

Humor and grammar in the foreign language classroom. Can we laugh at anything?

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(first submitted: 8 March, 2023; accepted: 25 April, 2023)

Abstract

This article describes a set of classroom activities designed for EFL university students of the Teacher and Translator Training Courses to integrate into the EFL classroom a scientific approach to grammar teaching and a critical antiracist pedagogy to foreign language teaching. Firstly, we account for the reasons why humor has been chosen as a means to introduce a grammatical teaching point, in this case structural ambiguity, as well as to tackle hegemonic social and racial stereotypes. This is followed by a description of the learning context and the activities proper. The conclusion captures the challenges of adopting both a scientific approach to grammar teaching and a critical pedagogy to EFL teaching in a university setting.

Key Words: structural ambiguity, university students, enquiry, critical pedagogy

Resumen

Este artículo describe una serie de actividades áulicas diseñadas para estudiantes universitarios de las carreras de Profesorado y Traductorado en Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (ILE) con el objetivo de integrar en el aula de ILE un enfoque científico para la enseñanza de la gramática así como una pedagogía crítica antirracista. En primer lugar, explicitamos las razones por las cuales se ha elegido el humor como medio para introducir un tema gramatical tal como la ambigüedad estructural y para discutir estereotipos sociales y raciales. A continuación, se describe el contexto de aprendizaje y las actividades. En la conclusión se detallan los desafíos de abogar tanto por un enfoque científico para la enseñanza de la gramática como por una pedagogía crítica en un contexto universitario de estudiantes de ILE.

Palabras clave: ambigüedad estructural - estudiantes universitarios - enfoque científico - pedagogía crítica

Humor as a means to understanding structural ambiguity and tackling stereotypes

This set of activities is a collaborative venture, designed to integrate the contents of two subjects at university: English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English Grammar (EG). Although the focus of both subjects is different, it is possible to pay attention to both meaning and form in EFL. In our experience, humor has proven to be a great tool to make grammatical concepts from EG such as structural ambiguity more accessible to EFL students and allow them to realize that meaning and grammar are closely connected. Furthermore, the same skills used in EG to argue in favor or against a particular analysis for a structure can be used in EFL to debate social and racial stereotypes in the classroom.

Lobeck & Denham claim that “we can study language scientifically, just like we study the circulatory system or the solar system, by examining data, constructing hypotheses that attempt to explain and describe these data, and testing those hypotheses against additional data” (2014, p. 41). Similarly, Bosque (2018) states that we should develop in the language classroom the same skills Science teachers enhance in theirs, such as proposing hypotheses, making generalizations, and providing arguments in favor or against a particular analysis. Though Lobeck & Denham refer to students who learn English as a first language and Bosque to students who learn Spanish as a first language, the same scientific approach can be adopted in the EFL classroom, as Arias (2018) illustrates. For our university students, studying language scientifically means that, when faced with ambiguous sentences (those which have more than one structure), they will make hypotheses to explain the ambiguity, find patterns and regularities in further samples of the language, and provide arguments to justify which elements form a constituent.

Two basic notions introduced in the EG classroom are that of *hierarchical structure*, namely the idea, using one of Larson’s analogies (2010), that words do not combine like beads on a necklace but rather like layers in an onion, and that of *constituent*, i.e., strings of words that behave as syntactic and semantic units. Closely connected to this concept is that of *structural ambiguity*. Students discover that phrases, just like words such as *fly*, can have more than one meaning, which is brought about by different structural relations. To illustrate structural ambiguity, consider the examples below:

- (1)
 - a. real people food (Oaks, 2010)
 - b. a [[real [people food]]]
 - c. a [[real people] food]]
- (2)
 - a. Enraged cow injures man with an ax. (Carnie, 2013)
 - b. Enraged cow injures [man with an ax]
 - c. Enraged cow injures [man] [with an ax]

The advertisement in (1a) is ambiguous since the adjective phrase (AP) [real] may either modify the sequence *people food*, so it can be a claim about food as in (1b) or the noun *people* as in (1c). In the first case, *real food* is opposed to *processed food* and in the second one, it refers to a particular type of people. Similarly, in the newspaper headline in (2), the prepositional phrase (PP) [with an ax] may modify the noun *man* (2a) or the whole event of injuring somebody (2b). In the examples above, we have discussed only two contexts of modification which may give rise to structural ambiguity: the grammatical function of an AP pre-modifying one noun or another and the grammatical function of a PP. There exist countless other contexts where structural ambiguity takes place (see Oaks, 2010 for other examples), although these are not discussed in this article. Teachers may choose those that are relevant to them depending on the proficiency level and learning needs of their students.

