

Script Oppositions and Humorous Targets: Promoting Values and Constructing Identities via Humor in Greek Conversational Data¹

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Although there is a growing interest in pragmatic research on the issue of identity construction via humor (see, among others, Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997, Holmes 2000, Holmes & Marra 2002a and 2002b, Tracy et al. 2002), research on Greek data has only recently focused on it (see Antonopoulou & Sifianou 2003, Archakis & Tsakona 2005, Lytra 2006 forthcoming). In this paper, we intend to investigate questions like the following: What is the role of humor in the construction of social identity? How could the General Theory of Verbal Humor (in Attardo 2001; henceforth GTVH) contribute to the analysis of humor as a means of identity construction, and, more particularly, what are the useful components of the GTVH to this end?

We will illustrate our points using Greek conversational narratives coming from same-gender groups of young Greeks. In Archakis & Tsakona (2005), we have claimed that conversationalists select targets either outside or inside their group. In the first case, humor criticizes "other" behavior; in the latter case, humor serves as a correction mechanism of in-group behavior in a rather covert manner. In both ca-

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ses, the target of humor reinforces the existing bonds among group members, while bringing the evaluative dimension of humor to the surface. In the present paper, we intend to investigate how humor highlights the implicit group norms, tying thus the group members together and, at the same time, excluding people not sharing the same values.

Special emphasis will also be given to self-targeting humor (henceforth STH) as a discourse strategy used for identity construction. In our data, conversationalists realize the incongruity of their own actions and, instead of seriously criticizing it, they present it in a humorous way. We argue that, by using STH, our interlocutors indirectly point to a positive self-image. STH actually raises the speaker's status by pretending to lower it.

In our study, we draw upon the social constructionist paradigm in order to discuss the construction of identity (see Sarbin & Kitsuse 1994). Our basic assumption is that identity is not an independent and discrete category, but rather that "human social identities tend to be indeterminate, situational rather than permanent, dynamically and interactively constructed" (Duszak 2002: 2-3). Consequently, they are to be treated as "a resource for the participants rather than the analysts" (Widdicombe 1998: 191). From this perspective, linguistic and conversational humorous choices can be seen as acts of identity relevant at different points in the sequentiality of discourse. Our approach is in line with Cameron's (1997: 49) claims that "people are who they are because of (among other things) the way they talk" and not "that people talk the way they do because of who they (already) are".

The data analyzed in the present study consist of humorous oral narratives. In order to define and analyze humorous utterances coming from natural conversations, we follow the GTVH (Attardo 2001). Since the GTVH has so far been applied mostly to written narrative texts produced by a single narrator (Attardo 2001, Tsakona 2004), we will attempt to take a preliminary step towards broadening the theory's scope and, hence, reinforcing its explanatory power.

The GTVH defines humor by focusing on the semantic/pragmatic content of humorous utterances. In addition to the punch line occurring in the end of the humorous texts, Attardo introduces a second kind of humorous lines, the *jab line*, which can occur *in any part* of a humorous text (before its ending) and consists of a word, a phrase or a sentence including a script opposition. In other words, jab lines are fully or partially compatible with two different and opposed scripts (Attardo 2001: 82-83; for a detailed analysis of the differences between the jab line and the punch line, see Tsakona 2003, Tsakona 2004: 267-302).

Moreover, we propose that, at least in the analysis of oral conversational data, where laughter can be recorded and studied, laughter should be considered as an additional, secondary criterion for the characterization of an utterance or a text as humorous, since it reveals the conversationalists' intention to adopt a humorous -not a serious- attitude towards incongruity (for a detailed discussion of laughter as a criterion for defining humor, see Glenn 2003, Norrick 2004, Archakis & Tsakona 2005). Therefore, narratives including one or more script oppositions (in the form of jab lines), but no laughter were not included in the corpus used for the present study. In other words, following the distinction proposed by Pike (1967; see also Taylor & Cameron 1987) between "etic" and "emic" analysis, we suggest that the script opposition is a more "etic", i.e. analyst oriented, criterion for identifying humorous narratives in oral data, while laughter is a more "emic", i.e. participant oriented, criterion for the same purpose.

