FLIPPING SITUATIONS AND ENDING PLOTS:

AN APPROACH TO COHERENCE IN HUMOUR

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Abstract

Recent linguistic research on humour and conversation has been successfully achieved on pragmatic and sociolinguistic grounds. My contribution should try to follow this (bi)methodological trail, deepening on the study of conversation and its implications. I should call Contextual Contamination (CC) the procedure of linking together different arguments and scripts in spontaneous talk. CC not only would follow from the well known given-new information opposition in talk, but would trigger comical sequencing and colloquial thinking aswell. My second step would undertake Douglas (1975a; 1975b) analysis on situational coherence in humour. I will approach some issues about mock attack theory and the collapse of pressuposed script in practical situations. My last point will approach the narrative constituent of comical performance. Absurd narratives (non comical) also confront the notional order embedded in natural stories, and we would try to

grasp how this contrast works. My conclusions will draw together the narrative and the conversational dimensions of humour.

Keywords: Conversation analysis, narrativity, ethnography, hermeneutics.

Pragmatics and sociolinguistics

Recent research on humour in pragmatics and sociolinguistics is sufficiently rich and diverse. The eclosion and later adoption of formal models to analyse humour (Attardo 1994) have focalized most discussions and opened paths for work that has followed. More concretely, the heuristic use of the interpretive model developed by Attardo & Raskin (1991) could and should be of special interest to educational work, and many workshops in different contexts move in this applied and multidisciplinary direction. Alongside the more formal models, we should also have in mind the development of applied functional research such as that carried out by Holmes (2000) on humour at workplaces, or by Kothoff (2003) on irony and language registers, amongst others (*Cf.* Attardo 2003). These approaches are all based on conversational data which have been obtained directly, and they present analysis and evidence with a considerable degree of formal precision. The sociological distinction made by Holmes between positive and critical humour, besides dating back to the long-established sociolinguistic separation between solidarity and power, can be explored in different empirical settings. Kothoff's attention towards what is *meant*, leads her to the discovery of two orientations in response to irony: one leaning towards what has been said (*de dicto* interpretation), and another towards the implications (or *de re* interpretation), with differing argumentative consequences. These works highlight the interactions between conversation and cognition –and also social cognition. To the discourse analist and the sociolinguist, they emphasise the fact that empirical data belong to the building of interpretation. Here I argue that we should connect these broad

methodological commitments in order to make headway in sociolinguistic and pragmatic research on humour.

My paper will explore issues related to ordinary conversation and its narrative implications. I will follow the inspiration of Norrick's work (1993; 2000) and also, to some extent, Attardo's (2001) general consideration of the essentially narrative nature of humour. Norrick has insisted in the value of conversational practice in the construction of humour. The storylike, performative side of comicity reveals the role of thematic reorientations, of metalinguistic resources, of restarting, false endings and lopped stories. Here, puns are not only verbal constructions, but also part of the argumentative plot in the dialogue, part of what speakers are willing to accept as conversationally feasible or not. Conversation is not only a set of logical arrangements, which it also is, but an interactive event that includes slips, reorganisation, breaks and summaries. I consider that Norrick's combination of ethnography and hermeneutics is an excellent path to follow, one that deserves closer attention.

Contextual Contamination

In *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler (1964) proposed a way to analyse comical sequences centred around the idea of *bisociation*. *Bisociation* resonates in different ways in human cognitive organisation, in the emotional system, in strict logic and in interaction through pranks and jokes. Although bisociation has been satisfyingly and formally developed in pragmatics through *Script Theory* (*Cf.* Attardo 1994), I would like conversation analysis to embrace Koestler's multiple echoes, regarding situational plots, emotions and verbal translation, so present in spontaneous conversational material (Viana 2004). We should recall Koestler's inspirational sentence:

> *It takes time to talk a person out of a mood, however valid the arguments; passion is blind to better judgement; anger and fear show physical after-effects long after their causes have been removed. If we could change our moods as quickly as we jump from one thought to another we would be acrobats of emotion.* (Koestler 1964:57)

We can follow these acrobatics of emotion through ordinary conversation. First of all, I would like to inquiry into what we could call *contextual contamination*, the capacity to shift from one context to another (from one script to another), in the course of everyday interaction. We have a pretty clear idea of how we perform this transfer by alternating given and new. Thematic progression does not work in a linear way: we achieve a certain conversational coherence by means of informative zig-zagging. This alternation between given and new allows us to perceive how new contexts enter frames that we take for granted, and it is this breach that is of interest. Contextual contamination is always an open possibility, in spontaneous conversation, owing to the productive mechanism of interaction itself. I take *contextual contamination* to be the meaningful penetration of contexts in such a way that it is difficult to pinpoint the salient frame at a given conversational point – without leading to difficulties in processing.

