HUMOROUS ONLINE DIALOGUES ON ROMANIAN REDDIT: DISCUSSING CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Abstract. We aim to investigate the forms and functions of online humor. We apply several suggestions from the discursive analysis of humor in face-to-face interaction to mediated online exchanges. Our research perspective combines dialogue analysis and multimodal discourse analysis with approaches from the computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) paradigm (Herring 2004, 2007), as well as from humor studies (Norrick 1993, Dynel 2009, Kotthoff 2007).

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of seven online exchanges collected from r/Romania, a subreddit dedicated to discussing life in Romania. Our corpus consists of thematically-related exchanges on the topic of conspiracy theories. These theories are created and spread both globally and locally. We aim to investigate humorous dialogues concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the 'mythical' past of the Romanian people, which refers to the Dacian conspiracy. Our aim is to describe the linguistic and discursive mechanisms of humor in online dialogic exchanges on global and local conspiracy theories and topics. The results of our analysis suggest that CMC conversational humor functions similarly to offline humorous interaction: users engage in a dialogic manner to create humor.

Beyond analyzing ChatGPT's pragmatic behavior, the paper positions AI not merely as a tool but as an integral component of the research process. Accordingly, the author proposes a new disciplinary framework − *trans-pragmatics* − which examines the hybrid communicative dynamics between humans and chatbots. The paper argues that instead of continuing to contrast human pragmatic competence with machine adaptation based on textual input, pragmatic competence should be reconceptualized as an emergent property of ontologically distinct communicative systems, rather than as an inherent trait of individual speakers. This reconceptualization broadens the scope of pragmatics to encompass synthetic participation and asymmetrical distributed agency, wherein meaning is co-constructed and pragmatic effects arise collaboratively. Such an approach reflects the shifting ecology of human–machine interaction, suggesting that communication is not limited to internal cognitive states but can be scaffolded by external systems.

Keywords: online communication, forum interaction, humor, verbal play, conspiracy theories.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conversational humor consists of various humorous phenomena that are created in spontaneous face-to-face interaction, such as verbal play or puns, and banter (Dynel 2009). Unlike conventional jokes and forms of humorous media (cartoons, for instance),

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conversational humor is a dialogic practice that requires a collaborative dynamic in which two or more individuals engage in an interaction. Conversational humor is an interpersonal process that has a metalingual dimension, since it often relies on word play and figurative meaning in order to articulate the ludic intentions of the speakers (Norrick 1993).

This research paper focuses on the description and qualitative analysis of several instances of conversational humor occurring in computer-mediated communication (CMC). It is well known that CMC presents features of both written and oral speech, and thus simulates face-to-face interaction, realized in a digital environment. This premise allows us to investigate conversational humour in a situation derived from the prototype of unmediated interaction, having shared features with oral interaction. However, computer-mediated interaction forces users to find ways to compensate for the lack of contextual cues and for other online-related phenomena (anonymity, multimodality, intertextuality). These specific constraints on virtual interaction essentially mean that everything that users need to verbally express in oral interaction is part of nonverbal and paraverbal communication. The nature of online dialogic exchanges is, therefore, one of overt verbalization along with creativity, since graphic features can sometimes relay contextual features (see emoticons, GIFs, and other visually enhancing devices for online dialogue).

The purpose of our paper is the description and analysis of conversational humor on the topic of conspiracy theories discussed online. We believe conspiracy theories have had a surge in popularity in recent years, considering the multiple crises taking place around the globe. Looking at how online participants engage with conspiracy theories in a humorous manner may add to our general knowledge on humor on the range of humorous subjects discussed online.

The dialogic exchanges we analyze below originate from r/Romania[2], a Romanian community on Reddit, the well-known international internet forum. This community is open to discussing any topic related to Romania and life in Romania. All analyzed conversations belong to forum threads created by r/Romania users between 2020–2024. During this period, I monitored several Romanian communities of Reddit as part of my PhD project on online forum interaction (Alecu 2025). In this paper, I chose to look at humorous exchanges on two conspiracy theories that are representative both at a global level – concerning the COVID-19 pandemic – and at a local level – concerning a particular version of the Dacian proto-history of the Romanian people (Rom. *teoria protocronismului dacic*). This latter theory refers to the belief that the Romanian people have had a glorious Dacian past that anticipated many cultural and technological innovations, both at a regional and at a global level.

We aim to analyze the forms of conversational humor on conspiracy theories that emerge in the Romanian subreddit, drawing on Norrick (2003), Dynel (2009), and Kotthoff (2009). We also examine the discursive mechanisms of producing and interpreting humor in online interaction.

The structure of the article is the following: the theoretical framework of our research is presented in Section **2**, which discusses the main features of humor in dialogue and computer-mediated communication. This is followed by background information on Reddit and the Romanian community of Reddit, from a sociocultural perspective (Section **3**). An analysis of six dialogic exchanges featuring conversational humor is provided in Section **4**. We conclude our study discussing our results (Section **5**) and providing final remarks (Section **6**).

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[2] https://www.reddit.com/r/Romania, last accessed 26.03.2025.

