

## **Recourse to Language Humour as an Added Incentive to Studying Contrastive Grammar and Idioms: a Modest Proposal**

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### *Motto*

“Linguists are a marvellously clever bunch of scholars; there is really *no limit* to the imaginative, elegant, and intellectually satisfying hypotheses they can dream up to account for observed linguistic behaviour”.

(Ohalo 1974: 269)

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### **Abstract**

The present contribution submits to the reader a “modest proposal” suggesting how language humour can be resorted to in an attempt to improve vocabulary and grammar skills of students taking comparative language courses (English vs. German vs. Romanian). Students – and reader alike – catch a first glimpse of linguicomedy in the second section which exposes the comicality of a *prima facie* “humour-proof” sentence like *I only drink whisky on the rocks*. Sections Three and Four discuss briefly the theory advanced by Coșeriu on linguistic norms and my own view on comic effects generated by the flouting of the aforesaid norms, with appropriate examples adduced in corroboration of the theory submitted. Section Five investigates translatability of language humour. Various linguicomedy samples are being anatomized, assigned to the particular linguistic norm type which they have been found to flout, and then

provided with a “punchline-friendly” rendition –if any– into one –or both– of the other two languages being investigated, with concomitant recourse to domestication and ethnocentric techniques for the intertextual type. A synopsis presented after the concluding section on the two otherwise similarly performing student groups shows the grades which the “humourful” student group got in their finals to be considerably higher than those of the “humourless” one, thus proving my “humorous” strategy right.

**Keywords:** Ambiguity; language-norm violation; language humour; intertextuality; translatability; domestication vs. alienation

## 1 Preliminary Remarks

The most reliable strategy – to my mind, at least – for keeping one’s mind nimble and one’s intellect sharp is humour . Consequently, the ideal exercise for a linguist’s mind is language humour. And, chopping logic even further, it follows from the above that the most palatable manner for a student of contrastive linguistics to sharpen her or his intellect would be comparing language humour specimens in terms of their translatability.

With a view to putting the tenability of this last hypothesis to the test, I conducted on my own an experiment at “Ștefan cel Mare” University on two similarly performing student groups to which I was at the time teaching courses in Contrastive Grammar and Idioms: the students in one group benefited from a “humorous” approach to the grammar and idioms of English and German, whereas to those in the other I continued teaching the two languages in the canonical “humourless” fashion. I then extended my approach to include a third component of different lineage, namely Romanian –the students’ native or second language–, descended from Latin, which widened even further the scope of comparison while rendering the contrastive task more challenging.

The experiment was carried out in four interrelated stages:

- a) Illustrating transposition of meaning, a phenomenon most apt to give rise to ambiguous interpretations. These in turn can be viewed as the root of all evil, i.e. the main cause of conflict of loyalties in multiple-subordination constituents.
- b) Ventilating Coșeriu’s theory on language norms.
- c) Submitting my own views on the flouting of language norms as a main generator of comic effects.
- d) Investigating translatability of language humour and verifying tenability of the views advanced in the previous stages.

## 2 Ambiguities – The Root of All Evil

Since my students were not in the least familiar with humour-generating devices, I decided to devote the first stage of my experiment to defining two major types of ambiguity which have been found to rule supreme in the province of linguistics, as well as to exemplification of the two by anatomizing *prima facie* “humour-proof” sentences and/or phrases in which the students’ prior knowledge acquired during the courses taken in Contrastive Grammar and Idioms could be turned to good account.

The former of the two types under discussion is *lexical ambiguity*, which, Trask claims, is “the simplest type of ambiguity” and “results merely from the existence of two different meanings for a single word” (Trask 2007: 14).

A more complex type is the latter one, *structural ambiguity*, “in which the words have the same meanings, but quite different structures can be assigned to the entire string of words, producing different meanings” (Trask 2007: 14).

Still, by far more challenging and humour-friendly are specimens involving both types. Subsection 2.1 below goes with a fine-tooth comb through the quite impressive semantic range of such a blend and then puts forward several more or less humorous illustrations of the readings identified.

## 2.1 Divided Loyalties in Multiple-Subordination Constituents

A most intriguing pun type following in the wake of referential duality phenomena is the one that plays havoc among English strings of words including multiple-subordination constituents such as “subject/object complements” or “subject/object adjuncts” which can readily be approximated to Romanian strings subsuming “elemente predicative suplimentare” or to the German ones containing an “Objektsprädikativ” or a “prädikatives Attribut” (cf Măciucă 2000a: 127-206 and 2000b: 90-108). Let us consider the following at first blush logically unobjectionable sample:

(1) I only drink whisky on the rocks.

The reading of the phrase *on the rocks* most likely to spring to one’s mind is “(US) (of whisky) served on ice-cubes without water” (cf Hornby 1992 : 735). In this reading *on the rocks* is syntactically dependent both on *drink* and *whisky*. Consequently, the sentence can be paraphrased as *I only drink whisky when it is on the rocks*, with the dependency relations diagrammed as in Fig.1 below.

A second reading – “(fig, of a person) very short of money” (id.) – is in fact, I presume to suggest, the result of a semantic take- and make-over: meaning 3 analysed further below has been taken over and readjusted idiomatically so as to be made available also for reference to human entities. It is therefore safe to assume that we are dealing here with a “second derivative” with respect to idiomaticity:

*on the rocks* → *on the rocks* (=wrecked) → *on the rocks* (=very short of money)  
literal meaning    figurative meaning 1        figurative meaning 2

Thus Fig. 1 above becomes Fig. 2 below, where *I* is being substituted for *whisky*.

In this particular case the sentence as a whole can be paraphrased as *I drink whisky only when I am on the rocks*. Admittedly, the abridged version *I only drink whisky when on the rocks* is more frequently resorted to in colloquial style but unfortunately it only contrives to make matters worse, at least as far as ambiguity is concerned (cf *I only drink whisky when I am/it is on the rocks*). However, the same abridged version will undoubtedly get the upper hand of *I only drink whisky on the rocks* – which everyday conversation usually links to the first reading – for the straightforward reason that the subordinator in the former immediately puts one in mind of the second reading.

Moreover, the shift in the dependency configuration gives rise to another one in the syntactic function: *on the rocks* switches over from “object adjunct” to “subject adjunct”.