Two different and well-known authors have commented on this basic intuition: G. K. Chesterton and Ervin Goffman. Chesterton wrote some wonderful lines about how delicate it is to lose the thread of the conversation. He commented upon the perils of changing the orientation of the conversation or of it seeming to change direction towards a known topic which may be irrelevant to the speakers. What interested him was how it was possible that an improvised conversation could lead *somewhere else*, somewhere completely different from its departure point. This is what fascinated him and what, according to him, made conversation seriously relevant –specially ordinary conversation. The fragment I am referring to belongs to *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* and takes place amidst a collective logical deduction. Chesterton introduces the subject of *resuming* a conversation as part of a search for clues on which the participants are deliberating:

> *"But if the conversation's not worth starting again, why is it horrible to stop it?"*
> *asked the conscientious Wotton, still laboriously in pursuit.*
> *"Why, that's why it's horrible to stop it," answered Pond, almost snappishly for so*
> *polite a person. "Talk ought to be sacred because it is so light, so tenuous, so*
> *trivial, if you will; anyhow, so frail and easy to destroy. Cutting short its life is*
> *worse than murder; it's infanticide (...) A good light conversation can never be put*

together again when it's broken to pieces; because you can't get all the pieces.
(Chesterton 1937)

In fact, the most open-minded observations related to the given vs. new can be found in Goffman's study *Forms of Talk* (1981). Goffman comes across as specially sensitive to diversions from conversation: the fact that the same departure sentence could originate so many variations, even hardly changing the situation –the contextual settings. He delighted in imagining different answers to the same conventional question ("Did you enjoy the film yesterday, love?") and explored which contextual settings seemed to be available depending on each answer.

We could call these conversational opportunities, these improvised reorientations, *fissures*. But it is certainly a more systematic occurrence. I am in favour of filling the situation of *contextual contamination* (*CC*) with content, understood as the the procedure of linking together different arguments and scripts in spontaneous talk. *CC* would be responsible not only for the given vs. new information opposition in talk, but also for comical sequencing and colloquial thinking in general; in a way, it would be used as a creative tool in dialogue.

Through the contrast between anecdotes and stories, we reach a different analytical level. By definition, anecdote is trivial, a parallel story to what we are really narrating, so as to say. We keep the thread with the stories, we cook up the plot, we await the denouement. The anecdote may not lead anywhere, but it has a value of its own. Now: in ordinary conversation, anecdotes generate stories. Like cherries: when you pull one of the stems, you can end up with a whole bunch. The explanation I would like to draw from here is that in *thematic progression* two classifications are activated: hierarchical or treelike, and connective or netlike classifications. Far from the traditional opposition, conversation links them to assure continuity. Hierarchical order secures the logic of a story according to basic narrative principles. Network ordering does none of this: it works through contact, freeing the wagons from the track. It unchains rather that chains. Somehow, it launches other stories, but is not responsible of narrating them. Indeed, being the junction (or the disjunction), it is as relevant as the sequence of the story. When we speak, we do two things

at the same time: pay attention to the order of the discourse and wander off to link topics. We relate topics taking trivial incidents as starting points: a marginal observation, a date, or a complementary explanation. We temporarily suspend narrative logic to link the next exchange. This general development can be examined with absolute precision in ordinary conversation, showing when it becomes more articulate and when it soars, giving way to a creative discourse that is also coherent.

Coherence in humour

Taking all the previous into consideration, my next step takes me to Douglas' analysis (1975a; 1975b; 1996) and her *mock attack* thesis. One of the purposes of my paper is to explore the coherence between lived situations, conversational narratives and joke patterns. We can take ethnography as a starting point with Mary Douglas, for, as I see it, the British anthropologist developed a new and extremely interesting argument based on situational value.

