

# Dame Edna and ‘the help’: Australian bilingual Latin American immigrants respond to *that* joke

**Adrian Hale**

Western Sydney University, Australia  
[a.hale@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:a.hale@westernsydney.edu.au)

## Abstract

*‘Dame Edna Everage’, a persona originally created by the Australian comedian Barry Humphries in 1955, is a character designed to simultaneously shock and amuse. Dame Edna voices (and satirizes) the discourse of ‘average’, older, politically conservative Anglo-Australians who feel compelled to ‘tell it like it is’ – no matter how offensive their opinions might be. In the Anglosphere, Edna’s humour is well understood and sustained international success has followed Edna for more than 60 years in Britain, Canada, the US and Australia. However, Edna occasionally misfires. In 2003, for instance, Edna’s satire outraged Latinos across the USA, in fulfilment of Poe’s Law (Aikin, 2009). Simply put, Latinos assumed that Edna’s comments satirising negative mainstream attitudes towards them were expressive of Edna’s authentic racism. This paper investigates the Edna joke in the overall context of failed humour and then specifically for the offensiveness it generated amongst the Latino minority in the United States. It then tests whether this reaction was the result of a discursive frame specific to the US context, by conducting an exploratory study amongst a small sample of highly educated Australian bilingual Latin American immigrants and their adult children, to see whether they thought Edna’s joke was funny. These Australian individuals of Latin American heritage responded via an online questionnaire, and an analysis of their responses is presented here. The study’s main finding is that while these individuals generally demonstrated a high comedic literacy across both English and Spanish, including a prior awareness of Edna’s and Australian humour, they overall rejected the intention and humour of Edna’s joke. This paper asserts that, when it comes to humour, some transnational migrant speech community loyalties transcend other notions of identity and language competence.*

*Keywords: Latin American, identity, failed humour, Dame Edna.*

## 1. Introduction and literature review

The notion of failed humour is a relatively new and emerging focus of enquiry in the overarching field of humour research (Zajdman 1995; Attardo 2005, 2008; Bell 2009, 2015; Bell & Attardo 2010; Kuipers 2015; Hale 2018a). Some research has investigated the failure of humour at the literacy level, semantic level, or pragmatic level, but little work has been performed into the

failure of humour at the *discursive* level. Thus, for instance, failed humour has been theorized as occurring at the functional communicative competence level (Canale & Swain 1980; Canale 1983; Celce-Murcia 2007), especially where this type of literacy requirement is framed as a matter of linguistic competence metrics, or a *hierarchy* of literacies (Canale & Swain 1980; Reid 2006; Stevens & Campbell 2008; Bell & Attardo 2010). Indeed, Bell and Attardo (2010: 429-441) examine what these literacies entail, and propose seven levels at which the humorous transaction could fail (or by implication, succeed): the utterance level; the lexical knowledge level; the pragmatic level; applying the humorous frame; the incongruity level; the joke appreciation level; and the adoption level. It is probably self-evident that a person who cannot operate at the less demanding levels of utterance, lexical knowledge or knowing when to apply the joke frame, is unlikely to be able to process the joke at all, and certainly not at the higher levels of pragmatics or adoption.

On the other hand, a person who is capable of processing a joke at *all* of these levels may still not *enjoy* that joke. Partly this might be because the joke is not satisfying or intriguing enough to satisfy that person's sense of humour - meaning that the joke is simply not very funny anyway (Norrick 1993; Hay 2001; Bell 2009). Or, a failure of humour might occur because people might not be discursively (or contextually) prepared to receive it: "Humour reception and evaluation are notoriously hugely dependent on context and whether or not the audience is primed for laughter" (Partington 2006: 117). Further to the idea of a communication problem not related to literacy, is the notion that we can generically define failed humour as being "some mismatch between repertoire and audience" (Palmer 2004: 161). Or, it can be simply described as a "communication fail" because "systems powerful enough to express what humans need to express cannot be failsafe (i.e. they have to rely on input from the speakers/hearers)" (Bell, 2015: vii). In terms of discourse, we can argue that any act of failed humour triggers a negative response not despite, but *because* a person has the literacy competence needed to recognise *and* process illocutionary intention and force, locutionary act and play frame – and yet the joke still fails.

There are various discursive reasons for failed humour. The act of humour might be offensive or it might simply be a weakly constructed joke, but it is *recognised* as a joke. Indeed, a person "when confronted with a poor attempt at humor...will find a means of demonstrating both their recognition of the utterance as an effort to be humorous and their understanding of the joke, but also indicate their lack of appreciation" (Bell 2009: 1826). In other words, there is no guarantee that a joke will work – and this is an area in the literature "in which very little research has been conducted" (Bell 2009: 1835). One important area of this neglected area of research, is what 'triggers' the negative reception of a speech act which was clearly intended as a humour attempt. Because the failure is at the complex level of discourse, we can safely ignore explanations which propose a key at the literacy or cognition levels:

Models which consider humour competence to be simply a universal cognitive skill fail to recognise the social and political aspects of texts...Given these differences, those jokes which Freud called tendentious give rise to contested interpretations, and it is usually those with most power in any situation or institution who determine which interpretation shall dominate.

(Lockyer & Pickering 2009: 22)

In order to understand the different ways in which discourse operates, we need to frame the concept of discourse holistically as the complex set of cultural knowledges, personal experiences and preferences, ideologies and speech community allegiances, face, politeness and other social negotiations of relationships, power and capital accumulations and other systems of interpreting the real and imagined world (Jaworski & Coupland 2014: 1-18). While complex, this framing also allows us to have a type of checklist from which we can identify salient and relevant discursive factors which impede, and determine, the failed humour response. Indeed,

some or all of these factors combine into a latent resistance to humour as a type of aggression – if we allow the assertion that *any* act of humour constitutes a face threatening act, or FTA (Gruner 2000; Hale 2018a). While perhaps still an experimental and theoretical ‘checklist’ of discourse factors, the *operation* of these factors to varying degrees has been categorised as a type of default, defensive mechanism which people use to identify, and defend against, acts of humour (Hale 2018a). The utility of this theorised operation of discourse factors is in the mapping of failed humour in a systematic way, as proposed by the Discursive Defence Mechanism (or DDM). The DDM suggests that:

...there exists a default setting for people in the reception of humour. That is, until people can determine whether an act of humour is benign or aggressive...they automatically treat the act of humour as a threat, and they act defensively. If they have decided that the act of humour is in their interests...they accept it as successful humour. But, in the situations where people cannot decide if the humour is a threat, or when they decide that the act of humour does actually constitute a threat, this DDM, or state of defence, continues.

(Hale 2018a: 51)

Because people are autonomous agents, the DDM can be tailored to map an individual’s discursive defences against any act of humour. But, because people are also affiliated with speech communities’ humour priorities and systems (Partington 2006), or they produce and consume humour according to norms articulated by ‘communities of practice’ (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992; Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999), people also tend to agree with, or reject, humour as a token of membership of a community. This affiliation with a speech community seems to be a matter of consensus in the literature (Hall 1980; Partington 2006; Davies et al. 2008; Kuipers 2009; Hale 2018a), such that there is agreement about the power of in-group membership in *enforcing* humour appreciation: “As with any other distinctive trait...a speech community is defined as much by what the members of that community find funny, as what they do not find funny” (Hale 2018a: 22). While not necessarily deterministic, there *is* enormous pressure to conform to a speech community’s notion of acceptable humour: “humour is not a simple individual response...but something socially constructed [by] external social, cultural and political settings” (Davies et al. 2008: 6). This is supported by Kramer (2011: 138) who suggests that humour “requires a shared set of beliefs in order to be socially meaningful, and the specific nature of those humor ideologies determines the types of social meaning that humor can take on”.

