

## **“THE DOCTOR SAID I SUFFER FROM VITAMIN € DEFICIENCY”: INVESTIGATING THE MULTIPLE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF GREEK CRISIS JOKES**

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### **Abstract**

Research on political jokes has more often than not concentrated on their content, which is related to, and interpreted in view of, the sociopolitical events and contexts that have given rise to the jokes investigated each time. The present study intends to suggest that there are other aspects of political joke-telling that could be taken into consideration when exploring its social functions and goals: First, the subgenres employed by speakers to convey their humorous perspectives on political issues; and, second, speakers' spontaneous comments on the jokes under scrutiny. The variety of subgenres could be related to the diverse ways joke-tellers perceive and encode their everyday problems and political views. Speakers' spontaneous comments on the content and effects of jokes could reveal why they consider such texts tellable and recyclable, as well as how they evaluate them. The political jokes analyzed here come from a large corpus of humorous material about the current Greek debt crisis and its sociopolitical effects on the Greek society. The analysis reveals the multifunctionality of such jokes: They convey a critical perspective on the current sociopolitical conditions in Greece, strengthen the solidarity bonds among Greek speakers, entertain them, and bolster their morale.

**Keywords:** Political jokes; Humorous (sub)genres; Greek financial crisis; Content analysis; Social functions of jokes; Comments on humor.

Political jokes stem from a real social-political context.  
The creation of new jokes thus depends on everyday life.  
(Laineste 2009b: 50)

### **1. Introduction**

Research on political jokes<sup>1</sup> –and political humor in general- has more often than not concentrated on their *content*, which is related to, and interpreted in view of, the sociopolitical events and contexts that have given rise to the jokes investigated each time. There can be no doubt that investigating the content of political (or other) jokes is

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<sup>1</sup> The term *joke* here refers to canned (not spontaneous) jokes, namely self-contained humorous texts that are circulated in a more or less fixed form (see Attardo 1994: 295-299, 2001: 61-62).

expected to reveal significant information concerning their social functions (see among others Obrdlik 1942; Douglas 1968; Brandes 1977; Shehata 1992; Badarneh 2011; Chen 2013; Moalla 2013). Nevertheless, the present study intends to suggest that there are other aspects of political joke-telling that could be taken into consideration when exploring its social functions and goals. Here, I will consider two of them: The *subgenres* employed by speakers to convey their humorous perspectives on political issues; and speakers' *spontaneous comments* on the jokes under scrutiny. The variety of subgenres could be related to the diverse ways joke-tellers perceive and encode their everyday problems and political views. Speakers' spontaneous comments on the content and effects of jokes could reveal why they consider such texts tellable and recyclable, as well as how they evaluate them.

I will therefore try to propose a more comprehensive approach to the analysis of political (or other) jokes, which could provide access to more information on the purposes served by such texts. The political jokes examined here come from a large corpus of humorous material about the current Greek debt crisis and its sociopolitical effects on the Greek society.

More specifically, I begin with an overview of some of the studies on political jokes (section 2), paying particular attention to some methodological trends attested in most (if not all) of them (section 3). This discussion is complemented with a few studies concerning political humor in times of financial crises (section 4). Then, in section (5), the data of the present study is described, whose analysis follows in section (6). This section is divided in three subsections, each of which is dedicated to a different aspect of crisis jokes: Their content (section 6.1), their subgenres (section 6.2), and speakers' comments on the jokes (section 6.3). In general, the analysis is intended to show that the information obtained from all these sources could offer more insights on the multiple social functions of the political jokes examined. Finally, in section (7), the findings of the study are summarized and discussed, while proposals for further investigation are explored.

## 2. The social functions of political jokes

Being anonymous creations circulating within a community, jokes are an integral part of modern folklore allowing us access to cultural preferences and norms and, most importantly, to how people interpret "an array of the economic, social and ideological contexts that make up a society" (Laineste 2008: 27). As a result, the analysis of jokes, especially political ones, could offer us useful insights on how people's minds interact with social reality and reconstruct it (Laineste 2008: 28-29; see also Shehata 1992; Kanaana 1995; Van Boeschoten 2006; Laineste 2009a; Hong 2010; Sheftel 2011; Moalla 2013; Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman 2015). Although jokes used to be part of oral folklore, recently they are often disseminated in written forms via the internet. Speakers thus have the opportunity to discuss matters of mutual concern, express their opinions, attitudes, and expectations, and share entertaining material (see among others Laineste 2008, 2009a: 394; Chen 2013; Moalla 2013; Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman 2015).

One of the most common kinds of jokes is political ones. Relevant research suggests that political jokes are generated either in oppressive political regimes, where people are more or less deprived of their right to express themselves openly, or in times

of political transition, where abrupt and radical political changes take place. In both cases, jokes allow people to express their anxieties and protests against their oppressors and/or their living conditions (Obrdlik 1942; Brandes 1977; Shehata 1992; Davies 1998: 77-83, 176-181; Van Boeschoten 2006; Badarneh 2011; Tsakona and Popa 2011, 2013; Moalla 2013). Political jokes also seem to help people cope with everyday hardships by allowing them to laugh their troubles away: They bolster people's morale and strengthen their hope for the future. Sharing such texts contributes to creating a sense of community and to reinforcing the solidarity among those who share them (Obrdlik 1942: 710-713; Brandes 1977: 345-346; Laineste 2009a: 393; Stanoev 2009: 186-187, 204; Hong 2010: 47, 57, 60; Klumbyte 2011: 666, 672; Moalla 2013; cf. VanLoan Aguilar 1997: 157; Sheftel 2011: 146, 159; Smith and Goodrum 2011).

Some scholars have claimed that political jokes function as a means of resistance and rebellion against oppressive regimes, leaders, and respective sociopolitical changes (Obrdlik 1942; Shehata 1992; Van Boeschoten 2006; Klumbyte 2011). This rebellious dimension of political humor could be considered reminiscent of Bakhtin's (1984a, 1984b) *carnival*, that is, the brief, regular, and state-sanctioned escape from the repression and restrictions imposed by the political status quo, during which people could defy social hierarchies and norms of etiquette, build a "second world" outside the regime, and mock the political order. In Bakhtin's (1984b: 10) own words, "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked a suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions".

This interpretation of political humor as rebellion has, however, been strongly criticized, as humor has hardly ever resulted in subverting any political decisions or regimes (see among others Brandes 1977: 345; Davies 2007: 300; Tsakona and Popa 2011). Stein (1989: 88-90) maintains that claims to the effect that political jokes constitute a form of resistance are not supported by contextual information or solid empirical evidence, but rather reflect researchers' own ideological positionings (see also Stanoev 2009: 186-187; Hong 2010: 28, 31, 61). In a similar vein, Billig (2005: 213) frames political jokes as "alibis for those who do not dare to rebel" enabling them to live with their conscience. Billig (2005: 211) argues for a clear distinction "between the psychological nature of humor and its sociological consequences". In his view, sociopolitical norms and codes may indeed be violated in humorous communication, yet they are not abandoned by humorists. On the contrary, by laughing at incongruous aspects of reality and momentarily disrupting the social order, humorists enhance their awareness of the restrictions imposed on them, and hence affirm and further reinforce the authority's power over themselves. In short, what is considered as rebellious humor may in fact be disciplinary humor ensuring compliance with the prevailing social order (Billig 2005: 200-235; see also Badarneh 2011).

To sum up, the wealth of studies dedicated to the sociopolitical functions of political humor clearly indicates that political humor, like any other kind of humor, is never just for fun. Via bringing to the surface incongruous aspects of political reality and simultaneously targeting politicians, political decisions, institutions, ideological beliefs, etc., humorists position themselves towards them (see also Tsakona and Popa 2011: 15-16). The following section will critically discuss some common methodological trends identified in such studies.

