

**THE LAUGH-MAKERS:  
HOW LANGUAGE SHAPES  
STAND-UP COMEDY (AND  
ETHNOGRAPHY)**

**Joana Solipa Batista**



**CRIA**

**FCT** Fundação  
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e a Tecnologia

PhD Candidate in Anthropology - CRIA NOVA FCSH, Portugal

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# RESEARCH CONTEXT

- ❖ **Influence of language** in humor and research on humor
- ❖ **Ethnographic** approach
- ❖ Stand-up comedy nights in **Lisbon** (Portugal) – **amateur and semi-amateur circuit**
- ❖ **Way of doing and writing stand up**, the creative process, comedians' motivations and frequent themes



# STATE OF ART

❖ **Lack of a unified theory explaining humor** (Apte, 1985; Bergson, 2019 [1900]; Billig, 2005; Bremmer & Roodenburg, 1997; Carr & Greeves, 2007; Douglas, 1968; Freud, 2002 [1940]; Hurley et al., 2011; Martin, 2007; Minois, 2003; Morreall, 2009; Provine, 2001, 2012)

*Superiority* – Aristotles, Plato, Hobbes

*Incongruence* – Kant, Schopenhauer

*Body automatism* – Bergson

*Relief or regression* – Freud



# RESEARCH IN ANTHROPOLOGY

❖ **Ritualized function of laughter and the comic** (Davies, 2012; Douglas, 1968, 1971; Hughes, 2010; Parkin, 1993; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940; Schechner, 2013; Turner, 1982, 1987)

*Symbolism* of the body & attack on control

*Dramatization* of social structure and values

*Cultural variation* and taboo

*Socially accepted* discourse and practices

*Representation* and performance



# LINGUISTIC THEORIES

## ❖ Relativism (Bakhtin, 1987; Lee-Whorf, 1940; Wittgenstein, 1953) vs Universalism

(Chomsky, 1975; Pinker, 1994)

## ❖ *Linguistic* theories of humor (Attardo, 1994)

## ❖ General theory of *verbal humor* (Attardo & Raskin, 1991)

## ❖ Jokes as *complex language* requiring a cultural context

## ❖ Performative formats and the *non-spoken* (Bloch, 1998)



# RELATIONAL RESEARCH AND LAUGHTER

## ❖ Laughter and knowing

### *Comedians' laughter*

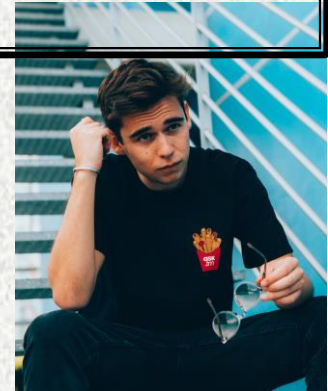
Audience that *personally know* the comedian

*Bergson* – “The comic therefore requires, finally, to produce all its effect, something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. It is addressed to the pure intelligence.”

(2019 [1900], p. 15)

### *Language codifying affection*

Pedro Teixeira da Mota  
Podcast Ask.tn



# LEARNING THE STAND-UP “DIALECT”...

- ❖ ... thorough **immersion or participation**
- ❖ Speaking the dialect equals **acceptance**
- ❖ **Glossary** of stand-up comedy – “*estrangeirismos*”

*Bit*

*Acting*

*Bombing or “bombar”*

*To kill or die on stage – “partir”*



# LOST IN TRANSLATION

## ❖ Different language, different conversation?

This *conference*

Stand-up *comedy specials*

*English-speaking* vs *Portuguese-speaking* shows in Lisbon

Jokes that are *free of reference* vs Jokes *referencing difference*

Modern *stand-up comedy format*, 50's, USA (Stebbins, 1990) as a hegemonic cultural product





# LOST IN QUESTIONING

- ❖ Can use of language in humor indicate cultural or taste variations?
- ❖ Does it signal variations on social practices and discourse?
- ❖ Language creates scientific knowledge; scientific knowledge creates language.



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# THANK YOU!

**Joana Solipa Batista**

PhD Candidate in Anthropology - CRIA NOVA FCSH, Portugal



**CRIA**

**FCT**

Fundação  
para a Ciência  
e a Tecnologia

Email: [a25363@campus.fcsh.unl.pt](mailto:a25363@campus.fcsh.unl.pt)

ORCID Profile: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2089-8722>

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