

Meta-communicative signals and humorous verbal interchanges: A case study*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to provide a system for analysis of verbal humorous interactions that incorporates both the General Theory of Verbal Humor and the meta-communicative level. The integration will be accomplished using a two-pronged analytical model of humorous interactions. According to the General Theory of Verbal Humor, the first phase will trace the humor in the text with particular attention given to the Script Opposition and to the Logical Mechanism; the second will monitor the meta-communicative level, focusing on meta-communicative signals. Information about the humorous frame constitutes a seventh Knowledge Resource, called Meta-Knowledge Resource. Applying this model to an Italian film starring the comic actor Totò produced two results: 1) the definition of two kinds of humor on- and off-stage depending on the presence of Meta-Knowledge Resource and 2) a description of the “ideal author” postulated by the text. The second result is achieved by an analysis that combines on- and off-stage humor with verbal and referential humor.

Keywords: General Theory of Verbal Humor; humor on and off-stage; meta-knowledge resource; verbal humor; referential humor.

1. Introduction

The primary goal of this study is to analyze verbal humorous interactions. When two or more speakers are involved in a communicative exchange, they show two kinds of competence, in order to encode and decode a humorous message. On the one hand, they are able to process a joke according to General

1 Theory of Verbal Humor. On the other hand, they send and interpret meta-
2 communicative signals that establish the humorous nature of the frame in
3 which they are interacting.

4 The focus of this paper is on linguistically conveyed humor, i.e. not on vi-
5 sual humor. From now on references to “humor” are to be understood in this
6 particular meaning. The humorous interactions in the film “*Siamo uomini o*
7 *caporali?*” (“Are we men or corporals?”)¹ has been chosen as the subject of
8 analysis for this article. The term “*caporali*” (translated “corporals”) stands not
9 only for the rank of corporal in the army, but by extension, for all pettifogging
10 bureaucrats: martinets who needlessly complicate the lives of others.

11 The analytic criteria proposed in this article include two phases. In the first
12 one, humor in the text will be identified using the General Theory of Verbal
13 Humor with particular emphasis on the Script Opposition and the Logical
14 Mechanism. In the second one, the audience’s awareness of the humorous
15 meta-communication will be evaluated using the Meta-Knowledge Resource
16 (to be defined below). The analysis is founded upon the conviction that humor
17 in an interaction is a textual feature that can be analyzed using the General
18 Theory of Verbal Humor parameters and that it must be perceived or recog-
19 nized by the speakers (on varying levels determined by using the Meta-
20 Knowledge Resource). In the first phase humorous examples are analyzed
21 using verbal and referential humor:
22
23

24
25 referential jokes are based exclusively on the meaning of the text and do not make any
26 reference to the phonetic or syntactic realization of the lexical items which make up the
27 joke. Verbal jokes, on the other hand, in addition to being based on the meaning of the
28 elements of the text, make reference to the ‘surface’ realization of the text. (Attardo
29 1994: 28)

30
31 The aim of the analysis of verbal vs. referential humor is to describe some
32 characteristics the ideal hearer postulated by the text, on the basis of the quan-
33 tity of verbal and referential humorous examples.² Moreover, I assume further
34 characteristics of the ideal hearer on the basis of the cultural dimension (as
35 defined below) that includes the extra-lexical set of information that is neces-
36 sary to process some humorous examples.

37
38 In the second phase, the categories of *on-stage* and *off-stage* humor have
39 emerged. In the former category, the actors on stage provide various meta-
40 communicative indicators that make the humor recognizable. Such signals are
41 verbal or non-verbal or para-verbal and they surround the chunk of text where
42 Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism are situated. Off-stage humor, the

1 humorous message is directed solely at the spectator who is, clearly, off-stage.
2 Thus, the presence or absence of Meta-Knowledge Resource is significant for
3 distinguishing between the two types of humor. It is assumed that on-stage
4 humor is more explicit than off-stage humor, because the intention of being
5 humorous is clearly expressed by meta-communicative signals. Thus, the pres-
6 ence of the Meta-Knowledge Resource in the text tells us where the ideal au-
7 thor wants to catch the attention of the ideal hearer.

8 Through the frequency analysis of the three variables (on- and off-stage
9 humor, verbal and referential humor, cultural dimension) expressed by the
10 humorous episodes it is possible to describe the ideal hearer of the text.

11 The overall result makes it possible to

- 12 1) enlarge the General Theory of Verbal Humor by including a seventh
13 Knowledge Resource, namely the Meta-Knowledge Resource,
- 14 2) offer a methodology for a thorough analysis of the phenomenon of non-
15 visual humor, specially expressed in funny movies,
- 16 3) hypothesize what kind of audience is postulated by the author of a humor-
17 ous text,
- 18 4) define two types of humor for further testing: on-stage and off-stage
19 humor.

20 21 22 23 **2. Humorous competence: The General Theory of Verbal Humor**

24
25 The underlying assumption of this paper is that humor is a feature of the text
26 expressed through determined semantic and pragmatic parameters. According
27 to the General Theory of Verbal Humor, the two Knowledge Resources essen-
28 tial for a humorous text are Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism. Added
29 to these are the Situation, the Target, the Narrative Strategies, and the Language.

30 For the methodological approach, the subject of the General Theory of Ver-
31 bal Humor study is humorous texts considered from a universal point of view.
32 The theory provides a formal structure for each humorous text and frees it of
33 the individual variables of the speakers. In fact, the “ideal reader” is defined
34 thus: “The ideal reader is far from being a concrete individual or a group;
35 rather, it is the audience postulated by the text” (Attardo 2001a: 31).

36 If we shift the analysis from the universal, humorous verbal text to humor-
37 ous interactions, a new element emerges, namely that the communication is
38 humorous. The interlocutors must, in addition to their awareness of the Knowl-
39 edge Resources, be aware that their communication is humorous.

