

ON THE DISCURSIVE INTERACTIONS IN A LANGUAGE CLASS: MULTILINGUAL HUMOR

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ABSTRACT

My paper focuses on the discursive interactions in the routine didactic activity of a language class. In a double perspective, I draw on the use of different languages and of humor, by the teacher and learners. I describe and discuss authentic samples collected during my experience as a mother tongue teacher of Italian to Hungarian high school foreign students of Italian from 14 to 18 years old. First, I outline the model and dynamics of a conversational, interactive and cooperative class. Then, the focus shifts on the communicational circuit which is activated by the teacher and the students. Finally, I detail on the specific discursive implications of resorting to some specific languages, in terms of class management, of the kinds of linguistic acts produced, of the features of the humor performed, through the analysis of a set of samples. Three major issues emerge: the potentiality of an approach including multilingualism and humor; the prominence of an unintended and spontaneous kind of verbal humor; its role as a tool which further fosters the negotiation of meaning, language and cultural assessment. Multilingual humor is an option which the teacher is crucially to be in control of, due to its facultative, unpredictable, strategic and occasional nature. Its feasibility directly ties to the dynamics and characteristics of a given class and of single learners. Boundaries are to be set. In such an educational setting, humor works as a tool of mediation, in two directions: the reinforcement of a collaborative environment; the exploitation of a participated, circumscribed and contextualized form of linguistic and cultural control.

INTRODUCTION

My aim is to outline the network of elements which contribute to envision the discursive practices occurring in the routine teaching practices of a language classroom. Therefore, from the general to the particular, I will focus on: a model of classroom; the communicational circuit; the discursive implications of using different languages; the linguistic and educational features of humor; a general classification of linguistic acts; an analysis of authentic samples of multilingual humor. My conclusive empirical observations sum up the features of multilingual humor and pinpoint the relevance of an approach which considers its adoption. More specifically, given the emergency of its optional, unpredictable, spontaneous and unintended aspects, it can factually and positively contribute, provided the control exerted by the language teacher, both to the class management and to the enactment of a participated and circumscribed form of linguistic and cultural assessment.

THE CLASSROOM

The classroom is viewed as an interactive and cooperative environment (Kinging, 2000), where (language) learning can be described in terms of a social practice. As such, it occurs by means of and implies assisted performance, meaning co-construction and participation in joint and goal-directed activity (Clay, 1998; Moll, 1994; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

The role of conversation within the educational framework (see Van Bramer, 2003) is crucial, above all for what concerns the relevance of the talk in which pupils are engaged in the classroom, in that conversation is highly structured, collaborative, and builds on shared understanding (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999).

The (language) learner is thus acknowledged to be a strategic acquirer, a processor of input and a discursive practitioner (Kinging, 2000). This intends to stress how the teaching and the learning processes depend on communication, whose aim is collaborative and obtains through negotiation of meanings, towards a mutual understanding (Wells, 1986). In this framework, multilingual humor falls within the range of discursive options which the teacher offers to the language learner – or keeps into account - and function as a possible comprehensible input (on the concept and theory of comprehensible input, see Krashen, 1985).

The reference model of classroom discourse departs from the traditional Initiate-Response-Evaluation pattern (Mehan, 1978); evolves into a conversational and interactional one (Van Bramer, 2003); unfolds around three discourse features: *speaker's rights*; *teacher's role*; *speech style*

(Cazden, 1988); keeps into account both the indications of the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001) and the notion of language assessment (see Kerper Mora, 1998).

My tentative study draws on the not uncommon situation of a teacher who teaches his/her native language, abroad or in his/her homeland, to foreign or second language learners. In particular, my observations build on my teaching experience as a mother tongue teacher of Italian, who has been working for two school years with Hungarian 13-to-18-aged Foreign Language Students of Italian, in two different high schools in Pécs, Hungary.

THE COMMUNICATIONAL CIRCUIT

In the context of the routine didactic activities, the multilingual – or cross-linguistic – discursive interactions, which occur between Teacher and Students (T-S) and between Student(s) and Student(s) (Ss-Ss) and involve the use of different languages, can be displayed as follows.

The teacher is an Italian Native Speaker (INS). He teaches his own language, which is L1 to him and Language Taught (LT) with reference to the didactic activity. He happens to have a certain degree of knowledge of the learners' native language, which is Hungarian. He may occasionally resort to it, as a Hungarian Foreign Language Speaker (HFLS).

Hungarian to him is his L2, it is used for Communicational purposes (LC) and it is at a certain extent Learnt (LL). He happens to have also a certain degree of knowledge of English, which works here as a vehicular language, which I will label as L3. In respect to it, too, the teacher is a Foreign Language Speaker (EFLS). This language, too, can be defined LC and LL.

Learners are Hungarian Native Speakers (HNS). Hungarian is their L1 and LC, as they use it for communicational purposes in the classroom, both in S-S and – more peculiarly - in T-S interactions. They study Italian as Foreign Language Speakers (IFLS), with very different levels of proficiency, as below illustrated. Italian is their L2 and LL. They may eventually have a certain degree of knowledge of English, which is their L3, as a vehicular language, thus LC and LL.

Language groups are made of students coming from different classes. Hungarian pupils can avail of the option of choosing more than one foreign language, which is not the same for all the members of a class. Choosing a language is a factor which contributes to define their portfolio, and ties their individual past experiences and future plans.

Those in the language group of Italian may have been studying Italian from the start up to eight years before high school. They may plan to study it at high school for different reasons. They may aim to get a certification of their level of proficiency through a state exam, which may be taken before the regular end of the school four-year term. They would like to participate in the different steps of a contest, whose final stage will grant them more credits for the admission to the university. They may even simply intend to disengage from more committing courses.

