

# CHARACTERS ON COMIC STRIPS: LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN HUMOR AND FICTION

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- **ABSTRACT:** This paper analyzes, according to interactionist researches of Language Acquisition, the speech of children characters on comic strips. Among other things, it analyzes the verisimilitude of these speeches and argues about the need of relating the data from the fiction to the data already collected by researchers, if someone wishes to work with those fictitious data. By contrast, this paper observes the data (the strips) as an important material in order to analyze, in fiction, the representation of the children's own speech and the effects that children speech produces in their receptors, considering the fact that the comic strips are texts written by adult authors who must make children speech somehow plausible. Noting that the comic strips are texts aiming to produce some effect of humor, this paper further argues that this effect is not related to (or it is very subtly related to) the comic effect produced by some children speeches.
- **KEYWORDS:** Language acquisition. Fiction. Comic strips. Humor.

## Introduction

Collecting data in the area of Language Acquisition is fundamental, and the area is strongly marked by it. In *interactionist* studies<sup>1</sup>, especially in the construction of longitudinal corpora from recordings and diary data, it is extremely important<sup>2</sup>. Considering such specificity, this paper intends to discuss if data collected in fictional works can be object of study for researchers in the area of Language Acquisition.

In order to achieve it, we will analyze some data collected from comic strips with children characters (some classic examples of this type of character are: Mafalda, by the cartoonist Quino, and Calvin, by Bill Watterson). Data related to three characters will be analyzed in this study: a secondary character on *Mafalda* comic strips – her

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview on researches in Language Acquisition and on theoretical positions in the area, see Del Ré (2006).

<sup>2</sup> As Pereira de Castro and Figueira (2006, p. 80) argue: “It [the longitudinal study] follows the path of a subject throughout its growth. Thereby, it allows the researcher to approach what, from the phenomenological point of view, is central to the theory in language acquisition, i.e., the change.”

younger brother, Guille; Matias, from the series *Yo, Matias*, and Enriqueta, from the series *Macanudo*.

Choosing Guille as one of our “subjects” was mainly due to two factors: 1- he is the youngest character we found in comic strips, whose infant universe is represented; 2 - it is a character presented from his birth until he began to speak using complex sentences, which would suggest, from the outset, verisimilitude with a longitudinal type corpus.

For the characters Matias and Enriqueta, the reasons were different. Although they are also children characters, Matias and Enriqueta do not share the same characteristics as Guille, like the fact of being presented from their birth, or even the fact that their physical growth is visible chronologically, related to the release of *Mafalda* comic strips. Regarding Enriqueta and Matias, the interest comes from sporadic occurrences of “speech”<sup>3</sup> which, at first, we consider possible or plausible if compared to productions by children in general.

Our path in this paper will be basically organized in three stages: 1- present the “errors” as data for analysis to Language Acquisition area; 2- present the laughter motivated by those “errors”; 3- analyze both errors and humor on the selected strips from the three series (*Mafalda*; *Yo, Matias*, and *Macanudo*).

### **The issue of “error”**

The error can be understood as a result of a situation where there is inability or even lack of effort of someone in a given circumstance. So, it is possible to talk about etiquette mistakes, behavior mistakes, etc. When it comes to language, the general idea of error is very similar to the latter one mentioned: it is a question of considering error something that is different from a certain pattern of speech. Thus, what distorts in a so-called correct way of speaking is judged as an error. Therefore, the error is defined either in language or in another domain, by a strategy of comparing between a model and an occurrence that, to a certain extent, deviates from it.

In the case of a child who is in the process of language acquisition, the error is also defined by divergence with a pattern. Thus, the child is said to make mistakes because they do not produce a speech like an adult does. Something similar occurs in the comic strips analyzed, since the use of divergent speeches for children and adults is important as a representative child speech for children characters. So we will deal with this central aspect to understand the relation between the child and the language in its acquisition process.

Linguistics has long given a different perspective to the question of “error”. It is the same that happened to Sociolinguistics, which approaches as a mark of linguistic variation what is wrongly treated in common sense as an error. Such variation is defined

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<sup>3</sup> At first, the quotes indicate it is not exactly oral production, since they are captured in the written universe of fiction; and secondly, in the case of Matias, we will see it is what would be characterized as babbling.

according to its connection with social stratification, age, gender, ethnicity, etc. Mistakes, thus, become not an error anymore, but a material of interest, and it is extinguished as terminology for occurrences that deviate from the standard norm.

In Language Acquisition, the error is also taken as an excellent material for analysis:

A few years ago, another field of research (the Language Acquisition) [...] promoted [error] to a prominent place among its methodological procedures. Initially banished and then rescued by scholars, the error thus came to a trajectory that went from the discriminatory exclusion of some to the unbiased and attentive gaze of others, who intend to extract from such rich material more than what can be revealed by its normal or correct counterpart. (FIGUEIRA, 1996, p. 56, our translation).<sup>4</sup>

In the interactionist perspective of Language Acquisition area, the study of the “error”<sup>5</sup> has been widely disseminated. Opposing a view that considers Language Acquisition as an accumulation of the learning of linguistic properties, this perspective sees “error” as a fundamental data for analysis. The so-called reorganizational error, above all, is what brings the greatest return to the researcher.

The reorganization “error” is the one that presents the work of the subject regarding the linguistic system. As an example of regularization, which is common for many children (perhaps all of them), we present the irregular verbs: “fazi” instead of “fiz” (I did). Here the irregular verb “fazer” (to do) is taken “into analysis” along with the other regular verbs in second conjugation. Its irregular form in simple past (in indicative form) is regularized according to the other verbs of the paradigm (bater (to beat): bati; sofrer (to suffer): sofri; therefore, fazer: fazi).