But, first, the *mock attack* thesis. The most well-known theories of the great 20th century authors laid the foundations to understand the structure of a comical situation: the appearance of prominent meanings produced by an unconscious set of topics (sex, aggression, scatology), the background-foreground contrast between the mechanic and the organic, or bisociation as a creative instrument. Mary Douglas tryied to synthesise Freud's and Bergson's best work in a discerning sentence: *Humour is a play on form*. She kept Koestler's inspiration that paralleled humour with agression and conveniently transformed it into a *mock attack*, thus changing this idea into an interpretative instrument to discover humour in situations. This is where I believe lies an interesting turning point.

Douglas does not interpret *mock attack* in terms of aggression and violence, but of play (keeping in mind that there is agressive as well as non-agressive humour). The crucial issue is directly related to the key moment when we joke: it lies in the suspension of the attack. Her formula goes this way: *Needless to say, a successful subversion of one form by another completes or ends the joke, for it changes the balance of power* (Douglas 1975b: 96). At the very moment when the play on form becomes evident, the joke ends; the

denouement is the manifestation of the playful subversion. We cannot add anything because we would spoil it. This dissolution when faced with playful subversion is fundamental in the construction of a joke. Such an approach to the final sequence links specially well with what we know about the formal structure of verbal humour (and the *punch line*). It also tells us something about the pragmatic content of what is implicit (and what we call the *script opposition*) and the moment when the joke ends.

But this is only part of the question. Douglas' analysis enables us to go further, for it gives us elements to know under which circumstances we can mould or insert a joke with some success. A joke is an event that happens, that someone produces in the course of action. Therefore, we can tackle it only in pragmatic terms. Let's think of real situations in which we can burst out laughing: Douglas (1996) argues that, to accept a joke, we must understand that the situation matches a possible inversion. The idea is that an attack on form is a kind of inversion. It will suffice for the time being to bear in mind that a situation should be perceived as being flexible enough to receive an alternative interpretation. This match between the situation as it is perceived and the joke as it is given or received is important: a joke will not work if the situation is too rigid and does not tolerate inversions or if the joke cannot match the inversion with an appropriate context. In Douglas' words:

> *I once argued that the social situation provides the context for seeing a joke. I claimed that the social context gives licence for the laugh: if the context is wrong, the same event will just not be funny. For recognizing "the right context" I took the old idea that a joke has the structure of an inversion, I added the idea that the inversions can be read as an analogy of the social situation, and added one more principle: that if the social structure is of a kind in which reversal is thinkable, then the latent joke is licensed and everyone can laugh; but is the social situation is tense with anxiety and fear, any expression of reversal is too dangerous, and the latent joke will be reversed. I still believe that social awareness flips the joke into and out of the danger areas.*   (Douglas 1996: 5-6)

This implicit appeal to coherence is interesting because it enables us to do away with possible structural inversions that are not comical and, contrariwise, to detect potential

humour that has not obtained its explicit resolution. Douglas is very precise in her thesis of matching the situation as it is perceived and the kind of subversion that is introduced. On the whole, it is an excellent guide for an ethnographic analysis. The thesis claims sociolinguistic coherence at two levels, between the structure of the joke and the lived situation –in fact, at four levels, if we add the psychological domain, also double, with the bodily, corporeal response (laughter), and the logical trigger, the incongruity (Table 1).

Table 1. Fourfolded coherence

Joke structure	Lived situation	*SL level*
Logical trigger	Corporeal response	*PSY level*

We will move into ambiguity to show the extension of Douglas' argumentation and to link it with the third part of this paper: the value of the narration. I will transcribe a story from an informant [EB] about her visit to a bookshop, which contains interesting elements for us to delve into the notion of situational coherence. Some words about the context are needed: the reader should keep in mind that in 2005 the Hispanic world was celebrating the IV Centenary of the publication of *Don Quixote*. Besides important ritual events, this has generated many jokes, visual and verbal, which have certainly brightened the event. What my informant heard at one bookshop in Lleida (Catalonia, Spain) is not exactly a comical story, but it would have the ethnographic value of a real situation, recorded and susceptible to being compared to other canned jokes. Her story is as follows:

> *I was in this bookshop a few days before Christmas, amidst the usual Christmas rush. A lady in her mid-thirties walked in –she clearly came from a modest background, you could see by her clothes and her way of speaking. She had a book wrapped in paper under her arm, she went up to one of the shop assistants and said: "Here I am again – after all the time I was here the other day it was of no use...". She unwrapped the book carefully and I can see it's a good edition of Don Quixote, leather bound, brown, with some golden thread even. The shop assistant asked her: "What's wrong? Didn't your husband like the book?". "Well, I thought he'd like it*

because it's on TV so much... he said it was OK, but that he prefers another one."
The shop assistant asked which one he wanted, and the lady had it written on a
piece of paper; she looked at it and in a small voice she said: "He says it's called
Kamasutra." The shop assistant exclaimed in surprise, but but went on: "This way.
We have it over here. There are many editions." They took some time to choose one
of them and they walked back to the till. "I hope he likes it this time... It's got lots of
pictures...", the shop assistant said, adding: "If there's anything at all, just come
back; don't worry: that's what we're here for!".

