

# “I get it, but it’s just not funny”: Why humour fails, after all is said and done

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## Abstract

*Failed humour can be explained by communicative gaps, at either the semantic or pragmatic levels, but sometimes, after all is ‘said and done’, people resist humour for purely discursive reasons. Some may recognise the divisive nature of a humorous text, and experience conflicting feelings. Others may welcome humour purely because of its appeal to ideology, while the text itself may not be considered as being very funny. Then there are people who ‘go along with the joke’ purely to avoid losing face. Political humour is a site of great power, where the stakes are high. For example, Donald Trump rejected Baldwin’s SNL parody, finding his ‘alter ego’ “unwatchable” and “not funny”. Other politicians, and members of the public, however, choose to respond to political humour in diverse ways. The reception of humour, therefore, is more complex than it appears. We might resist humour because of a deficiency in linguistic competence, but we might also resist humour because of literacy competence. This paper will theorise that there exists a ‘default setting’ in a person’s discourse, such that when encountering an instance of humour, we all employ a Discursive Defence Mechanism (DDM), and that there are ‘triggers’ which provoke this DDM.*

*Keywords: failed humour, face theory, Discursive Defence Mechanism, linguistic competence.*

## 1. Introduction

The title of this paper is taken from a comment made by a high-achieving university student who was a native speaker (and expert-user) of English. When confronted by a textual example of humour which students were asked to respond to as an assessment task, the student reported that while she clearly understood the text at every level, from the semantic, to the pragmatic, to the discursive, she didn’t see any humour in it. Or, in her words: “I get it, but it’s just not funny.” The significance of this comment, we can argue, was that humour can fail for reasons *other* than for deficits in linguistic capital. That is, after all is ‘said’ (in this case, we are referring to the semantic competence required by a text of an interlocutor) and ‘done’ (or, what is pragmatically communicated and required of the interlocutor), humour can fail for what are clearly not literacy deficits, but rather for *discursive* reasons. In this particular case,

the student, who self-identified as Muslim, discursively objected to the text's subversion of gender roles, and not with any particular negative emotion, but rather with a sense of bemusement as to why *anyone* would consider it to be funny. Indeed, this student was able to dispassionately articulate her objection to the text, with the discursive hedge marking it as being "*just not funny*".

This example provides a clear instance of a humour fail which is not attributable to a communication issue, as outlined in the literature to date, where the focus has mostly (at least historically) been on semantic/pragmatic miscommunication. What is indicated in this example is, rather, a situation where the person understands only *too well* what is being communicated, and this *competence* forms the basis of a rejection of the humorous transaction. This example of discursive motivation offers an important insight into how people process humour. It is the assertion of this paper that a closer examination of the discursive 'mechanism' behind such negative reactions has not yet appeared in the literature of humour studies.

In order to examine this area of humour, it is necessary first to review some relevant literature on the topic of failed humour in general. We will then move on to a discussion of what triggers the discursive rejection of attempted humour, before presenting a model of this default, discursive defensive setting, termed the Discursive Defence Mechanism (DDM). To illustrate this model, some high-profile examples of aggressive humour will be examined in more detail, to show how people differentially employ strategies under the DDM to defuse the face threats embodied in these acts of aggressive humour. These particular examples have been chosen because they offer high-profile, polarising, and high-stakes, instances of clearly destabilising acts of contextually public humour, but they are also highly variegated in their receptions from the person/s targeted by these acts. This diversity of responses offers us a means of comparing and contrasting the reception of humour and finding the underlying, discursive motivations for these seemingly unpredictable responses.

## 2. Literature review

There is an acknowledgement that the topic of failed humour has been, in general, neglected (Attardo, 2005, 2008; Bell, 2009, 2015; Bell & Attardo, 2010; Kuipers, 2015; Zajdman, 1995). Further, given that the authoritative collection of humour studies by Raskin (2008) failed to include any substantial reference to failed humour, it appears that this particular topic is still in the process of being developed. This is not surprising, since the focus of humour studies has always been on the *successful* humorous transaction, and this situation (largely) persists. Indeed, as Bell (2009: 1825) remarks, while "research on the pragmatics of humour has increased, the study of failed humour has continued to be neglected." Similarly, Bell & Attardo (2010: 426) noted that "there exists virtually no literature on failed humour". It is unclear as to why this situation has persisted, except if, as Attardo (2005: 15) suggests, there has been an intentional avoidance of the humour fail, because "most analysts merely ignore the issue or when they are aware of it, dismiss it for simplicity's sake".

And yet, this paper will argue, much of the literature on successful humour can be readily *repurposed* to illustrate the way unsuccessful humour operates. So, for example, if we use the image of a coin toss, failed humour is perhaps best explained as being the (obverse) outcome of the same equation as successful humour. Many times, the attempted humorous transaction can go 'either way'. That is, we can surmise, *potentially* there should be as many failed humour events as there are successful humour events, given that both outcomes rely on the same 'mechanics' of communication. Obviously, if we can spot, and define, the variables in any instance of humour, we can not only pinpoint where the humorous transaction 'went

wrong', but we might also be able to predict with some accuracy, when humour is *likely* to fail in any given interaction.

We can start with an overview of what the 'mechanics' of failed humour might be. Quite generically, Palmer refers to performances of humour which "fail because of some mismatch between repertoire and audience" (2004: 161). Similarly, Attardo says that humour "fails because communication fails and [communication] fails because systems powerful enough to express what humans need to express cannot be failsafe (i.e. they have to rely on input from the speakers/hearers)" (Bell, 2015: vii). In other words, we should look at what happens in the 2-way *process* of mis/communicating humour, in order to see precisely where the humour breakdown occurs. At first glance, it might be supposed that Attardo is referring to a semantic-structural communicative (or literacy) problem, but the notion of "input" from participants leaves this equation open to any issue of communication, including attitudinal, ideological and other discursive variables between participants. In that case, we might wonder that humour works at all sometimes, given the highly individualistic and variegated nature of human personalities and communicative styles.

Therefore, we suggest a streamlining of these human communicative variables into two types of hurdles for the successful humour transaction. These are: literacy needs, and discourse demands, where literacy needs are defined as the foundational levels of communicative competence objectively required for a person to understand the particular act of humour, while discursive demands are the more subjective, and unstable (not being fixed), filters which people *impose* on others' attempts at humour. It is assumed that this binary taxonomy of communicative variables is consistent with Attardo's notion of "input". It also offers us an interpretive framework for reviewing the current literature on humour fails, while providing a menu for further enquiry.

So, for instance, literacy needs can be viewed as being not only a matter of functional communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Celce-Murcia, 2007), but as also comprising a *hierarchy* of competencies (Reid, 2006; Stevens & Campbell, 2008). To summarise, this type of functional literacy entails a person being competent across the requirements of semantic-pragmatic literacy, from "grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence [to] communication strategies [or] strategic competence" (Canale & Swain, 1980: 27). Bell and Attardo (2010) further explore these literacies and identify seven levels at which the humorous transaction could fail (or by implication, succeed). These are: the locutionary or utterance act level; the meaning, or lexical knowledge level, including connotations; the pragmatic force level; applying the humorous frame; the incongruity level; the joke appreciation level; and the support/mode adoption level (Bell & Attardo, 2010: 429-441). Of course, one objection to the literacies as proposed, is not the literacies themselves, but rather the binary distinction between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS); since the conclusion is that "NNSs do not fail differently, they just fail more" (Bell & Attardo, 2010: 441). This does not take into account the distinction between NNSs, NSs and *expert users* of a language, who may very well be either NS or NNS (Rampton, 1990; Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Nevertheless, we can build on the idea of literacies as being a foundational function of understanding humour. Such literacies equip a person to function across many communicative situations (Bachman, 1990; Savignon, 1991; Kasper, 1992), and together, they qualify that person as an expert (multiple register) user (Hale & Basides, 2013: 58). Of course, while being foundational, there is nothing 'simple' about these literacies (Kintsch, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Quite significantly, an expert user of English must process competing scripts, in the production and reception of humour, where complex "[p]rocesses at many different levels interact [including] reading or listening, syntactic and semantic analyses, knowledge integration, as well as reasoning processes" (Kintsch, 2005: 127).

