

COMMENTATIONES

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DYNAMICS OF TELLING JOKES IN PLAUTUS. THE CASE OF THE SELF-REPAIR ROUTINE¹

ABSTRACT. Berger Łukasz, *Dynamics of Telling Jokes in Plautus. The Case of the Self-Repair Routine* (Dynamika opowiadania dowcipów u Plauta. Przypadek rutyny konwersacyjnej polegającej na auto-korekcje).

This article concerns one recurrent type of conversational joke in Plautus, which consists of three different steps: (1) some problematic formulation by the joke-teller, (2) a request for an explanation by the interlocutor, and (3) a punchline. Using Conversation Analysis methods, the paper describes how the joke-telling routine is responded to by its in-play recipient(s).

Keywords: joke; dialogue; Plautus; jocular routine; humour; laughter; repair sequence

The present paper delves into the way humour-generating content is delivered onstage in the comedies by Plautus. I am interested in how the action of telling jokes is introduced into the dialogues and how the interlocutors handle it. This study will focus on one specific type of joke, often associated with Plautine comedy, namely a conversational routine in which a joker – in the form of a set-up – says something enigmatic and offers the solution (the punchline) only after the other party asks for explanations. Since this routine derives from a practice of dealing with comprehension problems in a naturally occurring dialogue, I will use the methods of Conversation Analysis² to describe the phenomenon and

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²Conversation Analysis is a data-driven, inductive methodology of studying talk-in-interaction. For a comprehensive introduction, see Psathas (1995). Its methods were applied to the analysis of dialogues in Roman comedy by Hoffmann (1983), Müller (1997) and, more recently, Berger (2020).

identify its theatrical modifications. I start, however, with a general discussion on joke-telling activity (Section 1) as depicted in Roman comedy. After describing the selected jocular routine (Section 2), I pass on to the analysis of possible reactions it triggers in Plautus (Section 3) to draw more general conclusions about how humour is managed and evaluated in the plays.

1. TELLING JOKES IN ROMAN COMEDY

Salvatore Attardo defines a joke as ‘a short (narrative) text ending with a punchline,’ which can be either an independent and decontextualised (canned joke) or anchored in the ongoing talk (conversational joke).³ While the latter type is, in fact, witticisms emerging spontaneously during the interaction, the telling of canned jokes resembles the way speakers introduce stories into their discourse. According to Harvey Sacks’ classical analysis of the joke-telling sequence, the event is divided into three parts: the preface, the telling, and the response.⁴

As it happens, Terence offers a unique example of such a sequence when one of his characters (*miles*) recounts an anecdote, which, in turn, contains a conversational witticism. After boasting about his personal relationship with the king, the soldier Thraso prides himself on his witty comments on others’ expense. Through a preface to one of these anecdotes, given in (1), he secures the floor, signalling that a longer narrative is underway and checks if the recipient (the parasite Gnatho) has already heard the story. Since the announcement mentions that the story-teller ‘scored a hit’ (*tetigerim*) on some Rhodian at a dinner party, this part of the sequence helps to frame the ensuing text as humorous. Accordingly, Thraso informs the recipient that ‘laughter is desired in the response sequence and that it should be done on the recognition of a punchline.’⁵

- (1) TH. quid illud, Gnatho, / quo pacto Rhodium tetigerim in convivio, / numquam tibi dixi?
 GN. numquam; sed narra, obsecro. / plus miliens audivi.
 TH. una in convivio / erat hic, quem dico, Rhodius adulescentulus. / forte habui scortum:
 coepit ad id adludere / et me irridere. ‘quid ais’ inquam ‘homo inprudens? / lepus tute’s:
 pulpamentum quaeris?’
 GN. hahahae. /
 TH. quid est?
 GN. facete lepide laute nil supra. / tuomne, obsecro te, hoc dictum erat? vetus credidi. /
 TH. audieras?
 GN. saepe, et fertur in primis.
 TH. meumst. (Ter. *Eun.* 419–29)⁶

³Attardo 2020: 14.

⁴Sacks 1974. See also the discussion in Attardo 2020: 246–9.

⁵Sacks 1974: 341.

⁶The Plautus’ text and its English translation follow the edition by de Melo (2011–2013). Terence’s original and translation is quoted according to Barsby (2001).

TH. And what about the hit I scored on the Rhodian at the dinner party – did I never tell you?
 GN. Never. But do tell me, I implore you. (*aside*) I’ve heard it more than a thousand times.
 TH. This Rhodian youth I’m talking about was with me at a dinner party. As it happened, I had a woman with me. He began to flirt with her and make fun of me. “Answer me this,” I said, “you impudent fellow: being a hare yourself, do you hunt for game?” GN. Hahahahaha! TH. What’s the matter? GN. Witty, clever, neat, couldn’t be better! Was that *your* witticism, for goodness’ sake? I thought it was an old one. TH. Had you heard it? GN. Often. It’s known as one of the best. TH. It’s mine.

Once Gnatho has assured (insincerely) the teller of the newness of the story, Thraso proceeds to the *t e l l i n g*, which consists of an extended turn of talk. If the recipient had recognised the story as known, it might have been marked as not worth (re) telling. By Gnatho’s side-comment (*plus miliens audivi*), such characterisation, in fact, takes place but is communicated exclusively to the spectators, who thus may orient to the telling as repetitive and trite. During the telling sequence, the floor belongs to the teller, whereas the recipient(s) can intervene only through an interruption, for instance, if they have some understanding problems. Otherwise, as is the case in our Terentian excerpt, the other party waits for what seems to be the punchline to introduce their response. The anecdote told by Thraso concerns a young boy from Rhodos trying to flirt with the soldier’s female companion (*scortum*). Since Thraso finds the Rhodian very attractive himself, triggered by the situation, he addresses the boy with a classic quote from Livius Andronicus (*lepus tute’s: pulpamentum quaeris*), which M. Beard – to maintain its humour – translates as ‘Are you trying to pick up the tidbits, when you’re such a tasty morsel yourself?’⁷ Accordingly, by re-contextualising some well-known *dictum* during that dinner party, the soldier made a conversational joke in which the set-up was the ongoing situation at the table. Even though Gnatho mentions that the concept is already circulating as an old quip (*vetus*), the soldier boastfully pretends that the original witticism is of his own making (*meumst*).