2. HUMOR IN ONLINE DIALOGUES

Humor has been conceived of through different theoretical lenses, from linguistic perspectives to extralinguistic ones (including, e.g., philosophical essays on humor). Our research adopts a linguistic perspective, drawing on suggestions from extralinguistic (social and cultural) studies on the forms and effects of conversational humor in a greater discursive context. We focus on online forum interactions that have a dialogic component – i.e., that involve negotiating and exchanging information – as well as on interactions that lead to the dynamic creation of a dialogic space in relation to the Romanian cultural culture (see also Wierzbicka 2006). Bearing in mind that humans are dialogic beings (Benveniste 1974), we conceptualize forum threads as dialogic exchanges in which users formulate and share their thoughts in an online verbal form, namely, through posts and comments.

For our present purpose, we define *conversational humor* as a dialogic phenomenon, comprising different humorous processes and products, from wordplay to fantasy scenarios. This term allows for the analysis of various units of conversational humor, "from single-word lexemes, phrasemes to whole sentences and even multi-turn exchanges interwoven into non-humorous discourse" (Dynel 2009: 1286). Conversational humor is a subtype of verbal humor, as opposed to instances of non-verbal humor (Norrick 2004). Fantasy scenarios (Norrick 2003, Kotthoff 2007), intertextual play based on quoting or allusion and, lastly, anecdotes (Norrick 2003, Dynel 2009), are among the forms of humorous talk that have been the object of pragmatic and interdisciplinary research on face-to-face interaction.

Humorous conversation has been studied in CMC in relation to similar frameworks on the collaborative or joint production of humor in spontaneous (oral) interaction. For instance, online journalism (Chovanec 2012) and Youtube comments (Chovanec and Tsakona 2023) provide fertile ground for the investigation of dialogue as ground for collaborative verbal play or interactional humor. Humorous exchanges on Reddit remain less investigated.

Online communication has been the object of research for several decades, starting in the 1990s with the works of David Crystal and Susan Herring. The specialized term *computer-mediated communication* (CMC) covers all types of human communication taking place in a mediated environment with digital and electronic properties, using devices that can access the Internet (Herring 1996)[3]. Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) consider CMD to present following characteristics: nonstandard orthography and punctuation, visual and multimodal elements (emoticons, emojis), new discursive genres (blogs, vlogs, news sites, social networking sites, forums and so on). These emerging forms are ultimately influenced and shaped by three types of factors: i) social/interactional factors, such as the social status of interlocutors and their relationship; ii) contextual factors, including the digital context or environment (i.e., the platform used for interaction); iii) technological factors, such as specific platform affordances, like the *reply* function, which may contribute to intertextual humorous conversational play.

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[3] Internet studies that feature a linguistic perspective led to the development of novel terminology, including *electronic communication*, *online communication*, *e-discourse*, *e-communication*, *virtual interaction*, and so on. CMC is defined as human-to-human communication that takes place via networked devices (see Herring 1996, Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015, Herring 2018). *Computer-mediated discourse* (CMD) studies online communication as a discursive product.

3. SOCIOCULTURAL BACKGROUND

3.1. Reddit

Reddit is a discussion platform and a social networking site organized as a nested forum (for a general description of forums, see Arendholz 2013, 2017). Users are encouraged to set up a profile to participate in discussions via written messages called submissions (of posts or comments). A profile is not necessary in order to read and access the forum, although passively following discussions has been derogatively termed "lurking" and the person doing so, a "lurker". From a sociocultural perspective, therefore, to be a true member of the community one needs to actively participate in interaction (see also Angouri 2016). These discussion groups, called communities or subreddits, are usually thematically organized based on shared interests. They are referred to graphically as r/ [name of the community]. The scope and style of these groups vary, ranging from serious topics like r/Politics to specific and niche topics, such as r/StartledCats, a community dedicated solely to easily scared cats.

Reddit is a mixed mode platform (Jucker & Dürsched 2012) because it juxtaposes the classic forum with social media affordances, such as the ability to rate comments, the use of avatars, and more recently, the possibility of interacting via chat. The platform also employs a user-rating system based on *karma-points*, which are essentially rewards for an insightful or interesting contribution to a topic of discussion. Hateful, disrespectful, or vulgar contributions are reprimanded through the suspension of the offending user. There are essentially two interactional roles in the community, that of the poster (a "normal" user who takes part in discussions) and that of the moderator, who has discursive and *de facto* power over other users in applying the rules of the forum. Alongside human moderators (*mods*) there are also robot moderators (*bots*) (see also Reddit Guidelines 2022).

Since Reddit is an interactive, dynamic space in which dialogue is a type of *modus vivendi*, it can be "seen as a microcosm of culture online" (Panek 2022). The internet, and social media in particular, have been used to study the creation and spread of conspiracy theories (Stano 2020).

3.2. Conspiracy theories

3.2.1. *Conceptual framework*

Our analysis of verbal interactions that revolve thematically around conspiracy theories uses Goertzel's (1994, apud Douglas et al. 2017) definition, according to which a conspiracy theory is essentially a complex discourse that aims to explain phenomena that are perceived to be suspicious or odd by an individual or by a group of individuals. This attempted explanation attributes malevolent intentions to powerful social groups whose hidden decisions impact other members of society.

