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Self-disparaging humor in conversations: a brief survey of a complex phenomenon usually considered as obvious

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Introduction

Self-disparaging humor is one of the numerous kinds of humor present in conversations. As with humor in general, it can occur anywhere in the conversation, either as a simple word or an anecdote, allowing the speaker to tell a funny story in which he/she has a bad image of him/herself.

In this paper, I will point out the paradoxical aspects of self-disparaging humor concerning both its functions and its potential targets. Indeed, if it is true that self-disparaging humor is usually considered a threat to the speaker's own face; it is also true that it allows him/her to present a good image of him/herself. In the same way, if it is reasonable to think that the target is the speaker, it could be also the hearer, the audience, or an absent tierce person.

After having presented the necessary problem of defining this phenomenon, I will analyze some examples revealing that the target of self-disparaging humor is fuzzier than we think. Attempting to discriminate between the various targets of self-disparaging humor will pose several questions: when other targets can be identified, do these targets come in addition to the speaker? If yes, is the speaker the real target or is he/she just a kind of "screen"? And on another hand, when the speaker is clearly identified as the target, does he/she always laugh at him/herself or at just a (false) image of him/herself? I will try to answer these questions taking into account the audience's reaction. This study is based on audiotaped conversations among four, six and seven close participants. All are friends or members of a single family.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. General presentation

The analysis I am going to make 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. I will also discuss the Bakhtin's "dialogic" theory (1929) thanks to which one can consider humor as – at least – a kind of double voicing (in Bakhtin's sense).

1.2. The data

1.2.1. 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 that any conversation would not have any face work at stake.
- An "*inward goal, centered on contact*" (Vion 1992), the maintenance of the relationship, the cohesion of the group where the only 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, 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 Sacks et al. (1974) showed, in a conversation, no explicit rules exist concerning the order of speech turns, or their duration: all of that being determined 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 my corpus are familiar conversations between people who know each other very well. As V. Traverso says (1996), 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.

1.2.2. Presentation of the corpus used

The corpus consists 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 being recorded, they did not know the reason why. Except during the first minutes, when some participants were asking about 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.

1.3. Question of methodology

1.3.1. Humor as a generic term

My study is carried out in the linguistic field of pragmatics, 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, jokes; 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 ranking among humorous enunciations nor even to attempt to classify them according to their types. This is the reason why I shall adopt the term “humor” as a generic term even if, sometimes, the occurrences found will be probably closer to sarcasm, irony or teasing¹.

1.3.2. 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 only extricate a humorous utterance.

2. The question of the definition of self-disparaging humor (SDH)

Maybe because the meaning of “self-disparaging humor” seems obvious (to laugh at oneself), studies on this phenomenon are rare. I have not found any book or article entirely devoted to it. The few times SDH is broached, is always in the course of another topic more general (humor, Jewish humor, ethnic humor...). In every case, the question of its definition is evaded and SDH is broached either to point out its various potential targets or to give an illustration of a specific form of humor. In these cases, most of the time, it is its functions that are pointed out.

2.1. Problem of terminology

Insofar as SDH might be considered as a specific form of humor, it belongs to the woolly field of humor and so shares the same vagueness in terms of terminology. Reading the few existing texts about this phenomenon, one can find self-disparaging, self-disparagement, self-mockery, self-ridicule, self-irony... The aim of this paper is neither to try to make a difference between all these different words nor to choose which one is the most representative one. Consequently, I will use SDH as a generic term even if some occurrences I will analyze will have an aggressive aspect.

Another problem makes difficult any attempt of definition: the fact that, sometimes, the characteristics usually attributed to humor allow defining SDH. In this way, Noguez (2000) calls SDH, the “yellow humor”² to differentiate this phenomenon with, among others, black humor, or “red humor” (irony). More generally, – at least in France – someone has a “sense of humor” only if his/she is able to laugh at him/herself.

Insofar as humor and SDH belong to the same field, it seems normal to be confronted with a problem of definition in both cases. But the difference is the reason of this problem. In the case of humor, every researcher agrees that a definition is impossible because of the complexity of the phenomenon. The case of SDH is the contrary: its definition seems to be so obvious that it seems to be unnecessary to give one.

2.2. The various functions of SDH

Generally speaking, SDH increases a speaker’s self-image. Indeed, the speaker gives the impression not to care about his/her own face, of being aware of his/her own defects (Zajdman 1995). This same author also points out the ambiguity of the speaker’s intention, because the audience is thus unable to know what the speaker really thinks³. She also evokes the pragmatic function of SDH in interaction that is close to the question of the speaker’s intention. Indeed, SDH is a discursive activity particularly efficient to pull the rug from under the audience’s feet: in such a case, SDH allows the speaker to mock him/herself before being mocked by the others. For conversational analysis, this aspect of SDH is very important because it reveals the aggressiveness of such a phenomenon and above all, it reveals the notion of participants’ face (Goffman 1974) as an issue of interaction.

We can find the same kind of arguments in Ziv (1987) for whom SDH can be considered in two different and opposite ways: a form of masochism (to deliberately stage oneself in a bad or depreciated image, revealing one’s own defects), or on the contrary, SDH might be a demonstration of one’s own strength. As an illustration of this idea, he quotes L. Weiss who says about Jewish humor: “Look how strong I am. I can even show that I am

weak.” (Weiss 1952; quoted in Ziv 1987). The essence of SDH is in this single phrase: a discursive activity increasing one’s own standing by doing (apparently) the contrary. This paradox can refer to the speaker’s intention pointed out by Zajdman and, in a pragmatic meaning, asks the question of the real nature of the “said” and, by rebound, the question of the more appropriate audience’s answer.