3. A two-pronged analytical model: A working hypothesis

It is possible to trace the content and the type of relationship that the speakers construct within an interaction. Such an interaction can then be said to be humorous, when on a content level the Script Opposition and the Logical Mechanism are both present and when at least one of the speakers considers the relationship “un-serious” or humorous. An interaction can be called humorous, from a relational point of view, if at least one of the speakers are aware of the humorous content. From a communicative point of view such awareness:

- 1) is expressed by several signals;
- 2) indicates that at least one of the speakers is meta-communicating the message “this is play” (Bateson 1955: 41);
- 3) indicates the grade of humorous syntony achieved by speakers (the concept of humorous syntony is defined in Canestrari and Attardo 2008).

Sections 3.3. and 3.3.1. show the different kinds of meta-communicative signals and the analysis of those found in the corpus, respectively. The list presented is not exhaustive of all kinds of Meta-Knowledge Resource.

I define the Meta-Knowledge Resource as the signals that refers to the speaker’s intention of being humorous and to the hearer’s recognition of such intention. If we consider the Meta-Knowledge Resource as the seventh Knowledge Resource of the General Theory of Verbal Humor, we obtain a two-phase model aimed at analyzing verbal humorous interactions:

- 1) in the first phase, the verbal humorous interactions are identified on the basis of the Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism, and can be further investigated through an analysis of the remaining four Knowledge Resources;
- 2) in the second phase, the Meta-Knowledge Resource is utilized to understand the meta-communicative level of the interaction.

According to the analytical model proposed in this paper, two configurations can occur in a humorous text:

- 1) the presence of both parameters (Meta-Knowledge Resource and Script Opposition — Logical Mechanism);
- 2) the presence of Script Opposition — Logical Mechanism and the lack of Meta-Knowledge Resource.

The remaining two configurations do not determine a humorous text: the presence of meta-communicative signals typical of Meta-Knowledge Resource

1 (e.g. smiling or laughing) can occur also in non humorous interactions³ while
2 the absence of both Script Opposition — Logical Mechanism and Meta-
3 Knowledge Resource is obviously not a humorous text.

4
5
6 3.1. “*Siamo uomini o caporali?*”: A case study
7

8 To test this model, I have examined the film entitled “*Siamo uomini o capo-*
9 *rali?*”, (1955) starring Antonio De Curtis (stage name Totò) (1898–1967). I
10 chose one of Totò’s films for two reasons. First, both the actor and the film are
11 from my own Italian culture and that allowed me to analyze the original ver-
12 sion, to calculate the total amount of humorous events and to avoid cross-
13 cultural differences and the problems carried out by translation. Second, Totò
14 is an icon of Italian humor. Even today in Italy his films are rerun frequently on
15 TV, and his genius as a comic actor is highly appreciated. For example, a sur-
16 vey carried out by Francescato (2002: 122) showed that of 333 Italians, men
17 and women between the ages of 14 and 90, 72% of those interviewed named
18 Totò as their favorite comic actor. Only 5% declared explicitly that they did not
19 appreciate Totò’s brand of humor. The data confirm his great comedic gifts,
20 untarnished by time. This is why Totò was chosen over several others Italian
21 comedy writers and actors like Roberto Benigni or Dario Fo. Given the few
22 individuals interviewed for the survey, the responses may not represent the full
23 spectrum of Italian public opinion, but it is at least indicative of Italian taste in
24 comedy.

25 Totò made 97 films during his career which started as an actor in the theater.
26 Of these, I have chosen “*Siamo uomini o caporali?*” for two basic reasons:

- 27 1) the story idea for the film was Totò’s, and he co-authored the screenplay
28 himself. Compared to his other films, this one is highly autobiographical
29 and reflects the tragi-comic personality of De Curtis-Totò himself;
30 2) it is among the best known movies with Totò.
31

32 The film’s plot revolves around the personal life philosophy of Antonio De
33 Curtis, i.e., humanity is divisible into two classes, corporals and men. The
34 former hold significant positions in society and exert their power by humiliat-
35 ing and embarrassing other men who represent the common people and are
36 used to being tricked and humiliated. In the film, Totò plays a man who winds
37 up in a lunatic asylum after suffering a fit of rage over yet another abuse at the
38 hands of a corporal on duty. Talking with one of the psychiatrists in the asylum,
39 Totò describes his misfortunes in a series of flashbacks: his sufferings in a

1 prison camp during the World War II, where he meets Sonia, a young woman
 2 with whom Totò is secretly in love although she only loves him as a brother.
 3 Having escaped a firing squad, at the end of the war the two return to Rome and
 4 try to reconstruct their lives. It is the 1950s, a decade of prosperity: luxury cars,
 5 elegant clothes, theatrical extravaganzas, scandal magazines, and so on. But
 6 despite these social changes, Totò is still the victim of society's new corporals:
 7 a newspaper editor, a police commissioner, and a wealthy businessman who
 8 steals Sonia from him and marries her.
 9

10

11 3.2. *Phase one: Incongruity and resolution*

12

13 Applying the first phase of the proposed analysis model, 80 humorous in-
 14 stances were singled out. Visual episodes have not been considered because the
 15 transposition of categories theorized on the basis of linguistic examples (par-
 16 ticularly verbal and referential humor) needs further investigation.

17

18 Moreover, repetitions of the same Script Opposition and Logical Mecha-
 19 nism have not been considered. A humorous episode was to be considered a
 20 repetition:

21

- 22 1) if it shared with another example the same Script Opposition and Logical
 23 Mechanism (the analysis of the Script Opposition has been done in the
 24 most concrete way as possible);
- 25 2) if they occurred in the same scene (the end of a scene corresponds to the
 26 change of the setting and/or the change of the actors involved).