The belief in conspiracy theories (BiCT) is an emergent domain in the realm of psychological studies (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2018), thanks to a surge in recent years of various forms of individual and mass behavior surrounding conspiracy theories, such as increased scientific and sociopolitical skepticism, erratic or violent mass manifestations (protests and marches), and social media extremism or hate speech, among others (Pilch *et al.* 2023). BiCT may be related to collective trauma (wars, natural disasters) and

individual childhood trauma (Dixon 2023; see also a complex treatment of psychological factors in Butter & Knight 2020). Douglas et al. (2017) identifies three types of motivation for believing in conspiracy theories. The *epistemic motivation* suggests that conspiracy theories offer logical alternatives to "official truths" or narratives, thus satisfying the need to understand the cause of disturbing events. The existential motivation encompasses feelings of safety and belonging. Lastly, the *social motivation* allows the believers of conspiracy theories to feel superior to nonbelievers, based on an "us vs them" logic. These types of motivations may emerge in conspiracy discourse created and distributed in both offline and online spaces.

Usually, conspiracy theories work on a double level of meaning: that of the majority, who rejects them, and that of the minority, who are "in the know", thus rejecting mainstream narratives or official explanations for critical or concerning events. Two types of truths are put forward: the obvious and the obscure, with the latter gaining a cult following, especially on social media, which connects fellow believers or conspiracy theorists.

Bearing in mind that the BiCT is a pervasive phenomenon that feeds on human emotions such as fear, anger and confusion, we acknowledge that conspiracy theories may spread at different levels, moving from a personal to a more collective dimension. We distinguish between conspiracy theories spread at a global level and those spread at a local level, although we acknowledge the two categories to be intertwined. *Global conspiracy theories* are usually triggered by a massive, public event such as cataclysms, pandemics or war. *Local conspiracy theories* involve regional histories, cultural resources or urban legends restricted to a particular cultural space. Of course, global conspiracy theories are also actualized/manifested locally, while local conspiracy theories may spread to encompass different cultural spaces, thus becoming international.

3.2.2. *Global conspiracy theories*

Recent years have seen a surge in crisis communication. The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in January 2020 and, more recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 are two of the most acute crises that have local and global effects.

One form of the COVID-19 conspiracy theory states that medical institutions and the pharmaceutical industry are financially benefiting from the mass pandemic. February 2020 was the beginning of a global health crisis, triggered by a general chaotic response of people and authorities towards an unknown, undocumented medical emergency that quickly engulfed the globe. Several conspiracy theories arose as counter-discourse to the official discourse provided by healthcare professionals and politicians, such as "the vaccine is a creation of Big Pharma" complex, the notion that the vaccine may be related to infertility in humans, and the idea that there are other interests at play (e.g., New World Order). The general wave of medical skepticism and societal anxiety is thought to be correlated to certain psychological triggers: individual and collective trauma, lack of supportive or trustworthy authorities, and a critical view of government (Radford 2020, Kuhn *et al.* 2021). In their corpus study of tweets about COVID-19 conspiracy theories, Ahmed *et al.* (2020) found that humor may be an anti-conspiracy (coping) response. Chłopicki and Brzozowska's (2021) study on societal reactions to the pandemic instead focuses on fantasy scenarios, a form of conversational humor, in digital Polish memes. A common fantasy

scenario juxtaposes communist-era restrictions of food and basic products with restrictions imposed by authorities during the pandemic[4].

3.2.3. *Local conspiracy theories*

A local Romanian conspiracy theory refers to the Dacian past of the Romanian people. This theory posits that Dacian tribes formed a glorious civilization with great architectural, scientific, and cultural achievements, such as the digging of (a network) tunnels underneath the Carpathian Mountains. Believers in the Dacian conspiracy theory think many historical facts about the ancient past are hidden from public knowledge by authorities and institutions. Interest in Dacian culture and history was rekindled in the communist era by authorities, who encouraged the idea of a supposed grandeur of the past in connection to a so-called majestic present. Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime also proposed a kind of nationalism that fostered a biased view of Romanian history. During Ceaușescu's dictatorship, Romania celebrated 2050 years since the foundation of the first Dacian free state under the rule of Burebista, who Ceaușescu claimed to be related to by lineage.

The great disparity between actual hard facts (confirmed by archaeological findings) and popular culture myths created about this "Dacian past" has led to a societal divide in contemporary thought (Boia 2011 [1997], Florea 2020). Overall, this alternative narrative suggests that there are influential groups that hide the truth about the Dacians and about their importance in the history of the Romanian people. One Romanian thinker suggests that believers in the great "Dacian past" theory create, distribute and recontextualize public discourse in the form of a pathological web of myths and pseudotruths that may be called *dacopatia* (Alexe 2015).

4. ANALYSIS

Our work investigates how dialogic exchanges in Romanian subreddits rely on conversational humor to discuss conspiracy theories. For the purposes of this analysis, we collected submissions (posts and comments) from r/Romania. We anonymized all personal information and manually erased messages on sensitive topics to ensure the privacy of users featured in the corpus, in line with the general ethical consensus on using online user-generated data for research purposes (BAAL 2021, AoIR 2020).

Our method of analysis consists in the qualitative analysis of selected examples from our Reddit corpus. Elements of punctuation and orthography have been standardized according to the norms of standard Romanian, with the exception of cases in which non-adherence to norms is deemed to be a relevant stylistic choice of the user. The order of contributions is graphically rendered in hierarchical form, using letters of the alphabet instead of usernames. We use the [T] symbol to mark the *title* of a post as given by its original poster and, respectively, the [M] symbol to mark the *multimodal* element referenced in the conversation (e.g., an image, a meme, a video, or a news piece).