In a more psychological view, Ziv considers SDH an activity allowing the humorist facing his/her own fears and weakness. In that sense, Ziv is very close to the Freudian theory of humor in general as a “triumph of the narcissism” (Freud 1927): laughing at one’s own weakness and fear is a way to put them at distance, a way to face them instead of being overwhelmed by them. Moreover, the Freudian theory is particularly efficient for black humor and one of his famous examples is typical black humor: “a man under sentence of death exclaims on the gallows: ‘this week begins in a bad way!’”⁴ (Freud 1927)

2.3. *The question of the target of SDH*

This question is of course central in the present study and various researchers had already pointed out some particularities. Indeed, if it seems obvious that the target is the speaker him/herself (from which one can speak about SDH), Stora Sandor (1992) shows in her work that this target is not so obvious. She justifies such an affirmation setting her study in a more general frame, “the minority humor,” i.e. Jewish humor and feminine humor. Consequently, she considers SDH as a kind of “process of victimization.” In such a case, to laugh at oneself is nothing more, by rebound that laugh also at the others, the real responsible party of such a victimization (the men for the women for instance):

J’ai pensé et pense encore que l’auto-ironie, telle qu’elle est pratiquée par les Juifs, ne vise pas seulement la victime de l’ironie, mais atteint aussi, par ricochet, le monde qui l’entoure. En se posant comme victime, et ceci est particulièrement vrai pour l’humour féminin, la société, responsable de cette ‘victimisation’, se trouve également mise en cause. (Stora Sandor 1992 : 179).⁵

If for the author the target is clearly identified, it is just enlarged: the speaker *plus* others.

Lefort (1999) asks too the question of the target and, contrary to Stora Sandor, the target according to him is fuzzier and not at all obvious. One of the reasons of this claim is probably the fact that he studied humorous stories, i.e. stories necessarily staging a speaker and a narrator. In such a case, who is really “I” in this kind of story? The speaker or the character he/she is staging? Consequently, when one says that SDH is to laugh at oneself, the problem according Lefort is to identify this “oneself”:

Lors d’une recherche réalisée avec Maurice Riguet (1992), nous nous sommes heurtés à un double problème: la rareté des histoires que nous pouvions considérer a priori comme faisant appel à de l’autodérision et, en même temps, la difficulté à rendre opérationnelle la notion même d’autodérision. En clair, si l’autodérision consiste à rire de soi, la difficulté vient du fait que le pronom ‘soi’ se rapporte à une personne indéterminée : ‘soi’ peut être n’importe qui. Une manière de procéder peut consister à privilégier le texte et à considérer qu’il y a autodérision lorsque le sujet modal, celui qui énonce les propos, vise une cible qui n’est autre que lui-même. Mais ce sujet, dans une histoire, est généralement indéterminé [...]. (1999 : 118-119).⁶

In this study, the last example will have this shape and we will see that the target is indeed fuzzy.

3. Discursive approach of SDH

3.1. *Enunciative approach of SDH*

What I call by “enunciative approach” (Priego-Valverde 2003), which is a European term, refers to the “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 et al. 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).

3.1.1. *Humor as a double voicing*

Considering humor as a double voicing does not supplant the current theories of humor. It just completes them. If we consider for instance the most widely used and accepted theory according to which it is the contrast, the opposition between two meanings, two scripts, or two incompatible elements which creates the humorous incongruity, the double voicing theory allows to attribute a kind of “responsibility” to 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. Thus:

- Using other voice (s), 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 nothing more than 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.

3.1.2. *SDH as a double voicing*

The problem of the fuzziness of the target pointed out by Lefort in humorous stories is very close from my own concern and prefigures the questions I have already asked about the potential targets of SDH (Priego-Valverde 2002). Indeed, if we agree with the idea that humor is a kind of double voicing which allows the speaker both staging other voices to say things he/she does not think and presenting false and funny images of him/her, the question is thus to know if we have the same process in SDH. On a one hand, I would be tempted to answer yes in accordance with the fact that SDH is a sort of humor, so, there is no reason to have a different functioning. Within this logic, when a speaker produces SDH, he/she stages different voices to switch into a non bona fide communication, to point out to the audience that was

he/she is saying is not necessarily true. And above all, he/she points out the fact that the person he/she is mocking is not him/herself but a false and fictitious person. Linking the different voices a speaker can stage with the image of him/her he/she presents to the others reveals the biggest problem of considering SDH as a double voicing. Indeed, if the speaker stages a fictitious part of him/herself, one cannot consider that he/she produces SDH but just humor whose target would be a fictitious character that would not exist in the real world. In such a case, does SDH still exist? Another problem is the fact that, even if we consider that the speaker is staging someone else, how can one know that, after all, he/she does not laugh at him/her as well?

These two questions are difficult to answer: the latter, because it asks the speaker's intention which is impossible to know, even for an observer-participant, and the former, because one cannot reasonably think that SDH does not exist.

To attempt to solve this kind of problem, various adjustments have to be made to the double voicing theory. First, even if a link exists between the various voices staged by the speaker and the image he/she gives of him/herself, one cannot follow this logic to its end and consider that the speaker (as a person) does not exist. A part of him/her is still necessarily present, even if it is difficult to evaluate the size of this part. In other words, if it is true that double voicing allows revealing the heterogeneity of the speaker, one cannot reasonably go to its complete negation. Consequently, even if the speaker produces SDH staging a false image of him/herself, he/she has, in a certain way, chosen to do this and it is thus reasonable to think that this choice is based on a certain reality (even if this reality exists only at the time of the interaction, e.g. when SDH is used to answer someone else's attack). The second adjustment is to mix the double voicing theory with a pragmatic one as we will see below.

In other words, if I assume the double voicing as a characteristic of humor and, consequently, of SDH because it allows one explanation the existence of different scripts simultaneously existing, I refuse to follow its logic to its end which can carry a complete negation of the subject as such and, at the same time, a negation of SDH itself. Thus, if humor and SDH allow the creation of other fictitious voices and images, a part of the speaker still exists (even if it is a small one) and in that case, SDH is and stays a concrete phenomenon.

