

On Laughter and Insults: A Logical-Linguistic and Ethical Study on the Relationship Between Humor and Pejoratives Applied to Society /
Sobre risos e insultos: um estudo lógico-lingüístico e ético sobre a relação entre o humor e os pejorativos aplicado à sociedade

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ABSTRACT

Humor, especially in jokes, involves breaking rules of reason and social norms, such as moral, cultural, and religious standards. This transgression can produce pejoratives that insult or slander individuals or groups by exposing aspects of human life usually hidden to maintain social harmony. When the joke teller is unaffected, they and their audience share the pleasure of laughter and ridicule directed at the joke's targets. Thus, jokes can express a form of superiority over others based on physical, cultural, or behavioral traits. This study aims to connect the main philosophical theory of humor with the pragmatic theory of pejoratives, showing that the speech acts of joking and insulting overlap in certain pragmatic contexts, as it is not the words themselves that offend, but the agents who use them.

KEYWORDS: Humor; Joke; Insult; Slur; Pragmatics

RESUMO

O humor, especialmente presente nas piadas, envolve a quebra de regras da razão e das normas sociais, como as morais, culturais e religiosas. Essa transgressão pode resultar em pejorativos que insultam ou caluniam indivíduos ou grupos, ao revelar aspectos da vida humana geralmente ocultos para preservar a convivência social. Quando o narrador da piada não se sente afetado, ele e seus ouvintes compartilham o prazer do riso e do escárnio contra os alvos da piada. Assim, as piadas podem expressar uma relação de superioridade sobre outros, baseada em características físicas, culturais ou comportamentais. Este estudo busca articular a principal teoria filosófica do humor com a teoria pragmática dos pejorativos, evidenciando que os atos de discurso de contar piadas e de insultar se confundem em determinados contextos pragmáticos, pois o que ofende não são as palavras, mas os agentes que as empregam.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Humor; Piada; Insulto; Injúria; Pragmática

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Introduction

Behind what we understand as humor, in the most common scope of its concept, there is certainly a *moral* layer. In other words, it is quite relevant, if not essential, to consider several factors involving human values and *institutions* (“linguistic,” Searle, 1969, p. 50)¹ when we think about what makes an utterance funny. In fact, when we analyze the three most relevant theories to explain the phenomenon of laughter, namely, the Superiority Theory (ST), the Relief Theory (RT) and the Incongruity Theory (IT), it is easy to see that the keyword *transgression* permeates the center of their respective theses, but the question remains: transgression of what? It is clear that we are dealing with human relations, since language is a central feature of this complex species (Searle, 1969, p. 12), and such relations are *intrinsically* moral to the extent that we are dealing with some content of human social practice. Therefore, the aforementioned transgression has everything to do with the act of questioning the ethical conventions that govern good living among people, as well as the laws and religious dogmas applied in our daily lives.

By putting such conventions at risk, it is not uncommon to obtain a series of *offenses* through insults (cursing), swear words (socially prohibited terms) and slurs (discrimination and defamation of specific social groups) which, on the one hand, provoke anger, hatred and intrigue among people in particular, beliefs and ethnicities, on the other hand provoke jocularity and mockery, which are manifested by the most different types of laughter. In other words, *the insult of the pejorative creates the humor of the joke* (and vice-versa) and this work proposes to study the fundamental relationships that exist between the theory of pejoratives and the theory of humor, both based on a theory that encompasses them and governs the laws of communication, which is the Theory of Speech Acts (TSA). It is notable that the TSA, first devised by John Langshaw Austin in *How to do Things With Words* (1962) and refined by John Searle and Daniel Vanderveken in *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic* (1985), was influenced by Gottlob Frege (*The Thought*, 1956) as well as Paul Grice (*Logic and Conversation*, 1975) in order to obtain more clarity about the pragmatic phenomena behind all the formality of the *Illocutionary Logic* developed later.

¹ “Speaking a language is engaging in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior.”

Therefore, in this article, we will argue that jokes and insults are theoretically and pragmatically *identical*, demonstrating through the interweaving of the most accepted theories about humor and pejoratives and also through the application of this combination in practical examples, explaining why, based on the *same* speech, one person can laugh and another feel offended, depending on several pragmatic aspects of the speech. The study will be divided into two main sections: 1. “Theories for Humor and Pejoratives,” which explains the most accepted theories for the two supposedly different linguistic phenomena, that of generating humor and insulting, and 2. “The Relationship Between the Theories,” which, through the unifying Theory of Speech Acts (TSA), shows how illocutionary logic abstracts and formalizes the two phenomena as a *single one*, applying it to a real example of insulting people who suffer from dwarfism.

1 Theories for Humor and Pejoratives

Two theories will be intertwined and the proposal is to show that they have something in common, that they *identify* each other, despite being described in completely different and independent ways. Let us begin with an overview of the theory of humor.

1.1 The Three Theories of Humor

It has been theorized for centuries, from Plato to contemporaries, that there is a malevolent dimension to laughter. As summarized by Morreal (2016) in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, in the entry “Philosophy of Humor,” in addition to only a few philosophers having addressed the subject, it was only recently (from the 18th century onwards) that humor was seen as a source of pleasure and fun, although not all sides of the joke were taken into consideration, since laughter was seen as a kind of attack on someone’s “soul.” Introducing what is called the Superiority Theory (ST), Plato states in his dialogue *The Republic* (388 BC) that the guardians of the city should avoid laughter, as it generates discord and loss of control that often surpasses the power of reason itself. After all, laughter always arose due to mockery, scorn and sarcasm towards someone in particular or towards groups. He even repudiated the idea that Gods could not laugh at humans, as in this case they did not deserve to be venerated. For Plato, laughter is bad, a

vice, a reflection of self-ignorance, as mockery implies imagining reality differently, as if someone could not have been born with the physical defects or social status that they have instead of giving importance to greater virtues, such as respect and prosperity of the city. In the Middle Ages also, the Christian Church, which had the Puritans as one of its representatives, treated humor as sinful, pagan, obscene and corrupting. In modern times, Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651 [1996])² says that “much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able.” (1996, p. 38). René Descartes in his *Passions of the Soul* (1649 [2010]) also says that “Ridicule or derision is a kind of joy mixed with hatred, which results from our perceiving some small misfortune in a person who we think deserves it: we hate this misfortune, but enjoy seeing it come to someone who deserves it.” (2010, p. 50).³ An example of this would be “what teeth are those? They look like a donkey’s plate.”⁴ In short, humor was *amoral*.

