Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 12 (61) No. 2 – 2019
https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pcs.2019.61.12.14

Talking about humour, racism, and anti-racism in class: A critical literacy proposal

Villy TSAKONA[1]

The goal of this study is to argue that humour as an entertaining and funny way of perceiving and discursively constructing social affairs is most useful and appropriate in literacy courses, because it could sensitise students to how and why people produce humour as well as to its potentially aggressive and deprecating functions. More specifically, a critical literacy approach to teaching about humour is proposed, focusing on material where 'anti-racist' humour is employed to undermine racist ideologies, but occasionally ends up supporting them. Some tentative teaching activities are put forward, which could help students detect humorous and racist ambiguities. Finally, potential objections and reservations concerning teaching about humour, racism, and anti-racism within a critical literacy framework are briefly addressed.

Key-words: *humour, racism, anti-racism, critical literacy, comic strip*

1. Introduction

Humour is more often than not associated with fun moments, entertainment, and the creation of a pleasant atmosphere among interlocutors. Such sociopragmatic effects of humour are confirmed by numerous studies in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, among other fields (for a brief overview, see among others Chovanec and Tsakona 2018). This sometimes results in interlocutors' reluctance to look deeper into humorous texts and meanings in order to trace perhaps 'darker' sides of humour. The same studies have pointed out that humour may have negative effects for social relationships: it may exclude and discriminate against certain people or social groups.

These two opposing dimensions of humour often render it unpopular in educational settings. The 'seriousness' of educational institutions and the task-oriented character of teaching seem to be perceived as incompatible with the

[1] National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, villytsa@otenet.gr, vtsakona@ecd.uoa.gr

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

funny and entertaining dimension of humour. At the same time, its 'dark', offensive, and potentially dividing effects are also deemed as inappropriate for educational settings promoting inclusion, collaboration, and peaceful relationships (see among others Cook 2000; Morreall 2009).

The aim of this study is to argue, in a sense, against all of the above. Humour as an entertaining and funny way of perceiving and discursively constructing social affairs is most useful and appropriate in class as it may increase student engagement and sensitise them to how and why people resort to humour instead, for example, of a 'serious' interpretation and representation of social reality. On the other hand, the 'dark' side of humour is also relevant to learning about humour: students (and teachers) could benefit from becoming aware of the not-always-innocuous aspects of humorous discourse and of its potentially aggressive and deprecating functions.

To this end, in what follows, I will first refer to the reasons why humour could become part of language teaching (section 2). In particular, I will argue for a critical literacy approach to humour, so in section (3), I present some main tenets and activity types pertaining to critical analyses of (humorous or other) texts in class. Then, I explain why a critical approach to teaching about humour is, in my view, preferable, thus highlighting its goals and advantages (section 4). To illustrate how this could work in practice, I concentrate on the relationship between humour, racism, and anti-racism: in section (5), I elaborate on how, why, and when racism exploits humour and vice versa, as well as on the theoretical and analytical tools used in the present study. This discussion is a prerequisite for the tentative teaching proposal that follows. In section (6), I present that data utilised for my proposal and analyse some representative examples. These examples are not exclusively anti-racist in their content and meanings, but may also involve humorous (and hence ambiguous or disguised) recyclings of racist ideologies. The tentative teaching activities proposed in section (7) highlight such diversity in the data and aim at sensitising students to detecting humorous and racist ambiguities. Finally, section (8) summarises the main points and findings of the study, also addressing potential objections and reservations concerning teaching about humour, racism, and anti-racism within a critical literacy framework.

2. Humour and language teaching

Even though for some centuries and under the influence of religion, humour has been perceived as frivolous, immoral, inappropriate, and hence incompatible with 'serious' institutions and activities, including education (see among others Cook

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

2000; Morreall 2009; Tsakona 2013, 283-296; Bell and Pomerantz 2016, viii), in recent years, professionals in education have started to reconsider such views and the ensuing practices. As Bell and Pomerantz (2016, 5) suggest, there seems to be a "playful turn" in education allowing humour to enter the frame for various reasons and purposes. In the relevant literature, two main trends can be identified: first, humour is used in educational contexts as a means for classroom management and the improvement of learning outcomes (i.e. teaching *with* humour); and second, humour becomes part of the teaching materials in order to familiarise students with what humour is, how it works, what are its sociopragmatic effects and functions, etc. (i.e. teaching *about* humour).

In the first case, it is usually observed that teaching with humour may facilitate learning, increase students' interest in the course, reduce their anxiety, enhance the solidarity bonds in class and create a pleasant atmosphere therein, offer relief from tension or institutional constraints, etc. On the other hand, the use of humour in class may reproduce inequalities and be perceived as a form of aggression. It may also undermine the 'serious' and 'task-oriented' nature of classroom interaction and perhaps confuse those students who do not get it (see among others Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2008; 2011; Bell 2009; Archakis and Tsakona 2013; Shively 2013; Tsakona 2013, 283-333; 2020 forthcoming; Bell and Pomerantz 2016).

Without underestimating the significance of teaching with humour, the present study will concentrate on teaching about humour, which is not as common as the former. The most powerful argument in favour of teaching about humour is that humour is a significant part of students' *communicative competence* (see among others Cook 2000; Archakis and Tsakona 2013; Shively 2013; Tsakona 2013; 2020 forthcoming; Ahn 2016; Bell and Pomerantz 2016). It should be reminded here that the concept of *communicative competence* refers to speakers' ability to use language appropriately and effectively in diverse social situations, namely to their functional knowledge and control of the principles of language usage. In particular, Hymes (1972, 277) claims that a child

> acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others.

Consequently, in an effort to cultivate students' communicative competence, it appears to be beneficial to expose them to everyday, authentic humorous texts so

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

as to familiarise them with how, when, why, etc. humour is constructed and employed in communication. In particular, teaching about humour could assist students in realising how it helps us:

- build relationships and establish rapport with others;
- mitigate face threats,[2] relieve tension, and release emotions;
- subvert, resist, or critique social norms and conventions (albeit often in a safe or deniable fashion); and
- highlight or redraw certain relations of power (Bell and Pomerantz 2016, viii).

However, the use of humorous texts in class is often avoided, because they may engender multiple interpretations: the ambiguity of humour (e.g. as entertainment *and* aggression; see section 1) is often perceived as one of the reasons humour may fail and backfire in class, hence its use is not always recommended. Still, it is exactly this quality of humour that could help students realise how language works in general. The multiple interpretations of humour and its context-dependent nature could highlight the importance of context for interpreting all utterances, whether humorous or not: utterances have meaning potential and interactants jointly construct and negotiate their meaning(s). In this sense, communication (whether humorous or not) is not an exchange of words or expressions with inherent, fixed, pre-arranged meanings, but an act of interpretation (Linell 1998; Bell and Pomerantz 2016, 6, 12-13, 17-18, 197). Consequently, teaching about humour could enable students to understand their own contributions to interpreting discourse, and to reconsider their role in communication: as discourse producers and recipients, they do not merely repeat words or reach 'intended' or 'pre-determined' meanings, but they play an active role in producing, interpreting, and recontextualising meanings.

This is particularly important if we bear in mind that humour is intended as funny and entertaining, but can simultaneously denigrate and exclude people who may be perceived and/or discursively constructed as ridiculous or worth laughing at. Such negative humorous effects are sometimes overlooked, so teaching about humour could help us "make the familiar unfamiliar by close-up observation of what is normally taken for granted" (Hempelmann 2016, 46). In other words, it could enable us to see the overlooked offence or hostility in an utterance/text whose humorous and entertaining effects are often taken for granted. Thus, a *critical* approach to humour in class may be relevant and welcome:

[2] A face-threatening act involves either an imposition on an interlocutor restricting his/her autonomy, or a disregard for his/her wishes and needs (see Brown and Levinson 1978/1987).

