

COVID-19 is a Star: Allegory and Irony in the Brazilian Pandemic Scenario

COVID-19 é uma estrela: Alegoria e ironia no cenário pandêmico brasileiro

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Abstract: On January 2021 Brazil kicked off its nationwide COVID-19 vaccination campaign¹. Former President Jair Bolsonaro argued that scientists and the media were hyping the seriousness of a virus that took the lives of over 700,000 Brazilians². In this article, we discuss a case study in which different forms of figurative language are employed by a comedian called Marcelo Laham from the group “*Embrulha para Viagem*” (“Pack to takeaway” in Portuguese). We present some background information about the Brazilian coronavirus crisis at the time the first video was launched in June 2020. Then, we present step by step how the comedian, who personifies COVID-19 as a celebrity, introduces the coronavirus pandemic in the world and its first wave in Brazil by means of figurative verbal and multimodal language. We also present some current facts about the surge of a new coronavirus strain in the northern state of Amazonas, which is home to the Amazon rainforest, considered the ‘lung of the world’, and where a large number of COVID-19 patients asphyxiated to death due to the lack of oxygen tanks in hospitals. These events were described in the first and second videos in terms of an allegory that portrayed COVID-19 as a star on a world tour. The next surge due to a coronavirus mutation is represented by the use of different figurative, also multimodal language, which encompasses metaphor, irony and allegorical expressions. Our analysis demonstrates how productive an allegory can be as a creative means of expressing irony.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/01/18/world/COVID-19-coronavirus/brazils-halting-vaccination-effort-is-underway-as-virus-variants-have-already-taken-root>

² Figures of October 29th, 2021. Brazil has a population of around 220 million people.



Keywords: allegory; irony; multimodality; covid-19; pandemic; Brazil.

Resumo: Em Janeiro de 2021, o Brasil deu início à campanha nacional de vacinação contra a COVID-19. O ex-presidente Jair Bolsonaro argumentou que cientistas e a mídia estavam exaltando a seriedade de um vírus que tirou a vida de mais de 700.000 brasileiros³. Relatamos um estudo de caso, no qual diferentes linguagens figuradas empregadas por um comediante chamado Marcelo Laham, do grupo “Embrulha para viagem” são discutidas. Apresentamos algumas informações básicas a respeito da crise do coronavírus no Brasil à época em que o primeiro vídeo foi lançado, em junho de 2020. Em seguida, expomos passo a passo como o comediante, que personifica a COVID-19 como uma celebridade, introduz a pandemia do coronavírus no mundo e sua primeira onda no Brasil por meio de linguagem figurada verbal e multimodal. Apresentamos também alguns fatos atuais sobre o surgimento de uma nova variante do coronavírus no estado do brasileiro do Amazonas, onde se encontra a Floresta Amazônica, considerada o “pulmão do mundo”, e onde um grande número de pacientes de COVID-19 morreram asfixiados devido a falta de tanques de oxigênio nos hospitais. Esses eventos foram descritos no primeiro e no segundo vídeos por meio de uma alegoria que representou a COVID-19 como uma estrela em uma turnê mundial. A próxima onda, surgida de uma mutação, é representada pelo uso de diferentes tipos de linguagem figuradas e multimodais, que incluem metáforas, ironia e expressões alegóricas. Nossa análise demonstra como uma alegoria pode ser produtiva como um meio criativo de expressar ironia.

Palavras-chave: alegoria; ironia; multimodalidade; COVID-19; pandemia; Brasil.

³ Dados de outubro de 2023. A população brasileira é formada por mais de 220 milhões de pessoas.

1 Introduction

In a recent article on irony in times of COVID-19, Gibbs (2021) argues that irony appears in different settings of our daily life as an immediate reaction to a situation. Psycholinguistic research reveals that irony is a cognitive phenomenon, and people indeed think ironically (Gibbs & Colston, 2007; Gibbs, 2012). Gibbs (2021) also claims that irony reflects a complex blend of cognitive appraisals and pragmatic communicative intentions. Irony is all around us, but as the author points out, life during a pandemic can seem particularly ironic for a number of reasons, some of which we will attempt to investigate in this paper.