This type of “error” is considered by the area as an indication that the child began to build linguistic subsystems. It also shows that in a previous “stage” of acquisition, in which the child seems to do it correctly, there is a use preceding the language knowledge<sup>6</sup>. The child therefore uses the language before actually “knowing”<sup>7</sup> it. Reorganizational “error” is the best way to perceive that what the child produced

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<sup>4</sup> Original: “Há alguns anos, um outro domínio de investigação – o da aquisição da linguagem – [...] promoveu [o erro] a um lugar de destaque dentre seus procedimentos metodológicos. Inicialmente banido, e depois resgatado pelos estudiosos, o erro conheceu assim uma trajetória que foi – pode-se dizer – da exclusão discriminadora de alguns para o olhar imparcial e atento de outros, que pretendem extrair deste rico material mais do que aquilo que pode ser revelado por sua contraparte normal ou correta.” (FIGUEIRA, 1996, p. 56).

<sup>5</sup> From now on we will write the word “error”, when it refers to the swerving child speech, always between quotation marks. Since we are exposing subjects whose relationship with language is different from that of an adult, we assume that the designation “error” is in some sense false, as the “error” made by children can always indicate a path or even a relation/position with the language.

<sup>6</sup> This kind of precision revealed by the use of the language without knowing it can be explained, among other things, by the process of speculation, in which the child incorporates part of the adult speech (see DE LEMOS, 1982, p. 113).

<sup>7</sup> The quotation marks in the word “knowing it” indicate that we do not agree that the child is aware of their path, that they are aware that at a given moment they know, or have already learned, a certain rule, etc.

before “making a mistake” (which seemed to be right) is, in fact, an example of such unknowing use:

It is important to point out that the latter ones [divergent occurrences] will lead the researcher to question the status of the so-called “correct” forms, which were previously produced by the child, and, consequently, to review any premature conclusion that such so-called “correct” forms could already evidence a systematic knowledge of the linguistic procedures involved in them. (FIGUEIRA, 1996, p. 57, our translation).<sup>8</sup>

The occurrence of reorganization “error” is, therefore, an indication that the child begins to unconsciously perceive the regularities of the language to which they are exposed. And when faced with a system that is actually heterogeneous, it produces “errors.”

Let us see, for example, the case of gender exposed by Figueira (1996). The author observes that, during the acquisition of the opposition system – between masculine/feminine gender – one of the children analyze starts regularizing many occurrences. Let us see an occurrence of: “Bom dia *is for men*. Bom dia *is for women*” (FIGUEIRA, 1996, p. 69, our translation)<sup>9</sup>. This speech is part of a dialogue between two sisters: A. and J., in which J. corrects the sister who says “Bom dia” to a TV presenter.

The author’s hypothesis is that occurrences like this “are signs of subsystems under construction” (FIGUEIRA, 1996, p. 69, our translation)<sup>10</sup> and that the child begins to operate regularly with a formal rule acquired. In this case, they generalize the rule that words or names ending in “a” are for women and the words ending in “o” are for men.

The “error”, therefore, in the child speech, is a rich occurrence, so we can perceive the way in which the process of language construction occurs in the subject. It is also an indication that the child operates on linguistic regularities, and, by doing so, they hyper-regularize this heterogeneous system, the language.

However, there is, in De Lemos (2003), another approach to the phenomena of language acquisition process (including the “error”), in which they are put into operation in a relationship scheme between the child and another person. Thus, observing the “error” (among many other phenomena) may point mainly to the fact that it is determined by three positions of the subject (in this case, the speaking child) related to another pole. By proposing such new approach, the author intends to question the developmental studies of Language Acquisition.

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<sup>8</sup> Original: “É um ponto importante assinalar que são estas últimas [ocorrências divergentes] que levarão o investigador a se interrogar sobre o estatuto das formas ditas “corretas”, anteriormente produzidas pela criança, e, conseqüentemente, a rever qualquer conclusão prematura de que tais formas ditas “corretas” já pudessem evidenciar um conhecimento sistemático dos procedimentos linguísticos nelas envolvidos”. (FIGUEIRA, 1996, p. 57).

<sup>9</sup> Original: “Bom dia *é para homem*. Bom dia *é para mulher*” (FIGUEIRA, 1996, p. 69).

<sup>10</sup> Original: “são indícios de subsistemas em construção” (FIGUEIRA, 1996, p. 69).

In a first position, the dominant pole would be the other person's speech, the adult who talks to the child, often reassigning it. In the second position, there is dominance of the language. In the third position, "[...] it is possible to say that the other person gains space as alterity. Not only the child recognizes the difference between their speech and the speech of the other, but the difference in what emerges in their own speech." (DE LEMOS, 2003, p. 530, our translation)<sup>11</sup>. There is, in the last position, a "dominance of the subjective pole" (DE LEMOS, 2003, p. 531, our translation)<sup>12</sup>, but the subject is divided on it; in short, in discordant instances of speech and listening.

Addressing the "error" from those contributions given by De Lemos (2003) allows the observer to go beyond the so-called reorganizational error and face data that can cause some oddness to the researcher.

It seems to be clear that when we deal with the acquisition of verbal paradigm, the reorganizational error can play an important role to understand it. To explain the fact that children produce forms such as "sabo" and "fazi" through the phenomenon of reorganization<sup>13</sup> seems to be reasonable.

