Ridicule, Humour and Anti-Roma Racism in Romanian Television News: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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Date of publication: March 15th, 2022
Edition period: March 2022-July 2022

To cite this article: Breazu, Petre, (2022). Ridicule, Humour and Anti-Roma Racism in Romanian Television News: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, *International Journal of Roma Studies, 4*(1), 38-65. doi: 10.17583/ijrs.9883

To link this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/ijrs.9883

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Ridicule, Humour and Anti-Roma Racism in Romanian Television News: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract
Research shows that the public image of Roma on television reinforces existing prejudice and stereotypes in relation to illiteracy, criminality, primitiveness, or refusal to comply with societal norms and values. Scholars have drawn attention to the various forms of racism, both overt and covert, we find in media and political discourse. Yet, one aspect that is less explored is the role of humour and ridicule in communicating anti-Roma racism. In this article, I conduct a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) of two news clips aired by one of the leading audio-visual stations in Romania. I draw attention to the use of humour and ridicule on public television as discursive strategies to belittle or conceal anti-Roma racism. I argue that such representations—where buffoonery, bad taste, cultural incompetence, and arrogance are highlighted—go beyond simple entertainment and cheap laughs but reinforce the inferior and marginalised status that Romani people have held for centuries on Romanian territories.

Keywords: Anti-Roma racism, humour, multimodal critical discourse analysis, ridicule, television news
Ridículo, humor y racismo anti-Romaní en las noticias de la televisión rumana Un análisis crítico multimodal del discurso

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Resumen
Las investigaciones muestran que la imagen pública de los romaníes en la televisión refuerza los prejuicios y estereotipos existentes en relación con el analfabetismo, la criminalidad, el primitivismo o la negativa a cumplir las normas y valores sociales. Los académicos han llamado la atención sobre las diversas formas de racismo, tanto abiertas como encubiertas, que encontramos en los medios y el discurso político. Sin embargo, un aspecto que se explora menos es el papel del humor y el ridículo en la comunicación del racismo anti-Romaní. En este artículo, realizo un análisis crítico multimodal del discurso (MCDA) de dos clips de noticias emitidos por una de las estaciones audiovisuales líderes en Rumania. Llamó la atención sobre el uso del humor y la burla en la televisión pública como estrategias discursivas para menospreciar u ocultar el racismo anti-Romaní. Sostengo que tales representaciones, donde se destacan las bufonadas, el mal gusto, la incompetencia cultural y la arrogancia, van más allá del simple entretenimiento y las risas baratas, pero refuerzan el estatus inferior y marginado que los romaníes han tenido durante siglos en los territorios rumanos.

Palabras clave: Racismo anti-Romaní, humor, análisis crítico multimodal del discurso, ridículo, informativos televisivos
in constructing discourses about racial and ethnic minorities (Anderson, 2015; Pérez, 2017; Zack, 2016). Some researchers have emphasised the positive functions of humour in decreasing social distance between groups, thus reinforcing cooperation and bonding people together. Critical scholarship has drawn attention to the disparaging role of humour to ridicule groups perceived as socially and culturally inferior (Billig, 2005; Meyer, 2000). These studies have highlighted that humour—both in private and public contexts—has well-established roles in social life, such as to discipline behaviours, belittle cultural practices, construct membership boundaries and reinforce social order (Billig, 2005; Perez, 2017). The harmful role of humour in reproducing ideas about racial superiority and inferiority has been less articulated in academic research (Anderson, 2015; Martin, 2007; Weaver, 2016) and little do we know about the work of humour to support racist ideologies which maintain contemporary social hierarchies and inequalities. This is even more contentious in the case of Roma, as their negative representation both in private and public discourses often overlooks the long history of discrimination and social exclusion. Billing (2005) highlighted that ‘theorists have overlooked the power dynamics of humour’ (p. 238). Therefore, racist humour, and racism in general, has a historical existence in the practices of oppression and social exclusion in different societies (Camfield, 2016).

It has been acknowledged that racism in public discourses has increasingly become more subtle and it is often reinforced by a colour-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). This is often the case with colour-blind racist humour which is shaped around stereotypes and imaginaries which downplay ‘race’ and ethnicity as main sources of laughter (Pérez, 2013; Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013). Under the guise of colour-blindness, racist discourses are shaped around cultural expectations according to which those belonging to the ‘superior’ group will appreciate the joke and will unproblematically respond in a normative way (Ana, 2009; Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006). And such normative views are often motivated by negative affect toward the people who are subjected to laughter and ridicule, affect which takes different forms, such as hate, despise, anger, fear or simple fun (Perez, 2017). Romanian television has been noted as one of those venues where racist humour about the Roma has been less challenged and even unproblematically accepted by those who identify with the ‘superior group’ and go along with the joke (Breazu & Machin, 2022). This article provides an analysis of two news clips selected
from a larger corpus and it shows how racist humour is used to naturalise Roma’s social position as a lower class of people, thus perpetuating social inequalities and power relations between Roma and non-Roma in Romania.

