

2. Literature Review

This study brings together two different fields of linguistics, semantics and pragmatics. In this chapter the most important concepts this study is based on and their relationship to one another are discussed, beginning with a formal definition of meaning.

Meaning can be explained in three different ways: word meaning, sentence meaning, and the meaning of the use of certain words and their function in communication. In this thesis, I use meaning in the third way because I am focusing on the use of language in context; how meaning is interpreted and its role in communication. The elements that define the context include the speaker's stimulus and the hearer's response to what has been uttered rather than the ideas themselves (Bloomfield, 1933, as cited in Kempson, 1977). Establishing this is important for this thesis because humor meaning largely depends on the situation in which the utterances are being made and therefore the impact they will have.

2.1. Semantics.

Meaning can be looked at from a semantic perspective which refers to the relation between what we say and what we refer to. Palmer (1976, p. 5) explains that "language can be viewed as a communication system that relates something to be communicated with something that communicates, a message on one hand and a set of signs and symbols on the other". Linguistic humor, the focus of the present study, can be studied from a semantic perspective because the meaning of the humor act lies in the words being used.

2.1.1. Humor.

Defining humor is not an easy task because of the complexity of what humor is. Attardo (1994, p. 4) states that humor has been defined as an “all-encompassing category, covering any event or object that elicits laughter, or is felt to be funny”. However, this is a broad definition and as a result, other authors have proposed specific elements that humor must contain. Raskin (1985, p. 3), for example, proposes the concept of the humor act which he defines as “an occurrence of a funny stimulus”. The characteristics of this act are the participation of humans, a stimulus, previous experience, a specific situation, and society in general.

The participation of humans refers to the existence of a speaker and a hearer who is the addressee of the humorous stimulus. The second element is stimulus, an utterance to which the hearer will respond to. There are many questions regarding this element because it is not clear what the hearer actually finds funny or laughable and whether the hearer’s reaction is the sole purpose of humor. It is also important to consider that the listener’s reaction may vary depending on cultural experience and context. Yet, however different or unexpected the listener’s response may be, the ability to appreciate humor is a universal human trait. The stimulus is related to the next element, experience. This refers to the life experiences, a person’s background that makes him laugh or find a situation humorous. However, this is something that changes with time. What I found funny ten years ago may be very different from what I consider funny today. The physical environment in which the humor act occurs is called situation. This element is of utter importance since it might condition the perception of humor. The place where the humor act happens as well as the conditions around it will have an impact on how the humor is perceived.

Society is the final element which refers to the society and culture in which the humor act occurs. Shared values and norms make humor much more effective. According to Raskin (1985), the shared experiences between the speaker and the hearer are an important part of humor.

As mentioned previously, humor is a human trait. According to Banitz (2009, p. 10) “the concept of humor competence is redundant since it precludes other competencies”. First of all, it is necessary to have linguistic competence which refers to having the knowledge of the grammar of the language. Deneire (as cited in Banitz, 2009) also points out the need of cultural competence. This includes the background knowledge of what the specific society finds humorous which is closely related with the norms and values of each culture. Both, linguistic and cultural competence, are needed to detect the two opposing scripts that humor is based on. Without these competence, humor cannot take place. The concept of scripts and their opposition is explained further below.

Another important characteristic of the humor act is the element of surprise which, in a joke, is the punch line. According to Fry (1963, as cited in Raskin, 1985) this factor distinguishes humor from non-humor. Another element is laughter. Laughter is often considered as the natural response to humor. However, some authors, such as Attardo (1994) and Holt (2010, as cited in Çiçek Başaran, 2013) question the link between humor and laughter arguing that it is possible to find something humorous and not laughing about it. Laughter is therefore not a necessary condition for humor to take place and we need other criteria to determine whether humor has happened or not. The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), discussed below, fulfills this need.

2.1.1.1. Theories of Humor.

In order to fully understand humor, it is necessary to review some of the most important theories of humor. There are several theories of humor but all of them are explaining humor from different perspectives. Yet, the complexity of the phenomenon requires that the focus be limited to the linguistic account of humor in order to understand the relationship between humor and FTAs, the primary objective of the present study. According to Raskin (1985, p. 4), a linguistic theory of humor formulates the “necessary and sufficient linguistic conditions for a text to be funny”.

In order to analyze and explain the use of humor in political debates as a face threatening strategy, two theories of humor are needed: one that covers the social function of humor, the superiority theory, and another one, the GTVH, which is concerned with the linguistic analysis of humor. Next, these two theories will be further explained.