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

> our desired results or learning outcomes must extend to include opportunities for learners not only to expand their communicative repertoires but also to reflect on issues of identity and positionality. *We cannot just encourage learners to engage in humour and language play without alerting them to the potential risks and rewards*. For us, this means designing curricular units that don't merely proscribe what to say in particular specific situations, but engage learners in *critical reflection* about how we make meaning within and through interaction and what this means in terms of who we are and who we aspire to be. […] [T]he decision to concentrate on humour in the language classroom should be motivated by *the desire to expand learners' communicative repertoires, metalinguistic awareness, and critical reflexivity* (Bell and Pomerantz 2016, 177, 178, my emphasis; see also Archakis and Tsakona 2012, 155-163; 2013).

In this context, I intend to suggest that teaching about humour can be fruitfully done within a *critical literacy framework*, which allows for the exploitation of a wide variety of humorous texts and genres, contributes to students' familiarisation with the workings of humour, draws on students' everyday experiences with discourse and the respective needs, and incites them to scrutinise humorous texts so as to undig more or less latent meanings.

3. What is critical literacy?

In this section, I offer a working definition of critical literacy and describe some of its main principles, methodologies, and goals (drawing among others on Fairclough 1992; 1995; Baynham 1995; Wallace 2003; Vasquez 2004; 2017; Behrman 2006; Silvers *et al.* 2007; Archakis and Tsakona 2012, 109-163; Janks *et al.* 2014; Felipe Fajardo 2015; Tsakona 2013, 283-333; 2020 forthcoming).

Critical literacy is premised on the assumptions that neither discourse nor our interpretations of it are neutral, and that discourse shapes, and is shaped by, our understandings of the worlds, others, and ourselves. By representing aspects of social reality, discourse offers value-laden interpretations of it, whether its producers or recipients are aware of it or not. It constructs and perpetuates specific evaluations of social reality and thus positions not only its producers but also its potential addressees in specific ways in terms of background knowledge and ideological standpoints. By (re)constructing and presupposing specific ideologies (e.g. incubating various forms of social inequality and exclusion), discourse shapes and affects social relationships and is shaped and affected by them. Given the

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

above, critical literacy aims to assist text producers or recipients in realising the evaluative, ideological standpoints and the unequal/power relationships implicitly or explicitly evoked and reproduced in various texts and genres.

To this end, critical literacy is premised on analysing texts in depth so as to enable students to detect and expose how texts may be infused with manifestations of social inequality such as racism, sexism, classism, and linguistic discrimination, thus perpetuating discrimination against specific social groups. In this sense, critical literacy brings to the surface the ideological standpoints promoted through discourse, the hegemonic power of discourse as well as the struggle against the marginalisation of certain opinions or points of view, mostly those coming from powerless and/or minority groups.

Behrman (2006) identifies six broad categories of activities or tasks, all reflecting basic principles of critical literacy. Critical literacy courses may include a combination of some of these activities:

1. *Reading supplementary texts*: School textbooks and the texts included therein more often than not offer specific dominant perceptions of social reality and simultaneously exclude or silence voices coming from powerless, marginalised, or minority groups. On the contrary, critical literacy places particular emphasis on students' and teachers' ability to design their own curricula by selecting texts and material to be introduced and discussed in class. It encourages students and teachers to move beyond canonical and literary texts to popular culture, to various everyday texts coming from students' sociopolitical realities, thus promoting an ethnographic approach to literacy (see among others Wallace 2003; Archakis and Tsakona 2012; 2013; Tsakona 2013; 2020 forthcoming; Vasquez *et al.* 2013; Bell and Pomerantz 2014, 36).

2. *Reading multiple texts*: The material selected (see above) could be read and juxtaposed with texts coming from school textbooks and/or adopting different points of view, thus allowing students to approach a specific topic from different and often opposing perspectives. Within a critical literacy framework, students are expected to "unpack the multiplicity of meanings that resides in any text" (Rogers and Mosley Wetzel 2014, 10), to view the world from the perspectives of others, and to realise the inequality among different perspectives (e.g. dominant/majority vs. marginalised/minority ones).

3. *Reading from a resistant perspective*: The texts included in traditional school textbooks or curricula represent a single, usually dominant view of a specific topic and give the impression that this view is the only 'available' or 'acceptable'

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

one. Reading from a resistant perspective incites students to revisit and disagree with the standpoints, values, and knowledge they often take for granted and to gain some distance from their own ideological presuppositions (see among others Fairclough 1995; Wallace 2003; Vasquez 2004, 1; Jones and Clarke 2007; Deliroka and Tsakona 2018; Tsakona 2020 forthcoming).

4. *Producing counter-texts*: While language teaching has traditionally placed more emphasis on text comprehension rather than production, critical literacy underlines the significance of creating opportunities for text production in class (see among others The New London Group 1996; Silvers *et al.* 2007). Counter-texts, in particular, are considered to be most relevant to critical literacy goals as they allow students to represent non-dominant voices and to resist the values and ideologies put forward by school textbooks and curricula.

5. *Conducting student-choice research projects*: Students are encouraged to pick their topics of interest. More specifically,

> the activity must go beyond simply selecting a topic and finding library books or websites on the topic. Students must become engaged participants in a problem affecting them and be able to reflect upon the social and cultural forces that exacerbate or mitigate the problem (Behrman 2006, 485).

Students' topics may result in open and perhaps heated or conflictual debates on controversial, even provocative issues in class. Such debates would rather *not* be avoided within a critical literacy course aiming at scrutinising social inequalities and discriminatory phenomena (see Parker 2016; Archakis and Tsakona 2018).

6. *Taking social action*: Critical literacy involves taking social action moving students' real-life concerns beyond classroom walls and requiring students to become involved as members of a larger community. In other words, critical literacy places particular emphasis on individuals' engagement and commitment as members of communities and on designing activities prompting social change and justice (Vasquez 2004; Vasquez *et al.* 2013).

In sum, the goal of critical literacy is to enable text producers and recipients to detect, scrutinise, and critically discuss more or less latent ideologies and stereotypes pertaining to diverse forms of social inequality such as racism, sexism, classicism, and linguistic discrimination. Different kinds of teaching activities are proposed to attain such goals in the relevant literature, emphasising in-depth

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

analyses of texts where social inequalities are recycled and naturalised. Given that the focus of the present study is on humorous texts, in the following section I will argue for teaching about humour within a critical literacy framework.

4. A critical literacy framework for teaching about humour: Goals and advantages

Humour may be fun and engaging us in social interaction, but is never neutral or innocent. Consequently, teaching about humour is expected to aim at enabling students to detect potential positive or negative effects of humour as well as to realise that such effects may co-occur in a single interaction or context, as people may use and interpret humour in different ways (see also section 2).

This could be achieved within a critical literacy framework as the latter allows for the inclusion and processing in class of texts coming from students' social, political, and cultural realities, whether as supplementary readings or as the main ones (see section 3). Diverse humorous texts may indeed be part of students' out-of-school activities and experiences, while many of them could be characterised as *social issue texts* as they "address the socio-political issues that students may face on a day-to-day basis" (Vasquez *et al.* 2013, 51-52). As Bell and Pomerantz (2016, 120) suggest, "humour often indexes social, historical, and political conflicts, thereby allowing learners to access and analyse attitudes about these issues" (see also section 6).

In addition, a critical literacy approach to humour could help students realise its diverse sociopragmatic functions. Among other things, we use humour to build rapport, mitigate face threats, and criticise (Bell and Pomerantz 2016, viii, in section 2; see also Chovanec and Tsakona 2018). Sociopragmatic research on humour has brought to the surface a wide range of potential humorous effects, thus underlining the fact that humour is never 'just for fun'. Critical humour studies have also concentrated on a wide range of sociopragmatic effects. Humour may reproduce and maintain social discrimination and inequality, although at first sight it may seem to subvert stereotypes. The generic conventions of humorous genres (e.g. jokes, film comedies, stand-up comedy) may not incite the audience to think critically of their content but instead enhance their tolerance for discriminatory standpoints. Furthermore, discriminatory humour may force the targeted individuals to assimilate to prevalent social norms so as to avoid being ridiculed due to their differences (see among others Billig 2001; 2005a; 2005b; Lockyer and Pickering 2008; Santa Ana 2009; Chun and Walters 2011; Weaver 2011; 2013; 2016; Sue and Golash-Boza 2013; Archakis and Tsakona 2019). After all, as superiority/aggression theories of humour remind us, humour (re)constructs

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

relations of power (even in a mitigated manner): humourists portray themselves as superior to their targets and attack them for their 'foibles' (on superiority/aggression theories of humour, see among others Raskin 1985; Attardo 1994; Morreall 2009).