Nevertheless, it is also logical that any speech community will exhibit variation, especially for notions of what constitutes ‘transgressive’ humour – and humour which is subversive of a speech community’s core ‘settings’. Indeed, these differentiated responses to humour which violate speech community norms express individualism, and are subject to: “variegated filters of personality, gender, age, life experience, mood, and subjective attitudes and allegiances towards one’s own speech community” (Hale 2018a: 22). Thus, for instance, Rose (2014: 4, 9-10) notes that even in the middle of the Danish cartoons furore, there were Muslim commentators who publicly and privately acknowledged the ‘legitimacy’ of the humour which was subversive of their beliefs – thus taking an oppositional stand against their own speech community.

This is exactly what this paper sets out to test: Do Australian bilingual Latin American immigrants find Edna’s joke funny? In order to test this question, it is necessary to present some background information on Edna’s history and humour style, before moving on to the joke itself and the reaction it caused amongst Latinos in the US.

## 2. Dame Edna's humour

The “veteran” Australian comedian Barry Humphries has made a successful international career out of satire since 1955 (Blundell, 2009), employing various ‘characters’ to vocalise his comedy – of these, he is “best known worldwide for his popular drag character Dame Edna Everage” (Drill 2019). No stranger to controversy, Humphries most recently incurred the disapproval of some when, both in character as Edna onstage and speaking for himself in interviews, he made derogatory comments about transgender persons (Staff Writers 2018; Drill 2019; Imhoff 2019; Pender 2019). Some noted the irony of a cis-gendered male comedian who performs his most famous (and successful) character in drag, while mocking others who subvert hetero-normative ideas of gender, with one critic noting: “He is a heterosexual man who puts on women's clothes as a costume to create his Dame Edna Everage character [but] he lacks empathy towards those who are transgender” (Staff Writers 2018).

While some comedians capitalise on the ‘shock-value’ of being ‘in character’ and in presenting controversial views as part of the act, this is clearly not the case with Humphries and his character Dame Edna – since Humphries continues to espouse the same views when in formal interviews, as *himself* (Staff Writers 2018; Drill 2019; Imhoff 2019; Pender 2019). Indeed, this is something that Humphries seems proud of: “however respectable I might try to be, there's always someone whose feelings I seem to ruffle. That's exciting. I really feel it's my *raison d'être*: 'I offend therefore I am'” (Taylor 2015). This is in stark contrast to other satirists who, as a trope, base a character on the very world-views they are satirising, but who in ‘non-character mode’ explicitly distance themselves from, and criticize, these views - in the style of Sacha Baron Cohen’s ‘Ali G’ or ‘Borat’ personas (Panahi 2019), or Stephen Colbert’s pseudo-right-wing opinion pieces (LaMarre et al. 2009). This indicates an awareness of a risk that their satire might end up being seen as an *endorsement* of this fictional position, in what has been referred to as “the Alf Garnett syndrome, through which what is being satirised becomes a source of celebration among at least a section of the audience” (Lockyer & Pickering 2009: 18).

However, while publicly unrepentant for his transphobic comments, Humphries’ humour, including that as articulated by Edna, is more complex, and he is not always easy to categorise – except that he delights in being controversial (Taylor 2015; Pender 2019). For instance, one Edna performance in 2007 which brought together Edna, Ivana Trump and K. D. Lang, was deliberately designed to be provocative for, and subversive of, heteronormative ideas of gender and sexual orientation (Hale 2016). In response to negative reviews of Edna’s subversive humour, Humphries responded by describing the criticism as the “new puritanism” (PA 2015), and by declaring that in satire, “there are no rules” (Taylor 2015). Humphries certainly resists clear demarcations of boundaries for satire, asserting a type of ‘aesthetic alibi’, where the comedian performs as artist and the *art* is the object of attention – not the artist, who is at a remove from the art and its effects on other people. This is consistent with the definition by Jay (1992: 14), who refers to the ‘aesthetic alibi’ as “artistic freedom [or] a special case of freedom of speech [which] is deemed to have aesthetic value.” Indeed, this foregrounding of his humour as an act of autonomous art – not susceptible to scrutiny – seems to be what Humphries is claiming for himself when he asserts that “If you have to explain satire to someone, you might as well give up [...] There is no more terrible fate for a comedian than to be taken seriously” (Feneley 2014).

Humphries also seems to suggest that, when in character as Edna – a character he has been performing for more than 60 years - the persona ‘takes over’:

It's as if I'm channelling some other person...I say things other people wish they could say... What amuses me is that people have accepted Edna at her own estimation of herself. People want to go along with the joke but it's more than a joke, it's an idea — and it's not exactly calculated because

a lot of it I do unconsciously. I keep thinking I'd better put her in her box but every time I open it up, she comes out a little more real.

(Cavendish 2013)

Clearly, then, Edna is complex *and* problematic – perhaps the very definition of satire. It is important also to note that Edna is representative of a particular discourse which Humphries is seeking to mock. Edna, based on Humphries' own mother (Drill 2019), is a “send-up of prim, proper and bigoted suburban manners” (Cavendish 2013). The character's name is derived from a typical older Anglo-Australian first name (Edna) with the last name forming a pun (average-Everege), and the character's aspirational pretensions have been progressively added to over the years, starting modestly as a self-described “suburban housewife” before adding the aristocratic title “Dame”, and later (with international success), promoting herself as a “Megastar” and “Gigastar” (Turnbull 2008). As such, Edna is a caricature of the older, Anglo, conservative, pretentious suburban female with “petty bourgeois values” (Tolson 1991: 191) – but, perhaps more importantly, Edna has ‘no filter’. Thus, in a “combination of older female naiveté and pretentiousness [Edna's] character transgresses social norms of politeness” (Hale 2016: 10) by seeming to say the first thing that comes into her head – often without any hedge, and usually with face-threatening directness.

### **3. Dame Edna and *that* joke**

Historically, this characterisation worked to entertain the primary audiences which Edna has attracted since 1955, in Australia, the United Kingdom, the USA and Canada. However, while Edna's longevity would suggest that her humour can transcend divides of generation, ethnicity and politics, there are clearly limits: Edna was always more popular in Australia and Britain than in New Zealand, the USA or Canada, due to closer linguistic, historical and cultural links between the two countries which made Edna's discursive comedic elements more relevant and resonant (Pender 2010). In addition, Edna's appeal has simply been waning over the past two decades, and this has a lot to do with the nature of her humour which does not translate well with topicality and shifts in cultural sensitivity – including increased acceptance of transgender people:

Public taste has changed and that is that. Humphries is primarily of historic interest now. That's how satire and comedy work. It's not just the references that date in topical satire. Audiences are powerful, and if they feel insulted they can shut down a comedian.

(Pender 2019)

As a prime example of this decline in relevance, Edna's joke in 2003 about Spanish-speaking people in the US not only failed, it also managed to trigger a major backlash across various media. Edna had been invited to produce a satirical ‘agony-aunt’ column for the high-profile US magazine *Vanity Fair*. Edna's column in the February 2003 issue responded to the topic of the role of the Spanish language in American society and was linked to Salma Hayek (Mexican-American actress) who was featured on the cover and in a major article in the same issue. One commentator reported on it in this way: “A fictional reader, who Humphries had deftly placed in Florida's WASP-y millionaires' paradise Palm Beach” [asked] ‘Is Spanish a good second language to learn because so many people in the US already speak it?’” (Gare, 2017). Edna's reply was:

Forget Spanish. There's nothing in that language worth reading except ‘Don Quixote,’ and a quick listen to the CD of ‘Man of La Mancha’ will take care of that. There was a poet named Garcia Lorca but I'd leave him on the intellectual back burner if I were you. As for everyone's

speaking it, what twaddle! Who speaks it that you are really desperate to talk to? The help? Your leaf blower? Study French or German, where there are at least a few books worth reading, or if you're American try English.