The telling of a canned joke is officially terminated with a punchline, followed by a *r e s p o n s e s e q u e n c e*, which consists, as expected, of laughter and some further evaluation of the anecdote. As noted by Harvey Sacks, another possibility is silence and delayed (and thus forced) laughter, which both prove that the teller’s attempt at humour has failed.⁸ Surprisingly, despite Gnatho’s instant reaction (*hahahae*) to his clever quip, the soldier seems to be taken aback (*quid est?*). According to Donatus⁹, it might be the teller’s strategy – strengthened

⁷ Beard 2014: 11. The same witticism is quoted by one of the writers of the *Historia Augusta* (*Num.* 13.5) and attributed to Livius Andronicus, but, as suggested by the scholar (Beard 2014: 13), the fourth-century author could have easily confused the early-Latin playwright with Terence. In any case, for the humorous effect of the scene, the witticism had to be well-known both to Gnatho (*vetus*) and the audience.

⁸ Sacks 1974: 249–50.

⁹ Don. ad Ter. *Eun.* 427: *haec interrogatio gestum vultumque continet alacris cuiusdam et certi, quod laudandus sit.*

by self-congratulatory facial expressions and gestures – to gain more explicit compliments on the joke’s ingenuity.¹⁰

As mentioned before, this sequence of joke-telling, starting with an explicit preface and triggering a burst of scripted laughter, is unique in the whole comedy corpus. The scene from *Eunuchus* has been designed not as an efficient device for delivering jokes on stage but rather to characterise Thraso (as a boastful teller of trite witticisms) and his audience, Gnatho (as a shameless flatterer). The most successful jokers, both in Plautus and Terence, will instead make conversational jokes, produced without a preface and anchored in the context of the interaction. Accordingly, as a rule, the jokers would never warn their interlocutors that they are about to engage in a non-serious mode of communication, which the joke’s recipients have to figure out by themselves. On the other hand, the characters often set a limit to more extended joke-telling sequences and (jocular) verbal duelling by signalling that the fun is over (e.g. Plaut. *Trin.* 66: *aufer ridicularia* ‘stop your jokes’).¹¹ In the rest of this paper, I will focus on one type of conversational humour in Plautus, a self-repair routine, to examine its structural properties including the response sequence it triggers.

2. SELF-REPAIR JOKES

What I call here self-repair jokes derive from a conversational practice of interrupting the ongoing dialogue to deal with the troubles of hearing or understanding the prior utterance. Some Plautine scholars refer to this type of routine as riddle-jokes¹², two-acts,¹³ or simply question-answer structures¹⁴, but, arguably, none of these terms captures its structural nor interpersonal intricacies. According to the conversation analysts, the repair sequence has two different phases and consists of (i) initiating the repair (by locating the problematic part of

¹⁰Laughter can also draw the joker’s attention, whenever it is somehow aberrant: mirthless, too brief or mocking the teller (Sacks 1974: 351). This would be another possible interpretation of the scene: the soldier suspects that the parasite’s response is insincere or is triggered not by punchline but by the mere use of the trite witticism. As pointed out by Beard (2014: 13), ‘Thraso’s challenge could equally well suggest that Gnatho’s pseudospontaneity had been all too easy to see through.’

¹¹On the so-called cut-off lines see Richlin 2018: 183–5 (with further examples and references).

¹²For example, Maclennan Stockert 2016: 126 (on Plaut. *Aul.* 150). Riddles have also a three-part format, but the set-up is a question (e.g. ‘What is the difference between A and B?’), followed – if the telling is successful – by the recipient’s expression of ignorance (‘I don’t know’) and the punchline (the riddle’s solution). See Ritchie 2003: 159.

¹³Richlin 2018: 184–5. By the term ‘two-act’, the scholar describes a more general comedy shtick, which consists of ‘a straight man’ (joke’s recipient and often its victim), asking question and thus providing a set-up for ‘a funny man’ (joker). Nevertheless, most of her examples can be analysed also as a three-turn sequence as I discuss in this paper.

¹⁴Breunese Fantoli 2022: 175–6. The scholars use the general term ‘question-answer structures’, but are well aware that the joke consists of three turns of speaking.

the utterance) and (ii) providing a solution to the problem.¹⁵ These tasks often get distributed between the participants, while some features of the resources used in the process suggest that there is a preference for the trouble-source to be repaired by its producer.¹⁶ In the following excerpt (2), the slave Palaestrio identifies the female character entering the stage as a type of swift-sailing ship (*celox*), which leaves his interlocutor, Pyrgopolinices, quite perplexed. Accordingly, the latter initiates repair by asking for the bizarre ship metaphor and thus marking it as a trouble-source.

- (2) PAL. st tace, aperiuntur fores, concede huc clanculum. / haec celox illiust, quae hinc egreditur, internuntia, /
 PYRG. quae [haec] celox?
 PAL. ancillula illiust, quae hinc egreditur foras. / quae anulum istunc attulit quem tibi dedi. (Plaut. *Mil.* 985–8)

PAL. Hush, be quiet! The door is opening, walk over here secretly. The woman coming out is her speedboat, her go-between. PYRG. What speedboat? PAL. The woman coming out is her maid. She brought that ring I gave you.

In response, Palaestrio provides an explanation by saying that the woman is like a speedboat because she is a maid of a certain *matrona* and has been acting as a swift intermediary, passing on messages and tokens of love. According to the conversation-analytic terminology, this short three-turn sequence entails an other-initiated (by Pyrgopolinices) but self-completed (by Palaestrio) repair. From the dramaturgical point of view, signposting (and repeating) the word *celox* as a problematic formulation seemingly serves to draw the audience's attention to the witty Plautine concept. On the other hand, the self-correction resolves the incongruous image of calling a woman a speedboat, which admittedly can generate humour. In all the comedies by Plautus, I have found 81 self-repair jokes¹⁷ that present – with many variants and creative modifications – a similar dialogic structure, which contains the following sequence of actions:

- i. problematic formulation (trouble-source)
- ii. question (other-initiation of repair)
- iii. punchline (self-repair)

¹⁵One can find a useful review of the issue in Schegloff (2007: 100–106) and Kitzinger (2013), with further bibliography.