Some or none of them may have studied English, and those who have are not supposed to have joined the same English group or for the same length. Some are beginners, some intermediate, some advanced, as well as some have been studying it for one year, some for two, some for the whole four-year high school term.

The above elements contribute to determine the extent of the use of both Italian and English as L3 by the teacher, as a tool to involve learners in a participated kind of didactic activity and facilitate their access to and gradual intake of linguistic and extralinguistic items in their L2.

Once that the features of the language class have been outlined, it is worthy to envision the cross-communicational T-S and S-S circuit, in a double frame: the cross-linguistic exchanges; the interwoven levels of proficiency.

Table 1

With reference to the possible levels of proficiency of the users, their discursive interactions can be represented as follows. The terminology of the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001:23) has been adopted and is grossly coincident with the traditional distinction Beginner, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Upper Intermediate, Advanced. Basic User corresponds to the A1 and A2 levels, Breakthrough and Waystage; Independent User corresponds to B1 and B2, Threshold and Vantage; Proficient User corresponds to C1 and C2, Effective Operational Proficiency and Mastery.

In brief, if Ts are L1 I(talian)NSs, Ss are IFLSs, who are from Basic to Proficient Users. Then, Ts are assumed to be a Basic User, at least orally, Breakthrough to Waystage, in their L2, as

H(ungarian)FLSs, whereas Ss are HNSs. In the end, with respect to their L3, for both the same, out of a mutual agreement, here English, Ts are supposed to Independent to Proficient Users, whereas Ss may possess no knowledge of English, as well as be Proficient Users.

USING DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

The use of a multilingual and humorous approach in the routine didactic activity in a language class is in direct relation to: the specific dynamics of single pupils; the specific language group as a whole. It is an option which is to be exploited under the control of the teacher, who, with the aim to raise the effectiveness of his/her input, exerts his/her control in two ways: explicitly; implicitly.

As I maintain, self-control is to be exerted by the teacher, too, because the primary goal is to facilitate the process of intake of a linguistic item in the learners' L2. I have to add that, for the sake of the purposes of the present work, I am not going to touch such an important and basic issue of the differences and affinities between first and second language acquisition (see Pallotti, 1998). Multiliteracy here simply infers the possibility for a speaker to be correct, appropriate and communicatively effective in more than one language, including his/her native one.

Let me provide an example of direct exertion of control by the teacher. At its first appearance in the original language, a linguistic item is not recognized by the learners, not even at a first set of explanations by the teacher in their L2 and L1. So, the teacher may make use of his/her proficiency in a vehicular language - L3 - known at least by some of the pupils, for a translation or a more accessible explanation, if language is impeding. Students will then in parallel peer-translate or explain in their L1, to let others access it, if they cannot in L3.

The teacher's proficiency in L3 is here assumed to be higher than the learners, but precisely for this reason it is to be limited to a clarification on the term or expression - or concept - under question. Self-control means in this context not to make a diffused use of L3, for a prolonged intervention which turns into a digressive and counterproductive monologue.

Now let us shift to an example of indirect exertion of control by the teacher. On knowing that the learners are not familiar with a given term or expression or concept in their L2, the teacher may downgrade his/her position and – even supposedly – show his/her limited proficiency in their L1. They are then requested to convey the correct form of a mispronounced or misunderstood item in their L1.

So doing, they may have a clue to access the original item under question in their L2. They are actually assumed to be put in the conditions to confront two corresponding items in their L1 and L2. At first they did not have a way to access it; now they are hopefully provided with one link which they can be aware of and make use of again.

Self-control again refers to the primary functional scope of the teacher's intervention, which does not aim to satisfy a personal linguistic curiosity, if not apparently. The teacher is eager to know how to say a certain word in the learners' L1, but not to the extent that he/she takes and keeps the floor. The intervention is learner-oriented and falls into the mainstream of stimulating them to concretely reflect on a definite single item in the domain of their L1 and L2 literacy, knowledge and competence.

Self-control also entails that if the item in their L2 is without their range of comprehension, not even a translational cognitive operation may help approach it, or it is not profitable, in that the term or expression or concept are of unfrequent use and remain in a latent area of the learners' lexicon (see Bardós, 2000). If the item is within their reach, then it can somehow contribute to the reinforcement or fixation of its acquisition, knowledge and potential correct and appropriate use.

In this perspective, the use of different languages, which I consider here the learners' L1 and L3, can be both productive and counterproductive. First I will take into account the relevance of the subjective factor; then I will shift to overview on positive and negative effects.

Subjectivity entails the determinant role of the dynamics and features of single pupils and of the class group as a whole. For example, regardless of their proficiency and degree of literacy, students may choose to be outspoken and foot into a discourse (on the concept of footing, see Goffman, 1981), or withdraw from trying, even though they have the right answer to the teacher's suggestion in mind. There are personal reasons, related to their own character as well as to the public exposure of their outputs. There are inner and outer factors intertwined.

The IRE class discourse pattern (Mehan, 1978) implies that the teacher provides an input, mostly in the form of a question, to which the student is to answer, in the case of a language class in his/her L2. In a more interactional class discourse pattern (Cazden, 1988), the teacher poses much

more attention to the instances of the student, in terms of specifically soliciting him/her to foot into an ongoing conversation-like exchange, even allowing him/her to make the first move.

The latter pattern intends to reduce the possibility of negative drawbacks for the learner who does not utter the correct or appropriate or right sentence. That is one factor which inhibits him/her from speaking in public to the teacher, and which, to the contrary, is extremely profitable for the teacher to selectively monitor the knowledge, skills and competence of one learner in his/her L2. The eventual error, or imperfection, or mistake, can precisely turn out to be a very important signal in that sense.

