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Joke and Wordplay

Ambiguity as a Source of Laughter in Ancient Greek and Latin¹

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on jokes and wordplays that are based on ambiguity in ancient literary sources. It begins with a simplified definition of ambiguity and illustrates its significance for humour. Next, the ancient theories of humour are presented, particularly the sources of laughter as elicited by Quintilian and Cicero. Aristotle's categorisation of ambiguity will be helpful in analysing the different kinds of jokes they are the source of. This will lead into a catalogue of ambiguous jokes to showcase the range of this form. As expected, this begins with the comic poets Aristophanes and Plautus. I present also a few jokes from the *Philogelos*, a joke collection from approximately the fourth century AD, and conclude with jokes from Cicero and Augustus, as transmitted by Macrobius in his *Saturnalia*. As Quintilian (and Cicero in some sense) provides in his rhetorical handbook a rather – *nomen omen* – ambiguous evaluation of the jokes based on ambiguity I attempt to show a possible explanation of this apparent critique.

KEYWORDS: joke, wordplay, ambiguity, Aristophanes, Plautus, Cicero, *Philogelos*, Augustus, Quintilian, Macrobius

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Jokes and wordplays belong to everyday life today as back in the ancient times. Among them jokes and wordplays that take their source from ambiguity play a substantial role.

Ambiguity refers to the inherent dual or multiple meanings of a word in any given language. There are always lexemes that carry more than one meaning and therefore often more than one function as well. To ensure clarity in communication, typically a process of disambiguation occurs – often depending on context the listener (or reader) intuitively chooses the right meaning (e.g., the word “pen” means something different in an office than it does in a rural setting).² For laughter to be triggered, disambiguation must be suspended, allowing both (or multiple) meanings to be perceived simultaneously. Only then can the tension or surprise release into laughter.

Interestingly, Quintilian evaluates in his rhetorical handbook this type of jokes rather ambivalently or – *nomen omen* – ambiguous. The analysis and comprehension of his judgment will be the core of the current paper. However, before we turn to Quintilian a short discussion about the cause and reason of laughter may be helpful.

Why do we laugh is a question ancient thinkers before Quintilian were already grappling with. Today, there are countless humour theories³ but they all branch out from these three outlined beneath.

The first is generally referred to as the superiority theory, presented by Plato (*Phil.* 50a), Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* 4. 8, p. 1128a30), and later Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* 6, 3, 7). Quintilian sums it up pointedly: *a derisu non procul abest risus* (“laughter is not far from ridicule”), and in the 17th century, Hobbes adapted this theory, stating that laughter comes as a “suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of Eminency” (*Human Nature* (1650) ch. 9, sect. 13 – original orthography).

The second one is the incongruity theory. Aristotle also observed that laughter is a response to the unexpected and illogical (*Rhet.* 3.11, p. 1412a31). In the 18th century, Kant developed this further, stating that

² How disambiguation works in a natural language and how human beings perform the process of disambiguation (other than computers for example) cf. Crocker, Corley 2002.

³ Apparently, there exist nowadays more than 70 theories, but they seem to all derive from the three basic ones elicited above. For a first introduction into the modern theories of laughter you may consult Smuts.

laughter is “ein Affekt aus der plötzlichen Verwandlung einer *gespannten Erwartung* in nichts.” (*Kritik der Urteilskraft* 1790, I, I, 54).

The third could be called the relief or taboo-break theory. Though not explicitly defined in antiquity, Cicero defends in his *Philippics* the jokes he made during the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, claiming they served as a relief to stress (*Phil.* 2.39).⁴ Freud expanded this theory at the beginning of the 20th century (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unterbewussten* 1905).

At first glance, ambiguous jokes, puns and wordplays seem to fall within the realm of the incongruity theory. Nevertheless, other theories will apply as well to some of those jokes presented beneath.