**Race, Class and Humour**

The media play an important role in how the broader public understands race and ethnicity. It is often that our perception of ‘the other’ is rarely based on personal experiences but on myths and cultural symbols reproduced on a variety of media platforms (Brooks & Hébert, 2006). Ideas about race superiority or inferiority have persisted for centuries, yet contemporary discourses about race are reproduced in fusion with other discourses about ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, sexuality or class (Dines & Humez, 2003). As a complex system of domination and inequality (Van Dijk, 1991) or as a poisonous ideology (Husband & Downing, 2006), racism has been discursively manifested in various forms which go beyond invoking skin colour or other biological characteristics as markers of difference. Yet, as some scholars argue, in contemporary societies which are ruled by political correctness, biological racism takes on newer forms, often disguised as cultural incompatibilities, economic concerns, nationalist sentiments or conflicting social practices. Scholars have also drawn attention to the fact that in contemporary societies dominated by right-wing politics, biological racism is by no means a construction of the past (Burmila, 2018; Gasper, 2018). Instead, it metamorphoses into a more cultural and nationalistic dimension; this is what scholars have defined as ‘new or cultural racism (Ansell, 2016; Barker, 1981). In this paper, racism is not simply understood as an ideology but also as a materialistic concept, which has a historical existence in the practices of oppression and social exclusion in different societies and which has implications for treatment of ethnic minorities (Camfield, 2016). Racism needs to be understood in relation to how inequalities are historically shaped in various contexts and how it intersects with other social and cultural practices that serve to perpetuate it (Doane, 2017).

There is a trend in discussing cultural forms of racism in relation to class, through what scholars have defined as cultural class analysis (Atkinson, 2017; Bennett et al., 2009). Even though cultural class analysis does not primarily address racial injustices, scholars have shown that minorities are often judged as less valuable based on assumptions about their educational achievements, cultural assets, lifestyle and consumption practices, which set them apart from
their white middle-class counterparts (Flemmen & Savage, 2017; Lamont, 2016). Bourdieu’s (1991, 2013) concept of cultural capital is at the core of cultural class analysis, and could be extended beyond issues of class distinction to the analysis of racial inequalities. According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital encompasses the multitude of knowledge, behaviours, attitudes and skills that reflect someone’s competence and social status in society. Moreover, cultural capital is an important criterion for ethnic classification (Flemmen & Savage, 2017; Luke & Graham, 2006). The minorities’ lack of these competences, whether the lack pertains to right education, cultural knowledge, good taste, appropriate lifestyle or linguistic competence, makes them less desirable and less worthy than others who possess these skills. These criteria, especially since they function as moral judgements, have been long used to legitimise the marginalised status that some ethnic and religious minorities have held in society (Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Liu & Mills, 2006). Therefore, minorities’ social exclusion and poverty are not regarded as structural issues (e.g., because of massive discrimination on the job markets, lack of access to education, housing, health care) but rather as the result of their traditional ways of life or their refusal to comply with the requirements of modern societies (Ansell, 2016; Entman & Rojecki, 2001).

There has been less emphasis on discussing these cultural forms of racism through the lenses of humour and ridicule, especially when it comes to the representation of wealthy Romani who hold a privileged position in society.

The academic literature has drawn attention to the use of humour and ridicule as discursive strategies used to uphold the norms and values of groups believed to be racially and culturally superior (Billig, 2005; Gradin Franzén & Aronsson, 2013; Zack, 2016). These scholars have shown that humour and ridicule are not innocent strategies. Instead, they serve concrete ideological functions, such as to set clear boundaries between dominant groups and minorities, the latter of whom are marked in these approaches as being of lower social status than the former. Ridicule and humour towards minorities take various forms, from simple jokes to extreme racial violence, and the border between laughter and hatred is very thin (Billig, 2001, 2005). One of the most common forms of ridicule is disciplinary humour which, according to scholars (Billig, 2005; Gradin Franzén & Aronsson, 2013; Holmes, 2000), is deployed to mock those individuals who are believed to violate social norms and conventions. According to the same authors, there are different functions fulfilled by using humour to talk about minorities, such as to re-establish the social order by casting judgement upon minorities, to reinforce existing
stereotypes, to laugh for social pleasure, to claim superior status or to degrade and humiliate the groups perceived as inferior.