Being the teaching purpose to let the learners express in their L2, an open stimulus can work as a message conveyed to the learner, for him/her to resort to his/her multiliteracy - in terms of knowledge of more than one language - in order to utter a sentence. The learner may know it but not have the linguistic means to express it in his/her L2, or to have them without an immediate access to them when the use requires. The teacher then may provide them with reference to a contextualized situation, which may become a link to access them in another occasion.

The learner may know it, assume to have the necessary linguistic means but articulate an imperfect utterance. In that case, the teacher and learner shared awareness of the degree of mastery of one linguistic item or structure can solicit the learner to a quick and punctual revision. The aim is to assess, reinforce or fix, and not exclusively to evaluate.

Of course, the possibility which an imperfect utterance in L2 leads to be laughed at undercovers its potential face-threatening effect (on the concept of face, see Brown & Levinson, 1987). Given an imperfect performance which arises laughter, the group, but most of all the teacher, are to reduce its negative effect. The basic assumption is that the utterance, for the very reason that has been uttered in the learners' L2, has a positive value which is to be emphasized, as far as possible. To stress it means to turn it into a face-saving act, because the student was so sensible that he/she spoke it out.

The second valuable element is the immediate involvement of the entire group in the adjustment of its informative, linguistic and extralinguistic content. This step directly calls into question the face of the class as a collective unique body. The reaction to an input by the teacher may not be individual but general, whether positive or negative, which hints at a distance of mastery. What the teacher assumed the class could be in the possession of turns out not to be such. The class feels as a whole that one item is not within their reach in their L2 and reacts consequently.

The teacher may proceed to an acknowledgement of the consistency of the distance, by using their L1 or L3, which is a further tool to establish it. Multiliteracy lies on the possibility of being cognitively - not just linguistically or extralinguistically - in the conditions of accessing a term. If the teacher verifies that an item, sentence, structure or concept are not viable in the learners' L2, and that their L1 and L3 do not help, this may entail that they there they are cognitively impeding.

To sum up, as in the below scheme, the use of different languages, which is to be viewed as a strategy eventually enacted and signalled as practicable to the students by the teacher, can have positive and negative effects, with reference to single pupils as well as to the language group. Languages are different in that they are others than the learners' L2, therefore they are their L1 and L3, as below detailed.

Table 2

HUMOR, IN A LINGUISTIC AND EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

First of all, I intend to concisely report on the contributions to the study of humor which have shed light on its semantic, pragmatic, cognitive and discursive features; on its strategic function in discourse; on the cultural, contextual and cognitive implications of its use; on its role in an educational framework.

Studies in linguistics have organically emphasized its features and dynamics, semantically and pragmatically (Attardo 1997; Attardo & Raskin, 1991; Raskin, 1985), cognitively and in discourse (Curcó, 1996; Giora, 1991; Yus, 1997), by focusing both on the joke and on conversational humor (Norrick, 1993, 2003), and on narrative humor (Attardo, 2001).

As a social phenomenon (Bergson, 1903), humor is pervasive (Tannen, 1984, 1989) and can be strategically used other than to simply arise laughter, as a discursive resource (Dyner-Buczowska, 2006), as a tool of mediation (Korall, 2004). Production and understanding are cognitively demanding (Curcó, 1997; Yus, 2003), also because humor is subjective, context- and culture-bound (Apter, 1985).

Studies in the educational environment pinpoint how the use of humor as a speech activity relates to the (language) learners' communicative competence; enhances the conversational involvement; reinforces collaborative and cognitive skills (Davies, 2003; Sullivan, 2000; Whitmer, 1984, 1986; Ziv, 1988). Volpi presents an organic perspective of the didactics of humor in the context of the classroom (1983).

Valeri & Genovesi acknowledge the relevance of the use of humor in the classroom, in cognitive, social and educational terms, therefore are careful to set boundaries against a use of humor which obstructs and does not foster or support the class management (1973).

As to the use of humor in a class, the implications of its use as a tool of mediation, which fosters the positive effects and reduces the negative effects of multiliteracy, are general and particular. Broadly speaking, its use, which is understood to include the teacher's as well the students' production, in the above interactional class discourse pattern, can be outlined as follows.

Table 3

As to the more specific context of a multilingual language class, as the one targeted, where three languages are involved, L1, Hungarian, L2, Italian, L3, English, from the learners' viewpoint, and in consideration of the above observations, humor is situated, verbal, spontaneous, can be intended or unintended, and accordingly implies what follows.

Table 4

LINGUISTIC ACTS

In a language class, normally conversational exchanges imply the construction and interpretation of utterances which address mostly the learner but also the teacher. Such verbal acts have been classified on the basis of direct teaching experiences, mine and of some colleagues, through personal communication. The classification comprehends the teacher's and the class group's production, in the three languages targeted.

This classification basically divides the linguistic acts into two categories: serious and non-serious, which is quite natural and inevitable. It is natural, as discourse, broadly speaking, in terms of verbal communication, includes utterances which are intentionally committed to their truth and utterances which are intentionally not, therefore which are not to be taken seriously (see Attardo, 1994). Furthermore, the same linguistic and cognitive tools appear to affect the production of both non-humorous and humorous discourse (Attardo, 2006).

The former aim to be effective as to the message which they convey, at the level of what is said and what is implied in the utterance (see Grice, 1989). What the latter intend the hearer to do is to laugh, which means that their perlocutionary effect (see Searle, 1975) is precisely to arise laughter. They can be informative, as well, but for what the present study is concerned, the element to emphasize is that they represent linguistic outputs valuable in the teaching and learning process, as the former.

They provide important indications on the way learners master the language, in that they show both what they are able to do, in terms of knowledge, skill and competence, and what they are not yet, in terms of the processing and use of specific structures and/or words in their L2.