### 3. Some methodological issues on the investigation of political jokes

From a methodological point of view, there seem to be specific trends in the investigation of political jokes and their social functions:

1. a preference for jokes coming from oppressive regimes;
2. an emphasis on the content of political jokes; and
3. a preference for decontextualized texts coming from printed collections or archives and studied long after their initial production and dissemination.

Such trends have, in my view, narrowed the scope of the analysis of political jokes. In what follows, I will argue for a more comprehensive analysis focusing on contemporary material coming from democratic countries, taking into consideration the subgenres belonging to the broader genre of political jokes, and exploring what the readers of such jokes think about them and why they further disseminate them.

First of all, research on political jokes has for a long time concentrated on data coming from oppressive regimes, where such texts are usually forbidden, as they are considered indicative of people's oppositional thinking (e.g. the Communist jokes: Davies 1998: 77-83, 176-181; Brzozowska 2009; Laineste 2009b; Stanoev 2009; see also the jokes on the Franco regime in Spain: Brandes 1977; Pi-Sunyer 1977; Arab jokes: Shehata 1992; Badarneh 2011). In this context, two broad subcategories of political jokes are identified by Raskin (1985: 222-237):

1. *denigration jokes* targeting “a person, a group, an idea, or the whole society”; and
2. *exposure jokes* targeting “a political regime as a whole and contain[ing] a reference to an event or series of events, which are not widely publicized, and quite often actively suppressed by the regime” (Raskin 1985: 222).

In other words, the first category includes jokes against politicians and their policies and ideas, while the second one refers to censored facts, such as arrests, acts of state terror, and food or other shortages (Davies 1998: 80; see also Stein 1989: 101; Brzozowska 2009: 130-131; Laineste 2009b: 50, 63-66).

Denigration jokes are very popular in contemporary democratic countries as well, but the same does not hold for exposure jokes. In non oppressive regimes, there are neither severe restrictions on the media nor laws prohibiting citizens from expressing their dissent with the government and its policies. As Laineste puts it (2009a: 394), “democracy is a relatively mild and easy environment for jokes”. As a result, political jokes –and political humor in general- become part of the private and public deliberations on political issues, since they are often circulated not only in private interactions among citizens (e.g. oral or electronic), but also in public contexts (e.g. internet websites, TV shows). In other words, such jokes do *not* expose the inadequacies and failures of the government but instead discuss and criticize them openly (see also Billig 2005: 204, 209-213; Tsakona and Popa 2011: 11-12).

Secondly, political jokes are categorized solely on the basis of their content (see above). Other characteristics of such texts, such as their generic structure, are not, to the best of my knowledge, discussed when investigating the social functions of political jokes. Genres, as “relatively stable thematic, compositional, and stylistic types of

utterances” (Bakhtin 1986: 64), constitute cultural artifacts allowing us to construct, interpret, and act within specific contexts: They shape our understandings of reality and enable us to share such understandings with other speakers. Taking their particularities into account could therefore assist us in making sense not only of a text’s content, but also of the purposes served via encoding our perspectives and evaluations in various ways (see among others Bakhtin 1986; Freedman and Medway 1994; Miller 1994; Johns 2002; Bawarshi and Reiff 2010). Consequently, investigating the subgenres of political joking could reveal how jokers position themselves towards the circumstances and events surrounding them and, eventually, why they create and/or reproduce jokes or other humorous texts.

Another aspect of genres is pertinent to the present discussion: Their dynamic potential and fluidity. Genres adapt to various social contexts and thus change with time; new genres emerge and old ones gradually fade out. Genres may also incorporate one another. Bakhtin (1986: 62) distinguishes between *primary* and *secondary* genres:

Secondary (complex) speech genres -novels, dramas, all kinds of scientific research, major genres of commentary, and so forth- arise in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication (primarily written) that is artistic, scientific, sociopolitical, and so on. During the process of their formation, they absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communion. These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones. They lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others.

The notion of *intertextuality* (see among others Fairclough 1992: 101-136) is also relevant here. Intertextuality highlights the relations between different texts: texts are shaped by prior ones and may resemble each other in terms of content, structure, and/or function. Hence, genre hybridity and intertextuality attest to speakers’ creativity: Speakers have the ability to transform prior texts or genres to “new”, “novel” ones by modifying their generic structure and conventions and/or by reproducing their content (cf. Bakhtin 1981, 1986).

It is usually suggested that canned jokes (where political ones are included; see footnote 1) contain three main subgenres evolving around an incongruity, entertaining interlocutors, and creating solidarity among them (see among others Attardo and Chabanne 1992; also the data examined in Raskin 1985):

1. *narrative jokes*, namely short fictional stories located in the “past” with a surprise ending in their (final) punch line. They often represent a brief dialogue between two or more characters;<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In general, narrative consists of a sequence of (usually past) events viewed from an evaluative perspective (Labov 1972; see also Archakis and Tsakona 2012 and references therein). Although narrative jokes involve fictional events, they structurally resemble Labov’s (1972) oral narratives. More specifically, their *abstract* is usually found in their title (if there is one); alternatively, the narrator can provide some information on the joke’s content before its telling. Narrative jokes often include *orientation* elements, namely information on the protagonists and setting of the narrated sequence of events, that is, their *complicating action*. The *resolution* of the complicating action usually appears in the form of a punch line. The *coda* is omitted, as this would amount to an explanation of the joke and would defeat its purpose. The main means of narrative *evaluation* in narrative jokes is audience laughter and

2. *riddle-jokes*, which include a question and an answer, the latter forming the punch line with the unexpected, incongruous content; and
3. *one-liners*, namely very brief texts including an incongruous piece of information and offering an unconventional comment on a topic.

Joking subgenres, however, undergo changes due to intertextual influences and hybridization (see above), hence new joking (sub)genres emerge, especially online (see among others Chen 2013; Moalla 2013; Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman 2015). Speakers explore innovative ways of constructing and communicating their humorous messages without necessarily abandoning more “traditional” forms of humor. The diverse structures of joke texts are indicative of speakers’ various conceptualizations and communicative purposes. For instance, Moalla (2013: 2, 4-6) discusses jokes “creating an alternate reality”, namely referring to potential future contexts, and allowing humorists to shift perspective and distance themselves from their problems and the stressful circumstances they find themselves in. Such humor practices are reminiscent of what Kotthoff (1999) calls *fictionalization*, whereby speakers construct fictional scenarios about how they envision future events or situations. Such future narratives are common in oral interactions among peers aiming to amuse themselves (see also Archakis and Tsakona 2012: 99-105). It therefore seems that new subgenres emerge in political joke-telling whose analysis could also be considered a valuable source of information on their social functions.

Finally, the majority of studies on political jokes are performed several years after the jokes were created and disseminated, and are usually based on material coming from printed collections of jokes or historical archives (see among others Davies 1998: 176; Hong 2010: 29-31). Consequently, researchers do not have direct access to speakers’ actual joking practices but only to accounts of such practices (e.g. political jokes against the Franco regime in Spain *are reported* to have been secretly circulated to avoid censorship and persecution; Brandes 1977: 333-335).

Nowadays, modern technology and media allow us not only to collect contemporary political (or other) jokes, but also to gather evidence on how jokes are disseminated and, most importantly, on the reasons why they are circulated and on the social functions they serve, as conceptualized by the speakers themselves. Speakers’ spontaneous reactions to, and evaluations of, such texts have recently started to be documented and analyzed (Kramer 2011; Laineste 2011; Moalla 2013; Stewart 2013; Tsakona 2013). This kind of research is more speaker-based (i.e. *emic*) than analyst-based (i.e. *etic*) and usually brings to the surface various and often conflicting conceptualizations of, and reactions to, humor. It therefore appears that humorous content analysis performed by researchers familiar with theoretical frameworks on humor is not enough by itself to determine the functions of humor in real contexts as perceived by real people.