As already intimated above, there is still a third reading of the string *on the rocks* to be considered, namely “(of a ship) wrecked on the rocks” (id.).

A merger of readings 1 and 3 could be appositely illustrated by means of a caricature showing a tipsy guy who is coming out from behind the wreckage of a ship perched on the rocks upon which it had run in an ill-fated hour. The glass of whisky he is clasp in his hand accounts for the caption saying “I only drink whisky on the rocks”.

An utterly unsuspecting translator is bound to cling to the second reading, thus missing out altogether on the humorous side of the matter, which will otherwise come out as clearly as ever to one who is familiar with both readings of the word string *on the rocks*. Indeed, it is precisely the slight predictability of reading 3 being linked to a human entity –an association which our elocutionary competence (cf Coşeriu 1994: 31) would normally rule out– that induces a hilarious response in the reader.

A caricature presenting our tipsy guy perched on the same rocks (only this time with no ship to run upon them) is most likely to yield similar, if less comic, effects for the equally straightforward reason that here too the opposition predictable – unpredictable associations is strictly observed.

In order to better illuminate this aspect I shall try to work out the number of possible semantic combinations of the constituents included in the sentence under discussion (*I only drink whisky on the rocks*). The verb *drink* will be counted out due to the fact that in the context given it represents an absolute constant with respect to all variants, in other words its meaning stays the same regardless of the shift in the meanings of other constituents. The invariable sequence *I only drink whisky* goes to prove just that. In addition, it reinforces the dominating position of the verb *drink* within the syntactic configuration.

The semantics of *I* and *whisky* stays the same with respect only to their surface-structure syntax, whereas a searching look at the deep structure will immediately help expose their two-timing behaviour (cf all paraphrases given above). These two constituents could accordingly be placed on a second level of variability.

Finally, since its meaning varies with respect both to surface- and deep-structure syntax (cf discussion of surface-structure ambiguity vs. deep-structure ambiguity in Trask 2007: 14), *on the rocks* is the only one to lay claim to the third level.

Reading 2 (=very short of money) will also be left out of consideration because it applies solely to human entities (to *I* in this particular case), which helps disambiguate the sentence. Even so, a wayward imagination would not scruple to dream up a guy with a bottle of whisky in his hand, which bottle is flaunting a pair of distressingly empty pockets.

The combination of all five elements discussed above (*I, whisky, on the rocks* (1), *on the rocks* (3), *on the rocks* (4)) generates the following semantic variants:

1. I only drink whisky when I am on the rocks (4)
2. I only drink whisky when I am on the rocks (3)
3. I only drink whisky when I am on the rocks (1)
4. I only drink whisky when it is on the rocks (1)
5. I only drink whisky when it is on the rocks (4)

6. I only drink whisky when it is on the rocks (3),

most appropriately illustrated by Fig. 3 below.

The unbroken lines show the most predictable semantic associations, the broken lines mark the least predictable ones, while the dotted lines denote those in between.

Variants 1, 2 and 4 have already been dealt with above. Though sharing the syntactic configuration with variant 1, variant 2 is in addition idiomatically loaded. The surface structure patterns of the remaining variants are as follows:

[3] S+Sj+Vb+Od+As; [5] S+Sj+Vb+Od+Ao; [6] S+Sj+Vb+Od+Ao,  
where S=subject, Vb=verb, Od=direct object, As=subject adjunct, Ao=object adjunct,  
Sj= subjunct.

As regards their availability for generating comic effects, it can vary, as already mentioned, across syntactic formulas and within each individual pattern as well. Let us take a closer look at variants 5 and 6, which are identical in terms both of their surface- and their deep-structure syntax. The discontinuous lines representing the dependency relations between the two readings of *on the rocks* on the one hand and *whisky* on the other help expose their rather low predictability. Assuming that the hypothesis I ventured to put forward in my previous analysis of the second variant is true, it follows that the less predictable of the two semantic associations should raise the louder laugh.

Keeping our imagination on a loose rein, let us parade the following two caricatures before our mind's eye: one presenting a guy reaching out for a glass of whisky standing on some sky-high rocks; the other one showing the same guy reaching out for a no less tantalizing glass of whisky, only this time standing on a miniature ship wrecked on some equally sky-high rocks. Needless to say, both caricatures share the by now all too familiar caption *I only drink whisky on the rocks*. The louder laugh will undoubtedly be raised by the latter, which just goes to show that I have been right all along: the caricature in question illustrates the semantic association rendered graphically by the dotted line.

By way of a final illustration of this intriguingly protean sentence let us try putting our imagination on its mettle one more time and anticipate the response of a television viewer who suddenly finds himself visually challenged literally or rather visually offended by a commercial showing a huge glass and a blow-up of a bartender's hand pouring some whisky from an equally gigantic bottle onto an upward-facing open-mouthed undersized fellow perched on the ice-cubes in the glass. In the best tradition of British gallows humour and the most genuinely Puritan vein we could even go so far as to suggest actually drowning the unsuspecting little fellow in the accursed liquor he seems to be so fond of.

Whatever the grand finale, the fact remains that our little fellow is the funniest character in the whole series displayed so far, which places variant 3 at the top of the list including highly unpredictable semantic associations. This should not come as such a big surprise, since from the very outset *on the rocks* is much more likely to be taken as referring primarily to *whisky*. As a result all these semantic associations (*I – on the rocks* (4), *I – on the rocks* (3), *I – on the rocks* (1)) will prove to be less predictable than the corresponding ones represented by the same line style (*whisky – on the rocks* (1), *whisky – on the rocks* (4), *whisky – on the rocks* (3)).

To sum up, the comic effects of the variants analysed above could chiefly be traced back to two sources of ambiguity:

- a) POLYSEMY, by playing off *on the rocks* (3) and *on the rocks* (4) against *on the rocks* (1), the reading which most naturally springs to one's mind with regard to whisky. However, when *I* assumes the referential role, there occurs a shift in the distribution of readings in terms of predictability. *On the rocks* (3) teams up with *on the rocks* (1) against *on the rocks* (4) (as indicated in Fig. 3 above):

on the rocks (3)  
on the rocks (4) ↔  
on the rocks (1)

- b) HOMONYMY superimposed on a triple syntactic subordination: each of the three semantic readings of the string *on the rocks* is referentially dependent on *I* and *whisky* on an alternate basis, or a simultaneous one – provided the ambiguity has already been processed. The subordination net includes yet another relationship, that of permanent dependency on the verb *drink*, which has not been graphically contextualized for reasons already referred to above. In other words *I* as surface subject and “latent” referential<sup>1</sup> element (by “latent” I mean “most unlikely to assume this role”) is being opposed to *whisky* as “logical” referential element and surface direct object (“logical” is here taken to mean “most likely to assume the role in question”).