As I observed in the second paragraph, the learners' production in their L2 imply a particular effort and a group recognition. In his/her L2, the learner speaks to the native teacher in front of the class. The utterance can be flawless or imperfect. The latter case may inevitably lead to arise laughter. The classification applies to the verbal production in different languages in a language class, because it is comprehensive of those verbal acts which are unintentionally or unsuccessfully humorous.

A verbal act by teachers or learners – in L1, L2, L3:

- a1) may be intentionally serious and be successful in conveying a message and getting its perlocutionary effect;
- b1) may be intentionally serious and not be successful in conveying a message and getting its perlocutionary effect;

- c1) may be intentionally serious and be successful in conveying a message and getting its perlocutionary effect, but end out in unintentionally arising laughter;
- d1) may be intentionally serious and not be successful in conveying a message and getting its perlocutionary effect, but end out in unintentionally arising laughter.
- a2) may be intentionally humorous and be successful in getting the perlocutionary effect of arising laughter;
- b2) may be intentionally humorous and not be successful in getting the perlocutionary effect of arising laughter;
- c2) may be intentionally humorous, be successful in getting the perlocutionary effect of arising laughter, and in conveying a message;
- d2) may be intentionally humorous, not be successful in either getting the perlocutionary effect of arising laughter or conveying a message.

A SAMPLE ANALYSIS

My corpus is a collection of unintended and intended humorous verbal acts, in Italian, in Hungarian, in English, mixed. They have been occasionally been uttered by the teacher, by the learners, in a T-S(s) short exchange. Learners are either beginners or intermediate or advanced.

They have been produced during the lessons which I have held to differently aged and proficient groups of Hungarian foreign learners of Italian of two high schools in Pécs, Hungary. These lessons have covered the period of the last and actual school years.

They are authentic oral humorous verbal acts, which I have not had the time and means to record, if not through a faithful transcription. That is the most suitable option, rather than an obliged and unwanted choice, I have to say. Videotaping or audiorecording would actually have implied the use of many hours of registration, just to single out and excerpt one interesting item.

Humor in the language classroom, as I have emphasized, is spontaneous, situated, intended or unintended. For the sake of the purpose and features of the present paper, I feel I have to be clear. Humor is here understood to spring out of a serious discourse, within the framework of a serious lesson, where there might be hilarious exchanges, which cannot be taken for granted.

Humor is neither the topic nor the end. It tightly depends on the instances of single pupils and single language class groups, on the one side. It serves the class management and the linguistic and cultural needs of the teacher and the learners, on the other side. Therefore, it occasionally occurs and it is up to the teacher to profit of its manifestation during the lesson.

Keeping into account both the circumstances and its unpredictability and spontaneity, when such a kind of humor arises, just pen and paper can fix it. Cameras and microphones would - run the risk to - spoil its features. On the other hand, I do admit that the aforesaid tools are far more reliable, within the domain of scientific research, when it comes to provide a sample with a more clearly objective documentary value.

Unexpectedness has been the leading criterion for their detection and collection, together with their significance and expendibility, in terms of their use for language and cultural assessment, in the context of a single lesson. Those collected are items to invest on in the teaching practice, mainly just after they have been uttered. What is reproducible are the possibility that new ones emerge and the fact that they have to be immediately profited.

The samples in the corpus have fully met the above requirements. They have been empirically proved to be humorous. Their exploitation has arisen the same reaction of appreciation: hearers have laughed or smiled or stopped and thought about them. In an educational perspective, their appreciation has been shared, circumscribed, even commented.

From an analytical viewpoint, they have induced a frame-shifting process, due to the detection of an incongruity. The majority are unintended verbal humorous acts. They have offered the opportunity for linguistic recognition, assessment, discussion, that is to say for negotiation of meaning.

On the other hand, those which were clearly intended have rather enacted a limited cultural confrontation and reflection. In this respect, their face-threatening potential has always been minimized, out of a silent and mutual agreement between the teacher and the learners. Neither was supposed to look for or take advantage of occasions when to deliberately, offensively and without any notice attack the face of the other as a cultural representative.

Negotiations of meaning and cultural reflections have always been participated and goal-oriented, because they have drawn on specific items. Discourse has not been broadened, to the extent of disconnecting from the thematic path ongoing prior to the exploitation of the humorous acts. So, such acts have definitely given a concrete and positive contribution to the class management.

For the sake of conciseness, the exam of the conversational excerpts is limited to some samples for each of the two main groups which I have identified, following the above classification: unintended verbal humorous acts and intended verbal humorous acts, eventually with a message. The entire corpus is displayed in the appendix.

Unintended verbal humorous acts. c1) Intentionally serious verbal acts, which are successful in conveying a message and getting their perlocutionary effect, but end out in unintentionally arising laughter.

During a lesson with Advanced Italian Foreign Language Learners (IFLs), one notices something and immediately alerts the teacher, saying in Italian, L2:

- li - C'è un *insegnante* sotto la poltrona.
- There is a *teacher* under the armchair.

The student's verbal act is intentionally serious in this context, is successful as to the message of alert conveyed, and as to the perlocutionary effect to draw the teacher's attention on a fact. Unintentionally it turns out to be funny, as well. The student repeats her utterance, without realizing that what she said sounds different from what she meant to say, which is as follows:

- lii - C'è un *insetto* sotto la poltrona.
- There is an *insect/ a cockroach* under the armchair.

There is a priming effect, due to the first four homophone letters and the higher frequency of use of *insegnante* with respect to *insetto*, not unknown to an Advanced IL2 learner, though.

