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**Decoding Monomodal and Multimodal Incongruity:
A Genre-specific Analysis of Humor in
Contemporary Spanish Political Cartoons**

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ABSTRACT

The interpretation of humorous discourse is a complex process that requires different types of competences. Investigations on cartoon humor have generally addressed the process of incongruity resolution by applying linguistic theories or by focusing on extratextual factors, disregarding their visual or verbo-pictorial nature, and leaving monomodal cartoons unexamined. What has been commonly overlooked is the fact that the incongruous blend in cartoons is produced by two input spaces that are constructed by pictorial or multimodal metaphors. To find the cues that lead to the process of unpacking the blend, readers must turn to their linguistic knowledge, but also to their ability to read the visual grammar of cartoons. This dissertation revisits previous theories that study the mechanisms that interplay in readers' decoding of incongruous blends to propose a genre-specific model of analysis that takes into account all the semiotic codes that comprise multimodal as well as monomodal cartoons. In addition, the dissertation includes a pedagogical intervention study that corroborates the validity of the proposed hypotheses.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Humor is a distinctive characteristic of human beings that is valued as a positive quality. It is, however, an elusive phenomenon, difficult to define if all of the different factors that interplay in its production and comprehension are taken into account. Since ancient times, humor has been a subject of interest for thinkers in the fields of philosophy and psychology. Nowadays, its study is addressed from a multidisciplinary approach, including perspectives drawn from fields such as anthropology, sociology, medicine, and linguistics. As a consequence, among all of the approaches to humor developed from the different disciplines, researchers need to select those that function well for the type of analysis they wish to conduct. At the same time, humor is manifested in disparate formats, including verbal jokes, sketches, stand-up comedy, cartoons, and memes, among others. Given such variety, researchers always need to delimit the scope of their investigations.

This dissertation focuses exclusively on the analysis of humor in contemporary Spanish political cartoons that comment on the financial and political crisis in the country. The cartoons chosen for the purpose of the analyses, published in *El País* and *El Diario*, a center-right and a left-wing national newspaper, between the years 2010 and 2016, were created by Antonio Fraguas de Pablo, also known as Forges, and by Manel Fontdevila. The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the types of mechanisms that interplay in readers' decoding of cartoons' incongruous blends to propose a genre-specific model of analysis that takes into account all of their different elements. Previous

investigations on humor have used linguistic approaches, leaving aside the verbo-visual nature of some of its manifestations. At the same time, investigations on multimodality and comics cognition have defined the nature of the different hybrid genres but have not explored how signs mingle to produce a humorous response. This dissertation builds a bridge between different linguistic fields, arguing that readers must call on varied types of literacies to completely decode humorous discourse in cartoons.

The analysis of humor centers on the concept of incongruity. Humor is understood as the result of the resolution of a dissonance between two or more cognitive frames. Developing this idea further, different linguistic theories have offered approaches to explain how the process of resolution occurs. The chapters in this dissertation revisit and review the theories of humor that are applicable to the analysis of incongruity resolution in monomodal and multimodal cartoons. Before explaining how the chapters progress towards the final objective, it is necessary to clarify that this work does not intend to cover the cultural competence that readers need to have to comprehend the content of the cartoons presented. While it is briefly addressed under the concepts of the *iconological level* (Serafini, “Expanding” 344) and the *grounding box* (Coulson and Oakley 1516), and is taken into account in the practical application, the analysis presented in these pages does not delve into the pragmatic factors that affect comprehension. That said, the model of analysis proposed in this work is a model of incongruity resolution that explains how readers decode the humorous message. It is not the aim of this work to investigate the psychological factors that interplay in readers’ positive or negative reception of the joke.

Chapter 2 defines the object of study, the political cartoon, through a trajectory by the history of the genre since its beginnings in nineteenth-century Europe to its role in contemporary Spain. In addition, this chapter serves to introduce the two cartoonists whose work is used throughout the entire investigation. The cartoons by Forges and Manel Fontdevila sketch a general portrait of the Spanish political and financial crisis. The two cartoonists depict the main concerns of the average citizen (i.e., lack of working opportunities, the impoverishment of the educational system, and the cutbacks in health services). In addition they both comment on several cases of corruption made public in Spain in recent years, and on the tense situation of the Spanish monarchy and the subsequent abdication of the King Juan Carlos I.