It follows from the aforesaid that the variant giving rise to the most comic effects should be the one which subsumes the two opposition types. Indeed, if we take a closer look at Fig. 3 above, it will not take us too long to place variant 3 at the point where the most predictable reading with respect to *whisky* passes across the most unpredictable one in regard to *I*, with *whisky* and *I* in turn playing opposite roles as demonstrated under b) above.

The only challenger of this top position seems to be the variant resulting from the intersection of the most predictable reading with respect to *I* and the most unpredictable one in regard to *whisky* (The reader will kindly remember *on the rocks* (2), which has been left out of consideration for reasons specified at an earlier stage). The caricature presenting a man perched on some rocks with a bottle of whisky in his hand which is broke to the wide adduces copious proof in that direction.

## 2.2 Humour-Friendly Attempts at Translating Lexical and Structural Ambiguity

When asked to compare English *I only drink whisky on the rocks* with its German and Romanian semantic equivalents in terms of availability for ambiguous interpretation, students were not slow in detecting the contrasts. Admittedly, as is the case with *on the rocks*, both *Ich trinke Whisky nur mit Eis* and *Beau whisky numai cu*

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<sup>1</sup> Reference is viewed here as obtaining between two linguistic expressions, not between a referring linguistic expression and an entity pertaining to the non-linguistic world (s. Trask 2007: 245).

*cuburi the gheață* feature *mit Eis* and *cu cuburi de gheață*, respectively, as syntactic variables fulfilling two distinct functions which reflect their divided loyalties: “predikatives Attribut zum Subjekt” (cf Helbig and Buscha 2001: 465) and “predicativ suplimentar raportat la subiect” (cf Guțu Romalo 2005: 197), when modifying the subject, or “prädikatives Attribut zum Objekt” (cf Helbig and Buscha, ib.) and “predicativ suplimentar raportat la obiect” (cf Guțu Romalo, ib.), when the object is made the focus of modification.

As for the semantic range of *mit Eis* and *cu cuburi de gheață*, it is being dramatically narrowed down in both cases: to two readings for the former, accounted for by meaning 1 (=ice) and meaning 2 (=ice-cream) of *Eis*, and only one for the latter (*cu cuburi de gheață* = ice-cubes).

By way of home assignment, the students were then invited to put their thinking cap on and submit each two caricatures – or descriptions thereof – playing off for comic effects two readings for German *mit Eis* and Romanian *cu cuburi de gheață*, respectively.

As expected, most of them drew on the *ice* ↔ *ice-cream* ambivalence of the German phrase, accompanied in several cases by a switch-over in syntactic subordination: from typical object- to less predictable subject modification. For a change, two students resorted instead to less usual *pars-pro-toto* interpretations of *Eis* in its primary sense. One of them depicted an immense iceberg emerging from a huge glass of whisky, whereas the other, while retaining the basic meaning of *Eis*, rendered the reading less predictable by resorting to the syntactic switch-over specified above. Her caricature was featuring a woman with an icepack on her head and a glass of whisky in her hand.

Yet, much to my surprise, by far the most felicitous interpretation of all was the one submitted by an otherwise mediocre student for the less ambiguity-prone *Beau whisky numai cu cuburi de gheață*. Thus, he had the bright idea of making the string *cu cuburi de gheață* – normally construed as an object adjunct – over into an adjunct expressing attendant circumstance, more precisely, accompaniment – subtype “positive togetherness” (cf Downing and Locke 1992: 142). His caricature was featuring three characters: a man and his regular drinking companions, two human-sized ice-cubes, all three of them sitting cross-legged and clinking their glasses of whisky together in utter merriment.

At this particular juncture, with my humorous approach slowly growing on the students, I deemed it wise to get down to brass tacks.

### 3 Coșeriu’s Theory on Language Norms

In one of his lectures delivered in 1992 at the Romanian “Al. I. Cuza” University of Iași, Eugenio Coșeriu advances a challenging theory tracing each of the three main levels of human language (universal, historical, individual) back to three types of linguistic competence (also labelled “technique” or “strategy”, viewed as semantic equivalents of the Greek word “dynamis”): elocutionary, idiomatic and expressive (cf Coșeriu 1994: 31).

He then proceeds to define types 2 and 3 as “to master a particular language” (cf “a ști o limbă”, Coșeriu 1994: 33)<sup>2</sup> and “know how to speak under certain circumstances, about certain things, to certain people, i.e. know how to connect language in speech or writing” (cf “a ști să vorbești în situații determinate, despre anumite lucruri, cu anumite persoane, adică a ști să construiești discursuri”, id.), respectively<sup>3</sup>.

Elocutionary competence, on the other hand, is defined as “ability to speak as such, that has nothing to do with mastering a particular language” (cf “a ști să vorbești în general, independent de o limbă determinată, de o anumită limbă”, id.). More precisely, it has everything to do with our language faculty, i.e. our biological ability to use language.

Effective communication makes it a precondition that speakers should conform to a certain set of linguistic norms. Since the main attributes of language employed to show one’s competence at the three levels specified previously are congruence (for elocutionary competence), correctness (for idiomatic competence) and appropriateness (for expressive competence), it follows that, Coșeriu maintains (1994: 42), they can be conveniently promoted to the status of norms governing their respective provinces.

Furthermore, since it is not unusual for norms to be flouted, linguistic norms are not spared either. To compound the difficulties encountered by listeners/readers, they are even apt to cause each other to be breached, provided, Coșeriu argues (1994: 45), a fairly rigid hierarchy is being observed, according to which: the norms of correctness are susceptible of violation due to enforcement of those of appropriateness, while those of congruence allow superimposition of both of the above levels.