The ridicule of racial groups is always associated with a sense of superiority and display of power (Billig, 2001, 2005; Pérez, 2017; Willett, 2016; Zack, 2016). While at times ridicule may often sound playful and innocent, such strategies are in fact acts of aggression aimed at constructing ‘the other’ as an inferior social group (Breazu & Machin, 2019, 2022). The most extreme forms of ridicule merge racial discourses with other forms of discrimination, such as gender or sexual discrimination, and often rely on the use of scatological language which intensifies the racial violence they incite (Breazu & Machin, 2019).

Roma on television

Representations of Roma on television often perpetuate existing prejudice and stereotypes in relation to illiteracy, criminality, unconventional lifestyle, or refusal to comply with societal norms and values. Whether poverty-stricken or defined by extreme wealth, Roma communities on television appear unlikeable and abnormally different (Breazu & Machin, 2020; Imre & Tremlett, 2011; Jensen & Ringrose, 2014; Leudar & Nekvapil, 2000). Despite their marginalised status, contemporary public discourse about Roma has been largely shaped around stereotypes and prejudice in relation to illiteracy, crime, violence, corruption, primitiveness and unwillingness to abide by societal norms and values (Breazu, 2020; Cretu, 2014; Erjavec, 2001; Tremlett, Messing, & Kóczé, 2017). Research also shows that the media play an important role in constructing a homogenous Roma community which appears to be defined by collective negative attributes, ignoring thus differences of class, gender, culture, education, socio-economic status, educational achievements and aspirations.

Representation of the Roma on television has been less discussed in academic research despite television being an important medium of information and entertainment. This is definitely true if we look at the Romanian media landscape, where 90% of the people watch the daily news on television (Breazu, 2020; Trofin, 2015). Breazu and Machin (2020, 2021, 2022) have addressed the representation of Roma in Romanian television news. Their studies show that television with its affordances—juxtaposition of images, editing, combination of sounds, caption and voice overs—has specific ways to conceal or dismiss racism altogether. In their analyses,
Breazu and Machin emphasised the importance of each mode of communication (language, visual footage, captions, sounds) in conveying discourses about Roma, and therefore, they emphasised the need for an integrated approach to multimodal analysis. This means being aware of the manner in which, for example, racist discourses are communicated in different ways. It may be the case that there is nothing explicitly racist in language, but racism can come to surface when assembling discourses communicated by various other modes (visual footage, captions or soundtracks).

Other studies have examined the representation of the Roma in reality and entertainment shows (Imre & Tremlett, 2011; Jensen & Ringrose, 2014; Tremlett, 2014). Tremlett (2014) and Jensen (2014) have discussed the representation of the Roma in the much-contested reality show, Big Fat Gypsy Weddings, aired by the British Channel 4. They have argued that documentaries which claim to give insights into the lives of the Roma community are in fact sites for perpetuating and fostering negative representations, stereotypes and prejudices (Jensen & Ringrose, 2014; Tremlett, 2014). This is because they portray a community which is either ‘spectacular, extraordinary and above all, negatively different’ (Tremlett, 2014: 316) or primitive, ruled by oppressive traditions and cultural practices and notable for their excessive spending and consumption patterns (Jensen & Ringrose, 2014). These studies also show that the visibility of the Roma in reality programmes incite moral outrage amongst viewers since social injustices experienced by the Roma are reduced to their own culture. Judging the ‘Gypsy lifestyle’ on-screen allows the viewers to show their belonging to the culturally superior group: ‘they congratulate themselves on their gender progressive politics, tastefulness, and general cultural superiority’ (Jensen & Ringrose, 2014: 383). Apart from typical discourses in reference to the Roma’s lack of education, promiscuity, laziness, backwardness and enslavement by their own culture, we also see the construction of the Roma in terms of classes of people, namely, as an underclass characterised by excessive consumption of goods and a flagrant display of bad taste and behaviour. One aspect which is less discussed is the role of humour and ridicule as discursive strategies to undermine the Roma and belittle racism (Breazu & Machin, 2022). This article carries out a detailed multimodal analysis of two news clips aired by one of the most influential Romanian commercial televisions, and draws attention to the use of humour and ridicule as discursive strategies to conceal anti-Roma racism.
Theory and Method

This article draws on Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Machin & Mayr, 2012), a research methodology that allows me to carry out a detailed examination of language and audio-visual footage of how the Roma are represented in the two news clips.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an approach to Discourse Studies, examines the role of language and other modes of communication in the discursive reproduction of social domination, power abuse, inequalities and social injustice (Van Dijk, 1991; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). MCDA is instrumental in research that addresses complex social problems that affect our societies, such as racial discrimination. Images of the Roma in the media have been largely unchallenged to the point that racism is often naturalised, and therefore, more difficult to challenge.