Amazonas, a northern state of Brazil which also comprises the largest part of the Amazon rainforest, containing about 50% of Earth's biodiversity, is metaphorically known as the 'lung of the world'. Regarding the COVID-19 crisis, that metaphor is ironic, as it presents a type of situational irony that is almost paradoxical since during the pandemic the lung of the world experienced "shortness of breath". The horror of seeing patients asphyxiated to death in Amazonas' hospitals made headlines worldwide⁴. In the Brazilian pandemic scenario, there is a wide range of examples of politicians' statements on the coronavirus crisis or on how to deal with it that evoke irony, e.g., the public health scenario in the capital city of Manaus, in the Amazon in mid-January 2021. Although local health authorities had previously warned the federal government about the risk of collapse due to the lack of oxygen tanks in local hospitals, that was ignored by federal authorities until it was too late. The healthcare system in Amazonas collapsed as a whole, and hundreds of people died because there were no oxygen tanks available to treat COVID-19 patients in Intensive Care Units (ICUs). This is a case of situational irony which motivated some headlines in the news, such as:

- (1) a. "The 'lung of the world' suffocates without oxygen" (Santana, 2021a)
- b. "There is no oxygen in the lung of the world" (Nêumanne, 2021)
- c. "Without Oxygen, Manaus experiences breakdown of the healthcare system" (Santana, 2021b).

Another case of situational irony as a consequence of the lack of oxygen in Amazonas' hospitals was the following: since there were no oxygen tanks available in the public health-care system, relatives of those hospitalized due to COVID-19 gathered in long lines trying to purchase an oxygen tank. Neglected by local and federal authorities, those who feared for the lives of their loved ones were forced to gather in crowds and disregard social distancing, which was a dangerous behavior amidst a pandemic of a highly contagious airborne virus.

Those events are unintentionally ironic, and their consequences are the result of political mistakes that lead to the death of many people. There are several ways to twist the facts and turn the victims into actors of their own tragedy, for instance when citizens are blamed for not adopting protection guidelines such as wearing masks and social distancing. The employment of such measures should be a political decision, followed by advertisement campaigns and supported by federal, state, and local governments. However, even though the Ministry of

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/01/15/world/COVID19-coronavirus#with-oxygen-running-low-a-health-care-system-in-brazil-nears-collapse>

Health recommended people to wear facemasks and avoid crowded areas, former President Jair Bolsonaro was often seen gathering with supporters without facemasks or any attempt of social distancing. The difference between what is expected from the President and his real actions – this incongruence between expectation and reality – also evokes situational irony. This is the situation of a country that had to deal with governmental negligence and negationism from the beginning of the pandemic⁵.

An important aspect of verbal irony is that it conveys an evaluation – mostly negative – of a person or topic (Colston, 2017; Sperber & Wilson, 1981), and because of that irony can trigger powerful persuasive effects in communication (Bryant, 2012). In this paper, we discuss a case study of a series of videos by a Brazilian comedian group in which they created an allegory that allowed them to present several instances of irony in order to critically address the pandemic scenario in Brazil. The group “*Embrulha pra viagem*” (“Pack to take away” in Brazilian Portuguese) released a first video entitled “*Live do Corona*”⁶ (“Corona’s Live”) in which they presented a personification of the coronavirus with an extravagant, flamboyant personality that depicts the virus as an artist and the pandemic crisis as its world tour. Most of our analysis focuses on this first video, but we will also briefly discuss the second and third videos: “*Segunda onda*” (“Second wave”) and “*Mutação do Corona*”⁸ (“Corona’s mutation”), respectively. Those videos were chosen because of the creative ways in which the comedian group explains with the help of allegory and irony how COVID-19 arrived in Brazil. In the videos, the coronavirus personification claims that its career is doing particularly well in Brazil, where people were “gathering to celebrate it”. It is possible to identify the use of allegory in the narrative to create a satire, which was elaborated to point out how Brazilian’s behavior was not consistent with the scenario of a pandemic. Additionally, we observed several instances of irony emerging from the allegory. In the following sections, we will briefly discuss irony and allegory, and how they are intertwined in this multimodal narrative. However, in order to carry on with our analysis, more contextual information on Brazil’s current pandemic scenario is needed.