Indeed, there is nothing predictable about the successful decoding of humour, since even expert users, with their high level of language competency, may struggle to process the demands of a humorous text (Lee & Gunesequera, 2006; Nesi, 2012; Wulff et al., 2009). This is because the humorous text, by design, and by definition, typically brings together unique combinations of “script-schemas which overlap and conflict in ways not required of more streamlined, or directly propositional-content/communications” (Hale, 2016: 6). So, while superficially at least, ‘spotting’ the joke may be merely a matter of identifying the conflicting play-script-schemata (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1994; Hertzog & Anderson, 2000), the hearer must decode not only the semantic utterance, but also decide that there was an intention of humour (Hay, 2001). And, once the intention of humour is identified, the hearer must also look *behind* that intention to decipher all sorts of referentiality, or “underlying inferential processes [requiring] a wide range of sources of knowledge (linguistic knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, world knowledge, social knowledge, etc.)” (Mayerhofer, Maier & Schacht, 2015: 4). This is especially true for persons whose literacy levels are minimal, and it includes persons who are ‘new’ to English, or those described as “lower level learners, whose L2 processing capacities are less automatized”, meaning that these persons are unable to recognize, let alone process, the cues and “nonconventionality” of humorous texts (Bell & Attardo, 2010: 425).

Given, therefore, that the requirements of a successful humorous transaction are quite complex, and that a person must control multi-layered literacies in order to process humour communication, it might appear that a successful outcome for the humorous text can be unpredictable. If successful, we can assert that these are competencies must have been *learnt*, and, if they are learnt, then they are also discoverable, attainable and reconcilable as being consistent with the aims of a humorous transaction in any given speech community. A person who is integrated into a speech community will typically embody, and be conversant with, that community’s practices of communication. Having these literacies as part of their membership tends to predict, therefore, their capacity to participate in humour which is emblematic of that speech community, as a matter of literacy and normalised competence. As with any other distinctive trait of competence and practice, a speech community is defined as much by what the members of that community find funny, as what they do *not* find funny.

So, for instance, Kuipers (2009: 2015) refers to practices of humour which are distinctive from one European nation to another, and from one class system in the Netherlands, to another. Within each of these speech communities, the humorous transaction’s outcome is more predictable, because the participants are literate in the communicative practice: they expect it, and they are also very quick to identify, and respond to it. By extension, these members of a speech community will also identify, and *resist*, practices which are not found in their speech community. That is, people who identify as part of a speech community distinguish themselves, at least in part, by having “different notions of what good and bad humour is...they have different stylistic criteria and standards, and different ideas of what humour is, or should ‘do’. This may lead to different evaluations of the same humorous utterances and genres” (Kuipers, 2009: 220). When humour creates these demarcations of what is acceptable under prevailing communicative practice, it provokes what are referred to as “symbolic boundaries, social boundaries that become salient, meaningful, and often imbued with status differences” (Kuipers, 2009: 220). What actually *triggers* these symbolic boundaries, is not well explored in the literature, however.

Some theorists see the practice of accepting or resisting humour as being entirely, or at least predominantly, the product of social constraint and construction (Hall, 1980, Davies *et al.*, 2008, Kuipers, 2009). This is especially true for when humour offends. So, for instance, it is asserted that being offended by “humour is not a simple individual response...but something socially constructed and used for a purpose [by] external social, cultural and political settings”

(Davies *et al.* 2008: 6). This universalism does not allow much room for individualistic decisions which would defy or resist constructivism. Indeed, the notion of deterministic constructivism makes sense only if we apply the idea of literacies-competencies as being *static* identities and allegiances, or the product of literacy *needs*. However, the reality is more complex and so it is necessary to look further into the nature of discursive *demands*, where individualistic responses to humour offer a more variegated set of responses. It is one thing to say that humour fails because of a gap between communicative competencies; it is quite another to consider whether humour acts as a trigger for the more variegated filters of personality, gender, age, life experience, mood, and subjective attitudes and allegiances towards one's own speech community (or communities). And, perhaps more importantly, we need to look at *situated* instances of humour, when an act of humour produces its own, unique context, or 'moment'. There is evidence that people can be quite disloyal to their own speech community, or they can exhibit conflicted allegiances under certain pressures, if a humorous text creates a moment of discursive tension. That is, different "humour styles reflect the inherently interpersonal nature of humour" (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013: 54), and people (in general, and as individuals) can be very predictable, *and* unpredictable, in their responses. The question is whether we can predict this un/predictability, or at least post-analyse it for common elements. In order to start on this question, we need to look at our first high-profile example.

### 3. High-profile example #1: the Danish cartoons

A prominent example of this type of discursive tension productive of un/predictability, is the diverse set of responses documented by Flemming Rose, who, as the features editor of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, in 2005 commissioned the controversial cartoons of Muhammad (Klausen, 2009; Kissane, 2011; Rose, 2014). The diversity and scale of the responses surprised the editor: while some hostility was expected, the *degree* of polarisation was not foreseen. When the cartoons were 'exported' to a global audience, for instance, Muslim politicians and religious leaders encouraged violent reactions and exerted political pressure on a scale that was unprecedented for any humorous text (Klausen, 2009; Kissane, 2011; Rose, 2014). Klausen suggests that much of this response occurred because the cartoons were posted on the Danish newspaper's website, and thus what was originally intended as a domestic humorous text became decontextualized, and then recontextualised, as an international text and event: "we put things out in a global world and we have these instant reverberations" (Kissane, 2011). As an evidence of the extent to which this recontextualisation became an 'event', it was noted that many persons became offended, without having even seen the cartoons themselves (Rose, 2014: 25). The subsequent violence, where at least 200 people were killed internationally, was also, in Rose's opinion, out of all proportion to the significance of the humorous text itself, and yet explainable because "Everything that appears on the Internet appears everywhere. For humour and satire in particular, the loss of context opens the door to myriad possible misunderstandings and sources of offense" (Rose, 2014: 10).

Still, while the international Muslim response showed remarkable scale and ferocity, it was at least *predictable* as being consistent with the repressive regimes in which the largely contrived responses were fostered. In fact, a comparison can be made with historical regimes such as Stalinist Russia, in that an international incident was magnified by certain Muslim governments which gladly seized on the furore to distract attention from their own suppressions of human rights (Rose, 2014: 25, 94). By contrast, Rose was surprised by the unpredictable response in Denmark. He expected to have more political and ideological support—at least domestically—only to find an *inconsistency* between overt ideology and actual response. In addition, he found unexpected support from some unlikely domestic

locations, particularly as displayed by persons from different (and frequently oppositional) speech communities. On the one hand, he found that comedians/cartoonists, politicians and other prominent Danish social commentators, who had previously and publicly advocated for freedom of speech, managed to shift allegiances very quickly once the hostility increased. When “swayed by the fear of violence”, they expressed “reservations about challenging Muslim limits in the same way as [they] regularly challenged those of other groups in the society” (Rose, 2014: 47). By contrast, some Muslim commentators in Denmark (and the Middle East) showed great personal courage by publicly offering support for the cartoons at variance with (or in defiance of) the subsequent international and domestic Muslim uproar (Rose, 2014: 4, 9-10, 46). Likewise, Rose questions whether the dominant ‘narrative’ of offence was simply contrived, intimidatory and not representative of Muslims in general, since, “no doubt, many people of Muslim background were offended at being cited in support of that view when no one had bothered to ask them about it” (Rose, 2014: 93).