The next section is dedicated to the presentation of the (limited) literature on political humor referring to financial crises and their consequences on people’s lives. Such a presentation will become the intermediate step leading us to the description of the political jokes on the Greek debt crisis examined here.

#### **4. Political humor on financial crises**

As already mentioned (in section 2), political jokes are created and told by people who wish to protest against the political status quo and reduce the stress caused by everyday difficulties. As financial crises change people's everyday reality and place enormous strain on them, it comes as no surprise that they, too, become the source of political humor.

The limited number of studies on the humor produced in times of financial crisis concentrates on the consequences of such crises on people's lives and on how such consequences are conceptualized and evaluated by the creators of humorous texts. For instance, VanLoan Aguilar (1997) explores the satirical humor during the financial crisis in Mexico in the 1980s. Such humor brought to the surface the value conflicts and the social inequalities among different social groups in Mexico, and critically exposed the superficiality, racism, and hypocrisy of well-off citizens, thus becoming a kind of psychological relief for the under-privileged ones. More recently, two studies focus on visual humorous representations of the contemporary financial crisis. First, Bounegru and Forceville (2011) investigate the metaphors used in editorial cartoons to visually represent cartoonists' conceptualizations and evaluations of the crisis. Even closer to the data examined here, Christopoulou (2013) analyzes the political cartoons created by Greek school students (aged 10-12) asked to express their own perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the financial crisis in Greece. In their drawings, students refer to various aspects of everyday life during the crisis (e.g. unemployment, lack of money) and simultaneously raise a critical voice "[bringing] into play the rhetoric of the opponents of the IMF/EU/ECB Greek bailout memorandum" and drawing on "information from mass media resources and family and peer discussions" (Christopoulou 2013: 45, 52).

These studies are similar to the ones presented in section (2) in that the content of humor is investigated as the primary source of information on the social functions of humorous texts and as a way to gain access to what their creators think about the crises and their consequences. The humorous genres themselves do not become the focus of the analysis. Furthermore, none of these studies documents and takes into consideration for analytical purposes what their creators and/or recipients think of these genres, how they evaluate them, and what they believe their functions are.

In what follows, I will try to describe the corpus of jokes examined here (section 5) and then analyze examples from it by concentrating not only on their content (section 6.1), but also on their structure (section 6.2), as well as on speakers' spontaneous reactions to the jokes (section 6.3). Thus, I intend to suggest that, in order to reach a more comprehensive account of the social functions of these (or other) political jokes, all these three parameters need to be examined in detail.

#### **5. The data of the present study**

The data examined here comes from a large corpus of humorous texts (1,662 texts) referring to the Greek financial crisis and collected from January 15, 2010 until December 12, 2013. The corpus includes both multimodal texts (i.e. internet memes, political cartoons; 1,066 texts, 64.13%) and exclusively verbal ones (i.e. jokes; 596

jokes, 35.86%). All of them were sent to the author's personal email account by friends and relatives. None of the emails sent was excluded from the collection and, at the same time, no other material was added by the author (e.g. downloaded from websites or coming from printed collections). Although the corpus does not claim representativeness, it could be suggested that it was randomly selected and this selection was not biased by the author's personal preferences.

The verbal jokes included in this corpus could be divided in two broad categories: a) jokes directly targeting and discrediting Greek or, less often, foreign politicians and their political decisions and actions concerning the Greek debt crisis (322 jokes, 54.02%); and b) jokes referring to Greek people's everyday lives and problems due to that crisis, thus only indirectly and by implication targeting politicians and their policies (274 jokes, 45.97%; cf. section 3). Both categories employ a wide variety of topics, so their goals and functions seem to be multiple and not identical for both categories. The present study will limit its focus on the second category (henceforth crisis jokes), so as to provide a more detailed account of this specific kind of jokes. These jokes are to an extent reminiscent of the shortage jokes (see section 3) as they refer to shortages and everyday problems Greek people are facing.

The set of data examined here does not only include the jokes *per se*, but also the comments speakers add in their emails after reading the jokes and before forwarding them. Such comments constitute authentic, spontaneous reactions to the jokes and could offer us some information on how speakers perceive such jokes and why they forward them; in other words, they could reveal what are the functions and purposes served by disseminating such material. Out of the 167 emails including the jokes examined here, only in 72 cases (43.11%) did speakers offer their evaluations and views on such humor, either on the title of the email or exactly before the joke(s) began. In the rest of the emails (i.e. 95 emails, 56.88%), no comment was found: The email title included either an abstract of the joke or one of its utterances (e.g. the punch line or the opening phrase) or the word *ανέκδοτο/α* "joke(s)" or an utterance not directly related to the content of the email (e.g. a greeting).

## **6. The analysis of the data**

### **6.1. *The content of crisis jokes***

Given that humor is based on incongruity, namely on an act, situation, idea, etc. that is not expected in a specific context (see among others Raskin 1985; Attardo 1994, 2001), crisis jokes evolve around what are deemed as "incongruous" aspects of living in Greece during the past few years. Whether implicitly or explicitly, jokes compare former and present living conditions, thus offering a glimpse on how people experience and perceive the changes brought about by the austerity measures imposed on them.

Most crisis jokes in my corpus refer to the lack of money (due to unemployment or cuts in salaries and pensions), which has had several repercussions on people's lives: The cost of living has increased, people cannot afford to pay for their house heating or car fuel, they cannot pay their bills, bank debts, and taxes, and they resort to tax evasion



or to choosing spouses who are rich and/or could share these expenses with them. The following examples are indicative of such topics:<sup>3</sup>

(1) *Σε λίγο θα πηγαίνουμε σούπερ μάρκετ, δεν θα αγοράζουμε τίποτα και θα κάνουμε μόνο like.*

‘Soon we will go to the super market, we will not buy anything and we will only “like” the products [i.e. as we do on Facebook].’

(2) *Έλεγα να πάρω σκύλο στο σπίτι αλλά τι φταίει το δόλιο να κρυώνει; Θα πάρω πιγκουίνο.*

‘I thought of getting a dog at home but why should the poor animal be cold? I’ll get a penguin instead.’

(3) - *πήγες στον ιατρό?*

- *ναι...*

- *και τι σου είπε ο ιατρός?*

- *30 EURO παρακαλώ...*

- *όχι ρε, τι είχες εννοώ...*

- *20 EURO...*

- *ρε βλάκα, τι πρόβλημα είχες θέλω να μάθω!!!*

- *μου έλειπαν 10 EURO ...*

‘-Did you go to the doctor?’

-Yes...

-And what did the doctor say?’

-[He said] 30 euros please...

-No pal, I mean, what did you have?...

-[I only had] 20 euros...

-You stupid, I want to know what your problem was!!!

-I was 10 euros short...’

In example (1), the joker complains about high prices and the lack of money: At the super market, we will only “like” the products (as we do on Facebook), but will not be able to buy anything. The lack of money also results in the lack of heating at home, where only a penguin (and not a dog) could survive during the winter (example 2). Moreover, money shortage has become the most significant problem even when visiting the doctor: Health problems have become less important than having money to pay for the doctor (example 3; see also the joke included in the title of the paper).

Another popular topic of crisis jokes involves work-related matters: Job scarcity and unemployment, bad working conditions and relations, the shutdown of enterprises, and immigration as a solution to all the above.

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<sup>3</sup> All the data presented here was translated by the author for the purposes of the present study. Unconventional spelling was maintained in the Greek original texts, but was not reproduced in the English translations. Square brackets include additional explanatory material.

(4) *Αν ακούσετε τίποτα για καμιά θέση εργασίας ενημερώστε με σας παρακαλώ... ψάχνω δεύτερη δουλειά γιατί πρώτη δεν βρίσκω με τίποτα!!*

‘If you hear anything about a job post, please let me know... I am looking for a second job, because I can’t find a first one no matter what!!’