27

28 The linguistic analysis of the 80 instances has been done calculating the pres-
 29 ence of verbal and referential humor (next section) and the cultural dimension
 30 recalled by the humorous examples (Section 3.2.2). Each kind of humor and
 31 the cultural dimension are exemplified by cases drawn from the screenplay. At
 32 the end of both sections, there are conclusions on the identity of the audience
 33 postulated by the text.

34

35 3.2.1. *Referential vs. verbal humor.* I analyzed the 80 humorous cases
 36 found in the corpus using the distinction between verbal and referential humor.
 37 The aim was to discover if there is a significant quantitative difference between
 38 the two kinds of humor. I assume that verbal humorous examples are more
 39 evidently recognized than referential humor because they are also based on
 40 phonetics and syntax, besides meaning. On the contrary, referential humor re-
 41 quires from the audience more attention to the meaning because it refers exclu-
 42 sively to the lexical items.

1 3.2.1.1. *Referential humor*: The following example contains referential
 2 humor (Attardo 1994: 27). Totò finds himself in a concentration camp, con-
 3 demned to a firing squad for having poked fun at a German colonel. Just before
 4 firing at Totò, the squad is interrupted twice by several Nazi doctors who re-
 5 quest the condemned man as a guinea pig for an experiment. At their second
 6 request, Totò exclaims,

7 (1) *E no è e no è(.) e qui si perde tempo*
 8 No no no (.) we're wasting time here
 9

10 The implied scripts here are life/death and efficiency/inefficiency. Totò is con-
 11 demned to death, so it is assumed that he wants to live. By complaining for the
 12 wasting of time, that refers to the opposition efficiency/inefficiency, he switches
 13 from the script life to the script death: he paradoxically wants to anticipate his
 14 death. The connection is referential: replacing the words with synonyms does
 15 not change the resulting humorous effect.
 16

17 3.2.1.2. *Verbal humor*: The following case of verbal humor (Attardo 1994:
 18 27) employs a syllogistic device. Having signed certain statements at the edi-
 19 tor's office, Totò becomes rich and famous and can afford dinner in a luxury
 20 restaurant where a lady and her husband ask for his autograph.
 21

22 (2) 1 Totò: *Può dirmi il suo nome Signora per [cor]tesia?*
 23 And what is your name, [plea]se, Madame?
 24 2 Mrs Ossobuco: *[Si] (.) Filomena (.)~ eh eh~*
 25 [Yes] (.) Filomena (.)~ha ha~
 26 3 Totò: *Filo- Filo(.)mena (.) non scrive*
 27 Filo-Filo(.)mena(.)It doesn't work.
 28 4 Mrs Ossobuco: *Non scrive? Come mai?*
 29 Doesn't work? How come?
 30 5 Totò: *Filomena. il suo cognome Signora per cortesia.*
 31 Filomena. And your last name, Madame, please?
 32 6 Mrs Ossobuco: *Ossobuco*
 33 Ossobuco
 34 7 Totò: *Ossobuco?*
 35 Ossobuco?
 36 8 Mrs Ossobuco: *Si*
 37 Yes
 38 9 Totò: *Ossobuco*
 39 Ossobuco

- 1 10 Mrs Ossobuco: *Mhm*
 2 *Mhm*
 3 11 Totò: *Milanese?*
 4 *Milanese?*
 5 12 Mrs Ossobuco: *No Napoletana*
 6 *No, Neapolitan*
 7 13 Totò: *E a Napoli ci sono gli Ossobuchi?*
 8 *And are there Ossobuchis in Naples?*
 9 14 Mrs Ossobuco: *Tanti ce ne sono eh*
 10 *Lots of them*
 11 15 Totò: *Si: deve essere una famiglia(.) importante vero?*
 12 *Ye:s must be an important (.) family, right?*
 13 16 Mrs Ossobuco: *Ma forse*
 14 *Maybe*
 15 17 Totò: *Gli Ossobuchi sono milanesi*
 16 *Milanese Ossobuchi*
 17 18 Mrs Ossobuco: *Ah sì? ~Ha ah ah~*
 18 *Oh is that so? ~Hu hu hu~*
 19 19 Totò: *O meglio lombardi (.) [Lombardi]*
 20 *Or maybe they're Lombards (.) [Lombards]*
 21 20 Mrs Ossobuco: *[~Ha ha~]*
 22 *[~Hu hu~]*
 23
 24

25 The example above plays with onomastics and is a typical humorous strategy
 26 used by Totò since he was performing in plays. It is a re-semanticization of a
 27 proper name so that it becomes more than what it is, a proper name, by indicat-
 28 ing some characteristic of the person it is referring to (Rossi 2002: 123). The
 29 word “*ossobuco*” is homonimic in that it initially refers, in the dialogue, to the
 30 woman’s last name but is ultimately understood as the name of a typically
 31 Milanese dish. The shift in properties is explicit given the syllogistic reason-
 32 ing. The play on words is clearly a play on meaning as well as a play on sounds.
 33 By replacing the homonimic word “*ossobuco*”, the humor is lost. The reason-
 34 ing in the joke can be represented as such:
 35

- 36
 37 major premise: everything called *ossobuco* comes from Milan;
 38 minor premise: Madam’s name is Mrs. *Ossobuco*;
 39 conclusion: Mrs. *Ossobuco* is a Milanese.
 40

41 Since the major premise is obviously false, this is a case of reasoning from
 42 false premises (Logical Mechanism).

1 By analyzing and calculating the all amount of humorous episodes 30 ex-
 2 amples belong to the category of verbal humor and 50 to the referential humor
 3 type. Thus the text postulates a medium-high level of attention in his audience.