The GTVH analyzes humorous utterances using six knowledge resources: script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy and language (see Attardo 2001: 22-28). The target, which refers to the persons, groups or institutions ridiculed in the specific jab lines, is of special interest for the analysis proposed. Our study is based on the assumption that, by focusing on the humorous target(s) selected by our informants, we could come up with information related to the function of humor as a means of identity construction.

Since humor is based on incongruity and, more particularly, on deviation from the norm (i.e. a generally accepted convention or a valid convention inside a group), it is directly related to and results from evaluation or criticism procedures. Thus, humor can actually be used as a means of criticism. Moreover, since humor is related to laughter and laughter is often related to a non-serious and playful attitude towards reality, humor becomes a means of attenuated or covert criticism. Thus, conversationalists can use humor and laugh at the expense of whoever has caused the incongruity by acting in a deviant manner.

Our data reveal that interlocutors select three kinds of targets: (1) targets outside their social group; (2) targets inside their own group; and (3) their own selves as members of the second category. It will be suggested that, in the first case, humor criticizes "other" behavior, in the second case, it attempts to correct in-group behavior in a rather covert manner and, in the third case, humor creates eventually a positive self-image for the speaker. In all cases, the target of humor brings common values, beliefs and experiences, to the surface, thus revealing basic aspects of interlocutors' social identity.

In this context, we also emphasize on the script opposition as a knowledge resource, in order to identify *which exactly* are the group values shared by the group members and highlighted in the humorous narratives examined. In other words, the framing of an event or action as incongruous presupposes and results from its comparison with specific attitudes and beliefs about “how things should be”, i.e. with specific norms and values. Conversationalists establish intertextual connections with generally accepted representations of norms and values (see De Fina 2003: 29-30). Hence, we suggest that a close examination of the script oppositions appearing in our data reveals those implicit values and norms keeping the group members together and differentiating them from out-group people.

The present paper is part of a large-scale ethnographic study of everyday interactions of young people in Patras (Greece)². Our data consist of 123 humorous oral narratives extracted from 13-hours taped conversations coming from same-gender groups. The participants are 12 males and 17 females belonging to peer groups, aged between 17 and 20. These data were collected mainly by seven female researchers, all of them university students of about the same age, i.e. 20 years old.

The researchers spent two months visiting the school of the informants at least three times per week. They attended the school-courses with the excuse of gathering material for their own university projects. During the breaks they managed to get acquainted with the students and often developed a fairly strong bond with the informants. They spent their leisure time together (mainly their weekends) exchanging visits, going out for dinner or for a drink, etc. The recordings took place in various places after a long period of frequent interactions. Researchers were also instructed to participate in the conversations in as unobtrusive a way as possible, refraining from interruptions or challenging comments and preferring communicative acts such as displaying attention, understanding, and acceptance in order to keep the conversation and the narratives going.

The analysis of our data shows that both male and female conversationalists select all types of humorous targets, i.e. out-group targets, in-group targets, and self-targets. Gender differences regarding preferences in the selection of humorous target are addressed elsewhere (for a preliminary discussion of such differences, see Archakis & Tsakona 2004) and will not be discussed here. All the humorous narratives examined for the purposes of the present paper are narratives relating

2 This project (K. Karatheodoris, 2425) is funded by the Research Committee of the University of Patras (Greece).

authentic personal experiences or recycling funny stories heard elsewhere (cf. Norrick 1993: 45-57, Norrick 1994: 412).

In example (1), Mary narrates an incident revealing her father's inability to warm up a meal without burning it:³

(1) M(ary): Mine {my father} when {she} tells him warm it up, my mother tells him on the phone, because she has no time any more, she is an accountant. We are talking tax forms, she's freaked out, you know, she doesn't undertake any housework at all//

R(earcher): //Oh

M: And she tells my father warm it up, or something, the green beans or bean soup, say. Well, *in three minutes, say, the whole house stinks, the underneath, the thing, you know what {the hotplate}, is burnt⁴. Half the house is warmed up⁵ ((laughs)). The beans are black⁶. He sets it at {mark} 3, the maximum thing the cooker can take.⁷ Set it at 1, my good man, so that it warms up slowly. Be patient, man, wait. Zoom he sets it at 3 and the whole house stinks⁸. But I didn't burn it, but do eat⁹ ((laughs)). Mind you, he is the only one eating¹⁰.*

R: He is under the impression he hasn't burned it, on top.

