

15th Humor Research Conference

2025

February 14-16, 2025

East Texas A&M University

Keynote Speakers



DR. IAN BRODIE

Cape Breton University

JOY, RISK, AND RESPONSIBILITY: HUMOR PERFORMANCE



As a folklorist, I tend to bang the drum of ‘context’ as a critical evaluative criterion for any instance of humor, knowing full well how hollow it may sound to the more scientifically inclined. Humor ‘works’ through describable mechanisms, but whether an attempt ‘worked’ is an ethnographic judgment, and whether the scholar thinks it worked is essentially

autoethnographic. The idea of a joke and its analogous forms as efforts at aesthetic communion as much as they are exercises in humor competence (or, worse, self-conscious displays of testing taboos) is difficult to articulate when the language of the academy is so fearful that expressing delight can undermine the assumption of stringent scholarship. Building on an emerging project about how to take the concept of joy seriously in folklore and parallel scholarship, and using some recent examples of joke performance, this keynote beats the ethnographic drum again.

BIO

Ian Brodie is the Professor of Folklore at Cape Breton University: his research is about the intersection of folk and popular culture, emerging from considering stand-up comedy as the professionalization of vernacular small talk practices. He has written on local song parody contests, local underground comics, and, in what sounds like a volte-face, both Scooby-Doo and conspiracy theory. He is currently President of both the Folklore Studies Association of Canada and the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, and was recently elected a Fellow of the American Folklore Society.

DR. JAN CHOVANEC

Masaryk University

PRANKS AND ACTIVISM: HUMOUR BETWEEN THE FRIVOLOUS AND THE SERIOUS



This talk discusses a peculiar, though not uncommon, humorous practice that occurs when an ad hoc individual action, which can be a prank or some other humorous semiotic act, spontaneously develops into a collective movement. As a result, a momentary atmosphere of collective humorous action emerges within a given community, whose multiple members co-participate in the original humorous act. Their humorous (digital) activism is manifested in diverse ways, e.g. by replicating, developing, and even radically transforming the humorous theme and recontextualizing it to new situations. Based

on the analysis of several collective pranks, the presentation documents not only the functions of the semiotic means involved in such uncoordinated grassroots humorous action but also the gradual transformation of such formal means. It is shown that collective pranks range from playful and even trivial pursuits to more serious political activism that may seek to ridicule and thus delegitimize and undermine existing power structures and hierarchies. The talk argues that with the passage of time, a collective prank may – similar to digital memes – undergo semantic bleaching, and thereby shift towards genericity. As a result, the original humorous act, or some salient formal aspect of the act, can attain new indexicalities.

BIO

Jan Chovanec is Professor of English linguistics at Masaryk University in Brno, the Czech Republic, specializing in discourse analysis and socio-pragmatics. He has done research on the discursive processes of interactional humour in diverse media contexts. He is the author of *Pragmatics of Tense and Time in News* (John Benjamins, 2014), *The Discourse*

of *Online Sportscasting* (John Benjamins, 2018) and co-editor of a number of publications, including *The Dynamics of Interactional Humour* (John Benjamins, 2018, with Villy Tsakona) and *Analyzing Digital Discourses: Between Convergence and Controversy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, with Marjut Johansson and Sanna-Kaisa Tanskanen). He is currently co-editor-in-chief of *Discourse, Context & Media* and serves on the editorial boards of several international journals, including *Journal of Pragmatics*; *Internet Pragmatics* and *The European Journal of Humour Research*.

DR. GIUSEPPE BALIRANO

University of Naples L'Orientale

DIASPORIC HUMOR ON TIKTOK: IDENTITY, RESISTANCE AND HYBRIDITY IN STAND-UP COMEDY

This study introduces and explores the concept of diasporic humor in the stand-up comedy of TikTok performers from diasporic backgrounds, including Vir Das, Zakir Khan and Nish Kumar, among others. These performers use humor as a tool for negotiating identity, resisting stereotypes and challenging dominant cultural narratives. Drawing from Balirano's (2007) notion of hybrid scripts, wherein humor intertwines cultural and linguistic elements