4
 5 3.2.2. *Cultural dimension.* To process a joke hearers necessarily need a set
 6 of semantic properties, which can be divided in knowledge of the language and
 7 the knowledge of the world. In the first class, there is the “lexical information”
 8 or “linguistic knowledge” evoked by the humorous text (as defined by Raskin
 9 1985: 64–65). In the second category, here called cultural dimension, there
 10 is “extra-lexical information” or “encyclopedic knowledge” implied in the
 11 humorous text (as defined by Raskin 1985: 64–68). The definition between the
 12 two dimensions raises the unresolved problem of the distinction between lin-
 13 guistic and non-linguistic knowledge (Raskin 1985; Peeters 2000).

14 I would like to focus on cultural dimension because I assume that the pres-
 15 ence of humorous examples that implies some extra-lexical information re-
 16 quires a specific cognitive effort: the ideal hearer needs to possess and recall
 17 cultural elements, social codes, and historic-social information in order to
 18 solve the incongruity. Therefore the presence of such humorous cases makes
 19 the humor of the movie much or less culture dependent.

20 On the total amount of humorous examples of the corpus, 29 clearly refer to
 21 the cultural dimension. They do that in three different ways: sexual allusion,
 22 parody, and intertextual linking. All of them need a strong reference to cultural
 23 knowledge to be understood as can be seen in the following examples.

24 3.2.2.1. *Sexual allusion.* The following example contains a double inter-
 25 pretation. The cultural interpretation is involved in the sexual allusion implied.
 26 The dialogue is a continuation of the example 2, as reflected by the line numbers.

- 28 (3) 21 Totò: *O: mi dica un po' Ossobuco co- con due buchi (.) Ossobbu-*
 29 *Oh listen Ossobuco wi- with two holes(.) Ossobbu-*
 30 22 Mrs Ossobuco: *No con con una B*
 31 *No with just one B*
 32 23 Totò: *Ah con un buco solo ~uh uh~ Ossobuco con un buco solo*
 33 *Ah: just one hole; ~uh uh~ Ossobuco with just one hole*
 34 24 Mrs Ossobuco: [*Ha ha ha: hee hee hee*]
 35 [*~Hu hu hu: ha ha ha ha ha~*]
 36 25 Totò: [*Ossob(.)uco con un bu(.)co solo (.) le risate*]
 37 [*{silent laughter} Ossob(.)uco with one ho(.)le only what a laugh*]
 38 26 Mrs Ossobuco: *~Ah ah~ che simpa- ~ih ih ih~*
 39 *Uh uh~ that's funny- ~eh eh eh~*

1 The Language, as one of the six Knowledge Resources, is a crucial element in
 2 this example: the typically Southern Italian dialect doubles consonant sounds
 3 and makes “*Ossobuco*” assonant to “*Ossobbuco*”. Totò tries to clarify the
 4 doubt but by mistake he confuses the letter B and “*buco*” (“hole”).

5 The sexual innuendo is based on the cultural meaning associated with the
 6 word “hole”.⁴ In this case, the second script is implicated, in the sense that
 7 “one way of implying a script is by allusion to a certain element of information
 8 which is available to the hearer as well” (Raskin 1985: 113).
 9

10
 11 3.2.2.2. *Parody*. Parody belongs to cultural dimension when the Target
 12 (considered as a Knowledge Resource) is traceable to cultural knowledge. In
 13 the corpus, this is the most numerous category that has to do with the cultural
 14 dimension. The following dialogue is a continuation of the preceding example.

- 15
 16 (4) 27 Totò: *Eh di*
 17 (expression meaning “wife or daughter of”)?
 18 28 Mrs Ossobuco: *No fu Gennaro*
 19 No, he was the defunct Gennaro
 20 29 Totò: *Che strano credevo fosse stato suo marito*
 21 Odd I thought he was your husband
 22 30 Mrs Ossobuco: *No: fu Gennaro papà:*
 23 No: Gennaro was my fa:ther
 24 31 Totò: *Ah fu Gennaro papà*
 25 Oh the defunct Gennaro was your father
 26 32 Mrs Ossobuco: *Papà è morto*
 27 My Father is dead
 28 33 Totò: *Ah è morto mi dispiace*
 29 Oh he’s dead I’m sorry
 30 34 Mrs Ossobuco: *Povero paparino*
 31 Poor daddy
 32 35 Totò: *Eh: esequie Signora faccio le mie esequie*
 33 My obsequies Madame my obsequies
 34 36 Mrs Ossobuco: *Hh grazie*
 35 Hh thank you
 36
 37

38 The interpretation of the Script Opposition and the Logical Mechanism in ex-
 39 ample 4 is double-edged. Explicitly understood, this is an instance of verbal
 40 humor based on the similarity of sound between the term “*ossequio*” (“hom-
 41 age”), as in “*porgo i miei ossequi*” (“I pay homage”), which is respectfully
 42 reverent, and the word “*esequie*” (“obsequies”).

1 Implicitly, this is a parody of spoken Italian of the time (Rossi 2002): the
2 average middle-class man seeks to clothe his speech in cultural terms that are
3 not his own by unknowingly using inappropriate technical terms (as in exam-
4 ple 5), foreign expressions or terms used by a social class that is a cut above his
5 own. This interpretation is based on a familiarity with social, cultural and
6 historical *mores* of Italian society of the '50s. During this decade, the literacy
7 rate was quite low; and most Italians belonged to the peasant class which had
8 only recently emigrated to the cities in search of a better life that was symbol-
9 ized, for them, by status symbols typical of high society: wealth, culture, and
10 class.