Both Cicero and Quintilian saw the source of laughter either in *res* (the thing itself) or in *dictum* (the language used).⁵ The former is funny regardless of wording, while in the latter, the precise wording is essential. However, Cicero warned that with the latter, there could be a danger the prospective orator might descend into *scurrilis oratoris dicacitas*, a comic style not unlike that of modern stand-up comedians (*De or.* 2.244). Quintilian follows in Cicero’s footsteps in this point too and advises a rhetorician against using this kind of jokes too abundantly to prevent being called a *scurra* – a buffoon or jester (*Inst. Or.* 6.3.47).

Wordplay and jokes based on ambiguity naturally belong to the second category – linguistic humour (or humour based on *dictum*). In the context of rhetorical cunning ambiguity is naturally seen often as problematic (cf. e.g. the anonymous treatise *Rhetorica ad Herennium*). An orator should by any means avoid obscuring the meaning by using it, but it can admittedly as well contribute to witticism (*Rhet. ad Her.* 4.67).⁶

⁴ In *De or.* 2.236 Cicero states the reasons an orator might engage in humoristic instances. The fourth point is: *maximeque quod tristiam ac severitatem mitigat et relaxat odiosasque res saepe, quas argumentis dilui non facile est, ioco risuque dissolvit* (“and most of all because it eases hurt and breaks the tension, and, when hated issues cannot be argued away, a joke and laugh often dissolve them” – transl. by MAO). This reason for employing laughter comes next to the relief theory itself.

⁵ Cf. Cic. *De or.* 2.239. Quintilian takes this categorization from him in *Inst. Or.* 6.3.23.

⁶ *Ambigua quemadmodum vitanda sunt, quae obscuram reddunt orationem, item haec consequenda, quae conficiunt huiusmodi significationem. Ea reperientur facile,*

To comprehend the diverse means by which ambiguity may work in jokes and wordplays a categorisation of ambiguity as presented by Aristotle will be useful at this point. Aristotle undertakes this task twice: once in *De Sophisticis Elenchis* (IV 1, p. 165b 23–28) and again in his *Rhetoric* (II 24, p. 1400b 35). Since these differ slightly (the former is written for dialecticians, the latter for orators), I follow the unified approach offered by Stanford in his work on ambiguity in ancient literature (1939, repr. 1972: 7–9).

The first type is homonymy or lexical ambiguity (e.g., “pen”, as a writing utensil and shed for hens). Next is amphiboly, or syntactic ambiguity (e.g., “Visiting relatives could be boring”; the act of visiting them or them coming). Then comes ambiguity of connection and separation – what we might call liminal ambiguity (e.g., “ice cream”/“I scream”). This is followed by phonetic or accentual ambiguity (e.g., not/knot, here/hear, see/sea), and finally, the form of expression, where one must decide whether a word is a noun or a verb, for instance ((to) cook and (a) cook etc.).

Quintilian devotes the third chapter of the sixth book in his rhetorical handbook to humour and – as already mentioned – adopts, similarly to Cicero (*De or.* 2.239 and 244), a critical stance on jokes based on ambiguity (Quint. *Inst. Or.* 6.3.47).⁷

As for Cicero it will be shown that he himself employed this kind of jokes rather abundantly. In which circumstances they are allowed or even welcome will be therefore the focus of this paper.

Quintilian begins by stating that jokes based on wordplay are inappropriate for a speaker. He cites a joke by Cicero in which someone seeking office – whose father was a cook – asks for Cicero’s support. Cicero is said to have replied: *Ego quoque/coque tibi favebo!* (“I will also support you” / “I will support you; you cook!”).

si noverimus et animum adverterimus verborum ancipites aut multiplices potestates. (“Even though we should avoid those ambiguities that make the oration obscure, we should look for those which produce a meaning of a special sort. It will be easy to find them, if we know and pay attention to the double and multiple meanings of the words” – transl. by MAO).

⁷ Ambiguity itself is a big topic for the lawyer Quintilian as he discusses ambiguous laws and their interpretation. For ambiguity in Quintilian more generally cf. McNamara 2018. In this paper I focus exclusively on Quintilian’s stanzas on humour.

This is a phonetic ambiguity, as *quoque* and *coque* sound almost identical. Cicero likely pronounced it additionally rather blurred, hence, ambiguously to highlight his own wit. This may suggest premeditation on his side. Each joke presented here will be analysed in terms of whether it seems a premeditated or a spontaneous response – something central to both Cicero’s and Quintilian’s evaluation of ambiguous humour, as we will see later.