3.2. Pragmatic approach to SDH

A pragmatic analysis of SDH in interaction, and of humor in general, reveals, like the previous studies, the paradoxical side of this phenomenon; I mean both an attack and a defense, depending on the point of view we use to study this phenomenon. On the level of its interactive functions, as Zajdman has shown already, producing a SDH often allows the speaker to prevent someone else's attack. This fact reveals both the competitive side of a humorous interaction and above all, of friendly conversations where producing humor is often a matter for a kind of battle of wits leading the speaker to be humorous before the others. In such a case, the goal for the speakers is to say, to make a joke, to laugh at someone before being laughed at. And for that, all the ways to do so seem to be good, even self-disparaging humor. Consequently, - in this case at least - one can reasonably question the identity of the target as the speaker him/herself.

But on the level of the "said," the "apparent said," self-disparaging is an FTA (Brown and Levinson 1987; Goffman 1973), for the speaker him/herself, at least when the participants are in a bona fide communication. In such a situation, when a speaker threatens his/her own face, the hearer generally has to refuse the FTA and comfort the speaker. Here again, it is a question of face work. But with SDH, the situation is quite different. Even if, apparently, it is the same phenomenon (an FTA), it is not a real FTA as soon as the participants have switched into a non bona fide communication. This FTA might only be

apparent because it was produced just for fun (in these conditions, who knows whether the utterance is true, false, or both?), or because the speaker is not laughing at him/her but at someone who he/she invents (partly by exaggerating one defect or aspect or by creating a false image of him/herself), because the speaker is laughing, by ricochet, at someone else, maybe the hearer, if we may consider humor (or SDH) as a kind of indirect communication.

In a previous study (Priego-Valverde 2004), I showed that the most frequent reaction to SDH was laughter. One of the reasons of such a frequency is the probable audience's embarrassment facing this sort of humor. Pragmatically meaning, SDH leads the audience to a kind of "double bind"⁷ (Bateson et al. 1956), "a situation in which no matter what a person does, he can't win" (1956: 251). Indeed, I have shown that when a speaker produces SDH, he/she was threatening his/her own face but *jokingly*. Insofar as, on the one hand, what he/she says is ambiguous (maybe true, maybe not, maybe both) and on the other hand, he/she even so produces humor, he/she is probably waiting for a positive reaction by the audience. This is the reason why SDH leads a double bind. What is a positive or a negative reaction facing humor? Does the hearer have to answer the said or the tonality i.e. the humorous mode? Indeed, when the hearer hears a SDH, what are the different possible reactions? If he/she accepts the SDH (e.g. by one-upping the speaker), he/she risks causing the speaker to believe that he/she agrees with the SDH, with the said. Consequently, he/she threatens the speaker's face. But on the other hand, if he/she reacts to SDH in a negative way (e.g. showing that he/she does not share the bad opinion the speaker has of him/her), he/she still threatens the speaker's face because humor is refused. And if he/she answers in a serious way (e.g. comforting the speaker), the hearer loses his/her own face because the hearer didn't perceive humor and he/she is face to a failed humor. In other words, reacting too positively to SDH is an FTA because the hearer can make believe he/she agrees with the self disparagement. But reacting negatively is also an FTA: for the speaker, because it may lead to a failure of humor; for the hearer him/herself, because it can cause the speaker to believe that he/she didn't perceive and/or understand humor.

In order to center again the analysis of the SDH around the question of its target(s), I will analyze and use the audience's reactions to SDH assuming the hypothesis according to which if the hearer(s) feel(s) a double bind, the reason is probably because at least one of the potential targets of SDH is perceived – rightly or wrongly – as being the speaker him/herself. In other words, analyzing pragmatically the hearer(s)' reactions to SDH is a way to attempt to discriminate the various targets and to decide if the observer is facing SDH or not.

4. Analysis of the data

I will describe some examples of SDH in order to show the various forms this kind of humor can take and to attempt to discriminate the various possible targets SDH can have. Every time it will be possible, I will take into account the hearer(s)' reaction(s)⁸.

4.1 The target is the speaker

Excerpt 1

This example is the only one that is not recorded. The person who reported this phrase to me is the speaker's brother.

“Je te ferais bien faire le slow mais je suis à plat”

“I would love to slow dance with you but I'm run down”

Apparently, this utterance is not humorous at all. A man is declining to dance with his girlfriend. But if we reconstruct the context, the status of the utterance changes. Indeed, this phrase was produced during one New Year's Eve Party. Many people are dancing and this man and his girlfriend are watching them. The atmosphere of the party is probably merry. Knowing that the speaker is paraplegic and seated in a wheelchair for more than 20 years (he is about 45 at the moment of the data), the mood of the utterance is changing: from pointed, it becomes tragic. So, with this sort of phrase, the analyst is faced with various modes of communication. The first is pointed, reconstructing part of the context, the second is tragic and finally, taking into account both the context and the words produced, the utterance finally becomes humorous. Indeed – at least in French – the expression “être à plat” has two different meanings. In a figurative sense, it means that the speaker is tired and this is the reason why the utterance can be considered as stingy. But contextually and in a literal sense, it means that the tires of the wheelchair are flat. This utterance is the perfect example of a humorous incongruity based on the Koestler's “bisociation” (1964) or on the opposition of two different scripts (Raskin 1985). The first meaning is serious, coherent, and logical, so it is expected whereas the second is surprising, but not expected – even if it is plausible – because of the topic it focuses on. On the one hand, actualizing the second meaning without completely invalidating the first one creates the bisociation and then, the humorous incongruity. On the second hand, focusing on the wheelchair allows the speaker to focus on his own condition, on his handicap. Thanks to the wordplay, the speaker can focus on his handicap without any complaint. Here the function of the SDH is clearly the same described by Weiss and Freud: increase his/her own weakness to be stronger than it, not to be submerged by it.

This example is probably the only one I have in my data where the target can be clearly identified: the speaker himself and beyond, his own handicap. The only reaction I have is not the hearer's reaction directly (the speaker's girlfriend) but the audience's reaction (the speaker's brother, a few days later). The reaction was double: laughter and admiration, which show the two functions of SDH: invoke laughter and increase one's standing.