11 In this case, Totò prefers to use the term “homage” rather than the usual
12 “condolences” because he feels it is more appropriate to the refined ambiance
13 of the restaurant where the scene takes place. His linguistic error underlines
14 the fact that he does not belong to this social and cultural environment. The
15 opposite scripts are an aristocratic man and a common man, as these contain,
16 respectively, refinement and culture on the one hand and inadequacy, igno-
17 rance and presumption on the other. The Logical Mechanism is based upon the
18 linguistic errors that mimic the speech of high society.

19 The same kind of parody is present in the following example. Added to
20 parody Totò uses a word coming from the language of medicine that is very far
21 from his way of speaking. The cultural dimension is involved in confusing
22 everyday talk with scientific speaking: the result is a switch between two reg-
23 isters. Totò has just been hit in the head by a table, and he is complaining:

24 (5) *Proprio qui sul malleolo del cervello*
25 {touching the painful area} right here on the malleolus of the brain

26
27 By mistake, Totò locates the malleolus in the brain, revealing his ignorance of
28 anatomy. Confusing the ankle with the “*cervello*” (“brain”). An interesting ex-
29 planation by Giovannantonio Forabosco⁵ would seem to clarify the incon-
30 gruity. The scripts are head/foot, as in the metaphorical expression “thinking
31 with own feet”. Further developing this analogy, one might interpret Totò’s
32 comment as self-mocking. The metaphorical expression is assimilated into
33 the imagination and transformed onto a literal level where the feet, not the
34 head, are physically considered. The area that has been hit is, logically, the foot
35 area.

36
37 3.2.2.3. *Intertextual linking.* In this class there are humorous examples that
38 connect the movie to other texts. Example 5 also belongs to this class since it
39 refers to the language of medicine. The reference to another text is very clear

1 in the following example. Totò and Sonia are about to make their theatrical
2 debut. To ease the tension, Totò jokes:

3
4 (6) «*Ho tanta paura ho tanta paura*» (.) *cominciamo col dire che sei in*
5 *errore perché la paura fa novanta non fa ottanta*
6 {he repeats Sonia's words} "I'm so scared I'm so scared" (.) Let's start
7 by saying that you're wrong, because fear makes ninety, not eighty
8

9 In example 6 there are two humorous episodes: the first one is built on the as-
10 sonance between "*ho tanta*" ("I'm so") and "*ottanta*" ("eighty"),⁶ in the second
11 the scripts are "ninety" and "fear". While the first is clearly a verbal humor that
12 reveals its formal dimension, the second belongs to the cultural dimension. In
13 fact it refers to a text entitled *La smorfia*, a Neapolitan book that claims to ex-
14 plain the significance of dreams as indicators of which lottery numbers to play.
15 According to the rules of the *La smorfia* fear is associated with the number 90.
16 In Italian culture, both the lottery itself as a game and the choice of which
17 numbers to play in the lottery based upon one's dreams are very popular. Such
18 information about Italian lottery games is clearly in cultural dimension and is
19 necessary to an understanding of the scripts.
20

21 In conclusion, the analysis of the Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism
22 has been done considering verbal and referential humor and the cultural di-
23 mension implied in the examples above.

24 On the total amount of humorous examples 30, are verbal humor, 50 refer-
25 ential humor, and 29 belong to the cultural dimension. Verbal humor, com-
26 pared to referential humor, needs less cognitive effort to be recognized because
27 of the reference to phonetics and syntax in the text. From this point of view, the
28 movie analyzed requires a medium-high cognitive effort from the audience.
29

30 Now it is time to look at the humorous, or un-serious, relationship estab-
31 lished by the speakers using humorous communication. A frequency analysis
32 between meta-Knowledge Resource and kinds of humor will follow to clarify
33 the ideal audience intended by the text.
34
35

36 3.3. Phase two: MKR and the audience 37

38
39 After having singled out the humorous examples by applying the General The-
40 ory of Verbal Humor, the category of verbal, referential humor, and the cultural
41 dimension, I proceed to the second phase of the model. The main focus of this
42 section is on the analysis of the humorous relationship between speakers, pay-

1 ing attention to recognizable signals called humor support by Hay (2000,
2 2001). These signals clarify the meta-communicative aspect of the exchange.
3 They are the elements by which one interlocutor establishes for the other or
4 others the serious or humorous level of his/her discourse. In other words, the
5 signals of humorous intention establish a “*non bona fide* mode of communica-
6 tion” (Raskin and Attardo 1994), i.e., the intention or lack of same to tell a joke
7 and the successful or unsuccessful attempt at humor.

8 The series of humorous intention signals used in an exchange that apply on
9 a meta-communicative or relationship level between speakers is called the
10 Meta Knowledge Resource. The term itself underlines the fact that the meta-
11 communicative parameter is considered in association with the six Knowledge
12 Resources formulated by the General Theory of Verbal Humor as per the two-
13 pronged model presented earlier in this study.

14 The Meta-Knowledge Resource can be identified to the “external indexes”
15 with meta-communicative function (Mc Ghee 1972: 74–76; Forabosco and
16 Paratico 1984; Forabosco 1994: 20–26; Gulotta et al. 2001: 217–220). They
17 are facial expressions, explicit declarations, contextual elements that refer to
18 both the situation and to the speaker who is making the joke. On the other hand
19 “internal indexes” refer to the presence of incongruities and resolution. While
20 “external indexes” go along with humor, “internal indexes” are immanent in
21 the Script Opposition and in the Logical Mechanism. In other words, the Script
22 Opposition and the Logical Mechanism have a double function: at the same
23 time they are the humor and they indicate humor itself. Both signals reveal the
24 humorous nature of a text and they are defined as meta-communicative indexes
25 (Forabosco and Paratico 1984: 19; Forabosco 1994: 20–26; Gulotta et al. 2001:
26 217–220), but in the analytical model used here, the “internal indexes” reside
27 outside the meta-communicative space.