Shortly after (*Inst. Or.* 3.6.47), Quintilian presents another one of Cicero’s jokes that he in contrast considers praise-worthy. Asked during a trial, *quo tempore Clodius occissus es(se)t?* “when was Clodius killed?”. Cicero allegedly replied with just one word: *sero* (“late or too late”). This lexical ambiguity allowed Cicero to criticize Clodius while pretending a neutral disposition. As it comes as a response to a question one may suppose that it came spontaneously. This judgement may need some re-evaluation as it will be shown that Cicero used it at least one more time in a different setting. Hence, a suspicion may arise at this point that that was his “running joke”.

At this point, Quintilian also recounts a joke about a kleptomaniac slave, which he possibly draws from Cicero’s *De oratore* (2.248). It runs: *nihil ei nec occlusum neque signatum est* / “nothing is closed or sealed to him”. The ambiguity here lies in the fact that the same statement could apply both to a kleptomaniac and to a trustworthy and especially loyal slave. Thus, it would be categorised as a case of pragmatic ambiguity, though Aristotle does not explicitly name this phenomenon: the intent of the statement remains unclear. This utterance appears either as a response to a question or as a spontaneous remark arising from the situation.

To grasp a firm impression of the jokes and wordplays used by ancient authors I would like to survey some further examples. Only then we will be able to assess jokes apt for orators in a comprehensive way. Unsurprisingly, I begin with the comedy.

In *The Acharnians* by Aristophanes, staged in 425 BC in Athens – during the sixth year of the Peloponnesian War – the theme of longed-for peace takes a central stage. Dicaeopolis, an Athenian farmer, asks his interlocutor, in hopeful anticipation of a better fate, whether he has a peace treaty (or a drink) with him (186–192):

Dicaeopolis: ἀλλὰ τὰς σπονδὰς φέρεις;

Amphitheus: ἔγωγέ φημι, τρία γε ταυτὶ γεύματα.

αὐτὰι μὲν εἰσι πεντέτεις, γεῦσαι λαβών.

Dic.: αἰβοῖ.

Amph.: τί ἐστιν;

Dic.: οὐκ ἀρέσκουσιν μ', ὅτι

ῥζουσι πίττης καὶ παρασκευῆς νεῶν.

Amph.: σὺ δ' ἀλλὰ τασδὶ τὰς δεκέτεις γεῦσαι λαβών.

Dic.: ὄζουσι χαῦται – πρέσβων εἰς τὰς πόλεις,

ὀξύτατον, ὥσπερ διατριβῆς τῶν ξυμμάχων.

Dicaeopolis: Do you have the treaties?|Amphitheus: Yes, indeed, I've three samples for sipping. This one's a five-year treaty. Have a sip. | Dic.: Yuk!|Amph.: What's the matter? | Dic.: I don't like this one; it stinks of pitch and battleship construction. | Amph.: Well then, here's a ten-year treaty for you to sip. | Dic.: This one stinks too, of embassies to the allies, a sour smell, like someone being bullied. (transl. by Henderson).

The word he uses here is of great significance. For σπονδαί means both: a peace treaty and wine. This ambiguity arises because sacrifices in the form of libations were traditionally part of the conclusion of any peace treaty, so as a matter of fact the meaning treaty for the σπονδαί is a kind of metonymy in form of a *pars pro toto*.

Particularly interesting is the fact that the double meaning remains consistently operative throughout the passage. Naturally, the question arises whether the first utterance refers to a five-year-old wine or a five-year peace treaty. Dicaeopolis, however, is unimpressed and says it reeks of pitch and shipbuilding. Aristophanes managed to apply another ambiguity in this sentence, as πίττη (a kind of resin) was used both for refining the taste of wine (cf. even today's retsina) and as bitumen to waterproof the ships. Amphitheus then offers him a ten-year-old vintage instead, which the Athenian farmer also finds unpalatable, remarking that it tastes of diplomatic missions and the harassment of allies.⁸

⁸ Only later, when a 30-year treaty is mentioned, Dicaeopolis will be comparing it to ambrosia and nectar (196).