J(ane): Yes yes yes that's right. ((laughs))

M: *Well, it's just stuck a bit he says and you've made a big deal out of it¹¹*

J: What made a big deal you know, the food's stuck to the pot//

- 3 The narratives are translated from Greek. For the transcription of the oral material, we use the following conventions:

Underlining indicates the stressed parts of utterances

// indicates interruption

/ indicates self-correction

[xzx] indicates simultaneous talk

: indicates prolongation of a sound

>< indicates delivery at a quicker pace than the surrounding talk

() indicates the incomprehensible parts of utterances

((xzx)) includes comments of the authors

{xzx} indicates explanatory contextual or cultural information.

- 4 SO: normal/abnormal, warm up the food/burn the food, LM: exaggeration, SI: father is asked to warm up the food, TA: father, NS: narration, LA: irrelevant.

- 5 SO: normal/abnormal, warm up the food/warm up the house, LM: exaggeration, SI: co-text, TA: father, NS: narration, LA: irrelevant.

- 6 See note 4.

- 7 SO: normal/abnormal, warm up the food slowly/warm up the food quickly, LM: exaggeration, SI: co-text, TA: father, NS: narration, LA: irrelevant.

- 8 See note 7.

- 9 SO: normal/abnormal, admit failure/pretend that the food is edible, LM: ignoring the obvious, SI: co-text, TA: father, NS: narration, LA: irrelevant.

- 10 See note 9.

- 11 See note 9.

- M: //We're scraping there. Oh yes yes later//
J: //When you get home, watch it. Let go dad, I will warm up the food.
M: Yes yes yes. OK, you know, it's very bad when it stinks. The food, man, burnt food. OK, I don't care if it's black, to see, but not stink, because you can't eat it.
R: Yup.
J: You can tell burnt food from the taste.
M: I'm talking taste here, how it smells, yes.

In this narrative, Mary's father becomes the target of humor, when her mother asks him to warm up the beans, the food ends up completely burnt, the saucepan is damaged and the stench spreads all over the place (jab lines in notes 4-8). However, her father pretends that he does not realize the extent of the damage (jab lines in notes 9-11). Mary seems to think that this kind of behavior is incongruous and worth laughing at. She tries to ridicule an out-group figure, her father, and appears to challenge his status.

Moreover, the other participants' laughter and comments reveal that the group members agree on the evaluation of the out-group target's behavior, thus promoting their shared beliefs and values and strengthening their bonds. More specifically, the script oppositions in the jab lines of this narrative (notes 4-11) point to specific group values: conversationalists appear to agree on the fact that men must be willing and able to share the domestic tasks or, at least, to be capable of warming up a meal without burning it. It should be noted here that, in modern Greek society, many men are still reluctant to help with the housekeeping, which is traditionally assigned to women. Nevertheless, our example shows that (at least) these girls do not agree with men on that issue.

We will now turn to cases where one or more members of the same group with the interlocutors become the targets of humor. The following narrative (2) (see also Archakis & Tsakona 2005: 55 ff) refers to the way some members of a very cohesive group behaved while attending mass at church. Nikos and Yannis become co-narrators:

- (2) N(ikos): Well, we reach the church, there is a crowd all around, actually a very large crowd, how shall we get in we wonder, how shall we get in, {and we tell him} Yannis you go first and *tell them that we are members of Saint-Andreas church* //¹²

12 SO: actual/non actual, they were not from St. Andreas' church/they pretended to be from St. Andreas' church, LM: ignoring the obvious, SI: the adolescents tried to enter a very crowded church, TA: people around them, NS: narration, LA: irrelevant.