The concept of multimodality used in this article is informed by the developments in social semiotic (Machin, 2013; Machin, Caldas-Coulthard, & Milani, 2016; Machin & Mayr, 2012) on the ground that (1) all semiotic resources that go into the production of news clips (language, captions, visual footage, sounds, etc.) are active choices of those who produce and seek to disseminate various discourses, and (2) all these semiotic resources have meaning potential [carry certain meanings], and therefore they are ideological [create recontextualisations and communicate discourses which serve certain interests].

Here media discourse is conceptualised as a recontextualised social practice (Wodak & van Leeuwen, 1999; Van Leeuwen, 2008). Wodak and Van Leeuwen (1999) emphasise that representation of people in public discourses is always linked to practice, namely to what people do. The proposed theory expanded on Bernstein’s (2004, 2005) concept of recontextualisation of discourses and emphasises that language and other forms of communication are not neutral or ideological-free symbols. Not only do they reinforce existing discursive patterns (e.g., stereotypes, prejudice) but they also shape normative views in the society in relation to class, gender, sexuality or race. This paper draws in particular on Wodak and van Leeuwen’s (1999) theory of the recontextualisation of social practice. These scholars argue that discourses, as models of how we represent the world, are composed of elements such as participants, actions, performance modes, evaluations, presentation style, time and place. In this sense, media discourses comprise a
kind of ‘script’ about participants who are engaged in actions in specific contexts and who are driven by specific priorities.

It has been acknowledged that the main role of MCDA is to analyse discourses in relation to the actual events they are used to represent (Machin, 2013), placing emphasis on how social practices become recontextualised in various instances of communication. In the case of television news, it makes sense to ask: What parts of the discursive script are deleted, added, substituted, abstracted or re-sequenced? And what kinds of ideas or interests do these recontextualisations serve, legitimise and naturalise? MCDA thus aligns exactly with what I want to accomplish here, as I want to show how television with its affordances—to substitute, abstract, erase, evaluate, rearrange discourses—is able to communicate racism in ways which are less problematic or even naturalised.

In order to understand how recontextualisation takes place, it is important to examine how various social actors are represented—textually and visually—in the selected news clips. Scholars (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Van Leeuwen, 2008) provide a comprehensive account of the linguistic choices for naming people and their actions and the ideological functions these serve. The above authors emphasised that representational strategies for labelling people (e.g., nomination/anonymisation, personalisation/impersonalisation, individualisation/collectivisation, us/them polarisation) are indeed significant because they communicate values, identities and interests about the represented groups. The analysis of people’s actions is important as, on the one hand, these doings are indicators of the agency or lack of agency of the social actors, whether they are in the position of agents or beneficiaries. On the other hand, the lexical choice for the actions themselves allows for a variety of discursive transformations in relation to the participants, the processes or the circumstances. For example, the choice to employ either the active or the passive voice may be linked to revealing or concealing the agents or the beneficiaries of certain actions, or to representing a real event as an abstract notion. The visual analysis focuses on the study of iconography in visual design with special focus on the analysis of the carriers of connotation, such as settings, objects, and categorisation of people (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). The analysis in this paper draws on the empirical work of Breazu and Machin (2020, 2021, 2022) who provide concrete examples of representational strategies of people and their actions in television news.

The analysis reported in this article focuses on two news clips which featured wealthy Roma—the first one reports on an extravagant wedding, and
the second one on the mundane lifestyle of ‘Roma royal family’. Both news reports were aired by Antena 1, one of the leading audio-visual TV stations in Romania. The news clips are part of a larger corpus of 81 items collected from 2014 to 2018.

**Analysis I: Wedding with helicopters for teenage couple**  
(Antena 1, 30 April, 2017)

The first news clip reports on a Roma wedding. The analysis reveals that this manner of reporting is not about helping the public to learn about cultural practices of Romani people, but to showcase stupidity, poor language proficiency, lack of cultural capital and arrogance. What is of particular interest in this reporting is that it relies on humour and ridicule to stratify people into lower and higher classes. These representations are unproblematically presented to the public in ways which invite laughter and ridicule while belittling or concealing anti-Roma racism.

Romani weddings are common topics featured on Romanian television. The news-clip we examine here was originally broadcast in April 2017 in a television news bulletin on Romanian Antena 1. Ever since it received increasing attention on social media, including on Facebook and YouTube, and became the target of numerous parodies and entertainment shows. The news clip aired by Antena 1 reported on an extravagant wedding which involved lavish spending on helicopters, limousines, fancy carriages and outfits.

The manner in which such an extravagant event is introduced is very relevant for understanding the nature of such reporting. The virtual background in the studio is set up as if the anchor were high above the city. Her gaze, facial expression and tone of voice exhibit positive emotions and energy as she enthusiastically introduces the topic:
Extract 1 (translation from Romanian into English)

The helicopters flashed across the sky at Giurgiu, where distinguished guests walked on the red carpet to wish well to Bianca and Miclaus, two teenagers 16 and 17 years old respectively. The newlyweds enjoyed the most opulent surprises (.), from helicopters, carriages pulled by pure-blooded horses and limousines. Neither the lamb on the spit (.) nor the grilled minced meat rolls were left out.

