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Failed humor in conversation: a double voicing¹ analysis

Béatrice Priego-Valverde

Abstract

Even if humor in casual conversations is generally based on shared knowledge by the participants, sometimes, it can fail. In this article, we will focus our attention on the failures of humor intending to explain them with a double voicing approach.

After having defined our theoretical frame, and after having specified the kind of humor we encountered, we will analyse some examples of failed humor. Two cases will be examined: humor simply not perceived and humor perceived but refused by the hearer.

Introduction

Humor is an omnipresent phenomenon in our everyday interactions and a main element of our familiar conversations. One of the reasons is probably because, in such a kind of interactions, people know each other particularly well so, they do not hesitate to tell jokes, to mock themselves or each other. Yet, humor favours the establishment and the maintenance of a mood for conviviality, lightness and ludicism. However, despite these positive functions of humor and the fact that participants are often favourably disposed towards themselves, humor can fail. Therefore, in this article, we will focus our attention on these failures with intent to explain them with a double voicing approach.

After having defined our theoretical frame, the interactive frame of the familiar conversation, and after having specified the kind of humor we encountered, we will analyse some examples of failed humor. Two cases will be examined: humor simply not perceived and humor perceived but refused by the hearer.

1. Theoretical frame

1.1. *Humor, a generic term*

Our study is carried out in the linguistic field of pragmatic, interactionist and enunciative trends. Therefore, we should consider humor as it actually appears within our daily conversations. We observe it in order to explain how it works and how it influences the current interaction and the relationship between participants. Various forms of humor will then emerge which seem to be related to irony, mockery, point-blank joke; these forms may be thought to be of a questionable taste or to be more on the witty side. But what we aim at here is not to produce a graduation among humoristic utterances nor even to attempt to classify them according to their types. This is the reason why we shall use the majority of researchers studying humor in interactions who adopt the term *humor* as a generic term.

In our corpus, this term refers to many various types of utterances, which make often laugh the participants and which be regarded by them, rightly or wrongly, as humoristic one.

Taking laughers participants into account, is taking their reactions into account to consider an utterance as humoristic. Then, how consider an utterance which does not make laugh? How

¹ In Bakhtin's sense. Or what I call in French « double énonciation » (1998, 2003)

can we even identify it (Holmes, 2000)? In this study, we took advantage for the conditions of the recording of our corpus: being both observer and participant, we shared, we the other participants, the implicits on which are based many examples analyzed here. So, we could flush a supposed humoristic one.

1.2. Discussing subject's uniqueness

In his book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929²), Bakhtin / Volochinov oppose the two theories in force at that time: the individualistic subjectivism and the abstract objectivism and make the verbal interaction the central and founder element of the language: *“The actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic forms, not the isolated monologic utterance, and not the psychological act of its implementation, but the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances. Thus, verbal interaction is the basic reality of language. [1] Any utterance, no matter how weighty and complete in and of itself, is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication”* (1929 [1986]: 94-95).

In 1984, using Bakhtin researches, Oswald Ducrot elaborate a *polyphonic theory of the utterance* (1984: 171) and lay the idea of an heterogeneous speaker. That is what he distinguishes the *speaker* (S) and the *enunciator* (E) both constituting the subject, *empirical being* (1984: 199). In Ducrot's theory so, S is in charge of the utterance and E (one or many enunciators) correspond to various *voices*, points of view speaking through S. In this case and that is why Ducrot and later us, we consider that the uniqueness of the subject does not exist when S is speaking, we can consider that he is never alone to speak. Other voice(s) speak(s) through him. This/these other voice(s) can be the hearer's one (*diaphony*, Roulet, 1985) in the case of humor or irony for example, a third person's one, even absent (reported speech), people's one or his own voice (reformulation for example). These various voices can be identified or not, recognizable or not, real or fictitious (in the case of humor for example). At least, they can correspond to the speaker or not.

1.3. Definition of the interactive space

Through the Oswald Ducrot's distinction between speaker and enunciator, appears the principle of *enunciative setting*, according which the speaker sets, in his own discourse, other voices speaking through him. Onto this basis, Robert Vion (1995) establishes a frame which aiming at showing at the same time, this setting of the different voices and its effect on the participant's relationship. This frame permit to describe the *interactive space*, sort of image of the interaction constructed by all the participants:

« By interactive space we point out [1] an image of the interaction construed by the subjects engaged in the management of this interaction. [It corresponds] to a plurality of places connections. This interactive space is jointly construed by all the subjects, even if each of them will strive to initiate a particular place connection. » (Vion, 1995: 278-279).