Excerpt 2:

F2 : ben (+) i paraît que les chiens qui bavent (+) c'est parce que::: tu leur en / donne à bouffer heu:: (+) entre les repas tu vois (+) tu les habitues quand tu bouffes à leur filer des trucs (+) alors ça accentue la bave (+) et si tu les:: habitues pas (+) i bavent pas (+) alors c'est sûr que si i fait ça et qu'ien a partout //

M2 : ah c'est pour ça que:::

M1 : c'est pour ça que tu baves M2

M2 : c'est pour ça que tu veux plus que je bouffe entre les repas

(rires de tout le monde)

M2 : je bave trop (rires + rires des autres)

F1 : parce que quand tu <inaudible> tu baves: (rires + rires des autres)

F2 : oh: qu'i sont beaux:::

The participants are watching a documentary on the television about dogs. F2, who really loves this kind of dogs, knows a lot about them. She is so explaining to the others why they drool a lot.

109 **F2**: well apparently the dogs which drool it's because you give them food between meals you
110 see you accustom them when you are eating to giving them stuff so it increases the drool and

111 if you don't accustom them they don't drool so for sure if he is doing that and there is drool
 112 every where//
 113 **M2:** ah that's the reason why::
 114 **M1:** that's the reason why you drool M2
 115 **M2:** that's the reason why you don't want me anymore to eat between the meals
 116 (*Everybody is laughing*)
 117 **M2:** I drool too much (laugh+ others laugh)
 118 **F1:** because when you (inaudible) you drool (laugh+ others laugh)
 119 **F2:** oh so beautiful they are:::::

This scene takes place in a small apartment in a ski resort during winter holidays. Even if all the participants are not speaking here, there are six and all are watching the same documentary. As in quite every small group, each person has a kind of image and role to play. F2 – because she is studying pharmacy – is the person who knows everything about the flora and fauna; M2 (her boyfriend), is the scapegoat of the group, largely because of his weight, which is too heavy. Such a situation (the documentary about dogs and their meals and the particular status of M2) is propitious to a kind of battle of wits between the participants. As the overlaps show, M1 and M2 interrupt F2 to make a joke. M2, the person who is directly concerned, tries to say something, probably related to the documentary but applied to him (“that’s the reason why” 113). Even if, at that time, it is impossible for the observer to know the end of his utterance, we can reasonably imagine that it would have been a humorous incongruity based on the comparison and the opposition of two scripts, an animal one and a human one. Unfortunately for M2, he takes too much time to speak (“::”) and M1 takes advantage of this situation to tease M2 (“that’s the reason why you drool M2” 114). Nobody seems to react to this utterance and, at that time, M2 can at least say what he probably would have wanted to say until the beginning (“that’s the reason why you don’t want me to eat anymore between the meals” 115). If the content of the two utterances are ostensibly the same, the reactions differ. The reasons may be various. M1’s utterance tonality is very aggressive, maybe too much. Nevertheless, I don’t think it is the reason because many studies on conversations have already shown that humor can be very aggressive and still funny. In such circumstances, it is more probable that it is not the aggressiveness *per se* of the utterance that might stop any reaction, but two other reasons. First, the fact that this aggressiveness is not justified by any plausibility (Attardo 1994) – nobody can reasonably think that M2 is drooling. Second, there is a pragmatic reason. M1 interrupts M2 and maybe his utterance is considered by the others as parasitic. The sanction is thus immediate: no reaction.

We can say that two reasons explain the presence or absence of reaction to the two humorous utterances: the tonality and a pragmatic reason. We can now add two other reasons. The first one deals with the functioning of humor itself and more precisely, of the perception of humor. As Koestler (1964) has already shown (and many other researchers after him), humor needs a cognitive effort by the hearer to be decoded. And the more the effort is big, the more humor is funny. M1’s utterance has nothing to do with such a cognitive process. Worse, the shortcut he takes to compare the dogs to M2 is so big that, as we have already said, his phrase is not even plausible. On the other hand, M2’s utterance is closer to the humorous mechanism described by Attardo (1994). Saying that F2 does not want M2 to eat between the meals obliges the hearers, by backtracking, to create a relation of cause and effect between this banning and the supposed (and only supposed) drool of M2. Thus, the humoristic mechanism of this utterance appears on two levels: the opposition of two scripts (human and animal) and the unsaid but deductible relation of cause and effect.

Last but not least, if M2’s utterance obtains some laughs, it is also – and maybe above all – because it is SDH. Indeed, M2 himself implicates that he is dribbling. And even though

his implicature is false, the act of giving it to the hearer to be decoded makes it humorous because it is surprising. Actually, the self-disparagement side of this utterance appears on two levels. The first one is the previous implicature, and the second is an allusion to his weight. M2 is the fattest of the group, he eats a lot and his weight is a usual topic of mockery in the group. In other words, saying such an utterance is not a manner to represent him drooling, but increasing his weight.

The strategy used by M2 to make SDH is very interesting. Beyond the fact that he forces the hearer to make an effort of comprehension, he also attacks his own girlfriend, accusing her to of being strict about what he can eat or not. One can consider that the target of his humor is F2 (because it is probably right that she controls what he eats), but finally, the real target is himself and only himself. Whether he makes a false implicature or he makes an allusion to his weight, in both cases, M2 is laughing at himself, staging a bad image of himself. The first implicature is present only to allow him to laugh at his own weight in an indirect and exaggerated way.

