

HOW FUNNY IT IS WHEN EVERYBODY GETS GOING!  
A CASE OF CO-CONSTRUCTION OF HUMOR IN CONVERSATION

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Abstract

Humor is built and co-constructed by the participants in conversation, by means of terms and / or attitudes. The paper shows the effects of humor and its co-construction on the interaction itself and on the relationship of the participants to each other. The qualitative analysis of a short sequence carried out emerges into a theoretical reflection about both the functioning of humor itself and about familiar conversation in general.

Key words: Humor, conversation, quantitative analysis, interaction

**Introduction**

This paper deals with the co-construction of a humorous sequence among young people during a dinner conversation.<sup>1</sup> First, I want to show the way that humor is built and co-

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<sup>1</sup> A first presentation of this paper has been given in Bertinoro, Italy, 2005. And for the present one, I would like to thank G. Brown for his proofreading.

constructed by the participants, observing which terms and / or attitudes the participants utilize, and focusing on the links of humor that lead to the creation of a large sequence. Next, I want to show the effects of humor and its co-construction on the interaction itself and on the relationship of the participants to each other. Finally, this kind of qualitative analysis of a short sequence will necessarily emerge into a theoretical reflection about both the functioning of humor itself and about familiar conversation in general. This study is based on part of a conversation that takes place between two sisters and their boyfriends.

## **1. Theoretical framework**

### *1.1. General presentation*

My analysis of the humorous sequence here lies within the scope of pragmatic and interactional research on discourse which makes particularly relevant the description of the functioning of humor in interaction, and its effects on interaction and on the relationship between participants.

On the other hand, I will place this analysis within M. Bakhtin's "dialogic" theory (1929<sup>2</sup>), considering humor as –at least- a kind of "double voicing" (in Bakhtin's sense). According to this theory, the uniqueness of the speaker does not exist (Ducrot, 1984) and, when a speaker is speaking, other voices are speaking through him/her. These other voices can belong to the hearer ("*diaphony*", Roulet, 1985) and/or a third person (present or absent). These various voices can be identified or not, recognizable or not; they can (sometimes) correspond to the speaker or not and, in the case of humor, they can be real or fictitious. In this last case, it is the presence of another voice which allows the speaker to switch into a "non bona fide communication" (Raskin, 1985).

### *1.2. Humor as a double voicing*

Considering humor as a double voicing<sup>3</sup> does not supplant the current theories of humor. It just completes them, allowing one for instance, to attribute a kind of "responsibility" to

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<sup>2</sup> 1986 for the present edition.

<sup>3</sup> Or, what I have called in French "double énonciation" (Priego-Valverde, 1998, 2003)

each different meaning of a humorous utterance, in addition to the speaker him/herself. Thus, this approach emphasizes, on the one hand, the distance the speaker maintains from his or her own discourse, and on the other hand, the consequences of this attitude. So:

The humorist speaker can create a distance from the seriousness of language (play words), from the hearer, from the situation, from himself (self disparaging humor), and in general, he/she can create a distance from the “serious reality” (Bange, 1986).

This double voicing is the materialization of a contrast between two modes of communication -one serious and the other playful-. This contrast creates humoristic incongruity.

This double voicing refers to a doubly coded discourse. It involves, on the side of production, a speaker’s ambiguous intention and an ambivalent enunciation. On the side of reception, this doubly coded discourse forces a double interpretation which is not possible without a minimum of connivance, at once on the affective plane (accepting an absurd, illogical or indecent enunciation) and on the cognitive plane.

This double voicing is necessarily partly playful. It is part of what secures the humor as kind. Connected with the distance (“what I am saying is not serious and maybe not even true”), it reduces or indeed cancels all of the possible aggressive, vexing, subversive or indecent literal meaning in a humorous utterance.

## **2. The data**

### *2.1. General presentation*

The corpus is constituted of various familiar conversations recorded during evenings passed among friends or members of a single family. Thus, the participants are very well acquainted with each other. They are all between twenty five and thirty years old. The recordings were made with a visible microphone, but even *if* all of the participants knew that they were recorded, they did not know the real reason why. Except during the first

minutes, when some participants were asking for the reasons for the recording, they were unaware of it. The relationships between friends were so close and their encounters so frequent that the microphone was quickly forgotten. Thus, I think that I have collected a very spontaneous and natural sample of speech behavior.

In the corpus presented here, the participants are two couples composed of two sisters (F1 is a student and F2 is working in a high school), and their boyfriends (M1 – F1's boyfriend – is a dentist, and M2 is a sports teacher). They are all between 25 and 30 years old.

The recording has been done at F1 and M1's place of residence.

## 2.2. *Nature of the interactive setting*

We usually define conversation with the following criteria:

- Symmetric positions between the participants. Theoretically, all of them have the same rights and the same duties, especially those to be alternately speaker and hearer.
- A degree of cooperation (Grice, 1975) that is more important than whatever competition may exist. Even if the latter is necessarily present, at least because we cannot reasonably think that any bet of face for example cannot exist in a conversation.
- An “*inward goal, centred on contact*” (Vion, 1992), the maintenance of the relationship, the cohesion of the group where the only one goal acknowledged is the pleasure to be together and to talk.
- A mood of conviviality, which is the consequence of the previous criterion.
- An apparent informality which carries on as much in the discourse (two can speak about all and nothing, in a spontaneous way, without a precise goal) as in the interaction itself. Indeed, as Schegloff and Jefferson showed (1973), in a conversation, no explicit rules exist concerning the order of speech turns, their duration, all of that being determinate progressively.

Thus, the conversations are so auspicious that it is natural that they are a preferential space of humor. It is all the more natural because the conversations of our corpus are familiar conversations between people who know each other very well. As V. Traverso (1996) says, they are the space of a “pre-eminence of the relationship and of the complicity”, pointing out the importance of the shared knowledge and experiences.