Main caption: Wedding with helicopters for teenagers
Sub-caption: The wedding guests stepped on the red carpet
Subtitles on the middle of the screen: The helicopters are coming, get out of the way!
The lexical choices to refer to the wedding are noteworthy—helicopters, red carpet, distinguished guests, opulent surprises, carriages, pure-blooded horses, and limousines. These are not common linguistic terms to describe experiences of ordinary people but those of celebrities or aristocracy. Yet, the names of the two newlyweds—Bianca and Miclaus—are anonymous for the Romanian public. The disclosure of their ages (16 and 17) instinctively brings into focus that they might be Roma. This is because stereotypical discourses about early marriages and lavish weddings in Romani communities resonate with the Romanian public in general (Breazu, 2020). The hyperbolic representation of the wedding adds a humorous effect: helicopters are not said to simply fly but flash across the sky, the wedding guests are not ordinary but distinguished, the preparations are not customary but involve the most opulent surprises (carriages pulled by pure-blood horses and limousines). This is a type of esoteric humour since the inside-joke and sarcasm are meant to be understood and appreciated by those who identify/align themselves with the superior group and who therefore judge such practices as unreasonable or inappropriate, especially since for the ordinary Romanians, the Roma do not fit in this role.

**Roma as Aspiring social climbers**

The video footage which follows confirms that the main protagonists in the newscast are Roma [typical visual depictions one finds in Romanian media] and that the wedding indeed involved lavish spending. Video footage cuts to three helicopters which are synchronically prepared for landing, while the classical instrumental wedding song was played in the background. The main caption is displayed on screen: **Wedding with helicopters for newlywed teenagers**, while the sub-captions reads: **The wedding guests walked on the red carpet**. Next, we see the guests parading on the red carpet in posh outfits and jewellery, while a voice over adds:
Emotions took hold of the (cattle) market in Giurgiu. Immaculately dressed as a VIP, Miclaus is leading his chosen one to the red carpet, which is too short to reach the helicopter.

Here it is important to underline how the discourse is recontextualised based on the commentator’s evaluations of the event (Van Leeuwen, 2008). While the wedding required exquisite preparation (helicopters, limousines, immaculate outfits etc.) viewers are informed that it takes place in an old cattle market. This is definitively not a random representational choice; beyond arousing laughter, it subtly implies that the celebration is distasteful. The groom is said to be immaculately dressed as a VIP and to lead his partner on the red carpet, yet ‘the carpet is too short to reach the helicopter’, a smart play-on-words, which alludes to Roma’s being aspiring social climbers. These evaluations indeed carry ideological meanings, emphasising that Roma might have acquired the necessary financial capital (helicopters, limousines, VIP clothing) but this does not automatically grant them social prestige. At a casual viewing, there is nothing inherently racist in these evaluations, but they are charged with judgements about excessive spending, inappropriate behaviour and lack of taste. These sarcastic references are meant to be understood only by those who regard themselves superior because of their education, appropriate behaviour and good taste. Looking back at the long history of oppression and social exclusion of the Roma in Romania, representing them as part of red-carpet events and exquisite celebrations sounds unnatural and apart from provoking laughter it invites hatred (see Breazu & Machin, 2019). This type of racist humour is rooted in cultural and social expectations that the non-Roma will go along with the joke (Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013) and will judge this event for what it is, an arrogant, tasteless display of wealth, which exceeds what is reasonable or appropriate. As Perez (2017) mentions this humour about racial or ethnic groups invites negative feelings and this is confirmed if we look at how these discourses are further disseminated in
social media (Breazu & Machin, 2019), where under the guise of a morbid humour those posting display the most cruel and violent forms of verbal violence toward the Roma. This is not surprising, since such display of wealth on public television seems to be insensitive, considering that the average middle class Romanians struggle with economic hardships, and foreign media massively report on marginalised Roma migrants who live on the edge of poverty in various European countries. In this news clip, ridicule is used as a disciplinary strategy (Billig, 2005) both to construct the Roma as an inferior social class of people and to dismiss their claims of discrimination and social exclusion. The class disparity between the Roma and non-Roma is more articulated as the story develops.
### Extract 3

| Reporter: I’d like to tell you that you are gorgeous. Tell me please how much did this dress cost? |
| The bride: Mum knows (…) It’s a surprise from both mums [she uses the non-standard Romanian ‘supriza’ instead of ‘surpriza’] (she looks around and giggles) |

| Reporter: Do you know anything about the surprises your parents prepared for you? |
| Bride: No (she giggles) |

| Reporter: Haven’t they told you anything? Anything at all? |
| Bride: No. ‘Urmeste’ (It’s going to happen) [the bride uses a form of non-standard Romanian grammar]. |

| Father-in-law: (moving head with pride) So, we have here, the impeccable Florin Salam, we have Clejan band, we have Adrian Antoni, we have Stefan from Barbulesti, a surprise for tomorrow will be Nicolae Guta…. |
Reporter: I’d like to tell you that you are gorgeous. Tell me please how much did this dress cost?