Given the above, a critical approach to humorous texts calls us to rethink things that seem 'normal'. If humour may render discriminatory and/or aggressive contents easy to escape our attention, critical literacy "requires active engagement and inquiring minds" (Vasquez *et al.* 2013, 64), thus revealing what may be swept under the humorous carpet. This makes it suitable for analysing and teaching about humour, which is inherently ambiguous and engenders diverse, often contradictory interpretations by different people (see also section 2). Open critical discussions in class on what humour is and how it works in communication could be fostered by questions such as the following:

- Why does humour occur in certain genres or contexts and not in others?
- What is projected as incongruous and what is projected as normal or at least acceptable within a specific humorous utterance/text?[3]
- What is targeted through humour and why?
- Whose actions or standpoints are humorously targeted as incongruous and whose are naturalised as normal or acceptable ones?
- Who benefits from the distinction between 'incongruous' and 'normal'/'acceptable' acts and standpoints?
- Do all interlocutors agree with evaluating specific actions or standpoints as incongruous? Are there any humour recipients who may disagree? If yes, why?
- Do people consider the same texts humorous? If not, why do they end up interpreting the same text differently? (see also Tsakona 2013, 302; 2020 forthcoming).

Such questions could assist students and teachers in digging below the entertaining surface of humorous texts and in looking for readings different from the initial entertaining ones.

To sum up, a critical literacy approach to teaching about humour could familiarise students with what happens in interaction when humour is used, what various reactions to humour mean and entail for human communication and social relationships, how humorous texts, like all texts, shape the social world and the power differentials therein. Being a form of (mitigated) aggressive behaviour, and through pointing to incongruities, humour conveys specific ideologies and is

[3] On incongruity as the core of humour, see section (5).

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

premised on specific values that may not be shared or accepted by everybody, or may denigrate or victimise certain people or social groups. Critical literacy could help us make such sociopragmatic effects explicit in class through scrutinising humorous texts and allowing for the expression of diverse reactions to them besides and beyond laughter.

5. From racism to anti-racism and then to humour (and back)

So far, I have argued for teaching about humour from a critical perspective, so as to sensitise students to more or less covert discriminatory or other negative attitudes and views, which may be recycled and perpetuated within humorous texts. In order to illustrate how this could be achieved, I will continue my discussion with a tentative teaching proposal concerning humour, racism, and anti-racism. The design and preparation of a critical literacy course on this topic cannot but be premised on knowledge about the content of such concepts. Teachers are expected to be(come) familiar with what racism and anti-racism are, how racist acts and views are debated and framed in contemporary societies, but also with what humour is, how it works in communication, etc. So, in order to shed some light on the complex relationship between humour, racism, and anti-racism, in what follows I offer working definitions of these concepts and explore their points of convergence.

Racism involves "social practices of discrimination […] and relationships of power abuse by dominant groups, organisations, and institutions" which are based on "socially shared and negatively oriented mental representations of Us about Them" (van Dijk 2008, 103; see also van Dijk 1992). Such practices are not uncommon in contemporary nation-states wishing to maintain their national homogeneity and resisting their transformation into multicultural and multilingual entities. Despite the large numbers of people migrating to Europe and the Western world in general, monoculturalism and monolingualism seem to be dominant values within most nation-states. In this context, racist attitudes and views often take the form of pressure on migrants to abandon their own linguocultural characteristics and to assimilate to those of the majority population of the host country (see also Archakis and Tsakona 2019; Tsakona *et al.* 2020 forthcoming).

Although crude manifestations of racism are still common in the Western world, humanitarian and *anti-racist* values promoting multiculturalism and the acceptance of difference are simultaneously in wide social circulation (van Dijk 1992, 95-97). Usually, extreme racist behaviours are officially (e.g. by law) hindered or banned resulting in verbal racist attacks having acquired a mitigated form. This

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

oscillation between racist and anti-racist views and feelings often results in ambiguity in discourse, as people may deny racist stereotypes by reproducing them (e.g. disclaimers such as *I'm not a racist, but…*; see van Dijk 2008, 122-124; Archakis *et al.* 2018) or may attempt to discredit and subvert such stereotypes but eventually reinforce them.

Humorous discourse is indeed a case in point. In order to account for this mixing of anti-racist purposes and racist content, Weaver (2011; 2016) has introduced the concept of *liquid racism*, that is, a form of racism often attested in contemporary media texts using humour in an effort to refute racist representations and standpoints, but ending up reproducing and hence perpetuating them. In Weaver's (2016, 63-64) own words, liquid racism

> does not produce a monolithic reading as racism but is experienced as racism in particular circumstances […]. It has a structure that is constructed with far more potential for ambivalence. […] [L]iquid racism should not be seen as a weakened or challenged residue of racism but rather as an ambiguous form that is *encouraged* nowadays and one that weakens various defences against claims of racism (emphasis in the original).

Liquid racism stems from the ambivalence social actors experience and express in relation to race, ethnicity, and racism. It is a "highly contextual" form of racism with "more semantic layers" than earlier forms of racism, hence it may be hard to pin down and/or it may yield multiple interpretations (Weaver 2016, 63). This is due to the fact that, on the one hand, social actors do not seem to be able to relinquish monoculturalist and monolingualist values and norms; on the other, they try to refute them and to align with anti-racist values that become increasingly widespread nowadays (at least in the Western world; see above and Weaver 2016: 42-43; also Archakis 2018; Tsakona *et al.* 2020 forthcoming).

How exactly does humour enter this picture? Why do speakers resort to humour to express their ambivalent feelings and views? The answers to such questions lie in the sociopragmatic functions of humour. Humour is often employed to portray humourists under a favourable light by juxtaposing them to the victims of their humour, who are portrayed as 'inferior' and 'inadequate'. This is what the *superiority/aggression theory of humour* claims (see among others Raskin 1985; Attardo 1994; Morreall 2009; also section 4). Humour is perceived as an aggressive act of speakers perceiving and constructing themselves as superior to the entities they target through their humour: mostly other people who supposedly exhibit foibles or do not perform their roles 'properly', but also 'false' or 'faulty' ideas, situations which are below speakers' expectations, etc.

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

This theory is intricately connected with the *incongruity theory of humour*, suggesting that humour stems from a deviation from what is conventionally expected in a certain context. Humour results from perceiving an act, person, situation, idea, etc. as abnormal, unexpected, or impossible; in other words, as contradicting what we consider conventional or expected in specific circumstances. The entities perceived and framed as responsible for this deviation/contradiction are the victims or *targets* of humour (see superiority theory above; on incongruity theories of humour, see among others Raskin 1985; Attardo 1994; Morreall 2009).

These theories are frequently used to analyse humour, so here I will employ analytical tools associated with them. More specifically, I will employ the concepts of *target* and *script opposition* (see the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* in Attardo 1994; 2001; also Raskin 1985). The first one originates in the superiority theory of humour, while the second one accounts for incongruity in semantico-pragmatic terms: incongruity emerges from the opposition between two overlapping scripts evoked within a single (humorous) text[4]. The first script is usually 'expected', 'normal', or 'conventional' in a specific context, while the second one is 'unexpected', 'abnormal', or 'unconventional', subverting or even cancelling the meanings evoked within the first script and context in general.

So, in a *racist humorous text*, humour usually targets those who are perceived as different and incongruous (e.g. ethnic or religious minorities, migrants) and represents them in a deviating and simultaneously denigrating manner. As already mentioned (in sections 2 and 4), humour is an effective discursive strategy for those speakers who wish to mitigate face threats, release emotions, offer criticism, and attenuate relations of power and power abuse. When it comes to racist views and feelings, humour may be employed to release hostile or deprecatory emotions towards certain social groups (e.g. migrants) and to offer criticism (e.g. because migrants do not 'belong to' a certain host community or do not assimilate to it, thus they would rather be expelled). The non-serious, entertaining dimension of humour is useful in attenuating or disguising such hostility, criticism, or power abuse against the targeted groups and may eventually save the face of all parties involved. Racists may claim that their humour is 'just for fun' and has no 'serious' intentions or implications (thus avoiding – or at least trying to avoid – being overtly characterised as racists). On the other hand, the victims of racist humour may not be offended as the hostility or denigration humorously expressed at their expense was not 'seriously intended': it was 'only a joke' without 'serious' repercussions or 'sincere' harmful intentions. Hence, liquid

[4] The terms *incongruity* and *script opposition* are therefore used interchangeably.