### *2.3. Questions of methodology*

#### *2.3.1. Humor as a generic term*

Our study is carried out in the linguistic field of pragmatic, interactionist and enunciative trends. Therefore, I should consider humor as it actually appears within our daily conversations. I observe it in order to explain how it works and how it influences the current interaction and the relationship between the participants. Various forms of humor will then emerge that will seem to be related to irony, mockery, joke; these forms may be thought to be of questionable taste or to be more on the witty side. But the aim of this paper is not to produce a gradation among humoristic enunciations nor even to attempt to classify them according to their types. This is the reason why I shall –like the majority of researchers studying humor in interaction– adopt the term “humor” as a generic term.

#### *2.3.2. Analyzing only one large sequence*

Every observer of conversational humor is faced with two kinds of approaches. One can decide to analyse a large corpus (often many hours of recordings or examples) in order to point out a regular and potential recurrent linguistic mechanism. Or one –and it is my choice– decides to observe only a short sequence from a larger body of data. Even if this methodological choice is of course debatable by the questions it asks<sup>4</sup>, I do think that observing a unique but entire humorous sequence of a whole conversation is the best and most appropriate approach for an interactive analysis.

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<sup>4</sup> Is it a case study? Is it possible and reasonable to attempt a generalization? Is it conversational humor or individual humor?

### 2.3.3. *Being an observer participant*

As an analyst, being both an observer and a participant might be considered questionable from a methodological standpoint. How is one to know if the future analyst doesn't hinder the interaction too much during the recording? How is one to know if he/she uses too much knowledge that he/she has about the participants to interpret the data instead of just describing them? In other words, how can one measure the potential biases of such a method or recording?

In my studies, I assume the role of an observer participant and I justify such a position because of the nature of conversational humor. Indeed, conversational humor is so contextual, and so anchored in a conversational history based on shared knowledge, that it is often quite impossible for an external observer not only to understand the humor produced, but to actually extricate a humorous utterance.

### **3. Presentation of the analyzed humorous sequence**

As I said previously, this sequence is only a part of a whole conversation between close people. But at the time of this recording, they are living 800 kilometres from each other, and they don't see each other very often. These two points can explain why the whole conversation and more specifically, the sequence that I will analyze is so convivial, informal and funny: they are very happy to be together again. But in spite of the frequency of laughter, the humor which appears is very particular and heterogeneous, and necessitates dividing the sequence into three parts:

- Friendly humor (lines 80-128). Here, even if the target is "innocent", a baby not yet born, the humor used is more "absurd", illogic, and incoherent than really aggressive;
- Black humor<sup>5</sup> (129-173);

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<sup>5</sup> In this specific case, I mean by "black humor" a mix between racist and dark humor.

- Teasing humor against M2 (174- the end).

These different kinds of humor will show, as I said in the introduction, a paradoxical side of both conversation and humor.

Indeed, on the one hand, the informality of the conversation allows F2 (the pregnant woman) to introduce, without any pragmatic preparation, the topic of her future baby, which topic will become the beginning of the humorous sequence. This same informality allows an often absurd humor (no need to be or seem to be brilliant). Moreover, the essentially convivial nature of the conversation both permits, and is increased by the presence of humor.

On the other hand, the essentially cooperative nature of conversation certainly allows the co-construction of a humorous sequence and a humor based, most of the time, on shared knowledge known only by the participants themselves, but actually, it is partly because the participants are so close that the “face work” (Goffman, 1973) is less important than another kind of interaction and that they indulge themselves in very aggressive humor.

That is the reason why in this sequence, in spite of the presence of humor, of laughter, of conviviality and cooperation by sharing a same activity (co-building a humorous sequence) about an implicit shared focus, at one point –when humor will become more aggressive, more black and probably more indecent– the united group will be divided into two parts, endangering –because of humor– the conviviality it has itself contributed to create.

#### **4. Analysis of the data<sup>6</sup>**

In this part, first I will analyze some humorous mechanisms and second, I will focus on the co-building of the sequence.

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<sup>6</sup> See at the end of the paper, the whole transcription of the sequence and the original version in French

#### 4.1. *Some humorous mechanisms*<sup>7</sup>

As we will see with the following analysis, even when the humor produced becomes more and more aggressive, it will adhere to the same kinds of mechanisms largely described in many studies about humor in general.

##### 4.1.1. *Creation of an incongruity*

F1 and F2 are sisters. M1 and M2 are their respective boyfriends. F2 is pregnant. In line 80, F2 interrupts the previous serious topic, producing an utterance indexing the situation: her baby is moving in her stomach. This utterance should not have become a real topic because at the beginning, she is not really believed by the other participants. M1 is the only one who reacts –laughter and feed-back (81, 83)-, probably more by face work than true interest.

86: F2: it makes some:: ++ bubbles in my stomach

87: M2: goddammit you seem to be delighted while you are saying that we fail to see it's

88: unpleasant

89: F2: no no it's NOT pleasant I told you already + it's not pleasant

90: M1: <inaudible>

91: F1: <but it must be pleasant?>

In line 86, F2 goes on explaining what she is feeling, comparing the baby's movements to bubbles. This apparent delight is highlighted by M2 (87), and it is immediately corrected by F2 who specifies that feeling her baby is something unpleasant. If this is not the real beginning of the humorous sequence itself, F2 sets down a first incongruity in what is normally expected of a pregnant woman (wonder, happiness...). This first incongruity is increased by F2's insistence on explaining the unpleasant side of her situation:

89: F2: no no it's NOT pleasant I told you already + it's not pleasant

92: F2: listen to me I don't think it's pleasant ++ it makes bubbles

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<sup>7</sup> As the principal topic of this paper is not the humorous mechanisms but the co-construction of humor, I will quote only a few examples of them, as an illustration.