As Argentinean university teachers of English, probably because of our lack of knowledge and/or an informed opinion, we may have experienced a sense of discomfort while discussing sensitive topics, some of which are significant to our multicultural students, as is the case of discrimination based on race or social class. All human beings, regardless of race, are more than 99.9% genetically identical (National Human Genome Research Project, 2023); this implies that racial distinctions are not biologically founded but socially, historically, and ideologically constructed (Kubota, 2021). When these classifications are based on a superiority/inferiority construct underlying unequal relations of power, racial discrimination occurs. This involves “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life” (UN, 1965). Considering the detrimental impact of racist behavior on the construction of an inclusive society in Argentina, the EFL university classroom is an ideal place to bring the topic of racism to the fore and help both teachers and students to question their own beliefs through “a problem-posing dialogic approach” (Kubota, 2021). The adoption of a

critical antiracist pedagogy in our own learning and teaching context implies that both teachers and students view racial discrimination as a problem that needs to be solved, so in the quest for viable solutions, they are encouraged to gain awareness and knowledge about the nature and complexity of racial inequalities, critically reflect on power, privileges, and complicity, and engage in antiracist practices with an open mind, perseverance, and a vigilant eye. Since racism can manifest itself in different shapes, we are going to focus on personal racial discrimination on the grounds of social-economic background, nationality, and skin color, which is a major concern in our country according to a recently published INADI report (2019). Besides, as discrimination is an uncomfortable topic, we have chosen humor as a vehicle to release tension and cope with difficult situations (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Kornfeld, 2011). In relation to humor, Kornfeld (2011) holds that there is no limit as to what topics can be discussed through it since words themselves do not change reality. That is, predicaments such as discrimination exist in our country and in our classrooms regardless of the terms we use to refer to them. Considering the relevance of this topic, it is imperative for EFL teachers to address this thorny issue so that their classrooms can become a more inclusive space, where no groups are left out and where everyone may feel welcome.

EFL university students and their learning context

This set of activities has been crafted for EFL university students with an upper intermediate language proficiency level (B1 in CEFR, 2018) taking EFL and EG as part of the Teacher or Translator Training Courses. It has been planned to take two 120-minute lessons and it revolves around the topic of humor, which is usually popular with students. The main aim is the integration into the EFL classroom of the grammatical notion of hierarchical structure, particularly structural ambiguity, which is key for English students to continue understanding how ideas in a language are organized. These activities students also invite to deconstruct dominant ideas that can shape their beliefs and behaviors (and teachers' as well) through humor.

Overview of the lesson plan

In this section, we will briefly describe the nine activities which make up this set focusing on their goals, procedures, and expected learning gains (see Appendix A for the Student's Handout).

In Activity 1, students will write down their reactions to two short humorous videos in pairs. The topics dealt with by Nigerian journalist and content creator Charity Ekezie are racism and ignorance about the living conditions in Africa, while those in the Spanish dialogue between stand-up comedian Dicky del Solar and popular Argentinian actress Verónica Llinás include different forms of prejudice concerning social classes and migrant groups in Argentina. We predict that students will react to the idea that people in Africa have no access to technology and that high-class people in Argentina live in gated communities and play rugby or golf, while poor people are regarded as criminals who live in shanty towns. Their reactions may range from laughter to outrage, from sadness to a call for change. The column labeled "cultural equivalence" has been added to help students reflect on whether Argentinians share the same stereotypes as other nationalities do in other places. The following may serve as guiding questions: Why is it that some people tend to believe that African countries have no technology or running water? Is it possible to debunk these common misconceptions with sarcastic TikToks? Are certain sports limited to certain social groups in our country? Is there a relation between being a migrant and being a criminal?

As we mentioned in the first section, humor can serve as a means to discuss thorny issues in the EFL classroom and introduce grammatical topics as well. The jokes in Activity 2 have been selected because of their linguistic nature and to illustrate lexical ambiguity. In (2a), the humorous effect stems from the multiple meanings of the noun *will*. According to Merriam Webster (n.d.),

this is “a legal written instrument by which a person makes disposition of their estate to take effect after death” or somebody’s disposition or desire to do something despite difficulties. The explanation for (2b) is more complex as it combines both lexical and structural ambiguity, though we will focus on the former. The expression *time flies* may be interpreted as a noun followed by a verb meaning *time passes quickly* or as a noun pre-modifying another noun when referring to winged insects which have the ability of traveling through time. Whether students find these jokes funny will depend on many factors, including their proficiency, though the visual aid will help them discover why the idea is ambiguous.