Throughout the passage, the two meanings of *σπονδαί* remain operational. Peace treaties can be “tasted”, and their flavour corresponds to the political measures they entail. The punchline of this scene lies precisely in the sustained lexical ambiguity: the resolution of the ambiguity, so the disambiguation, is deliberately withheld. The passage is artfully and deliberately constructed. That makes the passage notoriously difficult to translate as in no other language is this metonymy operative.

In the comedies of Plautus we find unsurprisingly numerous examples of jokes based on ambiguity. In the *Persa*, Toxilus wishes to sell a girl to Dordalus and hopes he will believe she is a foreigner – a girl from Arabia (630–635):

Dordalus: Ubi nata est?

Virgo: ut mihi

mater dixit, in culina, in angulo ad laevam manum.

Toxilus: haec erit tibi fausta meretrix: nata est in calido loco,

ubi rerum omnium bonarum copia est saepissima.

tactus leno est; qui rogaret ubi nata esset diceret,

lepide lusit.

Dordalus: Where were you born? | Girl: As my mother told me, in the kitchen, in the corner at the left-hand side. | Toxilus: (to Dordalus) She'll be a lucky prostitute for you; she was born in a warm place, where there's a very regular supply of all good things. (aside) That's one for the pimp! She charmingly tricked the man who asked her to say where she was born. (transl. by de Melo).

He instructs Dordalus to ask her where she is from, which he promptly does. Her reply sounds absurd at first: “As my mother told me, in the kitchen, in the corner at the left-hand side”. Toxilus, however, immediately provides a commentary and suggests a double layer. First, he reassures his business partner that he makes a good purchase where he refers somewhat ambiguously to the girl's place of origin: the place he is talking about could be both the kitchen and the abundant exotic Arabia. Then he adds, seemingly as an aside (634–635) – not intended

for the other persons on stage but rather directed toward the audience – where he reveals that the girl’s reply was not supposed to sound absurd but rather it was a means to trick the potential buyer: “That’s one for the pimp! She charmingly tricked the man who asked her to say where she was born. But where exactly does the deception lie?”.

Upon closer inspection, one notices that *in culina* (in the kitchen) might phonetically resemble *inquilina* (tenant). The girl may thus be hinting at being a foreigner – not necessarily Arab, but at least a non-native to Athens. The term *inquilinus* derives from *incola* (inhabitant), and its primary meaning is “tenant,” which implies someone who has moved in from elsewhere. This interpretation was already considered by Lipsius in 1575 and more recently revived by Michael Fontaine in his monograph on Plautine jokes (2010: 95–96).⁹ Thus, the girl neither lies nor thwarts Toxilus’s plan – after all, she had promised her father (who made her available) to behave exactly as he had instructed her. However, Dordalus seems to be somewhat suspicious as he repeatedly demands that she names her country of origin to what she ultimately claims: “I am telling you: Since I’m a slave here, this is my country” (641).

Through this phonetic ambiguity – *in culina* vs. *inquilina* – Plautus enables the girl to display her intelligence: she fulfils the seller’s wish to appear foreign, while keeping the door open for the reinterpretation of her words as a misunderstanding. Within the dramatic setting, this is presented as spontaneous wit.

In the next comedy of Plautus, the *Mostellaria*, we encounter a quite drunken Callidamates, who leans on his female friend Delphium and asks her for an assessment of his condition (319–320):

Callidamates: *ecquid tibi videor/ mammamadere?*

Delphium: *semper istoc modo*

Callidamates: Do I seem to be ti-ti-tipsy to you? | Delphium: you are as always...

(transl. by de Melo, with minor changes)

⁹ Even Cicero was rather disparagingly referred to by Sallust (Coni. 31) as *inquilinus civis urbis Romae* (“an immigrant citizen of the city of Rome”).

Through this slurred speech, Plautus introduces a risqué ambiguity: *madere* means “to be drunk,” but *mammadere* also resembles *mam-mam adire* – “to reach for the breast.” Given the theatrical context, we can assume this line was accompanied by a rather inappropriate gesture. Delphium dryly replies: “you are as always”.