The next part of the excerpt is interesting and shows the issues of humor in conversation and, within that, the interactional advantages of SDH. Indeed, if M1 and M2's utterances are the same according the content, only M2 obtains some laughs, for all the reasons quoted above. After the common laugh (116), M2 repeats M1's utterance and receives again some laughs M2 did not receive (117). The first reason is maybe the fact that the shortcut used by M1 in his first intervention has been developed by M2 and consequently, the utterance became plausible. The second reason is probably the fact that even if M2's utterance is nothing more than an echo of M1's one (his own laugh is maybe a cue of that), it became SDH, so a funnier and less aggressive utterance than M1's phrase. But less aggressive does not mean not aggressive at all. That can explain the hearers' reactions. Indeed, line 118, if F1 is the only one who participates in this humorous sequence and this humorous fight, she only repeats what the two men have already said. She does not one-up the speakers. She stays neutral and she contents herself with laughing as she wanted to show she appreciates the humor said without giving any opinion about the content itself. This neutral attitude (that we will see again in other examples) seems to be a characteristic reaction to SDH: react without reacting. React, because it is quite pragmatically impossible not to say or do something after any utterance. A hearer has, at least, to take his/her speech turn and, in the case of humor, he/she has to react in one way or another to not threaten the speaker's face. Laughter here, allows F1 to react in a positive way (she shows that she appreciated and understood humor) without giving any personal opinion about the content itself. She allows the interaction to go on and she preserves the faces of those in attendance. Plus, mixing in her own phrase, M1 and M2's utterances, she does not designate any winner of this humorous "fight."

In line 119, the humorous sequence is abandoned by F2 who is commenting on the documentary.

Excerpt 3

F1 : non mais c'est ta **simplicité** d'esprit

M2 : t'iés simple

les autres : (*rires*)

M1 : (*il chante*) on m'appelle:: simplet l'innocent du village:: (*rires*)

les autres : (*rires*)

M2 : (*rires*) oh fan

F1 : oh:: là là::↑

In this excerpt, the participants are speaking about their personalities and trying to define themselves. As they constitute two couples, they have to say what they like about their boy/girlfriend. F1 is saying that what she likes about M1 is the fact that he is not snobbish.

- 385 **F1:** no but it is your simple side
386 **M2:** you're simple-minded
387 **The others:** (*laugh*)
388 **M1:** (*singing*) **ones call me simple-minded the village singleton::** (*laugh*)
389 **The others:** (*laugh*)
390 **M2:** (*laugh*) oh god
391 **F1:** oh dear:::

The humorous side of this sequence really begins with the line 386. Before that, the four participants are speaking in a serious mode about the personality of each of them. The problem for F1 (who is speaking at the beginning of the excerpt), is the fact that in French “simplicité” has two meanings. The first one, used in a serious mode of communication (and by the way, it is probably what she wants to do) is “non snobbish.” She is trying to explain to the audience that what she likes about her boyfriend (M1) is the fact that he is a modest person. The second meaning is very different and corresponds to “simple-minded.” Taking advantage of this ambiguity – even false because all the participants cannot reasonably think that F1 has wanted to consider the second meaning – M2, line 386, is pretending to having understood the second meaning. “Simple-minded” is so the “disjuncteur” (Morin 1966) which actualizes the second, unrealistic, illogical, surprising and finally funny meaning of “simple side” which is the “connector” in Greimas’ sense (1966). Using such a disjuncteur to rebound and distort F1’s phrase, M2 creates the typical humorous incongruity based on the opposition of two different scripts (*clever vs stupid*).

At that point in the sequence, we can consider that M2’s humorous intervention has two possible targets (and maybe both). First, M2 is clearly laughing at M1 because he is saying that M1 is simple-minded. But underneath, he is probably mocking F1 as well because she did not use a good word and because she was ambiguous. He attributes to her some intention she probably did not have. This humorous strategy is efficient, and one can say, particularly pernicious because, in case M1 would be vexed, M2 could still say that he was just repeating F1’s words.

Until that point, we can say that we have a common humorous construction (in conversations at least): the speaker says something (usually in a serious way), and something caught by one hearer is distorted and understood in a humorous sense. The interesting phenomenon appears in line 388 when M1 reacts to M2’s humor. One imagines M1 would be vexed (conceivable in an interaction according to the close links between participants); one could imagine that M1 would just laugh. He probably did in line 387, but he decided above all to “play the game,” to enter in the humorous sequence one-upping M2’s utterance. Thus, he actualizes the second meaning, i.e. the fact he would be simple-minded, singing an old French song staging him as simple-minded. Beyond the intertextual mechanism (Kristeva 1969) of the utterance, M1 uses SDH to laugh at him, self-evoking a bad image, even if all the participants – included him – know that he is not simple-minded.

And actually, if this SDH has no basis, what are the reasons for such a humorous strategy? And beyond, who are the real targets? The first and obvious reason is to enter in the game and to be active in this humorous sequence. But we can imagine that a second reason is also a kind of defensive face to M2’s attack. In this case, we face the classic interactive function of SDH consisting of counter-attack not to lose face: counter-attack on the other’s field, with the same weapon. This humorous strategy is unanswerable because the previous

speaker cannot answer anything more and because M1, at the same time, gives to the others the image of someone who is modest enough to accept such a situation. Deprecating himself in a humorous way, he projects a positive image in a serious way. It is to his advantage. Finally, linking to the problem of the target, we can imagine a third reason. Let's follow the previous reasoning. If we consider that M2's humor may be aimed both at M1 and F1 (probably more against F1), we can thus consider that, by rebound, the true – or at least the other – of M1's SDH target is also F1. When M1, singing, actualizes the second and false meaning, he reveals F1's ambiguity of purpose.

It is probably impossible to identify the real target of such an SDH. Considering the reasoning above and the next reactions of the hearers, I just can make the hypothesis that the targets are both M1, himself, and F1. Indeed, after M1's SDH, everybody laughed. Here again, we can imagine that the hearer chose a neutral reaction not to give any personal opinion, even if laughs are also carried by the obvious humorous side of the song, in this case. More interesting are the two last reactions. M2 (the one who, nevertheless, began the humorous sequence) decides against going on, one-upping. After a last laugh, he delivers only a conclusive feedback. The same applies to F1 (391) who only provides a small feedback without any laughter. All the participants behave as if they tacitly decided to stop this topic or at least, this humorous sequence. We can imagine that the reason for this end is actually the fact that the interest of the humor is in the fuzziness of the target and a desire to clarify this point would oblige the participant to open a meta-communicative sequence during which M1 would have to explain the reasons of his humorous utterance and, doing that, clearly discredits M1 or F1, which would have been a real criticism and not only a joke.