This set of responses, superficially at least, seems to be illogical, based on the expectation that people will act in accordance with overtly declared loyalties and literacies of practice embodied by their membership of particular speech communities. And yet, it also indicates that people, in reality, can be either very predictable or very unpredictable under certain circumstances—in this case in response to a text that was highly polarising, and where actual violence was threatened. In other words, people can present (apparent and real) inconsistencies or disloyalty to their speech community when a specific humorous text creates conflict, or other difficulties, at the personal level, while on the other hand people can be very predictable if they do follow the mandates of their speech community and act in accordance with deterministic constructivism. What is not clear immediately is what would function as the trigger for these discrete discursive responses. The same conditions seem to exist, at least for speech community norms of practice and symbolic boundaries, but people exhibit different responses as deliberate decisions in the humorous textual moment.

What is evident, though, is that none of these responses are *purely* explainable on the basis of literacy. Even in the case of persons who predictably, and ‘blindly’, showed allegiance to a community of practice (since they had neither the desire nor perhaps even the literacy to actually *understand* the cartoons) and thus expressed outrage at the text, there is no evident causative link to either literacy or illiteracy. Rather, these people rejected the cartoons (unseen) as being humorous, primarily because of loyalty or in-group solidarity. This is a discursive reaction which overrides, or even prevents, any literacy engagement with the text. Similarly, other people rejected the cartoons, after engaging with them at the literacy level, because they were coerced into retreating from their stated ideological position. And then there were others, who may or may not have *enjoyed* the cartoons, who made the voluntary (and often brave) decision to defend the cartoons on the basis of personal integrity and discursive allegiance to the idea of freedom of speech. For many of these persons, this discursive response was at the cost of not only perceived group allegiance, but also personal safety.

While extreme, this example was chosen to illustrate clearly the fact that while humour can fail for reasons of literacy, there are often deeper, more salient reasons why humour is rejected. Nowhere is this clearer than in the rejection of a humorous text without even engaging with it, but there seems to be a continuum of rejection also, including when people might very well understand (and possibly even enjoy) a joke, but they feel obliged to reject it for literal self-protection, or merely to be seen as being socially ‘good’. This moral dilemma is referred to by Rose when he reports that many Christians, atheists and others “on the political left” rejected the cartoons as being racist or otherwise discriminatory (i.e. bigoted) towards a minority (Rose, 2014: 4, 34). That is, some critics of the cartoons rejected them in a type of vicarious outrage, where their own face requirements as social activists compelled them to reject humour on behalf of other persons who they constructed as potential, or *presumed*,

victims. Evidently, then, humour can fail *not* for any intrinsic fault in the humour itself (what is said and done), but rather because “disagreement with the *message* is strong enough to eclipse any mirth a hearer might feel [and it] instead causes only feelings of offense” (Bell, 2015: 32, italics added).

#### 4. Filters, power and face needs

Thus, we can observe that the rejection of a humorous text because of moral objections is the result of an agential decision to intervene in the process of decoding humour. That is, we can *prevent* ourselves, quite deliberately, from participating in a humorous exchange, and we are very conscious of having done so. This indicates that we, as social participants, have certain filters with which we discern humour as being benign, or as being a threat, and that these filters are related to face needs, speech community identity, and other features of our integration as members of society. It also indicates that we can override these discursive demands, if we are certain enough of ourselves as individuals, in surprising ways—even at variance with our own speech community. This suggests that interaction in a social event (in this case, the humorous text) provides a context in which true identity is manifested from a range of potential ‘selves’. Indeed, it can be argued that identity is performed, and “emerges from the specific conditions of linguistic interaction”, and it comprises “the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore [is] fundamentally a social and cultural phenomenon” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005: 588). Humour, as a polarising ‘moment’ of interaction, forces people to decide which part of themselves they will exhibit, or ‘act out’, choosing from a range of culturally prescribed responses, even if only to defy those responses as being incompatible with autonomy.

The significance of this specific discursive practice is clear, when we note that the literature has not explored the intentional, deliberate strategies, or filters, that people employ in response to humour which destabilises speech community norms. Indeed, Bell and Attardo (2010: 426) expressly *exclude* this aspect of failed humour from their definition, when they state that they “will not concern ourselves” with failed humour except as a processing failure at the “perlocutionary” or “access” levels. They also acknowledge that investigating failed humour at the discursive level is “much more complex” and that this explains the “lack of interest in the subject of failed humour” (Bell & Attardo, 2010: 426). Similarly, Priego-Valverde (2009: 182), after looking at the idea of failed humour as a matter of either poor literacy or a deliberate rebuff of textual imposition, decides that “Many other factors...can contribute to the failure of humour”. So, we need to identify what these factors might be. We have already seen that they can operate in unpredictable ways, in the example of the Danish cartoons, and one frame that we assert to be salient as part of discursive demands, is face theory.

Face Theory, as developed initially by Goffman (1967), and later Brown & Levinson (1987), offers a mechanism for understanding how important the ‘pull factor’ for belonging to a group can be. A person’s public identity (or ‘face’) depends largely on what others think of them, and it is motivated by being endorsed by, or aligned with, the values of a particular speech community. This alignment between personal face needs and the face of a group comprises, and demarcates, “the public self-image that every [person] wants to claim for [themselves]” (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61). A clear demarcation of face occurs with humour, since, as we have seen, speech communities offer quite precise symbolic boundaries for what is considered to be acceptable humour (Attardo, 1994; Clark, 1994; Kuipers, 2009; Rose, 2014). A humorous text which transgresses these boundaries generates a Face Threatening Act (FTA) for the members of a speech community, and this FTA exerts pressure

to conform to these expectations of behaviour, since “face is extremely sensitive, volatile and vulnerable” (Partington, 2006: 87). When humour *fails*, this equation of face becomes even more apparent, since the person who deviates from the boundaries of the speech community is automatically ‘out of face’, and becomes an additional focus of the FTA for other members of that speech community. So, for instance, a joke which is transgressive, and which creates an FTA for a particular speech community, creates an expectation that any member of the speech community feels compelled to *not* laugh, and perhaps even to articulate disapproval. Similarly, a joke which a person does not understand (typically because of a literacy deficit), but which is approved of by their speech community, also creates an FTA, so that the person feels that they must respond favourably, or risk signalling that they are not fully participatory in their speech community (Fominaya, 2007).

Therefore, if a person steps *deliberately* outside these social expectations by endorsing a transgressive act of humour, or by not endorsing the approved act of humour, they are ‘out of face’. This is a bold, and often provocative, act, since it signals that other operations of personal (or another, external speech community) face are involved which triumph over the collective speech community face equation. If a person decides to align with an external speech community, even one in opposition to their own, it is because there are conflicting alignments of face at work. So, in the case of the Danish cartoons, a person might endorse the cartoons even if it means showing disloyalty to their own (in some cases, a specific Muslim) speech community, because they are invoking another allegiance to, or membership of, a wider, perhaps global speech community, where freedom of speech is paramount. It also taps into a conflicting set of FTAs, where loyalty to a speech community is eclipsed by a *macro* moral norm responsive to an “ideal social identity” because it offers, and is motivated by, a different kind of internal consistency, or “sense of homogeneity” (Spencer-Oatey, 2002: 531). That is, a moral and deliberate decision is made to defy one speech community, in favour of another, because this position rewards that person’s face needs.

By contrast, a person who fears violent retribution might relinquish their face needs altogether in the interests of (literal) survival. Or a person (who ostensibly argues for freedom of speech) might decide to align themselves with the target of humour, even if it means publicly contradicting themselves, because they are able to substitute their face needs as defender of a social ideal, with the face claim of being a defender of the defenceless. Both of these actions can be viewed as examples of a person seeking a resolution of “conflicting face wants” in the pursuit of the reward stemming from “mutual face wants [and] *pragmatic constraints*” (Spencer-Oatey, 2002: 531, italics added). This pragmatic constraint (or survival imperative) is interesting in that it also works as a power equation: these persons *align* themselves with the source of the greater threat, while the person who *defies* the dangers of a position at odds with their own survival, does so for idealistic, rather than pragmatic reasons.