Defined like this, the notion of interactive space aims to think the notion of relationship showing its complexity and focusing at the same time, on the different types of relationships and on the reciprocity links which join them. Thus, Robert Vion suggests two kinds of relationship: the social and interpersonal one and the interlocutive one. These two relations involve five kinds of positions: *institutional* positioning, *modular*, *subjective*, *discursive* and *enunciative* positioning. Even if the first three positions, are more linked to the social

² 1986 for the present edition.

relationship and the two final are more linked to the interlocutive relationship, all these positions are constantly in interconnection. On other words, when people are speaking with each other, he / she speaks always positioning him / herself in more than only one position with regard to the hearer(s). For example, during a medical consultation, a doctor speaks through an institutional position of *õdoctorö*, a discursive position of *õprescriber of medicinesö*, a subjective position of *õexpertö*. So, generally speaking, the doctor has a higher position than the patient. But at the same time, if this doctor asks for a recipe to his patient who is a cook, during several minutes, the patient will occupy the high position of the expert. So, the interactive space is not defined in advance but, on the contrary, by and in each interaction and it is something very unsteady.

When a speaker produces a humoristic utterance, he principally speaks occupying two kings of positions. The first one are the subjective positioning, e.g. sorts of images of himself that people shows through his discourse. The second one is the enunciative positioning. They concern the manner that subject puts him/herself in his own discourse. Indeed, it is not the same thing to tell *õso-and-so is like thisö* and *õapparently, so-and-so is like thisö*. In the second case, the speaker reports someone else's words.

1.4. A double voicing approach of humor

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, two incompatible elements (whatever the terms used), which creates the humorous incongruity, the double voicing theory allows to attribute a kind of *õresponsibilityö* 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. So:

- 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 *õserious realityö* (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 utterance. 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 utterance) 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 (*õwhat I am saying is not serious and maybe not even trueö*), it reduces or indeed cancels all of the possible aggressive, vexing, subversive or indecent literal meaning in a humorous utterance.

1.5. Double voicing approach of failed humor

Numerous reasons can explain the failure of a humoristic utterance. Jen Hay (1996) presents some of them and, in particular, the fact, existing in our corpus, that humor sometimes interrupts a serious conversation. But, counter to her, in this article, we want to explain these failures with an enunciative manner and not and pragmatic one (even of course, if we know that both are always more or less linked-).

When a speaker produces a humoristic utterance, he appeals to two enunciators: E1 saying and E2 observing what he/she says, joking about him/herself, about the language he/she uses, about the situation, the other(s) about all he/she is mocking. This second enunciator, this second voice switch the utterance into a *non bona fide communication* (Raskin, 1985) and which be decoded by the hearer to understand that what he/she is hearing will not be taken seriously. But, at the same time of course, it is this second voice which not easy to detect, at the risk of not perceiving humor. Indeed, when a speaker produces a humoristic utterance, the responsibility of this utterance devolves to the other(s) enunciators. Therefore and the double voicing approach permits to reveal that the humorist speaker is taking to a so complex play with the various voices he/she makes speak through him/herself that it is sometimes very difficult, or even impossible to identify these other voices, even to know if they correspond to the speaker. At that point, it is sometimes impossible for the hearer to know who is really speaking and if the speaker is serious or not. In this case, humor is not and cannot be perceived.

In another case, this speaker's hide-and-seek play with all these various voices can turn against him/herself. From that time onwards these other voices are, hidden, implicit, the hearer is welcome to actualize them, to hear them or not. Then, he can choose to proceed further and do as he did not perceive humor, did not decode the humoristic intention.

2. The corpus

2.1. Presentation

Our corpus is constituted by various familiar conversations recorded during evenings passed among friends. Thus, the participants are very well acquainted with each other. They have between twenty five and thirty years old. The recordings were done with a visible microphone. Thus, if all the participants knew that they were recorded, they did not know the real reason why. Except the first minutes during some participants were asking for the reasons of the recording, the relationships between the friends were so close and their encounters so frequent, that the microphone was quickly forgotten. Thus, we think that we have collected a quite spontaneous and not very distorted speech.

Finally, we have to add that we are present in the data as a positioning of observant participant. This fact permits to explain the reason why, sometimes, we are able to interpret some utterances as humorous and the reason why we have sometimes access to the speaker's intention.

2.1. Nature of the interactive setting

We usually define the 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 more important than the competition one. Even if the last one is necessarily present, at least because we cannot reasonably think that any bet of face for example exists in a conversation.
- an *inward goal, centred on the contact* (Vion, 1992), the maintain 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 on the discourse (to can speak about all and nothing, in a spontaneous way, without precise goal), than the interaction itself. Indeed, as Schegloff and Jefferson showed (1973), in a conversation, no explicit rules exist concerning the order of the beginning of speak, the duration of these speak, all of that are determined progressively.