However, when it comes to some "errors" outside the verbal paradigm, the reorganization alone does not seem to be sufficient for analysis. Figueira (2001b), addressing the question of unusual gender marks in the speech of two children, shows that although there may be a regularization driven by a gender/sex correlation, gender "errors" may show much more than a reorganization process.

According to the line adopted by the author, we observe that the analysis of gender "errors" can also show us the phenomenon of linguistic reflexivity. Using the concept of autonymy, the author points out that in some cases of replica the child begins to refer to the language, which would mark the reflexivity. Or if we use the terminology of De Lemos (2003), it would mark a third position.

It is possible to observe, therefore, that the "error" in the child speech, for Language Acquisition area, is an excellent material, not only for the interactionist perspective, but also for other perspectives. When we deal with the laughter provoked by the child speech, the "error" will also play a relevant role.

## The comicality of the child speech

One of the causes of the comic effect in the child speech is the "error". As it diverges from the adult speech, either a strangeness or a comic effect on the interlocutor will

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<sup>11</sup> Original: "[...] é possível dizer que o outro ganha espaço como alteridade. Não só a criança reconhece a diferença entre sua fala e a fala do outro quanto a diferença no que emerge em sua própria fala." (DE LEMOS, 2003, p. 530).

<sup>12</sup> Original: "dominância do polo subjetivo" (DE LEMOS, 2003, p. 531).

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted, however, that although verbal "errors" (essentially when dealing with irregular verbs) can easily be explained by an associative mechanism related to the regularity of the system, they may also assume an unpredictable facet. Figueira (2003) clearly observes an "error" multidirectionality in the acquisition of regular verbs in Portuguese, which are sometimes aligned with the pattern of first conjugation, and some other times with the pattern of second and third one.

occur. The occurrence of this type of “error” has been called anecdotal data by the area of Language Acquisition.

Figueira (2001a) got interested in this type of data, mainly by questioning the child’s awareness (or lack of it) regarding the production of a humorous sentence. Or, in the words of the author: “[...] when does the child realize or recognize themselves as the one who, with their speech, can even make people laugh or can play with their partner?” (FIGUEIRA, 2001a, p. 29, our translation)<sup>14</sup>. This question is interesting for the area, because “[...] it touches a problem that is a central concern for researchers committed to recognize, in the linguistic development of the speaker, the emergence of metalinguistic abilities.” (FIGUEIRA, 2001a, p. 30, our translation)<sup>15</sup>.

The “error”, therefore, plays a relevant role also in studying the comic effect that children can produce while speaking. But there is a new aspect: it is not only a question of whether or not the child speech makes someone laugh, but also to assess how this comic “capacity” may or may not reveal a linguistic reflexivity by the child.

It seems relevant to point out that Figueira (2001a) approaches the principle of positioning, proposed by De Lemos (2003), put here into a dichotomy: a position would be around naivety, not knowing what it produces; but, in another position, the speaker would realize that it produces something funny.

What is clear, in most cases of children who speak and produce some comic effect, is that they are not in the same relation to the language as an adult who produces a funny sentence. Although their speech may seem a lot with a funny text, it is not only the text that would make us laugh. According to Figueira (2001a), we also laugh at the naivety of the child. Let us observe the case commented by her:

A 3-and-a-half-year-old child that, after hearing an ad showing cold chicken (*frango resfriado*) on TV, suddenly asked: “Was he sick because he was playing in the rain?” (*ele ficou dodói por que foi brincar na chuva?*) The naively asked question was followed by a burst of laughter. What are we laughing at? We laughed at the “naivety” of the child who applied to the chicken the same logic that would be appropriate to themselves, what undeniably proceeds from the word “cold” and its more frequent use in the infant universe. (FIGUEIRA, 2001a, p. 51, our translation).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Original: “[...] quando a criança se dá conta ou se reconhece na posição daquele que, com sua fala, chega a fazer rir ou a brincar com seu parceiro?” (FIGUEIRA, 2001a, p. 29).

<sup>15</sup> Original: “[...] toca um problema que está no centro das preocupações de investigadores empenhados em reconhecer, no desenvolvimento linguístico do falante, a emergência de habilidades metalinguísticas.” (FIGUEIRA, 2001a, p. 30).

<sup>16</sup> Original: “Uma criança de 3 anos e meio, que, ao ouvir na tevê uma oferta de *frango resfriado*, de pronto perguntou: *ele ficou dodói por que foi brincar na chuva?* A pergunta, feita candidamente, foi seguida de uma explosão de riso. Do que rimos? Rimos da “ingenuidade” da criança que aplicou ao frango o mesmo raciocínio que seria adequado a ela, raciocínio que inegavelmente procede da palavra *resfriado* e de seu uso mais frequente no universo infantil.” (FIGUEIRA, 2001a, p. 51).

This may show us that, in fact, the laughter motivated by the child speech has much more to do with a stereotype of a child accessible to all of us: that of the naive child, rather than the possibility of the child to understand that they cause laughter with their speech. From our point of view, this is a principle: we laugh at the child speech because we are conditioned by this stereotype of a child. Thus, a deviation produced by a child can then cause laughter.

We would also add that the comic effect is also “achieved” by the unexpected, the surprising thing. Skinner, while tracing a historical overview of his Classical Theory of Laughter, adds the idea of the surprising thing:

In *De Oratore*, Cicero had alluded to the significance of the unexpected, but his Renaissance followers greatly embroider the point. Castiglione stresses that “certain newlye happened cases” are particularly apt to “provoke laughter” (SKINNER, 2004, p. 146).