2.1.1.2. GTVH.

Within the incongruity theories, we can find the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH). It was first proposed by Raskin (1979, as cited in Attardo, 1994). The main hypothesis of this theory is that a text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the next conditions are satisfied:

1. The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts.
2. The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite.

According to Raskin (1985, p.99) these two conditions are “necessary and sufficient” for a text to be considered as humor.

This theory, however, left some unanswered questions about humor. First of all, the SSTH is a semantic theory which means that it is concerned only with semantic scripts, a chunk of organized information. Furthermore, it cannot distinguish between verbal and referential humor which are based on different mechanisms and the script opposition is not enough to make the distinction between them. In addition, according to this theory, there is no difference between verbal and non-verbal humor but these two have shown to behave differently according to the different situations. In conclusion, according to this theory, all jokes are basically the same because the only element that is taken into account is the opposition of scripts. A final limitation of the SSTH is that it only focuses on jokes; it does not make any claims about other types of humorous texts.

In order to solve the above mentioned issues, Attardo and Raskins revised the SSTH and generated the GTVH. This theory is also based on the concept of the two opposed scripts but introduces five Knowledge Resources (KRs) in order to describe the humor act in more linguistic detail thus distinguishing between different types of humor carrying texts. These KRs are explained next, according to Attardo (1994):

- *Script Opposition (SO)* means there is an overlap or compatibility between scripts. According to Raskin (1985, p. 107), there are three basic types of opposition. The first one distinguishes between real situations and non-existing situations where one of the scripts is not compatible with the setting of the humorous text (REAL/UNREAL). The second type differentiates between the normal or expected state of affairs and the abnormal or unexpected state of affairs (NORMAL/ABNORMAL). Finally, the third type is based the opposition between a possible or plausible situation and fully or partially impossible or implausible

situation (POSSIBLE/IMPOSSIBLE). These three types of basic script oppositions will be used later to analyze the data in this study.

- *Logical Mechanism (LM)* refers to the parameters that bring the two scripts together such as false analogy, juxtaposition, or role reversal.
- *Situation (SI)* includes the participants, instruments, activities, and places of the humorous utterance; i.e., the context.
- *Target (TA)* refers to the person or object the utterance is making fun of.
- *Narrative strategy (NS)* is the narrative organization that is used in the text such as simple narratives, dialogues, riddles, etc.
- *Language (LA)* carries the necessary information of the humorous utterance, which includes extraordinary word choice such as synonyms, homophones, and syntactic constructions that give rise to two different meanings.

Even though these are the resources with which a text can be analyzed and explained, not all of them are always relevant to every humor act. The GTVH is used to analyze the data in this study.

As I discussed above, humor is very complex. One reason for this complexity is that humor does not follow the rules of standard communication, the bona-fide mode of communication. Rather, humor follows its own communicative maxims which will be explained in further detail below.

2.1.1.3. *Non-Bona-Fide Communication.*

In the US Republican primaries, one would think that it is necessary to be involved in a serious communication mode. Nonetheless, when candidates use humor, this communication mode is violated and replaced instead by a non-bona-fide mode of communication. Normally, when communication is taking place, both the speaker and the listener are engaged in a serious, truthful, fact-conveying mode of communication, also known as the bona-fide mode of communication. This basic mode of communication is based on the cooperative principle governed by Grice's maxims. These maxims include quantity, giving the necessary information; quality, that the utterance is true; relation, what is said is relevant to what is being talked about; and manner, that the utterance is concise and well organized (Grice, 1975, as cited in Raskin 1985).

However, when humor is used, the participants must be engaged in a different communication mode, the non-bona-fide, humorous mode of communication, which follows its own cooperative principle. For the humor act to be successful, the hearer must first recognize that the utterance has a humorous intention. Therefore, the speaker needs to provide the necessary information for the hearer to understand that he is involved in the non-bona-fide, humorous mode of communication. According to Raskin (1985, p 103), "the hearer does not expect the speaker to tell the truth or to convey him any relevant information" (Raskin, 1985, p. 103). Instead, the hearer perceives that the speaker's intention is to amuse him. When this is the case, the hearer will look for those elements that make up humor. Thus, cooperation between the speaker and listener is of vital importance for humor to be successful. If the listener does not cooperate and therefore remain in the bona-fide mode of communication, the humor act will be unsuccessful because the listener

fails to perceive the speaker's intention to amuse him. This failure, in turn, will destroy the effect the speaker had in mind. As a consequence, the use of the humor act cannot fulfill its intended social function. In what follows, I will explain the different social functions of humor in greater detail.