[EB, personal communication, 22.12.04]

As I have said, I cannot assume this is a comical story exactly. The formal elements of bisociation are here, the *culture* script vs. the *sex* script, with all the underlying meanings we are aware of. The key moment of the situation, when the client unfolds the paper with the other book's name, enough intrigue to guess whether she knows which book her husband has asked for and the presupposed knowledge about *Don Quixote* that one expects the Hispanic audience to possess –all this is here. The story, like all comical stories, can be explained according to different sociocultural implications: the importance of reading, the role of shop assistants, the value of illustrations in books, the influence of propaganda and publicity, and so on. In none of these aspects is EB's story necessarily comical. What seems to be clear here, however, is that it is *at least* a potentially comical situation that, in a first stage, does not result in a comical outcome because it does not match any possible inversion: participants, or even the narrator, don't look for any explicit alternative way to look at things, to make things evolve in a different manner.

Examining real situations has this advantage: that we come across definite cases that challenge the coherence set. We know we can have laughter withour comicity in ordinary situations; now we have potential comicity without practical resolution. What could surprise us most about EB's story after having heard it, and after having let it wander around our minds, is the contamination of scripts it establishes, following the line of contamination by contextual analogy in ordinary conversation. Now we have sufficient elements to relate *Don Quixote*, the funniest romance of chivalry in the world, with the

Kamasutra, the Indian collection of advices and postures. One thread can lead us to another. The explained anecdote fulfills this function: like conversational analogies, the narration about the real life situation in the bookshop somehow links both scripts.

My informant delivered the lived situation in the narrative form. Unfortunately, her story does not make use of sufficient conversational cues to help us take the story too comically. We would have to know how to modify the narration so that it could become comical (or more comical), because this transformation is crucial to what is relevant here. This is what we often do with the narration of anecdotes and the introduction of the comical-like in conversation: we display a whole array of conversational cues, we modify the narratives appropriately for them to be funny, or we introduce them into flexible contexts (with interventions from others, or digressions) with the same purpose.

My thesis is that, in conversation, and in humourous narration, *contextualization* plays the role of the *correspondence between joke and situation* mentioned by Douglas. Jokes and humourous stories are carried out among people and demand the participants' complicity. The speakers lay out the cues of the humourous narrative so that the listeners can develop its comical interpretation. The narrators force their voices, make loud noises, shout, they then distance themselves to get to grips with the story, and, finally, deliberately, deliver the punch-line. These pragmatic transformations, so well presented by Neal R. Norrick (1993), facilitate a multiple processing of information, help to open lexemes to parallel and sometimes incompatible meanings and call for the listener (and the speaker) to take into account two scripts at least when interpreting the story. This is how lived situations can become comical anecdotes. *Continuitiy* goes along with *correspondence*. What is coherent in the *joke* –the play on the situation through a verbal support– and what is coherent in the *comical situation* –the inversion of an expected situation– links with what is coherent in the most open *comical narrative strategy*: the contextual cues that draw attention to the multiple interpretations.

Canned jokes seem to be the most *elaborate* version possible of verbal humour (constituting a text in themselves, closed), whereas spontaneous joking, which require a flexible situation to be admitted and matched, would represent the most *unexpected* version

of the ethnographic situation. In this line, verbal jokes would not be pure invention, but would become closer to the anecdotes we come across in real life situations. Mid-way, we would have *narrative manoeuvre* and conversational strategies that enable the narration of anecdotes, which we have just referred to.