We illustrate our analysis by discussing six examples of humorous dialogue that feature references to global and local conspiracy theories.

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[4] This metaphorical mechanism has been used in Romanian society as well, as a form of protest against Covid-era restrictions.

4.1. Humorous exchanges about COVID conspiracy theories

Examples (1)–(3) are instances of conversational contributions in a r/Romania thread dedicated to memes about the pandemic[5]. These online dialogues, found in the comments' section, are based on the visual prompt of memes such as the one below (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. One of the memes commented on in examples (1)–(3).

The memes explore several clichés of the medical conspiracy theory, such as the belief that WHO (World Health Organization) is a masonic enterprise, or the idea that prominent figures like Bill Gates were involved in the development of the vaccine, and so on (see also Varis 2019).

In examples (1)–(3) below, we notice how users comment on the COVID pandemic starting from the messages encoded in the memes, both at a visual and verbal level (Shifman 2014, Wiggins 2019; see also Alecu 2020). The memes in this series introduce conspiracy stereotypes from a personal point of view, e.g., "I do not know anybody who ever died from COVID", "That moment when your belief in God did not stop the pandemic". This first-person worldview that the meme proposes is indicative of the author's intention to disaffiliate from the content of the meme. The general ironic tone of the memes may encourage debates within the comment section of the post.

Example (1) has a complex dialogic structure, featuring contributions from users A, B, C and D. The first comment in this thread is created by user A, who writes his/her comment in the form of a dialogue between a believer of conspiracy theories and a non-believer. This imaginary interaction consists of a question-answer schema. The first bullet point introduces a polyphonic voice: *Do you know anyone who has had Covid? [...] I know*

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[5] https://www.reddit.com/r/Romania/comments/j967nq/covid19_memes_de_duminic%C4%83/, published 11.10.2020, last accessed 26.03.2025. These memes are in the style of the Rage Comics genre, which consists of portrait sketches of deformed, human-like figures. The comedic effect usually results from the juxtaposition of the visual and verbal content, with the help of background information.

somebody. The reply introduced by the second bullet point represents the reaction of the believers of conspiracy theories, who reject such confirmation of the existence of the disease: *personal experience does not count.*

Graphically, this imaginary dialogue is written using bullet points instead of standard dashes. This is a creative alternative in line with the nonstandard punctuation often applied in CMC. The dialogue adheres to a schematic presentation of opposing worldviews. We may infer that the unmarked line of dialogue *I know someone* represents the voice of an average member of the majority, which expresses skepticism towards the conspiracy theory. Sketching a fictional dialogue is a common technique in verbal humor (see also performative humor such as stand-up comedy), since it is a dynamic way of summarizing opposing worldviews. This opposition may also be humorous. This fictional dialogue may also be employed for the purpose of attention-grabbing, which is an essential characteristic of content posted on social media platforms such as Reddit. One popular thread may reach thousands of comments. Looking at the example below, one may assume that each user intends to grab the attention of the audience.

(1)   A: • cunoașteți pe cineva cu covid? Eu nu știu pe nimeni
                   Eu știu pe cineva
                   • experiențele personale nu se pun, nu-i adevărat, minți
                   B: Șah mat ateiștilor!
                            C: aitiștilor
                                     D: artiștilor

          A: • *Do you know anyone who has had covid? I don't know anybody*
                   I know somebody
                   • *personal experience doesn't count, that's not true, you're lying*
                   B: check mate atheists / ATI-ists (Rom. ATI: abbreviation for
                   Asistență Terapie Intensivă – "Intensive Care Unit"; Rom. ATI-
                   ist, "person who works in the ATI section of the hospital")
                            C: it-ists (Rom. IT-ist, "information technician")
                                     D: artists

The fictional interaction presented by user A in example (1) is a sample of heteroglossia and ambiguity: on one hand, the voice of the conspiracy theorist is represented almost exclusively through stereotypes and fallacies (contradictions: *Do you know someone who has died from covid?*; *personal experience doesn't count*). On the other hand, the opposing worldview, according to which official narratives are trusted, is less developed rhetorically (*I know somebody*). We might infer that there is an unidentified narrator, essential to the thinly sketched fictional dialogue. The voice of the mainstream discourse is viewed through a less critical and parodic lens and, thus, may be identical with the voice of the unnamed narrator. This voice may also hint at the beliefs of the user who posted the comment. Heteroglossia thus develops between the two contrasting discourses presented.

The forms of conversational humor recorded in Dynel (2009) may assist us in analyzing the following two examples of verbal puns. The rest of the phrases in example (1) are reactions to the proposed fictional dialogue in the form of comments, proving its

success as an attention-grabbing device. In (1), the contribution of user B, an instance of phonetic-based wordplay with double meaning, is ambiguous. The plural vocative noun Rom. *ateiştilor* may be interpreted as being in reference to: a) Rom. plural masculine noun *ateişti* (< Eng. *atheist*), "person who does not believe in a supreme deity", a corrupted form of Rom. masculine noun *ateu, atei*, with the neologic suffix *-ist*; or b) Rom. *ATI-ist*, made up of an abbreviation meaning "person who works in the Intensive Care Unit" and the suffix *-ist*, read as *ateist*.