In order to better illuminate this rather difficult aspect, I thought fit to give my students a case in point and requested that they should decide on the spot which of the following two utterances was the correct one: “pană de vulpe *la* pălărie” or “pană de vulpe *pe* pălărie” (“a fox feather *in* one’s cap” or “a fox feather *on* one’s cap”). With attention being deliberately invited on the norm of correctness (i.e. which of the two prepositions has been wrongly employed) and away from that of congruence (i.e. genetically-unmodified foxes are furred creatures, not feathered ones), most students hastened to comply with the former in utter defiance of the latter (answer provided: “pană de vulpe *la* pălărie”). Only three of them managed to dodge the pitfall of logic (answer provided: “Neither, because foxes do not grow feathers”).

When called upon to draw on their imagination, or better still, their experience, in a joint effort to provide examples corroborating Coșeriu’s theory, I was thrilled to discover that my students had taken to this change of approach as naturally as a duck takes to water, and moreover, that it managed to draw out even typically face-to-face-interaction-shy students. Thus, a shining example of failure to observe the norms of appropriateness originates with none other than the shiest in the group, a Ukrainian student, who recounted a most embarrassing experience she had to go through at the beginning of her stay in Romania. It so happened that a close relative of one of her roommates had passed away and she was invited to attend the funeral. When first

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<sup>2</sup> The English translation of this excerpt, as well as of any of the following ones cited in languages other than English, originate with the author of the present contribution.

<sup>3</sup> According to the above definition, the term “expressive competence” can be taken to cover roughly both *sociolinguistic competence* (“knowledge of such things as how to address people”, Trask 2007: 43) and *strategic competence* (“knowledge of how to organize a piece of speech in an effective manner and how to spot and compensate for any misunderstandings or other difficulties”, id.).

introduced to the grieving family, she hastened to express her condolences, but, as she was still unfamiliar with appropriate language usage, she came out with “Felicitări!” (=congratulations) instead of the usual “Condoleanțe!” (=condolences), i.e. with the most infelicitous choice of words ever under the circumstances.

Despite the prevailing macabre undertones of this last story, most students could hardly contain their amusement, and, when urged to motivate their happy moods, all of them related it to the “unexpectedness”, “unpredictability”, or even “nonsensicality” of the set expression made use of to show one’s sympathy on that particular occasion.

#### **4 Infringement of Linguistic Norms as a Major Humour-Generating Device**

##### **4.1 Breach of Congruence/Correctness coupled with De/Recomposed Idiomatic Meaning, Syntactic Homonymy and Metaphorical Extension of Meaning**

Both my students and I deemed it safe to infer from the facts presented in the previous section that an intentional or unpremeditated failure to comply with any of the three linguistic norm types is bound to nonplus one or the other of the senses involved: of congruence, correctness or appropriateness. Taking the reasoning a step further, it follows from the above that the message conveyed to the listener/reader will in turn be rendered nonsensical. And, since it is a well-established fact that the ideal and most dignified escape for a mind at the end of its tether is to plunge into humour, stunning one’s interlocutor into laughter has come to be viewed as one of the favourite canonical ploys resorted to by humourists.

That is precisely why the next step in our undertaking was selection and subsequent investigation of various language-humour specimens, with a view to exposing the language norm breach as well as other humour-generating devices at work in each and every of the cases anatomized. The following are six – out of a total of thirteen specimens examined – which I consider highly relevant both in terms of devices employed for generating comic effects and of difficulties encountered when aiming to translate them into the other two languages under scrutiny.

(2) În satul acela au brațe și picioare vânjoase și păroase, poartă mustăți mari, negre și fumează lulele. Te uiți în ochii lor și vezi că sunt gata să te culce la pământ cu o labă. Iar bărbații sunt la fel de groaznici. (Duțescu 1993: 17)

(In that village they have long dark moustaches, hairy brawny arms and legs and smoke pipe. You look in their eyes and see they’re just dying to knock you down with one blow. As for the men, they look equally terrifying).

Here one takes the norm of congruence to be constantly in force up to the very end, when the processing of the last sentence renders it null and void in a most abrupt manner<sup>4</sup>. It is at this particular moment of truth that the listener/reader suddenly realizes that the whole impressive array of what she or he rightfully assumed to be male features is in reality describing the representatives of the fair sex living in that weird village. This realization in turn manages to spectacularly send down the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf also Garman (1990: 316): “The classic garden-path property of withholding crucial information till the last possible moment”.

emotional pressure and, as a result, plunge the listener/reader into good old all-healing humour.

(3) Professor Karl Thiersch fragte einen Studenten nach verschiedenen “Innereien”, doch der Student wußte nichts. Da sagte Thiersch mißbilligend: “Wie kann ein Mensch Arzt werden wollen, der nicht einmal die Eingeweide der unteren Bauchhöhle im Kopf hat?” (Buscha 1981: 99).

(Professor K.T. has been questioning a student for quite a while about all sorts of “innards”, yet the latter seemed to be not even remotely familiar with the topic. At long last T. remarked in utter disapproval: “How can one ever expect to become a physician, if one can’t seem to get the entrails of the lower abdomen into his head once and for all?”).

Though obviously not in the mood for jokes, the exasperated professor finally came to crack one by unwittingly inducing the listener/reader to decompose the meaning of the idiom *etwas im Kopf haben*<sub>1</sub> [“etwas (auswendig) wissen” (= know sth by heart )]<sup>5</sup>, as required by the semantics of the pre-processed context. More precisely, the technique at work here is, in a first phase, the superimposition of the non-idiomatically construed meaning *etwas im Kopf haben*<sub>2</sub> [“etwas befindet sich im Kopf” (=sth is located in one’s head)] on the idiomatically intended one, which in turn triggers off the total amazement of the listener/reader, confronted with a blatant infringement of the norm of congruence claiming that one’s entrails as a rule occupy the lower levels of the body, not the upper storey. Putting the norm of congruence back into force leaves the listener/reader with no other choice but to recompose the idiomatic meaning and laugh herself or himself out of the predicament.

(4) Tip cu cioc, la o masă într-un restaurant: “Ospătar, serviți bere și la țapi?”

Ospătarul : “ Noi servim pe oricine, domnule!”

(Libertatea 2007: 3)

(Guy with goatee at a table in a restaurant:

READING 1: “Waiter, do you serve *pints* here?”

READING 2: “Waiter, do you serve [=wait on] *goats* here?”

Waiter : “We serve *all our customers*, sir !”).