(*Vanity Fair*, February 2003: 118)

The contextual assumption underlying the joke, as indicated by the column's title 'Vanities', was that it was intended as non-serious, and the play-frame is invoked by its imitation of the 'agony-aunt' column genre – a genre typical of 'lowbrow' or "teenage magazines" (*OED*, 2012) – clearly a juxtaposition in a 'high-end' fashion magazine. Additionally, the joke was placed amidst other joke-responses, responding to fictitious reader names and with flippant questions/topics, such as: how to negotiate jealousy over a wife's relationship with a gay friend, whether salmon is out of fashion, and how to cover up a complexion burnt by laser surgery. The internal consistency between Edna's joke responses should have indicated that none of them were serious: e.g. "You'll probably look like a beetroot for the rest of your life, and the small print on your cosmetic surgeon's disclaimer is unlikely to cheer you up" and "I can't stand salmon, either. It's no coincidence that one of the yuckiest tummy upsets on the planet, salmonella, is named after [it]...the reek of an open container can taint your refrigerator in perpetuity" (*Vanity Fair*, February 2003: 118).

Indeed, while the joke was met with hostility, all of the commentators understood that the text was *intended* as humour, so clearly the text itself, its context, propositional content and purpose were decoded precisely as intended – but as *failed* humour. Whether or not the nuances of the joke were decoded was perhaps not the point, and this would explain why the following subtleties were not picked up in any of the negative responses: the reference to American popular culture (the original musical and CD artefact of 'Man of La Mancha'), and the intertextuality of "if you're American try English", which echoes Alan Jay Lerner's invented line, in his 1956 Broadway adaptation (*My Fair Lady*) of George Bernard Shaw's original 1912 play (*Pygmalion*): "There even are places where English completely disappears; in America they haven't used it for years" (Hale 2018b: 528). These items in the joke suggest that Edna's *primary* target was mainstream Anglo America: decoded this way, the joke can be interpreted as Edna voicing (and thus mocking) US racist attitudes which position Spanish-speaking people (Mexican immigrants, by implication) as 'deservedly' comprising a lower social class and performing menial occupations: the "help".

Media commentators in Australia ('Still playing the Dame' 2003; Gare 2017), Britain (Hancock 2009) and Los Angeles (McNulty 2015) defended Edna's humour, asserting, for instance, that "Of course, it's offensive. It's horrifically offensive and that's the entire point. Humphries was sending up the attitudes of rich white people who live in Palm Beach palaces, not anyone Hispanic for heaven's sakes" (Gare 2017). More temperate was the response from Rodriguez (2003) who argued that while the elitist/racist *humour* was predictable, and that Edna "had unwittingly captured the tone of the magazine and attitude of many of its readers so closely", the *outcry* was also unjustified: "we are a nation of sufferers and victims, the Puritans have won the day...committees of orthodoxy that decide what can and cannot be said". These responses can be argued as typically expressing a discursively distanced position, where commentators are geographically, linguistically and racially removed from the 'collateral' target, and affiliated/aligned with Edna's discourse. Rodriguez (2003) is the only voice which seems to express a more nuanced discursive position, balancing Hispanic sensitivity/community alignment against the unreflective Anglo propensity for invoking a minority in order to make a joke.

By contrast, the joke provoked a massive negative response from thousands of US Hispanic people, including Salma Hayek. Edna's reaction was not exactly conciliatory, arguing that "Hayek's fury was due to professional jealousy. "When I was offered the part of Frida I turned it down, and (Hayek) was the second choice. I said I'm not playing the role of a woman with a

moustache and a monobrow, and I'm not having same-sex relations on the screen" ('Still playing the Dame' 2003). Initially, the magazine's editor tried to draw attention to the primary target of the joke and the joke's context: "Swamped by complaints the editor attempted to explain the satire, calling Edna 'an equal opportunity distributor of insults'" (Pender 2019). There was also the explanation that Edna was part of a "long comedic tradition of making statements that are tasteless, wrongheaded or taboo with an eye toward exposing hypocrisies or prejudices" (Campbell 2003). But after sustained outcry, and death threats, the magazine published an apology and cancelled Edna's column ('A Satire' 2003).

Interestingly, many of the complainants explicitly defended their ability to take a joke: "many Latino groups say they don't lack a sense of humor - just patience with the way they are portrayed in mainstream America...The problem is the way it depicts Spanish and an entire culture" (Hernandez 2003). As for whether the joke possessed *any* elements required for humour, Lalo Lopez, "a nationally syndicated cartoonist", said that it "simply wasn't funny - on any level...It fails at humor" (Hernandez 2003). Similarly, the comment was made that there was a severe lack of comedian-audience affiliation: "It takes a skillful comic and an audience conversant with the convention to make this particular shtick play as humor [but it] had neither" ('A Satire' 2003). Others noted that they understood the context and satirical content, but objected to it on other grounds: "We understand that the column's advice is not intended to be taken seriously. We also understand the question ... was supposed to elicit laughter...We simply don't see what's so amusing about an appalling display of bigotry" (Salinas 2003).

Therefore, by explicitly (and pre-emptively) asserting that they possessed key literacy and humour recognition competencies to decode the joke, the commentators are signalling that their rejection of Edna's humour attempt was not based on any linguistic or pragmatic deficiency, but rather on a *discursive* recognition that the joke's premise and content were objectionable. This is evidence of a *higher-level* operation of the DDM and it could be argued that such an eloquent and reasoned set of responses (overall, of course – without ignoring some threats of violence) suggests that, by contrast, Edna's attempt at humour was poorly constructed and indicative of discursive *illiteracy*. Edna did not, for instance, take into account that as the single largest minority in the United States – at around 18% of the total US population (Flores 2017) - Hispanics are sensitive to many aspects of identity and status: a problematic history of relations between Latin American nations (especially Mexico) and the US; historical marginalisation within US society; and an ongoing social-linguistic divide between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking populations, as still articulated and symbolised in the duality of 'Hispanic vs. Latino' as nomenclature (Gracia 2000; Alcoff 2005). All of these aspects would validate the discursive objections to the joke, and they underscore that the commentators *understood* the joke – they just didn't find it funny.

One unresolved aspect of the failed joke was that, while Edna betrayed a cultural and discursive illiteracy in making the joke, US Hispanics had also made some assumptions about Edna. In their comments, commentators had conflated Edna's humour mocking the US discourse of racism with the US discourse of racism itself ('A Satire' 2003; Hernandez 2003; Salinas 2003). In other words, however clumsily, Edna was trying to indicate that 'she' was on their side. The misunderstanding was predictable, for several reasons. On the one hand, Edna demonstrated ignorance, or at best, a superficial understanding, of US-Latino relations and discourse in thinking that the joke would work when it was framed as a racist 'rant'. On the other hand, the humour fail is explainable by the fact that US Latinos had little or no acquaintance with Edna or 'her' style of humour. In the absence of these collective background knowledges, it is perfectly logical that Latinos would interpret the joke according to an established pattern of anti-Latino (or anti-Mexican) humour (Salinas 2003). This is an instance of Poe's Law, which is, that "unless there are unmistakable cues that one is being ironic or sarcastic, many parodies [will] be interpreted as...sincere expressions" (Aikin 2009: 2), but it is

also an instance where humour fails because of the inappropriateness of the joke itself and the discursive illiteracy of the comedian. The analogy could be made of a (hypothetical) white comedian who naively dons ‘blackface’ to parody that racist comedic tradition and to express solidarity with persons of colour who have been the target of this ‘humour’ in the past – it does not work as humour, and it perpetuates the offence of the original. There is a type of discursive boundary which should be respected in comedy, or it revives historical and social sensitivities.