2.1.1.4. Social Functions of Humor.

Besides the intention to amuse, humor has other social functions, dependent upon the type of humor that is being used and the context in which it is being used. Attardo (1994) makes a distinction between the primary and secondary functions of humor. The first is related to the effects the speaker wishes to achieve with the use of humor while the latter refers to the effects that achieved indirectly, without intention. Next, I will present and explain the four types of the social functions of humor according to Attardo (1994):

- *Social management*, this refers to the cases in which humor is used as a facilitator in group interactions. Some examples are: initiating or terminating a topic, getting attention, and repairing an unpleasant situation or atmosphere.
- *Decommitment* happens when humor is used to facilitate the speaker's social interaction in order to avoid harmful intentions targeting the speaker such as probing or salvaging. This is the case of face saving acts in which speakers will use humor to avoid putting their own faces at risk.
- *Mediation function*, which refers to humor as a mediating device. Humor is used to introduce embarrassing or aggressive interactions. An example of this situation is face threatening acts in which speakers will use humor to damage someone else's face without being obvious.
- *Defunctionalization* is the use of humor for playful and entertaining purposes.

As discussed above, humor has other functions besides entertainment and we can use it strategically to serve a certain social purpose.

However, not all social functions of humor are equally effective in different cultures because humor is appreciated differently in each culture causing the social functions of humor to differ across societies as well. This thesis is interested in the use of humor within the culture of the United States of America. According to Boskin (as cited in Banitz, 2009, p. 22), humor in the USA “mirrors the expanse of the American culture, its dreams, anxieties, conflicts, styles, and posture”. Humor is a highly demanded skill in the USA. If used appropriately, it is an irresistible form of communication, winning friends, arguments, and elections (Finermann, as cited in Banitz, 2009, p. 41).

This perception of humor in US society makes it a desirable skill; the one who possesses it is superior to the ones who does not. Because of this, the candidates in the political debates under study here consider the use of humor as an effective way to win votes while also using it to attack their opponents. The successful use of humor does not only position the attacker as a more suitable candidate for the presidency, it also positions the other candidates as inferior.

2.1.1.5. Superiority Theory.

In the previous section, I discussed the social functions of humor with one of them serving to position oneself above others. Being superior means having better skills to do something. During the political debates studied here, this is exactly the goal the candidates are trying to accomplish. Each candidate tries to decrease his or her opponents' credibility and

suitability for the presidency of the USA. To accomplish this task, some of the candidates are using humor to position themselves in a higher position, a position of superiority.

This takes us back to the social behavioral theories of humor mentioned previously which are related to the social function of humor. The most important social behavioral theory for this thesis is the superiority theory. This theory can be traced back to Thomas Hobbes, a British philosopher from the 1600's. His theory proposes that humans laugh at others' misfortunes which makes people feel superior (Raskin, 1985). "We feel superior to others when we compare them unfavorably to ourselves" state Vallade, Booth-Butterfield, & Vela (2013, p. 232). This explains why individuals are likely to use humor to make them feel superior.

Laughing at others' misfortunes or using humor to feel superior over others is closely related to the relationship people have with one another. Closeness among individuals makes it easier to use this type of humor; however, this will also depend on each person's personality and preferences. In addition, the use of humor also depends on what the speaker wants to achieve by using humor. One of the goals of humor used in debates studied here is to decrease the opponents' credibility and popularity with the audience while appearing superior and thus as a better option for the presidency.

As argued above, humor is closely related to the context of the conversation. This context is studied by another field in linguistics, pragmatics. In order to better understand the strategic use of humor in the political debates, it is necessary to understand what pragmatics is and how semantics and pragmatics are intertwined processes of meaning making. The next section defines the field of pragmatics and discusses its relevance for the present study.