This raises an interesting question: why, in response to an act of humour, do people act in ways that are, superficially at least, at variance with their own speech community? Or alternatively, we could ask, why do people adopt the dominant mode of response, as dictated by their speech community? The answer is clearly not a matter of literacy alone, but rather a discursive, and agentially deliberate, choice. Additionally, it seems evident that people make the decision to deviate, or not to deviate, after all is said and done, as an equation of personal power. More specifically, and using Fairclough’s definition of power as being the ability to act, contingent upon “resources or facilities that are differentially available to social actors” (2003: 41), people will respond towards the social act of humour according to a sense of personal autonomy as framed by their ability to resist or accede to existing and prevailing power structures. This frame tends to support the “Bourdieuian logic” which asserts that only “dominant groups” get to decide the symbolic boundaries of acceptable humour (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013: 192). However, while this may explain the actions of persons who, in the

context of the Danish cartoons, observed the intimidatory power of dominant groups *outside* Denmark, it does not explain why other persons felt sufficient confidence in defying these dominant groups both inside, and beyond Denmark, or in defiance of their own speech communities, which is decidedly a courageous act.

We could argue then, that while face is important, and while differential power equations are important, and while speech community identity and allegiances are important, these factors are really only *predictors* of behaviour in failed humorous acts. They are not consistently *deterministic* for whether a humorous transaction will fail, or even what a person's reaction will be, in the event of failed humour.

To further evidence this, we will now scrutinise this 'grey area' of humour by looking at two more high-profile examples, to see the different ways in which powerful persons (in this case, politicians in democratic nations) have sought to turn FTAs of humour to their own advantage—with mixed results.

## 5. High-profile example #2: trumped by humour

During the election campaign of Donald Trump, one media act of humour seemed to particularly irk the future president of the United States of America (Jones, 2017; Moran, 2017). This was the *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) program on NBC, where the actor Alec Baldwin impersonated Trump on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, and continued to do so on 20 other occasions until the end of July, 2017, before resuming in October, 2017 (SNL Archives, 2017). Interestingly, Trump had been impersonated by other comedians on the same program since 1988, and had even appeared on the show himself in 2015, accompanied by two of these impersonators (SNL Archives, 2017). As a famous identity in the US business, media and political landscape, Trump had been satirised on this program, on 57 separate occasions, over almost 30 years (SNL Archives, 2017). But suddenly, in late 2016, this satirical act became 'unfunny', or failed humour, according to Trump's public declarations via Twitter, during the election campaign, when *SNL* became "one of his most outspoken and popular antagonists" (Hale, 2017).

It seems that Trump's transition to political candidate, and perhaps a more personal intensification of humour by Baldwin, who is described as politically "pugilistic [and] an outspoken liberal" (Maslin Nir, 2016), both contributed to this dramatic change where Trump was no longer an active participant in his own public satirisation, leading to a situation where he felt threatened for power, loss of face and presidential potential. While previously Trump had been tolerant of, if not complicit in, his own parody, he became hostile, and publicly so, in late 2016 until mid-2017, tweeting on several occasions his disapproval in terms such as this: "Just tried watching Saturday Night Live – unwatchable! Totally biased, not funny and the Baldwin impersonation just can't get any worse. Sad." (Maslin Nir, 2016).

And then something odd happened, which might be defined as the product of oversaturation: Trump stopped publicly commenting and the popularity of Baldwin's character declined. It is not clear if these events are related, but the writers on *SNL* (and Baldwin) seemed to feel that the 'joke' had, as predicted, gotten "old with audiences", and that "exhaustion" had set in (Maslin Nir, 2016; Hale, 2017). Indeed, in a type of symbiosis, it seems no coincidence that for some time the parody had relied on, perhaps even *existed* for, Trump's hostile reactions, and that during this period, as "Trump's political fortunes [had] risen, *Saturday Night Live* [had] benefited...from its perceived status as the official television opposition to him" (Hale, 2017). Once that reaction had been lost, it can be argued that much of the motivation had been lost as well. Indeed, even when the parody resumed, in October 2017, it seemed to be half-hearted, and self-conscious, even contrived—despite the largely

positive response from media sympathetic to *any* parody of Trump (Dessem, 2017; Mosbergen, 2017).

This raises another interesting feature of this comedic ‘event’, in that it exhibited all the hallmarks of discursive *alignment*, but also, that there are limits to a joke even when there is a political motivation to participate in it. That is, people who were pre-disposed politically toward Trump would not watch *SNL*, while those who were politically opposed to him, were likely to be bored easily with, or even annoyed by, his continued impersonation. So, we have the admission, from the creators of the show, that the parody had reached its potential, in terms of audience, with one writer noting that “such satire rarely reached beyond an already agreeable audience...The real problem with our country now is that our media diets are so bifurcated” (Moran, 2017). It is also unlikely that even a sympathetic audience can prolong the parody of Trump, since even parochial audiences can tire of the same joke, endlessly repeated—especially once Trump stopped bringing it attention, and giving it existential reason for being, with his tweets.

For both Trump, and his supporters, then, we can see that the humour of *SNL* was always going to be failed humour, but that his public, and negative, responses may very well have prolonged the show’s relevance and ‘life’. This is evidenced by the fact that the overwhelming majority of the parodies of Trump predated 2016, and that these are historically not remembered: a situation probably caused by his complicity in his own satirisation. Similarly, we could argue that once he had made the decision to not publicly respond at a certain point in time (in the life of the text), this ‘silence’ probably contributed to the demise of the text itself.

Whether he could have acted sooner to intervene (by *not* responding at all) in the life of the text is not decidable, but there is another high-profile example of politicians acting decisively to intervene in the life a parodic text, which indicates that it can be done.

## 6. High-profile example #3: misogyny deflated

In this example, it can be argued that a more offensive (even misogynistic) campaign waged by certain cartoonists against two female politicians was ‘defused’ by a proactive, public, and *positive*, response by these female targets. By contrast with Trump, these two female, Australian, federal politicians took the initiative by going public, in a positive way, in the face of a concerted campaign against them by prominent (male) cartoonists, whose work was published in the national press. While it is not uncommon for cartoonists to ‘lampoon’ politicians in all sorts of unflattering ways (and the Australian media has a more confronting pedigree than most media around the world), these cartoonists chose to depict the two female politicians in semi-naked, and typically sexualised, contexts during the mid- to late 1990s. The result was a heated public debate in the press as to misogyny and unfair treatment of female politicians, in which some prominent female politicians publicly denounced the ways in which they were depicted (Eveline & Booth, 1997; Macklin, 1999; Curtin, 2006; Manning, 2008). Certainly, the two politicians could have legitimately and publicly protested about this highly gendered treatment, but they chose to not only ‘go along with the joke’, but even to approach the cartoonists personally and ask for signed copies of the cartoons. Indeed, one of the cartoonists, Bill Leak, was amazed that “some women politicians [would] purchase and display his cartoons [for their] parliamentary office[s]” (Manning, 2008: 135).