Recourse to the semantically double-barrelled prepositional phrase *la țapi* is the most conspicuous – if a subsidiary – humour-generating device in this third example. Thus, the top-ranking dictionary of contemporary standard Romanian, *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*, lists the following two definitions under the entry *țap* – along with a third one, which we can safely disregard as irrelevant in our case:

“1. Masculul caprei [...] 2. Pahar special de bere, cu toartă, având capacitatea de 300 ml, conținutul unui astfel de pahar [...]” (DEX 1998: 1123)

(“1. A male goat 2. A special glass container with a handle for drinking beer; the amount such a container will hold (300 ml)”).

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<sup>5</sup> Translatability of the specimen into both English and Romanian will be discussed in more detail in the section to come.

Since the exceptionally versatile preposition *la* can combine with the noun *țap* in both meanings cited above, syntactic homonymy makes it possible for *la țapi* to be construed in one of the following senses:

- a) a servi bere *la țapi*<sub>1</sub> = serve beer *to male goats*: malicious meaning, as construed by the waiter,  
b) a servi bere *la țapi*<sub>2</sub> = serve *pints of beer* (verbatim translation: “serve beer by pints”): benevolent meaning as intended by the customer, ambivalence reflected by the verb complementation patterns below:  
Subject + Verb + Direct Object + Indirect Object  
Subject + Verb + Direct Object + Adjunct  
(Cf Măciucă 2000a: 83, Măciucă 2000b: 86-103),  
as well as by the different semantic roles assumed by the prepositional phrase:  
*la țapi*<sup>1</sup> = Recipient  
*la țapi*<sup>2</sup> = Attendant Circumstance, Distributive  
(Cf Downing and Locke 1992: 141, 87).

In terms of linguistic-norm infringement, facing us here is not a genuine one, much rather a prospect thereof lurking in the evil mind of the mischievous waiter, who knows perfectly well that goats – again, genetically-unmodified ones, at least – are not in the habit of going to pubs to order beer. Yet, it is this metaphorical extension of meaning from *țap*<sub>1</sub> to *țap*<sub>3</sub> (“tip cu cioc” = guy with goatee) which must in effect be credited with the chief humour-generating virtues.

Since so far the opportunity has not presented itself to illustrate transgression against a norm of correctness, I submit for investigation variant 2 of the above-cited specimen, which I created with the explicit aim of filling this particular gap:

(5) Un grup de puștoaice exuberante invadează o terasă agresând auzul pașnicilor consumatori cu stridența vocilor pițigăiate. Una dintre ele i se adresează cu un aer superior chelnerului: “Băiete, serviți bere numai la țapi?” La care acesta răspunde, ascunzându-și orgoliul rănit sub un zâmbet șiret: “O, nu, se poate? Și la ...capre!!!”  
(A group of high-spirited teenage girls take all outside seats available in a café while carrying on their conversation in a sharp loud voice which obviously disturbs the other customers present. Suddenly, one of the girls waves to the waiter and asks him with a posh accent: Are you serving beer only *in pints*, boy?” (READING 1 )/ “Are you serving beer only to *billy goats*, boy?” (READING 2 ). With his ego seriously offended, the waiter retaliates: “Oh, no, imagine that, we’re also serving beer *in XYZ!*” (READING 1)/ “Oh, no, imagine that, we’re also serving beer to *nanny-goats!*” (READING 2).

Two main devices are being merged in this example to generate linguicomedy<sup>6</sup>:

- a) lexical ambiguity, already familiar to the reader: *capră*<sub>2</sub> with no non-linguistic entity to refer to (= XYZ; s. fuller discussion below), is being semantically opposed to a

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<sup>6</sup> The originator of the term is Esar (1961: 14).

- figurative meaning derived from *capră*<sub>1</sub> (“female goat”), namely *capră*<sub>3</sub>: taken to signify “a loud young woman who would not think twice before giving a man the come-on” (malicious reading, as intended by the notoriously mischievous waiter);
- b) complete bafflement of idiomatic competence by referring the listener/reader to a meaning of the Romanian word *capră* which simply does not exist, more precisely *capră*<sub>2</sub>: denoting in all probability “ a special glass container for drinking beer, smaller than a *țap*; the amount such a container will hold” (benevolent, if nonsensical, reading inferred by the unsuspecting listener/reader), which could most conveniently be made to operate in tandem with *țap*<sub>2</sub> as symmetrically opposed to *țap*<sub>1</sub>– *capră*<sub>1</sub>.

#### 4.2 “Tapping” Intertextuality for Comic Effects

Nurturing the firm belief that *finis coronat opus*, I saved as the last treat the most subtle type of all, intertextual humour. The intricate pattern of intertextuality (cf Trask 2007: 125), pregnant with more or less subtle sociocultural allusions which only a very well-educated target readership can hope to grasp, makes the sophisticated humour tapping it the most difficult to savour. However, as the specimens submitted below will hopefully demonstrate, this particular type of humour turns out to be a real blessing in disguise for intellectuals oppressed by a totalitarian regime, as well as their only mental escape out of it.

Specimens 6 and 7 below are the ones submitted to the “humourful” group for investigation and subsequent translation into the other two languages. The former is a parody<sup>7</sup> widely circulated back in the 80’s – on Coșbuc’s *Iarna pe uliță* (“Winter on My Lane”), a Romanian classic – the first two lines of which read as follows:

- (6) A-nceput de ieri să cadă/ Câte-un comunist pe stradă.  
Parodied original: “A-nceput de ieri să cadă/ Câte-un fulg [...]”  
(in Râpeanu 2004: 108)  
(Snowflakes have of late started to drop down[...]).

The latter has been extracted from *Divertis Show*, a Romanian TV series enjoying massive and enduring popularity:

- (7) “X: Economia României – Albă-ca-Zăpada și cei trei pitici : industria, comerțul și agricultura.  
Y: Da’ piticu’ Dumitrescu, nu l-ați văzut?”  
([www.divertisshow.antena1.ro/12/12/2006](http://www.divertisshow.antena1.ro/12/12/2006))

Since analysis and appropriate translation of intertextual humour go hand in hand, these two Romanian specimens will have to make do in this subsection with a drab humourless translation, with amends being made in the following section:

- (6a) Communists have of late started to drop down

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<sup>7</sup> For obvious security reasons, the originator of the parody wished to remain anonymous.