Thus, the conversations are so auspiciously, 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 says, they are the space of a *pre-eminence of the (relationnel) and of the complicity*, pointing out the importance of the shared knowledge and experiences.

2.3. *Humor in familiar conversation*

The affective tonality of conversational humor³, is particular, even paradoxical. Indeed, familiar conversations we observe are clearly convivial because all the participants want to be together and all want to have a nice break. With such conditions, in one hand, familiar conversations would go off well and humor would be frequent. But, on the other hand, because the participants are often close friends or members of a same family, the politeness rules and other social rites are less inflexible, less constraining than somewhere else. Thus, even if the face stake is always present (how would it be in another way?), a large freedom is taken with it. That explains the numerous humoristic utterances thanks to which the speaker do not hesitate to threaten the faces in presence, his / her own or the one of the hearer(s). All that involves a particular sort of humor that interfere with all the existing typologies, a sort of humor in which a kindly humor keeps close to a sour mockery. That explains why the mockeries and other teases are so frequent. That explains also why humor comes up regularly against irony without it is always possible to know if one utterance is humoristic or ironical. Finally, that explains why, sometimes, outer people of the group have so difficulties to disclose humor in such interaction. Indeed, in this case, humor is so anchored in an *conversational history* (Golopentja, 1988) shared by all the participants, and so based on implicits known only by them, that often, they can divine the presence of humor thanks to their great connivance.

But, on the contrary, that does not explain that humor can fail. Even when we could believe that the knowledge the participants have of each other suffice to reveal the humoristic intention, we will show that this knowledge does not succeed in counterpoising the complexity of the enunciative setting by the humorist speaker.

In return, the complicity that links the participants and that diminishes the face stake explains partly the fact that sometimes, the hearer(s) take (s) the liberty of refusing humor.

3. Analyse of the data

3.1. *When humor is not perceived*

- (1) *M2 does not have the driving licence. In this excerpt, he tells to the others that, sometimes, F2, his girlfriend, shows him how to drive.*

³ Or at least, of humor encountered in our corpus

156 **F2** : non mais en fait j'crois que le mieux c'est que t'apprennes d'abord à::: + dans une auto-
157 école et puis après heu::
158 **M2** : et ouais //
159 **F1** (*en riant*) ah oui c'est clair c'est l'idéal pour passer le permis une auto-école (*rires*)
160 **M2** : mais pas avec elle + pas avec elle
161 **F2** : ouais mais qu'il lui apprenne les rudiments heu::: + comment démarrer la bagnole et tout
162 et puis après on ira la conduire heu: ++ sur un parking=
163 **F1** : <voix souriante> on n'a rien trouvé de mieux pour le moment hein (*rires*)
164 **F2** : (*rires*) + non parce qu'en fait c'est vachement dur d'apprendre à quelqu'un à: démarrer la
165 voiture:::re heu:: ++ tu vois= + c'est dur d'expliquer
166 **F1** : ah ben ouais

156 **F2**: no but actually I think that the better is you learn at first in::: + in a driving school and
157 then hum::
158 **M2**: yeah //
159 **F1**: (*laughing*) oh yes it's clear a driving school is the ideal to take the driving licence (*laugh*)
160 **M2**: but not with her + not with her
161 **F2**: yeah but for learning the smattering hum + how to start a car and so on and after we will
162 drive it hum: ++ on a parking=
163 **F1**: <smiling voice> we didn't find anything else better at that time huh (*laugh*)
164 **F2**: (*laugh*) no because actually it is damned hard to learn someone start the car::: hum:: ++
165 you see= + it's hard to explain
166 **F1**: oh why yeah

On the lines before this excerpt, M2 explains that, as he is thirty and he does not know how to drive a car yet, it will be difficult to learn because, the more we grow old, the more it is difficult to learn. This fact justifies F2's sentence (156), his girlfriend, who proposes him (speaking to him) to begin learning in a driving school. Here, the subjects are in a *bona fide* communication where M2 exposes his problem and where F2 try to find solutions.

F1 takes advantage of F2's hesitations to start up her sentence and to attribute to her purposes she did not say. Thus, by a *diaphonic retaking* (Roulet, 1985), (lines 159-160), F1 imputes to F2 the truism consisting to say that a driving school is a good way to learn driving. So, F1 imputes to F2 the act of saying a truism pretending believe it, believe that F2 can really say such evidences. Here, F1 plays three different enunciators: E1, corresponding to a fictitious F2 saying truisms; E2, corresponding to a fictitious F1 believing F2's false purposes, and E3, corresponding to a facetious F1 laughing about all this.