(5) *Στην τρίτη λυκείου θα πρέπει να προσθέσουν μάθημα «Πως να ζήσετε στο εξωτερικό»...*

‘In the third class of Lyceum [i.e. the final year of Greek secondary education] they should add a course on “How to live abroad [as an immigrant]”...’

(6) *Υπολογίζεται ότι 190.000 μαγαζιά θα βάλουν λουκέτο στην Ελλάδα. Μάγκα μου, αυτό είναι! Θα ανοίξω μαγαζί που θα πουλάει λουκέτα.*

‘It is estimated that 190,000 shops will put on a lock<sup>4</sup> in Greece. Dude, this is it! I will open a shop selling locks.’

Such jokes focus, among other things, on the difficulty to find a job (example 4), on the fact that young people may be forced to leave Greece to support themselves (so Greek education needs to prepare them for this; example 5), and to the large number of shops closing permanently, which may be creatively (and incongruously) viewed as an opportunity for somebody to make a living out of it (example 6).

Greek people do not forget to criticize themselves for their current situation: In some jokes, they blame themselves for frivolity and living beyond their means, which, among other things, are represented as responsible for their financial problems. In other cases, they accuse themselves of apathy and lack of resistance against the austerity measures.

(7) *Οι νεοέλληνες ξοδεύουν χρήματα που δεν έχουν για να αγοράσουν αντικείμενα που δε χρειάζονται ώστε να εντυπωσιάσουν ανθρώπους που δεν εκτιμούν.*

‘Greeks spend money they do not have to buy things they do not need so as to impress people they do not appreciate.’

(8) *Μετανάστες με i-phone δεν θα έχουν ξαναδεί στην Γερμανία...*

‘It will be the first time they see immigrants with i-phones in Germany...’

(9) *Δεν είναι ότι δεν είμαστε επαναστάτες. Απλά είμαστε άτυχοι που δεν είναι όπλο ο καναπές.*

‘It is not that we are not rebels. We are just unlucky that the couch is not a weapon.’

(10) *Σε αυτή τη χώρα ο μόνος τρόπος να γίνει επανάσταση είναι να φτάσει ο freddo τα 10 ευρώ.*

‘In this country the only way to cause a revolution is to charge 10 euros for a freddo [i.e. a kind of iced coffee particularly popular among Greeks].’

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<sup>4</sup> Humor here is based on an untranslatable pun: *βάζω λουκέτο* means ‘put up the shutters, close the business permanently’. In order to reproduce the pun in the English text, the phrase *θα βάλουν λουκέτο* ‘they will put up the shutters’ has been glossed as ‘they will put on a lock’.

Greek people are portrayed as wasting their money to satisfy their vanity (example 7) and as spending money on gadgets even though they cannot actually support themselves and are forced to become immigrants (example 8). They are also represented as lazy and self-indulgent (i.e. lying on the couch all day or drinking freddo in coffee shops; examples 9-10), hence they do not care for, and do not fight against, the austerity measures imposed on them.

Moreover, crisis jokes identify incongruities in the general conditions of living and in the Greek public health and education systems (due to recent reforms), while they also critically comment on the Greek media, Greek public servants, corruption in both the public and the private sector, monetary insecurity, elections, banks, demonstrations, etc.

(11) *Τί κοινό έχουν οι Έλληνες με τις γαλοπούλες ;  
Τη βγάζουν δεν τη βγάζουν μέχρι τα Χριστούγεννα...*  
'What do Greeks and turkeys have in common?  
They may not survive until Christmas...'

(12) *Η διαφορά μεταξύ ελληνικής οικονομίας και Τιτανικού:  
Στον Τιτανικό είχε και ορχήστρα.*  
'[What is] the difference between the Greek economy and the Titanic?  
On the Titanic there was also an orchestra.'

(13) *Σκέφτομαι πόσο σοβαρά προβλήματα έχω.. μετά βλέπω ότι αυτός στο master chef δεν πέτυχε τη σωστή οξύτητα στη σαλτσα.. Ηρεμώ.*  
'I'm thinking how serious problems I have... Then I watch that guy on Master Chef [i.e. a TV cooking contest] who did not balance his sauce acidity... [Then] I calm down.'

(14) *Έχω μια περίεργη αισιοδοξία σήμερα. Θα δω ειδήσεις να μου περάσει.*  
'I'm strangely optimistic today. I'll watch the TV news and get over it.'

(15) *Ο χρόνος είναι ο καλύτερος γιατρός. Γιαυτό στο ΙΚΑ σου κλείνουν ραντεβού για μετά από 4 μήνες.*  
'Time is the best doctor. This is why at IKA [i.e. the largest social security organization in Greece] they give you an appointment for 4 months later.'

(16) *Συνομιλία μητέρας-γιού στην Ουγκάντα το 2011:  
-Αμπντούλ διάβασε τα μαθήματά σου παιδί μου. Τα παιδάκια στην Ελλάδα δεν έχουν ούτε βιβλία..*  
'A mother-son conversation in Uganda in 2011:  
-Abdul dear, do your homework. Children in Greece do not even have textbooks...'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> School textbooks are given to all students of Greek public schools for free at the beginning of each academic year. However, in September 2011, when the academic year began, the books were unavailable, hence teachers and students had to work with photocopied material for a few months.

(17) *Την Τρίτη θα μας επισκεφτεί ο υπουργός. Εμείς εντάξει, ένα σκούπισμα θα ρίξουμε. Θέλω να δω αυτοί στον πρώτο, πού θα κρύψουν το μπιλιάρδο...*

‘On Tuesday, the Minister will visit the premises. We are ready [for his visit], we will just vacuum. I want to see what those on the first floor will do, [namely] where they are going to hide the billiard table...’

(18) *Ένα πρεζάκι μου ζήτησε 100 δραχ στην Ομόνοια. Ή είναι πολύ πίσω ή πολύ μπροστά.*

‘A junkie asked me for 100 drachmas [i.e. the Greek currency before euro] at Omonoia Square [i.e. a central square in Athens]. Either s/he is stuck in the past or s/he can see long ahead into the future.’

The conditions of living in Greece are such that it is not certain whether Greek people will manage to survive (example 11), while Greek economy seems to be sinking like the Titanic but without an orchestra playing music (example 12). More specific aspects of the crisis are also represented. The Greek media either does not take into account people’s actual problems and continues with its life-style shows (example 13) or, on the contrary, panics Greek people with news broadcasts (example 14). Due to recent cuts, the public health system does not work properly (example 15) and, in Greek schools, students do not have textbooks (example 16). Public servants are targeted for not doing their jobs and for entertaining themselves in their offices instead (example 17). Finally, Greeks’ monetary insecurity, namely their anxiety whether they will remain in the Eurozone or not, is represented in example (18), where the humorist is not sure whether drachma was only used in the past or will be used again in the future (i.e. after Greece is expelled from the Eurozone).

To sum up, Greek people complain about their deteriorated living conditions and unemployment, and indirectly attack the political status quo for lowering the standards of living for Greek people. Greek people seem to feel deprived of goods and services available to them before the crisis (e.g. house heating, health services, school textbooks), while they also feel insecure about whether they will stay in the Eurozone or not. On the other hand, they do not refrain from criticizing themselves, among other things, for a luxurious lifestyle beyond their means and for not reacting dynamically against all the measures imposed by the Greek government and the members of the Troika (i.e. the IMF, the ECB, and the European Commission).

It could therefore be suggested that via crisis jokes Greek people express their criticism and indignation for their current situation and try to cope with it through laughing at/with its incongruities. The content analysis of crisis jokes sheds light on the problems Greek people have to deal with and the conditions they experience in their daily lives while struggling with expenses they can no longer afford, unemployment, and disappointment from the services expected to be provided to them by the Greek state, while also implying that things should not be like they actually are. What is more, they critically recognize (and laugh at/with) their own irresponsibility and inadequate behavior in preventing and/or solving such problems.