The bride: Mum knows (…) It’s a surprise from both mums [she uses the non-standard Romanian ‘supriza’ instead of ‘surpriza’] (she looks around and giggles)

Reporter: Do you know anything about the surprises your parents prepared for you?

Bride: No (she giggles)

Reporter: Haven’t they told you anything? Anything at all?

Bride: No. ‘Urmeste’ (It’s going to happen) [the bride uses a form of non-standard Romanian grammar].

Father-in-law: (moving head with pride) So, we have here, the impeccable Florin Salam, we have Clejan band, we have Adrian Antoni, we have Stefan from Barbulesti, a surprise for tomorrow will be Nicolae Guta….

In Extract 3 we see the bride and the groom being interviewed. The visual footage and the spoken language work together to construct an incongruence (Weaver, 2016) especially in relation to the construction of social class. The people have impeccable physical appearances and dress codes which could be easily associated with wealthy, refined individuals. However, as I show in Extract 3, this impression is easily disbanded once they start talking or acting.
The featured social actors (the bride and the father-in-law) display both poor language proficiency and arrogance. The bride gives only short, unelaborated answers and uses forms of non-standard Romanian grammar (‘urmește’ instead of ‘urmează’, ‘supriza’ instead of ‘surpriza’). In Romanian context, the use of similar non-standard language structures is often associated with little schooling or illiteracy. In this clip the poor language proficiency, and the way Roma act in front of the camera are used as evidence of stupidity, inviting hysterical laughs. These particular video footage has been massively shared on YouTube and Facebook attracting over half a million views and numerous comments (Breazu & Machin, 2019). Some entertainment shows did not miss the opportunity to come up with parodies, triggering more negative attitudes, indignation and bitter laughter.

The father-in-law proudly introduces the hired entertainment team and his speech comes across as arrogant, evident in the overuse of ‘we have [the impeccable Florin Salam, etc.]’. The entertainment team includes names of prominent Romani musicians and singers, but their musical products are largely associated with low culture in Romanian context (Haliliuc, 2014). The Romani songs, known as ‘manele’ also seem to be in stark contrast with the aristocratic preparations (the limousines, helicopters and Swarovski dresses).

The entire news clip is edited as sequences of ‘funny moments’, connected either to the language variety spoken by the people, their behaviour or their lack of good taste. These representations do not favour the Roma but construct them as a special class of people. In Bourdieu’s (2013) terms, it is implied that Roma might have accumulated the material resources, but they lack the social and cultural capital. Being part of a red-carpet event requires people to follow a certain doxa or etiquette rules. Yet, as we see in this news clip, the Roma do not demonstrate adequate behaviour, mannerism, taste, or appropriate communication skills. Instead, they become the target of the joke for those viewers who regard themselves as superior.

As we have seen so far, there are no references to race to belittle the Roma, and as Bonilla-Silva (2006) says this is precisely a form of racism without racists. The joke is not about Roma’s being racially other, but about their poor command of language, inappropriate behaviour, lack of good taste and social skills. It is only the visual footage and the variety of language used by the people that signal the idea of race. This is very important and needs emphasis: in such television reporting the racist humour becomes evident only when one assembles discourses communicated through various modes, including spoken, written language, visual footage or music. And one cannot
underestimate the negative role of humour, which here goes beyond innocent laughter and having fun. As Zack (2016) mentions these forms of racism are acts of aggression, especially since they do not target individual people, but groups believed to share collective identities.

**Analysis II: Cioaba put on his 2016 uniform**
*(Antena 1, 30 December, 2015)*

The second clip analysed in this article reports on the New Year Eve’s preparation by a Romani public figure in Romania, also known as the self-proclaimed king of Roma. This reporting merges two news clips in a humorous account, where buffoonery, bad taste, immaturity, and arrogance are highlighted. Humour and ridicule are used as discursive strategies to mask anti-Roma racism in Romania, substituting racist discourses for ones which appear to be playful, innocent and above all entertaining.