Thus, interfering the serious dialogue between F2 and M2, F1 does not really laughs at F2, but at the image she gives to her by the different enunciators she makes speak through her own discourse. Not only she gives to F2 a particularly depreciated image -although factitious-, but also she assumes the right to criticize, to denunciate them. So, she allows herself a high position.

But F2 is too thinking to find a solution for her boyfriend. She does not perceive F1's joking intent. In fact, she is in a *bona fide* communication, explaining to M2 the easier way to learn driving (*at first, and after*). She is all the more wrapped up in this *bona fide* communication because she expresses herself with difficulty and because she is searching her words. That would be the reason why F2 cannot identify the joking aspect of F1's utterance. Consequently, she does not perceive the way F1 has distanced herself from her own discourse. So, she does not know that F1 is joking, playing to give to her a factitious image. Then, F2 thinks that the goals of F1's sentence is to pick out her awkward and to laugh at F2 as speaker. So, F2 tries to justify herself (162-163) whereas F1 does not ask any justification.

The sort of misunderstanding here is due to the inadequacy between two modes of communication, the bona fide one, in which F2 confines herself, and the non bona fide other one, initiated by F1. The clash between the two modes leads to a failure on the relationship level because, as F2 does not be able to switch into the non bona fide communication, she does not recognize the image F1 gives to her, she refuses it and, above all, she does not accept the dissymmetric relationship fixed by F1. This fact because F2 cannot perceive and then identify all the different voices played by F1 in her discourse, voices which are the cause of this redefinition of their relationship. From that time, as F2 locks herself in the bona fide communication, the F1's second attempt (164) to say to her she is joking becomes a sort of fierceness of which F2 is the victim.

But F2 persists in her explanations, the said explanations become more and more difficult face to someone (F1) who does not care about them. Thus, in her last sentence (165-166), F2 tries in vain to persuade F1 speaking directly to her (actually, you see), while F1, who wants F2 to switch with her into a non bona fide communication, remains deaf to F2's arguments whom she knows they are useless.

At the end of this sort of conflict between F1 and F2 and, actually, at the end of this schema conflict, no speaker wins because at any time any of them made concessions to give up one of the two incompatible modes of communication. F2's laughs before her final sentence are not rallying laughs. She did not understand yet F1's real intent and she did not understand yet at what F1 is laughing precisely. So, if F2 is effectively laughing, it is more a sort of concession to F1 because she perceives vaguely F1's humor but she did not perceive the distance between F1 and her own discourse. So that, she goes on believing that F1 is mocking her and not the factitious image she has.

If the complicity between speakers is a necessary condition for humor to succeed, this excerpt shows their limits. Indeed, this nevertheless real complicity between F1 and F2, did not allow F2 to perceive the enunciative mechanisms of F1's humorous sentences. Several reasons can explain it. In one hand, maybe F1 did not give enough convincing clues. Maybe F2, too locked in the bona fide communication, did not be able to perceive these clues. Maybe at last, F2 did not want to take them into account because at that time, she would have reacted to F1's humor. And yet, insofar as F1 knowingly interrupted the dialogue between F2 and M2, dialogue whom she was a simple witness, F2 probably perceived F1's humor as parasitic sentences. She preferred so not understand it, and even, not raise it.

(2) *In this excerpt, F2 sets out, with a certain pride, her culinary talents.*

- 72 **F2** : mais j'avais pensé tu sais faire un truc[↑] + et aït / aller prendre un emballage <voix
73 *souriante*> à la boulangerie et vous le mettre dans l'emballage
74 **F1** : (*rires*)
75 **F2** : <voix enfantine> c'est moi qui l'ai fait ++ vous mangeriez JA-mais crue (*rires*)
76 **F1** : (*rires*)
77 **F1** : <voix souriante> ah non c'est clair (+) avec l'emballage <sérieuse> + eh bè dis donc[↑]
78 **F2** : <fière> eh ouais +hein[↑] j'ai fait de bons petits trucs hein j'ai fait le poulet
79 **BASQUAI**::SE + qu'est-ce que j'ai fait[↑]
80 **F1** : (*de la cuisine*) le poulet basquaise[↑]
81 **M1** : <air moqueur> le poulet basquaise[↑]
82 **F2** : <ne perçoit pas le ton moqueur et continue> le poulet basquaise qu'est-ce que j'ai fait[↑]
83 **M1** <alors il insiste> c'est dur ça à faire hein
84 **F2** : <toujours incompréhension> ouais hein[↑] t'as vu[↑]
85 **M1** : putain + moi je le rate tout le temps