## 6.2. The subgenres of crisis jokes

Canned jokes are usually categorized in three groups: Narrative jokes, riddle-jokes, and one-liners (see section 3). All of these categories are attested in the present corpus. An example of a narrative joke is the following one:

(19) Πάει ένας τύπος σε ένα μπαρ στεναχωρημένος και λέει στον μπάρμαν «βάλε μου ρε φίλε 5-6 ποτάκια, να σου πω τι έχω».

Τα βάζει ο μπάρμαν και τον ρωτάει «τι έχεις ρε άνθρωπε...».

-«Βάλε ρε φίλε άλλα 5-6 ποτάκια να σου πω...».

Τα ξαναβάζει ο μπάρμαν, «θα μου πεις τώρα;».

-«Μόνο 5 ευρώ».

‘A guy walks into a bar looking upset and says to the bartender: “Pour me 5-6 drinks, pal, and I’ll tell you what’s wrong with me”.

The bartender pours the drinks and asks him: “What’s wrong with you, man?...”

“Pour 5-6 more drinks, pal, and I’ll tell you...”

The bartender pours again: “Are you going to tell me now?”

“[I have] only 5 euros”.’

Based on intertextual links with other narrative jokes involving bars, bartenders, and drinking customers, example (19) comments on the lack of money experienced by the Greek people, which does not allow them to pay for their drinks (or, more accurately, to pay for drinking as much as they would like to). Example (16) is also a narrative joke representing a brief conversation between a mother and a son in Uganda. Although for Greeks Uganda has for decades been considered more underprivileged than Greece, here there is a reversal: In “poor” Uganda children have textbooks, while in Greece they do not.

What is particularly interesting about narrative crisis jokes is that, in many of them, the narrator appears to be relating a “story of his/her own” using first person deixis, which is untypical for canned narrative jokes and indicates that such jokes are constructed as personal experiences. For instance, in the short narrative joke (13), the narrator relates his/her own thoughts and experiences while contemplating on his/her problems and watching TV, using verbs in first person singular (*σκέφτομαι* ‘I’m thinking’, *έχω* ‘I have’, *βλέπω* ‘I watch’, *ηρεμώ* ‘I calm down’). Furthermore, narrative crisis jokes often lack an orientation, that is, a description of the setting where the narrated events take place (see footnote 2). The absence of such a description frames the story as “common” experience that “could happen to anybody” and that is circulated among people with shared background knowledge (see examples 3, 13; also the joke included in the title of the paper). What seems to be implied in such cases is that there is no need to describe each setting or the characteristics of the protagonist(s) of the joke, since the narrative involves familiar contexts.

One-liners are particularly common in the corpus under scrutiny. Greek people offer (or are represented as offering) brief, unconventional comments on the repercussions of the financial crisis on their lives, thus highlighting the incongruities arising from the comparison between the past and the present, and implicating the inefficacy of the austerity measures.

(20) *Είμαστε η γενιά που πρόλαβε τα καλοριφέρ αναμένα.*  
 ‘We belong to the generation that lived with the house heating on.’

(21) *Ευτυχώς εγώ δεν έχω λεφτά σε κυπριακή τράπεζα....*  
*Ούτε σ’ ελληνική....*  
*Ούτε λεφτά...*  
 ‘Fortunately I don’t have money in a Cypriot bank...<sup>6</sup>  
 Nor in a Greek one...  
 Nor money...’

(22) *Το ποσοστό της ανεργίας είναι μεγαλύτερο από το ποσοστό του ΠΑΣΟΚ.*  
 ‘Unemployment rate is higher than PASOK’s [Panhellenic Socialist Movement, i.e. the Greek socialist party] percentage.’

One-liners comment on Greek people’s inability to pay for house heating (example 20) and their lack of money in general (example 21). Example (22) refers to the unprecedented high rate of unemployment in Greece (cf. example 4) but, even more, to the unprecedented low percentages of PASOK in the 2012 elections and in the public surveys since the beginning of the financial crisis. PASOK was the ruling party when the crisis erupted and its percentage dropped dramatically, as this party was held exclusively accountable for what had happened. One-liners also critically comment on Greek people’s mentality and apathy (examples 7, 9, 10), the inadequacy of public services (example 15), monetary insecurity (example 18), etc.

While riddle-jokes are not particularly common in the data examined here, an explicit critical function is performed by them as well. Their initial utterance, namely the question, prepares the ground for the critical comparison included in the second utterance, which constitutes the answer to the question and simultaneously the punch line of the joke. So, in example (11) an analogy between the Greeks and Christmas turkeys is identified, while in example (12), the (sinking) Greek economy is represented as almost similar to the Titanic.

The analysis of the present corpus brings to the surface two more subgenres: *Monological fictionalization jokes* and *intertextual jokes*. First, the term *fictionalization* is borrowed from Kotthoff (1999) who explores the fictional scenarios speakers construct in their oral interactions, in order, among other things, to amuse themselves and to enhance their solidarity bonds (see section 3). Fictionalization involves future narratives constructed by speakers and describing how a situation or event could potentially evolve in the future. In Kotthoff’s (1999) study, such narratives are jointly constructed by more than one speakers (see also Georgakopoulou 2007; Archakis and Tsakona 2012), but, in the present case, the joker alone builds an incongruous, unrealistic future scenario. Hence, it could be suggested that canned jokes involving fictional scenarios constitute *monological fictionalizations*.

(23) *Οι νέοι λογαριασμοί της ΔΕΗ θα έχουν φωσφορούχα γράμματα για να διαβάζονται στο σκοτάδι....*  
 ‘The new electricity bills will be written in fluorescent letters, so that they can be read in the dark...’

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<sup>6</sup> The first utterance of this joke refers to the Cypriot financial crisis which erupted in March 2013.

The joker here creates a fictional scenario concerning the new format of the electricity bills which will have to be read by all people, including those who could not afford to pay their bills and now live without electricity. Such future narratives are created for a variety of topics: What people will do at the super markets where they will not be able to buy anything (example 1), their pets which will have to survive in houses without heating (example 2), how they can creatively “deal” with unemployment (examples 4-6), how Greek immigrants will be perceived in host countries such as Germany (example 8), how one can “overcome” his/her good mood by watching TV news (example 14), how Greek public servants will have to behave in case of an inspection by the Minister (example 17), etc. Such scenarios allow jokers to be creative and imagine circumstances and actions that are incongruous and not necessarily plausible.

It is interesting to note here that, similarly to narrative jokes (see above), monological fictionalization ones often use first person deixis and lack a setting description, so that the actions and experiences envisioned are constructed as “personal” ones, that could happen to “everybody”. Among the examples presented so far, monological fictionalization jokes (1, 2, 6, 14, 17) employ first person deixis, while jokes (2, 5, 8, 14) offer little or no background information. The latter incite readers to evoke shared background knowledge to reconstruct the represented contexts (e.g. houses without heating in example 2; job scarcity in example 5; living beyond one’s means in example 8; news broadcasts panicking TV viewers in example 14).

Last but not least, intertextual jokes draw on non humorous genres to convey their humorous messages. Intertextuality here involves content or structural similarities between crisis jokes and non humorous genres (see section 3). The following examples are illustrative of this category:

(24) *Κρίση είναι να σε ταΐζουν τα περιστέρια στο Σύνταγμα.*  
‘Crisis is to have pigeons feed you at Syntagma Square.’<sup>7</sup>

(25) *Κύριος που διαθέτει πετρέλαιο κίνησης, ζητά γνωριμία με κυρία που διαθέτει πετρέλαιο θέρμανσης.*  
‘Gentleman with car fuel wants to meet lady with heating fuel.’