in diasporic subjects' ideational representations of the world, this study highlights how these comedians bridge their ethnic heritage with global sensibilities. The resulting content, often shaped by strategies such as code-switching and wordplay, underscores the ways in which language becomes a central vehicle for diasporic expression on a global platform like TikTok. Additionally, as Davies (1982: 333) observes, ethnic jokes "delineate the social, geographic and moral boundaries of a nation or ethnic group", reducing ambiguities while clarifying borders. In contrast, diasporic humor introduces a new dynamic: it operates at the intersection of self-disparagement and in-group aggregation, fostering a 'double frontier'. This boundary is both internal, reflecting processes of cultural assimilation, and external, emphasizing inter-group relations, where hybridity disrupts fixed identities. More importantly, Mintz (1985) maintains that stand-up comedy has a specific social and cultural function, largely since it can be seen as a sort of outlet for the audience's sense of superiority towards the weaker members of society who may be ridiculed. By playing with cross-cultural elements, diasporic comedians redraw these boundaries in lively and often subversive ways, creating open, fluid borders through their comedic narratives. On TikTok, this process is amplified, enabling diasporic performers to explore and redefine these boundaries on a global platform. The theoretical

framework of the present study incorporates Raskin's (1979, 1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) and Attardo's (1994, 2020) General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) to analyze script oppositions, such as 'traditional vs. modern' or 'ethnic vs. cosmopolitan', which are central to the comedic narratives. Building on this, diasporic comedians on TikTok deploy what Rappoport (2005) terms the 'sword and shield' function of humor, enabling them to deflect prejudice while simultaneously critiquing it from within. Dore (2018, 2022) highlights that the audience's sense of superiority is fulfilled by the comedian's general disparagement (e.g., of others) and self-disparagement. Most importantly, the audience shows that it does not take audience-disparagement at face value. This dual function aligns with the 'double frontier' of diasporic humor, which, as opposed to Davies' (1982) delineation of ethnic jokes as boundary-setting, reflects both internal processes of cultural assimilation and external negotiations of inter-group relations, where hybridity destabilizes fixed identities. This is further enhanced by TikTok's multimodal affordances, as comedians employ prosodic and performative elements to mark and amplify humor, in line with findings on prosody and humor by Attardo et al. (2013). For instance, Nish Kumar's political satire dismantles microaggressions through ironic performance, while Zakir Khan's storytelling blends linguistic play with non-verbal cues, creating a space for cultural introspection. Moreover, Gillota (2013) underscores the subversive potential of ethnic humor in multiethnic contexts, arguing that it blurs the boundaries between insider and outsider by enabling comedians to challenge essentialist stereotypes while fostering relatability. In this way, TikTok, as a platform, becomes a stage for these comedians to address themes of hybridity, racial tension and generational conflict, reshaping the perception of ethnic identity through satirical self-representation. The virtual space of TikTok serves as a crucial platform for these comedians to disseminate their humorous content, which often serves as a means of reclaiming agency and subverting dominant power structures. This study concludes that diasporic humor on TikTok functions as both resistance and cultural production, challenging static notions of identity, fostering intercultural dialogue and reimagining diasporic belonging. Combining humor studies, multimodal and digital discourse analysis, this research advances our understanding of humor's role in negotiating diasporic identity within globalized digital contexts.

BIO

Giuseppe Balirano, PhD in English Linguistics, is Professor of English Linguistics and Translation at the University of Naples L'Orientale, where he is also the current Director of the University Language Centre (CLAOR) and Rector's Delegate for Lifelong Learning, E-learning and Multimedia Enhancement. He is the President of the Italian Association for the Study of English (AIA). He is also the Director of the monitoring group on hate speech online at the University of Naples L'Orientale and Principal Investigator (PI) of the PRIN 2022 Project admitted for national funding titled "ECHOES. English studies to Contrast Hate Online and Enhance Solidarity". He is the BeTwiXt series director, publishing original monographs in the field of linguistics and communication studies. His research interests and publications lie in the fields of multimodal critical discourse studies, humour, masculinity and queer studies, the discursive representation of organized crime and audio-visual translation. His most recent publications include: *The Rainbow Conspiracy: A Corpus-Based Social Media Analysis of Anti-LGBTIQ+ Rhetoric in Digital Landscapes* (2024, with B. Hughes); *Re-Defining Gender, Sexuality, and Discourse in the Global Rise of Right-Wing Extremism* (2021, co-edited with R. Borba); *Homing in on Hate: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (2020, co-edited with B. Hughes); *Food Across Cultures: Linguistic Insights in Transcultural Tastes* (2019, co-edited with S. Guzzo); *Queering Masculinities in Language and Culture* (2018, co-edited with P. Baker); *Gardaí & Badfellas: The Discursive Construction of Organised Crime in the Irish Media* (2017); *Humosexually Speaking: Laughter and the Intersections of Gender* (2016, co-edited with D. Chiaro); *Languaging Diversity* (2015, co-edited with M.C. Nisco); and *Masculinity and Representation: A Multimodal Critical Approach to Male Identity Constructions* (2014).