2.2. Pragmatics.

Humor is highly context dependent because the different elements of the context give meaning to humor. Although there is no one simple definition of pragmatics, the one I am using for this study defines the field from the Anglo-American perspective considering pragmatics as a core component of language theory (Huang, 2007). Yule (1996, p. 3) states that pragmatics is the “study of meanings as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener”. Pragmatics is not concerned with the words that are said but with the meaning (message) these words carry, which is often non-literal. The underlying meaning depends on the situation the speaker and listener are involved in and the context surrounding the situation which includes previous knowledge from the speaker and listener as well as their cultural backgrounds and the place where the conversation is taking place. An important element of pragmatics is that in order to understand indirect meaning, both the speaker and the listener must possess shared knowledge, which is also one of the requirements for humor to be successful. The next section explains how utterances are considered actions with a social function focusing specifically on the actions performed by the humor act.

2.2.1. Speech Acts.

This thesis analyzes how participants in the Republican primary debates perform very specific speech acts such as attacking, insulting, or pointing out mistakes through the use of humor. Speech acts are defined by Austin (1962, as cited in Cutting, 2008, p. 13) as “actions performed in saying something”. The main point is that in any uttered sentence, there is a particular action involved. This action depends on what the speaker’s intention is and the context in which the utterance is made. Speech act theory, an important theory in pragmatics (Cutting, 2008; Levinson, 1983), explains the speech acts in more detail. According to Cutting (2008), each speech act consists of three levels:

- *Locutionary* act, the act itself of saying something. In this research study, the locutionary act is the actual words uttered by the candidates.
- *Illocutionary* force, the function the uttered words have; i.e., the purpose the speaker has in mind when using the utterance. In this thesis, I am focusing on the illocutionary force of damaging or threatening the other candidates' faces.
- *Perlocutionary* effect, the hearer's reaction to the utterance. For the present study, it is important to establish that there are two different perlocutionary acts, one is the reaction by the target of the humor act and the other is the impact the candidate has on the audience, i.e., the reaction of the audience whose opinion the speaker is trying to influence.

To fully understand how speech acts have an impact on others, we need the concept of face which is explained in the next section.

2.2.2. Face and Facework.

All of us have a public image of ourselves that we are constantly trying to protect from others and the US politicians partaking in the debates under study are no difference. However, for these candidates, more than their reputation is on the line; they are competing for the presidency of the USA. They want to be accepted as suitable candidates while they also seek respect and admiration from the voters. In pragmatics, this public self-image is referred to as 'face'. According to Yule (1996, p. 60), face is "the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone to recognize".

Face can be further divided into negative face and positive face. Negative face is the need to have freedom of action and to be independent such as not being imposed on by others. Positive face establishes the need of acceptance which refers to being liked by others and

being treated as a member of a group. In the case of the present study, it is expected that positive face is the one the candidates try to damage in each order in order to avoid the other candidates being seen as a suitable presidential candidate and win the audiences' votes.

Goffman (1995, as cited in Chen, 2015) proposed the concept of face work which describes the efforts a person makes to maintain face during a conversation. Face is never given; rather, it must be constantly attended to and negotiated in any communicative situation. Whenever we interact with other human beings, we show our face. This means that our face is in a constant vulnerable state since it can be threatened by others. Face is "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced" (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987, as cited in Sriubaitè, 2014, p. 334). Facework is a very important aspect of this study because the Republican presidential candidates need to work on two things simultaneously: to maintain their own (positive) face while destroying their opponents' (positive) faces in order to discredit the other candidates while making oneself more likeable and accepted by the audience who will eventually vote for one of the candidates as the party's nominee for the presidency of the USA.