¹⁶Schegloff Jefferson Sacks 1977.

¹⁷The self-repair jokes in Plautus can be found in *Amph.* 357, 664, 719, 1031, 1034; *Asin.* 31, 55, 589, 620; *Aul.* 303, 355, 563, 817; *Bacch.* 50, 465; *Capt.* 862; *Cas.* 527; *Cist.* 233, 728; *Curc.* 30, 47, 129; *Epid.* 8, 12, 27, 32, 234, 350; *Men.* 160, 266; *Merc.* 304, 612, 673, 869; *Mil.* 322, 325, 363, 834, 965, 985, 1015; *Most.* 267, 731, 890, 1107; *Poen.* 310, 410, 634, 705, 760, 862, 977, 981; *Pseud.* 35, 46, 76, 331, 335, 338, 604; *Rud.* 151, 522, 535, 537, 874, 1026, 1116; *Stich.* 91, 259, 588, 593; *Trin.* 607, 630, 884; *Truc.* 136, 138, 159, 170, 738, 938 (for the sake of simplicity I only indicate the initial verse of the set-up).

Within the routine, accordingly, the trouble-source has been deliberately launched by the speaker (the joker), who thus sets a trap seeking to involve the other party (the joke-recipient) in humorous activity. By manipulating the addressee into asking for explanations, the joker assures the recipient of the funny concept. Furthermore, the joke-telling arises from the course of the dialogue and, in most cases, seems at first to be a serious and relevant (albeit problematic) speaking turn. In my dataset, 80% (65 items) of the jokes appear in the medial, topical phase of the conversation, and only 17% (14 items) are told in the post-salutation part, where the participants typically engage in small talk, exchange of humorous comments and friendly banter.¹⁸ In two isolated examples, the set-up is a dialogue-opening line (Plaut. *Aul.* 817) or a post-closing addition (*Cas.* 527). In both cases, which override the rules of politeness and/or conversational structure, the addressee expects to hear some urgent and relevant information – not jokes. Accordingly, once the speaker’s playful intention is revealed, the interlocutors involved in the routine may feel deceived and manipulated – hence their frequent negative or even violent reactions.

Throughout Plautus’ comedies, one also finds a similar type of humour, based on incongruous and bizarre imagery, which is expressed by the speaker within the same turn, i.e. without the intervention of the joke-recipient. Be an example the humorous idea presented by Chrysalus (3), who compares his old master to the ram with golden fleece. Immediately in the next sentence, he explains this mythological analogy by announcing that he intends to shear him of his money.

- (3) CHRY. [...] adibo hunc, quem quidem ego hodie faciam hic arietem / Phruxi, itaque tondebo auro usque ad vivam cutem. (Plaut. *Bacch.* 241–2)

CHRY. [...] I’ll go up to the man whom I’ll turn into Phrixus’ ram here today and whom by the same token I’ll fleece out of his gold, down to the thick skin.

Arguably, with dialogic witticisms (as opposed to their monological variants), the playwright switches the spectators’ focus of attention from one actor to another, and, thus, he allows them to align emotionally with the repair initiators – with their feeling of surprise or intrigue – when they halt the current interaction to ask for explanations. As a result, the routine also forces the audience to wait for a few more beats for the punchline, which gives it a chance to process the content of the set-up – with all its connotations and semantic or phonetic intricacies. Once the spectators recognise the routine’s elements, they will anticipate an opportunity for an easy laugh, which then gets satisfactorily fulfilled or not.¹⁹

¹⁸For the small-talk sequence see further Berger 2018.

¹⁹Much in a similar vein, Ritchie (2004: 162–164) conjectures, albeit not based on empirical data, that a question-answer format of jokes – as an alternative to their monological paraphrase

One should distinguish the jocular routine from a regular repair sequence, which abounds in the Plautine corpus full of communicative misunderstandings. I have excluded from my study the examples like (4), which do not create and resolve any humour-generating incongruity.

(4) PAEG. ne me attrecta, subigitatrix.

SOPH. sin te amo? /

PAEG. male operam locas.

SOPH. qui?

PAEG. quia enim nihil amas, quom ingratum amas. (Plaut. *Persa* 227–8)

PAE. Stop fondling me, you groper. SOPH. What if I'm in love with you? PAE. You're wasting your effort. SOPH. How so? PAE. Because your love is in vain when you're in love with someone who does not requite it.

The “problems” deliberately created by the joke-teller reside in the use of (i) obscure lexical items, which mostly coincide with comical coinages described by Michael Fontaine.²⁰ On other occasions, the trouble-source are (ii) manifestly absurd statements, where one can often find the examples of metaphoric identification and transformation examined by Eduard Fraenkel (see (2) above).²¹ Somewhat less scholarly attention, in the context of this jocular structure, has been paid to (iii) utterances which seem (syntactically) unfinished or (iv) complete messages which nevertheless are incomprehensible within the current context. For the former type, see the conversation between the slave Stasimus and an elderly citizen Callicles (5).

(5) CAL. sine dote ille illam in tantas divitias dabit? / non credibile dicis.

STAS. at tu edepol nullus creduas. / si hoc non credis, ego credidero...

CAL. quid?

STAS. me nihili pendere. (Plaut. *Trin.* 605–7)

CAL. Will he give her into such a great wealth without dowry? You can't make me believe that. STAS. Then don't believe it. If you don't believe this, I'll believe... CAL. What? STAS. That I don't care.

The turn by Stasimus seems syntactically incomplete: the predicate in the main clause (*credidero*) lacks a direct object, yet the speaker appears to have suspended his turn construction. Note that the slave stops talking in a strong prosodic break

– might contribute to its humour since the question helps to draw (and hold) the recipient's attention, while the slightly delayed punchline enhances the feeling of satisfaction.

²⁰ Fontaine (2010: 5) mentions that ‘a speaker draws our attention to an interlocutor's “funny” word by asking *quid istuc verbi est?* “What do you mean?”.’ See also Pieczonka (2020: 165), who recognizes a three-part structure: ‘the neologism, the question and the explanation.’

²¹ Fraenkel 2007. See also the article by L. Buzássyová in this issue.