We can only guess as to whether the politicians actually thought the cartoons were funny, or whether they made a considered decision to publicly terminate the effect of the cartoons by ‘owning’ them, discursively and literally. What is certain, is that the strategy worked; public sentiment moved in favour of the politicians (at least over this affair) in the short term. As one cartoonist argued, the politicians made a sound political decision in the face of a dangerous

humorous text: “Politicians may huff and puff, but generally those in power prefer to be seen to have a sense of humour—in fact, they often grit their teeth and buy the original” (Moir, 2006). This is especially significant, given that other female politicians chose to object strenuously to the way that they, and other female politicians, were depicted, claiming publicly that they were being “stereotyped as housewives or objects for male sexual gratification rather than [being] depicted as ‘the politician that is the woman’” (Macklin, 1999, as cited in Manning, 2008: 125). If we refer to two examples of these cartoons, as reproduced below in Figures 1 and 2, it is hard to disagree with this comment. It also serves to highlight the difference between these responses and to prompt the question as to why two female politicians opted to not only ‘suffer’ parody, but went so far as to publicly endorse the cartoons—when they quite reasonably could have objected, and perhaps even sued, the cartoonists responsible. The answer seems to lie in the nature of being a politician in the first place, and being a female politician as a secondary concern. That is, they presumably reasoned that in the ‘game of politics’, when “women politicians ask for special treatment at the hands of the cartoonists they undermine the wider claim to equality of treatment” (Manning, 2008: 127). Similarly, these two politicians were probably rejecting the not uncommon, and unrealistic, public expectation that “women will do it [politics] cleaner and better than men” as no better than “a way of minimising the presence of women” (Eveline & Booth, 1997: 116). This would explain the deliberate decision to *not* invoke gender as a type of protection against caricature; they signalled their credentials as ‘tough’ and powerful politicians.



Figure 1. Labor party politician Cheryl Kernot, depicted by cartoonist Bill Leak in *The Australian*, October, 1997. Reproduced by permission of Bill Leak/newspix.



Figure 2. Democrat part senator Meg Lees depicted by cartoonist Bill Leak, *The Weekend Australian*, May 1999. Reproduced by permission of Bill Leak/newspix.

## 7. Trumped by women: how to win by provoking failed humour

The contrast between the actions of Trump and the two female politicians could not be starker. While both instances offered a clear FTA in a very public setting, and both instances were potentially quite damaging to the political prospects of the individuals concerned, the female politicians managed to avert 'damage' by what can only be described as an innovative, and non-gendered, strategy. They were able to consolidate their power, and defuse the gender face threat, by *not* invoking the 'gender card'. By being 'good sports' and engaging with the cartoons in a public way, they actually managed to instigate an act of failed humour for the cartoonists. This is evidenced by the fact that the cartoonists soon afterwards tired of their aggressively caricatured targets. Rather than presenting as "fragile and 'thin-skinned'" (in what could be perceived as 'female' behaviour), or playing "the 'man's game' of politics" by attacking "the cartoonists from a position of considerable power" (Manning, 2008: 127, italics added), these two politicians chose to publicly participate in the humour, to be 'in on the joke', and to exhibit a public sense of humour in self-mockery. This, it can be argued, provides an example of a *non-gendered* response. And it was effective. This strategy left the cartoonists with nowhere else to go: to continue the gendered attacks would leave them out of face, because the humour had already failed, and to do so would presumably trigger a wider, negative, public response along gender lines (perhaps even warranting the accusation of sexist bullying).

This 'adoption' of the humorous text was the same strategy that Trump had *historically* employed, and it had previously worked: he was seen to be in face, and actively participating

as part of the joke, thus minimising any real or potential face threat. But then he departed from this strategy in his election campaign, and it backfired on him. He chose what can only be described as a highly *gendered* approach, that is, confrontational, aggressive, humourless, and bombastic, or using a tactic of “shock and awe attack on truth, decorum and liberal sensibilities [which was] designed to bludgeon his opponents into submission” (Hale, 2017). In doing so, he had crossed the line between self-parody and becoming a caricature himself. Indeed, his electoral and presidential performances have been described by various stand-up comedians, media personalities and academics as mirroring “a comedic format [with] signature elements of stand up” but with a distinctly *unfunny* outcome (Hall *et al.*, 2016: 77). Previously, the *SNL* parody had been almost sympathetic, and in good humour, providing an image of Trump “as a buffoon landing headfirst in his own gaffes [and even] almost sweetly silly on screen” (Maslin Nir, 2016). But when Trump became more aggressive in his public utterances, and then stopped commenting altogether (once he became President), the parody had clearly run out of material, become “exhausted”, and ceased being funny (Hale, 2017). Trump thus moved to an out of face position, to be a target who is so *boring* in his humourless self-caricature, that he had himself become the butt, or model, of *failed* humour. This is confirmed by Baldwin, who comments on the way in which the target of the parody, Trump, could have intervened earlier to put an end to the face loss—by appearing on *SNL* with him: “If he was smart, he’d show up this week. It would probably be over. He could end it. If he showed up” (Jones, 2017).

It is interesting, then, that both examples provide situations where politicians had generated failed humour, but in very different ways. The female politicians had proactively *provoked* failed humour by moving themselves into an (ostensible) alignment with the cartoonists, and thus generated face for themselves at the expense of the cartoonists. By contrast, Trump, through his public utterances and his almost ‘vaudeville’ campaign performances, had ‘killed’ the joke by being a ‘wet blanket’. His satirists had tired of the ‘game’ when there was no clear reward to be had, and stopped the parody before they could lose face: Trump had clearly lost face by being humourless, but he was so powerful already that there was no real damage to be incurred—unlike the female politicians who presumably had made a considered decision to retain what power they had by being seen to be in on the joke. Or, to put it another way, failed humour resulted in both of these examples, not as a matter of a literacy deficit, but because of deliberate, discursive decisions which superficially at least, were not always made in self-interest.

## 8. Triggers and deliberate, discursive decisions

While this analysis answers some questions, it prompts others. Why, for instance, when it comes to responding to failed humour, do we make decisions which seem out of character and which are not, presumably, always in our own self-interest? Why, for instance, did the female politicians choose to *not* act in gender solidarity with other female politicians who had previously, and publicly, protested at such sexist cartoons? Why, instead, did they choose to adopt the joke as their own—a tactic which, surprisingly, paid a face and political dividend very quickly? And, why did Trump, who had previously been ‘in on the joke’ at his own expense, suddenly switch to resisting disparaging humour—a tactic which in the short-term backfired on him, but which ultimately paid dividends for his political career?

What these decisions all have in common is that a person has made an autonomous, conscious, deliberate, discursive decision to respond to humour in a certain way. These decisions seem to take into account the environment of that decision; that is, the benefits and repercussions of making such a decision for face, speech community identity and solidarity,

power relations, and personal interest. And, for such considerations, it would appear that there are specific triggers for weighing this self-interest. Sometimes, as we have seen, community loyalty concerns are dominant and outweigh any consideration of deviation. But this also indicates that a person will make that decision in personal interest—it just means that fear of reprisal or isolation are more important considerations (at a particular time and context) for that person. So, the triggers are not static or ‘set in cement’ necessarily; they may be fixed but may just as easily not be fixed and open to revision. For this reason, the idea of symbolic boundaries is not adequate in explaining why people behave in certain ways, when it comes to responding to humour. Symbolic boundaries tend to be fixed, and set by social forces external to an individual, such that a person might accede to these symbolic boundaries, but just as easily might not. And, it is apparent that people also make decisions based on what is most important to them at that time, and in that context. This can be rephrased as a decision based on an assessment of whether short-term, or long-term, gain, is paramount to a person at any given moment when the humour is pivotal in provoking that decision. The question, then, is what makes a person decide on priorities for short or long-term self-interest.

## 9. The Discursive Defence Mechanism (DDM), discursive alignment, and the triggers for failed humour

The answer to this question might very well lie in a synthesised frame-work of multiple Discourse Analysis theories. That is, we can apply this more comprehensive framework to find both commonalities and uniqueness, by viewing an instance of failed humour through features of DA. As discussed previously, there are many “stylistic factors [which] are hardest to grasp, but [which] probably account for most of the difference in appreciation of humour, especially within one culture or society” (Kuipers, 2009: 220), and it is to be expected that a more comprehensive approach can show at what point each person might respond to triggers which enable, or decide, how they will respond to humour—especially when the decision is made to reject that humour. Or, in other words, each of the DA features in a framework could be interrogated as being a trigger for which each person must filter any given event or text. Priorities in these aspects would explain why people respond the way they do. So, we can use a (selective) taxonomy of DA features as rendered below:

1. The first level of textual decoding, or the set of literacies, at the **macro-discursive** level, recategorised and subsumed as **restricted** and **elaborated** codes.