The concept of a Romani royal family became known to the Romanian public in the 1990s, after the collapse of communism. Dorin Cioaba, who made numerous appearances in Romanian media, is hyperbolically referred to as ‘the international king of the Roma everywhere’, ‘the self-titled king of the Roma in Romania’, or ‘the self-proclaimed king of the Roma’. Dorin Cioaba has been featured in various TV programmes, where he attempted to speak for the Roma or give a glimpse into the Romani traditions. Yet, many of these programmes gave very little insight into the lives of the Roma but became sites for reinforcing negative representations, stereotypes and prejudice. Here, I analyse a news clip that reported on Cioabas’ preparation for the 2016 New Year Gala, featuring their chosen attire.

First, it is important to show how the topic is introduced to the news viewers, as we pay close attention to all semiotic resources that go into the production of this news clip: the language, visual footage, captions, as well as the gaze and tone of voice of the anchor. The anchor introduces the story about Cioabas’ new outfits for the New Year’s Eve celebration. The tone of reporting exhibits excitement; yet, irony and ridicule are obvious in the script, creating an incongruence (Weaver, 2016) between ‘what is being communicated’ and ‘how it is being communicated’.
Extract 4

Even the crowned heads are preparing for celebration.

The self-proclaimed international king of the Roma, Dorin Cioaba does not want to enter the New Year just any way. That’s why he made a gala uniform to befit his royalty.

It is of Bavarian inspiration and this opens a new tradition at his court. No celebration without real kingly outfits.

The lexical choices used to describe the Roma royal family clearly position them as the target of the joke (crowned heads, self-proclaimed international king of the Roma, his royalty, kingly outfits). The Romani royals are described as ‘crowned heads’, a metonymic expression which is usually
associated with both intelligence and aristocracy. The over lexicalisation of Cioaba’s title (*self-proclaimed international king of the Roma*), along with the repetition of the words ‘*royal*’ and ‘*kingly*’, signal that this is in fact a joke, inviting laughter and ridicule. The actions assigned to Cioaba (*he tailored a New Year’s Eve gala uniform to befit his kingly nature, he took inspiration from Bavaria*) come across as awkward and somehow nonsensical. The family’s chosen attire for the New Year’s Eve Gala is none other than a Bavarian-inspired uniform.

**Infantilising Romani leaders**

The next scene clarifies that a similar uniform was once worn by the very Ludwig II of Bavaria. On the soundtrack of *Für Elise* by the German composer Ludwig van Beethoven playing in the background, the portraits of the two ‘*royal*’ figures are presented on a split screen, as in Extract 5. Ludwig II of Bavaria, also known as the Swan King, the Mad King or the Fairy-tale King, was a very enigmatic figure who is remembered as one of the most eccentric European kings of the 19th century. The split-screen shot of Cioaba and Ludwig II of Bavaria, wearing the same uniform, creates a strong humorous effect. In comparison to Ludwig’s portrait which exhibits a natural aristocratic air and self-confidence, Cioaba does not appear to be comfortable in this role. As viewers, we do not know what was the original idea behind this broadcast, but such representations of Romani leaders are definitely not flattering. Here, Dorin Cioaba is infantilised, as he tries to impersonate Ludwig II, considering that there is no sound reason for this. The decision to wear a military uniform for his New Year attire comes across as childish, illogical and almost foolish.
Extract 5

**Cioaba**: A similar outfit was worn by …aaa… the Bavarian King, of whom I have a photograph since I was in Bavaria. I was very impressed, and I brought that photo to our tailor. And today we can present a first variant, let’s say, after the first fit.

**Commentator**: The uniform is not completely ready, but it will look impeccable for the night between the years. What more can be said except that it’s really special for a special king.

**Cioaba**: Look, here on the sleeves, there is some gold fringe. Here I have a few gold medals which I received from my grandfather, one is from Franz Joseph of Austria. I haven’t received it especially from him, but I have it from his palace there.

It is a valuable uniform because it is worn by me (laughing).

The next part of the news clip is organised as successive sequences between Cioaba’s statements and the commentator’s *evaluations*. In Extract 5 I illustrate this with an example. Cioaba explains why he chose this uniform for the New Year’s Eve Gala: he visited Bavaria, saw a picture of Ludwig II
wearing the uniform and decided he wanted the same for himself and for the entire family. Cioaba’s reasoning is illogical and childish which is emphasised in the evaluation provided by the commentator: ‘What more can be said except that it’s really special for a special king’. Van Leeuwen (2008) has shown that such evaluations about people and events [in this case provided by a media employee] are not neutral in communication. They have both a textual and cognitive function, in the sense that they provide models for how viewers should understand and interpret the clip. Of course, we do not have access to the entire interview with Dorin Cioaba but, as it stands out from the extract, the motivation for tailoring the uniform was driven by Cioaba’s obsession with Ludwig II. No doubt the interview was more extensive; yet, as viewers, we only watch sequences in which Dorin Cioaba sounds inarticulate and ridiculous. His statements display some sort of arrogance, especially when joking: ‘It is a valuable uniform because it is worn by me’.