28 In other words, the Meta-Knowledge Resource deals strictly with the meta-
29 communicative level and it refers to humorous intention expressed by signals.
30 Such signals can be considered from two points of view: communicative chan-
31 nels they use or their semantic and referential aspects.

32 The three communicative channels used by the Meta-Knowledge Resource
33 are:

- 34
- 35 1) verbal: used in linguistic expressions (like “I’ll tell you a joke”, “I didn’t
36 like that one”, “That was funny”, “don’t make me laugh!”) and repetition
37 of the punch line;
 - 38 2) non-verbal: utilized in visual expressions as gestures (like smiling, wink-
39 ing, poking in the ribs) and blank face (as defined by Attardo et al 2003);

- 1 3) para-verbal: regarding intonation, pitch range and tone of voice (e.g.
2 laughter, emphasis and variation of the tone of voice as described for irony
3 by Attardo et al. 2003).
4

5 From the semantic and referential points of view, a meta-communicative signal
6 can refer to three aspects of the interaction:
7

- 8 1) to the humorous text: this group includes signals that explicitly refer
9 to the punch line or generally to the humorous text (e.g. repetition of
10 the punch line, expressions like “that was funny”, “I didn’t like that
11 one”);
12 2) to the humorous genre: this group contains those signals that indicate the
13 humorous genre used or that is going to be used (expressions like “I’ll tell
14 you a joke/riddle”, “that’s a dirty joke” and non linguistic signals like the
15 rimshot typical in stand-up comedies in the area of Los Angeles, winking
16 that indicate irony or teasing, blank face typical of irony and poking in the
17 ribs usually used in teasing);
18 3) to the humorous situation: this final category includes signals that define
19 the situation as humorous (expressions like “don’t make me laugh”, “what
20 a laugh”, “just kidding”, “I’ll kill” said by a stand-up comedian; non lin-
21 guistic signals as laughing and smiling; mode adoption as defined by
22 Attardo 2001b).
23

24
25 As can be seen by the examples used, the two lists are overlapping and each
26 one offers a different prospective on the Meta-Knowledge Resource. The ex-
27 amples above, enriched by those found in the corpus (see next section), have to
28 be considered representative and not extensive.

29 On the basis of the presence of the Meta-Knowledge Resource, two humor-
30 ous typologies can be discerned: off- and on-stage humor. Given that the mate-
31 rial under consideration is cinematic, there are two types of audience defined
32 as the addressees of the humorous messages. When the joke is neither preceded
33 nor followed by the Meta-Knowledge Resource (examples 1, 4, 5, 6), the hu-
34 morous message is intended only for the spectator; when such signals are pres-
35 ent (examples 2, 3, 7, 8), the humorous interactions take place among or be-
36 tween the actors in a scene. In the former instance, the humor is off-stage; in
37 the latter, on-stage.
38

39 The most important function of the Meta-Knowledge Resource is to high-
40 light the presence of humor: the signals used explicitly define the humorous
41 frame of an interaction. In other words, the presence or the absence of the
42 Meta-Knowledge Resource indicates:

- 1) which humorous episodes are intended to be explicit by the speaker in his humorous attempt;
- 2) thus where the text intends to draw the attention of the hearer.

3.3.1. *Review of the types of MKR in the film.* In this section are shown the all kinds of meta-communicative signals found in the corpus and they are exemplified. In the movie, 57 humorous episodes take place off-stage and the remaining 23 are on-stage.

The analysis of the meta-communicative level reveals that smiles and laughter are the most common signals (examples 2, 3, which contains silent laughter, and 8), and that these are often accompanied by spoken words (like “just kidding” in 8, “what a laugh” and “that’s funny” in 3, “don’t make me laugh” in 7).

Variation of the tone of voice and emphasis are used in example 7 to redefine the humorous frame with the aim of denying it. In the following example the irony allows the use of the same words with two opposed meanings. Totò is in the police headquarters dressed up as a woman and considered a prostitute:

- (7) Totò: *Io sono una persona perbene*
I am a respectable guy
Policeman: *Ah una persona PERBENE(.) ma non mi fa- ridere.*
A RESPECTABLE GUY (.) don’t make me laugh

The policeman uses such signals to give an ironical meaning to the words “respectable guy” said by Totò and adds the expression “don’t make me laugh” by which pretends to intend Totò’s words as an attempt at humor.

At times repetition is used as the humorous signal, as in example 3. The first repetition appears in line 23 (“*Ossobuco* with just one hole”) followed by the second in line 25 (“*Ossob(.)uco* with just one ho(.)le only (.) what a laugh”), where Totò repeats the key words in line 21 to underline the humor which is further highlighted by non-verbal behavior (which produces brief pauses in the dialogue) and by dialogue (the expression “What a laugh”). Even this latter repetition earns the interlocutor’s laughter in line 26, which adds a verbal signal (“that’s funny”). The uniqueness of the signal lies in the fact that Totò repeats the punch line.⁷

An interesting non-verbal signal is offered in the following example, as shown by the photogram below. The dialogue is a continuation of case 4, as reflected by line numbers:

- 1 (8) 37 Totò: *Poteva morire suo marito era meglio* →
 2 It'd've been better if your husband had died → {smiling, he
 3 gently shoves her arm with his hand twice}
 4 38 Mrs Ossobuco: *No ˘ahah˘ perché poverino* [˘ah ah˘]
 5 No ˘ah ah˘ why poor thing? [˘uh uh˘]
 6 39 Totò: [Io]←io scherzo
 7 ← [Just] kidding
 8
 9 40 Mrs Ossobuco: *Eh lo so*
 10 Yeah, I know.