The very beginning of the humorous sequence appears line 96, at F2's instigation again:

96: F2: imaGINE + you / no but here / here to be specific you seem to be in an aquarium  
you see ++ frankly it's not pleasant to be an aquarium

In this utterance, F2 produces two successive incongruities. First, she begins saying that she looks like an aquarium and second, she outdoes her own utterance, saying that she *is* an aquarium. Typically, she produces the most usual and efficient incongruity called "schema conflict" (Raskin, 1985), which is based on the association of two incompatible universes<sup>8</sup>.

As the following laughter shows, the image of the aquarium is the starting point of the first humorous topic, based on the comparison of F2's stomach and the world of the water.

F2: imaGINE + you / no but here / here to be specific you seem to be in an aquarium you  
see ++ frankly it's not pleasant to be an aquarium

F1: (*laughter*)

F2: (*laughter*) imagine (*she is making many different noises*) (*laughter*) and you you are  
here goddam-mit super (*laughter*)

F1: maybe he is playing to the small duck

M1: yeah=

F2: (*laughter*) <she is singing and she is probably making gestures what illustrate what F1  
has just said>

F1 & F2: (*laughter*)

F2: the blazing::: hairs::: + soaking::: in the liquid::: (*laughter*)

M2: do you think he has hairs like surfers now ↑

Some have said that humor is nothing more than switching into another world, a world with its own logic, an incoherent, absurd logic according to serious reality. With the verb

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<sup>8</sup> A large terminology exists to describe this kind of incongruity. One of the most famous is the Koestler's "bisociation" (1964)

“imagine”, F2 explicitly enters in a non bona fide communication and leads the other participants with her. She begins by making different noises, as if the baby was not in her stomach but in his bath. F1 takes that idea and runs with it, imagining the baby playing with small ducks, still in his bath. Then, F2 outdoes her sister’s utterance this time, visualizing her future baby with blazing, long hairs dipped in water.

So, in these few lines, the baby, not yet born, is alternately compared to a fish in an aquarium and to a (born) baby taking his bath and playing.

#### *4.1.2. Humor based on shared knowledge*

In this kind of interactive frame (two sisters and their boyfriends), the participants meet them regularly. Thus, they know quite well their past and present histories and their plans. In such conditions, the present conversation is based and built on a foundation of past interactions.

The term “blazing”, used by F2 herself (line 104) reveals another humorous mechanism, and probably the most frequent: humor based on knowledge shared only by the participants. In this case, if “blazing” can be considered as one more one-upmanship on the already created incongruity, it refers to their “conversational history” above (Golopentja, 1988). Indeed, since the beginning of F2’s pregnancy, all of them, and more specifically F1 and M1, like to make fun of the fact that the future baby will have red hair. They do it with all the more pleasure, knowing that there is no reason at all to believe it. It is just a conversational focus that has become humorous, having become a kind of ritual. So, the term “blazing” here is more an explicit reference to the ritual that they instituted than simply an incongruity.

As we will see in the next section of the data, this ritual has been created on the basis of the fact that F2 and M2 like, and have been listening a lot to a rock band called “Simply Red”, whose singer is red-headed. Knowing this, F1 and M1 repeatedly set up a relation of cause

and effect between the fact that F2 and M2 are listening to this band and the "fact" that the future baby will be red-headed too.

The cryptic nature of this utterance is obvious. An external observer can understand why the participants suddenly speak about red hair only if he/she knows their conversational history. In such a case, an external observer can see that something is probably more or less funny but not humorous.

This allusion to the blazing hair is also a sign of connivance between the four participants because in this excerpt, it is F2 who initiates this topic, which is usually broached by F1 and M1. By doing this, F2 shows that she agrees with this kind of mockery.

M2: you see hum:: a little like simply red singer's style

The others: *(laughter)*

F2: *(laughing)* imagine

F1: *(laughing)* well + with the number of ALBUMS you buy

F2: *(laughing)* and more it's true

F1: *(laughter)*

F2: goddammit it's predestined he is predestined M2

M1: oh year

F2: we had too much listened to simply red

M2: *(singing a band's song)*

M1: *(laughter)*

F2: *(laughing)* yes you said it

M1: *(going on singing)*

<inaudible sequence>

In this excerpt, the participants make explicit the relation of cause and effect between the rock band and the potential baby's red hair.

#### 4.1.3. Intertextuality

Already present in Bakhtin's literary texts studies, the notion of "intertextuality" was theorized by Kristeva (1969) to describe the relations between two (or more) texts and the way one text refers to another one.

In the next excerpt, M2's utterance refers to a French comic's sketch about surfers and their supposed drug addiction.

M2: do you think he has hairs like surfers now ↑

The others: (*laughter*)

M2: <inaudible> <imitating the baby at birth> you stressed during nine months but I do be coo:::l + you want::: some + (he takes back his own voice) we won't agree together you

F1: (*laughter*)

F2: (*laughter*)

know you go back in ↓ you start again

F1 & F2: (*laughter*)

#### 4.1.4. Inscription of the sequence in a "local logic"

The "local logic" (Ziv, 1984)<sup>9</sup> is, in some ways, the counterpart of the incongruity:

« [...] local logic is appropriate only in certain place. In humor, local logic is appropriate in a way, because it brings some kind of explanation to the incongruity. We wait for one thing, and we get another thing that is quite different but that nevertheless has certain suitability. » (1984: 90).

This logic does not match with the rules of serious reality but governs a funny world, a non bona fide one. Knowledge and acceptance of this logic is the *sine qua non* condition of acceptance of the incongruity as something humorous and not only absurd or incoherent, and the acceptance of... the unacceptable, as we will see in the next part.

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<sup>9</sup> The mechanism itself of the local logic will be developed in the next part of the analysis of the data.