4.2. *The target is an extension of the speaker him/herself*

According to the definition of the Goffmanian “territory” (1973), an individual territory is not necessary limited to the person him/herself. If some material possessions can be considered as a part of one's territory, some communicative behaviors allow us to admit that a person (a child, a wife, a husband...) might be, as well, considered a part of the territory. In such a situation, this tierce person becomes a kind of extension of the individual. For instance, it is customary to be thanked by someone whose child we complimented, as if the compliment were for this person. If we think this kind of behavior appears more often with the rituals of politeness, we will see that it can appear, too, anytime during a conversation. With two examples, I will show that it can appear with humor.

Excerpt 4:

F1 : une petite question préalable ça vous dérange pas d'être enregistrés↑

F2 : ha:: (+) apparemment nous sommes des sujets intéressants↑ (*rires*) non= non=

tous : (*éclat de rire*)

M1 : en fait F1 fait une thèse sur vous

les autres : (*rires*)

F1 : (*en riant*) en fait

F2 : (*en riant*) les deux bidochons viennent à la maison (*rires*)

M1 : (*rires*)

tous : (*rires*)

F2 : non non pas de problème au contraire

F1 : oh au contraire

[...]

This excerpt takes place in the very beginning of the interaction. Four participants are present: F1 and M1; F2 and M2, two friends. It is the end of the opening sequence and after the greetings, F1 asks to her friends if they agreed to be recorded.

- 49 **F1:** a small preliminary question: do you mind being recorded
50 **F2:** ah::: + **apparently we are some interesting subjects** (*laugh*) no no
51 **All of them:** (*roar of laugh*)
52 **M1:** actually F1 is doing a thesis about you
53 **The others:** (*laugh*)
54 **F1:** (*laughing*) actually
55 **F2: the 2 Bidochons are coming home** (*laugh*)
56 **M1:** (*laugh*)
57 **All of them:** (*laugh*)
58 **F2:** no no no problem on the contrary
59 **F1:** oh on the contrary
60 [...]

For her own research, F1 needs to record the current conversation. So, she asks her friends if they accept the situation. As we can see with the word “apparently” (50), it is not the first time these two persons are recorded. As F1 is a linguist, each time she wants to record someone, the person believes that she wants to judge – and not only to describe – the manner in which people are speaking. In other words, people are often afraid of being observed, not in the way they speak, but in the *wrong way* they speak. Line 50, F2’s first intervention is directly linked to the anxiety concerning the recording. Consequently, the adjective “interesting” does not have to be understood in a positive sense but as a self-disparagement word: F2 and M2 are interesting because they speak bad French. Thus, F2 produces her first SDH. The pragmatic functions of this SDH are various. First, it is probably a manner for F2 to manage the embarrassment caused by F1’s request. And second, if F2 really considers that she is a good subject because of her bad French, it is a defense against F1’s unstated attack (“I want to record you to judge you”). In both cases, F2’s SDH is a face work activity. She laughs after her utterance and then, all of them laugh too (51). The reasons are probably the same: management of the embarrassment (even for F1 because she is the instigator of this situation), and face work. F1 cannot decently agree with F2’s utterance, at least about the content. A third reason can be added: the fact that the participants are still in the opening sequence and previous studies have shown that a lot of laughter is present during this moment (Traverso 1996; Priego-Valverde 2006).

In line 52, M1 attempts to defuse the situation and to minimize the embarrassment exaggerating F1’s request. This strategy works because all the participants laugh. In line 55, F2 one-ups her own humorous utterance and hammers it in clarifying what she means by “interesting.” For that, she quotes a very famous French comic strip called “Les Bidochons” which stages a narrow-minded family. This comic is so famous that “Bidochon” became in French a substantive to qualify such people. With this phrase, F2 gives to the other a very depreciated image of herself staging herself as a comic strip character. For that reasons, she produces SDH.

However, the particularity of her two SDH is in the fact that she includes her boyfriend in her utterance. At a first level of analysis, we could consider that she produces at the same time SDH and humor against her boyfriend. But at a second level, as M2 is precisely her boyfriend, a part of her couple, I assume the fact that I call such utterances SDH. The target is still herself, just an enlarged part of herself, her boyfriend included. She laughs after her own intervention and everybody follows her. So here again, SDH is received with

laughter, probably the best way not to develop a meta-communicative sequence during which F1 would have justified herself and her work.

To end this analysis, I quote in this excerpt only two lines more and cut the rest (Priego-Valverde 2003), because even if the humorous sequence is going on, the humorous key has changed. We assist here at a classical conversational joke where F2 says something serious (she does not care about being recorded) and where F1 distorts what she said in a humorous way. When F1 repeats “on the contrary,” she gives to F2 the image of someone who likes being recorded. The two scripts opposed are thus helpful *vs* pretentious. Even if I cut the end of the analysis, these two lines are sufficient to show the way the hearers manage SDH. First they laugh (always this neutral reaction), and then they reverse the situation. As it is difficult to react to SDH, and as F1 is in an uncomfortable situation because of her request, she decides to make a kind of aggressive jokes giving to F2 a false image of her.

This sequence shows thus that whatever the kind of humor used in conversation, it constitutes an issue for the face and the relative position of the participants.

Excerpt 5:

F2 : mais on savait pas comment ça allait devenir

M3 : ben nous c'est pareil hein (+) on s'attend au pire

F3 : ben voilà

F2 : (*en riant*) eh oui (*rires*)

M3 : <inaudible>

les autres : (*rires*)

M3 : <inaudible> ça va être horrible

In this short sequence between seven friends, F2 talks about the dog she and her sister offered to their parents, which dog became more and more ugly growing. F3 is pregnant.