The teacher uses intended humor with a face-saving aim, emphasizing that the *teacher* is to be very short to stand under the armchair. When the student finally realizes her incongruity, the teacher attempts to establish and reinforce the difference between *insegnante* and *insetto*, by humorously saying that also in the learner's L1, in Hungarian, the corresponding terms somehow sound similar: *tanar, bogar*.

The teacher is not committed to the truth of what he says, which just means to be funny and indirectly provide the student with a clue to reflect on and maintain the difference between the two terms.

2. T - Come state? - S1 - Bene! - T - X, che ora è? - S2 - Bene!

The teacher greets all of the students and uses a question as an ice-breaker, so that they start to concentrate on the lesson. One learner provides a positive feedback. On knowing that another student has a slower pace than the former, the teacher intentionally addresses him, X, with a different question.

They are beginners, who have already been studying Italian before high school, though. They can even automatically reply to the opening *How are you?*, whereas they have to resort to their specific knowledge, in order to answer the informative question *What time is it?*. They are reasonably supposed to know how to say the hours.

X has not made his way through the lesson yet, so, when he hears the teacher is calling him and asking him a question, he plainly and without thinking replies to the former: *Well!* His reply is grammatically correct but inappropriate.

The rest of the group has already been alerted and gained concentration through the first question. So they understand the second one and laugh on hearing their mate's answer. Them and the teacher immediately help him out of his embarrassment and do not ridicule him.

The focus can thus shift to the real purpose of the teacher: a warm-up on how to say the time in Italian. The whole group, including X, is now entitled to and enabled to meet the teacher's request, eventually with his assistance.

3. T - Sai che ... ? - S - Sì, I know ...!

This is a case when a linguistic interference is shown. The teacher's question *Do you know ...?* is answered correctly and appropriately, as to the word order, choice of words and timing. The learner actually replies immediately, automatically and effortlessly. The utterance is well-formed.

What is out of tune is the presence of items in two languages. They are foreign languages to the learners, Italian and English. Items have been encoded in the same formulaic-like reply: *Sì, lo so!*, which translates in English *Yes, I do!*.

The learner actually shows to have gone further on and accomplished an analysis of the constituents. He has thus replaced the fixed form *I do!* with *I know!*, which both literally translates the Italian *Lo so!* and has a different pragmatic function. The Italian *Lo so* is both a short reply and an opening, which suggests that an acknowledgement is about to come: *Sì, lo so che ... – Yes, I know that ...*.

The learner and his closest mates which have heard his utterance immediately realize its incongruity. The utterer himself laughs it out and produces a correct version, after reasoning it out together. The incongruity is revealing of the ongoing dynamics of the student's interlanguage. The inputs which he has been receiving have not been completely and consciously elaborated yet. He recognizes them, but is not in the condition of properly using them.

4. No, non c'è mai il telefonino.

The sentence has been uttered by a learner in a group of beginners, who have never studied Italian before high school. It reads: *No, there is never a mobile*. It is part of a gentlemen's agreement.

She knows from the last lesson that the teacher is going to ask her about her mobile, as she has been trying to use it. The teacher has made her promise to hand it to him at the beginning of the following lesson, so that she cannot – let's say – be tempted to switch it on and use it during the lesson. So the teacher checks if she keeps her promise, when he meets the group again for the weekly lesson.

All of the group knows: the verbs *essere* and *avere* - *to be* and *to have*; the word *telefonino* - *mobile* – due to the youngsters' extreme familiarity with the object, which may help fix the word; the form *c'è* – *there is* – to introduce and communicate the presence of something; how to make a simple sentence (S)VO; how to make the negative form, by adding *non* – *don't/doesn't* - before the verb in the sentence opening; how to open a negative reply through *no*.

The girl is about to sit at the bottom of the class, as usual, when she is reminded about the agreement. She hastily replies and makes an effort to do it in Italian. She intends to say *Non ho il telefonino* - *I haven't got my mobile with me*. For this reason she cannot hand it to the teacher. What she really says is that *the mobile does not exist*, because she adds *mai* - *never*. It is unintentional, and I am not going to speculate about her sort of justifying herself.

What matters is what follows. Everybody hears her. The teacher takes advantage of this occurrence to let the learners sit and open the lesson with a reminder. He writes on the board what she effectively said and what she should have said. In this way, everybody shares a laugh, the episode is closed, the focus shifts on the above listed linguistic elements, for revision and reinforcement, through a participated translation into Hungarian and further clarifying examples.

Intended verbal humorous acts. a2/c2 Intentionally humorous verbal acts, which are successful in getting their perlocutionary effect of arising laughter, and eventually convey a message.

1. E' un contadino con la pipa. E' un intellettuale paraszt.

The teacher has submitted the students of a Pre-Intermediate group a photocopy with cartoons. Each is a visual joke with a written comment, which has been blackened, because it is linguistically impeding. The goal is to let the learners concentrate on some drawings and describe them. The cartoons to select are the most attainable to the student, in that: they are graphically immediately comprehensible; they are particularly nice, or funny; there are objects, people, situations which the learner can label and illustrate in Italian.

The teacher monitors and assists the accomplishment of the activity. The attention is drawn on one cartoon, which seems accessible. There is a man in a car, on a bridge, with the mountains

ahead of him. There is another man, leaning on a fence, in a field. They are exchanging information. The latter, who looks like a peasant, wears a hat and has something in his hands.

The object stirs the learners' curiosity, because it is not clear what it may be. So the teacher and the learners, after taking their turns in a multivoice conversational exchange, decide that this must be a *pipe*. The teacher says in Italian that the man *is a peasant with a pipe*. Then he shifts from a literal description to a metaphorical reading.

Given the presence of a pipe in his hands, this man must be *an intellectual peasant*. He intentionally says that in Hungarian, and immediately arises a roar of laughter. His statement is blatantly contradictory and not credible to the students, in other words incongruous.