There is also the Relief Theory (RT), which is even more psychological than philosophical, represented mainly by Sigmund Freud in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905 [1960]).⁵ For the author, laughter arises due to an uncommitted (non-serious) transposition of concepts that are often suppressed by the so-called good customs of society, religion or rules of etiquette. Such forbidden concepts remain hidden in the unconscious but accumulate a dangerous and uncomfortable charge of energy in the brain. When someone has the courage to simply expose such ideas, a sudden relief arises that is expressed through laughter. This happens when, for example, someone swears in church, uses slang in a formal meeting or talks about violence and sexuality at a family dinner. Freud also talks about puns, such as when a young man holding a twig says “grab my dick,” referring not only to the piece of wood, but also to his own penis. According to the author, “the pleasure in a joke arising from a ‘short circuit’ like this

² HOBbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by J.C.A. Gaskin. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. [1651]

³ DESCARTES, René. *Passions of the Soul*. Transl. Jonathan Bennet. New York: Hackey Publishing Co. 2010.

⁴ In Portuguese: “que dentes são esses? Parece uma chapa de burro.” It’s a pejorative term used to refer to people with large or prominent teeth, especially the front ones. The comparison is visual: donkeys often have long, prominent incisors, and “chapa” reinforces the image of something flat and wide, like a “plate” of teeth.

⁵ FREUD, Sigmund. Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious. In: Strachey, J., Freud, A., Strachey, A. & Tyson, A. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume VIII (1905): Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, 1960.

seems to be greater the more alien the two circles of ideas that are brought together by the same word - the further apart they are, and thus the greater the economy which the joke's technical method provides in the trains of thought" (1905 [1960], p. 118).⁶ This economy is what causes relief, because without paying much attention to the seriousness of an alleged "correct use" of a given concept, laughter manifests someone's freedom of expression and gives them pleasure. Regarding the idea of transgression, Freud agrees, as in the TS above, that laughter is caused by an act of immorality, because there is a disrespect for several ethical-religious norms that put social stability at risk.

According to Laurence R. Horn in "Nice Words for Nasty Things: Taboo and its Discontents:"

Finally, where there is taboo avoidance there is also taboo attraction. For Read (1935), it's the prohibition itself that gives life to the obscenity, given the "fearful thrill" in seeing, doing, or speaking the forbidden": "It is the existence of a ban or taboo which creates the obscenity, where none exists before." The taboo may also generate humor, in the form of puns, word play, "dirty" jokes, and sly double entendres that exploit a particular kind of homonymy or polysemy (Horn, 2018, p. 202).

Finally, the Incongruity Theory (IT), by its very name, saves efforts to defend here that transgression is the key point of its argument. The main author who adopts this point of view is Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790 [2000]),⁷ where he argues that the humor of a joke arises from a general phenomenon of *contradiction*. According to Kant, "in everything that is to provoke a lively, uproarious laughter, there must be something nonsensical (...). Laughter is an effect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing" (2000, p. 190). For the author, instead of being frustrated by the breach of expectations, if, obviously, it not be a serious matter (which concerns our own survival or that of loved ones, for example), we experience a kind of rational relief (and not psychological, as Freud says), not because we kept certain contingent reprimands in our unconscious, but because it would be human nature to feel physical pleasure (the healthy swaying of the internal organs, caused by laughter) when we can finally *rest from the logical laws of reasoning and have our*

⁶ See footnote 5.

⁷ KANT, Emmanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Edited by Paul Guyer. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

predictions ruined without real (dangerous) consequences. Despite all the abstraction proposed by Kant, no joke comes without practical content (after all, the contradictory formal expression ($A \wedge \neg A$) is not in itself funny, at least not in human practice. Perhaps in a “practice” of formal logic?) and it is easy to see that such contradictions will be applied to human values and beliefs and mockery will once again arise (e.g. knowing that the following situations are rationally impossible, someone might still say “you are so fat that you look like God: you are omnipresent” or even “no need to get angry, fat guy. Are you going to swallow me?”).⁸

Aligned with Kant, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984)⁹ develops the concept of *carnivalization*, a central notion for understanding how humor works in discourse. The Carnivalization of Discourse *inverts* social hierarchies and *breaks* established norms. During Carnival, anything can be said! The discourse is liberating, grotesque, corporal, often vulgar, but profoundly democratic and *subversive*. Carnival laughter is universal, *ambiguous* and regenerative, not mocking the individual, but the collective. The humor of the Corporal Grotesque exalts the body in *transformation*: eating, evacuating, being born, dying. The language that carries these grotesque images is part of popular and comic discourse, linked to the earth and materiality. Humorous discourse is an example of how language can dialogue with different truths, ridiculing discursive authoritarianism. Therefore, for Bakhtin, humorous discourse is not just a joke: it carries a powerful *social* and philosophical function (moral dimension of humor), destabilizes serious and monologic discourses (the mental relaxation proposed by Kant), and allows the emergence of new forms of truth and freedom (contradictions). In short, the idea of *rupture* is always present.