- 13 **F2**: but we didn't know how it would turn out
14 **M3**: **same thing for us + we are expecting the worst**
15 **F3**: that's it
16 **F2**: (*laughing*) eh yes (*laugh*)
17 **M3**: <inaudible>
18 **The others**: (*laugh*)
19 **M3**: <inaudible> **it will be horrible**
20 **F2**: (*to F4*) no because you understood that:: + F3 was pregnant
[...]

The humorous sequence begins in line 13, when F2 explains (as she is used to doing) how awful her parents' dog is. If this intervention is not really SDH, it is a kind of ritual and humorous *mea-culpa* because she tells this story to everybody she meets. Line 14, M3 reacts to this intervention producing SDH which becomes more and more aggressive. At first, he begins comparing F2's expectation and his own (“same thing for us”). This unexpected and surprising comparison of two incompatible elements (Aubouin 1948), creates the humorous ambiguity. I consider this utterance, first, as a humorous one because nobody can reasonably think that M3 is really thinking what he is saying. M3 plays with the situation and creates a distance between what he says and what he is living: the expectation of his first child. And secondly, I classify this utterance as SDH for two reasons. First, because it is built on the same basis as the previous example: his baby (and his girlfriend too: “us,” “we”) might be considered as an extension of himself. And second, because as an observer participant, I know

these two persons and I know they do not really think they are beautiful. Consequently, “expecting the worst,” is also a manner of saying that they cannot cause a miracle and a very beautiful baby. Beyond the baby, M3 is laughing at himself and at F3, her girlfriend. And in fact, line 15, even if F3 does not one-up M3’s purpose, she marks her own agreement and shows solidarity with M3.

Facing such an aggressive SDH (M3 is laughing at his own baby not born yet), the hearers’ reactions are minimal. F2 – probably the woman who knows this couple best – laughs and makes a short interjection (“eh yes” 16). F2’s laugh has still the same function. It allows her to respect the pragmatic constraint according to which she has to answer something and to show that she heard the utterance. Her laugh shows too that she perceived humor as such and more, that she accepts the utterance as a humorous one. Consequently, she has a positive reaction without needing to say if she agrees or not with the content of the phrase. Her interjection (“eh yes”) is more complex. Apparently, it is an acceptance of M3’s opinion. So, it is a very aggressive and face-threatening answer. But it is probably only an apparent FTA because she says “yes” while she is laughing (laughter here can at least mitigate or straight out invalidate the affirmation). But actually, it is more an anti-FTA because this “yes” can have different meanings instead of being a simple affirmation. It could be just a meta-communicative answer, a positive reaction not to the content but to the humorous achievement; F2 may also continue M3’s “local logic” (Ziv 1984) initiated by the comparison between an animal and a human. Consequently, she stays in a non bona fide communication and we can not thus consider her utterance as a threatening one. In other words, this interjection is probably an anti-FTA and not a FTA.

In line 18, all the participants are laughing, probably in reaction to what M3 said in the previous line, which is unfortunately inaudible). In line 19, with the word “horrible,” M3 one-ups his own SDH and increases the aggressiveness of the utterance and gets closer to black humor. But this time, maybe because it is too much, maybe because M3 said it with a conclusive intonation, nobody reacts. This lack of reaction would have been perceived as threatening pragmatically but F2 found a strategy to get around this difficulty. She takes advantage of the situation and of the F4 is perceiving, her friend who does not interact at all F3 and M3, to get out the conversation and to develop a lateral sequence explaining F4 what happened during the few previous turns speech. By doing that, she does not have to continue the humorous sequence saying what she does not want to anymore and she introduces F4 who was excluded until that point of the conversation. She engages in face work activity.

4.3. *The target of SDH is an absent third person*

I assume the fact that it seems paradoxical to say that SDH can have a target who is not the speaker him/herself. Two caveats should be detailed. First, I follow Stora Sandor when she says that the target can be another person *by ricochet*. Such a hypothesis does not deny the phenomenon of SDH itself, it just allows admission that the obvious target may be different, hidden and more complex to find. In another words, this other target does not substitute for the speaker as a target but comes in addition. In my data, I have only one example of this phenomenon.

Excerpt 6:

M1 : t’as quoi t’avais une entorse aussi↑ (+) (*doucement*) ou une fracture

M2 : ouais (++) j’ai / j’ai sauté un p’tit mur comme ça pour aller chercher le (+) le copain de (+) de sa sœur (+) ils s’étaient disputés:: ou “chepa” quoi et moi généreux chevalier j’ai couru après lui et chpou:::

F1 : (*petit rire*)

F2 : (*en riant*) il s'est étalé

M2 : (*voix souriante et accélération du débit*) et après du coup ils se sont raccomodés et moi j'étais en train de gémir en bas de l'escalier↑

les autres : (*rires*)

M2 : (*voix souriante*) rien à foutre

M1 : toi t'avais eu mal↑

This conversation occurs between four friends: F1 and M1, F2 and M2. At that moment, M2 is on crutches because of a sprain. Thus, M2 tells them in which circumstances he had one, once.

36 **M1**: what do you have you had a sprain too + (*gently*) or a fracture

37 **M2**: yeah ++ I / I jumped a small wall like that to go for her + her sister's boyfriend + they
38 had a quarrel:: or I don't know what and **I generous knight I run after him and chpou:::**

39 **F1**: (*small laugh*)

40 **F2**: (*laughing*) he fell flat on the ground

41 **M2**: (*smiling voice and acceleration of the delivery*) and afterwards they were reconciled and
42 **I I was groaning downstairs**

43 **The others**: (*laugh*)