This supposed continuity allows us to accept as meaningful the *situations* in which the jokes are told. Much can be said here: the way in which a joke is related to the rest of the situational events is suggestive and interesting. One of the oldest jokes in the world: "Doctor, it hurts when I get up", "Well, get up later..." can appear, –or be transformed, or introduced partially as a joke, unconsciously– in different ways, according to different things: doctor jokes, wishing to stay in bed, the uncomprehending world, or the speed of diagnosis. Any of these associations is informative and suggests others things at the same time (including the possibility that the joke is a failure). It is highly probable that the canonical distinction between anecdotes and jokes, besides purporting a further level of formal precision, holds in latent form the relative degree of a connection with the context, given that anecdotes (understood now as brief conversational narrations) can be recuperated and play a clear memoristic role in human conversation and cognition; and jokes, precisely, unconnected with context and exportable, work as a machine to induce forgetfulness, or dissociate concepts –as Douglas says about ritual humour: *they connect widely differing fields, but the connection destroys hierarchy and order* (Douglas 1975b:102). Let us take it also as referring to conceptual grounds.

All these points depend on the initial formula: a joke has to present an inversion that matches a flexible situation that the participants are willing to subvert (= to play upon). In this way, the reverse situation is also possible: that an overtly subversive situation should claim a joke. The proximity of a very tall and thin person, and a short and fat one almost demands its comical expression. And this is just on physical resemblance. The path is open to explore what we could call *latent jokes*, the kind of comical situations that only require to be perceived by someone and expressed in order to surface. This *heuristic value*, which can be assimilated to formal theories, seems interesting and, in any case, makes the exploration of ethnographic situations possible .

Underpinning Narrative

The intuitive notion of conversation, inasmuch as it is a collaborative task (and somewhat improvised) does not help think of its narrative constraints. However, a couple of excellent works help us think in this direction: Chafe (1994) and Norrick (2000). Probably, one way of looking at the subject is to concentrate on the empirical construction of plots and understand narrative as being close to the translation of experience. I would like to think of the comical genre as inserted in this domain. Attardo (2001) has provided us with sufficient arguments to evaluate the basic narrative structure of jokes, the most clearly marked textual genre.

Logical narrative patterns are based on temporality and thematic progression. For classical rhetorics and poetics, the narrative pattern evokes the unfolding of human life: birth, growth, development (maturity, diversification) and end. Around this pattern appear all the known branches: kinds of actions and events, characters, situations, and the corresponding sequencing, with the unexpected contingencies and coincidences. Seymour Chatman (1978) took this classical pattern as a starting point to examine the difference between story and discourse with which we develop the plot.

The logical pattern is described as containing a centre and a periphery. What is essential in the narrative pattern, with all possible variations, is the idea of the plot and the climax. Before the climax and preparing the plot, there can be diverse presentations and introductions. The tenor of these presentations, and their existence, is peripherical material. We understand that the main part is the plot. At the same time, the climax and plots demand or include some kind of denouement, of outcome. Strictly speaking, the denouement is as necessary as the plot. It does not belong exactly to the periphery; it is simply the compensation required by the plot and the trajectories. Perceptively, however, the denouement belongs to the periphery in the measure that it triggers the ending. For the sake of convenience, we can agree that the ending is peripheric and that it includes the outcome of the plot. The tenor of the endings and their probable extension –through epilogues and glosses– can be (and has been) highly variable.

Literally, a denouement brings order to the confusion created by the plot. All plots must end in one way or another just as they have to start somewhere: this is one of the conditions of the pattern, which tolerates recursivity well, allows second and third parts. One of the old words to designate the denouement is *catastrophe*. If we situate ourselves in a tragic plot, the catastrophe is not, precisely, the return to early normality, but the moment when all problems and tensions emerge. This is still close to our idea of denouement, inasmuch as *catastrophe* is demanded by the plot. That the catastrophe coincides with the end is one of the possibilities. We have said that the endings can extend more or less significatively to include epilogues and even moral reflections. All this coincides perfectly with the interests of rhetorics and poetics –and is, strictly speaking, pure discursive syntax.

Let us now consider humourous narrative. We have agreed that humour, at least in the most elaborate forms of the joke, in parallel with other discursive kinds of organisation, presents a basic narrative pattern. The idea of the denouement now takes on another dimension. Comical narrative also contains a preparation –or not– and needs to soar with the plot, but other things happens afterwards. My thesis, in accordance with what I have been arguing about the *coherence* between *levels of experience* and *verbal levels*, is that here we have a serious inversion of the narrative pattern, a play upon logical structure. In verbal and practical jokes, as well as in comical situations that we interpret according to a narrative pattern, things happen the other way around: in the first place, the plot is subordinated to the denouement. In the second place, the denouement involves a new link, a kind of *odd plot*. Thirdly, the first two conditions compel us (in different degrees) to a backward reading of the narration, without which no humour is possible.