It is clear that the three theories above dialogue and find a common point: the transgression of rules.¹⁰ More specifically, the transgression of *moral* rules. Would morality be a preconceived reality? What would it be, after all, the best way for people to

⁸ In Portuguese: “você é tão gordo que parece Deus: é onipresente;” “Não precisa ficar com raiva, gordo. Vai me engolir, é?”

⁹ BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

¹⁰ For more details on what other rules are transgressed in the phenomenon of laughter, namely Paul Grice’s *conversational maxims* set out in GRICE, Paul. Logic and Conversation. In: *Studies in Ways of Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1905 [1989]. I bring them in practical examples of real jokes in the article by SOUZA, Euclides Barbosa Ramos de. The Philosophy behind the joke: logical and linguistical arguments that ground what makes us laugh at it. *Em curso*, v. 6, 2019, ISSN 2359. <https://doi.org/10.37038/006008>.

coexist? Should laughter be abolished? Would such a feat even be possible? We will now see what the theory of pejoratives consists of (its general form and basic elements) and how they can be used to insult others, generating on the one hand mockery, which is funny for some, and on the other insult, which is harmful for others. Next, we will present the theories for pejoratives and why the pragmatic perspective is the most accepted among them.

1.2 Theories for Pejoratives

Pejorating is the act of making something or someone worse, depreciating. The main authors responsible for theorizing what characterizes a pejorative are David Sosa and his compendium of articles (*Bad Words*, 2018), Christopher Hom (*Pejoratives*, 2010; *A puzzle about pejoratives*, 2012), Adam Sennet and David Copp (*What kind of a mistake is to use a slur?*, 2014).

Hom (2010) defines that we have basically three forms of pejorative terms: swear words (e.g. son of a bitch), insults (e.g. imbecile) and slurs (e.g. dyke, that is, an insult to a class of people). Each of these should supposedly correspond to a *neutral counterpart* (NC), that is, a “generic” or merely descriptive term (without the intention of classifying values) that is normally used in conversational practice. For example, we have that “female homosexual” (in real life, no one speaks like this) is normally referred to as “lesbian” (NC) and from this neutral counterpart we give rise to the pejorative “dyke” (reference to women who in theory resemble men due to the size of their feet only because they are sexually attracted to other women, something that, supposedly by certain conventions, only men should do). The discussion of whether “lesbian” is, in principle, “neutral enough,” will depend on several pragmatic factors and such factors are precisely what we are studying here. According to Hom (2012), the target of an insult goes through the following process: “must be subject to such-and-such discriminatory practice for having such-and-such stereotypical property and all in function of being from such-and-such group” (2012, p. 394) or from a formal point of view, we have “for any insult D and its neutral counterpart N, the semantic value of D is a semantic property with the form: must be subject to $p^*1 + \dots + p^*n$ for being $d^*1 + \dots + d^*n$, all in function of being N^* ” (2012, p. 394).

There are three semantic theories for pejoratives, but there is also the pragmatic perspective (which takes the context of the enunciation into consideration, such as implicatures, misunderstandings, ironies, metaphors and indirect speech acts). According to Sosa (2018) “According to fully non-semantic accounts, slurs don’t insult people, people do” (2018, p. 2). Therefore, it would not be the “fault” of the pejoratives themselves, but of the bad intention of a human agent of speech. Still in Sosa’s book, we find the theorists Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone, who say:

Slurs are not prohibited for such straightforward reasons. The alternative to a slur is a neutral name, not a circumlocution or a euphemism. In fact, using a description like “those people” might be just as offensive in the contempt it indicates for a target group. (Lepore and Anderson (2013b) highlight this contrast between slur terms and the action of slurring.) A comedian who utters a slur aims to derive humor from undermining the fairness and inclusivity his audience might normally identify with or aspire to, not just from mocking their prohibitions. Thus, it’s not simply the reference of a slur term that makes it objectionable (Lepore; Stone, 2018, p. 137).

On the other hand, restricting ourselves to semantic theories, the first would be *Combinatorial Externalism* (the pejorative is based on beliefs external to language, such as racial and ethnic prejudices supported by certain discriminatory institutions); the second, *Extended Combinatorial Externalism* (here we would not only have racial, sexual and religious insults, but there would be an extension to swear words and insults) and, finally, a thesis that underlies the externalisms above, which is *Semantic Innocence*, according to which we must presuppose *moral realism*. Moral realism assumes that sentences dealing with morality are capable of truth value as much as any other assertion (e.g. “it is morally good not to kill” is a sentence that can be verified in the world just like “the cat is black”).¹¹

Since morality is realistic, Hom and Robert May argue that only moral instances have an extension in the world, that is, while the term “dyke” is a pejorative and, therefore, amoral, there are no “dykes” in the world, only lesbians (2013, p. 293).¹² In fact, a rather

¹¹ In Portuguese: “é moralmente bom não matar;” “o gato é preto.”

¹² Lindemann highlights two interesting arguments, although ultimately fallacious, to prove the unfeasibility of semantic innocence. The first (2018, p. 42) is to appeal to homonymy: that a “bourgeois” can be identified with an “explorer,” the latter term would be a pejorative. However, this same word serves to name someone who likes adventures, which would not be a pejorative. Now, what matters is the meaning that is *actually* given to the word in the context of the enunciation, making the fact that there are homonyms

naïve and so-called “politically correct” position; it is easily questionable. Would it really be useful for a theory of pejoratives to fear the position of the reading public and already assume what is capable of offending someone or not? Shouldn’t this theory be the one to analyze why a pejorative is capable of offending in the first place? (and, thus, we can identify it *a priori* through its basic elements. By the way, Hom, 2010, p. 164, lists ten basic properties of a pejorative, which it is not up to this work to mention in detail).