– at a diaeresis of trochaic septenarius – which can be used to represent a moment of silence before the next speaker – exasperated and confused – finally asks for explanations. Then Stasimus gives an unexpected and anti-climactic ending to his utterance.²²

Finally, the excerpt (6), representing the last group of examples (iv), contains a turn which is constructed as complete, but – from the other participant’s point of view – it still does not make much sense in the context of the dialogic exchange. The parasite Ergasilus gives an elderly citizen a series of instructions to prepare a sacrifice, but the surprised interlocutor each time needs further explanations.

(6) ERG. [...] sed iube / vasa tibi pura apparari ad rem divinam cito, / atque agnum afferri proprium pinguem.

HEG. **cur?**

ERG. ut sacrifices. /

HEG. **cui deorum?**

ERG. mi hercle, nam ego nunc tibi sum summus Iuppiter, / idem ego sum Salus, Fortuna, Lux, Laetitia, Gaudium. / proin tu deum hunc saturitate facias tranquillum tibi. (Plaut. *Capt.* 860–5)

ERG. [...] But order clean vessels to be prepared for you for religious rights quickly, and a suitable fat lamb to be brought here. HEG. Why? ERG. So you can sacrifice. HEG. To what god? ERG. To me: I’m great Jupiter for you now; I’m also Salvation, Fortune, Light, Joy, and Happiness. So placate this god by making him full.

In the punchline, the parasite presents himself as the deity that Hegio should placate with food. Within this slightly more complex sequence, with two trouble-sources following one another, it seems as if Ergasilus was deliberately withholding part of the information or was getting ahead of the interlocutor by introducing a new idea, which is not sufficiently anchored in the knowledge they both share.²³ In this case, the parasite is delaying – teasingly and for a greater dramaturgical effect – the announcement of good news: Hegio’s long-lost son is coming home sound and safe. To sum up, all of the types of trouble-sources (i-iv) violate the rules of cooperative communication, as famously described by Paul Grice: they go against the maxim of quantity (“make your contribution as informative as required”) or manner (“avoid obscurity of expression”).²⁴

As mentioned above, Plautus makes extensive use of the format (81 examples in 19 out of 20 complete comedies), which is associated (albeit

²²For the same type of self-repair jokes after incomplete utterances (and a strong prosodic break) see Plaut. *Aul.* 817–820, *Epid.* 8, *Mil.* 363.

²³Clark (1996), drawing on previous research, created a framework to study the knowledge shared by the interlocutors, which he labels as ‘common ground.’ For its application in Latin, see Kroon (2021).

²⁴Grice (1975). On the analysis of humour as violation of the Gricean cooperative principle, see Attardo (2020: 158–168) with further bibliography.

not exclusively) with the figure of cheeky servants, both male and female (see Table 2 in Section 3). The playwright explores a range of structural possibilities by creating jokes with extended set-ups (see (6) above) or two consecutive and co-dependent punchlines.²⁵ On the other hand, he introduces a one-verse design of the routine, where all the three turns of the sequence fit – in a rapid-fire delivery – into one line.²⁶ The joking routine is quite well represented in the plays by Aristophanes, where I can find around 16 examples (in 8 out of 11 comedies) within the speech of the protagonists (like Strepsiades or Dionysus) or some secondary characters, but – quite surprisingly – not the ‘important’ slaves like Carion and Xanthias.²⁷ Compared to Plautus, there is not much variety in its form, and the whole sequence tends to be several verses long. The extant text by Menander offers only three examples of the joke-telling routine – it is attributed to parasites and a cook.²⁸ In Terence, I find five cases of self-repair in a humorous context, all of which seem to have been employed very consciously within the speech of only two strong-personality jokers.²⁹ The cunning slave Syrus performs the joke routine three times in a row while teasing his young master.³⁰ Notably, all three self-repair sequences have been accommodated metrically within one line (trochaic septenarius and iambic octonarius), as illustrated in (7).

- (7) CL. adeon rem rediisse ut periculum etiam a fame mihi sit, Syre! /
 SY. **modo liceat vivere, est spes...**
 CL. **quae?**
 SY. **nos esurituros satis.** /
 CL. inrides in re tanta neque me consilio quicquam adiuvas? (Ter. *Heaut.* 980–2)

CL. To think that it should get to the stage, where I’m even in danger of starving, Syrus! SY. Where there’s life, there’s hope... CL. What hope? SY. Of enjoying a fair amount of hunger. CL. Can you joke at a time like this? Can’t you give some helpful advice?

The remaining two Terentian examples belong to the parasite Phormio who uses the routine to talk – jokingly – about his profession during his first appearance

²⁵ Plaut. *Pseud.* 336–339. See Berger forth.

²⁶ E.g. *Epid.* 8, *Merc.* 304, *Mil.* 325, 363, *Trin.* 643.

²⁷ Ar. *Ach.* 395–400 (Slave), *Ec.* 465–8 (Blepyrus), 788–93 (Selfish Man), 994–7 (Young Man), 1085–7 (Young Man), *Eq.* 27–9 (Demosthenes), 447–9 (Sausage Seller) *Pax.* 695–9 (Trygaeus), *Lys.* 1162–4 (Spartan), *Nu.* 753–6 (Strepsiades), *Ra.* 83–5 (Dionysus), 129–33 (Heracles) 488–90 (Dionysus), 866–70 (Aeschylus). 1154–7 (Euripides), *Pl.* 1103–9 (Hermes).

²⁸ Men. *Dysk.* 630–2 (cook), *Kol.* 40–3 (parasite), *Sik.* 348–50 (parasite).

²⁹ There may be also some trace of the self-repair routine in Naevius’ fragment of *Agitoria* (*Com.* 11–12 R: *eho an vicimus? :: vicistis. :: volop <est>. quo modo? :: dicam tibi*). Although the preserved text does not include the joke’s resolution, Richlin (2018: 187) argues that the formula *dicam tibi* ‘is very often the lead-in for a punch line or a big lie in Plautus’.

³⁰ Ter. *Heaut.* 978, 981, 984.

on stage.³¹ This short survey of the available sources calls for a more in-depth examination. However, it can already be suggested that the self-repair sequence as a technique of joke delivery present in Greek comedies was particularly attractive to Plautus, who was fond of interactional and routine-based humour. As noted by Amy Richlin in the context of verbal duelling, ‘the shtick that recurs in Roman comedy is highly formulaic, in characteristic ways quite different from what appears in related jokes in Greek comedy.’³² I argue that this preference for routines (and their creative modifications) is also the reason behind the extensive use of the self-repair jokes in Plautus.