Chapter 3 revisits the different theories of humor that have been proposed in the fields of philosophy and linguistics. Going back to the philosophical theories of the classical period is necessary to understand the basis on which contemporary theories of humor lie. As mentioned earlier, it is commonly understood that the essence of humor resides in the resolution of an incongruity on the part of the addressee. This chapter introduces and discusses the most respected theory of humor, the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) (Attardo and Raskin), as well as several other models of analysis that have been used in studies of cartoon humor, such as the *Test 3 WD* (Hempelmann and Ruch). In spite of critiques from cognitive linguists and defenders of the Relevance theory, an analysis of Forges's cartoons by means of the parameters of the GTVH, presented in this chapter, shows that the theory is applicable to the study of humor in cartoons. Nonetheless, since it is, as its name indicates, a verbal theory, its usefulness for the analysis of visual or verbo-visual genres is limited, given that it leaves out an

important part of the message and, consequently, can provide only superficial conclusions.

Chapter 4 relates Relevance theory and cognitive approaches to humor to a deeper analysis of the process of incongruity resolution. Cognitive theories, such as Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Conceptual Blending Theory, as well as the principle of salience (Giora, “On the Cognitive” and *On Our Mind*) are revisited. These theories provide an explanation of the mechanisms involved in the transcoding of meanings from two mental spaces. Using that explanation, Juana I. Marín-Arrese (“Cognition” 9) proposes a five-stage for readers’ interpretation of humor in cartoons that will serve as the basis for the model of analysis proposed in the final chapter. Nonetheless, the humorous blends in cartoons usually rely on a series of visual and multimodal metaphors that cartoonists use to depict their implicit critiques. Therefore, this chapter concludes that Marín-Arrese’s stages need to be revisited to account for readers’ decoding of the visual or verbo-visual cues that cartoon metaphors comprise, something that, as Elisabeth El Refaie (“Understanding,” “Cross-modal”) argues, requires knowledge of the visual grammar of the cartoon.

Chapter 5, in line with El Refaie’s statement, fills the gaps left in the decoding of visual and verbo-visual blends by turning to Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) and its application in the study of multimodality. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, assuming that readers draw on their knowledge of the grammar of different semiotic resources, propose the grammar of visual design, which studies how the different metafunctions (i.e., *ideational*, *interpersonal*, and *compositional*) help readers interpret visual and multimodal texts (*Reading*). Nonetheless, the grammar of visual design is

composed of minimal elements that readers also need to know to decode the visual part of the blend. Thus, this chapter also states that readers need a certain level of visual literacy, presenting Frank Serafini's three levels in the reading of images (i.e., *preiconographic*, *iconographic*, and *iconological*) (Serafini, "Expanding" 344), as well as knowledge of the language of comics. Finally, this chapter ends with an explanation of the intersemiotic relations between codes (Martinec and Salway) in the case of multimodal cartoons and how they interact to promote different evaluations (Appraisal theory).

Chapter 6 collects all of the information presented in the previous chapters and suggests a reconsideration of the incongruity resolution process. Using Marin-Arrese's five stages ("Cognition" 9), this chapter proposes a genre-specific model for the analysis of humor in cartoons. The model integrates the idea of the input spaces and blending construals from Conceptual Blending Theory with the parameters of the GTVH, the metafunctions proposed by SFL, and a completed version of the grammar of visual design of Kress and van Leeuwen, which includes the language of visual arts, comics cognition, intersemiosis, and Appraisal theory. Considering all of the elements that interplay in the incongruous blend, this model accounts for the analysis of humor interpretation in monomodal as well as multimodal cartoons.

Finally, the dissertation includes an empirical study, carried out at an institution of higher education in the United States, to examine the effect of a pedagogical intervention on the ability to interpret the message of political cartoons. In a mixed-model pilot study, the results of a pre-test and a posttest of cartoon analysis skills completed by participants with different levels of proficiency in Spanish were compared. The statistical analysis

showed that regardless of their level of proficiency, participants in the experimental group, who had attended a four-hour workshop on the basics of the language of comics, had a better grasp of the humorous message. This was due to the fact that they had learned to pay attention to the right elements in the visual images and to the combinations between the two types of signs, even if sometimes they were unable to understand the totality of the linguistic message. This research is a final confirmation of the necessity in the field of humor for a holistic model that accounts for all of the variables that comprise the construction and resolution of the incongruous blend in cartoons, such as the model proposed in this dissertation.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