It is also easy to see, for example, that certain insults lose their strength or are extinguished over time (Sennet; Copp, 2014, p. 1100). The term “nerd” emerged in the 1950s in the United States, *initially* with a pejorative connotation, describing people considered socially awkward and overly focused on studies. Over time, the meaning evolved, becoming associated with a passion for technology, science, and pop culture, often with a positive connotation. According to the abstraction above, the values of $d^*1 + \dots + d^*n$ were weakened and/or lost as the prejudiced institution that sustained them faded. Sennet and Copp called this a *generalization’s failure of extended combinatorial externalism*, because there might be a moment in history, in a given place, when the pejorative ceases to be pejorative (and, therefore, it would be convenient for Hom to assume semantic innocence, since the extension of “nerd” could be lost, at least while it was an insult. Nowadays, “nerd” can even be seen as a compliment!). However, externalism already took into consideration the relevance of an institution that validated

irrelevant. The second argument (2018, p. 44), stronger, would be the self-contradiction of the thesis of semantic innocence in assuming null extensionality of pejorative terms by *truth by vacuity*: in the logical formula $(\forall x)(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$, if F is null, everything can be said about “nothing.” Therefore, in “every faggot deserves a cruel death,” if “faggots” do not exist, the sentence is true (whatever is said about “faggots” is true), which would allow, from a logical point of view, the endorsement of a hate speech against male homosexuals. However, Lindemann did not need to appeal to Logic to show us that the great defect of semantic innocence is the fact that it cannot simply *force* the term “faggot” not to exist in the world [In Portuguese: “Lindemann ressalta dois argumentos interessantes, embora, no fim das contas, falaciosos, para provar a inviabilidade da inocência semântica. O primeiro (2018, p. 42) é apelar à homonímia: que um “burguês” possa ser identificado a um “explorador”, seria este último termo um pejorativo. Mas, essa mesma palavra serve para nomear alguém que gosta de aventuras, o que seria um não pejorativo. Ora, o que vale é o sentido que se está dando *de fato* à palavra no contexto da enunciação, tornando irrelevante o fato de haver homônimos. O segundo argumento (2018, p. 44), mais forte, seria a autocontradição da tese da inocência semântica em assumir extensionalidade nula dos termos pejorativos pela *verdade por vacuidade*: na fórmula lógica $(\forall x)(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$, se F é nulo, tudo se pode dizer do “nada”. Logo, em “toda bicha merece uma morte cruel”, se “bichas” não existem, a frase é verdadeira (o que quer que se diga das “bichas”, é verdadeiro), o que permitiria, do ponto de vista lógico, o endosso de um discurso de ódio aos homossexuais masculinos. Porém, Lindemann não precisava apelar para a Lógica para nos mostrar que o grande defeito da inocência semântica está no fato de que ela não consegue, simplesmente, *forçar* que o termo “bicha” não exista no mundo”].

the offense. Therefore, the weakening or loss of the meaning of this offense due to the disappearance of the institution was already a theoretically predicted phenomenon.

In any case, for Corrêa in his *Pejorativos e externalismos combinatoriais* [Pejoratives and Combinatory Externalisms] (2016), neither semantic innocence nor the supposed failure in generalization would be the theory's biggest problems. What is worse for the theory is to note the fact that it is apparently not true that for every pejorative there is a neutral counterpart. He asks himself “what is the neutral counterpart of ‘idiot,’ ‘son of a bitch’ or ‘stick in the ass?’” and says that “it is not a term that expresses the opposite meaning to the pejorative term, but that is neutral, as occurs with ‘mulatto and Afro-Brazilian’ and ‘to fuck and to have sexual relations’” (2016, p. 89).¹³ One criticism to Corrêa would be: if on the one hand it seems that this defect in the theory is just a contingency, since we would eventually “discover” or simply notice which neutral counterparts are missing (perhaps we just haven’t thought about it enough), on the other hand we find it implausible to suppose that an offense can be created without there being a conceptual “basis” that was “worsened” by the pejorative. After all, how can something be harmed if, beforehand, it was not in its healthy, stable or standard form? (by the very definition of pejorative. A pejorative is nothing more than a value of “bad” attributed to a neutral class). For “son of a bitch,” we would have “son of a legitimate marriage” or just “son” and for “cockface” (someone who is cowardly, unreliable and/or inconvenient) we would have “a reasonable person” or simply a “person” or “citizen.”¹⁴ A curious case would also be that of “idiot,” which comes from the Latin *idhiótis*. This name simply means “individual/private citizen.” We ask ourselves: what’s wrong with that? However, in Ancient Greece, those who abstained from public/political life were not well regarded. Today, we can still say that an idiot is someone who does not open himself up to debate and will probably defend positions that lack objectivity.

Next, we will study how the TSA, through its logical-linguistic foundations, manages to abstract the core of the respective theories of humor and pejoratives and show

¹³ In Portuguese: “qual a contraparte neutra de ‘idiota’, ‘filho da puta’ ou ‘pau no cu?’;” “Não se trata de um termo que expresse o significado contrário ao termo pejorativo, mas que seja neutro tal como ocorre com ‘mulato e afro-brasileiro’ e ‘foder’ e ter ‘relações sexuais’.”

¹⁴ In Portuguese: ““filho da puta;” “filho de casamento legítimo;” “filho;” “pau no cu (alguém que é covarde, inconfiável e/ou inconveniente);” “uma pessoa razoável;” “pessoa;” “cidadão.”

how they identify with each other. The logical form of the joke/insult will also be explicit, as well as its application in a real example of an insult to the condition of dwarfism.