#### **4. Dame Edna, *that* joke, and the motivation for conducting a survey of Australian Latin American immigrants**

This idea of a discursive boundary is applicable to an Australian comedian mocking sensitive areas of another society. The question is prompted, then, as to how much the failure of Edna’s humour was due to its specific location in US society, or simply because the joke itself was not funny for Spanish-speakers from Latin America in general. In order to test whether this subtlety would be picked up in the Australian context (Edna’s ‘natural home’), a survey was conducted among Australian bilingual (Spanish/English speaking) Latin American immigrants familiar with Edna’s humour, to see if they would find the joke funny. By way of contrast with the US Latino population (around 18%), the Australian Latino community is estimated at no more than 2% of the population, and source nations are typically from South America, rather than Mexico: Chile, Argentina, Uruguay (ABS 2016). In addition, Australia is a nation of very high migration with a fairly even distribution of source nations. This means that in a nation where 26.8% of the population is born overseas (double the rate of the US population), there are no minorities on the scale of the US Latino population (ABS 2018). In addition to this, there are no Latino nations which border Australia, and Latino migration to Australia is fairly recent (dating from the 1970s and peaking in the 1980s). This means that Latinos come from nations which have no experience of social or historical conflict with their host country, and they are only one of many minorities in one of the most multicultural nations on the planet. There was also the consideration that since many Latinos have been in Australia for several decades, they were likely to have experience with Australian humour in general, and with Edna in particular. These demographic features were considered to be very relevant in making a contrastive comparison with the US Latinos who were offended by Edna’s joke.

#### **5. Methods**

The survey itself was conducted over the space of one month in 2019, using a paid SurveyMonkey account to present participants with a mixture of binary/Likert scale and open-ended questions in an anonymised online questionnaire. Ethics approval (#H13146) was granted, and supervision was managed by the researcher’s university Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Initial recruitment of participants was through official university emails to associates of the researcher, and then through snowballing via forwarded email contacts. All potential participants were emailed a full information pack with consent form and ethics documentation, and they were asked to reply only if they were an adult Australian resident/citizen of Latin American heritage with some proficiency in both English and Spanish. While some of the 13 participants were known to the researcher, the survey process randomised responses and no identifying features are to be found in any of the responses. Although the time constraint limited the number of participants, the responses to the open-ended questions yielded the most substantial and complex data. Although the sample is small, the extensive qualitative



data offers validity for an exploratory study. At the conclusion of the survey period, the survey was closed and all data was extracted and stored in a university-supplied secure cloud system.

Below is a summary of the questions and the coding system used to analyse the open-ended answers.

Question 1 was a simple binary demographic question: *'Are you an Australian (resident/citizen) bilingual in English and Spanish?'* It also was set as a 'gatekeeper' question, so that if any participant answered 'No', they were not able to proceed with the rest of the survey.

Question 2 asked a simple binary demographic question: *'Are you: (a) a migrant to Australia? [or] (b) born in Australia to migrant parents?'* It was also designed as a gatekeeper question to limit the participants to the target sample.

Question 3 asked: *'How many years have you lived in Australia?'* with the following options: *'(a) 0-5; (b) 6-10; (c) More than 10.'* Apart from confirming the residential status of the target sample (following up on questions 1-2), this question was designed to introduce a variable relating to, and suggestive of, exposure to Australian culture and humour in general, and also the likelihood of familiarity with Edna's humour.

Question 4 asked participants *'What is your level of education?'*, offering the following options: *'(a) I have never attended a formal school; (b) I have attended Primary school only; (c) I have attended Primary and High school only; (d) I have attended Primary and High school and attended a Higher education system (such as TAFE or university); (e) I have qualifications at the post-graduate level in addition to previous education levels.'* This question was designed to discover if there was a link between educational level and responses to the joke itself, especially if these were variegated.

Question 5 was a simple binary question which asked: *'Have you ever seen the humour of Dame Edna Everage?'* The question was designed to be answered either 'Yes' or 'No', to see if participants were familiar with Edna's humour, before they were presented with the joke text itself. This would be correlated with Question 3, to see if participants who had lived longer in Australia were more likely to be familiar with Edna, and if this informed their positive or negative reaction to the joke.

Question 6 asked: *'Do you think Dame Edna Everage is funny?'* and participants were offered a Likert scale with the following options: *'Very funny'; 'Often funny'; 'Not very funny'; 'Not funny at all'*. Although constrained by the level of 'Edna awareness' tested in Q5, this question was designed to test participants' prior opinions of Edna's humour as a general concept, before they were supplied with the actual joke text in Q7.

Question 7 supplied participants with a brief explanatory context of the *Vanity Fair* article, along with the 'invented reader's' question and Edna's complete response, before asking: *'Do you think Edna's response to the question is funny?'* Participants were offered these Likert scale options: *'Very funny'; 'Pretty funny'; 'Not very funny'; 'Not funny at all'*. Given the 6-year gap between the original text and this survey, and the possibility that participants would not know of the incident because of geographical and cultural distance, this question was designed to present participants with what was potentially a 'first-time' experience of the text. It was expected, that if this was the case, that their responses would be unmediated and more immediate, and thus with a higher probability of candidness.

Question 8 was open-ended and simply asked: *'Why?'* This question was designed to offer participants an immediate follow-up to their ranking of the joke, and it was assumed that they would be strongly motivated by the sequential ordering of the question to be more emotionally engaged and thus, more forthcoming with information/opinion.

Question 9 was a simple binary question ('Yes' or 'No'), and it sought to prompt responses by offering Edna's defence of the joke, with the following text: *'Dame Edna has defended this joke, by saying that the real target of the joke is not Latinos, but rather mainstream US society'*

which is racist towards Latinos. She is mocking this racist attitude by answering the question in this way.' It then asked: 'Does this makes any difference to your first reaction to the joke?'

Question 10 was open-ended and sought to follow up on previous responses, by simply asking: 'Why or why not?' Given the sequencing of the questions, it was expected that participants would be somewhat engaged and motivated to further comment, and to reflect on their own previous responses. However, it was also expected, as a supplementary question, that responses might not be as extensive as previously.

Question 11 sought to examine participants' transnational-linguistic identity by offering an open-ended question which was phrased as follows: 'Many prominent Latinos in the US were offended by this joke. Why do you think they were offended?' The question could be considered to be an act of orienting participants to the discourse of a related speech community since, although it superficially asked participants to consider why the US Latino community reacted negatively, it implicitly suggested that Australian Latinos would have an insight into this discourse because of a shared/comparative language, minority and immigrant experience.

Question 12 then directly asked participants for their views on the distinction – or link - between Australian Latino responses and the responses of US Latinos: 'Do you think Australian Latinos are more or less likely to be offended than US Latinos, and why?' The question was open-ended, and was designed to prompt participants into explicitly commenting on personal cultural-linguistic experiences as Australians and to decide if they felt that there was a discursive bond, or discursive distinction, between the two communities when it came to a potentially divisive/polarising text like Edna's joke.

Question 13 offered participants one more open-ended opportunity to comment, asking: 'Do you have any other comments you would like to add?'

Qualitative responses were coded using a simplified grammatical-semantic identification system which employed criteria of clausal construction/propositional content being unitary or conflicted, positive or negative. In addition, when it became evident that participants also wanted to add extra but purely informational content to their responses, the grammatical-semantic system isolated these items as neutral content. This content was separately calculated as a category of response items. All of these items were labelled as 'elements' and counted for overall content for each participant, before being presented in summary tabular form (below, in 'Findings') for each question. A few examples will be provided in the 'Findings' section for each qualitative question to illustrate salient aspects of the data analysis. Space does not permit the rendering of all participant/responses in this paper, but two examples will suffice to indicate the operation of the coding system, with explanatory/justificatory comments for how the results were interpreted. For example, the following participant response<sup>1</sup> contained 6 elements, 5 of which were negative (n), 1 of which was extra informational (e) and the comment overall was unitary for negativity (u count = 5n):

*#8:2. It lacks humour (n): there is no sarcasm (n) or double meaning (n) in these statements that would make me laugh (n). Also, by today's standards (e) it sounds pathetically racist (n) (u = 5n).*

The overall consistency between these negative elements for propositional content and sentiment can be contrasted with the element 'by today's standards' which functions as a contextualising, modifying or hedging marker presenting neutral information. Another example which offered a conflicting set of elements is as follows:

*#8.5. It's a bit racist (n) but Dame Edna is a comedian (p) so it's not going to be a straight answer (e). That's how comedy works (e) - you poke fun at whatever the topic is (e) (c/c = p1 and n1).*

---

<sup>1</sup> Original spelling and punctuation is retained in all responses used.