Going back to the data analyzed by Figueira (2001a), there is obviously no textual strategy<sup>17</sup> consciously defined by the child, but fortunately, they managed in a relatively simple sentence to gather the factors that can provoke laughter. So we laughed at their naivety, but we also laughed at a different interpretation in the context for the word “resfriado”, which causes surprise.

As for the change of the child’s position regarding language, Figueira (2001a) makes the defense using another data, which is very peculiar, considering the child produces a pun with a proper name (Dagmar<sup>18</sup>) in a very lucid way. And in this case they are aware of it, since they laugh at what they have produced, not demonstrating the naivety noticeable in other data.

We now turn to the domain of linguistic reflexivity. The moment the child begins to listen to their speech and reflect about it. It is also the change of position. It occupies, undoubtedly, the third position, as postulated by De Lemos.

But how is the child speech perceived in fiction? How is it used for humor? Surely, if a comedian realized that the child speech, or the “mistakes” it produces, would be funny by themselves, he/she could use them without the need of using any other thematic resources.

Some time ago, an advertisement for a food supplement used the child speech in a very reasonable way<sup>19</sup>. In the case of comics, the presence of child characters is not something new. Just remember the famous “Turma da Mônica”, cartoon children created

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<sup>17</sup> As we see in jokes, for example.

<sup>18</sup> When producing the pun, the child observed by the author talks to a person named Dagmar [*mar* means *sea*], asks her name several times and suddenly asks the question: *ah, Dagmar! Não é dagchão?* [*chão* means *land*] (see FIGUEIRA, 2001a, p. 42).

<sup>19</sup> It is an advertisement for the product *Sustagen Kids*, in which the child character, after drinking the product, turns to the mother and says: *eu gosti*. The mother, now presenting the product and focused on the camera, says: *Se ele gostiu, eu também gosti*.

by the Brazilian Maurício de Souza. Remembering that, even the *Mafalda* comic strip, in which Guille is inserted, circulated mainly in the 1960s and 70s. The question that remains is: since the image of the children is extensively explored on the comic strips, is it possible to notice any verisimilitude with the speech of a real child?

Thus, the importance of this section lies in observing which relationships can be established between the child speeches that causes laughter and the fictional data selected and analyzed in this article. Although the comic/humorous effects of the two cutouts are different, the “error” is quite important for the humorous effects in the strips and, of course, essential for the comic effect of the childish speech.

The following sections will be dedicated to the three characters we have already mentioned in the introduction. However, it is worth emphasizing two aspects: 1- Both the search and the analysis of the selected data are based on the hypothesis that the “error” is a determining factor for the characterization of the childish speech; 2- There are differences between the selected characters. Guille, as we have already said, differs from the others by its perceptible process of growth on *Mafalda* strips. The *Mafalda* strips are all gathered in a collection (“*Toda Mafalda*”).

The differences between the characters could not be ignored neither in the search and selection of the data nor in their analysis. Thus, the selection of data from the character Guille was exhaustive and performed using the collection; and the analysis takes into account his physical growth and the changes represented in his speech when observing such fact. The other characters, whose strips are still produced by their authors, obviously do not have all their strips gathered in collections. Moreover, their growth is not clear, as Guille’s is. Therefore, the analysis takes into account specific questions of sporadic data, the babble in Matias and the prefix “des” in *Enriqueta*. Data collection was done using the collections we had. These are included in the list of references.

### **The “phases” of Guille: from the beginning to the beginning**

The title of this section is obviously a joke with the aforementioned fact that Guille appears on the strips by Quino since his birth, and continues to be a character until the last *Mafalda* strips. The first word “beginning” in the title makes, therefore, reference to the beginning of Guille’s life. The second one refers to the beginning of his speech, or even his speech closer to the speech of an adult.

It is worth mentioning that Guille is a very different character on the strips, which take the name of his older sister. Besides being a boy who is shown since his birth, unlike the other characters (including *Mafalda*), he is the only one whose physical growth can be seen.

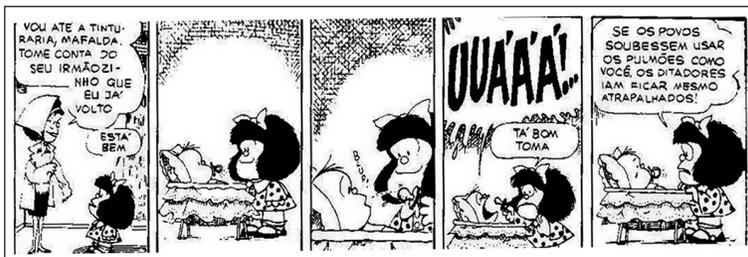
Thus, as we have already pointed out, the path of this character on the strips produced by Quino may seem very much like a longitudinal cut in a child’s language acquisition, since it is possible to notice it from his first sonorous productions until the formulation of complex sentences. However, it remains to be seen if there is reliability

in the speech representation that is made in these strips, especially regarding the “errors” in child speech.

In order to observe this character, we will select strips that expose a certain path of Guille in language acquisition. Remembering Guille is a character inserted by the cartoonist Quino sometime after the creation of the strip Mafalda. He is, therefore, a late character. In this way, he appears since his birth (or rather, from his mother’s pregnancy) to virtually the last Mafalda strips that the Argentinian cartoonist produced.

The strip below is the first one in which Guille appears. He is, of course, a baby and at that moment he is already exposed to language. He is treated, even if he does not speak, as a talking subject. Let us look at the second-person treatment given by his sister: in the fourth part, the phrases “tá bom, toma” (all right, here!) and in the last, the pronoun “você” (you) reveals how, since cradle, the child is taken as a subject of speech.