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Y(annis): //Please, please we are for the holy bread, let us through //¹³

N: //Now hear this, the old ladies open up a passage by falling back one upon another, y' know, we squeeze through¹⁴ and we cross ourselves and get to the icon of Jesus, such a big icon where Jesus was not on the crucifix//

Y: //It was Jesus with the mantle, the holy wreath

R(e searcher): I see, I see

Y: The stick/ well where he holds the lance and seems to be leaning forward somehow, pondering over the blood. So I go and kiss the icon, so does Kostas, and I hear now Nikos, well guys, asking loudly in the middle of the church of Saint-Andreas who on earth is this?¹⁵ The asshole was confused, I don't know what was wrong with him, he hadn't realized it was Jesus [Christ]¹⁶

N: ((laughter))

Y: You asshole I tell him, do wake up, it's Jesus Christ I tell him, can't you see that?¹⁷ What's that you are saying guys, this can't be Jesus¹⁸.

N: ((laughter))

Y: Look man I tell him, it's Jesus all right, and he stood gaping.¹⁹

N: I was stuck, man!²⁰

Y: It was Jesus Christ, you asshole.

N: I'll go have a second look²¹.

The script oppositions in narrative (2) are based on the following facts: firstly, the young men pretend to be carrying holy bread, in order to pass through the crowd and get inside the over-crowded church (jab lines in notes 12-14); secondly, one of them, Nikos, does not recognize Christ's figure on an icon (jab lines in notes 15-21). In jab lines 12-14, there is an out-group target of humor, since the adolescents laugh at the people they tried to fool by pretending to be carrying holy bread. However, in the majority of jab lines (notes 15-21), the target is Nikos, a group member, who is also a co-narrator and is actually recorded to be laughing at himself.

The most important aspect in such cases is the fact that, at least in our data, no in-group targeting humor actually results in a row or a fight between the group

13 See note 12.

14 See note 12.

15 SO: normal/abnormal, people recognize Christ's figure/Nikos did not recognize it, LM: exaggeration, SI: co-text, TA: Nikos, NS: narration, LA: irrelevant.

16 See note 15.

17 See note 15.

18 See note 15.

19 See note 15.

20 SO: normal/abnormal, people recognize Christ's figure/Nikos did not recognize it, LM: exaggeration, SI: co-text, TA: Nikos, NS: statement, LA: irrelevant.

21 See note 20.

members, although, since one or more group members laugh at the expense of another one (whether absent or present), a quarrel would be a possible and even expected outcome. However, the absence of a clash does not mean that humor loses its evaluative force (as described in section 3.). On the contrary, it enables the group members to negotiate their beliefs and values and reach an agreement on their evaluation(s). More importantly, the bonds between the group members emerge as too strong to be threatened by such negative evaluation and criticism, even if the group itself is targeted. Therefore, the in-group target of humor and the laughter caused by it essentially highlight the intimacy shared by the group members and the safety they feel while "attacking" their friend's deviant behavior. Conversationists who share an intimate relationship commonly use humor in their attempt to correct or modify each other's behavior without jeopardizing the already existing close relationship (see also Norrick 1993: 56-57, Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997: 280, Holmes 2000: 174, Lytra 2006 forthcoming).

Furthermore, a close look at the script oppositions on which humor is based reveals what is considered to be "acceptable" behavior within group boundaries. These young men allow themselves to fool other (out-group) people while in church by pretending to be carrying holy bread (jab lines in notes 12-14). However, the fact that they frame this kind of behavior as incongruous indicates that they are aware of the conventional norms they should have followed and, most importantly, that they choose to violate them as a means to construct their group identity. At the same time, they all agree that it is inadmissible (and thus incongruous) not to recognize Christ's figure on an icon (jab lines in notes 15-21). Even Nikos who did not recognize Christ's figure (becoming thus an in-group target) does not try to deny the implied norm (i.e. that he should have recognized it), so as to play down the significance of his failure, but instead he attributes it to a temporary lapse of concentration (*I was stuck, man!*, in jab line 20). In other words, humorous utterances help us identify the norms implicitly adopted by group members and constructing their group identity.