3. RESPONSE SEQUENCE AFTER SELF-REPAIR JOKES

In this section, I will look into the immediate response triggered by the self-repair jokes I gathered from the plays by Plautus. In over half of the scenes (55%), the joke is unrecognised as such by the participants of the conversation, which means that the joke-teller’s interlocutors do not yield to the humorous mode of discourse (see Table 1). In such cases, the joke recipient(s) can orient to its content, taking the joker’s words seriously, or ignore the whole sequence and change the topic. The same effect is achieved in the excerpts where the jokers – after they launch the punchline – continue talking or let a third party take the floor, typically with an utterance unrelated to the joke’s content.

Table 1. Types of response after self-repair jokes in Plautus.

Types of response sequences	No. of instances (%)
The recipient acknowledges the humour	36 (44%)
Joking reaction	14
Aggression (anger, verbal abuse)	14
Negative evaluation	5
Positive evaluation	3
The recipient does not acknowledge the humour (serious uptake)	19 (23%)
The jokes are left with no reaction	26 (32%)
The recipient ignores the jokes (change of topic)	12
The joker continues talking	7
Self-selection by others	7
Total	81 (100%)

³¹Ter. *Ph.* 329–31, 342–3.

³²Richlin 2017: 156–7.

For a serious uptake, see the following excerpt (8), where the young citizen Charinus tries to stop his overly dramatic friend Eutyclus from going off into exile. The desperate youth maintains that he is held by some mysterious fellow travellers, which – after Eutyclus’ inquiry – turn out to be personifications of his emotional states. After this punchline, the interlocutor seems to play along, accepting Charinus’ para-tragic concepts quite literally and asking to abandon those (imaginary) companions to talk with him.

- (8) CHAR. quid me voltis?
 EVT. ire tecum.
 CHAR. alium comitem quaerite, / non amittunt hi me comites qui tenent.
 EVT. qui sunt ei? /
 CHAR. cura, miseria, aegritudo, lacrumae, lamentatio. /
 EVT. repudia istos comites atque hoc respice et revertere. (Plaut. *Merc.* 868–71)

CHAR. What do you want from me? EUT. To go with you. CHAR. Look for another companion; the companions who are clinging on to me won’t let go of me. EUT. Who are they? CHAR. Worry, wretchedness, grief, tears, wailing. EUT. Reject those companions, look back here, turn back.

It is also possible that the joke’s recipient ignores the punchline and changes the topic. In (9), the hanger-on Peniculus jokingly compares his patron – escaping from his nosy wife – to a racing charioteer, looking over his shoulder to see if other competitors are getting close. In his next turn, the joke’s recipient, Menaechmus, uses the formula *sed quid ais?* to regain the addressee’s attention and mark a topic transition without commenting on his humour-generating idea.³³

- (9) PEN. eu edepol! ne tu, ut ego opinor, esses agitator probus. /
 MEN. quidum?
 PEN. ne te uxor sequatur, respectas identidem. /
 MEN. **sed quid ais?**
 PEN. egone? id enim quod tu vis, id aio atque id nego. /
 MEN. eccquid tu de odore possis, si quid forte olfeceris facere coniuncturam cu-*** (Plaut. *Men.* 160–4)

PEN. Goodness! You’d really be a good charioteer, I think. MEN. How so? PEN. You keep looking behind you to check that your wife isn’t catching up with you. MEN. But what do you say? PEN. I? I say yes and no to whatever you wish. MEN. If you happened to smell something, could you make a conjecture from the smell ***?

What seems significant here is that the punchlines in (8) and (9) fall right before the verse-final pause. As I show elsewhere, almost all of the self-repair

³³ See Ferri 2008: 20: ‘*Sed quid ais* “but tell me something” is used to move on in a dialogue.’ On the conversation-managing function of *quid ais*, see further Barrios-Lech 2014.

jokes in Plautus (93%) present a similar metrical resolution,³⁴ which means they have a perceivable verse-terminal rhythm,³⁵ whereas the actor could use the following prosodic stop to allow the audience some kind of a reaction. In his analysis of jocular slips of the tongue, which have a similar three-part structure, Michael Fontaine suggests that

[...] both the content and end-stopped delivery of the line expose the pun as an example of what we call a “rimshot” joke, that is, a painfully obvious joke that, in modern performance, is punctuated by a drum roll and cymbal crash (transcribed *ba-dum tish!*) to coincide with the collective groan of the audience.³⁶

Accordingly, even if other characters do not account for the humour, the script (as we have it) still may have encouraged its appreciation by the spectators, whether it is a ‘collective groan’ or a genuine outburst of laughter. An attractive analogy is offered by the television sitcoms from the past few decades, where the internal joke recipients rarely acknowledge humour but instead patiently wait for the viewers’ (real-time or pre-recorded) laughter to die out and then continue talking unhindered.

Slightly less than half of the cases in my data entail response sequences where the recipient acknowledged the routine’s humour. However, the characters’ reaction in Plautus is never laughter. Luis Unceta shows that the few uses of the interjection *hah(hah)ae!* in Plautus are associated not with a mirthful response but rather with the triumphant and somehow caricatured laughter, especially of the villains.³⁷ Such is the case of *hahae!* opening the monologue of the pimp Ballio (10), boasting with self-satisfaction, just before he realises he has been duped by Pseudolus.

(10) BAL. **Hahae**, nunc demum mi animus in tuto est loco, / postquam iste hinc abiit atque abduxit mulierem. [...] (Plaut. *Pseud.* 1052–3)³⁸

BAL. Haha! Now at last I can relax since that chap has left and taken the woman away [...].

³⁴Berger, forth.

³⁵One must remember that the last foot in most iambo-trochaics (the most common metres in Roman comedy) had a fixed cadence with an obligatory light (i.e. short) syllable in the penultimate position. See the discussion of the phenomenon by Fortson (2008: 34–37) and its implications for the change of speaker suggested by Berger (2019).