**Figure 1 – Guille’s first appearance<sup>20</sup>**



Source: Quino (2009, p. 202).

Then you can see Guille’s babble:

**Figure 2 – Guille’s babble 1<sup>21</sup>**

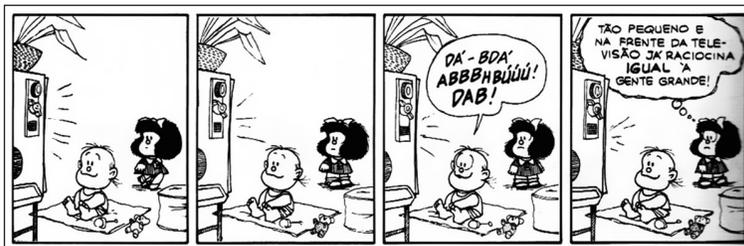


Source: Quino (2009, p. 208).

<sup>20</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> frame: Mom: “Mafalda, I’m going to the laundry shop. Take care of your little brother, I’ll be back soon”. Mafalda: “ok”. 4<sup>th</sup> frame: Guille: “UUAUA”. Mafalda: “All right, here!”. 5<sup>th</sup> frame: Mafalda “If people knew how to use their lungs the way you do, dictators would be dizzy!”.

<sup>21</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> frame: Mafalda: “Hi, Guille. How are you doing?”. 5<sup>th</sup> frame: Mafalda: “Poor boy! He still doesn’t know how to deal with his public relations”.

Figure 3 – Guille’s babble 2<sup>22</sup>



Source: Quino (2009, p. 222).

There is another strip below, in which the interpretation of a word (“ete”), probably a holophrase<sup>23</sup>, by Guille’s interlocutor (Mafalda), is evident:

Figure 4 – “Ete”<sup>24</sup>



Source: Quino (2009, p. 233).

On the strip below, two words combined and again the interpretation of Guille’s interlocutor (“eta mamã” is interpreted as “essa é a mamãe” (this is mom), by Mafalda):

Figure 5 – Brigitte Bardot e mamãe (Brigitte Bardot and mom)<sup>25</sup>



Source: Quino (2009, p. 247).

<sup>22</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> frame: Mafalda: “So young and, watching TV, he is already thinking as an adult”.

<sup>23</sup> See the importance of the holophrase in the interesting article by Scarpa (2009).

<sup>24</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> frame: Guille: “This?”. Mafalda: “Plant”. 2<sup>nd</sup> frame: Guille: “This?”. 3<sup>rd</sup> frame: Mafalda: “Chair”. 4<sup>th</sup> frame: Guille: “This?”. 5<sup>th</sup> frame: Mafalda: “This”.

<sup>25</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> frame: Guille: “This mom. Mom. This...”. 2<sup>nd</sup> frame: “No, Guille. This is not mom. It’s Brigitte Bardot”.

To conclude, a strip in which Guille begins to produce complex sentences:

**Figure 6** – Ovinhos desorganizados (Messy little eggs)<sup>26</sup>



Source: Quino (2009, p. 284).

The six strips above are here arranged sequentially due to their temporal appearance in the series *Mafalda*. What really matters to us is this sequence that reveals a certain understanding of the author of the strips regarding a path children go through in terms of Language Acquisition. Previously there would be babblings, after that isolated words or holophrases (“ete”), then combination of two words (“eta mamã”) and, finally, the production of complex sentences (“mas ela num nacheu do ovinho?”, “didn’t it come from an egg?”). It is also clear that the author, as well as the translator, has a kind of awareness for possible pathways of phonological acquisition. As examples, the pair “ete” and “eta” (Figures 4 and 5) reveals a late acquisition of the phoneme /s/ in position of syllabic coda, and “nacheu”<sup>27</sup> (Figure 6), in which there is an exchange of fricatives.

In terms of production of humorous effects, we can highlight that part of the strips (Figures 1 to 5) orbit around an image of a child that differs from the common ones, the child (sometimes *Mafalda* – figures 1, 2, 3, and 4, sometimes *Guille* – Figure 5) that says or does something outside of what would be appropriate for their age. What causes humor is this mismatch of an “adult” speech or action and the stereotyped images of children as naive, for example<sup>28</sup>. In the other strip (Figure 6), the humorous effect is produced somewhat differently and it reveals a non-coincidence of what the child says with what an adult would say about “organização de ovinhos” (egg organization). We will return to this strip later.

<sup>26</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> frame: Guille: “Where is the little belly button?”. *Mafalda*: “She doesn’t have belly button, Guille. She came from a little egg.”. 4<sup>th</sup> frame: Guille: “And the tiny wings?”. *Mafalda*: “It also doesn’t have tiny wings”. Guille: “But, didn’t it come from an egg?”. 5<sup>th</sup> frame: *Mafalda*: “Yep! But not all that come from eggs have wings. Fishes, spiders, snakes, birds, ants, frogs and many others come from eggs”. 6<sup>th</sup> frame: Guille: “How messy these eggs are!”.

<sup>27</sup> *Mafalda* is a well-known series of comic strips in Brazil, so it was decided to use the translation into Portuguese and not the original text in Spanish. We noticed, however, Guille’s speech is virtually identical in all strips listed here, except for Fig. 6 which has some differences in translation. The exchange of the voiceless alveolar fricative by the voiceless alveopalatal remains, although it happens in different words. In the translation it occurs in “nacheu”, and, in the original text, the exchange occurs in the word “entonche”, in “¿y entonche laz alitaz?” (“where are the wings?”; see QUINO, 1993, p. 380). The source excerpt mentioned was translated as “e a ajinha?”. Here the translator inserts another exchange of fricatives, now the voiced alveolar is replaced by the voiced alveopalatal.