To sum up the discussion up to now, in our data humor functions at least in two parallel but different ways: a) as a device for criticizing people either inside or outside the group, and b) as a positive politeness strategy (see Brown & Levinson 1987) reinforcing the group bonds. The critical function of humor highlights the deviation observed outside or inside the group and, hence, indicates what is considered "socially accepted" behavior by the humorist(s). The solidarity-reinforcing function of humor is closely related to and actually results from the critical function: When the target is a respectable or authoritative person or an institution outsi-

de the group, the young friends form a unity against this particular person or institution. When the target is a person inside the group, the threat is avoided due to the raised protective solidarity among the co-participants enjoying a close relationship. Finally, it seems that, via the humorous narratives, conversationalists propose a specific and common interpretative framework for their actions, which brings their (often implicit) beliefs to the surface and allows access to group norms and values (cf. Tracy et al. 2002).

In what follows we focus on narratives where the narrator becomes the target of humor, i.e. s/he is “attacking” him/herself in *what seems to be* a self-disparaging manner. In example (3), the narrator (Dinos) is describing his behavior during the additional courses provided by the school for the benefit of students who perform poorly, so that they could improve their grades. These courses were a recent addition to the school schedule at the time and few students were willing to attend. Although the narrator is a member of a “deviant” and “underground” group of adolescents, he shows an unexpected interest in these courses and then tries to justify it by saying that the main reason for his interest in these courses was the food and drink provided for free (because the courses were taking place after hours, when most of the students go back home for lunch). Furthermore, since the narrator was not really interested in the courses, he was not making any serious effort to provide the teacher with a proper reply to her questions:

- (3) D(inos): I was going to the supplementary courses last year//
 R(earcher)1://Supplementary courses? What's that?
 D: A supporting school inside the [standard school]
 R2: [yeah]
 R1: Hey fuck//
 R2: //Has it finally been established inside the school as well? Does anybody go? As if//
 D: //I was going just for the food, cause they were giving food too, a coke and some sandwiches and I say to myself why not go?²² ((laughter))
 R2: In order to attract the students.
 D: Anyway, I went there and sometimes I would get in and, you know, the teacher asked me a couple of times, and I would throw some irrelevant answers to her²³ and then, you know, she asks so-

22 SO: normal/abnormal, he was interested in improving his records/he was only interested in the food, LM: juxtaposition, SI: the narrator attended some additional courses expected to improve his school records, TA: narrator, NS: narration, LA: irrelevant.

23 SO: normal/abnormal, he was interested in improving his records/he wasn't making any effort to participate in the course, LM: juxtaposition, SI: co-text, TA: narrator, NS: narration, LA: irrelevant.

mething and/ she was wondering *should I ask you?, shouldn't I ask you? What should I do now?*²⁴ and I told her *go ahead and ask, there is no problem, I told her some shit, ok*²⁵.

In example (3), the narrator emphasizes his refusal to think and act in a “proper” and “socially acceptable” way (jab lines in notes 22-25), since he is not at all interested in improving his school performance. The script oppositions appearing in this narrative point to the implicit (socially accepted) norms violated here: students should be interested in school courses, willing to participate in them and learn, and they should also show respect for their teachers. Thus, the narrator highlights his “deviant” behavior by using humor and eliciting laughter.

Such behavior is very common in our data. Speakers use STH when they narrate their “socially unacceptable” acts, which could elicit criticism or rejection from the audience. The narrators present their “misconduct” as a source of incongruity so as to elicit *laughter* from the audience, *instead of* pure criticism or rejection. It is crucial to point out here that their behavior is presumably judged to be incongruous (and thus humorous) not on the basis of in-group norms, but on the basis of *out-group norms* (see above). From this perspective, our informants’ actions are resulting neither from embarrassment nor from weakness, as previous research has claimed (see, among others, McGhee 1979: 210-207, Purdie 1993: 65, Kotthoff 2000). On the contrary, their actions are usually presented as *deliberate norm-breaking acts* showing that they are fully aware of the existing norms and values, which they, nevertheless, choose to ignore.