It is fascinating to observe the narrative structure, on the one hand, and its powerful dissolution, on the other. Inverse, implicit, reading complicates things. In comical narrative, the denouement (wrongly called "denouement" here) is a break and, at the same time, a new plot –in fact, the plot to be grasped if it is a comical narration. We notice that a plot at the end is logical nonsense. It's a plot that breaks the narrative, a complication with no development. In itself, comical narration is an attack against narrative form. Here, the end

is the beginning. To indicate more paradoxically that it is the beginning, there can be nothing after the *punch line*, which represents the absortion of the end.

It is coherent to find equivalences between the way in which we take situations and how we organise meanings. In the hypothesis I am arguing for here, formal inversion also affects the narrative interpretation of *comical situations*. Jokes do precisely this by means of a verbally ordered discourse: we recognise narrative entries, we wait patiently while the plot advances, knowing it will end up as a soft and empty husk (this itself is funny, the plot has lost value), and, finally, the *punch line* propels us towards an unexpected and silent version of the story. When we perceive a comical situation, we will apply a similar pattern. We walk into an office, for example, and a certain distribution of tables and people surprises us. On closer examination, we discover that the tables have been distributed as if they were a fort to defend a person. So, the reading *fort-defence* overrides that of *tables-office* and we cannot help laughing. In this pattern, the end of the story is also a complication of the initial story. In classical terms, the contrast between congruence and incongruence (a relative one, because there can be also partial resolution) indicates the comical perception, the contrary of what is canonically produced in the perception of standard stories.

I do not know whether there is a word that means *catastrophe* in a comical sense. Contrarily, we possess a certain knowledge concerning sudden beginnings: to start *in medias res* means exactly this and has been, undoubtedly, relevant in narratives, both rhetorically and poetically. It could also represent the logical correlation of our comical endings. We know we can start suddenly, intuition tells us that to start *in medias res* presupposes the ternary structure of *beginning*, *climax*, *denouement*", and we know that we will rebuild the logical order afterwards somehow. But, on the other extreme, we have not completely identified these broken endings that press towards an implicit script that destroys the certainty of the told story. As we know, the symmetries and chiasms of our cognitive systems are neither perceived as being stable nor find regular translations into vocabulary (*Cf.* Sperber & Wilson 1986). Symetrically, we should say, in Latin, *nihil in fine*, only the story that bursts, in whichever way (Table 2).

Table 2. Narrative structure and marked spots

Plot	Denouement	Ending
in medias res	*catastrophe*	*nihil in fine*

Let's move one step further. We can discern fairly well *incomplete stories* from these comical regenerative endings. The inverted pattern of humour offers *a logical way* to introduce what is absurd into the narrative, to integrate it in a schema, in a genre. Without these rigourous rules about inversion and the end, incomplete narratives would purport an absurd air, nonsensical, far from strict comical (in)coherence. Incomplete stories, so usual in any kind of conversational narrative, enable us to navigate along this indefinite area that touches upon absurdity because it defies patterns and completness. The quantity of stories that get lost on the way in everyday conversational practice suggests our need to impose and look for patterns in interpretation. Indeed, ordinary conversation, as Chesterton and Goffmann perceived, contains potentially infinite paths difficult to follow *a posteriori*; it is made of digressions, of lost threads and half drafted stories. It is the layer where different style manouevres repose. To the conversational analyst, all this has meaning, it is part of an activity in progression.

Obviously, it is possible to attain absurdity through a well organised literary piece, although it may be a delicate and difficult topic. Samuel Beckett's narrative is probably the most stimulating example. For the sake of our argument, let us consider *The Unnamable*. This is a work of creative disorder, of elaborate verbal machinery to produce distorsion. At least a few lines will remind us of his intention:

(1) *At no moment do I know what I'm talking about, nor of whom, nor of where, nor how, nor why. But I could employ fifty wretches for this sinister operation and still be short of a fifty-first, to close the circuit - that I know (without knowing what it means).*

(2) *They build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another (it's human, a lobster couldn't do it).*

(3) *This story is no good, I'm beginning almost to believe it.*

(Beckett 1953)