Several users participate in the wordplay by using other sequences of sounds with the suffix *-ist*, creating other humorous associations: *aitiştilor* and *artiştilor* are not thematically related to conspiracy theories, but are structurally related to the initial pun. This sequential game which users B, C and D engage in is an instance of what Norrick (2003: 1345) calls "competitive wordplay", a manifestation of verbal wit and, simultaneously, a presentation of the self. Norrick (2003) also observes that competitive wordplay may disrupt the cohesion of the interaction, as it is not usually thematically related to the topic of conversation. Moreover, the verbal contributions employed in ludic turn-taking are not usually informative. Examples (1) and (2) illustrate that this is also true for online environments:

(2)   A: The 9 horsemen of the apocalypse (in the original English)
        B: Aprostcalipsa

        B: *A-stupid-calypse* (Rom. *prost* "stupid")

Analyzing example (2) is a complex feat, since it presents two strategies of conversational humor: verbal play (puns) and allusions. This latter type of verbal humor operates on a discursive level. Intertextual relationships are established via allusions to other elements of popular culture discourse. While direct citations from original sources constitute *quotations*, allusions to other discourses using modified forms may be classified as a subtype of allusion, called *distortions*. In (2) we identify one such distortion. Through a biblical intertextual reference, the four riders of the Apocalypse become nine, which alludes to the number of memes in the series that started the conversation thread. Moreover, as the riders of the Apocalypse have distinct features, the distortion suggests that the nine memes also represent nine different stereotypical portraits of conspiracy theorists and believers. Playing on the allusion of user A, user B proposes a verbal pun through the phonetic resemblance between Rom. *prost* "stupid" and the syllable *-po-* of Rom. *apocalipsă* "apocalypse", an untranslatable instance of wordplay based on substitution. This suggests a pejorative semantic association which may be summarized as: "conspiracy theorists are stupid".

Example (3) is a multiparticipant dialogue with 6 participants. Their interactions are layered, as may be seen from the graphical representation below. Users B, E and F initiate separate conversations and do not interact with one another. This phenomenon of side-conversations or *off-topic* contributions, in emic terms, is typical of forum exchanges.

(3)   A: Nici eu nu am văzut cu ochii mei pe nimeni să moară în
               accident de mașină, sau de infarct, sau de anevrism. Deci ergo și
               prin urmare nu să există (sic!) așa ceva.

> B: N-am văzut pe nimeni să moară
> C: Șșșș, nu le zi (sic!) că suntem nemuritori.
> D: Bună asta
> E: Auzi la el „ergo" se scrie „ego" boss /s
> A: Ba se scrie hugo boss. Auzi, ego boss...
> E: Corect :))
> F: Condu o oră prin București... o să crezi în accidente de
> mașină sigur. Pentru că o să eviți vreo 3 la limită.
> A: Păi dacă le evit, înseamnă că nu se întâmplă.

> A: *I too have never seen anyone die in a car accident, or of a heart attack,*
> *or of an aneurysm with my own eyes. So ergo and therefore there is no*
> *such thing (sic!)*

> B: *I have never seen anybody die*
> C: *Shhh, don't tell them that we're immortal*
> D: *That's a good one*
> E: *Look at him writing "ergo", it's "ego" boss /s*
> A: *No, it's "hugo boss". Look at him, "ego boss"...*
> E: *Right :))*
> F: *Drive for an hour in Bucharest... and you'll believe in car*
> *crashes for sure. Because you'll be barely avoiding them.*
> A: *Well if I avoid them, then they never happened.*

The conversation begins with a modified cultural allusion to the stereotypical argumentation frame of conspiracy theorists regarding the need for empirical, first-hand experience to prove the existence of a given phenomenon. This logical *modus operandi* is absurdly extended from the pandemic to car crashes and strokes, culminating with user B's comment on death in general as non-existent in the absence of first-hand empirical proof. It follows, then, according to user C's contribution, that humans are immortal.

This is an interesting exchange which relies on recognizing cultural allusions to both the content of the stereotypical discourse of conspiracy theories and to the argumentation frames applied within this discourse. This is related to what Kotthoff (2007: 269) considers to be the function of direct quoting: it allows "implicit typification of the *dramatis personae* which are easily identifiable by the listeners because they are based on shared knowledge about typical speech styles in typical situations". Users A, B and C demonstrate competence in interpreting and producing cultural allusions and, together, create a humorous exchange, as may also be inferred from the expressive act of user D, who compliments C on his/her contribution (*That's a good one*).

The complex parody discourse on conspiracy theories is amplified by the use of rhetorical lexemes such as *ergo*, which becomes the locus of yet another verbal pun. Pleonastic nonstandard associations (*ergo, deci și prin urmare* "ergo, therefore") also contribute to an ironic undertone. Users A and E briefly engage in competitive wordplay through a progression of verbal puns: *ergo > ego*, *boss > hugo boss*. User E initiates a mock-corrective ludic move by dividing *ergo* into *ego, boss*, possibly hinting at a critical view of conspiracy theory discourse (which is accordingly associated with an egocentric or paranoid worldview). Furthermore, to alleviate this corrective stance and to suggest an

affiliative stance, user E addresses user A with the appellative *boss* (*ergo > ego, boss*), an in-group verbal marker. Lastly, a pun on the name of the well-known designer Hugo Boss represents the *come-back*, in emic terms, of user A, who properly interprets the ludic, mock-corrective move of user E. The latter admits the creativity of user A's pun and offers a metacommunicative appreciative comment, signaling agreement with their interlocutor. The appreciation of this brief competitive wordplay may be inferred from participant E's use of the laughter emoticon, a multimodal representation of a paraverbal cue. This competitive wordplay comes to an end with this metacommunicative expressive act.