86 **F2** : (*rire*) <elle semble rire parce qu'elle le croit et non parce qu'elle a saisi le ton
 87 moqueur>
 88 **M1** : cœst::: //
 89 **F2** : ouais non cœst //
 90 **M2** : elle aussi hein↑
 91 **M1** : (*éclat de rire*)
 92 **F2** : oh dis:: cœst pas vrai pace que tu te régales
 93 **M2** : non cœst pas <inaudible>
 94 **F2** : quœst-ce que jœai fait↑
 95 **F1** : (*elle est en train de préparer la raclette et parle à M1*) je coupe le fromage <inaudible>
 96 **M1** : ouais= ouais= ouais
 97 **M2** : VOILA↑ tu fais //
 98 <inaudible>
 99 **M1** : BON ben RAclette ce soir

72 **F2** : but I though you know to make something ↑ + and to bye / to go to take a package
 73 <smiling voice > to the bakerø shop et put it into the package
 74 **F1**: (*laugh*)
 75 **F2**: <childlike voice> I have done it ++ you would never believed me (*laugh*)
 76 **F1**: (*laugh*)
 77 **F1**: <smiling voice> oh no itø clear + with the package <seriously> + oh isnø it ↑
 78 **F2**: <proud> oh yeah + eh ↑ I cooked some good little things eh I cooked the BASQUAI::SE
 79 chicken + what did I cook ↑
 80 **F1**: (*from the kitchen*) the basquaise chicken ↑
 81 **M1**: <in a mocking way> the basquaise chicken ↑
 82 **F2**: <she does not perceive the mocking tone of voice and goes on listing all the meals she
 83 cooked> the basquaise chicken what did I cook ↑
 84 **M1**: <insisting in his mocking way> this is hard to cook eh
 85 **F2**: <always misunderstanding> yeah eh ↑ you saw ↑
 86 **M1**: goddammit + I always make a mess of it
 87 **F2**: (*laugh*) <she seems to laugh because she believe him and not because she have perceived
 88 the joke>
 89 **M1**: itø::: //
 90 **F2**: yeah no itø
 91 **M2**: so does she eh ↑
 92 **M1**: (*burst of laughter*)
 93 **F2**: oh itø not true because you have had a delicious meal
 94 **M2**: no itø not <inaudible>
 95 **F2**: what did I cook ↑
 96 **F1**: (*preparing the raclette and talking to M1*) I cut the cheese <inaudible>
 97 **M1**: yeah= yeah= yeah
 98 **M2**: there ↑ you cook //
 99 <inaudible>
 100 **M1**: well raclette tonight

As her smiling voice shows it, on the beginning of this excerpt, F2 accepts that her culinary talents were potentially mocked by her friends (72-73). But, from the line 80, F2 is so proud of her new culinary competences that she wants to expose them to her friends. Her pride can

be seen, among other, thanks to her tone voice (78). She is thinking aloud, without really listening to her friends' sentences and commentaries, probably without looking at them because she is entirely concentrated on remembering her all the meals she cooked recently (80). It is clear that here, F2 wants to become serious for her talents will be appreciated at their true value. But F1 and M1 are not prepared to accept that and they want to stay on the non bona fide communication initiated from the line 80. For instance, on the lines 81 and 82, F1 and M1 are joking about the supposedly difficulty of cooking the basquaise chicken, but F2 do not perceive it. As F1 et M1 content themselves with repeating F2's words, she probably think that is only a feed back, a sort of invitation to go further in listing the meals she cooked. So, she does it (83-84). With their humoristic sentences, F1 and M1, would probably say that is not really hard to cook the basquaise chicken so, is not worth being proud. Thus they are laughing at F2's pride. With this mockery, F1 and M1 try to restore a non bona fide communication, the very one which F2 refuses. But F2 does not perceive the mocking tone of voice. Several reasons can explain it. At first, she does not want to perceive it because laughing at her and her culinary talents is minimize them and she probably refuses it. Then, she is so trapped in her own pride and she is so token up by the research of all the delicious meals she has done, that she cannot perceive the humoristic intent. Both reasons are probably valid. Consequently, F1 and M1's simply joke becomes a real and aggressive mockery. One can believe that the misunderstanding between F2 and the others is linked to the fact that their humorous production is not sufficiently marked. M1 seems to think it so, he is going on insisting and makes explicit what his tone of voice in the previous utterance was letting understand: *õThis is hard to cookö* (84). Here, M1 is playing with an implicit background that he believes common and shared by all the participants i.e. the basquaise chicken is easy to cook. He probably thinks and maybe hopes that when F2 will find the implicit, she will discover in the same time the humorous dimension of M1's utterance. But F2 does not seem to share M1's opinion about how easy is to cook this plate. Thus, she cannot pick out the allusion. Because F2 does not share the same value scale than M1, she cannot perceive the distance M1 puts in his utterance and takes it very seriously. F2 does not perceive M1's signal he makes to switch into a non bona fide communication. Thus, a conflict between two modes of communication appears: M1's humorous one and F2's serious one. In other words, even if all what M1 says does not have to be taken seriously, it is actually done by F2. Thus, from the line 81 and more, on the lines 86 and 89, M1 uses a double voicing. The first voice has to be taken in a literal (and serious) way: the basquaise chicken is difficult to cook. So, saying that, he is congratulating F2 for having cooking this plate. Here, M1 lets speak an enunciator which does not correspond to him and which opinion is not the same that him. The second voice corresponds to the humorous sense of the utterance: he is teasing F2 and, as in an ironic utterance, it is the contrary which it must be taken into account. In this second case, the basquaise chicken is everything but not a difficult plate. So, not only M1 does not have any reason to congratulate F2 but more, he is mocking her proud. And as we shown it, F2 takes in a serious way the false M1's congratulations. Moreover, as she believes M1 when he is saying (in a humorous way) that he does not know how to cook this plate (86), the laughter she produces (87) is a mocking laughter while it would be a friendly one.