Here too, Plautus uses lexical ambiguity to generate a surprise effect rooted in incongruity. Within the dramatic logic, however, it is presented as unintentional – merely part of mimicking drunkenness.

While talking about jokes from Antiquity one cannot omit the Greek collection of 265 jokes called *Philogelos*, a laughter-lover. The collection is dated no earlier than the second half of the third century AD, and likely to the fourth or even fifth century, as one joke references the Roman Empire’s millennium celebration in 248 AD.

The jokes are organised by joke type. The largest group of jokes belongs to the *σχολαστικοί*, which can be roughly translated as “students” or “academics” or in German rather pointedly “Stubengelehrten” (what comes close to an “armchair scholar”).

The first joke features a clever student (55):

σχολαστικός εὐτράπελος ἀπορῶν δαπανημάτων τὰ βιβλία αὐτοῦ
ἐπίπρασκε· καὶ γράφων πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ἔλεγε· σύγχαيره ἡμῖν, πάτερ, ἥδη
γὰρ ἡμᾶς τὰ βιβλία τρέφει.

A clever student, lacking money, sold his books and wrote to his father:
Congratulate me, father, for my books already feed me! ¹⁰

Naturally, the young man wishes to avoid admitting that his academic career cannot support him. He cleverly exploits lexical ambiguity to reassure his father. The statement can be understood both literally and figuratively: literally, the books have fed him because he sold them; figuratively, they could be feeding him by means of the knowledge they contain. The lexical ambiguity is no accident – it showcases at least the student’s rhetorical cunning (as to certify that at least in that capacity the education his father sponsors pays off).

¹⁰ All jokes from the *Philogelos* I render in the translation of Baldwin 1983 (with slight changes).

The next two jokes are aimed at the εὐτράπελοι, the clever or witty ones (141):

εὐτράπελος κυβερνήτης ἐρωτηθεὶς, τί φυσᾷ, εἶπε· φάβα καὶ κρόμυα.
When asked which way the wind was blowing, a waggish steersman replied: “from the beans and onions.”

This question posed to an apparently witty steersman could also be interpreted as “what kind of wind is blowing? or what is blowing/passing?”. Unexpectedly, he responds to the second meaning and says: “Beans and onions”.

The joke derives not only from the double meaning of the question, but from a break in narrative expectation: the anticipated nautical response is replaced with gastrointestinal humour. Labelling the helmsman as witty suggests he deliberately subverts the question for comedy effect.

In the second joke, a witty man visits a barber, who asks how he would like to be shaved (148):

εὐτράπελος φλυάρου κουρέως ἐρωτήσαντος· πῶς σε κείρω; σιωπῶν, ἔφη.
“How shall I cut your hair?” a talkative barber asked a witty man – “In silence!”, he responds.

Naturally, the expected answer concerned hairstyle, not the manner of the shave. Once again, humour arises from situational incongruity.¹¹

In the final example stemming from the *Philogelos*, we meet a man with atrocious breath (232):

ὁζόστομος συνεχῶς τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καταφιλῶν ἔλεγεν· ἡ κυρία μου, ἡ
“Ἦρα, ἡ Ἀφροδίτη μου. κάκείνη ἀποστρεφομένη ἔλεγεν· Ὁζεύς μου, ὁζεύς μου!

¹¹ Situational incongruity is one of the common ones within the realm of all the jokes based on incongruity cf. Attardo, Chłopicki, Forabosco 2024 and Veale 2004.

A man with bad breath, started kissing his wife passionately, saying: “My lady! My Hera! My Aphrodite!” Turning her head away she said: “O my Zeus/ Ozeus!”

The humour stems from the apparent symmetry of the couple’s divine epithets but hides a deeper punch: *O Zeus!* (even if the regular vocative case would be ὦ Ζεῦ, one can assume a nominative case of the exclamation at this point) sounds nearly identical to a made-up (*ad hoc*) exclamation *ozeus*, which can be connected to the verb ὀζω (to stink).