44 **M2**: (*smiling voice*): they didn't give a damn

45 **M1**: you did you suffer

In this excerpt, M2 tells a short story. He relates the reasons why he had, one day, to be on crutches. The humorous sequence begins with M1's question asked in a serious mode. Answering the question, M2 switches into a non bona fide communication telling, in a factitious dramatic way, what happened to him. In his discourse, M2 alternatively uses the epic and the oral mode. The contrast between the two modes of communication and the image M2 presents to the audience create SDH. Indeed, at the same time he is staging himself as a "generous knight," i.e. a brave man who does not hesitate to get over the worst obstacles to help people; he specifies that the obstacle in question is a small wall. SDH is created also by the contrast between the exaggeration of his bravery and the minimization of his real action. Until that point, we can consider the SDH as real and its target the speaker himself. Moreover, M1 does not react, and F1 produces only a small laugh. The only person who really reacts to one-up M2 is F2, her own girlfriend. And even if she produces her utterance while laughing, she laughs at M2 and hammers it in, as the lexicon shows ("he fell flat on the ground," 40). It is probably not a coincidence that F2 is the only one who dares to say something. She is M2's girlfriend and their relationship allows such an intervention. She acts as if she were accredited to do that, because of the links between them, and because she was present during the incident. We can thus consider that F2 does not really attack M2 but constructs with him a kind of "co-énonciation" (Jeanneret 1999), i.e. a discourse built by them together. Moreover, line 41, M2 goes on relating his story without paying any particular attention to what F2 said and he concludes his story. The same SDH mechanism is used. He presents himself in a bad and comical posture ("I was groaning downstairs," 42). But as with the previous SDH, we can see appear a criticism against the two persons he wanted to help ("and afterwards they were reconciled"), as if his brave act would have been useless. Facing this criticism, the audience is contented with laughing, maybe to not have to take a stand on a subject they could launch a controversy. Once again, the hearers adopt a neutral attitude. M2's criticism becomes clear in line 44, even if he produces it with a smiling (and mitigating) voice. Thus, it becomes obvious that M2 is not the only target of his SDH. Two other targets are aimed at: the two persons

who put him in such a situation. Line 45, M1 prefers to change the topic of the conversation and with his question he comes back to his own sprain. It is probably a strategy to switch into a bona fide communication and to stop M2's complaint without having to tell him directly.

Conclusion

All the examples analyzed have in common the same target: the speaker him/herself. Of course, in a paper about SDH, it is not a big surprise. On the other hand, what is more surprising is the fact that most of the examples have more than one target in addition to the speaker him/herself. If the target of Example 2 is clearly the speaker himself, this sequence shows the issue of SDH in conversation and the kind of glorification a humorous utterance obtains for the speaker. It is in this way that we can understand the battle of wits between the two Ms, the overlap and the way they interrupt each other to have the final word... and the final laugh. In the example 3, SDH target is one of the hearers, F1, who is also the trigger of the SDH sequence. If she had not been ambiguous, the sequence might not have appeared. The examples 4 and 5 reveal a particular sort of target and of "entity": the notion of individual is enlarged and can include the children (here, the future child) and the other member of the couple. Finally, the most problematic example is the number 6 because it is the only one which asks the question of the real target. Indeed, if the speaker is an obvious target of his humorous story by staging himself as a brave man doing small feats, it is also obvious that his story is a criticism against two absent persons. In other words, we could maybe consider the speaker as a screen which masks the real targets. This last example is also the most problematic – the only example which is presented as a short story – it illustrates both the Stora Sandor and Lefort theories. Indeed, in his story, the speaker presents himself as a victim of the two absent persons (and in this sense, it is not SDH) but in a humorous way, thus, in SDH mode. But in this case, as Lefort asked, who is really the speaker? An external narrator or the character of his own story? If all these questions do not allow excluding the speaker himself as a part of the target, their quantity asks undoubtedly the question of the fuzziness of some SDH targets.

One of the solutions to reduce – for lack of deleting – the fuzziness of the SDH targets is to analyze the hearers' reactions. In this study, in all the humorous sequences (the first one excluded because it is a reported example) we can see the same kind of reaction. The hearers adopt the most neutral reaction as possible. In every case, they laugh. Sometimes they content themselves with laughing; sometimes they produce a short feed-back, and sometimes they develop a sort of "avoidance activity" to not have to answer something. In every case, they do not one-up the SDH speaker. The reasons for such reactions are probably various and would merit a deeper analysis, but we can say that the common point is the embarrassment they may feel facing SDH. As I said at the beginning of this study, it is difficult to react because of the situation of double bind SDH put the hearer(s). This difficult reaction can explain the last phenomenon I point out here: the absence of one-upping between the participants, an activity frequent in familiar conversations (Priego-Valverde, 2006). But it is true that one-upping SDH would come down to agreement with the content of SDH (or at least, give this impression), would come down to "twisting the knife in the wound," and even if many things are admitted between friends, the aim of a conversation, of humor and of a party is undoubtedly to not lose one of them.

Conventions of transcription

F/M	Feminine/ masculine 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 haltingly
Underlined words :	overlaps

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¹ I assume the choice of the term “humor” as a generic one even if my data is very close to other researchers who use “irony” (e.g. Eisterhold, Attardo, Boxer 2006; Kotthoff 2003).

² Literally “humour jaune .”

³ We can note that the same ambiguity exists in every case of humor.

⁴ My own translation.

⁵ “I have thought, and I still do, that self-irony, as it is practiced by the Jews, does not target the victim of the irony, but reaches also, by ricochet, the surrounding world. By setting itself as the victim, and this is particularly true of women’s humor, the society, responsible for this victimization, is equally questioned.” My translation.

⁶ “During a research project with Maurice Riguet (1992) we ran into a double problem: the rarity of jokes that we could consider a priori as utilizing self-ridicule and, at the same time, the difficulty in operationalizing the very notion of self-ridicule. To put it bluntly, if self-ridicule consists in laughint at ineself, the difficulty comes from the fact that pronoun “self” refers to an indetermined person: “self” can be anything. A manner of proceeding may consist in privileging the text and considering that there is self-ridicule when the modal subject,

the one uttering the utterance, targets a victim that is none other than him/herself. But this subject, in a joke, is generally indeterminate.” My translation.

⁷ Even if I’m aware of broadening Bateson’s concept, I assume this terminology for my purposes.

⁸ In order to be as clear as possible, I will divide this analysis into three parts, according to the SDH’s target; at least the obvious target...