4.2. Humorous exchanges about Dacian conspiracy theories

There are, in our opinion, at least three recurrent themes in Dacian conspiracy theories: the ethnic superiority of the Dacian origins of Romanian people; the unrecognized conquest and discovery of lands by the Dacians, and the mysteriously advanced Dacian technologic inventions.

The first two themes are explored in (4) below, a verbal exchange that results in joint fantasizing about an alternative history[6]. The association between Dacian tribes and the conquest of Japan constitutes a juxtaposition of opposing scenarios, producing humorous effects.

(4)

[T] Japonia, dar colonizată de dacii liberi
[M] Hartă a Japoniei în care denumirile oraşelor, formelor de relief, etc. sunt „românizate": Tăchiu (Tokyo), Năgăsari (Nagasaki), Hirodoara (Hiroshima).

A: Acum stau şi-mi imaginez cum ar fi un anime despre daci.
      B: • Decebaru-sama, Toroian a făcut un pod peste Dunăre şi a trecut cu
            legiunile.
            • Nani?!

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[6] https://www.reddit.com/r/Romania/comments/rvtir3/japonia_dar_colonizat%C4%83_de_dacii_liberi/, published 4.01.2022, last accessed 26.03.2025.

C: Bătălia dintre Decebaru-san și Toroianu durează 3 episoade, Decebaru-san scapă când vine Dochia-sama și ridică fusta și ies turme de oi peste Toroianu.
D: So desu ka!
E: cringe-ul e prea mare în aistă parte de comentarii :3

[T] A map of Japan, if it were colonized by the free Dacians
[M] A map of Japan in which names of cities, mountains etc. have been approximated to Romanian: Tăchiu (Tokyo), Năgăsari (Nagasaki), Hirodoara (Hiroshima).
A: Now I'm trying to figure out how an anime about Dacians would be like
  B: • Decebaru-sama, Toroian has built a bridge over the Danube and has crossed it with his legions.
    • Nani?!
C: The battle between Decebaru-san and Toroianu lasts for 3 episodes, Decebaru-san gets away when Dochia-sama arrives and lifts up her skirt, and flocks of sheep run over Toroianu.
  D: So desu ka!
   *E: the cringe is too much in this part of the conversation :3*

Joint fantasizing or fantasy scenarios are a form of conversational humor (Kotthoff 2007, Norrick 2003), and according to Dynel (2009) constitute humorous forms related to banter. Joint fantasizing generally operates according to a "double representation": there are two mental frames through which reality is perceived. Following this logic, one of the mental frames is a conventional representation of the world, while the other one proposes an absurd, unconventional worldview. The transition between the two is built through conversation. All participants must be able to "speak" this language of double representation in order to interpret and produce alternative scenarios that are inherently ambiguous.

Example (4) presents an alternation between two competing mental frames: documented Dacian history, on the one hand, and a dramatization of Dacian history in the form of the Japanese anime genre, on the other hand. Apart from the juxtaposition of these contrasting scenarios, there are other essential micro-level discursive elements that contribute to the humorous effect of the exchange:

a) the graphic and phonetic approximation and alteration of proper names: the experimentation with a well-known feature of Japanese (the phonetic identity of [l]/[r] phonemes, as exemplified in *Decebaru*); insertion of final [u] and epenthesis of [o] (see, e.g., *Decebaru*, *Toroianu*).

b) the usage of an allogenous honorific system based on politeness enclitic particles: Jap. -*sama* (high ranking adults), -*san* (high ranking men): *Dochia-sama*, *Decebaru-san.*

c) the introduction of Japanese lexemes used for producing expressive acts: Jap. *Nani?!* (Eng. *What?!*, Rom. *Ce?!*); Jap. *So desu ka* (Eng. *Really?*, Rom. *Chiar așa?*). These expressive acts are short and easily remembered by fans of the anime genre, with little to no knowledge of conversational Japanese. These lexemes add cultural specificity to the jointly fantasized scenario.

d) obscene or vulgar humor: the visual imagery of a woman (*Dochia*) pulling up her skirt, with flocks of sheep running over a man (*Toroian*). According to Norrick (2003: 1342) vulgar humor performs a double function: it tests the audience while bringing it closer through the discussion of intimate, vulgar or taboo subjects.