(7a) X: Romania's economy – Snow-White and the Three Dwarfs: Industry, Trade and Agriculture.

Y: What about dwarf Dumitrescu, haven't you seen him?

## 5 Suggested Strategies For Translating Language Humour

The brief survey of the above specimens is more than it takes to make one realize the sad fact that even for an accomplished translator the rendering into another language of linguicomedie is not exactly mere child's play.

### 5.1 The Ideal Case: the Punchline Survives Intact

As is only natural, the easiest to translate seem to be those flouting universal logic, i.e. the norms of congruence. As important piece of evidence supporting this view I adduce specimen 2, the translation of which into English has been provided in the previous section. The very fact that the sample in question was translated into Romanian from an English original by the editor when putting together the collection (s. in this respect the title of the book, *Umor englezesc* ("English Humour")) only to be just as easily translated back into English by me for the research at hand, goes to substantiate the above assumption. By way of additional proof I submit below my students' translation into German of the same specimen, with the punchline surviving intact:

(2a) In jenem Dorf tragen sie lange schwarze Schnurrbärte, haben muskulöse, haarige Arme und Beine und rauchen Pfeife . Und die Männer sehen ebenso furchterregend aus.

### 5.2 Breaking through Language Barriers: Semantic Variants

As already intimated through the English translation accompanying the third specimen under investigation, our difficulties were compounded by the language barrier. More precisely, translatability of the punchline implies fulfillment of one major precondition, namely: that the vocabulary of the target-language should include a set phrase semantically equivalent to German *im Kopf haben* in both readings –as an idiom and as a free combination. Fortunately, in this particular case the language barrier turned out to be a less rigid one, for both English and Romanian fulfill it, though not to the letter. So, for instance, the closest semantic English counterpart I could come up with was *get into one's head*, which, to be sure, is an inchoative verb combination – as opposed to the durative German one–, but has instead the advantage of featuring the exact equivalent of the nominal constituent (*head*). In addition, *it* had to be dispensed with in order for the phrase to pass muster as a free combination.

When assigned the at first blush less strenuous task of translating the punchline into Romanian, most students suggested *a avea în cap*, which is the perfect equivalent to the German verb phrase employed. Only three of them thought instead of two inchoative variants of the above, which proved to be far more "humour-prone" than

their durative version: *căruia nu-i intră (odată) în cap / care nu-și bagă în cap* (verbatim translation: “*get into one’s head / get sth into one’s head*”).

### 5.3 Punning on Potential Conveyors of the Punchline as a Means of Dealing with Semantic Incompatibility in “Crippled” Jokes

The fourth specimen cited above was the one that definitely put our idiomatic competence on the mettle. To be perfectly candid about it, the temptation to let the matter rest for obvious reasons of semantic incompatibility of the three languages involved (s. *la țapi<sub>2</sub>*) loomed as large as life. In other words, our intentions of rendering this joke into the other two languages investigated have been, so to say, nipped in the bud by the sheer absence in English and German of a noun covering both meanings listed above under Romanian *țap*. Consequently, the safest and easiest way out of the dilemma would be to dismiss the first humour-generating device as unavailable to the target-languages, and confine ourselves instead to translation of the language humour generated by the second one, which, given the universal validity of the linguistic norm previously referred to (s. 4.1 above), poses no problem at all.

Indeed, both morphological pattern and dictionary definition of English *goatee* (cf *goat* + *ee*; cf also *LDELC* 2003, 563: “a little pointed beard on the bottom of the chin like the hair on a male goat’s chin”) and German *Ziegenbart* (cf *Ziege(n)*[=goat]+*bart* [=beard]; cf also *PGDF* 2006, 1627: “(umg.) ein spitzer, schmaler Kinnbart”, though *Spitzbart* is preferred as a rule in standard German to discourage any such discourteously implied comparison with the animal in question) substantiate the claim of *male goat* and *Ziegenbock* to be metaphorically extended to “guy with goatee” and “einen Ziegenbart tragender Mann”, respectively.

An English translation of the severely “crippled” joke has already been submitted in subsection 4.1 above. The German rendition –as provided by my students– accordingly reads:

(4a) Mann mit Ziegenbart an einem Tisch im Restaurant: “Herr Ober, servieren Sie hier auch Ziegenböcken Bier?”  
Ober: “Wir bedienen alle Gäste unseres Restaurants, Mein Herr!”

again, needless to say, with the joke falling flat... on us and, for that matter, on anyone who was privy to our discussion of the full-fledged Romanian version<sup>8</sup>.

Since I could not bear to see such an exquisite piece of linguicomedie run to total waste, I defied my students to think of humour-generating strategies making up for what had been lost in the translating process. The question which most readily springs to one’s mind when facing a challenge like this is: which are the main prospective conveyors of the punchline? My students’ first choice was the English and German semantic equivalents of *țap<sub>1</sub>* and *țap<sub>2</sub>*, i.e. *male/he/billy goat* or (*Ziegen*)*bock* and *pint* or *Seidel*, respectively. Unfortunately, failure to assume at least two different meanings dismisses both English *pint* and German *Seidel* from the very start as potential

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<sup>8</sup> As regards variant 2 of this specimen, created by me, its rendition into the other two languages under scrutiny is a feat by far more difficult to accomplish, because the semantic pattern to be matched must in this case be expanded to include at least two of the three meanings in which the word *capră* is employed.

candidates for lexical ambiguity. That is precisely why I suggested looking for synonyms of or lexical items semantically related to these two words as a possible solution. My personal choice was *mug*, displaying an odd assortment of no less than six homonyms (cf *CED* 1990:940-1):

*Mug*<sub>1</sub> (cf *CED* 1990, 940: “a cup with more or less vertical sides : its contents”; cf also *LDEL* 2003, 893: ” 1. a round container for drinking especially hot liquids such as tea and coffee, having straight sides and a handle, and used, without a SAUCER in the home or on informal occasions but not at formal events [...] 2. [...] the contents of a mug: *two mugs of coffee*”) and *mug*<sub>5</sub> (cf *CED* 1990, 941: “a wooly-faced sheep”) in particular struck me as possible conveyors of a pun type very much in line with the one generated by the humorous employment of *țap*<sub>1</sub> and *țap*<sub>2</sub> above. The specimen submitted below is, to my mind, the closest one can get to the punchline of the Romanian joke:

(4b) Guy with thick unkempt hair down in his eyes :

“Waiter, do you *serve mugs* here?”