Activity 3 introduces students to structural ambiguity and helps them realize that “the meaning of a string of words is determined compositionally, that is, it is regulated by its component parts and their relations” (Haegeman, 2006, p. 11). This concept is typically referred to as *compositionality*. To be able to match the picture and the sentence, students will need to observe the language samples, experiment with them to see whether meaning changes when they replace or move elements around in the sentence, and argue in favor of their choices. Although they might feel biased towards one particular picture when completing this activity, the primary objective is for them to see how compositionality works through the recognition of two of the possible interpretations for each of the ambiguous sentences selected and the solid evidence in favor of their analyses, considering that one reading will usually be more salient or compatible with their knowledge of the world. For instance, people are more likely to report their allergies (to penicillin or pollen) to their doctor than to claim that they are allergic to their doctors as in (3c). The sentence in (3a), *Edna hit the yeti with a frying pan*, illustrates the same phenomenon discussed in Section 1 for *Enraged cow injures farmer with an ax*. The different interpretations involve determining which the entity who holds the frying pan is. The ambiguity in (3b) *I saw a one-eyed purple people eater* resembles the case of *real people food* in Section 1, but it is more complex because this noun phrase (NP) contains multiple modifiers. In picture A, we see a one-eyed purple monster who eats people of any color, while in picture B, there’s a one-eyed green monster who only eats purple people. There’s another possible interpretation: that the AP *one-eyed* refers to people. The last set of pictures show the ambiguity in Spanish caused by the category of the word *nada* in the sequence *Nada mal*, which may be understood as third person singular present tense verb (He *swims badly*) or an adverb or intensifier (*Not bad at all*). Although the ambiguity in this Spanish example, and also with the words *will* and *fly*, is lost when translated into another language, we have included it to remind students that this phenomenon occurs across languages. By the end of this activity, students should be able to conclude that structural ambiguity is not the product of a word containing more than one meaning but the result of the way words are combined inside a phrase or sentence.

Activity 4 aims at practicing argumentation, another of the essential skills described by Arias (2018), Bosque (2018), and Lobeck & Denham (2014) in their own learning contexts. In this case, the evidence which students need to justify a given analysis takes the form of constituency tests, such as the question fragment test, the replacement test, and the cleft construction test. These are tools used in the EG classroom to help students prove whether a given sequence of words is a constituent or not. It is worth remembering though that not all tests can be applied for every sequence and that they work only one way. If we conduct one test and the result is a grammatical sentence, then the sequence is a constituent indeed, but if the result is an ungrammatical sentence, this does not automatically mean that the sequence is not a constituent. It could be a false negative, to use one of Santorini & Kroch’s (2007) analogies. The question fragment test involves asking content questions. The fragment that serves as the answer must be a constituent. These are some questions that may be expected from students: *Who did Edna hit? Which yeti did Edna hit?* (3a), *Which color was the one-eyed monster? What did the monster eat?* (3b), *Which allergies should you report? Who should you report your allergies to?* (3c) and *What does your son do? Is he any good? and How good is he at swimming?* (3d). The replacement test may give us *Edna hit it* or *Edna hit it with a frying pan* (3a), as this diagnostic works well with most NPs and PPs which

express either time or place. However, it is not very useful with NPs with modifiers inside, such as the example of the one-eyed monster in (3b).

As to cleft sentences, they are used to show contrast. If we can focus on a particular sequence of words and obtain a grammatical sentence, then this sequence is a constituent. In (3a), it is possible to say both *It was the yeti that Edna hit with a frying pan* (and not the monster) and *It was the yeti with a frying pan that Edna hit* (not the one with a pot). These new sentences reveal a different word ordering and help us disambiguate the original sentence.

Applying one test is not enough, though. That is why students are asked to conduct different tests and then evaluate the results they get. Other alternatives include translation, as we suggest for (3d) and paraphrasing for (3a): *the yeti which was holding a frying pan*.

To check that students are able to synthesize what they did in the previous activity, Activity 5 prompts them to choose the definition that best defines the term ‘structural ambiguity’. They may also write one of their own, selecting the clearest parts of the two definitions provided by the specialists. Finally, they are asked to provide an example of their own to illustrate this new and improved definition.