<sup>28</sup> Regarding humor, stereotypes and comic strips for child characters, see Gatti (2013).

## Matias's babble

Unlike Guille, Matias, also created by an Argentinean – Sendra, is the main character in the series of strips whose title explicitly refers to his name (*Yo, Matias*). Such strip is currently published in the Argentinean newspaper *Clarín*, and parts of the strips are gathered in collections.

Matias is a boy in school age (by the context of the strips, he must be about seven or eight years) and lives with his mother, one of the few adult interlocutors who talk to him. So, on the strips we will present below, Matias's mother remembers when he was a baby.

Figure 7 – Shakespeare<sup>29</sup>



Source: Sendra (2008, p.6).

Figure 8 – Crying<sup>30</sup>



Source: Sendra (2008, p.7).

<sup>29</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> frame: “And I also remember, Matias, how I used to teach you how to speak. Let’s see. Mati, say ‘mommy’. 3<sup>rd</sup> frame: “I can’t believe it”. 4<sup>th</sup> frame: “It seems like he said Shakespeare”.

<sup>30</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> frame: Memories...Memories... “This baby is brilliant. Look at what he said! (...) It’s unbelievable! It seems he talked about “Lead fluoride”. 2<sup>nd</sup> frame: “And now he talked about ‘staphylococcus’ (...) Then I believe he said ‘Aconagua is high’. 4<sup>th</sup> frame: “Now he cries like an ordinary baby”.



own acquisition process. (PEREIRA DE CASTRO, 1998, p. 82, our translation, original emphasis).<sup>34</sup>

Thus, we can say that children, since their birth, are exposed to the functioning of the language, because they are taken by parents and relatives in general as a subject of speech:

Since they are born, babies are immersed in a significant universe by its basic interlocutors, who attribute meaning and intention to their vocal utterances, gestures, direction of their gaze. Even the various types of crying are “interpreted”, receive a “meaning” and are “classified” by the interlocutor adult. The baby is thus seen as a potential communicative partner for the adult, who undertakes a “fine tuning” of the child’s potentially communicative and significant manifestations, regardless of their expressive content (gesture, voice, babbling, words or phrases). There is a mutual adjustment in conventions between adult and child, so that child vocalizations do not fall into a communicative vacuum. (SCARPA, 2003, p. 215, our translation).<sup>35</sup>

We will see that what occurs on Matias strips above is somewhat similar to what Scarpa observes. Matias is in the context of interacting with his mother, emitting seemingly unrelated sonorous sequences with possible words or expressions from his language. However, his mother attributes meaning to those vocal achievements. Thus, in Figure 7, the sequence “shashpash” is interpreted by the mother as “Shakespeare”.

We can see, therefore, in the four strips of Matias, that the kind of relationship the mother has with the boy is precisely interpretation. There is, however, a difference between the first three strips (7, 8, and 9) and the last one (10): in the first three there seems to be a pattern for the interpretation done by the mother, and in the latter one this pattern does not seem to occur.

In 7, 8, and 9, Matias’s mother follows clues left by her son’s own sonorous achievement. So, she looks for words that have some phonetic similarity to Matias’ babble. In 8, for example, “agugaguá-ato” is interpreted as “Aconcagua es alto”. In

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<sup>34</sup> Original: “Se é pela interpretação da mãe que a criança é posta no funcionamento da língua, por outro lado, sua única possibilidade constitutiva é enquadrar-se na fala do outro [...]. De fato, a *interpretação* no quadro dessas questões deve ser tomada como *efeito*: *efeito* da fala do adulto na fala da criança, *efeito* da fala da criança na fala do adulto e *efeito* que a fala da criança promove no seu próprio processo de aquisição.” (PEREIRA DE CASTRO, 1998, p. 82, grifo do autor).

<sup>35</sup> Original: “Desde o nascimento, o bebê é mergulhado num universo significativo por seus interlocutores básicos, que atribuem significado e intenção às suas emissões vocais, gestos, direção do olhar. Até mesmo os diversos tipos de choro são “interpretados”, “significados” e “classificados” pelo adulto interlocutor. O bebê é, assim, visto como potencial parceiro comunicativo do adulto, que empreende uma “sintonia fina” com as manifestações potencialmente comunicativas e significativas da criança, qualquer que seja seu conteúdo expressivo (gesto, voz, balbucios, palavras ou frases). Há um ajuste mútuo nas convenções entre adulto e criança, de maneira que as vocalizações infantis não caem num vácuo comunicativo.” (SCARPA, 2003, p. 215).

10, however, the correspondence does not exist, since “foshodorshosh” has nothing similar to “teta”.

It should also be noted that although there is a sound correspondence between Matias’s babble and the words attributed to him by his mother, it is an attempt to make humor based on at least one factor: the nonsense generated by the affectionate relationship between mother and son. It is overt that these are interpretive gestures done by the mother, who makes babbling significant by giving it meaning; yet such meanings are complete nonsense, since a baby is not expected to say “Shakespeare,” “estafilococo” and “filosofia.”

## Enriqueta and a prefix

Enriqueta is a character in the series called *Macanudo* by the Argentinean cartoonist, Liniers. It is about a girl who is always interacting with her cat, Fellini, with her teddy bear, Madariaga, and who is reading and thinking about life from time to time.