## ***4.2. Co-construction of the humorous sequence***

### *4.2.1. General presentation*

What we called “co-construction” is the same phenomenon that has been called “joint fantasizing” by Kotthoff (2006) i.e. “[...] the emergent production of a shared fantasy, often with several conversational participants making short contributions which create coherent scenes through the incremental structuring and augmentation of unreality. The genre shows how interlocutors put each other on inferential tracks and how these tracks can be processed, drawing on the relevant contextual knowledge, so that the humor can be immediately ‘topped’ [...] It shows how several persons closely oriented to each other select formulations which produce a coherent fiction, until the created scene is conversationally phased again.”

This humorous sequence has several particularities. First, it might seem to be absolutely indecent, chocking and all the more aggressive for external persons because the principal target is an innocent one: F2 and M2’s future baby. But this aggressiveness is not a real one and, for external observers, the best guarantee of this falsehood is the enormity of the purpose. For the participants themselves, they know each other so well and they are so close that it is just impossible for them to believe that they can say such horrible things. This shared knowledge allows them to co-construct a humorous sequence based on a performing of various voices that are sometimes racist, sometimes indecent, or just absurd.

The second characteristic of this humorous sequence is its conviviality due to both the relationship between the participants and the activity that they are co-building. The frequency of laughter is a cue to this.

A corollary of this conviviality is the cooperative nature of this sequence. Here again, the cooperation can be explained both by the relationship of the subjects and by their activity. Even if all of them are lapsing (at least at the beginning of the sequence) more and more in the horror, they do it together, responding and one-upping what it has just been said. This system of one-upmanship, often on a simple word, shows that they are reasoning based on

the principle of idea association, which gives the sequence a large coherence. It is this kind of coherence –even if it is a humorous one– that I am going to describe, following line after line, the participants’ purposes.

The final characteristic –and probably the most important one, in order to accept the humor produced here as such– is the distance the participants show throughout the sequence between what they say and what they (probably) think, between what they should say as real speakers and what they attribute to other voices, between the image of themselves they show and their “real” personalities and finally, between the world they are creating and the world of factual reality.

#### 4.2.2. *The co-construction, line after line*

F2 initiates the topic of the baby (80) and later, the beginning of the humorous sequence (96), comparing herself to an aquarium. In line 99, she illustrates what she has just said producing various noises. Thus, she is presenting herself as suffering from the baby’s activity or more... from the fish activity if we want to follow the local logic to its end.

In line 101, F1 one-ups F2’s purpose and more specifically the water as a topic, transforming it into bathwater. This frame being set down, F1 can visualize the baby playing in his bath with a small duck. In line 106, the water may have three different meanings and may correspond so to three different frames: the amniotic liquid (which will be really actualized by M2 in 109-110), the aquarium (which seems to be abandoned since line 101), and the bath (the most probable script in that case). Thus, favouring the bath, the participants here seem to return to the closest world to reality. But only *seem* because at the same time, F2 evokes her future baby’s blazing hair soaking in the liquid (106). Per se, F2’s intervention is already funny, but it becomes really humorous because it is the product of various elements: the creation of the incongruity already shown, the inscription of this utterance in a certain logic which consists of visualizing the baby in various situations, and,

above all, the actualization of a conversational ritual which is being developed below. Indeed, at the period of the recording, F2 and M2 are listening to a band whose singer is red-headed, a band which F1 and M1 do not really like. So, this musical taste is a real topic of mockery between them and here, they will use it to extrapolate around until the creation (first implicitly (106), and then explicitly (115)) of a relation of cause and effect which exists between this taste and the future baby's eventual hair.

So, in lines 115 to 128, they are explaining that if the baby will have red hair, the reason will be because of the number of albums that the future parents have bought: (*"he is predestined M2"* (121)). Here, all of the participants are creating a joint fantasy (in Kotthoff's sense) around this topic, a fantasy based on real facts, but which is totally absurd and impossible. As they know this, they can easily switch into a non bona fide communication; they can laugh a lot, and even concerning F2 and M2, laugh at them.

Until this point, the participants have created a humorous sequence based on shared knowledge with a true starting point: F2 is effectively pregnant and the parents like the band "Simply Red". On the basis of this truth, they begin to co-construct a humorous sequence, one-upping each purpose until the production of false conclusions, or more exactly, of a local conclusion following a local logic occurs.

From line 129, exactly the same local logic is used (relation of cause and effect between a singer and his influence on the future baby's look), but considering the new singer that they speak about, they switch into a black humor sequence.

Indeed, in line 129, F1 infers what would have happened to the baby if their parents had liked Ray Charles –i.e. the baby would have been black and blind–. But she only infers it and never says it. One of the possible reasons is the fact that she starts a black humor sequence whose target is the future baby of her own sister. Using an inference here is a kind of face work strategy. The inference is actualized and the relation of cause and effect is explicated by F2 herself in 133 (*"(laughter) (laughing) he was heading for trouble hum*

(*laughter*) + *black and blind my god*”), the only person with her boyfriend who is authorized to do so. Only at that moment, F1 can also make explicit the implicature, as the overlap shows it (134).

From this moment, the participants will create a joint fantasy based on a system of one-upmanship whose goal is always going further. Further in the humor and, as it is black humor, further in the horror.

The necessary distance between the participants and their utterance is shown by three elements: first, by the enormity of the words produced (it is just impossible to believe they really think what they are saying), second, by the laughter which punctuates each utterance. Finally, the humor is also produced by the hierarchy the participants are establishing. Indeed, they are creating a world where it is more serious to be black than blind (137). Here the joint fantasy is created both by saying absurd and indecent things, and by creating a counter discourse which could have been produced by racist people. In such a case, we can say that they are producing a kind of ironic humor; a sort of sarcastic one whose target is not really the future baby, but people who really think such things in the real world.

From line 137 to 142, they all say the same thing, just to show the complicity that they share and their agreement.