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

racism surfaces as speakers may oscillate between the presence or absence of racism by relying on the ambiguity of humour (i.e. its playful or serious intentions and meanings; see among others Billig 2001; 2005a; Santa Ana 2009; Chun and Walters 2011; Weaver 2011; 2013; 2016; Sue and Golash-Boza 2013; Archakis and Tsakona 2019).

Interestingly, liquid racism may surface in *anti-racist humorous texts* as well. In such texts, it is the racists and their views and practices that become the object/target of humorous attack and denigration. Anti-racist humour frames racist acts and values as abnormal and incongruous. Still, in some cases, anti-racist humour may end up reproducing racist ideologies and discrimination (see Weaver 2016; Archakis *et al.* 2018). As a result, the distinction between a racist and an anti-racist humorous text may not be as straightforward as it seems.

Without underestimating the important negative sociopragmatic effects of racist humour, the present study focuses on humour intended as anti-racist and sometimes including instances of liquid racism. As already mentioned, liquid racism is not uncommon in humorous texts, but could be difficult to detect and refute. So, in what follows, I analyse a few examples using the concepts of *script opposition* and *target* so as to demonstrate that the humour employed in a comic book promoted as anti-racist educational material may not necessarily target racists and racist views, but may, in some cases, lead to interpretations sustaining racist ideologies. Later on, in section (7), I will propose some tentative teaching activities exploiting the same examples for critical discussions in class.

6. The 'anti-racist' data and its analysis

The material exploited for the present teaching proposal comes from a comic book referring to discriminatory phenomena (mostly but not exclusively racism) and created and disseminated by the European Commission as educational material to be used in schools in EU states (European Commission 1998). The comic book has an explicit anti-racist/anti-discriminatory purpose, as stated in its front pages:

> The European Union is determined to combat discrimination on grounds of sex, race, ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. This *humorously written* and informative pamphlet has been designed for teachers to use when addressing the subject of racism with young people (European Commission 1998: 3, my emphasis).

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

This material is freely available online and written/translated in several European languages (Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish). For the purposes of the present study, I will use extracts from the English version[5].

The use of humour for such educational purposes does not seem to be accidental: humour is often employed as a pedagogical tool to improve learning outcomes, attract students' interest, and enhance their involvement in class (see section 2). Perhaps, humour in the form of a comic book including comic strips is employed to render the discussion on racism more 'pleasant', 'attractive', and 'less dangerous'. Still, there can be serious doubts concerning how a discussion about racism and other discriminatory phenomena can in fact be 'pleasant' or 'safe' in contemporary multicultural but usually monolingual classes.

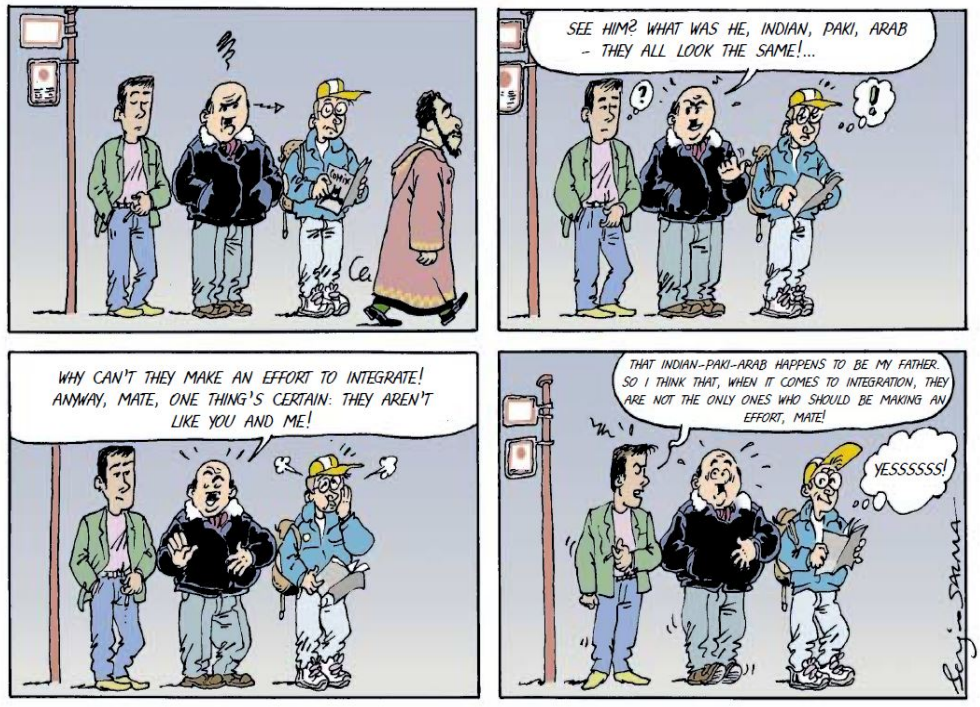
In the following analysis, my aim is to show that the comic book in question does not include only anti-racist comic strips (example 1), but also comic strips where liquid racism is attested (examples 2-3). In other words, even though the declared goal of the book is to be used in educational contexts to discredit and fight against racist ideologies, some of its humorous extracts can yield more or less latent racist meanings. This, in my view, does not entail that the book cannot or should not be exploited for educational purposes. Quite on the contrary, as I will try to demonstrate, its critical analysis and discussion in class could sensitise students not only to how humour may be employed to denounce racism, but also how it may implicitly reinforce and further disseminate racism, as it may allow racist meanings and values to go unnoticed. In such cases, humour may distract readers from scrutinising racist discourse or may disguise racist meanings into supposedly anti-racist ones.

The first example examined here comes from a page titled "Stereotypes". One of the main characters of the comic book, Mr. Nimby, usually portrayed as recycling racist views, addresses two other persons in what seems to be a bus station, and negatively comments on a man of Asian descent passing in front of them:

[5] Except for the 22 pages of comic strips, the final 10 pages of the book are dedicated to information on the actions EU has taken against racism and xenophobia, the roots and consequences of such phenomena, the reasons why racism should be combatted, statistical information concerning the expansion of racism in EU states, and relevant bibliographical references. Although it would be interesting to critically analyse how racism and related phenomena are discursively constructed and challenged by the European Commission, this falls outside the scope of the present study, which focuses on *humorous* representations of racism from an anti-racist perspective.

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

(1) “Stereotypes” (b) (European Commission 1998, 19)



In this example, Mr. Nimby expresses racist views in front of people he does not know personally. He repeats well-known stereotypes about people of Asian origin (*What was he, Indian, Paki, Arab – They all look the same!...*) and about migrants in general (*Why can’t they make an effort to integrate! Anyway, mate, one thing’s certain: they aren’t like you and me!*), like the one passing in front of him. By recycling well-known racist ‘complaints’ against migrants, he discursively constructs their assimilation as a prerequisite for their acceptance (*Why can’t they make an effort to integrate!*) and, at the same time, he denies such a possibility (*Anyway, mate, one thing’s certain: they aren’t like you and me!*).