Thus, through near-homophony, the wife may in fact be calling her husband “Stinker!” – a brilliant example of phonetic and semantic ambiguity playing off real-life experience. It comes as well as a spontaneous reaction to the husband’s efforts to seduce his wife.

As the *Philogelos* is a collection of jokes, we must assume that they were collected and deliberately construed for the purpose of evoking laughter both in private and public settings. They are therefore *per definitionem* premeditated and apt for learning by heart. This, as will be shown shortly, is exactly why they should not be employed by a rhetorician.

In contrast, upon returning to Roman authors in a manner of an ABA composition, I present some jokes by Cicero and Augustus as preserved in Macrobius’s *Saturnalia* that are of markedly a different kind.

Macrobius transmits Cicero’s jokes via a collection allegedly compiled by Tiro, Cicero’s secretary, though he notes that Tiro may have been overly eager in attributing witticisms to his master. Macrobius also remarks that both Cicero and Plautus were renowned and should be praised specifically for their humour.

To introduce the theme, Macrobius cites a joke from the famous enemy to Rome (*Sat.* 2.2.1–2). When Antiochus at whose court Hannibal was living as an exile at that time showed him his army and asked:

putasne satis esse Romanis haec omnia?

Do you think this all is enough for the Romans?

(translations here and beneath by Kaster – with some minor changes)

Hannibal supposedly replied:

plane satis esse credo Romanis haec, et si avarissimi sunt.

I think it's enough for the Romans – even though they are very very greedy!

This exploits the ambiguous formulation of the question. Antiochus presumably meant “enough to defeat the Romans,” but Hannibal interprets it as “enough to satisfy them” – recasting the army as a gift. The *dativus commodi* (or *incommodi*) permits *per definitionem* both readings. The joke's strength lies exactly in this twist.

A later Ciceronian joke reprises the wordplay on *sero* (late), a structure already discussed (Macr. *Sat.* 2.3.7):

sed et cum ad Pompeium venisset, dicentibus sero eum venisse respondit, “minime sero veni, nam nihil hic paratum video.”

But as he (scil. Cicero) came to Pompeius, he replied to those who said, he came late: “certainly not, for I see nothing prepared yet!” (here the translation is mine)

One may be tempted to understand that in the context of a dinner. Again, he defuses the criticism by interpreting *sero* as relating to the time of day rather than timing of arrival (like the example quoted by Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* 6.3.47)).

Similar in their demise are two jokes attributed to Augustus, both of which contain criticism veiled in irony (Macr. *Sat.* 2.4.8):

Galbae, cuius informe gibbo erat corpus, agenti apud se causam et frequenter dicenti, “corrige in me siquid reprehendis,” respondit, “ego te mone-re possum, corrigere non possum.”

When Galba, whose body was deformed by a hump on his back, was pleading a case before him and kept saying, “Set me straight if you find any fault,” Augustus said, “I can advise you, but I cannot set you straight.”

The wordplay lies in *corrigere*, which means both “to correct” and “to straighten,” shifting the focus from content to the physical deformity of his opponent.

The second joke also delivers criticism – this time targeting action rather than appearance (Macr. *Sat.* 2.4.10):

Vettius cum monumentum patris exarasset, ait Augustus, “hoc est vere monumentum patris colere.”

When Vettius had ploughed under his father’s memorial stone, Augustus remarked, “Now that’s what I call cultivating your father’s memory.”

Here, he plays with the word *colere*, which can mean both “to till the land” and “to honour/traditionally venerate.” By ironically praising the desecration, Augustus indirectly criticises it – a case of pragmatic ambiguity akin to the joke on kleptomaniac slave quoted above.

Upon closer reading all those jokes quoted by Macrobius come as responses or reactions to a particular situation. This is exactly what differentiates them from the collection of jokes that are procured for learning. Macrobius aims to show the intelligence and wit of both Augustus and Cicero. He is not preparing a collection of jokes.

Finally, we return to Quintilian and his ambiguous stance on jokes based on ambiguity. Before proposing a possible resolution, let us first consider the function of humour in oratory, according to Quintilian: Laughter should dispel sorrow, refresh the mind from toil, and relieve it from fatigue and saturation (6.3.1: *tristis affectus solvit; et animum ab intentione rerum avertit; a satietate vel a fatigatione renovat*. It should also shatter hatred and anger (6.3.9: *odium iramque frequentissime frang(i)t*).