Activity 6 aims for students to look into structural ambiguity in Spanish. The sentence under analysis, ‘*We need more intelligent leaders,*’ is ambiguous because *more* can be a quantifier modifying the NP [intelligent leaders], in which case we already have intelligent leaders, but we need more of them or a degree adverb or intensifier referring to the degree of intelligence our leaders possess. In this second interpretation, leaders are already intelligent but we need them to be even more intelligent. Students may disambiguate this idea by applying one of the tests introduced in Activity 4. For example, they can paraphrase it using a relative clause to get *We need more leaders who are intelligent*. To add richness to the discussion especially among translators-to-be, students will finally consider the Spanish equivalent and reflect upon the complexity of translating syntactically ambiguous sentences into their mother tongue. They should notice that although *más* can be an equivalent for the two meanings of *more* (that is *más líderes* or *más inteligentes*), the position it occupies in the Spanish sentence accounts for the ambiguity and thus, its humorous effect is lost. It should be noted that the 80-100-word limit for each of the answers can help them direct their attention to the relevant aspects of each instruction.

Methodologically, analogies can enhance the learning process through learners’ connections between familiar information and a new teaching point. In Activity 7, students are encouraged to compare structural ambiguity to an optical illusion depicting either a rabbit or a duck (Jackendoff, 2012) and find the shared features that allow them to be similar. Two definitions of “analogy” have been provided for those students who may not be familiar with it to ease the completion of this activity. Some students may also choose to create their own comparisons.

Finally, the aim of Activity 8 is that students transfer argumentation skills, similar to those employed in the analysis of syntactic ambiguity, to a debate on Gervais’ controversial views on humor. This comedian’s challenge of the widely-held assumption that some topics are unsuitable for humor is expected to lead students to examine their own views. Although there are no final answers for Activity 8, students will be guided to argue in favor or against his perceptions of what laughing matter is, his reaction when the audience gets hurt and his attempt to take the people out of their comfort zones. In this respect, Gervais and Kornfeld’s views (see Section 1) coincide when they contend that our society is afflicted by social and racial discrimination and prejudice and that humor can defy these assumptions. As Gervais claims “people get offended because they mistake the subject of the joke with the actual target and they are not necessarily the same” (YouTube, 2018, 0:25).

Activity 9 widens the scope of this discussion by presenting students with some reflection and problem-solving questions that prompt them to go back to and revisit the two videos depicting cases of discrimination in two different parts of the world in Activity 1 and discuss alternative ways to help eradicate or diminish this predicament in our country. As teachers, we will need to motivate them to make informed contributions free from prejudices and guarantee equal

participation while observing that students are not forced to discuss ideas which they do not feel comfortable with (MacAndrew & Martínez, 2001). In relation to this, taboo topics can make our students feel awkward as a result of their lack of understanding and (mis)information and they can fear discrimination, unfair judgment, and rejection because of their own controversial views, they might not want to offend or hurt others, or they may feel safe and protected within their mental barriers. In relation to questions (d) and (e), university teachers and students are challenged to collectively propose and work towards practical solutions to combat racial inequalities in our context. Finally, if we want to create a safe learning space for everyone in our class, we need to consider the complexity of the topic selected, our students' prior knowledge, potentially conflicting situations, and age and linguistic related factors as well as cultural, institutional, and national constraints (Quinterno, 2009). What we are sure of, though, is that choosing not to include the discussion of such a thorny topic in the EFL is definitely not an option, if we want discrimination to disappear from our classrooms and contexts at large.

Conclusion

There are compelling reasons why EFL university teachers should teach grammar from a scientific perspective and a critical and proactive antiracist pedagogy. First, students can transfer knowledge from EG to the EFL classroom to find richer connections between both subjects. Next, viewing language as an object of study will allow university students to strengthen skills such as experimenting, hypothesizing, identifying patterns, and providing reasons for a particular point of view (see Bosque, 2018). As regards motivation, this real-life, hands-on teaching scenario is likely to boost their interest in their own learning processes. Finally, the humorous material selected for the introduction of different grammatical contents can act as springboards for university teachers' and students' revision of their social and racial assumptions, their recognition and acceptance of different identities, and their actual transformation of the status quo. Adopting inquiry-based learning and a critical pedagogy to language teaching is not an easy task, but it is a necessary one if we want our learners and future language professionals to build a fairer and more inclusive society.