The interpretation of humorous discourse is a complex process that requires different types of competences from the addressees. Given the elusive nature of humor, researchers must always delimit the type of humorous manifestation to be studied, as well as the types of approaches that best suit the purpose of analysis. Investigations on cartoon humor have commonly addressed the process of incongruity resolution by the application of linguistic theories, such as the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). Others have focused on extratextual aspects that affect the comprehension of humor in cartoons, analyzing influential factors such as the medium of publication, the gender and age of the addressees, the ideology of the cartoonist, and the cultural and linguistic knowledge shared by the artist and the readership. Finally, a third group has studied the effects of certain topics on the positive or negative reception of the humorous message of the cartoon.

As explained in the introduction, the purpose of this dissertation was not to cover all of the possible types of extratextual factors that influence humor perception. The object of this work was to investigate how readers manage to identify and solve the incongruous blend produced in a genre that is not exclusively verbal. Although in a first analysis of Forges's cartoons, linguistic theories proved valid for the analysis of their humorous messages, a doubt arose upon a second reading of the results: to what degree could the GTVH be applied to monomodal cartoons? In the research on cartoon humor this seems to be, surprisingly, a largely unexamined issue, with most investigators

focusing only on verbo-pictorial cartoons or those that could also be considered monomodal because the visual component exclusively serves as an illustration of a verbal joke that is complete in itself.

To analyze humor decoding in monomodal and multimodal cartoons it was necessary to delve into the cognitive mechanisms construed by readers. As explained in Chapter 4, readers approach every type of text presupposing it is communicating a relevant message. Nonetheless, when the nature of the message is humorous, they find an incongruous blend that they need to unpack to understand the purpose of the addresser. To do so, they need to map back to the blend's input spaces and make the necessary associations to find a second, less salient meaning.

In the case of cartoons, what has been commonly overlooked is the fact that the incongruous blend is produced by two input spaces that are constructed by pictorial or multimodal metaphors. To find the cues that lead to the process of unpacking the blend, readers of cartoons must therefore turn to their linguistic knowledge, but also to their knowledge of the cartoon genre. This means that, only if readers know how to read the image and are familiar with the language of comics and with the possible intersemiotic relationships between linguistic and pictorial signs, will they be able to decode the monomodal or multimodal incongruity and, subsequently, understand the humorous message.

This dissertation has thus progressed from the first chapter to the last revisiting the theories that comprise the final model of analysis. After defining the object of study, Chapter 3 presented a first approach to philosophical and linguistic theories and included

a practical application of the GTVH to the analysis of cartoon humor. Chapter 4 explored the process of incongruity resolution by examining cognitive linguistic theories such as Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Conceptual Blending Theory, and by delving into the construal of pictorial and multimodal metaphors. Chapter 5 completed the examination of cognitive linguistic theories by discussing the different types of literacies that readers must control to decode the blend. Social semiotics and comics cognition studies, as well as intersemiotic approaches, filled the gaps left in the previous chapter. Chapter 6 collected all of the processes explained in previous chapters and integrated them into a model of analysis that covers all of the genre-specific elements that play a role in the decoding of monomodal or multimodal incongruity. The pedagogical intervention appended to these pages serves, in addition, to corroborate the validity of the hypotheses proposed in this dissertation. A pilot study conducted with participants with different levels of proficiency in Spanish showed that those who had attended a workshop on the language of comics had a better grasp of the humorous messages of cartoons, regardless of their level of proficiency in the language.

There is still much work to do in the field of humor studies as well as in visual and comics studies. The genre-specific model presented in this dissertation has, however, crossed borders, building a bridge between the different disciplines. The value of the model resides, in part, in the directions it suggests for future humor research. Offering an analysis that responds to the necessities of a specific genre but also to multimodal formats, it opens the door to humor studies that focus on other multimodal formats. Modifying the different components that the target genre brings to the process of incongruity resolution, this model can be applicable, for instance, to audiovisual humor.

In addition, having specified the visual components that help decode the monomodal and multimodal incongruity, it will be interesting to apply technological advances, such as eye-tracking, to conduct fMRI analysis to investigate brain activity when readers are presented with pictorial versus multimodal cartoons, as well as their reactions to cartoons with different components.