F2 speaks in a bona fide communication. She only understands the literal meaning and not the humorous sense of M1's utterances. She does not perceive neither the humorous sense nor the distance M1 puts between what he says and what he is really thinking. So, she cannot adopt the same mode of communication than him and thus, she cannot play with him.

From the moment she is not in the same mode of communication than the other participants, she does not have the necessary tools *to rebuild* the second and ludicrous voice. This is here all the difficulty for the participants to the double voicing process of humor. Generally, the

second voice is not explicit and must be rebuilt. But, as F2, we does not perceive the signals of a second possible voice, there is no possible rebuild. Humor is not understood because not perceived. We do not see it. We *cannot* see it.

Here, F2 is never in the good situation to perceive M1's humorous intention. Thus, all M1's attempts to lead F2 in a non bona fide communication become *fierceness* and the friendly humor of the beginning becomes more and more aggressive because F2 does not react in the appropriate way. She becomes so the victim of M1's humor and not a partner of the play.

We have already said that, from eventual partner of humor, F2 becomes the victim. All the more so since her own boyfriend (M2) finishes joining M1 and F1 in line 91 when he infers that F2 either does not know how to cook the basquaise chicken. But here again, F2 does not see M2's second voice and humorous meaning. So, she takes M2's utterance as a real, disloyal and unjustified attack against her. She has not other choice than directly question M2's dishonesty (93). This F2's intervention is another clue of the conflict existing between the two modes of communication because if it would not be the case, F2 would have been probably answer something but not putting forward the lie because lie only has sense and only can exist in the "serious reality".

M2 has joint M1, the F2's victim position is reinforced because not only she was M1's victim, she is now the victim of a real male coalition⁴.

3.2. *Humor is refused*

The two following experts show that, sometimes humor fails not because it is not perceived but because, although it is perceived, it is purely and simply refused.

- (3) *This interaction is between four participants which are students: M1 and M2 in dentistry, F1 in linguistics and F2 in pharmacy. The four participants are discussing about potential collaborations to have a good dentistry office.*

⁴ Here, we can notice that if F1 excludes her of the humorous coalition is not by any feminine solidarity but it is only because she went to the kitchen for cooking.

235 **M1** : cøest compliqué (+) faut voir heu::: //
 236 **F1** : et un linguiste ça vous intéresse pas↑
 237 **M1** : <très sérieux> non::↑ non non
 238 **tout le monde** : (éclat de rire)
 239 **M2** : une fac privée heu:::
 240 **F1** : (rires)
 241 **M1** : <par contre ?> un médecin
 242 **M2** : <qui te fasse ?> les cours heu:::
 243 **F1** : (rires)
 244 **M1** : un médecin cøest bon (+) si i tøarrive un pépin ou quoi
 245 **F1** : <inaudible> <le ton est très sérieux et laisse donc penser quøelle søest ralliée à M1>
 246 **M2** : moi par exemple je vois::: on a / on a commencé à en parler en délirant avec mes
 247 copains de løarmée là médecins <inaudible> ben moi je me sentirais tout à fait de:: / døêtre
 248 avec lui tu vois