As a matter of fact, from a cultural viewpoint, the Hungarian for *peasant* is effortlessly associated to a very negative stereotypical figure, that of an ignorant and rude man of the country. Such a man cannot be so educated and polite to be labelled as *intellectual*.

After the laughter dies down, the teacher starts to briefly explain the difference with respect to the stereotypical figure of the Italian *peasant*. The word *contadino* does actually translate the word *paraszt*, but not its metaphorical reading and value. A *contadino* is a simple man, maybe illiterate and rude, but clever and even shrewd.

2. Caro amico, come stai? Ciao.

The teacher has instructed the learners of an upper-intermediate group of students to orally report a letter. He has provided them with the guidelines to make one and showed examples in Italian, which have been translated. The learners have both the linguistic and the extralinguistic knowledge and competence to correctly and appropriately frame the task, which refers to a specific typology of text.

After some minutes, a learner is solicited to let everybody know about her output. She begins smiling while she is uttering her letter: *Dear friend, how are you? Bye*. Her letter is an intended verbal act, which meets the given requirements, in that the elements are provided in the correct sequence: introduction; development; conclusion.

The incongruence lies in the extreme synthesis, which contrasts the need for minimal expansion due to be produced in an informal letter to a friend. The learner's letter is funny, because it is an unexpected version and is well-formed.

Given the specific learner, the time when the lesson takes place and the function of the task, which is to conclude the lesson and the didactic activity, her intentional and successfully humorous output is to be praised. It has no disruptive intention or effect, and it is not defiant of the teacher's assignment, either.

On the contrary, it shows the learner's creativity, her linguistic and extralinguistic skills and competence. The class environment is benefited. As a matter of fact, it also signals that it is not the case to insist by the teacher and make it heavier the load on the students, which would be counterproductive and spoil the result – and the students' gain - obtained.

3i. S - Can I ask you a question? - T - No, you can't!

During a lesson with Intermediate IFLs, one student intentionally uses the English, L3, to make a polite request for clarification, which the teacher wishes she could make it in L2, instead. To this extent, the teacher provides a negative answer in L3 to the locutionary act, that is asking for permission. Let me remind that the question is to reality a request, or else has an illocutionary force (for the distinction in locution, illocution, perlocution, see Searle, 1975).

The negative answer is not only impolite but so blatantly inappropriate, that it is unpredicted. Therefore, it manifests an incongruity, which arises the laughter of the rest of the class. The point which the teacher takes the occasion to make is another one, of course, as the utterer's mates realize and invite her to do.

The extralinguistic knowledge and competence of the utterer's level of proficiency in L2 are supposed to allow her to make a request for clarification in her L2, instead of repeatedly - in the case given - enacting an avoidance strategy and resort to her L3.

To help her out of any further eventual embarrassment, because she wanted - and has the right - to have a clarification, the teacher himself suggests the correct question she should pose and invites her to a follow up, in order to reframe and lead to a felicitous outcome the conversational exchange:

3.ii S - Posso fare una domanda? - T - Certo, prego!
S - Can I ask you a question? - T - Of course, please!

4. T - *Egy nő ...* Come si dice in italiano? [Lunga pausa di silenzio] - S1 - Una donna.- S2 – Egy nehez szó!

During a lesson to Beginners who have already studied Italian before high school, the teacher comes across the Italian for *woman*. It is a word which the group is assumed to know and to be able to parse and retrieve with a limited cognitive effort.

On the contrary, the teacher's question about how to say *woman* in Italian, given the Hungarian translation, remains unanswered. There is a long pause of silence, which grows more consistent the more it lasts, and creates a certain embarrassment among the learners.

The teacher patiently and smiling with comprehension waits for the reply to an eventually too simple question. A buzz in the class becomes thicker and thicker, the more trial hypotheses on the correct translation are uttered. In the end, a learner, not without hesitation, for fear to make a mistake, utters the proper translation.

Soon after that, another student, rather addressing a mate of hers, makes a thoughtful remark in Hungarian, which is audible to the teacher. His feedback is a sign of confirmation and agreement. By saying that it is a *difficult word*, the learner has passed from the literal to the figurative meaning.

It is exaggerate, therefore incongruous, to consider it difficult the translation of *woman*, as the word is quite common and eventually known or recognizable even to beginner students. To reality, out of a frame-shifting process, the word is difficult from a sociocultural viewpoint, which means that it is consistent, peculiar, committing.

In this sense, it is *hard* to say *woman*. This caused the long pause and this entails the learner's pun, which is performed in Hungarian, as she cannot as immediately and effortlessly do it in Italian. She was addressing a peer, not the teacher, who, on hearing her, provides the translation in Italian: *E' una parola difficile*. His following nod of confirmation closes the exam of the topic.

CONCLUSIONS

I have focused on the use of multilingual humor in the routine interactional discursive practices of a language class. Within the teacher-student and student-student communicative circuit, multilingual humor is an option which ties to the dynamics of a group and of each pupil, and which is to be exploited under the teacher's control. With reference to an interactive and participatory class environment, I have drawn on my teaching experience to Hungarian foreign language high school learners of Italian. I have carried out a discursive analysis on authentic samples in their L1, L2 and L3, a vehicular language, English. Results are as follows. Humor is verbal, mostly unintended, spontaneous and situated; it can positively contribute to the class management; it allows to enact a participated form of negotiation of meaning and of selected linguistic and cultural control.

APPENDIX

c1) Intentionally serious verbal acts, which are successful in conveying a message and getting their perlocutionary effect, but end out in unintentionally arising laughter.