The following two examples[7] highlight the function of wordplay as a humorous conversational strategy which sometimes coexists with joint fantasizing. The multimodal element that sparks the conversation in (5) is a picture of a Mazda car showing the Dacian wolf logo associated with conspiracy theorists or simply with fans of ancient Dacian culture. Several puns are proposed based on the visual and ideational contrast:
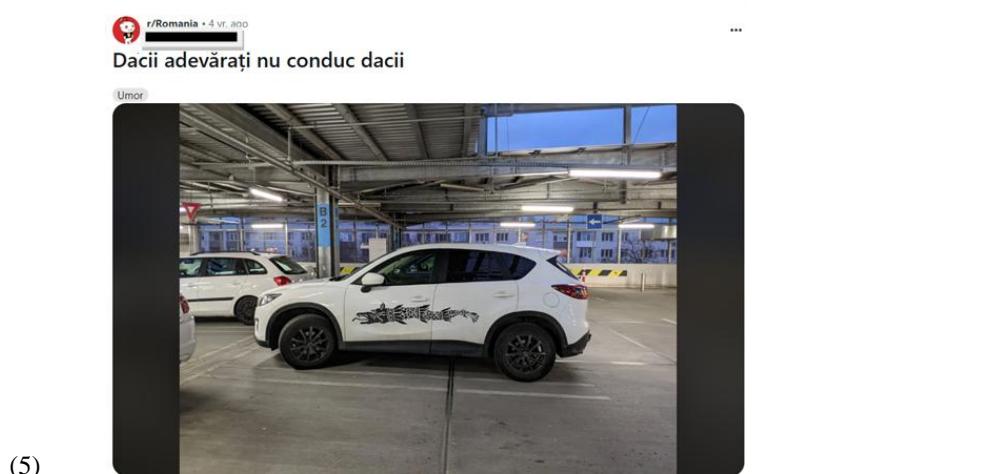
(5)

[T] Dacii adevărați nu conduc dacii
[M] Poza unei mașini, Mazda albă, cu un autocolant lateral înfățișând lupul dacic.
A: Sunt LIBERI să aleagă orice marcă.
     B: Japonia a fost descoperită de daci, toată lumea știe asta
         C :   Tokyo este de fapt Tăchiu iar Muntele Fuji vine de la faptul că pe vremuri „lava fujea la vale din dânsul".
         D: Faci confuzie, America a fost descoperită de daci.
             E: El a zis Japonia pentru că mașina e japoneză. Tu de ce ai zis America?

[T] Real Dacians don't drive Dacias
[M] A picture of a Mazda car with a drawing of a Dacian wolf.
A: They are FREE to choose any brand.
     B: Japan was discovered by the Dacians, everybody knows that

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> C: *Tokyo is actually Tăchiu and the Fuji Mountain was*
> *named after the fact tshat long ago the lava would "run*
> *(away) across its valley" (see Rom. a fugi, "to run*
> *away").*
> D: *You are mistaken, America was discovered by the*
> *Dacians.*
> E: *He mentioned Japan because that is a*
> *Japanese car. Why are you mentioning America?*

The semantic wordplay exploits the name of the Romanian car brand *Dacia*, named after the historical province *Dacia*. The title of the post that accompanies the multimodal element is *Real Dacians do not drive Dacias*. The verbal and visual dimensions of the meme generate the complex implicature "Real Dacians drive Mazdas instead of Dacias". This is based on an example of perfect wordplay resulting from the identical phonetic form of m. pl. *dacii* "Dacians" and f. pl. *dacii* ("Dacias [car brand]"). A second instance of wordplay is graphically marked: *sunt LIBERI să aleagă orice marcă* (*they are FREE to choose any brand*). This is an intertextual reference to the motto *free Dacians* (Rom. *dacii liberi*), which is often employed in Dacian conspiracy speech.

The switch to a fantasy scenario is made explicit by user B, who ironically claims that Japan has been discovered by the Dacians. This initiates the double code suggested by the visual element, a Japanese car with Dacian motifs. Lastly, an example of untranslatable wordplay is given by user C, who offers a humorous folk-etymology perspective on the name of Mount Fuji. User C in example (5) is the author of the map discussed in example (4). The pun relies on semantic association and phonetic substitution. The semantic dimension of the mock-folk etymology suggests that the mountain is called Fuji because the lava would roll down (cf. Rom. *a fugi* "to run away, escape") the mountain. Interestingly, on a phonetic level, the association between Jap. *Fuji* – Rom. *lava fujea la vale din dânsul* (lit. "the lava would run away across him, i.e., across the mountain") is based on two regional characteristics that are indicative of the northeastern variety of Romanian (spoken in historical Moldova). These characteristics are, on the one hand, the typical alteration [g] > [j] and, on the other, the use of a particular lexeme of the Romanian politeness system, Rom. *dânsul* ("him"). This is a pragmatically marked choice in standard Romanian, but not in the region that is (phonetically) alluded to – North-Eastern Romania or the historical province of Moldova – where *dânsul*, along with the feminine noun *dânsa,* has no value as a politeness marker.

We are interested in the representation of Dacian speakers as presenting Moldovan speech characteristics. This would mean that, for user C and for those who accepted their fantasy scenario, Dacians are essentially "proto-Moldovans". However, this association may be motivated by the common strategy of characterizing older diachronic stages of language and culture *via* contemporary peripheral cultures (see, for instance, using regional British accents for depicting Medieval British characters in films). Moreover, regional linguistic traits are sometimes preserved from generalized diachronic stages of a language. Kotthoff (2006: 286) believes that the use of identifiable regional speech characteristics in oral conversational humor contributes to the imagination of regional personas and stereotypes, but also suggests the frame in which the humorous contribution should be interpreted.