Waiter: “We serve all our customers, sir!”

For an even more true-to-punchline rendition of the Romanian joke into German I suggested punning on *Bockbier*, which *PGDF* defines as “starkes Spezialbier” (2006: 217) (“a strong special sort of beer”), but which might just as well be taken to mean “beer for goats”. The joke thus generated, though sounding almost identical to the previous German rendition, has the added advantage of language humour derived from a deep-structure ambiguity:

(4c) Mann mit Ziegenbart an einem Tisch im Restaurant:

“Herr Ober, servieren sie hier Bockbier?”

(Verbatim translation: “Do you serve male-goat-beer here?”)

Ober : “Wir bedienen alle Gäste unseres Restaurants, Mein Herr!”

A further strategy which can be successfully brought into play is – as suggested in 4.1 above – the recourse to idioms containing the lexical item to be punned on. Hence, my next choice was the pair *mug*<sub>1</sub> and *mug*<sub>2</sub> (cf *CED* 1990, 940: “(coll.) *n.* the face: the mouth - *v.i* (*theat.*) to grimace”), as played off against each other in the following example:

(4d) The archetypal gentleman seated at a table in a pub:

“Could you *give me a mug*, boy?” Upon which a mischievous waiter, impersonating nowadays’ Figaro, promptly replies: “Right away, Sir!”, and distorts his face in jest, and, naturally, in keeping with the second homonym of *mug* cited above.

Left to their own devices in punning on various potential conveyors of the punchline, two of my students came up with the following inspired variants:

(4e) Guy seated at a table in a restaurant, with a goat standing by his side: “Waiter, do you *serve goats* here?”

Waiter: "We serve all sorts of meat, sir!"

(4f) A guy goes to a restaurant and orders lamb. After more than half an hour's wait, the absent-minded waiter brings him goat instead of lamb. Customer flies into a rage, rises to his feet and cries out at the top of his voice: "I say, you've definitely *got my goat*, boy! When are you going to get me my lamb?"

In 4e lexical ambiguity (*goat* = 1) the animal, alive... and kicking; 2) its flesh as food) joins forces with structural ambiguity (READING 1: Subject+Verb+Indirect Object+Adjunct; READING 2: Subject+Verb+Direct Object+Adjunct) to generate the comic effect, which, to be sure, is far below the one of the Romanian joke. What accounts for the diminished comicality of example 4e is the fact that facing us here is the very reverse of a linguistic norm violation. More precisely, by employing *goat* in the second meaning specified above, the roguish waiter is in fact putting back in force the norm of congruence disregarded by his interlocutor when viewing the animal as a potential customer (*here* is the keyword in this particular context, making it perfectly clear that the man does not rule out the possibility of goats being treated as regular customers in other restaurants).

In 4f humour is generated by superimposing the non-idiomatic meaning of *get someone's goat* (= fetch from the kitchen the goat-dish to be served to someone who has ordered it) on the idiomatic one (cf *LDELC* 2003, 563: "3. **get someone's goat** *infml* to make someone extremely annoyed [...]").

Admittedly, the punchline of many of the renditions submitted so far is what one would in all fairness call a far cry from the original version. But the praiseworthy fact remains that *volens nolens* my students became actual creators of linguicomedie –and some of them quite gifted ones, at that–, which clearly shows they finally got to the bottom of the humour-generating devices investigated.

#### 5.4 The Least True-to-Punchline-Renditions: Translating Intertextual Humour

It is precisely the intricate pattern of intertextuality –exemplified in 4.2 above– that makes the humour tapping it equally difficult –if not downright impossible– to translate. More often than not in such cases the original text is refashioned beyond recognition, with the translator facing the even more challenging decision of whether to "domesticate" the source-text or to "alienate" the target-text (cf Schleiermacher, in Störig 1969: 47). Or, better still, in sociolinguistic parlance, whether to tackle it ethnocentrically (by "bringing it all back home") or ethnodeliantly (by "sending the reader abroad") (id.).

Since both Communist regimes and post-Communist socioeconomic changes are something which English as well as most German-speaking peoples have been fortunate enough to experience only vicariously, my students decided for an ethnocentric approach in both cases. That is why for the former specimen I suggested incorporating a new dimension into the pattern, namely the musical one. All students – myself included– pitched in and came up with the following "slightly adapted" lyrics of Gene Kelly's famous *Singin' in the Rain*:

(6b) “Communists keep falling to the ground” (parodied original: “Raindrops keep falling on my head”)

with attention remaining focused on the plight of the common pre-Decembrist Romanian men, in particular of the veterans who in the past honestly believed in the Communist doctrine, only to be bitterly disappointed with the totalitarian manner in which it was subsequently put into practice, and eventually die of hunger, of a broken heart, or, worse even, at the hands of the secret police.

For the German rendition I put forward the first two lines of an all too familiar German winter song – in keeping with Coşbuc’s original:

“Schneeflöckchen, Weißröckchen / Wie kommst du geschneit”

(“Tiny snowflake, white skirtlet / How you’re coming wrapped in snow”).

We joined forces again and the “adaptation” reads as follows:

(6c) Dünnes Flöckchen, Rotröckchen / Wie fällst du so leicht

(Skinny snowflake, red jacklet / How lightly you’re falling).

“Redjacklet” is a transparent allusion to the political doctrine<sup>9</sup>, while “skinny” and “lightly” unambiguously hint at the compulsory “meagre diet” on which obese political leaders forced “the vermin”<sup>10</sup> to live on day in day out.

A brief examination of the humour-generating devices at work in the latter specimen under scrutiny in this subsection seems to be of the essence at this particular juncture, in order to better illuminate its availability for translation into the other two languages. Ambiguity is again the root of all evil, only this time in league with what Evan (1961: 30), Schöne (1978: 110) and Dragomirescu (1972: 555) call “syllabics”, “Wortzerteilung” (“word-splitting”) and “fonetică sintactică” (“syntactical phonetics”), respectively.