(26) *Μόλις άναψα το καλοριφέρ. Γενική είσοδος 10 ευρώ με ποτό!!!*  
‘I just turned house heating on. 10 euros for entry and a drink!!!’

(27) *Υπάρχουν και ευχάριστα: Στο φεστιβάλ των Καννών πήραμε σήμερα το βραβείο μισθού μικρού μήκους.*  
‘There is also good news: at the Cannes [International Film] Festival today we received the award for the shortest [i.e. smallest] salary.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Syntagma Square is the central square in Athens, the Greek capital, right in front of the Greek parliament. The square attracts not only tourists but also Greek families, whose children very often feed the pigeons crowding the square. Here this image is reversed for humorous purposes: The pigeons feed the humans.

<sup>8</sup> An untranslatable pun is also involved here. Based on the phrase *ταινία μικρού μήκους* ‘short film’, the humorist constructs the phrase *μισθός μικρού μήκους* ‘short salary’ actually meaning ‘small salary’.

## (28) ΜΕΡΙΚΟΙ ΛΟΓΟΙ ΠΟΥ ΜΑΣ ΑΡΕΣΕΙ Η ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΚΗ ΚΡΙΣΗ ΣΤΗΝ ΕΛΛΑΔΑ

*Μου αρέσει που όταν λέω για αύξηση στο αφεντικό μου δε με αγριοκοιτάζει αλλά λιώνει στα γέλια. Άσε που έδιωξε κανα δυο που δε μου άρεσε η μούρη τους..*

*Μου αρέσει που τα καφενεία έχουν γεμίσει άνεργους επιστήμονες με 2 μεταπτυχιακά. Πλέον πας για ουζάκι και αντί για μπάλα συζητάς για μαύρες τρύπες τουλάχιστον. [...]*

*Μου αρέσει που το μέλλον της χώρας είναι αβέβαιο, γιατί σε όλους μας έλειπε λίγο πολύ η περιπέτεια στη ζωή μας.*

*Μου αρέσει που μπορώ να έχω κατάθλιψη ελεύθερα. Παλιά μου τα είχαν πρήξει όλοι «Τι σου λείπει ρε; Τη δουλειά σου την έχεις, το αμαξάκι σου, τι άλλο θες;» [...]*

*Μου αρέσει που αν πω ότι δουλεύω 2 φορές τη βδομάδα με κοιτούν με συμπάθεια και μου λένε κουράγιο, ενώ πιο παλιά σκεφτόντουσαν «Ρε τον τεμπέλη»..*

*Μου αρέσει που θα έχω και εγω μία ιστορία πόνου και δυστυχίας να λέω στα εγγόνια μου, όπως εμείς ακούγαμε για χούντα και κατοχή. Αλλιώς θα με πέρναγαν για πολύ φλώρο.*

## ‘SOME REASONS WHY WE LIKE THE FINANCIAL CRISIS IN GREECE

I like it when I ask my boss for a raise and he does not frown on me but bursts into laughter. Not to mention that he fired a couple of guys whose faces I didn't like...

I like that the coffee shops are full of unemployed scholars with 2 post-graduate degrees each. Now you go out to drink ouzo [i.e. a traditional Greek alcoholic beverage] and instead of football you talk about black holes to say the least. [...]

I like that the future of the country is uncertain, because we all more or less missed a sense of adventure in our lives.

I like that I can be depressed without feeling guilty. Previously everybody would attack me “What’s your problem, pal? You’ve got your job, your car, what more do you want?” [...]

I like it when I say I work 2 times per week and people look at me with sympathy and they try to encourage me, while in the past they would think “What a lazy dude”...

I like that I too will have a story of pain and misery to tell my grandchildren, like the ones we used to listen about the [Greek military] junta [i.e. 1967-1974] and the [Nazi] occupation [i.e. 1941-1944]. Otherwise, they would think that I am too uncool.’

Jokers borrow conventions from non humorous genres to create jokes about the Greek debt crisis and its repercussions: A dictionary definition is used to humorously represent the fact that some Greek people cannot afford to feed themselves (example 24); a fictional personal ad comments on the high fuel prices (example 25); another ad creates an analogy between a night club and a house with heating whose owner tries to gain some money to pay the heating bill by charging his/her visitors (example 26); a short news report criticizes the low salaries in Greece (example 27); and a list like the ones appearing in fashion magazines includes a variety of (incongruous) reasons why Greek people seem to (ironically) enjoy certain negative aspects of the financial crisis (example 28). More specifically, they “enjoy” bad working conditions and relations,



going out for coffee with highly educated yet unemployed people, living in insecurity, feeling depressed, working part-time, and narrating tragic stories.

In the corpus examined here, genres such as popular sayings, songs, politicians' statements, religious texts (e.g. prophecies, prayers), letters, grammar books, public announcements, games, etc. are also exploited to create intertextual jokes.<sup>9</sup> In addition, first person deixis once again renders the represented events "personal" and frames them as "shared" experience (examples 26-28), while a similar effect is achieved by the generic second person (i.e. *σε* 'you' in example 24).

It should be noted that the subgenres of crisis jokes identified in the corpus are not always clearcut categories but may occasionally overlap. This can be illustrated in example (23) which could be considered a monological fictionalization and/or a one-liner. Overlapping is attested in example (27) as well, which was analyzed as an intertextual joke based on a news report, but could also be considered a narrative one, as it includes the representation of a (fictional) past event (*πήραμε το βραβείο...* 'we received the award...'), with its orientation (*στο φεστιβάλ των Καννών* 'at the Cannes Festival' *σήμερα* 'today'), and evaluation (*Υπάρχουν και ευχάριστα* 'there is also good news', *βραβείο μισθού μικρού μήκους* 'award for the shortest salary'; on the categories of a narrative, see footnote 2).

What brings all these subgenres together is that, in Bakhtin's (1986) terms (see section 3), they constitute *secondary genres*, since they are made up of other primary genres. More specifically, narrative jokes absorb (fictional) interactions between their protagonists and draw on oral story-telling conventions (see footnote 2) to convey (more or less) "personal" and "common" experiences. One-liners and monological fictionalizations are formed by (more or less fictional) statements and comments offered by Greek speakers.<sup>10</sup> Riddle-jokes draw on the question-answer format of children's riddles, while intertextual jokes exploit a wide variety of other, non humorous genres. Thus, crisis jokes exhibit strong intertextual links not only with the sociopolitical discourses recently produced in Greece, but also with diverse genres whose conventions and particularities are exploited in jokes. Via recontextualizing and creatively reconstructing reality in common, easily recognizable genres, humorists evoke, and simultaneously enhance, common background knowledge with their recipients. In other words, by resorting to *shared everyday experiences* and *shared ways of representing* such experiences (i.e. genres), humorists strengthen the solidarity bonds with their recipients and highlight their common standpoints and practices.

In a similar vein, the mere fact that the crisis jokes examined here are circulated via emails among intimates underlines their function as a means for enhancing the solidarity bonds among them, regardless of the particular subgenre they belong to. This is further confirmed by the speakers' comments on them, which are analyzed in the following section.

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<sup>9</sup> It could be claimed that the non humorous genres simulated for the creation of intertextual jokes are thus parodied (cf. Fairclough 1992: 103-104, 123). This perspective, however, goes beyond the scope of the present study.

<sup>10</sup> Even if one-liners and monological fictionalization jokes are based on "real" utterances produced by "real" speakers in "real" contexts, they still do not constitute primary genres, in Bakhtin's (1986: 62) sense. Given that they are recontextualized (in the present case, inserted in emails) and recycled as jokes via the internet, they become secondary genres which no longer belong to "unmediated speech communion", that is, spontaneous oral communication (see section 3).