2 On the Relationship Among Theories

It is notable, from daily conversational practice, that each of the insults, swear words and insults listed above are instruments of jokes and mockery, being among friends, co-workers and even strangers to creators of humorous content (the *stand-up* comedians). Regarding the latter, much has been said about lawsuits against “unfunny jokes” or “morbid humor.” To cite some famous cases in Brazil, we have Danilo Gentilli who compared the biggest donor of human milk in Brazil, Michele Rafaela, with the pornographic film actor Kid Bengala, saying that “in terms of milk donation, she is almost reaching Kid Bengala.”¹⁵ Referring to the actor’s semen, who had been quite active, Danilo ended up belittling the precious donation of milk that saves lives, attributing a sexual and, therefore, “dishonorable” connotation to Michele. We also had Rafinha Bastos who, on his old TV show, “CQC,” in an attempt to overly “praise” the singer Wanessa Camargo, who was then pregnant with her first child, said that she was so beautiful that he would “bang her and the baby” (he would have sexual intercourse with both of them). His intention was to say that the genetic makeup of the mother that the baby had would already make it (the baby) sexually attractive enough for such a feat.¹⁶ By the way, the joke’s humor lies in the exposure of the *absurdity* and *contradiction* of socio-biological *ideas* in assuming that it is plausible to have sexual relations with a baby, especially since this baby is *not* Rafinha’s son, which does not make him feel offended, at first. According to Kant (TI), the mind *relaxes* from the logical constraints of always expecting and calculating something coherent, in this case, with today’s Western society, transforming such expectation into *nothing to worry about*, generating mental pleasure. In any case, it

¹⁵ In Portuguese: “Em termos de doação de leite, ela está quase alcançando o Kid Bengala.” Accessible at <https://www.bol.uol.com.br/noticias/2013/10/30/danilo-gentilli-faz-piada-com-maior-doadora-de-leite-materno-do-brasil-e-e-processado.htm>.

¹⁶ Or, as he corrected himself, he meant to say that he would have sexual relations with Wanessa *while* she was still pregnant (that is, he would bang her *with* the baby), trying to compliment her by saying that the pregnancy did not take away her beauty. The controversy is explained in the YouTube short: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/bygn7xW1cbE>. This shows how different prepositions can change the course of someone’s life, especially in the world of comedy.

was an absurd comment, violating even the strictest laws in Brazil, but it certainly generated a lot of laughter for those who did not feel harmed by the situation illustrated by the joke. Recently, in June 2025, we also had the case of comedian Léo Lins, about a presentation produced and published in 2022, in which the comedian made a series of discriminatory statements against black, elderly, obese, Northeast and indigenous people. Also, people with HIV, homosexuals, evangelicals, Jews and people with disabilities. He was sentenced, in the first instance, to 8 years and 3 months in prison.¹⁷

To better understand how these theories relate, we need a more contemporary and precise apparatus, which is the TSA and its various details, which will require an additional section in this article.

2.1 Theory of Speech Acts

When using language, we not only have the function of describing the world, but of acting with it. In fact, there are actions that can only be performed through it, such as a naming or declaring war, for example. A speech act consists of a locutionary act (the act of issuing information), an illocutionary act (what the speaker intends to achieve with such information) and a perlocutionary act (effects that are actually provoked in the interlocutor upon receiving such information). Daniel Vanderveken in *Meaning and Speech Acts* (1990) defines that (1990, p. 1) “illocutionary acts are important for the purposes of philosophical semantics because they are the primary units of meaning in the use and understanding of natural languages” and their study is of philosophical interest because it concerns itself with the universal characteristics of language (such as propositions, illocutionary forces, speech acts, truth, success, satisfaction and implication).

In developing a formal semantics for illocutionary acts, Vanderveken seeks to answer the following question: how do the meaning of words and other syntactic features systematically contribute to determining the nature of the illocutionary acts that are performed by the use of the sentences in which they occur? For example, questions such as “is it raining?” imply the act of saying “please tell me whether it is raining,” but we

¹⁷ The first piece of news came out in: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/articles/c2d52p0py02o#:~:text=O%20humorista%20Léo%20Lins%2C%20de,stand%2Dup%20publicado%20na%20internet>.

have an incompatibility when we say something like “it is raining” and “I don’t believe it is raining.” He therefore proposes a *transcendental* approach to language. A logical-philosophical analysis that accurately describes the semantic universals of language use is transcendental in the sense that it articulates the *a priori* character of thought and the world, and thus sets limits to what can be thought and what can exist and be experienced (Vanderveken, 1990, p. 4). In fact, language is not (just) a mere description of reality.

Elementary illocutionary acts of the form $F(P)$ consist of an illocutionary force F and a propositional content P . Questions such as “are you coming?” and “is it raining?” have the same illocutionary force of questioning, but different propositional contents. “Long live the republic!” and “the republic will live forever” show an opposite case, when the first reveals the speaker’s will and the second constitutes an affirmation. Unlike the elementary case, we also have: $\neg F(P)$ is the illocutionary *denegation* (e.g. refusal is the denial of an acceptance), $(P \rightarrow F(Q))$ is a *conditional* (e.g. an offer of an object presupposes the condition of a response from an interlocutor who would accept it or not) and joint speech acts $(F^1(P^1)) \ \& \ (F^2(P^2))$ (e.g. notice = (affirmation + suggestion)). The latter is particularly interesting to us, as we will see later.

There are 7 syntactic types of *sentences*: declarative, conditional, imperative, interrogative, exclamatory, optative and subjunctive, characterized by markers of illocutionary force (verbal mood, intonation, punctuation and word order) applied to their specific clauses (where the concepts of subject, person and verbal tense are relevant).

A *performative sentence* (Vanderveken, 1990, p. 19) is one whose successful *literal utterance* constitutes the execution, by the speaker, of the illocutionary act named by its main performative verb (“to name,” “to promise,” “to banish,” “to forgive,” “to blame,” “to order,” etc.). This performative sentence expresses, with respect to each possible context of utterance, a literal *declaration* by the speaker that he performs the illocutionary act named by the performative verb. In fact, in the TSA, it is the defining feature of a declaration that the speaker is *representing himself* as performing an action present in the world and is able to perform this action in virtue of his speech act by the *sole fact* of his representation. Thus, any successful utterance of a performative sentence has the *secondary* illocutionary force named by the performative verb, having as its

primary force that of declaration.¹⁸ Someone who asks a question does so by declaring (and not merely affirming) that he is asking a question. This is what gives the question its performative character, since the fact that someone asked a question is *necessarily* true.