In recategorising literacies as the ability to decode and respond ‘appropriately’ (i.e. according to speech community literacies, loyalty and identity alignment) to humour intentionality, we can use Bernstein’s original binary set of abilities (i.e. restricted and elaborated codes), since they summarise levels of socialisation and competence-performance. Firstly, each code is representative of a “social relation...based upon some extensive set of closely shared identifications, self-consciously held by the members” of any speech community (Bernstein, 1964: 61). In addition, they entail the requisite *literacies* of each community for engaging with texts, and are referred to as a knowledge of “the totality of options” for both vocabulary and speech (Bernstein, 1964: 55-56). So, while the ‘restricted’ code is representative of *basic* ties to, and literacy pertaining to, any given community, the ‘elaborated’ code represents a *higher* literacy and it “enables complex thoughts to be processed and expressed [allowing] the speaker to move...toward greater autonomy and individuality” (Wajnryb, 2005: 172). This categorisation not only envelops other ideas of literacy as being foundational for decoding and responding to a text, it allows us to see literacies as being productive of autonomy and individualisation.

Therefore, we can view the elaborated or restricted codes as summative divisions of literacy, where a higher literacy enables a person to process more information, and to also be more *independent* of their socialisation (or speech community). Possessing an elaborated code, then, might be a good predictor of a person being secure enough in their literacy, to look beyond the demands of speech community loyalty and identity, to making an autonomous decision as to whether a text is funny or not (more or less objectively, on its own merits). By contrast, we can assert that a person with a restricted code is more likely to feel threatened by the demands of a humorous text which challenges them on the basis of either literacy or loyalty to their speech community. In this situation, the restricted code forms a trigger for ‘self-defence’ and thus it constitutes an insurmountable barrier for appreciation of humour which is potentially threatening to their speech community (or to their level of literacy). A person in this situation cannot understand, appreciate, or even want to engage with a humorous text because it is alien to their constitution as a member of the speech community which they are aligned with.

2. The second level of textual decoding occurs at what can be referred to as the **micro-discursive level**, and this level is highly complex and individualistic, synthesised from multiple DA features.

It is at this stage that we can employ a synthesised DA approach, which includes notions of power, face, presuppositions, politeness, background knowledge, experience, phatic competence, culture and ideology and religion (including ideological discursive features), gender, age, and personality. The reason for combining such a discrete set of DA features is that we can employ them as a type of ‘checklist’ to see which features are most important in an individual’s rejection of humour. It is asserted at this point that these features, and combinations of these features, are present in any population in diverse, variegated ways.

One critical area where DA features converge is in what can be termed ‘discursive alignment’. This is allied to the idea of speech community and ideological discursive formations (IDFs), but they can also be quite overt, and deliberate, individual choices. So, for instance, while Fairclough (1985) stresses the constructed, social nature of the IDF, in reality most people actually *deliberate* on whether they will laugh, according to the person making the joke, or the people in attendance when the joke is made—for personal interests. We are conscious of the social significance of laughing “in company” (Ross, 1998: 1), and pay close attention to: “a self-congratulatory awareness of our own cleverness in enjoying them. We feel ourselves to be...in the company of clever people like ourselves, and...delight in our membership of the closed circle to which the joke can appeal” (Carey, in Freud, 2003: xvii). In some cases, people will laugh because a particular individual (who they feel affect or affinity *for*) is making the joke, and this might be in direct opposition to any IDF, speech community allegiance or other social construction: “...it is logical that people who are already aligned discursively with the textual author are more likely to enjoy the joke...This is because they discursively share the ‘same code’” (Critchley, 2002: 67–68).

By the same token, a person might very well decide *not* to laugh at a joke made by a powerful individual who is representative of their IDF or speech community, because they have affective *disaffinity* with that specific, albeit, powerful individual. In other words, people are complex, and they make all sorts of individual decisions to *fail* humour because of complex discursive triggers. Perhaps the only way to discern where these triggers operate is to visually represent them as a type of checklist. We will return to this checklist later in the paper to ‘map’ how individual responses to failed humour are triggered. For now, however, it is imperative that we establish how they work as a type of hierarchy to ‘block’ humour.

Bernstein's codes (subsuming other literacies) are the foundational level of humour failure, i.e. the first and most important impediment, beyond which a joke cannot pass if it hits the barrier of a restricted code. However, should an act of humour satisfy the code, or literacy requirements, a joke will then be negotiated by higher-level DA features, where it is sifted for its status as a threat, or benign effect. In this approach, we are treating all humour as essentially, since all humour is initially, at least, treated as a threat or an act of aggression. This does not mean that all humour maintains this role; once an act of humour is filtered as benign, and received positively, it ceases to be a threat. But we can safely argue that *all* failed humour fails because it is assessed by the individual as a threat (at the code level initially, or later at the discursive level). Indeed, we can even *define* failed humour as being perceived, and acted upon, as a threat to the person who responds to it negatively.

The idea of humour as aggression is not new; however, there is some dispute as to what constitutes aggressive humour. Freud, for instance, regarded humour to be either innocuous or tendentious, and he stressed that much of tendentious humour relied on being "hostile [or] used for aggression, satire, defence" (Freud, 2003: 92). Similarly, commentators have focused on the nature of hostile humour as being a very specific *type* of humour, defining it as "humour that is sarcastic, avoidant, and disparaging...unhelpful or even deleterious" (Weinstein et al., 2011: 1044). By contrast, Gruner considers any act of humour to be an act of aggression, and thus, "innocent humour" is a "mirage" (Gruner, 2000: 147). It is also asserted that all humour relies on an embedded "impulse [for] aggression [with its] common ingredient...the aggressive-defensive or self-asserting tendency" (Koestler, 1964: 52).

One way of reconciling these different opinions is to stress that there exists a *default* setting or Discursive Defence Mechanism (DDM) for people in the reception of humour. That is, until people can determine whether an act of humour is benign or aggressive (for them, as individuals) they automatically treat the act of humour as a threat, and they act defensively. If they have decided that the act of humour is in their interests (that is, benign to them as individuals, even if it attacks a third party or the humourist themselves as self-effacing humour) they accept it as successful humour. But, in the situations where people cannot decide if the humour is a threat, or when they decide that the act of humour does actually constitute a threat, this DDM, or state of defence, continues. This is consistent with Tsakona's (2009) comment, building on Attardo's taxonomy of 'Knowledge Resources' (Attardo, 2001: 1–28), that the 'target' of humour readily shifts, and can become personalised. However, Tsakona does not closely define this process, saying that while the effects are evident, the process itself is not clearly understood, and that "further research is required" (Tsakona, 2009: 1187).

So, in further (research) analysis of this 'process', we can investigate the phenomenon along discursive lines. We know that when a threat is observed, people treat the potential act of aggression as a real threat, and this decoding of the humorous text relies on the determination that there was an *intention* of aggression. This is because, in the absence of further information, the act of humour, relying on its strategies of unconventional implicature and surprise, causes us consternation. And one conclusion we reach, is that the act is meant to destabilise us. This is unavoidable, because we readily impute *intention* to any speech act, and that includes humour:

In all interaction, the parties assume that each person means what he or she says and is speaking with a purpose...people impute intentions to others...they positively seek out intentions in what others say and do. What people assume is another's intention colours the meaning they get from messages.

(Clark et al., 1994: 467)

## 10. The DDM individualised: high-profile examples ‘mapped’

Assuming, therefore, that all humour represents an act of aggression until it is decided as being benign or a threat, we can use this principle to map how an act of failed humour actually occurs for individuals. In order to do this, we will use the examples cited previously, since they offer discrete responses illustrative of the DDM in practice.