In line 143, a new boundary is crossed when the blindness (a handicap in real life) is presented as an *advantage* by hiding the worst possible defect: the fact of being black. The mechanism of the local logic is obvious: it is effectively clear that blindness prevents one from knowing the colour of one's own skin, particularly if nobody reveals this defect (144). But of course, even if that logic is presented as real (*that's true we don't have to tell him*), it is only a pretence of logic developed not by the speakers themselves but by other voices they are staging for fun.

Until this line, the humorous sequence has two different targets: one obvious but false target (the baby), and one, more indirect and hidden but real target (racist people). In terms of double voicing, we probably could say that the first, false, funny target (the baby) is

created by the speakers and the second one, more hidden but real one, is created by the sarcastic voices they use.

From line 145 to 149, still using the local logic consisting of an system of one-upmanship on what was just said, the speakers come back to Ray Charles explaining that, maybe, he himself, does not know that he is black (still “thanks” to his blindness). The participants here are still developing the logic according to the notion that by being blind, one could avoid knowing the color of his or her skin.

During all this time, the frequency of laughter and the repetition (or echo) of the same terms (like “maybe”) show that all the participants agree with the world they are creating.

From line 150 to 158, the new factitious and funny target is R. Charles himself. According to the principle that blindness prevents one from knowing about skin or hair color, the participants imagine a world where the singer thinks he is red headed (*maybe he thinks he's red*). This utterance by M1 is really important for the construction of the humorous sequence. Indeed, even if all the speakers are creating an absurd world where serious logic does not have any place, the coherence of the absurd logic is completely respected. The humorous sequence begins with a potential red headed baby, who would have become black if his parents had liked to listen to Ray Charles. This singer presents, for them, an opportunity to introduce blindness as a new topic, which is ultimately associated with the red hair colour: they have come full circle.

Until that point, the humor produced is indeed, more absurd because they imagine R. Charles with red hair, but it is still black humor because the speakers are laughing at a handicap and consider it a “drama” to be red headed and/or black. Typically here, we have an inversion of values and to a game of moral values.

Until line 158, the unity of the humorous sequence is maintained, thanks to several elements: the speakers are laughing together; they co-construct a funny and unrealistic story based both on absurd (but coherent in some cases) arguments and on shared knowledge; and above all, they feel authorized to produce such utterances because they know

themselves very well and they know they do not think for one second about what they are saying. Here, their complicity and the use of the double voicing is a guarantee of the functioning and recognition of humor *as such*.

This first part of the excerpt is clearly a co-construction of a humorous sequence by the different participants. M2 is not really active and does not speak a lot, but at any point, he avoids the development of the sequence. One can say that he is probably embarrassed by this kind of humor, but not enough to stop it. As was said already, one of the reasons is because of the close relationship between the participants which allows him to know that all that is said is just for fun. He knows that the speakers themselves are not really responsible for their discourse; the responsibility is attributed to other voices. The other reason is a pragmatic one. Indeed, construing together a humorous sequence based on shared knowledge reinforces the already close relationship between the participants, maintains the cohesion of the group and consequently, the conviviality of the conversation. In such a case, not to participate or worse, to *refuse* to participate in the development of the sequence would endanger the cohesion of the group and, for M2, risk being excluded from the interaction.

From lines 153 to 173, a kind of transition in the sequence is present. In the first part, even if all the participants were less active, at least they did not realize that M2 was set back. From line 153, F2 realizes it and asks M2 if he feels good. Once again, M2 does not answer; this is a way for him not to interrupt the sequence. But at the same time, F2's utterance is very important, both for the continuation of the humorous sequence and as a face work activity. The fact that she does not take into account M2's silence shows that she probably wants both to go on in a humorous way (what she will do), and to manage M2's face. With this activity done, she can (with a clear conscience) go on participating in the humorous sequence.

Then, until line 173, the three participants (but not M2) will make a joint fantasy against red headed people, still following the same local logic and system of one-upmanship.

The lines 174-175 are a new transition. The first part of F2's utterance is a humorous intervention to the previous one. But the second part is, once again, a way for F2 to take into account and, in a certain way, to officialize M2's silence. She probably wants to manage his face. But this utterance does not work because, if it is true that F1 and M1 are taking into account M2's attitude, it is not to manage him and to stop the sequence, but to *laugh at him*. Thus, the sequence takes another shape: it is still humorous but it has two major differences. First, the target has changed and now it is not the future baby or red headed people; it is M2 himself. From participant, he becomes a victim of the humorous sequence. Secondly, the cohesion of the group has exploded, and the group is now divided into two parts: F1, M1, and F2 against only one person, M2: a coalition is born and will be effective until the last utterance, when M2 will explicitly accuse F2 of double dealing (192).

#### 4.2.3. M2's attitude

In order to show the paradoxical side of both humor and conversation, when the question is to preserve the conviviality and humor of an interaction using black humor, I will now focus on the analysis of this same sequence with respect to M2's attitude.

This sequence, like many conversations, is very cooperative. Each speaker participates in the construction of the humorous sequence, alternately bringing some new elements by the use of a system of one-upmanship. Each participant laughs about what anyone says, thus guaranteeing the success of the previous utterance. All are equal, becoming alternatively speaker and hearer. They participate in the creation of a euphoric mood. Nevertheless, two problems will appear gradually.

Thus, with the passing sequence, M2 will be more and more silent and will dissociate himself from the rest of the group. From this point of view, we can divide the sequence into two parts. The first part goes from line 80 to line 129. The humor created is quite friendly, “traditional” and not very aggressive. The participants content themselves with imagining the future baby in several situations. On the other hand, since line 130, with the system of one-upmanship, the participants fall into black humor. At that point, M2 begins to be more and more silent. Why? Maybe the reason is the fact that he feels directly concerned about the baby? But this reason is not valid because F2 is also very concerned as the future mother. Maybe he does not like black humor? This is a possibility that one cannot verify. Maybe finally, he is the one who cannot distance himself from the topic that they are laughing at, even if all the situations they imagine are fictional, necessarily so. Trying to answer these questions would carry an interpretation which would be incompatible with a linguistic description. Consequently, I will content myself to show the consequences that such a set back attitude from the conversation has on the interaction itself and on the development of the humorous sequence.