There is no direct correspondence between the number of illocutionary forces and performative verbs in any natural language. The types of forces we have are: assertive, commissive, directive, declarative (or declaratory) and expressive. Note that it is not even possible to translate some verbs between natural languages, because they are directly related to the culture and institutions that provide context and the “right” of someone to do something by successfully making an utterance in a given appropriate context. Imagine a culture without marriage, for example: there would be no “divorce,” besides the fact that, even if there were, not just anyone could officially declare this event in the world (only someone with the license to do so).

To better understand what the successful performance of an illocutionary act consists of, we must analyze the concepts of conditions of success and satisfaction. *Conditions of success* (S): stipulate what must occur in a possible context of enunciation for the speaker to be successful in performing that act in that context. An (*in*)success (\$) is the non-performance of the act itself (although another could have been performed). For example, if $F(P)$ is the illocutionary force named by the performative verb “accept,” then $\neg F(P)$ is named by the verb “refuse” (the opposite of accept). Therefore, $\neg F(P) = \$ F(P)$ (if someone refused something, or performed any other act other than accepting, they did not accept something. It is an insucess of acceptance). However, we have the *failure to perform*. It consists of trying to do something without the proper preparatory conditions (e.g. firing someone without having the proper authority or even, in a monogamous society, the case of a married person accepting someone other than his current wife as his legitimate wife. In fact, not even the current wife could be accepted again). The *satisfaction conditions* concern what we must obtain in the world, in a context of enunciation, to satisfy this act. For example, a promise is satisfied when it is fulfilled and this only happens if the one who made the promise makes its propositional content true (not by coincidence or another source of facts). When an assertion is verified as true (by correspondence with the world, whatever the epistemological criteria), it has been

¹⁸ The big problem with this would be the fact that we would need, beforehand, *to declare the very existence of the act of declaration*, which would lead us to a paradox or infinite regress. Similar to this problem is the debate about the primacy of the mind over language, defended by John Searle in his *Intentionality* (1983).

satisfied, but there is not only satisfaction of assertions (as we saw about promises above). An order, for example, is satisfied when it is obeyed). Also, two elementary illocutionary acts are different if they are performed or satisfied under different conditions. “I order and forbid you to come” is both *unperformable* and *unsatisfiable*. It is illocutionary and truth-conditionally *inconsistent* (Vanderveken, 1990, p. 105).

By the rules of *implication*, some illocutionary acts are automatically performed due to the satisfaction of others. For example, if someone fulfilled the promise to be good, then the statement “this person can be good” was made (that is, from the satisfaction of one act, another is performed). The opposite also happens: if someone has the power to declare that “I declare you excommunicated,” that person also asserts “you are excommunicated” (from the fact of being able to perform a declaratory act successfully, the satisfaction of another is already deduced).

All these elements make up what John Searle and Daniel Vanderveken call *Illocutionary Logic*. It aims at a *systematic* and *unified* explanation of the conditional aspects of truth, success and satisfaction of the meaning of the sentence, with the aim of enriching the expressive illocutionary capacities of the object languages of formal semantics and to allow an adequate interpretation of non-declarative expressions and performative sentences, since, as we have seen, language is not only about an adaptation of language to the world, but also, of the world to language. Such adaptations characterize what we call *directions of fit*, which we will now understand, with the basic components of illocutionary force:

Illocutionary point (Vanderveken, 1990, p. 104) (IIF): is the main part of the force, as it indicates the corresponding directions of fit. It represents the five forms of language use mentioned above. Points can be: assertive, commissive, directive, declarative and expressive. The four directions of fit are: *word-world* (the propositional content must fit Vanderveken’s presuppositional “independently existing state of affairs.”¹⁹ E.g. assertions), *world-word* (the world is transformed to fit the propositional content. E.g. promises and orders, when fulfilled, show a world that “obeyed” what someone said), *double direction* (to make the world match the propositional content, *saying*, and only by that, that the propositional content matches the world. E.g. declarations) and *null direction*

¹⁹ Also known as the Naïve realism.

(no commitment to fit anything. Ex. an apology, which is just the expression of a psychological state about a given, real presupposition, state of affairs).²⁰

Mode of achievement (Vanderveken, 1990, p. 110) (mode (F)): determines how an illocutionary point is to be achieved in the propositional content about a successful performance in an act with that force. E.g. Forcing someone to do something for you, simply ask or invoke a position of authority over that person, *ordering* them.

Propositional content (Vanderveken, 1990, p. 112) (θ): not all propositional content is appropriate for a given illocutionary act. A prediction deals with the future and a report deals with the past.

Preparatory conditions (Vanderveken, 1990, p. 113) (Σ): if someone testifies to a lie in court, although the testimony was given successfully, it was *defective*.²¹ This person presupposed the truth of the content of his statement (even knowing that it was a falsehood, he presupposed the truth of the content on purpose). When someone gives an order to another person, the first person presupposes that he has the corresponding authority to do so. Otherwise, he will fail in his act.

Conditions of sincerity (Vanderveken, 2009, p. 117) (Ψ): when someone asks another person to do something for them, they express that they want (the desire) that this person do something for them. These mental states are *propositional attitudes* and the performance of an illocutionary act is sincere when the speaker has the mental state that it expresses.

Degree of strength (Vanderveken, 2009, p. 119) (degree (F)): depending on the conditions of sincerity and/or mode of achievement, one can have different degrees of strength of an illocutionary force. Someone who begs expresses more of a desire for something than a

²⁰ It is interesting to note that, although there are 5 types of illocutionary forces, there are only 4 directions of fit. This is due to the fact that the commissive and directive types, which have the world-word direction, differ only in that, in the first, the person responsible for the future course of actions is the one who made the promise (speaker), for example, while in the second, the person responsible is the one who received an order, for example (hearer).