To start, we can convert the checklist of codes and DA features to an indicative image-map, as shown in Figure 3 (below). Note that this model is proposed as a prototype; we cannot exhaustively detail and scrutinise all of the DA features (suggested) in this paper, but we can tentatively explore its application for a few DA features to the examples provided in this discussion. Naturally, it can be tested further for utility in future; however, for now it does seem to provide not only a useful analytical tool, but it also furnishes a predictive model, for how and where failed humour triggers negative responses.

In this figure, the large blue ‘target’ is discursive alignment, or the object of *successful* humour. The coloured spheres in front of the target represent various aspects of the DDM, including the most basic level of codes: the restricted or elaborated code (in grey). As these spheres align discursively, they shrink as obstacles to discursive alignment, and present as enablers of successful humour, since they no longer form an obstacle. These spheres include DA features, such as: face needs, power differentials, presuppositions, politeness, background knowledge, experience, phatic competence, culture and ideology and religion (including IDFs), gender, age, and personality. The spheres are very active, responding almost instantaneously to a person’s discursive priorities. They expand or shrink, presenting more, or less, of an obstacle, according to an individual’s discourse. They also move inwards or outwards, according to the receiver’s discursive priorities; that is, they are activated and expand, or shrink, move away from, or move into, the ‘obstacle’ position as a person discursively responds to the humorous text as being either benign or a threat. The movement of the spheres is prompted by elements of the humorous text which act as triggers; typically, these triggers are moments of recognition, when we identify items such as ‘sexism’ or ‘bigotry’, and these provoke our discursive ‘alerts’ that some cherished moral idea has been breached by an act of humour. In Figure 3, the spheres represent a latent, non-individualised, or default setting.

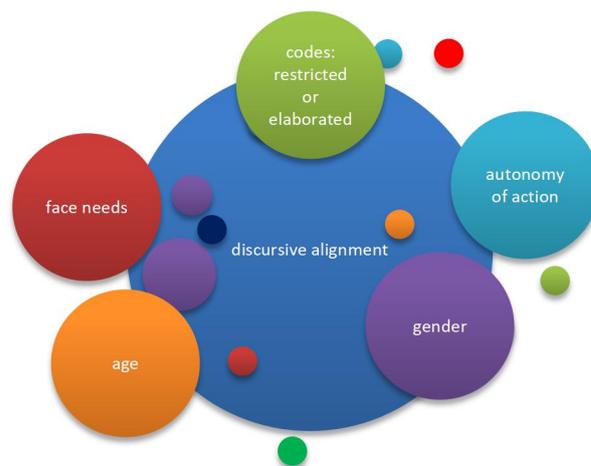


Figure 3. The *latent* elements of the DDM (indicative only) with some elements labelled, showing how various discursive elements are already situated to obstruct the successful humorous transaction from aligning with the target of humour.

We will now present the same map individualised for each of the examples presented in this paper, showing how certain DA features are more prominent than others, and how they clarify why (and specifically where) the humour failed by triggering discursive elements.

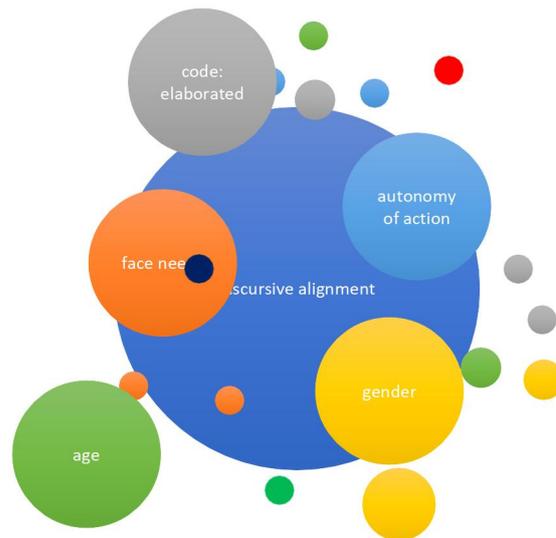


Figure 4. Example #1, female Muslim student.

In this instance, discursive alignment was *prevented* by the expanded presence of face needs, gender and autonomy of action. So, the student, as a female Muslim, identified with prescribed gender roles in her religion sufficiently to object to the humorous text on the grounds of face needs. This explains the “it’s just not funny” segment of her utterance. Meanwhile, the student, as an expert user of English, had an elaborated code and was young, so these spheres are pushed to the side of the equation, signalling that they actually enabled her decoding of the humorous text. This is the “I get it” part of her utterance. But a pivotal sphere of discourse is the autonomy of action allied with a minimal power differential; the student is well educated, articulate and has sufficient confidence in her own social capital and in the university setting to freely express her disapproval of the text. This, while juggling her other discursive needs, explains the polite marker (hedge) of “but” in the utterance.

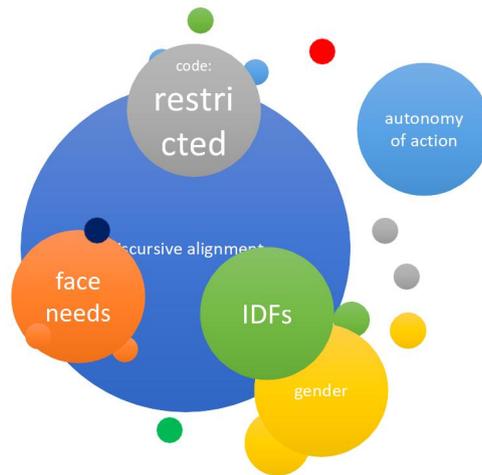


Figure 5. Example #2, International Muslim (hostile) response to the Danish cartoons.

In this instance, the stated reasons for failed humour were very clear: the international Muslim community (or at least those who responded violently) acted in concert with their religious and political leadership. This foregrounds not only IDFs but also face needs and a restricted code, especially since many (perhaps most) of the violent responses came from people who had not even seen the Danish cartoons. It is not immediately clear what part other discourse features such as gender or age, or BK, played in this failed humour. It is also probable that many of these persons were coerced into rejecting the Danish cartoons so autonomy of action was minimal, and thus it acted as a peripheral factor, at most.

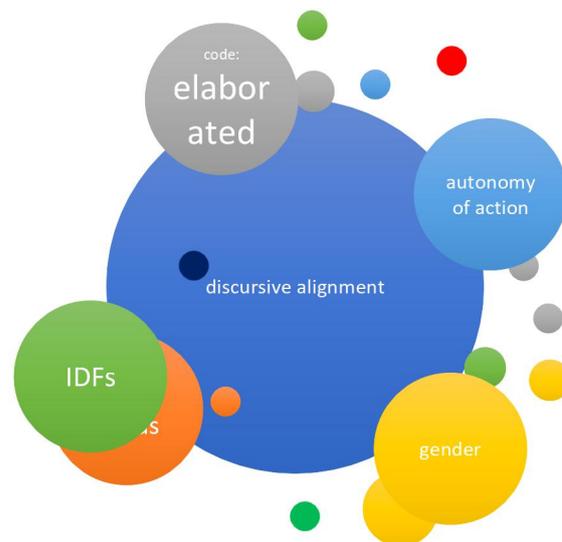


Figure 6. Example #3, International and Danish Muslim (supportive) responses to the Danish cartoons.

In this instance, it is suggested that the Danish cartoons were enabled, as successful humour, not necessarily because the Muslim commentators ‘got the joke’ (this is not clear from the responses themselves) but because they decided, with high autonomy of action, high awareness of IDFs, and an elaborated code, that the cartoons had a right to *exist*. In addition, it is clear that these commentators made the decision to support the cartoons out of face needs (perhaps as educated, internationally-aware citizens) which overrode their face needs, or identity, as Muslims or as members of specific speech communities.