³⁶Fontaine 2007: 213.

³⁷Unceta 2012: 378–379.

³⁸See also the triumphant *hahahae!* by the pimp in Plaut. *Poen.* 768 and by the courtesan’s maid Astaphium in *Truc.* 209, once she managed to manipulate an annoying client (see Richlin 2019: 233). The last Plautine example in *Pseud.* 946, *hahahae!* is “a surprising outburst of excitement from the cynical Simia, perhaps ironic” (Christenson 2020: 294).

In fact, the laughter by Gnatho in example (1) from Terence, even if not mirthful or sincere, is the only use of the interjection produced as a follow-up action to joke-telling.³⁹

Other than laughter, there are some reactions of the characters which serve to accentuate the humorous intention of the interlocutor. Only three scenes include some form of appreciation of the joke-telling, and – significantly – it never entails direct praise of the slave jokers.⁴⁰ The follow-up action that one associates most with Plautine comedy is perhaps some token of verbal abuse: an insult (e.g. *verbero!* in *Mil.* 322) or a malediction (*i in malam crucem!* in *Pseud.* 335). These types of reactions might be viewed in the light of humour-as-aggression theories, which stress the sense of superiority and ridicule implied in the joke-telling.⁴¹ Significantly, Thraso, in the Terentian excerpt (1), describes his jocular activity with the verb *tangere* ('to sting'), which introduces an 'image from gladiatorial combat.'⁴² In his conversational joke, made on the expense of the young Rhodian, we have also seen elements of derision. Gnatho's first thought was that the soldier's victim must have suffered humiliation. As noted by Mary Beard, his (feigned) empathy expressed towards the boy (*dolet dictum imprudenti adulescenti et libero*, 'I'm sorry for the poor youth you aimed it at, just for being a bit careless and not holding his tongue'), was a 'backhanded compliment to the force of Thraso's wit.'⁴³

In the case of the self-repair routine, some form of aggression, anger or irritation might be caused by violating the cooperative principle: the jokers are teasing their interlocutors by abusing their *bona fide* disposition towards handling the trouble-source. Significantly, all of the violent reactions in my data are triggered by the jokes performed by the servants when talking to their young masters, pimps or fellow slaves. This power dynamic can be illustrated with the slave Pseudolus, who makes his naïve master believe – for a minute – that he

³⁹ Soon after the instant reaction at Ter. *Eun.* 426, Gnatho will laugh (insincerely) again – this time at 497 at his patron's witless insult (see the discussion by Beard 2014: 7–17). In general, Terence's use of the interjection *ha(ha)hae!* is much more nuanced. It can convey a scornful disbelief (*An.* 754), spontaneous amusement and admiration (*Heaut.* 886), teasing flattery (*Hec.* 863) or derision and irony (*Ph.* 411).

⁴⁰ A pimp praises the wittiness of *advocati* (Plaut. *Poen.* 637: *facete dictum*), a soldier appreciates the tit-for-tat by a courtesan (*Truc.* 939: *par pari respondet*), and an eaves-dropping youth comments to his slave on the joke performed by an old maidservant (*Most.* 271: *ut lepide atque astute*).

⁴¹ See see Attardo (2020: 64–67), with further references.

⁴² Barsby 1999: 163. In Plautus, the verb *tangere* (with the same meaning) appears in Toxilus' comment on the girl's witty response to a pimp (Plaut. *Persa* 634–5: TOX. [...] *tactus leno est; qui rogaret ubi nata esse diceret. / lepide lusit*, 'TOX, [...] That's one [hit] for the pimp! She charmingly tricked the man who asked her to say where she was born.') See also *iugulare* ('slaughter') used by Thraso in reference to another victim of his wit (Ter. *Eun.* 417).

⁴³ Beard 2014: 14.

has spotted his beloved, although both characters are alone on the stage. When it turns out, after an other-initiated repair, that the trickster meant the name of the girl written on the tablets, the boy – both disappointed and ridiculed – reacts with a curse.

(11) PSEU. tuam amicam video, Calidore.

CALI. ubi ea est, opsecro? /

PSEU. eccam in tabellis porrectam: in cera cubat. /

CALI. at te di deaeque quantumst—

PSEU. servassint quidem. (Plaut. *Pseud.* 35–37)

PSEU. I can see your girlfriend, Calidorus. CALI. Where is she, please? PSEU. Look here, stretched out on the tablets: she's lying in the wax. PSEU. (*angrily*) But you, may all the gods and goddesses, as many as there are— PSEU. (*interrupting*) Preserve me!

Interestingly, Pseudolus continues the humorous mode of discourse by not letting his interlocutor finish the verbal abuse. Instead, he interrupts him (with perfect timing) to tweak the curse formula, changing it into a blessing. From the audience's perspective, a violent reaction by the joke's victim arguably can intensify the satisfaction from its resolution: if the onstage humour-recipient is showing anger, it means that the joke has been effective, that it 'has stung' (*tangere*) its victim.

If not treated with violence, the slaves' witticism is sometimes considered a nuisance or disruption (I have counted these examples under 'negative evaluation'), which, moreover, seems to be part of the type's characterisation.⁴⁴ As indicated by the data in Table 2, servants are by far the most frequent joke-tellers who use the self-repair routine. The device is also available to their masters, pimps and parasites, especially if they talk – teasingly – to each other: e.g. *leno-senex* or *senex-senex* and *adulescens-servus* or *adulescens-adulescens*.⁴⁵ Still, the cunning slave and other male servants cover more than half (55%) of all the examples in Plautus. As for the female characters, quite significantly, the routine is used only by the 'cunning' maid Astaphium (4 times) and by a witty and defiant *anus* (3 times).⁴⁶ In a way, this deceitful and dialogical humour can be considered another case of a slave's subversive activity that, on the other hand, should be disciplined and held in check.

⁴⁴Here the only exception is the *senex amator* Lysidamus, whose wittiness seems to be negatively evaluated by his neighbor (Plaut. *Cas.* 527–8: ALC. *attatae, caedundus tu homos: nimias delicias facis*, 'ALC. Goodness! You ought to be cut down to size: you're getting above yourself.'). but it can also be example of a friendly banter.