²¹ We say that a testimony, for example, was *plainly happy* when a report is given under the condition of a witness and that what was said corresponds, in fact, to the events that occurred in the world, regardless of the criteria used to *check it*. For now, TSA does not take into account the epistemology involved in verifying the facts, which, according to Vanderveken, are independent of someone who perceives them (a non-idealist view). However, Souza (2021) addresses Cohen's Problem, where it is discussed to what extent a baptism (a declaratory act), performed by someone pretending to be a priest, actually occurred or not. If so, until when, to what extent, or in relation to whom? What investigative methods would have been used to prove this fraud? Ultimately, since all illocutionary acts are primarily declaratory, how can we remove the performative and transformative power from the preface "I declare that..." uttered by anyone?

simple request. Furthermore, when a mother asks something of her son, he will probably obey more easily than a request coming from a friend.

Let us now look at the abstract form of an insult/joke so that we can clearly see how they are the *same* linguistic phenomenon.

2.2 Definition of an Insult/Joke

According to all these terms of Illocutionary logic, let's see what an insult/joke would be: it is the *combination* of the illocutionary acts of the *assertive* and *expressive* types, with the illocutionary forces assertive F¹ and expressive F², respectively.

The first has the illocutionary point IIF¹ of asserting that an individual who has certain characteristics (physical, psychological, cultural, social, political or gender traits, for example) should be seen as “inferior” or worthy of fewer rights or privileges due to such characteristics (word-world direction of fit, that is, the speaker tries to adapt his words to the state of things in the world). The second has the illocutionary objective IIF² of expressing *disapproval* of these characteristics, as well as *pride* in not having them (null direction of fit, since the speaker is only expressing his psychological state in relation to the target of the insult/joke). The speaker intends to achieve the *perlocutionary*²² effect (also called the unconventional effect; the effect that is ultimately generated in the hearer) of psychologically shaking his target and revealing some kind of supremacy of his own characteristics or those of the group to which he belongs.

His mode of achievement, mode (F), might be diverse, but the *same* for both acts, from an arbitrarily equal position (when, for example, a millionaire claims to have more money than another millionaire, considering that, initially, one could assume that they are both equally rich) or one of submission, when the speaker has some kind of power over

²² In fact, Butler (1997, p. 15) argues that an insult does not occur instantly, like a promise or an appointment, that is, it is not a mere illocution, but depends entirely on how the interlocutor will feel upon having been the target of such an illocution, sooner or later, whether the speaker intends to insult or not. In this way, the insult would not depend entirely on the speaker's sincerity, but would still need to reach the perlocutionary level of the complete speech act. However, not being totally dependent on the speaker would make the solution to the debate contingent and fairly psychological (by placing us in an inevitable and insoluble doubt about a so-called “real” mental content of the speaker), moving away from the pragmatic-linguistic interests of this article, which only determine the conditions of success and satisfaction of an illocutionary act.

his hearer (a boss over an employee or even a soldier over a war hostage). Obviously, depending on the position of the speaker, the degree of strength, degree (F), of the assertive act and the conditions of sincerity Ψ of his/her expressive will vary, although they are the same for both acts, in a given specific context of enunciation (after all, the insult/joke was just one), making the insult/joke more (or less) powerful (provoking the hearer to simply turn his/her face away, respond with something or even burst into tears).

The preparatory conditions Σ , also the same for both acts, involve the assumption that the speaker believes himself to be superior to the victims of the insult/joke and, even if the assertion is defective, in the case in which its propositional content θ^1 (harmful to the target of the insult/joke) is considered false (according to the independent reality asserted by the TSA), it will still have been successful and, thanks to the perlocutionary effects of the propositional content of the expression (sincere or not) of repudiation on a certain individual or group θ^2 (a propositional content different from that of the assertion. E.g. “you are a son of a bitch” has a certain content in the assertion, but “and I hate bastards” is the other expressive content), which range from mockery to the generation of certain beliefs around a certain region, the insult/joke also achieves the goal of a *quasi-declaration* that a certain individual or group is inferior to another, although the decision of what is considered “better” than what and which criteria should be taken into account is arbitrary.

So, in a certain modal context wi and in a certain instant ti , formally, we would have in the enunciation of an insult/joke:

$$\{[F^i(wi, ti): \Pi F^i, \text{mode}(F), \text{degree}(F), \Sigma, \Psi, (\theta^1)] \& [F^2(wi, ti): \Pi F^2, \text{mode}(F), \text{degree}(F), \Sigma, \Psi, (\theta^2)]\}$$

Which, if we compare it to the abstraction brought by Hom (2012, p. 394), already mentioned above: “For any insult D and its neutral counterpart N, the semantic value of D is a semantic property with the form: it must be subject to $p^*1 + \dots + p^*n$ for being $d^*1 + \dots + d^*n$, all in function of being N^* ”

Applying it, in world w^1 and time t^1 , to the insult/joke D: “You gnome! Grow up first before talking to me.” Suppose the target of the insult/joke is an adult x . According to independent reality, x is, in fact (biologically), N : dwarf (suffers from dwarfism).

- (1) The assertive of force F^1 is done with the propositional content “ x is a dwarf, that is, short in stature (d^*1), similar to children (d^*2), incapable of debating seriously (d^*3)” = θ^1 . This sentence, in itself, would still not be enough to insult or generate humor, since the speaker still needs to attribute *subjective value* to his words and feel superior to the victim, which occurs next;
- (2) x must be subject to the perlocutionary effects, caused by the expressive of force F^2 of the speaker whose propositional content is “I hate dwarfs and their pretensions of being adults. I am better than them!” = θ^2 , of feeling humiliated (p^*1) for being treated like a child (p^*2) and being seen by everyone as someone incapable of positioning himself as an adult (p^*3);
- (3) All because x is an N^* : “gnome,” which is the pejorative term for the neutral counterpart “dwarf.”