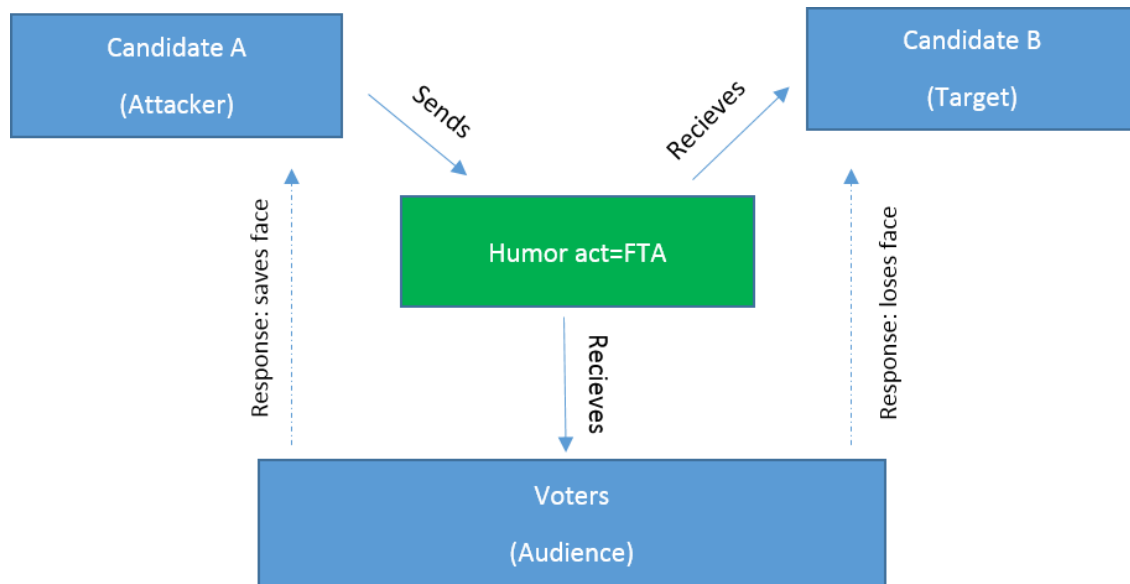
A face threatening act (FTA) is any utterance which represents a threat to an individual's expectations regarding his self-image, either positive or negative face (Yule, 1996). The threat might be uttered by the same person whose face is being threatened or by a third party. Among the most common speech acts of face threatening acts are orders, requests, complaints, and criticisms such as the one uttered by Paul in the August 6th debate when he claimed that "he's [Trump] already hedging his bets because he's used to buying politicians" intended as a direct threat towards Trump's positive face. However, while the

prior example shows a direct attack, humor, as is explained below, can be used as a strategy to soften or even cover-up direct FTAs.

2.3. *Humor as an FTA in Politics.*

All of the concepts discussed above are vital to understand how humor can be used as a strategy to threaten someone's face. In political debates, the main goal of the candidates is to win the voters' trust in order to be elected. At the same time, each candidate wants to make himself or herself a better option than his or her opponents. As a result, the candidates try to attack the others in order to decrease their opponents' credibility and thus their public image of a suitable presidential candidate. Humor functions as a tool to threaten the other candidate's face in a more subtle way while protecting one's own image. The diagram below (Diagram 1. Use of Humor as FTA in Debates) represents how humor is used in the political debates under investigation in the present study.

Diagram 1: Use of Humor as an FTA in Debates



Humor and Pragmatics in Politics

As shown above, Candidate A chooses to attack the face of Candidate B (an indirect FTA) using humor (the locutionary act). In this interaction, the use of humor mediates the introduction of an aggressive comment. This means that the illocutionary force of the humor act is a threat to Candidate B's positive face by highlighting his or her flaws or by criticizing his or her actions. This has an effect on Candidate B (the perlocutionary effect). If Candidate B is not engaged in the cooperative principle of non-bona-fide, humor mode of communication, he or she will either not understand the humor or will simply not respond to the attack, losing face in case case and causing Candidate A to gain face in the process. If, however, Candidate B is engaged in the cooperative principle of the non-bona-fide, humor mode of communication, he or she might respond with another locutionary act that is either a direct threat to Candidate A's face or, even more dangerous for Candidate A, a humor act humor that tops Candidate A's own humor act resulting in Candidate A losing face while Candidate B, in turn, not only has saved his face but has even gained face. This is why the concept of face work is so important; all candidates have to constantly attend to their own faces while trying to discredit the ones of their opponents. Using humor to do so is a very effective strategy because of its perceived desirable status in US society; however, if the attacked opponent responds with an even more ingenious humor act, the first attacker loses face. Yet, the candidates are ready to take that risk because if the humor act works, the gain in face of the candidate using humor is substantial, potentially leading to more votes.

The audience, meanwhile, receives the locutionary act with Candidate A counting on the audience engaging in the non-bona-fide, humor mode and thereby cooperating in the interpretation of the humor act as an FTA. As the audience appreciates the use of humor,

Humor and Pragmatics in Politics

not doubt for entertainment purposes as well (defunctionalization), it waits to see how Candidate B will respond resulting two potential effects in the audience (perlocutionary effect). First, the audience most likely appreciates the use of humor which in turn increases Candidate A's popularity among the voters. Second, if the attack is successful, the audience will perceive Candidate B as a person not suitable for the presidency. As a consequence, Candidate A will be positioned as superior (Superiority Theory) and therefore as a better candidate which, in the end, will win him votes from the audience.

In what follows, the methods of data collection and analysis used in this study are explained in detail.