1. C'E' UN INSEGNANTE SOTTO LA POLTRONA (L2-Adv.S-c1)
A student noticed something, but says *insegnante* - teacher, not *insetto* - beetle.
2. T-COME STATE?-S1-BENE!-T-X, CHE ORA È?-S2-BENE! (L2-T<->Adv.Beg-c1)
After the introductory greeting, the teacher breaks the ice addressing a student.
3. T-SAI CHE ... ?-S-SÌ, I KNOW! (L2/L3-T<->Adv.S-c1)
A student's short reply to a question by the teacher shows a linguistic interference.
4. NO, NON C'E' MAI IL TELEFONINO. (L2-Beg.S<->T-c1).
The student replies to the teacher, who checks whether she has kept her word or not.
5. T-COSA FARESTI, PER ES.?-S-TOGLIEREI I CAPELLI! (L2-T<->Adv.S-c1).
Asked to make an example, a student attempts to provide an appropriate answer.
6. HO VISTO IL TEMPO. HO GUARDATO IL TEMPO (L2-PreInt.S<->T-c1).
Trying to explain what he was at, a student uses two phrases for *weather*, not for *time*.
7. HO GIRATO STEVEN SPIELBERG. (L2-AdB.S-c1)
The student uses *to turn* instead of *to shoot* – the meanings of *girare* - with a film director.
8. T-IZE SI DICE COSA.-S-COSA?-T-IZE E' COSA.-S-COSA? (L2-T<->Ad.S-c1)
A word and an interrogative are coincident, which arises a sustained misunderstanding.
9. S1-ANGELO COTTURA!-S2-ANGOLO COTTURA!-T-LA CUGINA E' L'ANGELO COTTURA.-S3-ANGELA. E' FEMMINILE. (L2-AdS<->T-c1/a2/c1).
Revising the parts of a kitchen (*cucina*), a mispronounced word originates the exchange.
10. ERA UN DIALOGO FRA 3 ANNI. (L2-UInt.S-c1).
The student talks about a text which the class had already been submitted.
11. UN PRINCIPALE AL PASSATO, SUBORDINATO. (L2-Adv.S-c1).
Principale is *main clause* when female, *boss* when male, differently *subordinated*.
12. ROBERTO BAGGIO AVEVA IL CODINO ED ERA BRAVO. QUINDI LO CHIAMAVANO 'DIVIN CODINO', AZ ISTENI FARKINZA. (L2-Adv.S-c1)
The teacher explains – and translates - the nickname of a famous Italian footballer.
13. QUESTE DUE SONO SEMPRE FATTE. (L2-Adv.S-c1)
TV characters always with a perfect *make up* are *fatte* - under the effect of drugs, instead.
14. S1-SI', BECAUSE ... [...] ... GUARDO SEMPRE, AND ... [...] SOLE, YES ... S2-SO, ... IGEN, SO ... [...] ... VICCES, FUNNY, DIVERTENTE. [...] THAT'S ALL.-T-E' TUTTO. (L2/L3-Adv.Beg.S<->T-c1)
Speaking in Italian, some students use IFIDs and words in English, intentionally in the end.
15. T-CHISSA'?-S-MIT JELENT?-T-KI TUDJA?-S-NEM TUDOM! (L2-T<->Adv.S-c1)
A word is translated by the teacher and misinterpreted as a question by a student.
16. QUANDO IL TAPPO E' SERVITO NEL CESTELLO E LO CHAMPAGNE SALTERA' VIA. (L2-Adv.S-c1).
The student misreads two lines of a text: *il tappo saltera' via; lo champagne è servito ...*
17. T-ZITELLA.-S1-AGLEGENY, AGSZÜZ.- [...] T-SIETE PIU' CATTIVI DI NOI. E' PIU' BRUTTO DI ZITELLA.-S2-SI'. [...] T-NOI DICIAMO VECCHIA ZITELLA INACIDITA.-S3-COSA VUOL DIRE INACIDITA?-T-COME IL LATTE DOPO QUALCHE GIORNO.-S4-SAVANYOSZTA, MEGROMLOT. (L2-T<->Adv.S-c1/b2)
The exchange is about the meaning, use and implications of the word for *spinster*.
18. -E' UN GOVERNO DI COLAZIONE [...] IL PAPA BENITO XVI. (L2-Adv.S-c1)
A student says *colazione* and *Benito* instead of *coalizione* and *Benedetto*, and knows why.

A2/C2 Intentionally humorous verbal acts, which are successful in getting their perlocutionary effect of arising laughter, and eventually convey a message.

1. E' UN CONTADINO CON LA PIPA. E' UN INTELLEKTUALIS PARASZT. (L1/L2-T<->Pre Int. Ss-L2-a2/c2).
The teacher focuses on a visual detail of an illustration and on a metaphorical reading.
2. CARO AMICO, COME STAI? CIAO. (L2-U.Int.S-a2)
Instructed to 'orally write' a letter on a given model, a student makes a very short one.
3. S-CAN I ASK YOU A QUESTION? - T- NO, YOU CAN'T! (L3-U.Int.S<->T-c2)
The student makes a request, which the teacher wishes she could make in Italian.
4. T-UNA CAMICIA A PIZZI-S-SÌ, UNA CAMICIA PICI, PICCOLA (L2/L1-T<->Adv.S-a2).
The teacher explains the word *pizzi* and a student, who knows it, proves playful.

5. **T**-JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE E' UN TIPO DI SCARPE.-**S**-GEORGE BUSH E' UN CESPUGLIO. (L2/L3-T+Int.S-a2)

The teacher and a student play with two famous people's surnames that are English words.

6. EGY DRAGA POCSOLYA. (L2-Int.S-c2)

The teacher expresses the low opinion of a student about a famous place in Hungary.