Therefore, we argue that, at least in our data, the use of STH actually raises the speaker’s status by pretending to lower it. The creation and maintenance of a humorous frame (cf. Raskin’s 1985 “non-bona-fide mode of communication” and Mulkey’s 1988 “humorous mode”) seems a most appropriate means to that end. If someone really wanted to sincerely and severely criticize him/herself in front of others, s/he could sustain a non-humorous frame of discourse. In other words, if the speaker did not use *humor* to criticize him/herself, s/he would damage his/her positive face (see Brown & Levinson 1987) and would probably give the audience the opportunity to do the same by responding to his/her criticism in an equally serious manner.

Conversational evidence supporting the claim that STH is *not* a face-threatening act (see Brown & Levinson 1987) is found in the audience reaction. In our data, we

24 See note 23.

25 See note 23.

found a variety of such audience responses to STH ranging from complete lack of reaction to the narrator's laughter, including supportive utterances (like "OK", "yes" etc.), utterances repeating or elaborating on the previous one, humorous or non humorous comments on the narrative and requests for elaboration on a certain aspect/point of the narrated event(s) (see narrative 3). None of these responses is ever turned against the speaker's face. In other words, it should be underlined that, at least in our data, the audience *never* attacks the speaker *on the basis of* his/her own STH, supporting thus the socially accepted norms and values. Thus, STH is not perceived by the audience as a self-attack, but rather as a way of creating a positive -even brave- self-image.

Focusing on laughter as a response to STH, notice that it is usually supposed to show agreement with the self-deprecating content of the humorous utterance (Priego-Valverde 2004) and it is, therefore, considered as an act threatening the humorist's positive face. In the humor literature, it is claimed that, in order to show solidarity, one would rather offer sympathy and understanding or contradict the speaker's self-attack (Hay 2001: 63-64). However, in our data, no laughter response appears to be taken by any conversationalist as a face-threatening act, thus leading the current speaker to an excuse in order to protect his/her positive face or resulting in a quarrel between the participants. Moreover, nobody offers sympathy or contradicts the speaker's humorous self-attack, giving thus sign that they understand the speaker as sincerely criticizing him/herself. In other words, in our data most of the times both speaker and audience seem to work towards the maintenance of the humorous frame.

We should also point out that, since the audience do not adopt any serious (threatening or supportive) reaction canceling the humorous frame and since they do not react as threatened or in support of the (violated) social norms, it seems much easier for them to actually enjoy the humorous narration and, consequently, to appreciate the humorist who actually manages to attract the attention of others to him/herself. In this light, STH can be seen as a device raising the narrator's status and, at the same time, contributing to bonding, i.e. the maintenance and reinforcement of solidarity bonds among the participants.

To sum up, STH, at least in our data, does not reveal low self-esteem or modesty. On the contrary, the humorous frame gives the opportunity to the speaker to present a positive self-image, i.e. an image of a strong and brave person who defies the social norms. Therefore, based on our data and terminologically speaking, we could claim that this kind of humor is neither "literally" *at one's own expense* (as La Fave et al. 1996, Kotthoff 2000 call it) nor *self-deprecating* (in Davis 1993) nor *self-de-*

*precat*ing (in Lampert & Ervin-Tripp 1998, Holmes 2000, Hay 2001, Priego-Valverde 2004) nor *self-denigrating* (in Zajdman 1995, Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997) nor *self-disparaging* (in McGhee 1979, Ross 1998) nor *self-mocking* (in Norrick 1993, Kotthoff 2000). It is definitely *self-directed* (in Zajdman 1995) and *self-addressed* (in Bonaiuto et al. 2003), but it can actually become *self-projecting* and *self-enhancing*.

What we propose in the present paper is a new approach to the analysis of humorous conversational data. The present study suggests that the GTVH can actually be applied not only to written texts, but also to oral conversational data. The GTVH appears to be a useful tool for recognizing humorous utterances on the basis of their semantic/pragmatic content rather than solely on their paralinguistic features. Furthermore, our approach, by focusing on the target of humor, contributes to the description of its social meaning and function. And it is this knowledge resource that can reveal the “bonding” and “biting” -in Boxer & Cortés-Conde’s (1997) terms- function of humor, which renders it a very flexible device for the construction of identity (see also Archakis & Tsakona 2005).