Example (6) shows another "verbal contest" which presents less translatable wordplay:

(6)   A: Mazdacia!
              B: mazdapeste cap cu gluma asta bold
                        C: nissantărit burta de atâta râs!
                                    D: Kia mai bună glumă de azi

        A: Mazdacia!
              B: mazda-rolling on the floor with this bold joke
                        C: nissan-aches my belly from laughing so hard!
                                    D: Kia best joke from today

In this example, the source of verbal play includes the creative contamination of proper nouns (*Mazda + Dacia = Mazdacia*) and of proper nouns with phrasal items (*Nissan + mi s-a întărit burta de atâta râs*, Engl. *my belly aches from laughing*). The proper nouns in this verbal game are semantically restricted to Asian car brands: *Mazda*, *Nissan*, *Kia*. The phrasal items are colloquial expressions describing (extreme) laughter, like Rom. *a da peste cap* (Engl. *rolling on the floor laughing*) or Rom. *a i se întări burta* (Engl. *to have one's belly ache*). The last contribution in the thread is the comment of user D, which exploits the phonetic resemblance between a positive evaluative marker (Rom. f. sg. *cea* "the most") and a proper name (the car brand *Kia*). This phonetic resemblance is imperfect, since it involves different phonemes, [ʧ] – [k]: *cea – Kia*.

5. DISCUSSION

We have analyzed conversational humor in the form of puns, joint fantasizing, and allusions in six examples of online dialogues that refer to global and local conspiracy theories. These dialogues are humorous exchanges that rely on both verbal (e.g., polysemy, ambiguity, and phonetic resemblances) and visual elements (which include intertextual references to visual imagery, such as memes, maps, images).

It might be assumed that conversational humor is more elaborate in online environments, since access to conversational history is essential for the production of joint fantasy scenarios or allusions (by direct quoting). For instance, in comparing our examples with those analyzed by Kotthoff (2009) or Norrick (2003), we do not find traces of increased complexity in terms of production or reception of conversational humor in CMC. Online dialogic exchanges that feature humorous intent rely heavily on multimodal elements (memes, images, mock maps) that act as triggers or prompts for (more) verbal humor. The discursive strategies of the COVID and Dacian conspiracy theories overlap in that they are both recontextualized in humorous discourse through cultural allusions and stereotypes. Both feature an underlying critique of a unique target, that of the believers in conspiracy theories.

For humorous interaction, the technological affordances in organizing speech and turn-taking, such as the reply function, may be particularly relevant. Replies may target one

contribution or another, thereby creating side-conversation that may be humorous or *off-topic*. Moreover, multimodality in the form of images may function as a conversation-starter (the case of the map of Japan as colonized by the Dacians), while emoticons indicate paraverbal effects of conversational humor (laughter).

Interestingly, we observe a lack of prefaces often found in situations of conversational humor (such as *let me tell you a joke*) – this may be symptomatic of the explicit nature of CMC, since any participant may see, at any time during the conversation, whether the general topic of discussion is a serious or jocular one. Therefore, there is little to no need to introduce a new conversation theme or to communicate a change in stance. However, we believe the lack of pragmatic prefaces is a result of the fact that all our examples are ludic interactions that were initiated under *non-bona fide communication*, as Raskin (1985) puts it. Thematically cohesive CMC interactions (instances of verbal play/joint fantasizing) are considerably shorter than their unmediated counterparts. We believe this is in part due to participants' lack of shared background knowledge. Their online conversation cannot develop beyond the ludic interaction itself, and its brief nature is based on a witty exploitation of language resources, with scarce reference and play on shared background information.

Lastly, online humor occurs between strangers on forums. CMC is documented to have a disinhibiting effect on users (Joinson 2007). Consequently, users may engage in ludic interaction with unfamiliar people. Moreover, the topic of online conversation is made explicit through different discursive strategies, such as thread titles based on wordplay, and humorous multimodal elements (images). Another strategy – with a metadiscursive or paratextual nature – is articulated in tags like Rom. *discuție serioasă* "real/serious talk", Rom. *umor* "humor", Rom. *Doamne-Ajută* "God, help!". A successful interpretation of paratextual elements acts as an audience-selecting device: predominantly like-minded people join a humorous conversation, therefore the degree of perceived intimacy may be higher in comparison to other types of group conversations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

We analyzed two main forms of conversational humor, verbal play and joint fantasizing in online communication. The two forms of conversational humor are used to create complex parodies of these conspiracy theories, both at a formal and at a functional level of interaction. Language resources are mainly exploited in puns and competitive wordplays. Discourse and speech stereotypes are mainly exploited in joint fantasy scenarios and imagined dialogues. Finally, other forms of conversational humor like distortions or modified textual allusions may also be employed together with puns or juxtaposed scenarios.

In conclusion, we believe global and local conspiracy theories are recontextualized successfully in humorous online dialogues and represent new topics for humor in general. Romanian Reddit interactions tend to consist of brief exchanges that feature a variety of humorous genres (from verbal puns to fantasy scenarios), channeling "the other" through the creation of an anti-conspiracy vs conspiracy theory dynamic through intertextual puns and allusions. Collaborative and competitive humor might be more intertwined online than in other types of interactions, since users are virtually strangers who lack "traditional" contextualization cues. In online dialogues, conspiracy theories act as prompts for both ludic fantasy play and verbal pun contests. Future research may tackle the formal and

functional features of online conspiracy theory humor, which – not unlike disaster humor and dark humor – involves a specific array of scenarios, strategies, and worldviews that ultimately serve to critique and ridicule conspiracy theory discourses.

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