A speaker should, therefore, not seek laughter for its own sake but apply humour where it serves a purpose – perhaps in the spirit of the relief theory (cf. above the notion of Cicero seeking relief from the stress of the civil war in *Phil.* 2.39 and *De or.* 2.236 cf. as well above n. 4).

Consequently, an orator must apply his wit according to a certain *καίρως* paying attention to the reactions and needs of his audience. For Quintilian as teacher of rhetoric, wit is not to be used for its own sake.

That marks the first premise to understand his criticism of ambiguous jokes.

Quintilian further distinguishes two types of jokes: those based on *forma dicendi* (form of expression) and those on *forma respondendi* (form of response; Quint. *Inst. Or.* 6.3.46).

The former corresponds to well-thought-out, polished remarks – what we might call *bons mots*, or jokes memorised for instance from joke collections such as the *Philogelos*. The latter refers to spontaneous replies. Such reactive jokes rely on quick wit and the clear presence of mind. Quintilian values them highly for their surprise effect and for showcasing the speaker’s intelligence and reflexes.

If, by contrast, a speaker were to deliver prepared witticisms, he would risk being seen as a *scurra* – a jester or stand-up comedian, a label Quintilian strongly advises to avoid. He mentions even that facial expressions and comic gestures are all banned because of the same reason: an orator should not be *scurrilis* (*Inst. Or.* 6.3.29). Unsurprisingly we find in Cicero – on whom Quintilian depends heavily for his treatise – a similar notion. Cicero too warns his adepts against being seen as a *scurrilis iocus aut mimicus* – “ridiculous jester or stand-up comedian” (*De or.* 2.239). He words his explanation in a slightly different way: *ea, quia meditata putantur esse, minus ridentur* (those get not as many laughs as they seem rehearsed/premeditated – *De or.* 2.246).

Quintilian provides a theoretically well-thought-through categorisation. However, the conclusion is the same: an orator must not be using jokes and wordplays as if he would have learned them from such a collection of jokes as the *Philogelos*. On the other hand, he will be highly praised when his wordplays come in a reactive way, when he is able to showcase in that way his quick wit and intelligence.

In this connection it appears rather interesting that Cicero, whom Quintilian praises and whose words he uses writing his own treatise was once mockingly dubbed a *consularis scurra* (a jester of consular rank) by Cato – a fact confirmed by Plutarch (*Comp. Dem.&Cic.* 1). According to the judgement both of Cicero himself and Quintilian he would not run the risk of being called *scurra* as his jokes do not seem to be premeditated (from all those jokes of Cicero we looked at only the two so-called *sero*-jokes seem premeditated or at least reduplicated after the

first rather successful employment). Cato – on the other hand – was not particularly known for his wit, euphemistically said. But obviously he knew very well how to pick a criticism towards his opponent: Cicero may have been known for his prevalent tendency to apply humour to his orations (due to his ability and probably good genetics).¹²

Language-based or ambiguous humour according to both, Cicero and Quintilian, is therefore acceptable for orators only if it arises as a clever response to a question or situation. At least, it should never appear to be well-prepared. This kind of wit should also serve a cause beyond laughter: during a long talk an orator should remain wakeful and respond to the reactions, questions and remarks of his public. And only then he should apply wit that is supposed to stem from his quick intelligence.

Pre-formulated *bons mots* should be left to professional jesters, who may, after all, rely on joke compilations (e.g. *Philogelos*) to pimp up their performances.

Therefore, Quintilian stresses that the task of an orator does not consist of evoking a laughter. Laughter is seen only as an instrument for achieving another at times somewhat deeper or more serious end. And for that purpose, premeditated wit, especially when it is not responsive is to be avoided. Quintilian never forgets his main purpose that is creating a *vir bonus dicendi peritus*.

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¹² The whole section of humour in *De oratore* begins with the question whether humour is teachable or not (2.216).

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