235 **M1**: Itø complicated (+) we have to see uh::://
 236 **F1**: and a linguist youøre not interested in it
 237 **M1**: <very seriously> no:: no no
 238 **Everybody**: (roar of laughter)
 239 **M2**: a private univ uh:::
 240 **F1**: (laughter)
 241 **M1**: <on the other hand?> a doctor
 242 **M2**: <who?> teach for you uh:::
 243 **F1**: (laughter)
 244 **M1**: a doctor itø good (+) if you have a problem or whatever
 245 **F1**: <inaudible> <tone is very serious and let think that she joins M1>
 246 **M2**: me for example I see::: we have / we have begun discussing about it in a funny way with
 247 my doctor friends of the army <inaudible> and me I will completely agree to::/ to be with him
 248 you know

When F1 produces her humorous and very incongruous utterance (236), the topic about the professional collaborations is discussed since 9 minutes and 30 seconds. During all this time, F1 and F2ø interventions were only sporadic. Two reasons can explain this phenomenon. The first one is maybe the small interest the two F feels for this specific topic, above all when it is developed during such a long time. The second reason is a real lack of knowledge in dentistry to be able to participate actively. Even if M1 and M2 are necessary aware of these gaps, they do not estimate they have to interrupt the topic. The reason is probably because the two F are their girlfriends so, they are *de facto*, interested in the topic concerning their future life.

F1 attempts to interfere in the conversation. She chooses the humorous mode, proposing her own services to participate to the creation of a dentistry office. In 236, F1ø utterance is voluntarily incongruous. Her production is thus humorous because, asking such an unrealistic question, she knows already the answer. So, it is not a real question she asks. In fact, this humorous utterance only meanings something thanks to the functions it has. She has two functions actually: (i) the face management, (ii) the hope F1 has to abandon the current topic.

Concerning the first reason, the laughter she obtains allows her to amend the affront M1 made to her a few minute ago when he did not take into account her sporadic interventions. She tried to save her own face making humor. And she succeeds because her intervention is finally taken into account by M2 (239, 242) and greeted with laughter (238).

Nevertheless, M1 goes on ignoring her utterance and, even if he perceives its humorous dimension (he participates to the general laughter), he chooses to respond in a serious way (*õno no noö* 237). This language strategy is very clever because it allows M1 to respond to F1 and thus, to accomplish his pragmatic constraint, going on developing the current topic: *õon the other hand a doctorö* (241) and *õa doctor itø goodö* (244).

In her humorous utterance and voluntarily absurd, F1 produces a double voicing. The first enunciator (E1) is a little stupid and unable to see that a linguist is completely useless in a dentistry office. The second enunciator (E2) is amusing by the situation created by the previous one. He /she had the sufficient distance to make the conversation funnier and lighter. But the fictive aspect of E1 can be actualized only if we take into account the existence of E2 i.e. F1ø intention to make laugh. But, recognizing the existence of E2 is dangerous for M1 because it also recognize F1ø desire to switch into a non bona fide communication. And such a switch could trigger a thematic digression, digression that M1 does not want. M1 is thus obliged to react as if he believed that F1ø production was serious. Taking seriously this utterance, of course M1 cannot do anything else but answer that a linguist is useless and keeping going on the topic.

A humorous utterance is built by convoking different voices or enunciators behind which the speaker hides him/herself. Thus, such a utterance requires an effort from the hearer to decode it. But insofar as these sorts of enunciator are hardly identifiable and implicit, the hearer is free not to see them, not to switch with him or them into a non bona fide communication if he/she does not want to. Humour, although perceived, is not validated because the hearer may do *as if*, as if he/she does not see it.

The second reason why F1 produces her humorous utterance is probably the hope she has to interrupt the current topic about professional collaborations in a dentistry office. This interruption would have probably succeeded if, as M2, the other participants would have cooperated to more develop the humor F1 tried to include. But F1ø attempt to switch into a non bona fide communication fails at M1ø behest. F1, recognizing her failure, seems to join M1 as the serious tone she employs show it (245), even if her production is inaudible. All the participants thus are going on the current topic (246-248).