The anti-racist message comes through loud and clear when the man on the left criticises Mr. Nimby for his racist attitudes and explicitly states that the majority population should also make an effort if the integration process is to succeed. Integration, in this sense, entails not only migrants’ effort to adjust to the new environment, but also majority people’s efforts to adjust to it. Such a discrediting reaction against the racist views expressed by Mr. Nimby leaves no doubt about the anti-racist message and goal of the comic strip. The positive

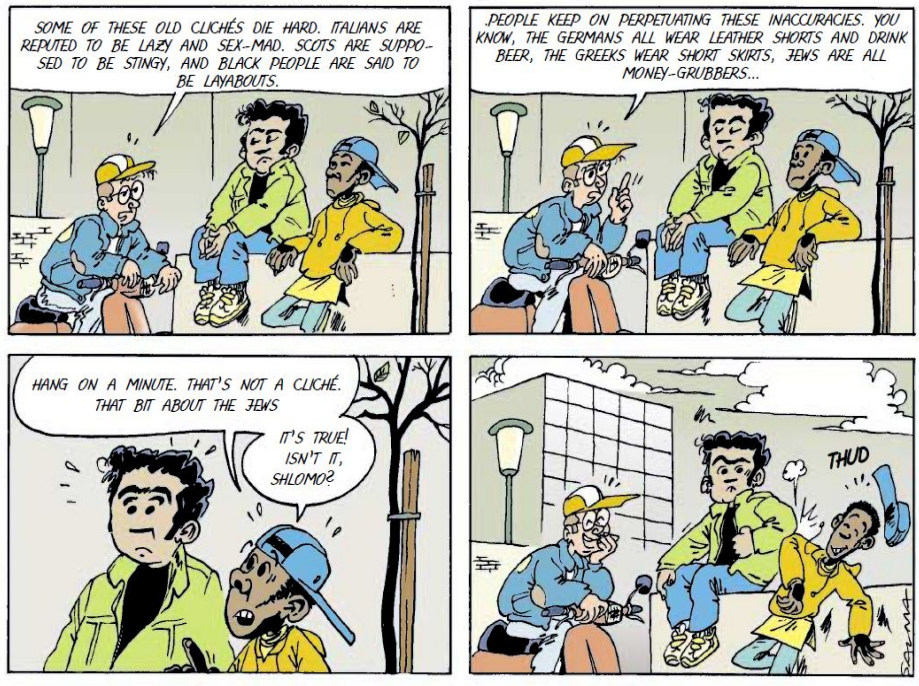
BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

evaluation of this discrediting reaction by the third character on the right (*Yesssss!*) confirms this interpretation.

The opposition between Mr. Nimby's racist views and the anti-racist views expressed by his interlocutor form the basis of humour. Two opposed scripts are evoked: "Mr. Nimby should not hold racist views/holds racist views"; or perhaps "Racist views are unacceptable and discredited/widespread and normalised". Thus, racism and its supporters (represented by Mr. Nimby) are targeted and ridiculed through humour. In this case, the analysis in terms of humour theory clearly demonstrates that this is indeed an instance of anti-racist humour undermining social discrimination and the relevant discourses.

On the same page titled "Stereotypes", right above the comic strip of example (1), there is another comic strip, where three of the protagonists of the comic book discuss racist stereotypes: Freddy (on the left) is the homosexual character of the comic book (see also example 1), Shlomo (in the middle) is of Jewish descent, and Theo (on the right) of African descent:

(2) "Stereotypes" (a) (European Commission 1998: 19)



BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

Freddy refers to and denounces widespread stereotypes about various ethnic groups and turns against those who disseminate such stereotypes (*Some of these old clichés… Jews are all money-grubbers…*). Then, Theo suddenly claims that the stereotype about Jews is accurate (*Hang on a minute… Isn't it, Shlomo?*), making the Jewish character look puzzled. This change of perspective seems to cause the humorous incongruity/script opposition of the comic strip: "Stereotypes are inaccurate hence Jews are not money-grubbers/Stereotypes are accurate hence Jews are money-grubbers".

In the final panel of this comic strip, Shlomo and Theo elbow each other: this reaction seems to be ambiguous, as it is not clear whether they disagree with each other or they agree that Theo's previous utterance was intended as humorous. The laughter on Theo's face is not reciprocated by Shlomo and this reinforces the amgibuity, since the reasons for laughing are not clarified: is it because Theo aligns with the 'accurate' stereotype about Jews, thus targeting Shlomo for behaving 'incongruously' (script opposition: "Shlomo should agree with Theo because the stereotype is accurate/Shlomo disagrees with Theo because the stereotype is inaccurate")? Or is this laughter a way of framing his previous utterance as a humorous one that should not be taken 'seriously' (script opposition: "the stereotype about Jews is/is not accurate")? In both cases, Freddy's initial rejection of stereotypes develops into an ambiguous reproduction of clichés about Jews, where two comic characters (Freddy and Theo) align through laughter against an offended target of humour, that is, Shlomo the Jew. The latter is not only targeted for being a Jew, but also for being 'humourless', that is, for not laughing at his own expense (script opposition: "Shlomo does not laugh/is expected to laugh with stereotypes against Jews").

Consequently, this comic strip cannot be perceived as an unambiguous anti-racist humorous text. According to the analysis in humour theory terms, it rather constitutes a prototypical case of liquid racism, since it yields multiple and opposing interpretations despite its initial effort to subvert racist stereotypes and undermine racist views. It could, therefore, be suggested that this example may not fulfil the anti-racist goals set by the creators of the comic book (see above). Nevertheless, in section (7), I will try to explain why and how this comic strip could be exploited in critical literacy courses aiming at training students to detect and denounce racism (whether liquid or not) in humorous texts.

The final example examined here depicts the (fictional) transformation of a racist into an anti-racist in a humorous manner:

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

(3) “I had a dream” (European Commission 1998, 9)

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

In example (3), Mr. Nimby hits his head on a signpost while walking his dog, and this results in suddenly 'forgetting' his racist views and embracing multiculturalism and anti-racism. Humour is here based on the script opposition "Mr. Nimby is racist/becomes anti-racist due to an accident". This constitutes an oversimplifying and rather impossible or unrealistic representation of the distance between racist and anti-racist values and views: it makes the process of becoming anti-racist look improbable and incongruous rather than feasible, and simultaneously normalises racist views. The target of humour seems to be Mr. Nimby for behaving in an incongruous manner, namely for becoming anti-racist after an accident. This may imply that anti-racism is 'incongruous', 'unexpected', and 'abnormal', and that becoming anti-racist is 'ridiculous'. If the aim of this comic strip is to reinforce anti-racist feelings and values, this may not be achieved, after all.

At the end of the comic strip, we realise that this sequence of events is not 'real', but part of a dream dreamt by one of the main characters, Theo, who is of African origin (see also example 2). A second humorous script opposition emerges: "Mr. Nimby's accident and transformation are real/fictional". Such a reframing further undermines the supposedly intended anti-racist message, as it suggests that a racist person can become anti-racist only in someone's dream. This time, the target of humour is Theo who dreams such an 'impossible' and perhaps 'naïve' chain of events. Moreover, Theo's utterance "I had a dream" could be interpreted as an allusion to Martin Luther King's famous quote "I have a dream", which inspired anti-racist struggles. Its humorous recontextualisation here brings to the surface a literal interpretation, strongly supported by Theo's visual representation: he has just woken up because he fell out of bed due to this 'strange' dream. The emerging script opposition is "Martin Luther King had a dream, namely a vision about human rights/Theo had a dream of a racist accidentally becoming anti-racist" (target: Theo).

The analysis in humour theory terms has shown that this example is also a case of liquid racism, because the 'intended' anti-racist messages conveyed via humour are not unambiguous enough. On the contrary, example (3) represents anti-racist values and views as improbable, incongruous, and unexpected, thus challenging them and implicitly projecting the dominance of racist ones.

In the following section, the examples analysed here will be further discussed, this time as potential material in a critical literacy course about humour, racism, and anti-racism.

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

7. Designing a critical literacy course on humour, racism, and anti-racism

The main goals of the critical literacy approach developed here are the following:

1. to familiarise students with what humour is and how it works in communication. In particular, the discussion in class could evolve around the facts that humour is premised on something that is unexpected in a specific context (i.e. an incongruity/script opposition), and that it is more often than not employed to undermine or denigrate those people, ideas, etc. perceived as responsible for the above-mentioned violation of expectations (i.e. the targets of humour; cf. superiority/aggression theory of humour).

2. to sensitise students to the fact that humour may not be exclusively used to attack racists and their practices and views, but it may more or less covertly result in hiding racism under the carpet by making people laugh and creating an entertaining atmosphere. In such cases, humorous texts intended as anti-racist may be interpreted as instances of liquid racism: the 'intended' anti-racist meanings and effects are cancelled or reversed because of the use and/or the ambiguity of humour.