From line 130, the sequence continues with only three persons: F1, M1 and F2. At the beginning, they do not seem to be embarrassed by this situation, and they go on developing humor in the same mode, intensifying even the black side of the humor produced. The pragmatic reason for such behavior is probably the fact that three people are enough to develop a sequence. The interaction is not endangered. Another probable reason is the fact that humor is often more delightful when someone is embarrassed by it (according to the fact that one of a humorist’s pleasures is to flirt with limits and above all, with moral and social limits).

They are not embarrassed but, gradually, F2 becomes more and more embarrassed. Many reasons can explain this. A personal reason is probably the fact that she is M2’s girlfriend and maybe she does not want to hurt him too much. But if this reason is right, she is thus confronted with another problem, a kind of “double bind” (Bateson, 1956) due to the nature of the interaction. Indeed, how can she stop the sequence or at least, the topic, without endangering the convivial and cooperative side of the interaction? It is quite impossible

because if F2 decides to quit the sequence, she risks interrupting it because of a shortage of participants. On the other hand, how can she quit without giving the impression to the others that she is abandoning the game? This question addresses the problem of the competitive aspect of a humorous sequence based on a system of one-upmanship. It is a kind of competition where the participants have to find, at each speech turn, something new to say, something more and more humorous, funny, or absurd... The participants are then caught up in a spiral where they do not have any other choice except one-upping. For F2, the problem is the following: if she gives up the sequence, she manages M2's face but she threatens both her own face and the continuation of the sequence. If she decides to stay with the topic, she threatens M2's face. She is thus in a kind of double bind and the only way she has to get out of it is using F1 and M1.

I have already said that twice, F2 directly hails M2 to ask about his feelings. This is probably a strategy to show F1 and M1 that M2 is beginning to quit the group. The first time, she fails because instead of helping him, she transforms him into a target of the humorous sequence. But the second time, even if M2 is not fooled (192), the topic which embarrassed him is permanently forgiven. The strategy used was a good one because she succeeded in giving the responsibility of the end of the sequence to F1 and M1 (188), and in showing her solidarity (albeit late) to her boyfriend. And above all, she manages to quit the sequence without giving the impression that she lost the battle of wits.

## 5. Synthesis

Analyzing this humorous sequence according to two different points of view (the co-construction itself and M2's behavior) is interesting in many ways.

### 5.1. *The co-construction of humor*

At first, despite the obvious absurdity of the discourse, its incongruity and its illogical side (the qualifiers do not miss...), the sequence shows a *high coherence*. This coherence is due

both to the constant respect of the local logic of humor and to the system of one-upmanship consisting of reacting systematically to the previous word and / or utterance.

Then, this co-construction activity shows two aspects of the connivance between the participants. On the one hand, this connivance is a *sine qua non* condition, pre-required for the right functioning of such a sequence and such an activity. Indeed, the participants have to share a common cognitive and affective system of reference to be able to laugh about the same things, and above all, to be able to make some idea associations with the other's ideas. On the other hand, the connivance is also a consequence of the co-construction activity.

### 5.2. *M2's behavior*

Even if the analysis of a humorous co-construction reveals the connivance existing between the participants and the necessary conviviality of such a sequence, focusing the analysis on M2's behavior shows the high paradoxical side of humor (at least conversational humor) and moreover, of familiar conversation. Indeed, if construing together a humorous sequence is a real carrier of conviviality and, consequently, of cooperation, then this activity is also a kind of *yoke* from which participants cannot go out without difficulties because of several reasons that we have shown: pragmatic constraints, face work and above all, the speakers' own self-projected images when it comes time to quit a competition.

This last point gives of conversational humor and maybe of conversation a paradoxical image. They are indeed phenomena which are both cooperative *and* competitive, and this paradox sometimes creates a sort of double bind for the participants; a situation always difficult to deal with.

Of course, I am aware of the fact that such a conclusion is largely dependent on the nature of my data and the key of the humor described. It will be worthwhile for it to be developed

and verified with a larger corpus and probably, with some sequences containing any black humor.

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### **Data**

*F2 is pregnant. At one moment, she feels her baby moving in her body. The conversation switches into the future baby.*