What is interesting about this news clip is that the narrative extends beyond the uniform issue as an attempt to put on a more hilarious show. The news clip incorporates another media coverage previously aired on 5 September 2015. The 2015 news clip reported that ‘Cioaba replaced the limousine with the bicycle’, as he was taking part in a charity cycling event. In this news clip, the bicycle ride is recontextualised as Cioaba’s attempt to exercise in order to physically resemble Ludwig II and, therefore, become more attractive for his wife.
Extract 6 (translation into English)

With such a uniform, Dorin Cioaba grows in the eyes of his wife, Sighisoara, especially after working out the entire summer to look like his idol, Ludwig.

Sighisoara (Cioaba’s wife): Oh, you are exhausted. Let me bring a towel.
Cioaba: Bring the towel, the chair

Cioaba: Come on quickly, massage!
Sighisoara: You really pushed yourself!
Cioaba (to the masseur): I got two legs
Assistant: Of course!

Even good causes (charity cycling event) are presented in a manner that trigger laughter. Shots 3 and 4 show Dorin Cioaba riding his bicycle. These images depict the ‘self-titled king’ who seems unfit for the challenge. At the
end of the race, we see Cioaba behaving childishly and demanding the assistance of his team for water, towel, chair and massage.

As with the wedding news clip we analysed, there is nothing inherently racist in this kind of representation, but the power of humour and ridicule should not be underestimated. This is even more contentious, as there is a sense that this is how Roma choose to represent themselves. As viewers, we have no access to what happens behind the camera or how sequences are put together. Instead, one is led to believe that this is how Roma chose to act, dress and speak on public television. This manner of representation only invites cheap laughs (Cowley, 2012) in the fashion of reality TV shows.

This news clip is not about helping the public to learn about Romani traditions and culture; it rather perpetuates existing stereotypes and constructs an image of an inferior class of people, whose behaviour, taste and consumption practices are beyond what is reasonable and appropriate. As Breazu and Machin (2022) showed, such news clips with all the editing work that goes into their production are meant to create points of view, where buffoonery, bad taste, cultural incompetence, and arrogance are highlighted. In this article we saw two news clips in which rich members of the Roma community appear to be more concerned about displaying their wealth and extravagant lifestyle on screen. In both cases, this comes across as unreasonable and insensitive, especially since large numbers of Roma in Romania live in extreme poverty.

Conclusions

Whether poor or rich, the Roma appear to have a collective negative image in Romanian media. In this article we see examples of how ridicule and humour are used as disciplinary strategies to construct the Roma as an inferior group of people. This manner of reporting—where buffoonery, bad taste, cultural incompetence, and arrogance are highlighted—perpetuates social inequalities and power relations between Roma and non-Roma in Romania, thus glossing over the long history of racism against Roma in Romania.

As Jensen and Ringrose (2014) point out, this manner of representing the Roma is problematic. While such television programmes claim to provide information about the lives and experiences of the Roma community, they actually fail to do so; instead, they acquaint the public with a community whose cultural practices are so different from the non-Roma’s and whose
values and behaviour are incomprehensible (lavish weddings, helicopters, Swarovski clothing, gold and expensive jewellery, royal uniforms, etc.). In fact, as Knowles (2012) and Cawley (2012) argue, similar programmes exploit the Roma for ’cheap laughs’ in a fashion that would be regarded as unacceptable for any other ethnic group. In addition, as Billing (2005) highlights, this kind of humour is used to mark power and construct the Roma as an inferior class of people, who do not shy away from publicly displaying arrogance and bad taste.

Such representations of Roma on television do not benefit the Roma communities. On the contrary, they invite hatred and further condemn an entire group of people to more social exclusion and marginalisation (Breazu & Machin, 2019). First, such coverage ignores the realities faced by the majority of Roma in Romania and across Europe. It overlooks the fact that ordinary Roma do not have access to such extravagant experiences, but, in fact, live in deep poverty and struggle for survival. Second, featuring people who only appear to care about impersonating an aristocratic role is a deliberate way to demonstrate that the rich Roma value the wrong things, instead of helping their own communities, or using their social positions to challenge the mainstream negative image that the Roma have in Romania/Europe. The rich Roma on screen are represented as arrogant and immature. Such discourses also feed the growing populism and racism in Romania at a time when ordinary Romanians are said to be suffering the austerity measures imposed by the government. Humour and ridicule are just convenient strategies to mask anti-Roma racism in Romania, substituting cruel, racist discourses for ones which appear to be playful, innocent and above all entertaining. These are just a few examples where racism can be easily dismissed, on the grounds that this is just a joke or this is how Roma choose to represent themselves.

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