Taking into consideration the types of critical activities discussed by Behrman (2006; see section 3), here I will concentrate more on *reading from a resistant perspective* (so as to undig the racist messages underlying the 'anti-racist' comic strips), *producing counter-texts* (e.g. non-humorous texts on similar topics; see below), and *taking social action* (e.g. in the form of public presentations; see below). It should, however, be noted here that a critical discussion of racism and humour will probably be relevant to students' everyday experiences and out-of-school interests, hence such activities could be part of a *student-chosen project*. In addition, the facts that the material used involves a genre that is more often than not popular among students, and that this particular comic book is not officially part of school curricula, could lead us to consider the proposed activities as involving *reading supplementary and multiple texts*.

The discussion about what humour is and how it could discredit racism could begin with example (1), where humour is indeed employed to discredit racists and their views (see section 6). The script opposition "Mr Nimby should not hold racist views/holds racist views" clearly suggests that Mr. Nimby's racist views are incongruous and hence not to be tolerated, and both his listeners appear to agree on that. The second generation migrant causing the script opposition with his words clearly expresses an anti-racist ideological standpoint (*So I think that, when it*

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

comes to integration, they are not the only ones who should be making an effort, mate!).

Within a critical literacy course, activities such as the following ones could be explored in class:

Reading from a resistant perspective

1. Is this comic strip humorous? If yes, why? If not, why not?
2. Who benefits from its humour and who is denigrated by it?
3. What semiotic means are used to signal a humorous intention as well as a denigrating one?
4. Which views are supported by humour and which are challenged by it? Which views are represented as incongruous and abnormal? Do you (dis)agree with them?
5. What is your opinion about cultural integration? Is it something that pertains exclusively to migrants or is it a two-way process involving both migrants and majority people?

Producing counter-texts

6. Why does the cartoonist use humour to attain his anti-racist goal? Could we come up with a non-humorous version of this comic strip? What would their differences be?
7. Why would one opt for a humorous (or non-humorous) representation of this fictional incident?

Such topics for discussion could, first, help students understand incongruity as the core of humorous discourse as well as its potentially challenging and denigrating function in interaction (questions 1-4). Students could then reflect on their own perceptions of integration and racism (questions 4-5) and explore differences between humorous and non-humorous texts, the former perhaps being more subtle and entertaining in their meanings, while the latter perhaps more direct and compelling (questions 6-7).

Moving on to example (2), we could bring students into contact with the ambiguity of humorous texts and representations, resulting in liquid racism (in the present case). Various and contradictory incongruities have been detected here blurring the distinction between anti-racism (as the goal of the comic book) and racism (as the effect of humour, at least partially): “Stereotypes are inaccurate hence Jews are not money-grubbers/Stereotypes are accurate hence Jews are money-grubbers”; “Shlomo should agree with Theo because the stereotype is accurate/Shlomo disagrees with Theo because the stereotype is inaccurate”; “The

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

stereotype about Jews is/is not accurate"; "Shlomo does not laugh/is expected to laugh with stereotypes against Jews" (see also section 6). The discussion in class could evolve around activities such as these:

Reading from a resistant perspective

1. Is this comic strip humorous? If yes, why? If not, why not?
2. Who benefits from the humour and who is denigrated by it?
3. What semiotic means are used to signal a humorous intention as well as a denigrating one?
4. Which views are supported by humour and which are challenged by it? Which views are represented as incongruous and abnormal? Do you (dis)agree with them?
5. What is the purpose of this comic strip? Do you think that the cartoonist gets an anti-racist message across? If yes, why? If not, why not?
6. If an anti-racist and anti-stereotype message is intended, is it loud and clear? If not, why do you think this happens?
7. What are the semiotic particularities that create ambiguity?
8. What are the results of this ambiguity in communication? What values and views are recycled through humour?

Reading multiple texts

9. What are the differences between example (2) and example (1)? How does humour function in each case?

Producing counter-texts

10. Could we come up with a non-humorous version of this comic strip? What would their differences be?
11. How would the absence of humour work in this case? Would a non-humorous depiction of such a fictional dialogue be read as racist or anti-racist?
12. Why could one opt for a humorous (or non-humorous) representation of this fictional incident?
13. Have you heard such stereotypes before? Do you believe that they are (even partially) accurate?
14. Would you repeat them in front of people coming from these cultural groups? If not, why? If yes, why? Would you do it in a humorous or in a non-humorous tone?

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

15. How would you feel if you were members of one of the targeted groups and such stereotypes were reproduced in your presence? How would you react? Would you take it as a joke?

Besides familiarising students with what humour is and why it may be used (questions 1-8), this example could once again encourage them to experiment with serious and humorous depictions of racist stereotypes and views (questions 10-14). The same example could also be critically analysed as an instance of liquid racism, as it reproduces racist stereotypes without clearly denouncing them (questions 5-9). It could be suggested that humour is used to mitigate the insults towards ethnic groups, but not to retract them and to deny their 'accuracy' (questions 5-8, 11-12). Moreover, this example could become a motivation for empathising with groups targeted by racism (whether humorously or seriously; questions 13-15; see also Archakis 2020 forthcoming).

Example (3) is also an instance of liquid racism oversimplifying the denouncement of racist views and simultaneously evaluating it as a "dream", that is, as something difficult to attain, if not impossible and unrealistic. Hence, the 'intended' anti-racist message does not come out loud and clear; instead racist ideology is represented as dominant and invincible. The humorous script oppositions identified (see section 6) contribute to these effects: "Mr. Nimby is racist/becomes anti-racist due to an accident"; "Mr. Nimby's accident and transformation are real/fictional"; "Martin Luther King had a dream, namely a vision about human rights/Theo had a dream of a racist accidentally becoming anti-racist". Exploring the use and effects of humour within a critical literacy course, the following activities could frame the discussion:

Reading from a resistant perspective

1. Is this comic strip humorous? If yes, why? If not, why not?
2. How are the humorous incongruities/script oppositions semiotically constructed?
3. Who benefits from the humour and who is denigrated by it?
4. What semiotic means are used to signal a humorous intention as well as a denigrating one?
5. Which views are supported by humour and which are challenged by it? Which views are represented as incongruous and abnormal? Do you (dis)agree with them?
6. What is the purpose of this comic strip? If this comic strip is intended as anti-racist, does it fulfil its purpose? Does it strongly support anti-racist idea(l)s? Or do the humorous incongruities undermine such a purpose?

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

7. What are the semiotic particularities that create this ambiguity?
8. What are the results of this ambiguity in interpretation? Could one tell for sure that this comic strip is racist or anti-racist?
9. Could a racist person become anti-racist 'accidentally'? Is such a representation effective from an anti-racist point of view? If yes, why? If not, why not?
10. Are anti-racism and the acceptance of multiculturalism a 'dream'?
11. Do multilingual and multicultural communities/societies seem 'incongruous' or 'unexpected' to you? Do you know any communities/societies that are monocultural and/or monolingual?

Reading multiple texts

12. What are the similarities or differences between this comic strip and those of examples (1) and (2)? How does humour function in each case?

Producing counter-texts

13. Could you create a text where the protagonist's sudden transformation would appear to be justified and plausible?
14. Would it be a humorous or a non-humorous one?
15. Would it differ from example (3)? How?

The definition and sociopragmatic functions of humour could be discussed in relation to this comic strip as well (questions 1-6, 12-15). But, in this case, special emphasis could be placed on the role of humour as an undermining or even subverting factor: it may create a funny and pleasant story for the readers, but it represents anti-racist practices as unrealistic and utopian (questions 5-12). Hence, students could elaborate on how, even though humour ridicules the racist protagonist and challenges his racist perspective, his change of mind/heart is depicted as abnormal and incongruous. They could also explore how the comic strip represents an anti-racist perspective and world as merely a dream (questions 7-11).