On the strip below, what interests us is the use of the prefix “des”:

Figure 11 – Desfazendo tempo (Undoing Time)<sup>36</sup>



Source: Liniers (2009, p. 37).

We note in this strip a mismatch related not specifically to the use of *des*, since in Spanish there is the possibility of the verb to be prefixed by “des” (as in Portuguese, “fazer/desfazer”, or English “do/Undo”), but a mismatch with the use of *desahaciendo* in a fixed expression of the language: (*des*)*haciendo tiempo*.

Enriqueta interprets the expression *hacer tiempo*, literally, considering that *fazer tempo* would produce more time, letting her more distant from her Christmas gifts.

It is not a mismatch in understanding the sense of reversibility that the prefix mobilizes when it is incorporated into a verb (“fazer/desfazer”, “colar/descolar”), but, in a certain way, it is a mismatch in the use of “des” in fixed expressions of the language and even in the way these expressions are used.

<sup>36</sup> Single frame: Fellini: “What are you doing, Enriqueta?”. Enriqueta: “I’m undoing time until I can open my Christmas gifts”. Fellini: “How come you are “undoing” time? Wouldn’t it be “making” time?”. Enriqueta: “No. I need the time between now and the time I can open the gifts to disappear... I mean “undo” it. Do you understand?”. Fellini: “What a strange life you are going to have when you grow up...”.

It differs in this way from those data studied by Figueira (1999) that show a non-differentiation in the use of the prefix “des”, since Henrietta “perceives” the function of such morphological mark. In the same way, it differs from those of Figueira (1999) that mark a predominance of the morphological item over the lexical one (“deslimpar”, “desmurchar”<sup>37</sup>).

We may notice that although Enriqueta is aware of the function of the prefix “des” in her language, there also seems to be the same type of “prevalence of the morphological resource on marks of lexical opposition” (FIGUEIRA, 1999, p. 204, our translation)<sup>38</sup>, since by interpreting “literally” the expression *hacer tiempo*, the character ignores its current meaning that is precisely the one that she wants to employ.

### **To conclude: a gap**

In all cases considering fictional characters analyzed here, in terms of humorous effect, there is a fundamental difference in comic data from the child speech analyzed and the ones collected by Figueira (2001a), since these are similar to what Freud called a naive comic:

[...] the naive [comic] is ‘found’ and not, like a joke, ‘made’ [...]. The naive occurs if someone completely disregards an inhibition because it is not present in him – if, therefore, he appears to overcome it without any effort. It is a condition for the naive’s producing its effect that we should know that the person concerned does not possess the inhibition; otherwise we call him not naive but impudent. (FREUD, 1960, p. 351).

The fundamental difference is that in cases from fictional speech there is the production of verbal material with clear humorous purposes, i.e., it is a material produced for humor and it is the ultimate end of the strip as a discursive genre. Sometimes the child’s divergent speech even plays an accessory role in the production of humor, such as Guille’s babble and some of Matias’s, for example. It is an unthinkable fact in naive comic speeches collected and analyzed by Figueira (2001a).

In the previous sections, we found there is a very interesting representation on the strips (and also a perception) considering the way the language acquisition takes place. Considering the character Guille, the cut produced by the examples is also a historical cut of the apparitions of the character. Thus, the proposed order follows the chronological order of his appearance on the strips. It is possible, therefore, to perceive in this chronological sequence a certain kind of division in phases of acquisition, as already emphasized.

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<sup>37</sup> See Figueira (1999, p. 200).

<sup>38</sup> Original: “prevalência do recurso morfológico sobre as marcas de oposição lexical” (FIGUEIRA, 1999, p. 204).

Observing Quino's character a little more, when it comes to the representation of "errors" in child speech, it does not go beyond the phonetic question. The well-known exchange between "R" and "L" does not fail to be noticed on the strips, and that is the case of the words "agola" (now) and "sujeila" (dirt) (instead of "agora" and "sujeira") pronounced by Guille on others strips. Thus, we should note that there are no "errors" as we were initially looking for. Those "errors" in which we see a systemic force, the reorganizational "errors", hence the typical errors analyzed by the area of Language Acquisition, do not appear on the strips by Quino. But a question remains: what, then, is the humor in these strips?

Unlike Matias's strips, where the humor lies in a certain exaggerated representation of the mother's affection for her child, or the Enriqueta strip, in which there is specifically a possible "error" to occur; in Guille it is less related to a likelihood with the typical "errors" children present during language acquisition than with what Possenti postulates when analyzing jokes whose main characters are children:

The first [discourse] destroys the hypothesis of children's ignorance about secret subjects or taboos [...], the second one [...] shows the violation of the rules in discourse, basically because children say things they could not say, that is, what adults could not say. (POSSENTI, 1998, p. 143, our translation).<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the discourse(s) uttered by a child character in the jokes, nothing or almost nothing has to do with the "errors" that can provoke laughter in the "real" speech of a child. What makes the jokes funny is the fact that a child speaks what was not supposed to be said or knows more than should be known. Let us see an example:

*A professora para o Joãozinho:*

— *Joãozinho, qual o tempo verbal da frase: "Isso não podia ter acontecido"?*

— *Preservativo imperfeito, professora!*<sup>40</sup>

In this joke it is possible to notice that the child (Johnny) uses a sexual script in an improper environment and at an inappropriate time. It is an example of the convergence between too much knowledge about something that they should not know (in this case, sex) and saying something at an inappropriate time (the lesson on verb tenses).