Acknowledgements

Agradecemos al profesor Juan José Arias por compartir con nosotros la propuesta de presentar un artículo en una revista como cierre de un seminario de posgrado y por la motivación que nos dieron sus devoluciones exhaustivas y constructivas. Y a nuestros estudiantes que, con sus inquietudes, siempre nos alientan a pensar más y mejores formas de enseñar.

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Appendix

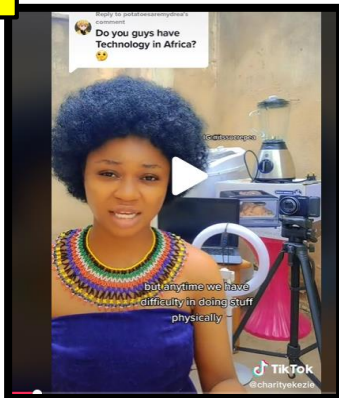
Students' handout

**HUMOR AND GRAMMAR IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM.
CAN WE LAUGH AT ANYTHING?**

1. WARMING-UP:

Watch two short videos, one in English and one in Spanish:

Do you guys have technology in Africa?



<https://www.tiktok.com/@charitykezie/video/7103560687825276165?lang=es>
<https://www.tiktok.com/@charitykezie/video/7103560687825276165?lang=es>

Dicky del Solar y Verónica Llinás en el Club House



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raniSkRLa14><https://w>

Fill in this chart in pairs.

	Topic(s)	Reactions	Cultural equivalence
Do you guys have technology in Africa?			
Dicky del Solar y Verónica Llinás en el Country Club			

2. Now take a look at the jokes below and discuss:

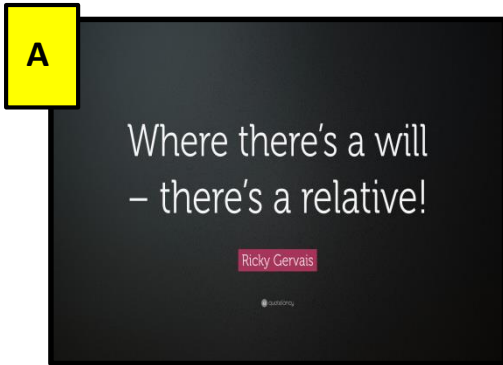


Image by QuoteFancy via <https://quote fancy.com/quote/1204700/Ricky-Gervais-Where-there-s-a-will-there-s-a-relative>

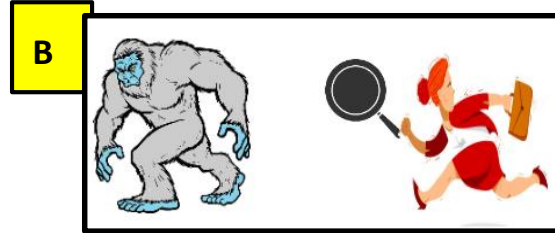


Image by GoComics via <https://americasbestpics.com/picture/don-t-kill-us-we-ve-come-from-the-future-FY1JFA6U9>

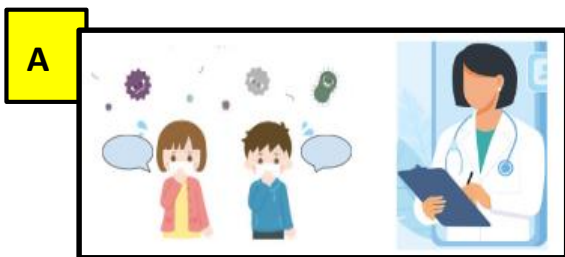
- a. How are these jokes different from the first ones?
- b. Have you found them funny?
- c. What's the source of these humorous interpretations?

3. How do you interpret the following sentences? Choose the picture¹ that best matches your interpretation.

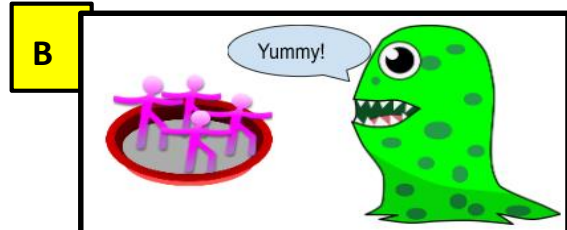
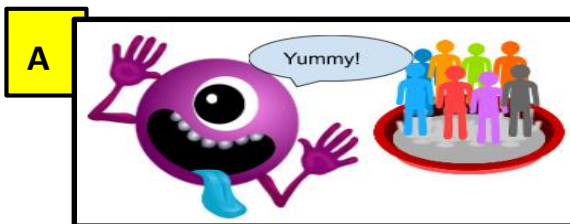
a- Edna hit the yeti with a frying pan.



b- I just saw an ad that urged people to “report allergic reactions to your doctor”. I had no idea so many people were allergic to their doctors.



c- I saw a one-eyed purple people eater.