⁴⁵For a series of self-repair jokes between a pimp and an elderly citizen, see Plaut. *Rud.* 522, 536, 538. Two young citizens engage in joke-telling activity in *Merc.* 612, 869 and two *senes* in *Merc.* 304, *Cas.* 527, *Aul.* 563.

⁴⁶For the consistent way Astaphium uses the self-repair routine, see Plaut. *Truc.* 136, 159, 170, 738. The joke-telling elderly female servants (*anus*) are Syra (*Merc.* 673, see Richlin 2017: 267–8), Scapha (*Most.* 267), and Staphyla (*Aul.* 355).

Table 2. The most frequent joke-tellers (self-repair routine) in Plautus according to character types.

character types	self-repair jokes (%)
servants	50 (62%)
female slave	7 (9%)
clever slave	20 (25%)
other male slaves	24 (30%)
<i>adulescens</i>	11 (14%)
old man	7 (9%)
pimp	5 (6%)
<i>parasitus</i>	4 (5%)
other	3 (4%)
total	81 (100%)

In (12), the slave starts a conversation with his master, Lyconides, with a triumphant statement that he has found something. When asked for an explanation, he introduces the punchline, whose actual meaning eludes us⁴⁷, but the humorous intention is well recognised by the recipient. Lyconides complains that the slave is playing his typical joking game (*iamne autem, ut soles? deludis*).⁴⁸

(12) SER. repperi...

LYC. quid repperisti?

SER. non quod pueri clamitant / in faba se repperisse.

LYC. **iamne autem, ut soles? deludis.** /

SER. ere, mane, eloquar iam, ausculta.

LYC. Age ergo loquere.

SER. Repperi hodie, / ere, divitias nimias. (Plaut. *Aul.* 818- 821)

SER. I've found... LYC. What have you found? SER. Not what boys shout out they've found in a bean. LYC. Your usual jokes? You're making fun of me. (*turns to go*) SER. Master, wait, I'm going to tell you this instant, listen. LYC. Go on, then, speak. SER. Today, master, I've found enormous riches.

To abandon the non-playful mode, the joker has to re-initiate the conversation and re-issue the original turn of speaking (*repperi*) – this time with serious, informational content.

One of the examples with a negative evaluation as part of the response sequence (13) contains an interesting metatextual comment on the routine.

⁴⁷ See the discussion of possible (sexual and otherwise) interpretations in Walker 2005: *ad loc.*

⁴⁸ For another joke made by Lyconides' slave see Plaut. *Aul.* 637, where his master is also trying to discipline him (638: LYC. *pone hoc sis, aufer cavillam, non ego nunc nugas ago*, 'LYC. Let me have the thing, will you, and stop your witticisms. I'm not joking now.')

Amidst a quarrel between two slaves, Pinacium and Phaniscus, the latter tries to get the upper hand by tricking his interlocutor into a self-repair sequence. Suddenly, Phaniscus pretends that something has painfully got into his eyes. Pinacium falls for that sudden act and asks – alarmed – what the matter is. The punchline, then, introduced by Phaniscus exploits the double meaning of the word *fumus* as ‘fumes, smoke’ and ‘worthless, foolish talk’.⁴⁹

(13) PIN. *ferocem facis, quia te erus amat.*

PHAN. *vah, / oculi dolent.*

PIN. *cur?*

PHAN. *quia fumus molestust. /*

PIN. *tace sis, faber, qui cudere soles plumbeos nummos. (Plaut. *Most.* 890–892)*

PIN. You're playing the hard man because master loves you. PHAN. Bah! My eyes hurt.

PIN. Why? PHAN. Because your gas is a nuisance. PIN. Be quiet, you moneyer who always mints base coin.

In reaction, Pinacium calls the trickster a counterfeiter of coins, which – as George Franko has recently pointed out – is partly ‘a metatheatrical complaint about recirculating stale, unfunny jokes in comic routines.’⁵⁰ While we are not able to unequivocally assess the originality or ‘funniness’ of Phaniscus’ pun, what this excerpt manages to confirm are the conclusions from the quantitative part of the present study (see Section 2): this jocular sequence is so frequent in the Plautine corpus that it can sound very trite.

Pinacium’s witty criticism comes close to another possible reaction to joke-telling, namely a follow-up instantiation of humour. Joking reactions to the self-repair sequence are one of the indirect confirmations that the joke-recipient has recognised the speaker’s non-serious intentions and – moreover – is willing to play along. Within this group of examples, somewhat more sophisticated cases seem to be when the other party, in response, generates humour, building on the first speaker’s punchline. In (14), the slave Strobilus and the cook Anthrax make fun of their stingy neighbour. Once the servant comes up with the idea that the old miser, while sleeping, covers his mouth with a leather bag not to lose any precious breath (*anima*, meaning also ‘breath of life, soul’), his interlocutor asks if he seals also the lower bodily orifice.

(14) STRO. [...] *quin, quom it dormitum, follem opstringit ob gulam. /*

ANTH. *quor?*

STRO. *ne quid animae forte amittat dormiens. /*

ANTH. *etiamne opturat inferiorem gutturem, / ne quid animai forte amittat dormiens? (Plaut. *Aul.* 302–5)*

⁴⁹ThLL, s.v., p. 1544.5. See also Pers. 5.20 (about insubstantial writing) and Plaut. *Asin.* 610 (within a joking routine but with a more literal meaning as ‘smoke making one’s eyes tearing up’).

⁵⁰Franko 2022: 25.

STRO. [...] And what's more, when he goes to sleep, he ties a bag over his windpipe. ANTH. Why? STRO. So he doesn't lose any vital spirit by accident while sleeping. ANTH. Does he also block his lower windpipe so that he doesn't lose any vital spirit by accident while sleeping?

Thus one absurd image of extreme stinginess is topped by another – a much more coarse one. Significantly, the cook repeats *verbatim* Strobilus' punchline, shared by his joke, to signal that he is engaging collaboratively in the same kind of humorous activity.⁵¹

I have also found an excerpt in which the self-repair routine is followed by another, launched by the joker's interlocutor. In (15), Astaphium, a cunning maidservant of a courtesan, runs into Diniarchus, an insistent and nosy ex-client of her mistress. Soon enough, their conversation turns into a friendly argument about how the prostitutes treat their lovers.