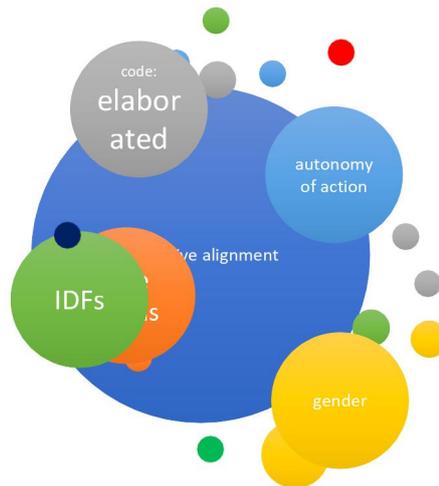


Figure 7. Example #4, Danish atheists’ and other commentators’ (negative) responses to the Danish cartoons.

In perhaps an inversion of the previous example, many prominent Danish atheists, Christians and other public commentators rejected the cartoons out of an overt, *stated*, sympathy for the Muslim minority of Denmark. In doing so, they were especially careful to be seen as morally good, i.e. sensitive to the religious sensibilities of a group of people they otherwise would be in ideological opposition to. This is a clear example of face needs overwhelming the expected operation of IDFs and an elaborated code; indeed, these features were **re-purposed** through the autonomy of action (a deliberate, overriding of their avowed respect for free speech, and possibly motivated by primal fear of retribution) into blocking the normal operation of humour reception. That is, they forced themselves to fail the humour in a public demonstration of face needs, which the editor of the Danish magazine labelled public cowardice.

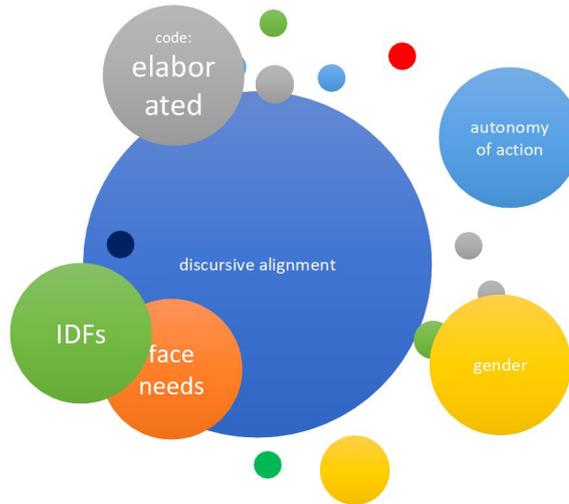


Figure 8. Example #5, Australian female politicians' adoption of misogynistic cartoons.

This example illustrates an extremely paradoxical operation of discursive features. On the one hand, gender, face needs, IDFs and an elaborated code should together and separately, predict a negative response to misogynistic cartoons which specifically target the female politicians in a public FTA. Nevertheless, the female politicians seem to employ high levels of autonomy of action to suppress these natural triggers, and so each of these discursive triggers are moved to one side, setting up what *seems to be* a discursive alignment. We do not have any evidence that the politicians were in any discursive alignment; rather it is safer to assume that the action of 'buying the original cartoons' was a deliberate strategy to publicly 'defuse' the FTA. This *ostensible* discursive alignment strategy did bear results, in that the cartoons soon 'backfired' on the cartoonists. The evidence for this is that the cartoonists subsequently ceased to depict the female politicians in such demeaning ways.

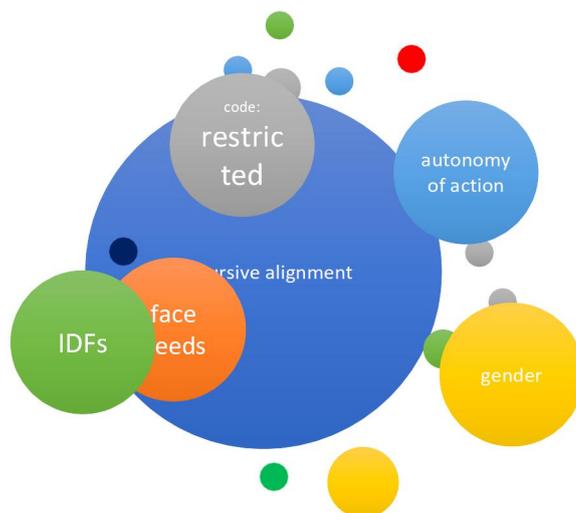


Figure 9. Example #6, Donald Trump and the SNL impersonation/s.

In this instance, we can refer to a previous instantiation, which was similar to that of the Australian female politicians, in that Trump ‘played along’ with his impersonation/s on the comedy program *SNL* for many years. However, as Trump transitioned to a political candidate (as depicted in this Figure 9), he seemed to ‘lose his sense of humour’, or more accurately, he found that his public face investment was too susceptible to face loss through parody. We can see that the triggers of face needs, IDFs, and gender were expanded to become major obstacles to his participation, or discursive alignment. We can also argue that Trump’s restricted code (he is not an expert user of English), which had not been an obstacle previously, now became a major trigger of failed humour—especially in combination with other factors. The more Trump publicly commented on how ‘unfunny’ the parody was, the more material he furnished for his own public face loss. However, as the material became predictable, and Trump lost interest, the parody lost momentum. Thus, this figure represents the ‘standoff’ between Trump and his detractors at its height, before he stopped commenting, and about the same time that the parody also ceased to be broadcast.

## **11. Conclusion**

This paper has presented various examples of high-profile failed humour, and discussed these in terms of discourse features. The examples were chosen specifically because they were all high-stakes, high-profile and highly polarising acts of public humour which at first glance, should have been consistently resisted by the persons targeted. However, diverse strategies were employed by the targets of the humour, and by other persons who took a public stance towards the acts of humour, in various attempts to mitigate, deflect, or bring about the ‘failure’ of these humorous texts. This diversity of responses highlighted the ways in which humour can fail and this is significant, given that failed humour has not been previously investigated in the literature for specific moments of triggered negative responses, and that there has not been any in-depth analysis of what these triggers might be, or why they are individualised in unpredictable ways.

It is hoped that this investigative analysis has offered some clues as to patterns of behaviour which indicate discursive traits common to all individuals but which are realised in traceable, and personalised responses triggered by humour—it is also claimed that humour provides a unique context for provoking these combinations of discursive traits. Related to this system of realised discursive traits is the assertion that they are present already in each of us as a latent arrangement of defensive triggers. We, quite simply, initially respond to any act of humour defensively, because humour is by nature, unexpected, and aggressive—at least potentially. We then apply the Discursive Defence Mechanism (or DDM), a type of discursive reflex, to block the act of humour until we can analyse it for its status as threat, or benign act. If we are pre-disposed to the agent of humour, this DDM will also be resolved in favour of that person’s acts of humour, but there is no guarantee that all acts of humour will be acceded to. Indeed, the fact is, we can ‘change our minds’ towards someone we would normally be discursively aligned with, if that person makes a faux pas, or transgresses our systems of face needs, IDFs or other aspects of speech community or personal identity.

By mapping the DDM, it was hoped that the actions of the discursive filters, or triggers, in real instances of high-profile failed humour might be made more evident. We can see that these triggers are typically in place already in certain combinations and that they are very useful for predicting a reaction if we know enough about the humourist, the humorous text, and the person receiving the humour. The map is also useful for depicting the actions of real people in certain contexts when a humorous text creates a moral-ethical dilemma—people

adapt their own DDM through autonomy of action to respond in defensive, receptive, or paradoxical combinations to defuse, align with, or reject, the act of humour.

Although this discussion has been based on real, well-known and evidenced examples of failed humour, the analysis has been informed by a largely theoretical frame. It is hoped that this DDM will be further refined and tested in more empirical ways in future to verify its validity. To do this, we could perform mixed methods research with participants who would describe their responses and motivations as they experience controlled acts of humour.

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