In this response, the participant offers the initial negative element, which is then moderated by a positive element, and the rest of the comment justifies the *relativism* of the comment by offering further (neutral) information, explaining the participant's understanding of how this type of humour works. As propositional content, the response is conflicted evenly between positivity and negativity, and dominated by extra informational content.

This paper now examines in greater detail the analysis of the data supplied by the survey.

## 6. Findings

Question 1 asked participants a binary question: '*Are you an Australian (resident/citizen) bilingual in English and Spanish?*', to which all 13 respondents answered 'Yes'. The successful operation of this gatekeeper question in tandem with the recruitment process provides some confidence in the integrity of the sample.

Question 2 asked: '*Are you: (a) a migrant to Australia? [or] (b) born in Australia to migrant parents?*' Of the 13 respondents, 10 were immigrants and 3 were the children of immigrants. Since the recruitment process only asked for immigrants from Latin American Spanish-speaking nations, there was high confidence that the respondents were indeed from these areas, and children of these immigrants who claimed bilingualism were considered as being equivalent for background, as the homes were assumed to be bilingual and/or bicultural.

Question 3 asked: '*How many years have you lived in Australia?*' with the following options: '*(a) 0-5; (b) 6-10; (c) More than 10.*' Of the 13 responses, only one person had lived in Australia for 0-5 years, with the rest stating that they had lived in Australia for more than 10 years. This suggested that the participants had a fairly good acquaintance with Australian culture, language and humour given the typical length of time they had spent in the country.

Question 4 asked about educational levels, and *all 13* respondents indicated that they had formal tertiary qualifications, in addition to primary and secondary schooling. In addition, 9 reported having post-graduate qualifications. This suggested - probably due to the nature of the recruitment process, which had begun with contacting academic associates of the researcher - that the participants were all well educated in both English and Spanish, that high levels of literacy in both languages were to be expected, and that they were likely to be very competent at the pragmatic-discursive levels of humour decoding in both languages.

Question 5 asked: '*Have you ever seen the humour of Dame Edna Everage?*' The majority of the 13 respondents answered 'Yes' (10), while 3 answered 'No'. Given the fact that Edna's humour/career seems to be on the wane and that this is a generational factor (as previously discussed), it is *possible* that these 3 participants are the same 3 participants who identified as the children of immigrants. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a confirmatory correlation between responses to previous questions, and it indicates that a familiarity with Edna's humour is linked to the fact that most of the participants had lived in Australia for many years. This also suggests that the majority of respondents had high background knowledge for, and multiple exposures to, Edna's humour over a number of years.

Question 6 asked: '*Do you think Dame Edna Everage is funny?*' The 12 responses along a Likert scale were: '*Very funny*' = 1; '*Often funny*' = 6; '*Not very funny*' = 2; '*Not funny at all*' = 2. These responses can be interpreted as expressing a lack of consensus, with only one person fully endorsing Edna's humour, 2 being fully opposed to Edna's humour and the majority (6+2 = 8 respondents) offering their opinions in the middle of the scale, with an indication of slight positivity. This question and the responses occur before the participants are provided with the joke text, so it remains to be seen if participants would change their predisposition/opinions subsequent to exposure to the joke text. There is a complication or presumed error in the responses/data for this question, since 3 out of 13 people had previously responded that they had

not seen Edna’s humour (Q5), and in this question, there were only 12 responses. It is probable that one of the 3 respondents who were not familiar with Edna’s humour had opted out of this question, which would explain that only 12 people responded. Of the other 2 people who were unfamiliar with Edna, it is likely that they answered ‘*Not funny at all*’, since they could not form an opinion on a comedian they had never seen. Even if they had answered in another category, it does not skew the data in any particular direction: we can still assume that the majority (10 of 13) of the respondents who are familiar with Edna are expressing ambivalence. That is, there is no obvious consensus amongst the respondents as to Edna’s humour -before they see the actual joke.

Question 7 supplied the *Vanity Fair* context, the invented reader’s question and Edna’s complete response, before asking: ‘*Do you think Edna’s response to the question is funny?*’ All 13 participants responded, selecting from the Likert scale options: ‘*Very funny*’ = 0; ‘*Pretty funny*’ = 4; ‘*Not very funny*’ = 6; ‘*Not funny at all*’ = 3. Given the 6-year time lag (and US context difference) between the original text and this survey, there was the possibility that the respondents were seeing the text for the first time, and that they would be responding with greater sincerity/immediacy. This might explain the fact that no-one found the joke ‘very funny’, with a minority finding it ‘pretty funny’ and the majority (9/13) expressing negativity. In other words, the question with the joke text seems to act to trigger respondents’ negativity somewhat towards Edna’s humour. This indicates that the participants recognise that Edna’s humour is, at best, ‘problematic’ and the open-ended questions of the survey were designed to elicit more information on this issue.

Question 8, which all participants answered, asked: ‘*Why?*’ These qualitative responses were coded as explained in the Methods section, and a summary table appears below, in table 1.

Table 1. Q8 – Why?

Responses	Total elements	Extra informational elements (e)	Positive elements (p)	Negative elements (n)	Conflicted (c)	Unitary (u)
13	95	41	17	37	Total = 6 Positive = 0 Negative = 4 Split = 2	Total = 7 Positive = 2 Negative = 5

The overall negativity of the participants towards the joke is confirmed by the presence of a clear majority of negative elements (n = 37 versus p = 17), and the dominance of negativity in conflicted (ambivalent) comments and in unitary (completely) comments. Only 2 of the respondents offered positive unitary comments. This indicates that while respondents sought to offer some ‘even-handed’ elements of positivity, negative elements still appeared at twice the rate of positive comments. The surprising prevalence of extra informational elements (at 41 out of 95 elements overall) indicates that participants felt they needed to *explain* their negative responses. These elements functioned as an ‘offering’ of information – all implicitly linked to their negative joke reaction - to justify, to contextualise, to credentialise, and to explain, relevant issues of personal experience, US-Australian-Latino speech community loyalties and understandings, and literacy in decoding, receptivity to, and familiarity with, Australian humour and discourse. Three response excerpts illustrate this type of extra informational response (with bold identification of ‘e’ elements) and are reproduced below to indicate the complexity of the responses:

#8.3. ...*Another example of good humour is her explanation that Australians are good at sport because they spend a lot of time outdoors, eat good food, and have no intellectual distractions ...*

#8.6. *Australia has been my home for over 30 yrs. During my time here I've learned that the quirky world of Australian humour is situated somewhere in the middle of British and American sensibilities. And it is the opposite of Latino sensibility. I've also learned that Aussies' unique strain of humour include making fun of friends (in a good way), making fun of themselves, using sarcasm, using dark humour, making anti-establishment jokes ...*

#8.10. ...*Latinos in the US already face discrimination, particularly in the workforce, where the majority of jobs they can receive is domestic and agricultural labour. Their representation in the media only enforces these stereotypes, and they are almost always presented in a negative light.*

As can be seen in these examples, the 'e' elements are not directly/explicitly related to the joke itself, but relate to the conditions of Latino-US society in general, the nature of Australian humour, the recipient's own location in a Latino speech community, or to their experience as a migrant. These are all very supportive of, and explanatory for, each participant's response, but they are valuable for more than that. They are also illustrative of: the participants' sensitivity to difference; an awareness of how, why and where the sensitivity is 'triggered'; a keen understanding of, and empathy for, Latinos' marginalisation in US society; a very informed, and *eager* level of response (reflecting a highly educated, articulate and motivated, sample); and perhaps most importantly, the 'e' elements represent an effort to *mediate* between US-Latino and Australian-Latino speech communities and discourses. In other words, while (typically) not accepting the *joke* itself as appropriate or funny, most participants are keen to show that they *understand* it as an artefact of Australian humour – and that Australian humour is something they typically affiliate with as part of a wider alignment with Australian society.