11 Example 4 lays the groundwork for case 8: the opposing scripts are life/death
 12 and the association is based on an implied information, i.e., a husband's death
 13 frees the wife. Totò's veiled flirtation begins in line 27 of dialogue; with the
 14 pretense that he is writing a dedication to Mrs. Ossobuco, he asks her what her
 15 marital status is.⁸

16 Case 8 is characteristic for the Meta-Knowledge Resource used: Totò jostles
 17 the woman's arm with the back of his hand just after he delivers the punch line
 18 in line 37 ("It'd've been better if your husband had died.")⁹

19 Examples of off-stage humor are cases 1, 4, 5 and 6, in which meta-
 20 communicative signals are absent but the Script Opposition and the Logical
 21 Mechanism are present. Those examples present "internal indexes" as defined
 22 above.
 23

24 On-stage humor is characterized by the fact that some speaker uses a signal
 25 to define the humorous frame of the situation. In most of them, Totò makes the
 26



41 Figure 1. ■■■■
 42 ■■■■

1 jokes and uses some meta-communicative signals, in some cases another
2 speaker reframes the serious words said by Totò in a funny way. In few cases
3 Totò is not involved in the humorous interaction.

4 As anticipated above, one of the functions of the Meta-Knowledge Resource
5 is to stress the fact that a piece of text contains the Script Opposition and
6 Logical Mechanism, namely that it is humorous. Meta-communicative signals
7 are distributed in the film where the movie wants to catch the attention of the
8 audience. In other words, such signals reveal which jokes the movie wants to
9 underline. Thanks to the analysis of the Meta-Knowledge Resource and kinds
10 of humor, it is possible to evaluate the type of humor foregrounded.

13 **4. Analysis of Meta-Knowledge Resource and the two kinds of humor**

15
16 This section is dedicated to highlight some characteristics of the ideal hearer
17 postulated by the movie, on the basis of the analysis of the humor presented
18 above. In particular, a frequency analysis of on- and off-stage humor and ver-
19 bal and referential humor is shown.

20 The definition of the Meta-Knowledge Resource grew from the need to ana-
21 lyze humorous performance which, as such, involves real spectators. The anal-
22 ysis and presence of meta-communicative indexes provide a way to recognize
23 the intention of a speaker to be funny. Thanks to this parameter, the distinction
24 can be drawn between on- and off-stage humor. It is assumed that on-stage
25 humor is more explicit than off-stage humor. If the joke is signaled, the audi-
26 ence is informed of the presence of humor; vice-versa, if a humorous example
27 is not emphasized by the Meta-Knowledge Resource, it is up to the spectators'
28 subjective ability to get the humor.

29 Therefore, speakers can use meta-communicative signals as a strategy,
30 depending on their intent to communicate their intention to be humorous. In
31 the cinematic case, the hearer of the text corresponds to the audience and the
32 author to the director, the screen writer and actors too (in particular Totò who
33 is famous for his improvisation). By using a frequency analysis of the three
34 tools presented here (on-stage vs. off-stage humor, verbal vs. referential hu-
35 mor, cultural dimension) I attempt to infer where the “ideal author” draws the
36 attention of the intended audience of the movie, namely its “ideal hearer” (Eco
37 1979).

38 In the film under consideration in this paper, the humorous episodes are
39 distributed as follows:

Table 1. ■■■

		TYPE		Total
		verbal	referential	
STAGE	on_stage	8	15	23
	off_stage	22	35	57
Total		30	50	80

By analyzing the variables described above, it is possible to outline the strategies of the humorous narration analyzed. The most important strategies chosen by the ideal author are:

- 1) preferring off-stage humor to on-stage humor (the data are statistically significant, using the chi-square test; $p < .05$);
- 2) favoring referential humor to verbal humor (the data are statistically significant, using the chi-square test; $p < .05$);

The distribution of the two variables in the crosstab is not statistically significant, using the chi-square test ($p > .05$). Therefore, it cannot be concluded that the attention of the audience is drawn more on referential than verbal humorous examples (15 and 8 cases, respectively) thanks to their association with meta-communicative signals.

In order to discover where the attention of the ideal audience of the movie is drawn, we have to consider a secondary function of the Meta-Knowledge Resource: after having perceived a certain amount of on-stage humorous examples the ideal hearer defines the whole text as humorous. Thus, it is easier to interpret as humorous the incongruities that are not signalled by the Meta-Knowledge Resource. Unfortunately, this criterion does not signal precisely where the audience's attention is focused, but it is important to underline the secondary function of the Meta-Knowledge Resource for further investigations.

For what concerns the kinds of abilities and cognitive efforts required to the ideal hearer of the movie analyzed, I conclude that: the cognitive effort required is medium-high since off-stage humorous examples are more numerous than on-stage cases. Finally, considering the cultural dimension, the movie obviously requires an audience that is familiar with Italian cultural elements. This may go a long way in explaining the relative lack of success of Totò's movies outside of Italy.

1 **5. Conclusions**

2
3 To understand whether speakers are aware of the humor occurring in their
4 communication, the meta-communicative level must be evaluated, and this
5 evaluation is made possible by an investigation of the humorous signals. The
6 analytical model proposed in this paper combines these two strong points, pro-
7 viding a dual approach: singling out the presence of humor in exchanges by
8 applying the General Theory of Verbal Humor and evaluating the way the
9 speakers build up a humorous frame, by the analysis of the Meta-Knowledge
10 Resource.

11 During the first phase, the type of humor used can be singled out by evaluat-
12 ing the presence of verbal and referential humor and the cultural dimension.
13 Thanks to the second phase, the meta-communicative level of the text can be
14 profiled on the basis of the presence of the Meta Knowledge Resource, that
15 points out on- and off-stage humor.