¹The pics for this exercise have been taken from <https://pixabay.com/es/>.

d- Ann: Mi hijo está practicando natación / Tim: ¿Y qué tal le va? / A: Nada mal



Which of those interpretations is the expected one? Why is the other one unexpected? Why is this so? Could it be any other way?

4. Now that we have worked on the meaning of these linguistic jokes (or puns), let’s take a closer look at how the combination of words allows for these different meanings or interpretations. Complete the chart below. Some squares have already been completed to help you.

TESTS				
Jokes	Questions	Replacement	Cleft sentences	Other tests
a. Edna hit the yeti with a frying pan.	<i>What did Edna do? Which yeti did Edna hit?</i>			
b. I saw a one-eyed purple people eater.		<i>I saw it.</i>		
c. “Report allergic reactions to your doctor”. I had no idea so many people were allergic to their doctors.			<i>It is to your doctor that you should report all your allergic reactions (not to your friend)</i>	
d. Mi hijo está practicando natación. Y ¿qué tal le va? Nada mal.	<i>What does your son do? How does he do it? How good is he at it?</i>			

Share your answers with your classmates.

5. Based on the cases of structural ambiguity we have discussed in Activity 3 (a, b & c), which of the following definitions best describes this phenomenon? You may also add an improved version of your own with an example to illustrate it.

a.	“Ambiguities which arise through different structural relations are structural ambiguities” (Haegeman, 2006, p. 70).
b.	“A sentence can be ambiguous because of its syntactic structure” (Lobeck & Denham, 2014, p. 37).
c.

6. Now, look at this sentence, which is also meant to have more than one interpretation or meaning.

WE NEED MORE INTELLIGENT LEADERS

- a) Discuss the two possible interpretations of this joke and determine which one is intended to have a humorous effect on the audience.
- b) Apply one constituency test to disambiguate the sentence.
- c) Explain the syntactic ambiguity by focusing on the function and categories of the relevant constituents.
- d) Discuss whether structural ambiguity can be maintained when translating this sentence into Spanish.

Write your answers in an 80/100-word paragraph. Use as much specific terminology as you can.

7. One useful analogy: How are structural ambiguity and this image similar? Complete the prompt below.

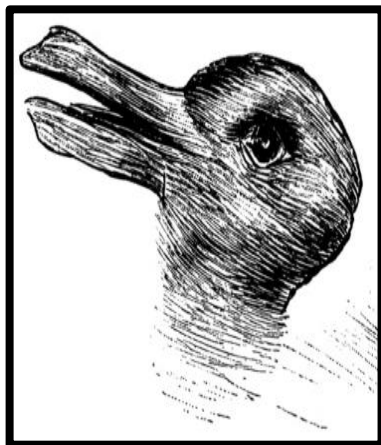


Image by Joseph Jastrow via <https://mathworld.wolfram.com/Rabbit-DuckIllusion.html>

An *analogy* is a comparison of two otherwise unlike things based on resemblance of a particular aspect.
Source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com>

An *analogy* is a comparison between things that have similar features, often used to help explain a principle or idea.
Source: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>

Structural ambiguity can be compared with an optical illusion because

.....

.....

Compare answers with a classmate.

8. HOMEWORK: Watch this one-minute video titled *Ricky Gervais Doesn't Care If You Feel Offended*:



How far do you agree with Ricky Gervais' views on humor? For next class, be ready to share your point of view and whether you agree or disagree with this popular British comedian.

A

People mistake the subject of the joke with the actual target and they are not necessarily the same.

B

If you live in a safe world, the worst thing that happen to you is you say something stupid.



C

I like the discomfort of talking about uncomfortable things.

9. Get in pairs and discuss:

- a. Did you find the jokes in the videos in activity 1 funny? Why? Why not?
- b. Would you like to change the jokes in some way? Why? Why not?
- c. What do Ricky Gervais, Charity, and Dicky del Solar have in common?
- d. Can you think of other ways of helping people challenge these racial stereotypes?
- e. What effective actions would you take to fight against racial discrimination in the classroom and in your neighborhood?