This can be interpreted as an act of conciliation and mediation, balancing competing identity needs with the FTA posed by the joke itself, and resolving it in terms of dual speech community authenticity, affiliation and identity. This establishes a pattern which continues in the rest of the data, and this pattern can be interpreted as fulfilling the conditions for the DDM, in that, even while articulating negativity towards the joke, participants are keen to explain, and understand, why they are experiencing this negativity in the first place. The highly complex responses indicate that the sample is indeed, as expected, highly literate and reflexive – without expressing these sentiments in terms of the DDM, they are intuitively providing evidence for it, not only for themselves, but also empathetically for US Latinos as well.

Question 9 provided participants with the following text: '*Dame Edna has defended this joke, by saying that the real target of the joke is not Latinos, but rather mainstream US society which is racist towards Latinos. She is mocking this racist attitude by answering the question in this way.*' It then asked: '*Does this makes any difference to your first reaction to the joke?*' Given this 'explanation' all 13 participants responded, with only 2 saying 'Yes', but the overwhelming majority (11) replied 'No'. In order to clarify these responses, the next question (Q10) asked '*Why or why not?*' As expected, in a supplementary question, responses were not as extensive as in Q8, since the topic had been already covered. Also, as expected, responses were consistent with Q8 for negativity (10) and for positivity (2), but they *consolidated* for their respective positions, so that there were no *conflicting* elements in any of the responses, but rather, they became consistently unitary for either negativity or positivity. This showed that the participants had formed their position and were now defending that position in generally binary ways. This is indicated in table 2, below:

Table 2. Q10 – Why or why not?

Responses	Total elements	Extra informational elements (e)	Positive elements (p)	Negative elements (n)	Conflicted (c)	Unitary (u)
13	42	21	3	18	Total = 0 Positive = 0 Negative = 0 Split = 0	Total = 13 Positive = 3 Negative = 10

Interestingly, even though the average length of response was shorter than in Q8, the number of ‘e’ elements remained high, even increasing as a proportion of elements overall (from 40% to 50%). This indicated that participants continued to have a high motivation to explain, mitigate and contextualise their responses, and that this motivation had increased slightly over the course of the survey. Respondents also conceded the *premise* of Edna’s defence, but decided that it did not alter the joke’s lack of validity. Some excerpted responses are shown below to demonstrate the complexity of the ‘e’ elements – including some reflections on the nature of satire and the modality of the text:

*#10.13. I understand she's projecting the attitude of others and making a social commentary, but not everyone would understand that. It's difficult to know how to react to it. Watching it would have made it easier to get.*

*#10.9. Maybe the joke could be refined and show her target criticism more clearly from the start.*

*#10.10. Although I understand the intention, jokes must be performed with contextual understanding. In a place like mainstream US which already has racist and discriminatory views against Latinos... it's no longer a joke but an attack*

These comments further evidence the literate and conciliatory discourse of the participants: they are seeking to understand the joke from several angles, including the viewpoint of the US Latino audience, Edna’s intention, and their own connected but geographically removed context as Australians. This provides further evidence for the operation of the DDM, in that respondents are clearly motivated to support their negative responses and provide highly informational content.

This set of allegiances was tested by Q11, which asked participants to interpret the hostile response to the joke by US Latinos: ‘Many prominent Latinos in the US were offended by this joke. Why do you think they were offended?’ The question could be considered to be an act of orienting to the discourse of a related speech community, and it definitely had this effect. All except one of the 13 respondents identified strongly with US Latinos in their negative elements and unitary negative responses (see table 3, below):

Table 3. Q11 – Why do you think they were offended?

Responses	Total elements	Extra informational elements (e)	Positive elements (p)	Negative elements (n)	Conflicted (c)	Unitary (u)
13	39	9	2	28	Total = 0 Positive = 0 Negative = 0 Split = 0	Total = 13 Positive = 1 Negative = 12

Participants provided strongly worded elements referring to racism, marginalisation and stereotypes. The only dissenting opinion was positive about the joke and interpreted the negative Latino response as being the result of ‘hyper-sensitivity’:

*#11.11. They **didn't understand the intention**. Or they feel **defensive** because their minority status.*

The ‘e’ elements were fewer in number and length, which is explained by the nature of the ‘follow up’ question. However, they are interesting for introducing some new reflections, as reproduced below in one response:

*#11.4. I really hate the term **Latinos**...But an **exponent of that kind of view is exactly what Dame Edna is, so a considered, well-educated and non-bigotted response would not fit the character.***

This response reflects on the nature of Edna’s humour, *isolating* it from the negative stereotypes and offensive comments of the joke itself – arguing that as an act of bigotry it is understandable, but not excusable. The comment also reflects on the term Latino as a nominative imposition which the participant rejects as a marker of identity.

Question 12 asked participants for their views on the distinction between Australian Latin American responses and the responses of US Latinos: ‘Do you think Australian Latinos are more or less likely to be offended than US Latinos, and why?’ Because the question was asking for a more binary response, coding was simpler: the 13 responses were clearly divided into those who were certain that US Latinos would be more offended (9), and those who were not sure if there would be any difference (4). No one believed that Australian Latinos would be more offended (see table 4, below):

Table 4. Q12 – Who do you think would be more offended?

Responses	Total elements	Extra informational elements (e)	Not sure	US Latinos
13	43	30	4	9

The high level of ‘e’ elements consisted of supplementary information relating to the differences between the size of the Latino community in Australia and the US, the nature of Australian humour, Edna’s humour style, and issues of identity. This latter element relating to identity is considered to be significant, as it reflected participants’ ideas of loyalty to Australian society, wider identity as Spanish-speakers, and links to family and friends in the US. Some of these comments (excerpted) appear below:

*#12.12. ...there **isn't enough of a Latino community presence in Australia to draw attention to its cliched depictions more commonly found in the US.***

*#12.10. our **Latino population is smaller and has a different relationship** within Australian society...the joke also just **doesn't really apply to Latino Australians who don't face the same stereotypes**...*

*#12.5...**racism is a lot more open and strong in the US than in Australia... in Australia there are many people from many cultures so multiculturalism is not treated in quite the same way**...*

*#12.9. Australian Latinos have **family in the USA and we feel very united with Latinos all over the world, especially Central American Latinos***

Question 13 was a simple invitation to add any comments if the participant wanted to. Of the 11 responses, only 5 were informational (the rest simply replied 'No'). It was evident in the responses and elements that these 5 participants were motivated by two objectives – to offer explanatory information and to offer strident opinions on the topic. This resulted in very conflicting elements and in the dominance of typically informational elements (with no unitary responses), as summarised in table 5 (below):

Table 5. Q13 – Do you have any other comments?