Taking into consideration the relevant analyses and critical discussions in class, students could be asked to produce non-humorous representations of racism-related encounters and interactions and elaborate on their differences with the humorous ones, so as to realise that the use of humour in a representation is far from accidental (see the *producing counter-texts* questions in all the examples; also Tsami 2018). Thus, they could explore in depth the role of humour in such depictions and the ambiguities it may engender, often at the expense of anti-racist views and practices. Finally, moving beyond the production of counter-texts and towards *taking social action*, students could organise an open event to talk with

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

other members of the community (inside or outside school) about their findings and to share their experiences and thoughts concerning the complicated relationship among humour, racism, and anti-racism. They could also attempt to organise a campaign where humour would be expressly (and as unambiguously as possible) exploited to denounce racist practices and standpoints by taking the use of humour in example (1) as a prototype and elaborating on it.

Needless to say, there can be numerous teaching proposals concerning the same topic (or similar ones). The present proposal is a tentative one and intends to show how a critical literacy course on this topic could be designed using 'anti-racist' comic strips as teaching material. Different materials and difference questions could be focused upon in different classes and sociocultural contexts.

8. Concluding remarks

In recent years, humour has entered education either as a pedagogical tool improving learning outcomes and enhancing students' engagement with courses (i.e. teaching *with* humour), or as an object of teaching, hence humorous texts are exploited as teaching material (i.e. teaching *about* humour). In the latter case, the aim is to familiarise students with what humour is, how and why it is used in interaction, what are its sociopragmatic effects and functions, etc. In this sense, teaching about humour is expected to cultivate students' communicative competence and critical skills.

Focusing on teaching about humour, the present study has argued for a critical literacy approach to humorous discourse allowing students to read between the humorous lines, to scrutinise more or less latent meanings, and to express their own perceptions and views on issues relating to humour and social inequalities and discrimination. By scratching below the humorous surface, students could realise the ambiguity of discourse (whether humorous or not), the complexity of humorous representations of social affairs, and the multiple and often contradictory functions and effects of humour. As shown in the analyses of the examples (in section 6), humour may *criticise or sustain* stereotypes, social inequality, and power abuse, and sometimes it may do both simultaneously. In any case, humour is never 'just for fun' and a critical literacy course on humour is expected to emphasise that point exactly.

To illustrate how this could work in educational practice, I designed a tentative teaching proposal delving into the intricate relationship among humour, racism, and anti-racism. Contemporary media and mass culture texts often employ humour to attack racist practices and views, but may end up reinforcing and

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

perpetuating them, thus giving rise to what Weaver (2013; 2016) calls *liquid racism*. In other words, humorous texts intended as anti-racist may yield multiple interpretations, both racist and anti-racist ones. In my view, such texts could constitute useful, suitable, and appealing material for approaching humour and racism within a critical literacy framework.

The data analysed and exploited as teaching material here comes from a comic book created for educational purposes by the European Commission (1998). As already mentioned (in section 2), humour may be used to facilitate some potentially 'unsettling' and 'dangerous' discussions in class (or elsewhere, for that matter) and may create a pleasant and entertaining atmosphere motivating and engaging students. In a critical course dedicated to humour, racism, and anti-racism, it is even more important to underline the fact that humour may blur the boundaries between racism and anti-racism and foster phenomena of liquid racism. The inherent ambiguity of humour may cancel or reverse the explicitly stated anti-racist intentions of a humorous text (see sections 6-7). Simultaneously, its entertaining dimension may deter readers from critically scrutinising its discriminatory meanings.

I have tried to show that such overlooked effects and biases of the material under scrutiny do not necessarily prevent it from being exploited as a useful and suitable resource for exploring humour, racism, and anti-racism in critical literacy courses. The comic book discussed offers diverse material that could be used to investigate what anti-racism means (example 1), how racism may pass for anti-racism (i.e. what liquid racism is; see examples 2-3), and, more significantly in the present context, what is the role of humour in all this. Obviously, humour is never 'innocent' and 'just entertainment', but may instead sustain or challenge discriminatory ideologies and practices. We as critical readers are expected to be able to tell when it sustains them and when it challenges them. This is what teaching about humour and (anti-)racism within a critical literacy framework is all about.

We should not overlook or underestimate the reservations and objections to teaching about humour in a critical literacy framework, as teachers are often not properly trained to design and implement such activities in class. In addition, given that critical literacy is usually not part of the official curricula and material for language teaching, teachers may consider it unnecessary and time-consuming. Open critical discussions are expected to last long, or at least longer than other tasks which do not incite students to scrutinise texts, to reflect on their deeper (perhaps latent and discriminatory) meanings, and to express their own stances towards them. In this sense, teaching about humour from a critical perspective may sound not only unnecessary but even harmful to students (Wallace 2003, 45), as it

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

distracts them from other 'serious' goals (on such objections, see among others Beck 2005; Curdt-Christiansen 2010; Archakis and Tsakona 2012; 2013; 2018; Felipe Fajardo 2015, 40-44; Parker 2016; Tsakona 2020 forthcoming).

Another potential obstacle in the implementation of such critical activities in class may be related to the fact that teachers often select topics and texts that are assessed as 'safe', in the sense that they are not expected to cause negative reactions or confrontations among students (see among others Wallace 2003, 53). Humorous texts and texts concerning racism and anti-racism may turn out to be controversial texts, especially within a critical literacy context encouraging students to trace and critically discuss the more or less latent ideologies and values of the texts and their own diverse interpretations of these texts. The aggressive and denigrating content of such texts may discourage teachers from using them in class as potentially 'dangerous' and hence 'ineffective' material. This, however, perpetuates the impression that humorous texts are 'just for fun', they cannot hurt or disparage anyone: they are 'inconsequential'. Are they? The analyses offered in sections (6-7) have tried to demonstrate that they are not.

Despite such potential reservations, I would like to underline the importance of critical readings of humorous discourse (whether it refers to racism of not). Within critical literacy courses focusing on humorous texts, students may be given the opportunity to analyse appealing material from their own sociocultural realities. At the same time, they may have to confront issues that are sensitive to them, they may be asked to consider different perspectives, and eventually to make changes in the ways they think about or use humour. This does not necessarily mean that they will stop enjoying humour or laughing with it, but they could become more conscious and critical of the uses of humorous discourse. Critical literacy teaching and analytical practices may be different from the ones students and teachers are usually socialised into, but this should not discourage them from trying a different approach to learning and thinking about language in general and humour in particular.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (HFRI). In particular, it is part of the research project "TRACE: Tracing Racism in Anti-raCist discoursE: A critical approach to European public speech on the migrant and refugee crisis". I am grateful to Argiris Archakis and Vasia Tsami for their supportive feedback.

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

References

Ahn, So-Yeon. 2016. "Bridging Notions of Language Play and Language Awareness." *Humour: International Journal of Humour Research* 29(4): 539-544.

Archakis, Argiris. 2018. "The Representations of Racism in Immigrant Students' Essays in Greece: The 'Hybrid Balance' between Legitimising and Resistance Identities." *Pragmatics* 28(1): 1-28.

Archakis, Argiris. 2020 forthcoming. *Από τον εθνικό στον μετα-εθνικό λόγο: Μεταναστευτικές ταυτότητες και κριτική εκπαίδευση* [From national to post-national discourse: Immigrant identities and critical education]. Athens: Patakis. [in Greek]

Archakis, Argiris, Sofia Lampropoulou, and Villy Tsakona. 2018. "'I'm Not Racist but I Expect Linguistic Assimilation': The Concealing Power of Humour in an Anti-Racist Campaign." *Discourse, Context and Media* 23: 53-61.

Archakis, Argiris and Villy Tsakona. 2012. *The Narrative Construction of Identities in Critical Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Archakis, Argiris and Villy Tsakona. 2013. "Χιούμορ, κριτικός γραμματισμός και Γ2 [Humour, critical literacy and L2]." In *Routes in Teaching Modern Greek*. Supportive material for teaching Modern Greek as a second/foreign language, Articles for teaching Modern Greek as a second/foreign language, 4. Sociolinguistics. Centre for the Greek Language. http://elearning.greek-language.gr/mod/resource/view.php?id=308 (accessed 15 November 2018). [in Greek]

Archakis, Argiris, and Villy Tsakona. 2018. "A Critical Literacy Proposal for Exploring Conflict and Immigrant Identities in the Classroom – or How *Not* to Sweep Conflict under the Multicultural Classroom Carpet." *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 6(1): 1-25.