7. A RÓKA KÖVET A NYÚLOT, A FERI ÜLDÖZ A FELESSEGET. (L2-T<->Adv.S-a2/c2)

The teacher pretends not to know the difference between to *follow* and to *run after* sbdy.

8. HOGY MONDJÁTOK MAGYARUL? ... NEM MONDJÁTOK?! (L2-T<->Adv.S-c2)

The teacher should say *mondiák* and adds a further stimulus for the students to reply.

9. **T**-EGY NŐ ... COME SI DICE IN ITALIANO? [LONG PAUSE OF SILENCE] -**S1**-UNA DONNA.-**S2**-EGY NEHEZ SZÓ! (L2-T<->Adv.Beg.S-c2)

The pause after the teacher's question originates the student's thoughtful remark in Hungarian.

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Table 1

- The following scheme attempts to synthetically display the multilingual - or cross-linguistic - Teacher-Student (T-S) and Student-Student (S-S) discursive interactions, in the context of a language class:

- **Teacher:** INLS (Italian Native Language Speaker) - L1 - LT (Language Taught); HFLS (Hungarian Foreign (Second) Language Speaker) - L2 - LC/LL (Language of/for Communication/Learnt); EFLS (English Foreign (Second) ...) - L3 - LC/LL;
 - **Student:** HNLS (Hungarian Native...) - L1 - LC; IFLS (Italian Foreign (Second) ...) - L2 - LL (Language Learnt) - EFLS (English Foreign (Second)...) - L3 - LC/LL.

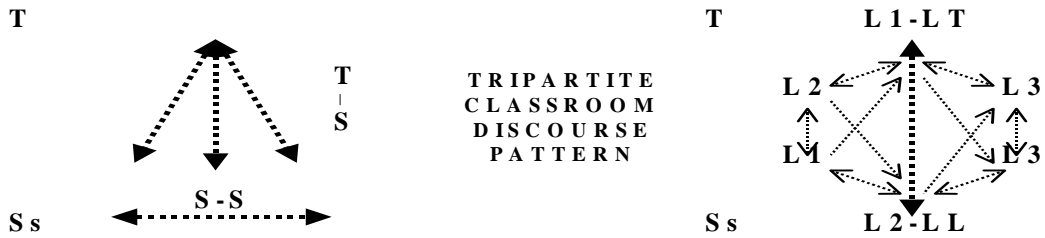


Table 2

The use of different languages (STUDENTS' L1, L3)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive and effective contribution to: • THE CLASS MANAGEMENT; • THE CREATION OF A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT; • PUPILS' LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT, TOWARDS AN AUTONOMOUS, CORRECT AND APPROPRIATE USE OF DIFFERENT LANGUAGES. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative effects: • ISOLATION, WHEN THE VEHICULAR LANGUAGE - L3 - IS IMPEDING AND EXCLUSIVE OF THOSE NOT SUFFICIENTLY MASTERING IT; • STRENGTHENING OF THE ASYMMETRY – OR DISTANCE – BETWEEN TEACHER AND STUDENTS, WHO PERCEIVE THE ADDRESS AS FACE-CHALLENGING. |
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Table 3

The use of humor (BY TEACHERS (Ts) AND STUDENT (Ss))

- Positive:
 - FUNCTIONAL TO A JOINT AND COOPERATIVE DIDACTIC ACTIVITY (Ts-Ss);
 - FOSTERING SOLIDARITY, TOWARDS POSITIVE POLITENESS (Brown & Levinson, 1978);
 - LOWERING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIER BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CORRECTNESS;
 - EFFECTIVE IN A COMMUNICATIVE RATHER THAN LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE.
- Negative:
 - ITS AIM IS TO TAKE AND KEEP THE FLOOR:
 - 1. Ss:
 - i. S-T THE MOTIVATION IS FACE RECOGNITION;
 - ii. S-S DISENGAGEMENT FROM THE LESSON;
 - 2. Ts:
 - i. FACE-THREATENING, FOR THE USE OF IRONY OR SARCASM;
 - ii. DIVERTING, WHEN OBSTENSIVELY IN SEARCH FOR A HUMOROUS EFFECT, APPARENTLY TO RELAX THE ATMOSPHERE.

Table 4

Classroom humor: situated, verbal, spontaneous

- Intended:
 - A LINGUISTIC ACT WHICH IS APPRECIATED, AS:
 - i. IT ARISES LAUGHTER;
 - ii. IT SUCCESSFULLY CONVEYS A MESSAGE;
 - iii. IT IS SHARED BY THE ENTIRE GROUP;
(Ss: L2-L3-L1 – Ts: L1-L3/L2)
 - iv. IT IS VALUABLE FOR LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT, AS TO THE SKILLS OF LANGUAGE FLUENCY AND CREATIVITY;
(Ss: L2[-L3-L1])
 - v. IT SERVES TO IMPLICITLY EXERT CONTROL.
(Ts: L2)
- Unintended:
 - THE HUMOROUS EFFECT ARISES FROM AN ERROR - OR A MISTAKE, OR AN IMPERFECTION - IN THE OUTPUT OF THE TELLER:
 - i. Ss: SOLICITED TO REPLY TO THE TEACHER'S INPUT IN THEIR L2;
- THE FLAW IS SIGNIFICANT, IN THAT IT ALLOWS TO FOCUS ON A SPECIFIC ITEM (Norris, 1992); ITS FACE-THREATENING POTENTIAL TO THE LEARNER IS TO BE REDUCED BY THE TEACHER.
 - ii. Ts: WHEN EXPRESSING IN THE LEARNERS' NATIVE LANGUAGE, HERE IN HIS/HER L2, OR THE LANGUAGE WHICH HE/SHE LEAST MASTERS.