80 **F2:** he is moving  
81 **M1:** (*laughter*)  
82 **F2:** it's VErY unpleasant  
83 **M1:** oh yeah ↑  
84 **F2:** yeah  
85 **F1:** oh yeah  
86 **F2:** it makes some:: ++ bubbles in my stomach  
87 **M2:** goddammit you seem to be delighted while you are saying that we fail to see it's  
88 unpleasant  
89 **F2:** no no it's NOT pleasant I told you already + it's not pleasant  
90 **M1:** <inaudible>  
91 **F1:** <but it must be pleasant?>  
92 **F2:** listen to me I don't think it's pleasant ++ it makes bubbles  
93 **F1:** by the way no  
94 **M2:** you get a kick in the stomach  
95 **M1:** (*laughter*)  
96 **F2:** imaGINE + you / no but here / here to be specific you seem to be in an aquarium you see  
97 ++ frankly it's not pleasant to be an aquarium  
98 **F1:** (*laughter*)  
99 **F2:** (*laughter*) imagine (*she is making many different noises*) (*laughter*) and you you are here  
100 goddam-mit super (*laughter*)  
101 **F1:** maybe he is playing to the small duck  
102 **M1:** yeah=  
103 **F2:** (*laughter*) <she is singing and she is probably making gestures what illustrate what F1 has  
104 just said>  
105 **F1 & F2:** (*laughter*)  
106 **F2:** the blazing::: hairs::: + soaking::: in the liquid::: (*laughter*)  
107 **M2:** do you think he has hairs like surfers now ↑  
108 **The others:** (*laughter*)  
109 **M2:** <inaudible> <imitating the baby at birth> you stressed during nine months but I do be  
110 coo:::l + you want::: some + (he takes back his own voice) we won't agree together you  
111 **F1:** (*laughter*)  
112 **F2:** (*laughter*)  
113 know you go back in ↓ you start again  
114 **F1 & F2:** (*laughter*)  
115 **M2:** you see hum:: a little like simply red singer's style  
116 **The others:** (*laughter*)  
117 **F2:** (*laughing*) imagine  
118 **F1:** (*laughing*) well + with the number of ALBUMS you buy  
119 **F2:** (*laughing*) and more it's true  
120 **F1:** (*laughter*)  
121 **F2:** goddammit it's predestined he is predestined M2  
122 **M1:** oh year  
123 **F2:** we had too much listened to simply red  
124 **M2:** (*singing a band's song*)  
125 **M1:** (*laughter*)  
126 **F2:** (*laughing*) yes you said it  
127 **M1:** (*going on singing*)  
128 <inaudible sequence>  
129 **F1:** (*laughing*) fortunately you don't like ray charles hum (*laughter*)

- 130 **F2:** (*laughing*) what ↑
- 131 **F1:** (*laughter*) (*laughing*) fortunately you don't like ray charles so much
- 132 **M1:** (*laughter*)
- 133 **F2:** (*laughter*) (*laughing*) he was heating for trouble hum (*laughter*) + black and blind my god
- 134 **F1:** black and blind
- 135 (*laughter*)
- 136 (*laughter*) (*laughing*) oh how awful
- 137 **M1:** blind it's not serious but black is//
- 138 **F1&F2:** (*laughter*)
- 139 **M1:** (*laughter*)
- 140 **F2:** oh goddammit
- 141 **M1:** no blind <it's enough yes but?>
- 142 **F2:** no black would be hard hum
- 143 **F1:** well the advantage it's the fact that he won't know he is black
- 144 **F2:** no that's true we don't have to tell him
- 145 **M1:** maybe Ray Charles doesn't know he's black
- 146 **F1&F2:** (*small laughter*)
- 147 **F1:** (*laughing*) maybe
- 148 **M1:** maybe
- 149 **F1:** and how can he know that
- 150 **M1:** maybe he thinks he's red
- 151 **The others:** (*laughter*)
- 152 **M1:** can you imagine the drama + blind and red
- 153 **The others:** (*laughter*)
- 154 **F2:** (*laughing*) what a silly
- 155 **M2:** strange problem
- 156 **M1:** (*laughter*)
- 157 **F2:** (*laughing*) oh god-dammit
- 158 **M1:** (*laughter*)
- 159 **F2:** oh M2 are you okay M2 ↑
- 160 **The others:** <*laughter face to M2 who looks downcast because he doesn't like that one can*
- 161 *laugh at his future baby*>
- 162 **M1:** <ah/it will be?> it's the lesser evil he doesn't know that he is red
- 163 **F1&F2:** (*laughter*)
- 164 **F1:** (*laughing*) but if he doesn't see itself he smels himself
- 165 **F1&F2:** (*laughter*)
- 166 **F2:** (*laughing*) some senses don't fool (*laughter*)
- 167 **M1:** and the smiles too
- 168 **F1&F2:** (*laughter*)
- 169 **M1:** he can hear + (*laughter*) actually the ideal thing would be he was deaf + blind ↑
- 170 **F2:** (*laughter*)
- 171 **F1:** well if he is red hum
- 172 **F2:** (*laughter*)
- 173 **M1:** if he is red ↑ + of course ↓
- 174 **F2:** (*laughing*) otherwise it's no necessary hum I will say well ↓ + no kidding ↑ ++ are you
- 175 okay loulou ↑
- 176 **F1:** (*laughter*)
- 177 **F2:** (*laughter*)
- 178 **M1:** (*laughter*)
- 179 **F2:** (*laughing*) you are going to kill him hum + I do tell you

180 **M1:** (*smiling voice*) goddammit he'll be on a huff when he'll see him and when he'll be red ↑  
 181 **F2:** (*laughter*)  
 182 **F1:** (*laughing*) he'll have a damned fear the delivery day  
 183 **M1:** oh::: goddammit  
 184 **F1:** (*small laughter*)  
 185 **M1:** imagine + the guy who delivers her (*changing his voice*) oh:: the beautiful small red  
 186 goddammit her POUAH (*showing F2*) killing herself laughing (*laughter*) M2 pfu (*laughter*)  
 187 **F1&F2:** (*laughter*)  
 188 **F2:** poo::r guy you don't realize hum after I do go back with him (*laughter*)  
 189 **F1:** (*laughter*)  
 190 **M2:** eh=  
 191 **F2:** (*as she was talking to a child*) honey what do they say hum honey  
 192 **M2:** eh:: you you know you have a finger in every pie

### Conventions of transcription

F/M	Feminin/ masculin and same couple (F1,M1), (F2, M2)
:	Vocalic lengthening. Quantity of : is proportional to the duration
/	Self interruption of the discourse
//	Interruption by another speaker
(+)	Pause. Quantity of + is proportional to the duration
↑	High intonation. After the concerned syllabus
↓	Low intonation. After the concerned syllabus
=	Fast speech. After the concerned word or syllabus
( )	Into brackets: description of behavior (in italic)
<ton moqueur>	Observer's commentary or interpretation
<puisque ? >	Doubts about the interpretation
<avez / aviez ?>	Hesitation between two possible words
< inaudible >	Inaudible word or sequence
NON, BONjour	Increased word or syllabus
pas-du-tout	To speak haltingky