(15) AST. *nimis otiosum te arbitror hominem esse.*

DIN. **qui arbitrare?** /

AST. *quia tuo vestimento et cibo alienis rebus curas.* /

DIN. *vos mihi dedistis otium.*

AST. **qui, amabo?**

DIN. *ego expedibo.* / *rem perdidit apud vos, vos meum negotium abstulistis.* / *si rem servassem, fuit ubi negotiosus essem.* /

AST. *an tu te Veneris publicum aut Amoris alia lege / habere posse postulas, quin otiosus fias?* (Plaut. *Truc.* 136–142)

AST. I think you have far too much free time. DIN. Why do you think so? AST. Because you care about other people's business while providing your own clothing and food. DIN. You have given me free time. AST. How, please? DIN. I'll explain. I lost my possessions at your place, you've taken my business away from me. If I'd saved my possessions, I'd have somewhere to do business. AST. Do you really expect to be able to occupy the public land of Venus and Love except on the terms of becoming a man of leisure?

When Astaphium launches the self-repair routine, Diniarchus responds to her punchline with a witty concept of his own.⁵² Thus, in a tit-for-tat, the roles of the joker and the joke's recipient go back and forth. Some prominent tricksters, however, are not willing to renounce their dominant role as joke-tellers and would create a whole series of set-ups and punchlines: such is the case of Mercury-as-Sosia in (16).⁵³

⁵¹ For a humorous response building on joke-teller's punchline, see Plaut. *Pseud.* 45–48, and Christenson's (2020: 122) comment that, in this scene, Pseudolus and his master Calidorus 'work as a comic team' (at *Pseud.* 32).

⁵² In the whole scene, both characters try to get the upper hand while making clever comments but it is the maidservant who initiates 3 out of 4 self-repair sequences (Plaut. *Truc.* 136–7, 158–61, 170–1).

⁵³ Another is Milphio in Plaut. *Poen.* 977, 980.

- (16) AMPH. [...] quem pol ego hodie ob istaec dicta faciam ferventem flagris. /
 MERC. Prodigum te fuisse oportet olim in adulescentia. /
 AMPH. **Quidum?**
 MERC. Quia senecta aetate a me mendicas malum. /
 AMPH. Cum cruciatu tuo istaec hodie, verna, verba funditas. /
 MERC. Sacrifico ego tibi.
 AMPH. **Qui?**
 MERC. Quia enim te macto infortunio.
 AMPH. At ego te cruce et cruciatu mactabo, mastigia. (Plaut. *Amph.* 1029–35)

AMPH. [...] For those words I'll warm you up with whips today. MERC. You must have been a spendthrift back in your youth. AMPH. How so? MERC. Because in your old age you're begging me ... for a thrashing. AMPH. You'll suffer for pouring out these words today, slave. MERC. I'm making a sacrifice to you. AMPH. How? MERC. Because I'm giving you an offering of blows. AMPH. But I shall give you an offering of a cross and crucifixion, you whipping post.

In this excerpt, Amphytruo thinks he is talking to his slave Sosia, impersonated here by Mercury, who, most arrogantly, maintains he does not know his own master. The trickster god initiates two self-repair routines, which are responded to every time by the furious master with threats of physical abuse. Additional humour of the scene seems to consist of the fact that Amphytruo, despite being extremely mad, falls for the same trick each time and, after every set-up, asks the alleged servant for explanations. By launching another jocular sequence, Mercury manages to distract his interlocutor and delay the potential punishment. One gets the impression that this series of conversational jokes could continue for a while, but here the play's text breaks off.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The present article examines how Plautine conversational humour, represented here by self-repair jokes, becomes part of the verbal interaction depicted in the plays and – indirectly – of the comedy text. The jocular routine, relatively well attested in Plautus, emerges from the ongoing interaction – in most cases – as a relevant but somewhat problematic contribution to the conversation. The unusual, incomprehensive or enigmatic content of the joker's utterance (the set-up) draws the other party's attention, who, by asking for explanations, forcefully becomes the joke-telling activity's participant. According to my data, after the punchline (in the form of the joker's self-correction), half of the witticisms are not accounted for by the characters, who either treat them literally or ignore them and move the conversation forward. What seems relevant, however, is that over 90% of the punchlines finish with a strong prosodic break at the end of the line, which arguably could be a textual

cue that the performers (the actors and, in the case of the accompanied metres, the *tibiae* player) leave some space for the audience to react. In the other half of the examples, where the humour of the routine is acknowledged, it is mainly through the in-play recipient's disaffiliating reaction (complaint, curse, verbal abuse, etc.) or follow-up humour. As one could expect from any comedy genre (ancient or contemporary), the characters never – mirthfully – laugh at each other's jokes, leaving this to the spectators. Gnatho's unique use of *hahaha!* interjection shows that the laughter appears onstage only as a part of the playwright's joke and not a genuine (depiction of) response sequence. Finally, this routine joke-telling, like most of the funny business in comedy, seems to belong mainly to the repertoire of the Plautine servants, including the cunning slaves. In general, the self-repair sequence focalises the superior position of the joker, who teases and abuses the rules of conversation, which is in keeping with the characterisation of the non-obedient servants. For the same reason, other male characters like young and elderly citizens or pimps can also use the self-repair jokes whenever the scene entails some power imbalance or banter.

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DYNAMICS OF TELLING JOKES IN PLAUTUS.
THE CASE OF THE SELF-REPAIR ROUTINE

S u m m a r y

The study concerns one recurrent type of conversational joke in Plautus, which consists of three different steps: (1) some problematic formulation by the joke-teller, (2) a request for an explanation by the interlocutor, and (3) a punchline. Using methods of Conversation Analysis, I interpret the routine as a case of a self-repair sequence and examine responses it triggers in all the comedies by Plautus. According to the quantitative part of the study, in half of the cases, humour is not acknowledged by the in-play recipient of the joke who may understand it literally or ignore it whatsoever. In the rest of the examples the joker's interlocutor mostly reacts negatively (with some form of verbal aggression or complaint) or continues the non-serious mode of talking by launching another joke. Ultimately, the jocular routine is associated with the figure of rebellious slave, who uses the powerful joker's position to tease and abuse the rules of a collaborative conversation.