(4) *This interaction was recorded during ski vacations. Six friends are sharing the same small apartment. This excerpt takes place during the evening, after a long day skiing.*

154 **M2** : eh ben écoutez je me suis vraiment (+) fait une super journée de ski aujourd'hui

155 **M3** : moi aussi

156 **M1** : sans trop forcer↑

157 **M2** : hmm= pétard

158 **F2** : il est encore chaud ce truc ça dure ad vitam eternam↑

159 **M2** : ad qui ↑

160 (*petit rire des autres*)

161 **M3** : oh tu parles latin toi oh

162 **M2** : elle veut impressionner <inaudible>

163 **F3** : couramment

164 **M1** : cøest une pharmacienne elle sait <inaudible>

165 **F2** : oh putain <lêche-les ?> (+) les pauvres (+) i sont cons comme des manches

154 **M2**: hey listen this day was a super ski day today

155 **M3**: me too

156 **M1:** without forcing too much
157 **M2:** hm Goddammit
158 **F2:** it is still hot this thing⁵ it last ad vitam eternan
159 **M2:** ad who
160 **The others:** (*small laughter*)
161 **M3:** hey you speak latin you hey
162 **M2:** she wanna impress <inaudible>
163 **F3:** fluently
164 **M1:** she's a pharmacist she knows <inaudible>
165 **F2:** oh goddammit <keep them away?> (+) poor guys (+) they are so stupid

⁵ A gel bag ones put on the muscles to reduce the pain.

This excerpt takes place in the beginning of the evening. The six friends are back from a long day skiing. It is the moment when everybody makes the appraisal (154-157). They are all chatting about the day they passed. The utterance which will carry the humorous sequence is line 159 and concerns a gel bag F2 applies on her leg. She applied this bag a long time ago and it is still hot, from which we can understand her utterance. This sentence would have been gone unnoticed if F2 did not add a Latin locution. This locution, although very frequent in French, keeps being Latin and so, connotes a certain level of culture. But, in this very close group, F2 is known for her uncultured. But with such an utterance, she takes the image of a well cultured person, image generally refused by the other participants. That is exactly what will happen here. This Latin locution will be noticed by the hearers and particularly by M2 (159) and M3 (161), to turn it in derision, and through it, F2.

At the line 161, M3 underlines that F2 is speaking Latin. He proceeds by exaggeration as if the only fact to use a Latin locution implies to speak the whole language. On the line 162, M2 overbids denouncing ó rightly or wrongly ó the effect F2 wants to give i.e. impress. By this utterance, M2 wants to give to F2 the image of a pretentious person. By this fact, he gives to F2's discourse a maybe fictive enunciator and which F2 did not really wanted to convoke i.e. a pretentious enunciator. On the line 164, M1 overbids and stresses the F2's false pretension underlying the fact she is a pharmacist i.e. a person who has a certain social level. At this point, F2 is a victim of a kind of *öbeatingö* indeed humorous but real too above all if we underline the fact that she is, at that moment alone against all the others. She is all the more alone because this *öbeatingö* is probably not justified: the enunciator, the image of a pretentious person is probably false.

Even if we never know if this image which she is the victim corresponds to her or not, F2 decides, line 165 to dissociate from it probably because it is too heavy. For doing that, she proceeds in two different ways. First, she chooses a vulgar language and second, she clearly dissociates from the other pharmacists (*ötheyö*) because being a pharmacist is exactly the basis of the humorous beating: it is because she is pharmacist that she has a certain culture and that she use Latin locutions. According to this logic, if F2 refuses to be compared to the other pharmacists, she refuses too the humorous logic. Here, humor is probably perceived, but refused by F2.

In this excerpt, F2 refuses the humorous sequence refusing the probably false image the others want to give to her. Taking this sequence in a serious way, all what M2 and M3 say become a series of reproaches and not something funny. This is probably the reason why she decides to stay in a serious mode of communication: she need to respond to the reproaches; she need to justify herself even if it is not really necessary.

Conclusion

Many reasons can explain why humor can fail: it can shock (by the topic turned into derision, in the case of black humor for example), it can be not perceived (because it is not the moment to produce humor like in example 1 when F2 want to stay in a serious mode), it can be refused (like in example 3), it can be not understood (in the case of some word plays for instance) etc. In this paper, we described to kinds of humor failure. In the first case, humor is purely and simply not perceived. In the second case, it is perceived but refused by the hearer which so becomes a victim and not a participant of the humorous sequence. Thus, from friendly at the beginning, the humorous sequence becomes aggressive.

In all the cases described, we have chosen the double voicing theory to explain the failures⁶. When humor is not perceived, the explanation we suggest shows that sometimes, it is impossible for the hearer to know which enunciator, which voice is speaking. As a result, it is totally legitimate for him/her to question who is really speaking and above all, if the utterance is serious or humorous.

In the case where humor is perceived but denied, the double voicing process bothers not the hearer but the speaker him/herself. Indeed, as the different enunciators convoked are screened, the hearer is so free not to take them into account. The humorous voice being ignored, humor is ignored too and so denied.

It is the biter bit.

Transcription conventions

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 haltingly
Underlined words :	overlaps

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⁶ Double voicing theory is not of course exclusive. Many other reasons (pragmatical, psychological etc.) can explain failed humor

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