-
terest. Gaffe as an unintentional act should
not be reduced to a simple cause-and-effect-
relation. Ultimately, it translates goals of ac-
tion and is intertwined with individual be-
liefs. Peres' visit to Brazil seeks to reduce
the speed of what Israelis call the "Iranian
infiltration in Latin America"[3], and, in spite
of the friendly tone of the conversations, it
became evident that the representatives were
not in sync. President Lula has supported
Iran's desire to develop nuclear research for
civilian use, which puts Brazil in a delicate
situation with Israel. Obviously, Peres' gaffe
is tolerable for the circumstances of some-
one who did not know the recent blackout in
the country. Taken literally, Peres' sentence,
"Mr. President, come and light the lights in
the Middle East", sounds laughable (an anec-
dote, Wittgenstein would say). However,
taken as a metaphor or as a model by which
one can see the world and man himself, it is
no longer funny (humoristic) or a gaffe. To
understand the meaning of a metaphor is to
use it in many contexts and to relate it with
other frequently used words, or words that
are not quite used. In this sense, we start to
understand certain rules of use and to under-
stand that words have meanings as part of a
certain discourse universe. These meanings
are forms of intervention, since they enable
people to see the world in one way or an-
other.

Under the hypothesis that the journalist

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[3] Peres visited Brazil on November 11, 2009,
and the Iranian leader, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, on
November 23, 2009.

described the gaffe as a situation of humor, since there was an appropriate incongruity (ORING, 1992), there would have been a transgression to the Maxim of Mode (be clear, be objective. GRICE, 1975), and the implicature would have sounded derisive to the efforts of Lula to posit himself among the world leaders and to lobby for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Humor depends upon the discernment of an appropriate incongruity. This conceptualization holds that humor proceeds upon the apprehension of a structure of ideas rather than from the reaction to particular ideas, motives, or events (ORING, 1992:81).

We discern an appropriate incongruity in the totality of social, cultural and psychological formations of individuals, for "the social order uniquely exists as a product of human activity" (BERGER; BRUCKMANN, 1994:76). In fact, people are looking at an specific part of the world without noticing that it's not pure data what they are focusing on, but the semiotic refraction of their social praxis. In the journalistic activity, the professionals build mystical and idealistic representations of their activities, and these beliefs result in a praxis characterized by:

a) an specific competence (to master time);

b) a way of acting (performativity);

c) a way of speaking (an specific jargon);

d) a way of seeing (bipolarity);

e) a privileged unity of analysis (the event but not the problem. The Journalist's basic question is: "What's new?");

f) a glance that provides much "foreground" but little "background" (adapted from TRAQUINA, 2005). Within this ideological context for the journalist associated to the dramatic way of structuring events, plus the previous conditions that should be met so that the narrative remains in the "serious discourse" domain, in such a way that the readers will legitimate them as a happy speech act, the definition of event as "gaffe" instead of "humor" is the linguistic behavior expected for the circumstances of Peres discourse.

In the 1960s, when "new journalism" emerged, the sophistication of the journalists' modes of expression enhanced the potential for "capturing of the real" in news reports. Journalism and fiction became closer. Although this gesture might have reinforced the deconstruction of the fiction/non-fiction hierarchy, it kept the rift between narrative and news article, communication and information[4], serious and non-serious! Unfortunately, it proved not to be fruitful the dismantling of the non-place status assigned by the philosophical tradition to humor in journalism. The new genre only created other filters so that journalists could describe the world. Paradoxically, humor here is not intended to "cause to laugh", it is rather used to reinforce "serious" aspects of the narrative. In other words, humor in the ethics-aesthetics of journalistic entertainment became a game-spectacle - a complement, in order to gesture

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[4] According to Marcondes (2000:105), "(...) a piece of information is not tied to any subjective interaction. It forbids the comment or intrusion of the subject within the message. It can also be theoretically measured: for that, one uses the concepts of entropy, redundancy and noise".

to a renewal where the obscene and the eschatological unfold in politics!

Journalistic culture is rich in myths, symbols and social representations that provide this interpretative community with a liturgy of clear images of villains and heroes to whom the members of a tribe pay homage or focus their hatred (TRAQUINA, 2005:51-52).

This framework of events and this set of beliefs cause humor to remain "expatriated" in the political journalistic discourse, especially in the news articles. Humor is sometimes invoked to meet a transitory necessity. Although humor does not hold a permanent place, we can argue that the journalistic tribe uses it as self-defense with positive results. In the symbolic capital of journalists, humor is an actualization of the medieval "charivaris". The origin of this term is uncertain, probably coming from the Greek "chalibarion" or the Italian "capramarito".

It consists of a noisy grouping of the villages' community. Some of them are disguised, hitting kitchen silverware; they meet up before the residence of a parishioner, who is excluded from the group for some misconduct (MINOIS, 2002:169).

Humor is an agent of sanction. It can be transformed into hostility, sarcasm and violence. The victims have no conditions to defend themselves and to get rid of the ridicule it causes. In the newsrooms, this way of using humor is a self-regulation of a political surrounding, of a power practice and self-defense that will be used as "revenge laughter". According to Mey (2003:336), "people communicate about more (and other) things than facts: they share emotions, impart wishes, issue orders, and so on, 'doing things with words' - things that are not reducible to facts." Thus, rational decisions adopted in journalism don't always constitute the regulating principle of language use in the news. Although there is a pre-determined ritual with proper intellectual routines, the aspects of the individual experience (beliefs) can be used either to transgress the normative institutional constraints or to single speech acts out, not only in terms of style, but also in terms of "authorship" (production, edition, circulation).

The exclusion of humor from the halls of the "serious" was here revised. However, even if the search for a "permanent place" is intensified, the idea that there are prototypical elements to define humor must be used with caution. From a pragmatic perspective, "humor" has to be understood merely as a word used in this or that occasion to justify a pattern of behavior that we made and contemplated. That is, to argue around a word, sentence or situation that is considered humorous is equivalent to ask how language is used in that context. In principle, this means "humor is everything you want to call humor".

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