What we want to argue, however, is that in addition to what Possenti postulates, there is a certain aspect in those strips, in which Guille demonstrates a complex speech,

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<sup>39</sup> Original: "O primeiro [discurso] consiste na destruição da hipótese da ignorância das crianças sobre temas secretos ou tabus [...], o segundo [...] caracteriza-se pela violação de regras de discurso, basicamente pelo fato de que crianças dizem o que não poderiam dizer, ou seja, o que os adultos não poderiam dizer." (POSSENTI, 1998, p. 143).

<sup>40</sup> *The teacher asks Johnny:*

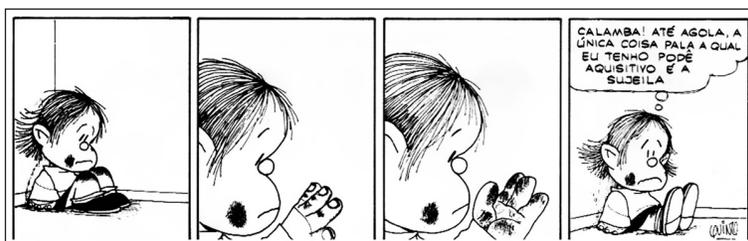
— *Johnny, what is the verbal tense in the phrase: "This was not supposed to happen"?*

— *Contraceptive imperfect!*

that points to a mechanism very close to what motivates laughter in the speech of real children, that is, the “error”. In fact, there is a constancy of a non-coincidence between the child speech and what would be expected from an adult’s speech. Although, as we have already said, it is not exactly the common “error” made by children.

We can mention as examples of such non-coincidence Fig. 6 and Fig. 12, as follows:

**Figure 12 – Poder aquisitivo (Purchasing power)<sup>41</sup>**



Source: Quino (2009, p. 403).

Both in 6 and 12 we can observe the aspect of knowing things that a child might not know (in 12, the question of purchasing power, in 6, organization/disorganization).

However, we can also note how divergent these speeches are. In the case of strip 12, Guille mobilizes a knowledge which is clearly from the “adult world” (and, in a sense, by a well-educated adult), but he applies this knowledge unlike what an adult would do. It is obvious that an adult would not apply the concept of purchasing power to dirt.

In #6, the same phenomenon of non-coincidence can be observed in the relationship proposed by Guille between the little eggs and organization/disorganization. Such relationship does not exist in the “adult world”.

Thus, questioning the verisimilitude of data coming from the universe of fiction can be useful for researchers who want to extract material for analysis, especially if they want to analyze the imaginary about the child speech. It opens, as Chacon asserts,

A new research front: the imaginary about the child language, an investigation that can be turned not only to how fictionists exhibit this imaginary but also considering the way adults (parents, relatives, baby-sitters, children’s professionals, among others) also display it and feed it. (CHACON, 2012, p. 31, our translation).<sup>42</sup>

It is important to look at the performance of the researcher and the fictionist, observing and collecting representative data of a certain phenomenon – as the researcher

<sup>41</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> frame: “Gosh! So far, the only thing for which I have purchasing power over is dirt”.

<sup>42</sup> Original: “Nova frente de investigação: a do imaginário sobre a linguagem da criança, investigação que pode se voltar não apenas para como os ficcionistas exibem esse imaginário, mas, sobretudo, como adultos (pais, familiares, cuidadores, profissionais da infância, dentre outro) também o exibem e o alimentam.” (CHACON, 2012, p. 31).

does –, and inventing speeches about what is a certain imaginary regarding language acquisition – as the fictionist does.

It is, in fact, a path of investigation that enters the imaginary about the child speech through the preconceived and sometimes stereotyped images that can affect the interaction between children and adults. Definitely, the possible incidence/influence of this imaginary in the interaction between children and adults is a good domain for new research; also for child speech in Language Acquisition itself. How a certain imaginary about child speech focuses on the language? In addition, if someone wants to penetrate this path by observing fiction, a possible route is verifying data already collected by researchers, thus checking verisimilitude.

It is not, however, a simple check. It is one of the possibilities, since analyzing child speech from fiction would be impossible, and even an irresponsible attitude, to take it as something representative or as data for analysis without a check using real speech data already collected. It is, therefore, a question for other paths of research in Language Acquisition, either to observe the representation and the imagination about the child speech, or to extract from such imagination data to be analyzed, or to perceive aspects, in interaction, of such imagination that may affect Language Acquisition.

GATTI, M. Personagens de tiras cômicas: aquisição de linguagem no humor e na ficção. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v. 63, n.1, p.119-139, 2019.

- *RESUMO: Este artigo analisa, em consonância com os estudos interacionistas da área de Aquisição da Linguagem, a fala de personagens infantis de tiras cômicas. Entre outros aspectos analisa a verossimilhança dessas falas e argumenta sobre a necessidade de relacionar os dados oriundos da ficção com dados já colhidos por pesquisadores da área, se a esses dados fictícios quiser se recorrer como material de trabalho. Por outro lado, aborda os dados (as tiras) como um relevante material para se observar como se representam, na ficção, a própria fala da criança e os efeitos que ela produz nos seus interlocutores, dado o fato que as tiras são textos produzidos por autores adultos que de alguma forma devem tornar verossímil a fala infantil. Observando que as tiras são textos produzidos para obter algum efeito de humor; o artigo argumenta, ainda, que o efeito de humor produzido pelas tiras não se relaciona ou relaciona-se muito sutilmente com o efeito cômico produzido por algumas falas reais de crianças.*
- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aquisição da Linguagem. Ficção. Tiras cômicas. Humor.*

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