The word string at issue is *piticu’ Dumitrescu* which can be construed both as

- a) a two-word string, where the apostrophe shows omission of final *e*, which is part of the suffix *-ul* – marking Romanian masculine nouns for plural – while simultaneously indicating the use of substandard colloquial spelling of the word *piticul* (“the dwarf”); and as
- b) a three-word string, *pi Ticu Dumitrescu*, where *pi* is a substandard variant of the Moldavian dialect for *pe* (inherent preposition of Romanian verbs taking a direct object, with Ø-equivalent in English), while Ticu Dumitrescu are first and family name, respectively, of a Romanian politician striving in vain at that time to lobby through the Parliament the highly controversial law requiring that the whole collection of confidential files assembled by the “ferocious giant” of the Communist regime (*scil.* Ceauşescu’s secret police force) should be made public.

Domestication of the source text was again the approach my students considered more appropriate to employ in translating this last specimen. The next most important thing was selecting a British/ American key figure and a German one, both of them

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<sup>9</sup> Cf *LDEL* 2003, 1115: “**Red** adj 1 derog (especially in newspapers) supporting LEFT-WING political ideas; Socialist or Communist”.

<sup>10</sup> *Vermin*: (derog) Elena Ceauşescu’s favourite “label” for common people.

politically dwarfed preferably as a result of involvement in dubious schemes or fatal scandals.

The odd assortment of names had then to be narrowed down to the most “pun friendly” ones. I suggested punning on the similarity of certain names and those of the seven dwarfs in Walt Disney’s famous production. My students’ final choices were Dick Cheney and Gerhard Schröder featuring in the following rendition:

(7b) Snow White (regaining consciousness after being poisoned by evil stepmother):  
“Oh, how happy I am to see you all again: Sleepy, Sneezzy,[...] Grumpy. But where is Cheney/Schrödli?”

Dwarfs (in chorus): “Alas, poor Cheney/Schrödli took a bite out of the poisoned half of the apple... quite inadvertently”.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

While still under the spell of the theory advanced by Coşeriu (1994: 31-45) on linguistic norms, and in relentless pursuit of humour-generating devices, the connection between the two was gradually revealed to me (cf Măciucă 2002b: 11-24). Taking the reasoning one step further, I also took the liberty of assuming that comic effects could indeed be traced back to the flouting of each of the three norm types identified by Coşeriu : of congruence, correctness and appropriateness (cf Măciucă 2002b: 105-174; Măciucă 2005: 139-155).

On the other hand, my fairly extensive research into contrastive linguistics as well as on referential-duality phenomena, contexts prone to ambiguous interpretations and the comic effects generated by the flouting of linguistic norms (cf Măciucă 2002(a, b), 2004, 2005) made me realize the sad fact that the rendering into another language of linguicomedy samples poses a stern challenge even to an accomplished translator.

That is why I decided to unify the two approaches I had been using separately in teaching courses in Contrastive Linguistics and, more recently, in Humorous Approaches to Language, and conduct an experiment consisting in giving a short series of lectures on Contrastive Grammar and Idioms by resorting to analysis and translation of more than a dozen specimens of language humour. Before starting on it I set myself two clearly defined goals:

- a) to substantiate or invalidate my claim that recourse to language humour is apt to improve language skills, in particular of students taking courses in contrastive grammar and idioms, when translatability of language humour is taken into account;
- b) to verify tenability of the view I hold that the flouting of linguistic norms is a main generator of comic effects, and further investigate translatability of various types of language humour.

As regards attainment of the former goal, a brief statistical synopsis is being submitted below in the final section of this contribution to attest to it. With respect to infringement of linguistic norms, the samples investigated above – which, as already intimated, represent approximately half of the total number of specimens under scrutiny, with the remaining half being left out for obvious reasons of space limits –

have clearly “exposed” the device as a main generator of comic effects, whether by accident or design. As to translatability of such comic effects, the scale I put forward shows the three types of humour ranking quite differently from the corresponding linguistic norms in the hierarchy suggested by Coşeriu (1994, *ib.*), namely: the congruence-flouting type ranks highest, while the correctness-flouting kind is relegated to the lowest position, with the appropriateness-flouting humour hovering somewhere in between. That should not surprise us in the least, for the norms of correctness observe the private logic of a certain language –not always in keeping with the universal one– and also reflect a particular *forma mentis* which not infrequently begs to differ even from that of other languages in the same family.

In substantiation of this last claim I submit an example provided by one of my Italian students, based on personal experience. Possessed of a beautiful voice, she was invited, shortly after her arrival in our country, to a soiree where she performed in a duet together with a Romanian male student. Though she was in exceptionally good voice, she confessed she almost burst into tears when the prevaillingly Romanian audience applauded loudly shouting “Bravo!” at the top of their voices, which she mistakenly took to refer solely to her male partner’s flawless performance – as they usually do back home in Italy, where female performers are always acclaimed with shouts of “Brava!”.

Last but not least, the suggested attempts at “domesticating” the intricate pattern of semantic and sociocultural variables displayed by intertextual language humour have shown the translator compelled to reshape the situational and linguistic context out of all recognition, yet content to have finally found an acceptable way of putting the message across to his readers.

But, most importantly of all, considering the social evolution of *zoon politikon* throughout history and, more particularly, that of *homo sapiens* in a post-Babel world, such attempts clearly show the switch-over from an intraindiomatic to an interdiomatic *modus vivendi*, in other words, from “living-within-a-language” to “living-between-the-languages”, with Humour ruling supreme as *the lingua franca* of a future-conscious mankind.

## 7 Brief Statistical Synopsis of Exam Results

As if intent on proving my hypothesis right, the “humourful” students did best (verging on “excellent”) in their final exams in Contrastive Grammar and Idioms. Thus, from among 24 students, 18 ( i.e. 75%) got an A, 5 a B and only one a C ( there were no D’s in this group), as compared to the “humourless” group, where out of 21 students only 7 got an A ( i. e. exactly 33%), 5 got a B, 4 got a C and 5 got a D. Mention must be made of the fact that candidates got additional credit (*scil.* points) for clearly labelled diagrams, rigorously documented motivation and coherently constructed arguments. Moreover, a higher percentage of the former group came up with quite original solutions to the more difficult assignments. And finally, when polled to find out whether the “humorous” lectures had benefited them in improving their language skills, all students answered in the affirmative and most of them even added they relished the prospect of taking a full-fledged series of courses in Language Humour.

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