More particularly, we have shown that the target of humor brings the evaluative dimension of humor to the surface and, hence, distinguishes between what our young informants consider overtly or covertly “appropriate” behavior from what they consider “inappropriate” behavior. Thus, humor contributes to the reinforcement of the groups bonds, firstly by bringing the participants together against the targeted other(s), secondly by protecting the in-group targeted member and, thirdly, by creating a positive image for the self-targeting humorist.

Moreover, humor provides information regarding the humorists’ shared beliefs, values and bonds, and, hence, proves to be a very efficient means for the participants’ identity construction. The identification and close examination of the script oppositions forming the basis of the humorous utterances *intertextually* points out the specific (often implicit) values and norms negotiated and eventually shared by conversationalists. These values keep the group members close together and define the boundaries between “us” (i.e. in-group people) and “them” (out-group people). At this point, we suggest that the “in-group” identity constructed via humor by our informants as members of peer groups and foregrounded in their encounters is in line with the importance attached to in-group relations by Greek people in general. Sifianou (1992: 41) has claimed that, in Greek interactions, “very often the individual’s needs, desires, expectations, and even actions are determined by considering those of the other members of the in-group. [...] The behavior of other clo-

sely related members of the in-group contributes greatly to the overall picture of every individual's face" (see also Tzanne 2001).

Furthermore, drawing upon the social constructionist paradigm (see Sarbin & Kitsuse 1994), our basic assumption is that identity is something that people negotiate and co-construct in interactions, rather than something they are. In other words, identities emerge from situated discourse and are dynamically constructed by conversationalists in specific contexts. In this framework, linguistic and conversational humorous choices can be seen as acts of identity, i.e. as discursive strategies by means of which people can construct their situated sense of identity (see Holmes & Marra 2002: 378, Tracy et al. 2002, Lytra 2006 forthcoming). Our analysis brings three types of humorous target to the surface: out-group target, in-group target and self-target. These three types are related to different ways of identity construction: in the cases of out- and in-group targets, the speaker eventually de-legitimizes those others, while, through self-targeting humor, the speaker aims at legitimizing him/herself and his/her own actions (cf. van Dijk, 1998: 259 ff). More particularly, we argue that through out- and in-group targets interlocutors de-legitimize people acting in an incongruous/deviant manner, while through self-targeting humor the speaker legitimizes him/herself, by laughing at his/her own incongruous acts.

Our findings seem to show how humorous narratives can function as an index of the identity of the narrators, as a linguistic lens through which to discover peoples' portraits, i.e. their views of themselves and of others as situated in a social structure (cf. Schiffrin 1996: 170, 199).

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Script Oppositions and Humorous Targets: Promoting Values and Constructing Identities via Humor in Greek Conversational Data

Recent pragmatic research focuses on the issue of identity construction via humor. In this paper, we intend to investigate how could the General Theory of Verbal Humor (in Attardo 2001, henceforth GTVH) contribute to the analysis of humor as a means of identity construction.

Among the six knowledge resources proposed by the GTVH we focus on target and script opposition. The first one helps us identify whose behavior our young informants consider incongruous and, at the same time, worth laughing at. The second one reveals the specific (and often implicit) norms and values shared by conversationalists.

We illustrate our points using Greek conversational narratives coming from same-gender groups of young Greek males and females. We show that, in our data, conversationalists select targets either outside or inside their group. Special emphasis is given to self-targeting humor (henceforth STH) and its function as a discourse strategy used for identity construction. Previous research on this kind of humor has revealed that STH can be interpreted as an index of either lack or presence of self-confidence and self-esteem. Our data show that, by using STH, our interlocutors indirectly point to a positive self-image. In all cases, the target of humor reinforces the existing bonds among group members, while bringing the evaluative dimension of humor to the surface and revealing the group values.

Finally, our analysis brings an interesting pragmatic difference to the surface. This difference is related to the effect of humor on the identities constructed: through humor directed at other people's behavior (in the cases of out- and in-group targets), the speaker eventually de-legitimizes those others, while, through self-targeting humor, the speaker aims at legitimizing him/herself and his/her own actions.

Key words: *Humor, General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), jab line, conversational narrative, script opposition, target (of humor), laughter, construction of identity, face, self-targeting humor, (socially accepted) values.*