Hypothesis that collapse on top of one another: a good definition of a narrative that defies a logical pattern, a narrative that claims to have no end. In general, in *The Unnamable* and other works, Beckett's decided insistence in not finishing, in continuing with the discourse, is already his first general impugnation of the cognitive premises of narrativity. All discourse is always *a part of,* and the pretension of infinitude, declared, open, goes against it. *The Unnamable* is peppered with lost references, false endings, with sudden appearances of the characters, with disappearances and improvised reappearances. The interesting question is that the predominant texture dissuades from seeking any meaningful organisation. And if it is all about building stories, Beckett manages to build and demolish all the cognitive system at the same time. The following, somewhat long, fragment will illustrate the procedure of building a story and discredit it perfectly:

They love each other, marry (in order to love each other better, more conveniently). He goes to the wars, he dies at the wars. She weeps (with emotion) at having loved him, at having lost him. (Yep!) Marries again (in order to love again, more conveniently again). They love each other. (You love as many times as necessary - as necessary in order to be happy.) He come back (the other comes back) from the wars: he didn't die at the wars after all. She goes to the station, to meet him. He dies in the train (of emotion) at the thought of seeing her again, having her again. She weeps (weeps again, with emotion again) at having lost him again. (Yep!) Goes back to the house. He's dead - the other is dead. The mother-in-law takes him down: he hanged himself (with emotion) at the thought of losing her. She weeps (weeps louder) at having loved him, at having lost him.

There's a story for you! That was to teach me the nature of emotion (that's called emotion): what emotion can do (given favourable conditions), what love can do. (Well well! So that's emotion! That's love!) And trains, the nature of trains. And the meaning of your back to the engine, and guards, stations, platforms, wars, love, heart-rending cries. (That must be the mother-in-law: her cries rend the heart as

she takes down her son. Or her son-in-law? I don't know. It must be her son, since she cries.) And the door? The house-door is bolted: when she got back from the station she found the house-door bolted. Who bolted it? He the better to hang himself? Or the mother-in-law the better to take him down? Or to prevent her daughter-in-law from re-entering the premises? There's a story for you! (It must be the daughter-in-law: it isn't the son-in-law and the daughter, it's the daughter-in-law and the son. How I reason to be sure this evening!) It was to teach me how to reason, it was to tempt me to go, to the place where you can come to an end.

(Beckett 1953)

There is nothing particularly humorous here, because the demolition exercice takes precedence, along Beckett's effort on cognitive distrust. What we have here is a precise literary verbal display against narrative order. The unending pattern claimed by the Irish writer corresponds, in a literary level, to unfineshed stories in ordinary conversation –and still contrasts with the inverted pattern we have recognised in comical narratives. Absurdity is related to lost threads as well as comicity is linked to sudden opposite plots. The quality and the revision of the end is implied in both cases.

Beckett, who wished to conduct his writing towards the negation of any system, also had to mock the humouristic pattern, establish a distance from laughter, so it could be a good idea, in his delicate work of digressions and unendings, to let fragments of an odd order, remains of comical narrative, surface from time to time. This comical outbursts allow us to put absurdity in the narrative spotlight momentarily, so the reader can admire it, but we soon return to the serious side of an unending discourse that is seldom congruent, something like the face of that friend who never laughs at jokes. We do not know what is going on in his or her head, but we guess that he or she must be lost in one of these possible narrative mazes. *The Unnamable* lives on in this region of lost steps. This is its basic narrative choice.

Terminus

In this paper, I have tried to deep on the conversational analysis of humour and its implications, from the point of view of ethnography, pragmatics and narrativity. I think that the establishment of connections between narrative and conversational models is interesting. After all, comical narrative often closes with a dialogue (in canned humour), and comical dialogue is one of the paths towards narrative openness (in conversational humour), so that the collusion of both perspectives is fairly pertinent. As I said at the beginning, an appropriate combination of ethnography and hermeneutics is also of use (Fludernik 1996).

I have worked along the *coherence* on different levels: situational, verbal and pragmatic, trying to understand their common concern with contextual contact and inversion. I have tried to clarify the narrative roots of humorous activity, and related to this, I have brought forward the definition of *comic ending*, in front of other rhetorical patterns: then I have found meaningful contrasts to different models of narrative disruption, like ordinary conversational telling, and literary experiments on cognitive distorsion (as Beckett's *The Unnamable*). Finally, I have suggested that the basic narrative sign, from a cognitive point of view, comprises fragmentation (and boundaries). Jokes follow strictly these narrative premises, introducing a logical way to alter the end.

Note

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