Responses	Total elements	Extra informational elements (e)	Positive elements (p)	Negative elements (n)	Conflicted (c)	Unitary (u)
5	23	12	4	7	Total = 3 Positive = 0 Negative = 1 Split = 2	Total = 0 Positive = 0 Negative = 0

The principal insight offered by this set of responses was a strident rejection of prejudice. One respondent, who had lived in the US for several years, compared it with their Australian experience as follows:

*#13.4. I lived in America for 4 years and...there is a lot more discrimination than what I ever saw growing up in Australia.*

Others related Edna's humour to wider issues of discrimination, including racism in Australia, but one participant made the (unprompted) link to Barry Humphries' comments about transgender persons:

*#13.2. When Edna Everage was a housewife from Moonee Ponds, she was funny. When Edna Everage became Dame Edna and got all glamorous, Barry Humphries officially became a drag queen. Ask him if he thinks THAT's funny...*

This final comment can be interpreted as a particularly critical/reflective subversion of Edna's joke and it seems to epitomise the high-level discursive literacy of the participants. Not only were they able to distinguish between, and mediate for, the different discourses of US Latinos, Australian Latinos and Australian humour (including Edna's) they seemed very able to identify nuances between these often competing identities and discourses. Indeed, the comment is emblematic of the operation of the DDM for all participants; they clearly understood the depth of FTA that the joke presented for US Latinos, which evidences strong discursive empathy, but also as Australian Latinos. They understood the isolating nature of this type of humour for an immigrant minority which has experienced prejudice and disadvantage historically and contemporarily – but it was not simply the recognition of a *threat* that motivated their responses. In processing the joke and its context, the participants were also negotiating the tension between dual identities and loyalties which the joke presented. Their responses, therefore, are considered to be valuable because of their high discursive literacy in the understanding of how humour works to marginalise people, how people recognise and manage the threat posed by such instances of humour, and how people articulate their thoughts and feelings as they undergo the experience of the operation of the DDM.



## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper seeks to contribute to the (largely neglected) area of research into failed humour at the discursive level. Its significance lies in the use of a formal survey to consult a minority affected by a joke which failed because it misunderstood that minority's sensitivity to humour targeting them on the basis of their language and social status.

Indeed, the survey was indicative for some central ideas. While a minority of respondents asserted that Edna's joke *was* funny, and one participant rejected the label 'Latino' itself, overall the participants responded negatively to the joke, linking it to wider discrimination against Latinos in the US. They sympathised with the offence registered by US Latinos, typically identifying themselves as *Australian* Latinos and therefore, as a linked/affiliated speech community. In doing so, they were expressing an emotional-identity alignment with US Latinos for the common rejection of the joke, and they identified similar FTA triggers for the DDM: negative references to the Spanish language and derogatory stereotypes of US Latinos.

However, most also articulated significant differences between the US Latino experience and the Australian Latino experience. In doing so, they were signalling a definite, and considered, allegiance to the Australian community – and with some qualification, to its majority, Anglo community, who they felt were very much *unlike* the US Anglo community. There was some ambivalence about Australian humour, however, with some participants asserting that it was an 'acquired taste', while others stated that they enjoyed it, and signalled that as part of their Australian-ness, they took pride in it. Many also were careful to explain that they understood the nature of satire/sarcasm, and that they were happy to take a joke, but that the vulnerable situation of the Latino minority in the US mitigated against the humour attempt. As a 'slight' against a community with historical and contemporary vulnerability, respondents felt that the joke was clearly inappropriate as it evoked issues of power asymmetry and stereotyping in popular media.

There was high consensus, therefore, amongst both Australian and US Latinos, that the joke was an example of failed humour. It clearly transgressed cultural-language boundaries by targeting (whatever its true, or intended target was) the language and culture of a community in the US that the humorist did not belong to. Compounding this referential appropriation was the power differential: as an English-speaking Anglo monolingual, Edna chose to focus on a (typically bilingual) minority for whom there has been historically an asymmetrical power relationship with mainstream US society. The Australian comedian was also commenting on a US context which he did not understand, empathise with, or have any direct experience of – and this was noted by the Australian Latinos, who, while sympathetic to Edna's humour (overall, and as a humour discourse which they understood, and *mostly* approved of, at least in principle), still rejected as being insensitive, and inappropriate. In other words, while the Australian Latinos demonstrated a high-level cultural literacy in Australian discourse and humour which they employed in order to 'make sense' of Edna's joke, they ultimately – and after considerable deliberation - decided that the joke was most certainly *not* in their interests. This was clearly the operation of the DDM in practice, since the participants offered through open-ended comments their *deliberations* over the offence registered by the joke as they were processing it. In trying to make *sense* of the joke, the participants were also articulating their balancing of multiple and conflicting face needs, allegiances, identities, and discursive responses. After these deliberations, the majority of the participants decided that the joke constituted failed humour, and the data reveals this process of deliberation.

While the study has limitations in that it was exploratory and employed a small sample, it seems to indicate that this is a productive area for future research. Its relevance to the overall field of humour is in its pioneering exploration of how people negotiate failed humour at the discursive level. Future research is proposed which will more systematically explore the

boundaries of ethnic-linguistic identity and transgressive humour, understanding the operation of the DDM in respondents' explicit articulation of reflexivity and empathy, and comparative samples of a larger size and with a control sample which investigate variables of age, gender, education, immigrant experience and exposure to different types of mainstream humour. It is also proposed that this study and the depth and range of data provided by the highly educated respondents will furnish a solid foundation for further comparative analysis. In other words, the potential areas of research are immense in our understanding of how we negotiate humour that is discursively threatening.

## References

- “A satire, a protest, then an apology”. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved October 9, 2018 from <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/feb/08/entertainment/et-rutten8>.
- “agony aunt” (2012). In *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED online). Retrieved September, 9 2020 from <https://www-oed-com/view/=agony+aunt#eid171233460>.
- Aikin, S. F. ‘Poe's Law, group polarization, and the epistemology of online religious discourse’. SSRN. Retrieved January, 1 2020 from [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1332169](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1332169).
- Alcoff, L. M. (2005). ‘Latino vs. Hispanic: The politics of ethnic names’. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31 (4), pp. 395-407.
- Attardo, S. (2005). ‘Humour’, in Verschueren, J., Ostman, J.-O., Bolmmaert, J. & Bulcaen, C. (eds.), *Handbook of Pragmatics: 2003-2005 Instalment* (2nd ed.). Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 135-155.
- Attardo, S. (2008). ‘Semantics and pragmatics of humour’. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 2 (6), pp. 1203-1215.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] (2016). *2071.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census, 2016*. Retrieved September, 23 2020 from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Cultural%20Diversity%20Article~60>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] (2018). *Migration, Australia*. Retrieved September, 23 2020 from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/migration-australia/latest-release>.
- Bell, N. D. (6.02.2009). ‘Responses to failed humour’. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41(9), pp. 1825-1836.
- Bell, N. (2015). *We Are Not Amused: Failed Humour in Interaction*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Bell, N. & Attardo, S. (2010). ‘Failed humour: Issues in non-native speakers' appreciation and understanding of humour’. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 7 (3), pp. 423-447.
- Blundell, G. (2009). "Barry Humphries, the clown prince of suburbia". *The Australian*. Retrieved February, 25 2019 from <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/arts/the-clown-prince-of-suburbia/story-e6frg8n6-1111118780314>
- Campbell, D. (14.02. 2003). ‘Dame Edna treads on Spanish toe.’ *The Guardian*. Retrieved October, 9 2018 from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/14/spain.duncancampbell>.
- Canale, M. (1983). ‘From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy’. *Language and Communication* 1, pp. 2-14.
- Canale, M. & Swain, M. (1980). ‘Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing’. *Applied Linguistics* 1 (1), pp. 1-47.
- Cavendish, Dominic (10.10.2013). ‘Farewell Dame Edna: Barry Humphries interview.’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved September, 8 2020 from:

- <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/barry-humphries-curtain-call-for-dame-edna-everage-20131016-2vlih.html>.
- Celce-Murcia, M. (2007). 'Rethinking the role of communicative competence in language teaching', in Soler, E. A & Jordà, M. P. S. (eds.), *Intercultural Language Use and Language Learning*, Berlin: Springer, pp. 41-57.
- Davies, C., Kuipers, G., Lewis, P., Martin, R. A., Oring, E., & Raskin, V. (2008). 'The Muhammad cartoons and humour research: A collection of essays'. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 21 (1), pp. 1-46.
- Drill, S. (29.04.2019). 'Barry Humphries in first appearance since Melbourne Comedy Festival award furore.' *The Daily Telegraph*. Retrieved April, 29 2019 from <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/entertainment/barry-humphries-in-first-appearance-since-melbourne-comedy-festival-award-furore/news-story/bb77295c313d3302b95c30ba36d224a5>.
- Eckert, P. & McConnell-Ginet, S. (1992). 'Think practically and look locally: Language and gender as community-based practice'. *Annual review of anthropology* 21 (1), pp. 461-488.
- Gare, S. (2017). 'This Way To The Desert Island.' *The Sydney Institute*. Retrieved May, 14 201 from <https://thesydneyinstitute.com.au/blog/issue-24>.
- Feneley, R. (2014). 'Poetry professor Barry Spurr: master of parody or bigotry?'. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved September, 25 2016 from: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/poetry-professorbarry-spurr-master-of-parody-or-bigotry-20141024-11azyf.html>.
- Flores, A. (18.09.2017). 'How the U.S. Hispanic population is changing'. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved September, 9 2020 from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/18/how-the-u-s-hispanic-population-is-changing>.
- Gracia, J. (2000). *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Gruner, C. R. (2000). *The Game of Humour: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
- Hale, A. (2016). 'Gender bender agenda: Dame Edna, k. d. lang and Ivana Trump'. *The European Journal of Humour Research* 4 (3), pp. 1-23, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2016.4.3.hale>.
- Hale, A. (2018a). "'I get it, but it's just not funny": Why humour fails, after all is said and done'. *The European Journal of Humour Research* 6 (1), pp. 36-61, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2018.6.1.hale>.
- Hale, A. (2018b). 'There is an after-life (for jokes, anyway): The potential for, and appeal of, 'immortality' in humor'. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 31 (3), pp. 507-538, doi: [10.1515/humor-2017-0105](https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2017-0105).
- Hall, S. (1980). 'Encoding/decoding', in Hall, S. et al. (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, London: Unwin Hyman, pp.128-139.
- Hancock, S. (18.02. 2009). 'Dame Edna: Why the fuss?'. *BBC News Magazine*. Retrieved October, 15 2018 from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7892682.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7892682.stm).
- Hay, J. (2001). 'The pragmatics of humor support'. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 14 (1), pp. 55-82.
- Hernandez, Sandra (February 12, 2003). 'Hispanics blast Vanity Fair over comic Dame Edna quip.' *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved October, 9 2018 from <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2003-02-12-0302120068-story.html>.
- Holmes, J., & Meyerhoff, M. (1999). 'The community of practice: Theories and methodologies in language and gender research'. *Language in Society* 28 (2), pp. 173-183.
- Imhoff, D. (20.04.2019). "'Comedians' view: Is the world too politically correct for good comedy?' *Herald Sun*. Retrieved April 29, 2019 from:

- <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/entertainment/comedy-festival/comedians-view-is-the-world-too-politically-correct-for-good-comedy/news-story/41808f62043aec10486479ca45e4e6cc>.
- Jaworski, A. & Coupland, N. (2014). *The Discourse Reader* (3rd ed.). London, New York: Routledge.
- Jay, M. (1992). 'The aesthetic alibi'. *Salmagundi* 93, pp. 13-25. Retrieved September 8, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40548650>.
- Kramer, E. (2011). 'The playful is political: The metapragmatics of internet rape-joke arguments'. *Language in Society* 40 (02), pp. 137-168.
- Kuipers, G. (2009). 'Humour styles and symbolic boundaries'. *Journal of Literary Theory* 3 (2), pp. 219-239.
- Kuipers, G. (2015). *Good Humour, Bad Taste*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- LaMarre, H. L., Landreville, K. D. & Beam, M. A. (2009). 'The irony of satire: Political ideology and the motivation to see what you want to see in The Colbert Report'. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14 (2), pp. 212-231.
- Lockyer, S. & Pickering, M. (eds.) (2009). *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*. London: Springer.
- McNulty, Charles (23.01.2015). 'Though her purple hair shows no silver, Dame Edna prepares to retire.' *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved October, 15 2018 from <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-ca-dame-edna-20150125-column.html>.
- Norricks, N. (1993). *Conversational Joking: Humor in Everyday Talk*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- PA. (2016). 'Barry Humphries slams BBC's 'puritanism''. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved September 25 2016 from <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/barry-humphries-slamsbbcs-puritanism-20160105-glzuhf.html>.
- Palmer, J. (2004). *Taking Humour Seriously*. London: Routledge.
- Panahi, R. (27.11.2019). 'Sacha Baron Cohen's attack on hate speech hypocritical'. *Herald Sun*. Retrieved November 29, 2019 from <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/rita-panahi/sacha-baron-cohens-attack-on-hate-speech-hypocritical/news-story/6c520616e314bf9f178157448615d6b2>.
- Partington, A. (2006). *The Linguistics of Laughter: A Corpus-Assisted Study of Laughter Talk*. Abingdon (UK): Routledge.
- Pender, A. (2010). *One Man Show: The Stages of Barry Humphries*. Sydney: ABC Books.
- Pender, A. (14.06.2019). 'Friday essay: Barry Humphries' humour is now history – that's the fate of topical, satirical comedy.' *The Conversation*. Retrieved September, 8 2020 from <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-barry-humphries-humour-is-now-history-thats-the-fate-of-topical-satirical-comedy-117499>.
- Reid, A. (2006). 'Key competencies: a new way forward or more of the same?'. *Curriculum Matters* 2, pp. 43-63.
- Rodriguez, R. (16.02.2003). 'Dear Edna: Why can't we laugh anymore?' *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved October, 15 2018 from <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/feb/16/opinion/op-rrodriguez16>.
- Rose, F. (2014). *The Tyranny of Silence*. Washington: Cato Institute.
- Salinas, M. E. (17.02.2003). 'Dame Edna joke is not funny to Spanish speakers.' *Daily Herald*. Retrieved October, 9 2018 from [https://www.heraldextra.com/news/opinion/dame-edna-joke-is-not-funny-to-spanish-speakers/article\\_37f478a2-9d01-5880-adb9-2fc1d8b40173.html](https://www.heraldextra.com/news/opinion/dame-edna-joke-is-not-funny-to-spanish-speakers/article_37f478a2-9d01-5880-adb9-2fc1d8b40173.html).
- Staff Writer (22.07.2018). 'Barry Humphries lands in hot water over anti-trans comments.' *The Daily Telegraph*. Retrieved July, 22 2018 from

- <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/entertainment/celebrity/barry-humphries-lands-in-hot-water-over-antitrans-comments/news-story/66bdc59722c159c6cb6e8a38f07ad689>.
- Stevens, C. R. & Campbell, P. J. (2008). 'Collaborating with librarians to develop lower division political science students' information literacy competencies'. *Journal of Political Science Education* 4 (2), pp. 225-252.
- 'Still playing the Dame' (1.05.2003). *The Age*. Retrieved September, 10 2020 from <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/still-playing-the-dame-20030501-gdvmpc.html>.
- Taylor, A. (24.05.2015). 'Barry Humphries guides Adelaide Cabaret Festival with uncanny ability to offend.' *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved February, 25 2019 from <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/comedy/barry-humphries-guides-adelaide-cabaret-festival-with-uncanny-ability-to-offend-20150523-gh8147.html>
- Tolson, A. (1991). 'Televised chat and the synthetic personality', in Scannell, P. (ed.), *Broadcast Talk*, London: Sage, pp. 178-200.
- Turnbull, S. (2008). 'Mapping the vast suburban tundra: Australian comedy from Dame Edna to Kath and Kim'. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 11 (1), pp. 15-32.
- Vanity Fair (February, 2003). *Vanities: Ask Dame Edna*. Retrieved September, 9 2020 from <https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/2003/02/01/ask-dame-edna>.
- Zajdman, A. (1995). 'Humorous face-threatening acts: Humour as strategy'. *Journal of Pragmatics* 23 (3), pp. 325-339.