### 6.3. Speakers' comments on crisis jokes

The investigation of the social functions of political jokes has so far been more analyst-based (i.e. *etic*) than speaker-based (i.e. *emic*; see sections 2-4). In the previous sections of the analysis, I have tried to identify such functions on the basis of the content and the subgenres of crisis jokes, thus offering insights based on humor and genre theories. In this section, I will discuss the comments offered by those who read and circulate the jokes under scrutiny, so as to explore what people think of them and how they understand their content and social functions. Speakers' own perceptions and evaluations of crisis jokes are equally (if not more) important with researchers' analyses, as they could confirm, enrich, or even refute *etic* conclusions.

First of all, it should be noted that forwarding an email including jokes could be considered an indication of their positive evaluation in and of itself. We would not easily spend time recycling texts that we do not approve of; on the contrary, we share information and material that we find interesting and potentially enjoyable as a means of bonding with our peers (see among others Laineste 2008: 35). This seems to be confirmed by *all* the comments collected and examined here: No negative evaluation of such jokes is attested in the 72 comments offered on them.

More specifically, crisis jokes are evaluated via adjectives such as (*αρκετά/πολύ*) *καλό/ά* '(quite/very) good', *φανταστικό* 'fantastic', *κορυφαίο* 'top (joke)', *καταπληκτικά* 'great', *φοβερά* 'amazing', *σοφό* 'wise', *φιλοσοφημένο* 'sagacious', *τέλειο* 'perfect', *νόστιμα* 'cute', *χαριτωμένα* 'delightful', *έξυπνα* 'clever', etc. A crisis joke also seems to be appreciated because it is (*πολύ*) *επίκαιρο* '(very) timely'. Furthermore, a positive evaluation of such jokes is implied when the emails including them are titled with phrases such as *γελάμε* 'we laugh', *XAXAXAXAXA* 'HAHAHAHAHA', (*και*) (*λίγο*) *γέλιο* '(and) (some) laughter', *πλάκα έχουν* 'they are fun', *τρελό γέλιο* 'crazy laughter', etc. Such phrases also reveal that crisis jokes are circulated to provoke laughter and to share the amusement speakers feel when reading them. Thus, they become a means of entertainment and bonding among speakers.

What is interesting is that speakers comment on the "realism" of such jokes: The jokes seem to be perceived as reflecting reality and proposing ways of interpreting and dealing with it. The following comments are illustrative:

(29) *ANTIMETΩΠΙΣΗ ΤΗΣ ΚΡΙΣΗΣ !*  
'DEALING WITH THE CRISIS!'

(30) *δεν θα ηθελα να ηταν ετσι αλλα δυστυχως ΕΙΝΑΙ!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*  
'I wouldn't like things to be like this but unfortunately THEY ARE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!'

(31) *ΚΑΛΗΜΕΡΑ ΣΑΣ.....ΕΤΣΙ ΕΙΝ'Η ΖΩΗ.....*  
'GOOD MORNING TO YOU... THAT'S LIFE...'

(32) *Gia na gelasoume ligaki me ta xalia mas!!*  
'Let's laugh a bit with our mess!!'

(33) ΜΗΝ ΓΕΛΑΣ . Η ΚΑΤΑΣΤΑΣΗ ΕΙΝΑΙ ΤΡΑΓΙΚΗ !!!  
'DON'T LAUGH. THIS IS A TRAGIC SITUATION!!!'

(34) Ανέκδοτο για γέλια και για ...κλάματα!  
'A joke to laugh and to... cry!'

Not only are the situations described in these jokes perceived as “realistic” (at least by some speakers; see examples 29-32), but also as “tragic” (examples 32-34). Speakers imply that crisis jokes are in a sense “accurate” representations of what happens in Greece ever since the crisis began – and this seems to be one of the reasons why they choose to forward such jokes. Even if we do not adopt a literal interpretation of examples (29-32) but a figurative one (i.e. as exaggerations), the message conveyed remains that one of the reasons for recycling such jokes is that their incongruities seem at least “plausible” to Greek speakers. What is more, such incongruities are considered to be funny and tragic at the same time, and it is this ambiguity and contradiction speakers wish to share with their peers.

In other words, all the comments presented so far show that, for Greek speakers, there is a strong interconnection between the hard reality of the financial crisis and the comictragic reality of the jokes. Even though Greek speakers are aware of the fact that these texts are humorous and meant for entertainment (see the evaluative utterances above), their evaluations underline the similarities between real life and its humorous representation. Such similarities become one of the main reasons why they choose to forward the humorous material.

In this context, it seems that crisis jokes and the ensuing laughter function as a coping mechanism, namely as a way to survive the crisis (at least from a psychological point of view), as the following examples indicate:

(35) ΤΕΤΑΡΤΗ ΒΡΑΔΥ ΤΟΥ ΑΗ ΔΗΜΗΤΡΗ!!!  
ΠΕΡΙΜΕΝΟΝΤΑΣ ΤΗΝ ΨΥΧΡΟΛΟΥΣΙΑ ΑΠΟ ΤΗΝ ΕΕ.....ΑΣ ΤΟ  
ΔΙΑΣΚΕΔΑΣΟΥΜΕ  
με πολυ αγαπη (διοτι μονον αυτη θα μας μεινει στο τελος)  
'IT'S WEDNESDAY NIGHT, [the feast day] OF ST. DEMETRIUS!!! [i.e.  
October 26th]  
WAITING FOR THE BAD NEWS FROM THE EU... LET'S HAVE SOME  
FUN  
With lots of love (because this is the only thing we'll be left with at the end)'

(36) Καλή σας μέρα και περαστικά μας!  
'Good morning and let's get well soon!'

(37) και λιγο γελιο!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! χρειαζεται σε ολους μας.....  
'And some laughter!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! We all need it.....'

(38) το χιούμορ και το γέλιο δεν θα το πάρουν απο τα χείλη μας !!!!!  
'They won't take humor and laughter from our lips!!!!'

(39) *Γελάστε γιατί χανόμαστε!!!!*

‘Laugh or perish!!!!’

(40) *Μπορεί να μην έχουμε λεφτά, μπορεί να είμαστε στα πρόθυρα της χρεοκοπίας, αλλά έχουμε χιούμορ και αυτοσαρκασμό! Διαβάστε κορυφαίες ατάκες που κυκλοφορούν τα κρίσιμα αυτά χρόνια.*

‘We may not have money, we may be on the verge of bankruptcy, but we have [a sense of] humor and self-sarcasm! Read top punch lines circulating during these critical years.’

Speakers reproduce crisis jokes in their effort to help themselves make it through the hardships. They admit that they may have been deprived of their money (example 40) or their hope for the future (examples 35, 38, 39), but they have managed to maintain their sense of humor and their ability to laugh as a means for keeping things in perspective. They seem to suggest that exchanging emails with crisis humor and the ensuing laughter will help them to endure the bad living conditions they find themselves in (examples 35, 37, 39) and to recover from the crisis (example 36). Such stances and attitudes towards crisis jokes become strong motivation for their circulation among people who share the same problems and anxieties about the future.

Finally, only in one comment are crisis jokes framed as a means for awakening the Greek people:

(41) *Προωθήστε το μπας και ξυπνήσουν κάποιοι*

‘Forward this just in case some people wake up.’

Crisis jokes are rarely perceived and framed as a means for cultivating Greek people’s awareness of the circumstances and events that led to the current situation and, at the same time, for inciting them to react against it. Such a perspective on the function of crisis jokes highlights their critical aspects, that is, the incongruities identified in them (see section 6.1).