Archakis, Argiris and Villy Tsakona. 2019. "Racism in Recent Greek Migrant Jokes." *Humour: International Journal of Humour Research* 32(2): 267-287.

Attardo, Salvatore. 1994. *Linguistic Theories of Humour*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Attardo, Salvatore. 2001. *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Baynham, Mike. 1995. *Literacy Practices: Investigating Literacy in Social Contexts*. London: Longman.

Beck, Ann S. 2005. "A Place for Critical Literacy." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 48(5): 392-400.

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

Behrman, Edward H. 2006. "Teaching about Language, Power, and Text: A Review of Classroom Practices that Support Critical Literacy." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 49(6): 490-498.

Bell, Nancy D. 2009. "Learning about and through Humour in the Second Language Classroom." *Language Teaching Research* 13(3): 241-258.

Bell, Nancy D. and Anne Pomerantz. 2014. "Reconsidering Language Teaching through a Focus on Humour." *EuroAmerican Journal of Applied Linguistics and Languages* 1(1): 31-47.

Bell, Nancy D. and Anne Pomerantz. 2016. *Humour in the Classroom: A Guide for Language Teachers and Educational Researchers*. New York: Routledge.

Billig, Michael. 2001. "Humour and Hatred: The Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan." *Discourse and Society* 12(3): 267-289.

Billig, Michael. 2005a. "Comic Racism and Violence." In *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, ed. by Sharon Lockyer, and Michael Pickering, 25-44. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Billig, Michael. 2005b. *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. London: Sage.

Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson. 1978/1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chovanec, Jan and Villy Tsakona. 2018. "Investigating the Dynamics of Humour: Towards a Theory of Interactional Humour." In *The Dynamics of Interactional Humour: Creating and Negotiating Humour in Everyday Encounters*, ed. by Villy Tsakona and Jan Chovanec, 1-26. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Chun, Elaine and Keith Walters. 2011. "Orienting to Arab Orientalisms: Language, Race, and Humour in a *YouTube* Video." In *Digital Discourse: Language in the New Media*, ed. by Crispin Thurlow, and Kristine Mroczek, 251-273. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cook, Guy. 2000. *Language Play, Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Curdt-Christiansen, Xiao Lan. 2010. "Competing Priorities: Singaporean Teachers' Perspectives on Critical Literacy." *International Journal of Educational Research* 49(6): 184-194.

Deliroka, Sideri and Villy Tsakona. 2018. "Exploring Identities in the ELF Class: A Critical Proposal." *Brno Studies in English* 44(1): 5-26.

European Commission. 1998. *What? Me? A Racist?* Brussels. https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1066bfab-97f6-45a1-844d-009f1308e9ed (accessed 5 November 2019).

Fairclough, Norman (ed.). 1992. *Critical Language Awareness*. London: Longman.

Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman.

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

Felipe Fajardo, Margarita. 2015. “A Review of Critical Literacy Beliefs and Practices of English Language Learners and Teachers.” *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL* 10: 29-56.

Hempelmann, Christian F. 2016. “Humour in the Teaching of Writing: A Microethnographic Approach.” *EuroAmerican Journal of Applied Linguistics and Languages* 3(2): 42-55.

Hymes, Dell H. 1972. “On Communicative Competence.” In *Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings*, ed. by John B. Pride, and Janet Holmes, 269-293. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Janks, Hilary, Kerryn Dixon, Ana Ferreira, Stella Granville, and Denise Newfield. 2014. *Doing Critical Literacy: Texts and Activities for Students and Teachers*. New York: Routledge.

Jones, Stephanie and Lane W. Clarke. 2007. “Disconnections: Pushing Readers beyond Connections and toward the Critical.” *Pedagogies: An International Journal* 2(2): 95-115.

Linell, Per. 1998. *Approaching Dialogue: Talk, Interaction and Contexts in Dialogical Perspectives*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Lockyer, Sharon and Michael Pickering. 2008. “You Must Be Joking: The Sociological Critique of Humour and Comic Media.” *Sociology Compass* 2(3): 808-820.

Morreall, John. 2009. *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humour*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Parker, Christina A. 2016. *Peacebuilding, Citizenship, and Identity: Empowering Conflict and Dialogue in Multicultural Classrooms*. Rotterdam: Sense.

Raskin, Victor. 1985. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

Rogers, Rebecca and Melissa Mosley Wetzel. 2014. *Designing Critical Literacy Education through Critical Discourse Analysis: Pedagogical and Research Tools for Teacher Researchers*. New York: Routledge.

Santa Ana, Otto. 2009. “Did You Call In Mexican? The Racial Politics of Jay Leno Immigrant Jokes.” *Language in Society* 38(1): 23-45.

Shively, Rachel L. 2013. “Learning to Be Funny in Spanish during Study Abroad: L2 Humour Development.” *The Modern Language Journal* 97(4): 930-946.

Silvers, Penny, Mary Shorey, and Linda Crafton. 2007. “Critical Literacy in a Primary Multiliteracies Classroom: The Hurricane Group.” *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 10(4): 379-409.

Sue, Christina A. and Tanya Golash-Boza. 2013. “‘It Was Only a Joke’: How Racial Humour Fuels Colour-blind Ideologies in Mexico and Peru.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(10): 1582-1598.

The New London Group. 1996. “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures.” *Harvard Educational Review* 66(1): 60-92.

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

Tsakona, Villy. 2013. *Η κοινωνιογλωσσολογία του χιούμορ: Θεωρία, λειτουργίες και διδασκαλία* [The sociolinguistics of humour: Theory, functions and teaching]. Athens: Grigoris Publications. [in Greek]

Tsakona, Villy. 2020 forthcoming. *Recontextualising Humour: Rethinking the Analysis and Teaching of Humour*. De Gruyter Mouton

Tsakona, Villy, Rania Karachaliou, and Argiris Archakis. 2020 forthcoming. "Liquid Racism in the Greek Anti-racist Campaign *#StopMindBorders*." *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*.

Tsami, Vasia. 2018. *Κείμενα μαζικής κουλτούρας και γλωσσική ποικιλότητα: Κριτική ανάλυση και ανάπτυξη εκπαιδευτικού υλικού* [Mass culture texts and language variation: Critical analysis and development of teaching material]. Patras: University of Patras dissertation. https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/42689 (accessed 17 November 2018). [in Greek]

van Dijk, Teun A. 1992. "Discourse and the Denial of Racism." *Discourse and Society* 3(1): 87–118.

van Dijk, Teun A. 2008. *Discourse and Power*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Vasquez, Vivian Maria. 2004. *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*. Mahwah: Laurence Erlbaum Associates.

Vasquez, Vivian Maria. 2017. "Critical Literacy." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. http://education.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-20 (accessed 13 November 2018).

Vasquez, Vivian Maria, Stacie L. Tate, and Jerome C. Harste. 2013. *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Teachers: Theoretical Foundations and Pedagogical Resources for Pre-service and In-service Contexts*. New York: Routledge.

Wagner, Manuela and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi. 2008. "Pragmatics of Humour in the Foreign Language Classroom: Learning (with) Humour." In *Developing Contrastive Pragmatics: Interlanguage and Cross-cultural Perspectives*, ed. by Martin Pütz, and JoAnne Neff-van Aertselaer, 209-228. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Wagner, Manuela and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi. 2011. "The Use of Humour in the Foreign Language Classroom: Funny and Effective?" *Humour: International Journal of Humour Research* 24(4): 399-434.

Wallace, Catherine. 2003. *Critical Reading in Language Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Weaver, Simon. 2011. "Jokes, Rhetoric and Embodied Racism: A Rhetorical Discourse Analysis of the Logics of Racist Jokes on the Internet." *Ethnicities* 11(4): 413-435.

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)

Weaver, Simon. 2013. “A Rhetorical Discourse Analysis of Online Anti-Muslim and Anti-Semitic Jokes.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(3): 483-499.

Weaver, Simon. 2016. *The Rhetoric of Racist Rumour: US, UK and Global Race Joking*. London: Routledge.

BDD-A31268 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.9.169 (2026-09-10 14:04:22 UTC)