Underlined words : overlaps

**F2** : il bouge

**M1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : c'est HYper désagréable

**M1** : ah ouais↑

**F2** : ouais

**F1** : ah ouais

**F2** : ça fait des::: (++) des bulles dans le ventre

**M2** : putain tu dis ça et t'as l'air ravie on a du mal à le croire que c'est désagréable

**F2** : non non c'est PAS agréable je te

l'avais dit déjà (+) c'est pas agréable

**M1** : <inaudible>

**F1** : <ça doit être agréable pourtant ?>

**F2** : écoute moi je trouve pas ça agréable (++) ça fait des bulles

**F1** : non remarque

**M2** : tu te prends un coup de pied dans le ventre

**M1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : t'imaGINES (+) tu te / non mais là / là en l'occurrence on dirait que t'es un aquarium tu vois (++) franchement c'est pas agréable d'être un aquarium

**F1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : (*rires*) t'imagines (*série de bruits*) (*rires*) et toi t'es là pu-tain super (*rires*)

**F1** : si ça se trouve il est en train de jouer au petit canard là

**M1** : ouais=

**F2** : (*rires*) <elle chantonne avec probablement des gestes illustrant ce que vient de dire F1>

**F1 et F2** : (*rires*)

**F2** : les cheveux:::: flamboy ants:::: (+) qui bai::::gnent dans le liqui::::de (*rires*)

**M2** : tu crois qu'il a les cheveux surfeur là↑

**Les autres** : (*rires*)

**M2** : <inaudible> <imitant le bébé à la naissance> t'as stressé pendant neuf mois moi chuis coo::::l (+) t'en veux:::: (+) (*reprenant sa voix*) on va pas s'entendre tous les deux hein tu rentres↓ tu recommences

**F1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : (*rires*)

**F1 et F2** : (*rires*)

**M2** : tu vois un peu style le chanteur heu:: (++) de Simply Red

**les autres** : (*rires*)

**F2** : (*en riant*) t'imagines

**F1** : (*en riant*) MA FOI (+) avec le nombre de DISQUES que vous achetez

**F2** : (*en riant*) en plus c'est vrai

**F1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : putain c'est prédestiné il est prédestiné M2

**M1** : ah ouais là

**F2** : on a trop écouté Simply Red

**M2** : (*chantonne une chanson du groupe*)

**M1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : (*en riant*) oui c'est le cas de le dire

**M1** : (*continue à chanter*)

<séquence inaudible>

**F1** : (*en riant*) heureusement que vous aimez pas Ray Charles hein (*rires*)

**F2** : (*en riant*) quoi↑

**F1** : (*en riant*) heureusement que vous aimez pas trop Ray Charles

**M1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : (*rires*) (*en riant*) il était mal barré hein (*rires*) (+) noir et aveugle con (*rires*) (*en riant*) oh les boules

**F1** : noir et aveugle (*rires*)

**M1** : aveugle c'est pas grave mais noir c'est //

**F1 et F2** : (*rires*)

**M1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : oh putain

**M1** : non aveugle <ça suffit mais bon ?>

**F2** : non noir on aurait du mal hein

**F1** : bon l'avantage c'est qu'il saura pas qu'il est noir

**F2** : non c'est vrai on est pas obligé de lui dire

**M1** : tant Ray Charles il sait pas qu'il est noir

**F1 et F2** : (*petit rire*)

**F1** : (*en riant*) tant

**M1** : tant

**F1** : et comment il le saurait

**M1** : tant il croit qu'il est roux

**les autres** : (*rires*)

**M1** : t' imagine le drame (+) aveugle et roux

**les autres** : (*rires*)

**F2** : (*en riant*) qu'il est con

**M2** : drôle de problème

**M1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : (*en riant*) oh pu-tain

**M1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : oh M2 ça va M2↑

**les autres** : <*rires devant la mine déconfite de M2 car il n'aime pas qu'on se moque de son futur bébé*>

**M1** : <ah / se sera ?> moindre mal il le sait pas qu'il est roux

**F1 et F2** : (*rires*)

**F1** : (*en riant*) té si i se voit pas i se sent hein

**F1 et F2** : (*rires*)

**F2** : (*en riant*) y a des sens qui ne trompent pas (*rires*)

**M1** : puis les sourires aussi

**F1 et F2** : (*rires*)

**M1** : il entend (+) (*rires*) (++) en fait l'idéal c'est qu'il soit sourd (+) aveugle↑

**F2** : (*rires*)

**F1** : enfin si il est roux hein

**F2** : (*rires*)

**M1** : si il est roux↑ (+) bien sûr↓

**F2** : (*en riant*) sinon c'est pas la peine hein je vais dire bon↓ (+) faut pas déconner↑ (++) ça va loulou↑

**F1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : (*rires*)

**M1** : (*rires*)

**F2** : (*en riant*) vous allez le faire mou::rrir hein (+) je vous le dis moi

**M1** : (*voix souriante*) putain la gueule qu'i va tirer quand il va le voir et qu'il sera roux↑

**F2** : (*rires*)

**F1** : (*en riant*) il va avoir une putain de peur le jour de l'accouchement

**M1** : oh::: putain

**F1** : (*petit rire*)

**M1** : t' imagines (+) le mec qui l'accouche (*changement de voix*) oh:: le joli petit roux putain elle POUAH (*désignant F2*) (*rires*) morte de rire (*rires*) M2 pfu (*rires*)

**F1 et F2** : (*rires*)

**F2** : le pau::vre vous vous rendez pas compte hein après c'est moi qui rentre avec lui (*rires*)

**F1** : (*rires*)

**M2** : èh=

**F2** : (*comme si elle parlait à un enfant*) hein mon kikou:: qu'est-ce i di::sent hein mon kikou

**M2** : eh:: toi tu sais tu manges à tous les râteliers toi