Both practices of exchanging emails containing such texts and commenting on them appear to contribute to the carving of a restricted, symbolic space, where joking about the crisis is allowed, positively evaluated, and eventually encouraged. In this restricted space and time, Greek speakers are permitted to create more or less amusing, comicotragic conceptualizations of the financial crisis, to laugh at its dark(est) sides, and to explore alternative perspectives. Such activities could remind us of Bakhtin’s (1984a, 1984b; see section 2) carnival, during which people were free to turn the sociopolitical world upside down and symbolically construct a “second world”, where political or other authority lost its power and conventional power relations were no longer valid. Carnival was, according to Bakhtin, a feast limited in space and time and sanctioned by the state: As soon as it ended, everything went back to “normal”, that is, the sociopolitical order was fully restored. The same could be suggested for the data under scrutiny: As speakers’ comments suggest, crisis jokes enable them to participate in an alternative reality, where they can identify similarities between the “official” reality and the “joking” one, laugh at the expense of the “official” one, comfort and entertain each other via humor; but when people close or delete their emails, or when they log out of their email accounts, they are back to the hard reality of financial and other problems.

Although Bakhtin considers carnivalesque laughter as rebellious and liberating, its effects are limited and practically nonexistent: People do not manage to escape from the impositions and restrictions of the status quo. The same holds for the Greek people who, outside the “online carnival of crisis jokes”, remain under the pressure of the austerity measures. Therefore, the present analysis confirms Billig’s (2005) critique (see section 2) claiming that what could be considered as rebellious humor is actually disciplinary humor: It affirms and perhaps even reinforces the existing sociopolitical order. No change is effectuated. Via humor speakers enjoy a kind of social disruption that has no lasting effects (see also Badarneh 2011; Tsakona and Popa 2011). This is further reinforced by the fact that, at least in the data examined here, no comment offered by Greek speakers referred to such jokes as acts or discourses of rebellion or as practices liberating from political and economic oppression.

To sum up, the analysis of speakers’ comments on crisis jokes reveals some of the reasons why they enjoy reading and disseminating them. First, it seems that these jokes are positively evaluated by Greek people as entertaining, clever, wise, timely texts aimed at producing laughter. Moreover, they are considered to be more or less “plausible” or even “accurate” representations of a “tragic reality”. Hence, the laughter provoked by them is, according to Greek speakers, expected to help them cope with everyday hardships and endure the crisis. In other words, such humor becomes a means for bolstering Greek people’s morale and less often for sensitizing them to the reasons that led to the current situation (see example 41). Consequently, the telling of such jokes helps create a carnivalesque online environment (in Bakhtin’s 1984a, 1984b sense), but does not in any way contribute to drastically challenging the status quo.

## **7. Discussion and conclusions**

Even though it has been suggested that political humor discourages citizens from taking governmental policies seriously (Žižek 1989: 24), the present analysis has shown that citizens cannot but take governmental policies seriously since they suffer from them on a daily basis. Nevertheless, it seems that they simultaneously need to view such policies from a humorous perspective so as to endure their consequences. It is thus confirmed that “telling and listening to political jokes manifests political awareness and is an important element in the complicated system of political life” (Stanoev 2009: 192).

The jokes examined here could be classified in Raskin’s (1985) *exposure jokes* (see section 3), but they do not expose anything. Instead they talk about situations and events (e.g. unemployment, high cost of living, lack of money; see section 6.1) that are well-known to the Greek people, as the majority of Greeks experience them or witness other people suffering from them. These jokes refer to the consequences of the Greek government’s inability to provide decent conditions of living and employment to a considerable part of the population. Such inadequacy and its consequences do not, however, constitute “forbidden” topics of discussion, as it would have been in an oppressive regime, but instead prevail in both the public and private spheres as major problems that need to be dealt with. In other words, the analysis of jokes circulating in contemporary democratic states shows that citizens are more or less allowed to critically comment on various aspects of politics via writing or speaking, thus contributing to the public deliberation of political issues.

The main goal of the present study has been to propose a more comprehensive approach to the analysis of the social functions of political (or other) jokes. So far, relevant studies have been exclusively based on the content of such texts to discuss their functions, always in view of the sociopolitical circumstances that led to their creation and circulation. Here I have tried to suggest that this kind of analysis could be complemented with two other parameters of political joke-telling: The subgenres employed and the comments offered on the jokes. Summarizing the findings of the present study, we cannot but notice the *multifunctionality* of the Greek crisis jokes. More specifically:

1. Via crisis jokes Greek people identify, and try to laugh at/with, the incongruities emerging in their daily lives due to the austerity measures imposed on them by the Greek government and the Troika. They (more or less) implicitly compare past and present living conditions to conclude that the latter are much harder than the former. They also complain for the problems they have to deal with and sometimes even blame themselves for them. Hence, the *content analysis* of the jokes brings to the surface a critical perspective on reality suggesting that things are much worse than they used to be or than they should have been.
2. The use of various *subgenres* for constructing joking texts allows humorists, on the one hand, to frame the represented (more or less fictional) events as “common” and “personal” experiences and, on the other, to exploit well-known, easily identifiable generic structures. This brings to the surface the common sociocultural background between the humorists and their recipients and underlines their shared perspectives and practices.
3. The *comments* offered by speakers on crisis jokes reveal their positive evaluation of this kind of humor, which explains why they forward them to other people: They try to amuse each other. In addition, crisis jokes are perceived as “plausible” and, in a sense, “realistic” representations of reality viewed from a humorous perspective. Speakers perceive them as a way to psychologically cope with the consequences of the austerity measures and to bolster their morale. Hence such jokes are shared as a means of self- and other-encouragement and of making people aware of the critical circumstances surrounding them and, less often, of their own responsibility therein.

Stein (1989: 88-90) has claimed that viewing political jokes as a form of resistance is not usually supported by contextual information or empirical evidence, but rather reflects researchers’ own ideological positionings (see section 2). This is confirmed by the present study, whereby none of the speakers reading and disseminating such jokes does not frame them as an act of resistance or rebellion against the Greek government or the members of the Troika, despite the fact that these jokes are (even indirectly) critical towards the political status quo and its policies.

In general, the present study highlights the importance of the *context of delivery* of jokes for determining their social functions and eventually their meanings. The fact that the jokes under scrutiny were circulated via emails among intimates makes their entertainment, bonding and morale boosting functions most relevant. If, for instance, some of them were delivered orally in the Greek parliament by members of the opposition addressing members of the government, the above mentioned functions would be most irrelevant. In that case, their critical, confrontational, and aggressive

functions would be considered most salient. The opposition would most probably use such jokes to attack, denigrate, and eventually ridicule governmental policies as well as to side with “the common people” (cf. Archakis and Tsakona 2011).

Due to its design, the study could not take into consideration speakers who may not enjoy such humor, as they would most probably not forward (or perhaps not even read) emails including it, hence their views would not be included in the set of data examined here (see section 6.3). This kind of research could therefore be complemented with data coming from other contexts (e.g. websites, interviews, questionnaires), where speakers could more or less spontaneously offer their comments on jokes (cf. Kramer 2011; Laineste 2011; Moalla 2013; Stewart 2013; Tsakona 2013).

Needless to say, more research is required along these lines. Given that political jokes encode people’s perceptions of their everyday realities, they could be investigated as counter-hegemonic testimonies of sociopolitical events, namely as unofficial sources of information on political changes and contexts (Shehata 1992; Stanoev 2009: 204; Badarneh 2011; Sheftel 2011; cf. Hackett and Rolston 2009). Political jokes may serve humorous purposes, but, as was hopefully shown here, are not a-political accounts of politics. Furthermore, as Chen (2013: 43) observes,

the new media [...] has for the first time provided tools for ordinary people who hitherto may have lived in fear of voicing their dissatisfaction all their lives, but are now empowered to create their individual and personalized expression of protest [...].

So, online political (or other) humor could shed light on people’s reactions and experiences which often go unnoticed or are underestimated by sociological and historical research. Instead of looking for “universal” functions and traits in similar joking texts from different parts of the planet (cf. Stanoev 2009: 190), it would perhaps be more fruitful to concentrate on what specific texts can tell us about particular contexts which may otherwise escape our scholarly attention.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author is grateful to Argiris Archakis and the two anonymous reviewers for inspiring feedback on the present study.

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