Note that the asterisks serve to represent the speaker’s *intention* to use the terms according to the presuppositions he makes according to his preparatory conditions. It is obvious that these terms do not *necessarily* mean what the speaker wants them to mean.

Also, mentioning Elizabeth Camp, taken from his own book, Sosa (2018) states in his Introduction that:

Camp proposes a “perspectival dual-act” account, on which the use of a slur effectively performs two speech acts, two distinct, coordinated contributions to a sentence’s conventional communicative role. There is both a predication of group membership and an endorsement of a derogating perspective on the group. The prominence of these phenomena can vary across different contexts (Sosa, 2018, p. 3).

Luvell Anderson in “Calling, Addressing, and Appropriation” says that:

Humor, for example, is an area where membership in a particular social group affects one’s ability to make certain jokes. Ted Cohen (2008) highlights a kind of Jewish depreciation humor that only works if the joke-teller is also Jewish. And by “work” I mean the joke is interpreted in a non-hostile way, a way that likely signals a kind of insider status. If the speaker is not a member of the Jewish community, the joke is

likely to be interpreted as bigoted. Here we have a clear instance of how group membership can affect a speaker's ability to perform certain illocutionary acts. In this particular instance, the non-Jewishness of the speaker effectively blocks the performance of non-bigoted ethnic humor. (Anderson, 2018, p. 21).

Corrêa (2018) argues that, although the two acts work together above, in fact, the descriptive power of a pejorative would not be exactly a description of the world (in this case, of the target of the insult), since the expressive load of the expressive illocutionary act, as a “non-cognitivist” act (that is, one that cannot be true or false, 2018, p. 106), is only capable of demonstrating disapproval. It would hardly be sufficient to truly assertively describe a state of affairs in the world (e.g., “my neighbor is a fag” is not intended to conform to the true state of affairs in the world, only to disapprove, Corrêa, 2015). Therefore, the assertive act is also necessary, in addition to the expressive one. This also brings us to *thick concepts* (“thick,” “dense” or “complex” concepts). According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* in the article under the entry “thick ethical concepts,” thick concepts (e.g. generous, kind, rude, selfish, cunning, reckless, banal, graceful etc.) involve not only a generic assessment of good or bad, right or wrong, but a non-evaluative description (assertion) of the target of the enunciation, characterizing it under certain contextualized moral assumptions (Väyrynen, 2021).

Therefore, we come to the conclusion that the *semantic* perspectives of pejoratives, shown above and taking into account their conceptual disadvantages, are *insufficient* to describe the real insulting effect of pejoratives and, also, their ability to generate humor in their form of a joke (when the pejorative is seen as a joke). Thus, the *pragmatic* perspective would be the most appropriate, which considers the context and the most varied factors of enunciation, such as individuals and/or groups of individuals, sociocultural aspects and even time and geography.

At first, it might seem absurd to try to identify a joke with an insult, when the latter seems to be a mere contingent element of the former (i.e., not every joke is capable of insulting), but here we argue, in favor of a *generic* approach (i.e., of philosophical interest), that, from a pragmatic point of view, insulting and funny effects, from the *same statement*, can be generated depending on multiple contextual factors, such as *who* says what to *whom*: an inside joke to a group of obese people loses its humor when someone said to be “in shape” says it.

Something important should be said: jokes that are said to be “innocent,” such as puns, double meanings and logical “errors” *also* fit the model, even though, although it might not seem like it, the nature of the insult lies in the dimension of *derogatory* (harming, altering, changing for the worse, lowering the value) in the *strictest* sense of the word, that is, with the intention of diverging from the *original* meaning of the pun term. For example, “what is the most delicious bear in the world? The *bearbecue*.” Even though we do not have an established moral society to defend the “rights” of the literal meaning of the word “bear” and how it should naturally be used in a given *serious* context, we can see that it is the *same* phenomenon of defamation with the use of the thick term “fags” (referring to homosexual men), when we try to undermine the *masculine* status of men, simply because of their behavior and/or sexual orientation. In the latter case, the destruction of the term “man” is not only carried out linguistically, but *socially* and will be judged, since human beings have institutions against sexual discrimination, for example.

Summarizing, allegedly two different speech acts, that of the joke and that of the insult, are now seen as one, being itself composed of two types of illocutionary act, assertive and expressive, whose statements must take into account place and time, speaker and interlocutor, in addition to the culture and institutions underlying their communicative, social, religious and conventional practices. In other words, they must take into account all the pragmatics involved in defining language. Someone is derogatory (diminishes or harms) when they want to “occupy” another individual’s space with their own individuality or group identity, and this space is a *constant* that will eventually give more freedom of movement to one or the other, depending on who has the advantage in this egotistical and animalistic dispute of always trying to be better than the other.

Final Considerations

Given the existence of two relatively well-developed theories, that of humor and that of the pejorative, and also given the intrinsic relationship between these two types of illocutionary acts (making jokes and insulting, for example), it became convenient for the future of these theories to intertwine them in order to explain them in a more coherent and comprehensive manner. We have seen that, given the two existing theories about

humor and pejoratives, these two types of illocutionary acts are interdefinable and only differ contingently in relation to the target audience that laughs and the one that is offended by the joke/pejorative, something that varies between cultures, social groups and, of course, with time and space. We have also seen how the elements of a joke are intrinsically related to the elements of a pejorative, in addition to having brought more formality and development to theories that only very recently received some contribution, although they represent an extremely present element in human life. Finally, it is notable that the pragmatic explanatory perspective of pejoratives is the one that best describes the degrading effect of pejoratives and, therefore, also the mocking effect of the joke.

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