16 By considering qualitatively and quantitatively the three variables (verbal
17 vs. referential humor, on-stage vs. off-stage humor, cultural dimension) it is
18 possible to outline the strategies adopted by the ideal author and to define the
19 ideal hearer.

20 It is important to stress the fact that the analysis of humor presented here is
21 partial as it investigates only linguistic humor. Further investigations on the
22 applicability of the three variables to visual humorous examples are desirable.
23 Moreover, it should be useful to test the analytical model of humorous compe-
24 tence presented by this application to several corpora. Clearly, such aspects
25 require the performance approach.

26
27 *University of Macerata*

28
29
30 **Appendix**

31
32 The transcription model employed here is based on the Jeffersonian model
33 with some additions.

- 34 ? ascending tone;
35 . descending tone;
36 (.) brief pause;
37 hh audible expiration;
38 :: prolonged sound;
39 - truncated word;

1	[]	overlap;
2	→	beginning of frame;
3	←	end of frame;
4	{ }	includes important non-verbal behavior information;
5	˘˘	includes laughter;
6	<i>italics</i>	text in Italian;
7	«»	includes citations.
8		
9		
10		
11		

Notes

13
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16 would like to thank Salvatore Attardo, Giovannantonio Forabosco, János S. Petöfi, and
17 Andrzej Zuczkowski. Each in his own thought-provoking way stimulated my curiosity about,
18 and determination to explore, my research topic ever more deeply. Clearly, none of them is
19 responsible for any errors in the text.

- 20 1. My thanks to “Cristaldi Film”, copyright holders of the film, for their kind permission to re-
21 print several frames.
- 22 2. That is due to the fact that verbal and referential humor require different cognitive processes
23 to be recognized and understood and involve different areas of the brain (Goel and Dolan
24 2001).
- 25 3. Many studies have demonstrated that laughter may, at times, be dissociated from humor
26 (e.g. Francescato 2002; Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974; Provine 2000). Therefore, the very existence
27 of such a textual index cannot necessarily furnish criteria for assessing the presence of
28 humor.
- 29 4. It might be appropriate to mention here the exophoric relationship between the first script in
30 the text and the second script outside the text itself. Exophoric references are mentioned by
31 Attardo et al. (2002: 16) in the context of meta-humor: “a metalinguistic self-reference is
32 exophoric, since it does not refer to any entity *in* the text” (2002: 42). For the time being, it is
33 best to use the expression “cultural dimension” to avoid confusion.
- 34 5. This interpretation was offered by Giovannantonio Forabosco during one of our recent ex-
35 changes of ideas.
- 36 6. As the transcription shows, Totò emphasized the double consonant, as is often the case in
37 Neapolitan dialect. The emphasis is useful in further emphasizing the similarities between the
38 two scripts.
- 39 7. This repetition serves the same functions as many spontaneous humorous conversations: 1) to
40 identify a change of script, and therefore the joke (Norrick 1993a); 2) to underline a linguistic
41 error, a meta-communicative function (Norrick 1993b). It would be interesting to further in-
42 vestigate the motivations behind such analogies.
8. Until 1975 Italian law obliged married women to use both their maiden name and married
name in legally binding signatures.
9. This gesture is often present in Totò’s films and is used after a joke to meta-communicate the
playful level of the interaction. It is reproduced in the frames below which follow an analog-
ous episode from the film “*Un turco napoletano*” (“A Neapolitan Turk”) in which Totò uses
the same gesture in a situation similar to the one under examination.



Figure 2. [redacted]

Concetta: *‘Eh’ giù con le ma:ni:*

{Totò tries to embrace Concettina} ‘hey’: keep your hands to yourself

Totò: *Concettina mia io sono turco (.) figliuola mia tu lo devi capire io sono ottomano (.) tu ne vedi due ma io ce ne ho altre sei*

Concettina mine I’m a Turk (.) my child you have to understand that I’m an Ottoman (.) you see two {shows his hands} but I’ve got six more → {smiles and with his right hand pokes her arm}

Concetta: *‘Ah ah ah’ che simpatico*

‘hu hu hu’ you’re funny ← (from “*Un turco napoletano*” 1953)

In this scene, as in those analyzed in “*Siamo uomini o caporali?*”, Totò’s partner in the scene is a woman, and the relationship he is trying to establish has to do with more or less explicit advances on his part. The wordplay is completely based on homophones. The Italian word “*Ottomano*” is turned by Totò into “*otto*” (“eight”) and “*mano*” (“hand”). In the sequence from *Un turco napoletano* the sexual reference that is already clear in the joke becomes even clearer at the punch line: Totò shows Concettina a salami he picks up from the table. Here too, the humor is provocative: Totò’s joking hides a serious meaning. Concettina’s answer is not serious; i.e., she doesn’t seem to get the serious meaning in his teasing. The complicit look she gives Totò in the last frame just before the scene ends, however, leads us to think that Concettina did indeed understand what Totò meant.

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1 **Filmography**

2

3 *Siamo uomini o caporali?* [Are we men or corporals?] (1955) by Camillo Mastrocinque. Starring
4 Totò (Totò Esposito), Paolo Stoppa (various corporals), Fiorella Mari (Sonia), Franca Faldini
5 (secretary). Story by Totò. Screenplay by Vittorio Metz, Francesco Nelli, Mario Mangini, Ca-
millo Mastrocinque and Totò. Produced by Lux Film (Ponti-De Laurentiis studios).

6 *Un turco napoletano* [A neapolitan Turk] (1953) by Mario Mattoli. Starring Totò (Felice Scio-
7 ciammocca), Isa Barziza (Giulietta), Carlo Campanini (Pasquale Catone), Franca Faldini
8 (Angelica), Aldo Giuffrè (Faina), Enzo Turco (don Carluccio). Produced by Lux Film (Ponti-De
Laurentiis studios).

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