2 The Trump of the Tropics strikes back: governmental negligence during the COVID-19 pandemic

On February 26, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was officially detected in Brazil. A few weeks later, quarantine and social distancing guidelines were adopted by most state governors in order to curb infection rates. On March 24, former President Jair Bolsonaro declared, in an official statement broadcast to the whole country, that Brazilians should not worry about the virus, as it was just a “little flu”. This was the beginning of a health and political crisis.

In an attempt to keep the economy going at any rate, Bolsonaro denied the threat posed by the pandemic several times, claiming that the commotion around COVID-19 was caused by the media. He even stated that people were hysterical, and Brazil had to “stop

⁵ <https://youtu.be/IH1RopfGCm4>

⁶ <https://youtu.be/J4xgW4ajFXM>

⁷ <https://youtu.be/OletaXUOfdM>

⁸ <https://youtu.be/M8z7m5nP7fo>

being a country of sissies”⁹. Despite being repeatedly proven wrong in the following months, Bolsonaro maintained his stance to the end, leading many of his supporters to deny the gravity of the pandemic and refuse to wear facemasks and adopt social distancing measures. These attitudes led President Bolsonaro to lose popularity among the population (Gielow, 2021).

Along with his declarations regarding the pandemic, Bolsonaro also adopted various attitudes that did not only fail to curb infection rates but can be considered to have contributed to the spread of COVID-19 in Brazil. Measures such as adding gyms and hair salons to the list of essential businesses – therefore, allowing them to open during the pandemic –, and Bolsonaro’s restless defense of treatments with no proven efficiency, such as the prescription of hydroxychloroquine, have been partially responsible for Brazil’s position ranked as one of the countries that were most affected by the pandemic. Not surprisingly, it was claimed that the ex-President is more than a pandemic denier: his attitudes as a political leader have unquestionably contributed to the spread of the virus (Ventura & Reis, 2021) and led to a strategy of attempting to make Brazil reach herd immunity (Lima, 2020). Due to this fact, Bolsonaro’s handling of the pandemic went through investigation in the Brazilian Senate in 2021. The parliamentary commission found him guilty of nine crimes, including crimes against humanity, which can lead to a trial in the International Court of Justice (Teixeira, 2021).

In addition to his speeches, Bolsonaro has also constantly disrespected social distancing measures. From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, he has attended several rallies – some of which have even been considered anti-democratic, as the protest on April 20¹⁰, in which there were signs in favor of the return of AI-5¹¹. Such actions were criticized by a large share of the Brazilian media since that behavior is not compatible with the right to health care every Brazilian has according to the 1988 Constitution (Brasil, 1988). What is more, figurative language use played a significant role in those events.

3 The allegorical career of COVID-19

Most dictionaries define allegory as a literary device through which a story is able to portray a “hidden” meaning. In a sense, a literary allegory is a story within a story¹². How is it then possible that we comprehend the meaning behind such a text? Gibbs (2011) claims that human beings are intrinsically allegorical beings. According to the author, it is common for people to go through an experience and try to make sense of it by reading it as an allegory. A person who has faced a serious problem in their life, for instance, might talk about it and conceive of it as

⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/11/11/bolsonaro-coronavirus-brazil-quotes/>

¹⁰ <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/nacional/2020/04/20/bolsonaro-discursa-em-protesto-que-defende-ai-5-e-mais-da-manha-de-20-de-abril>

¹¹ Institutional Act Number 5, issued during the Brazilian military dictatorship. Among other things, this act is infamous for the institutionalization of political persecution – mostly against communism – and the use of torture by state forces.

¹² George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945), for instance, is a story about farm animals who, led by the pig Napoleon, organize a rebellion against the farm’s owners, creating a society without humans in which equality is the major rule. This story is widely regarded as an allegory for the 1917 Soviet Revolution and the USSR’s subsequent years. It is possible to draw several connections between Orwell’s story and the Soviet communist regime, even though Orwell does not mention anything related to the Soviet regime in his text.

if it had a deeper symbolic meaning or as if it was something that was there to teach a lesson. People are drawn to the idea of uncovering hidden meanings under a narrative (Okonski & Gibbs, 2019), and that extends to stories found in daily life, as if certain events represented more than what they really are. Gibbs (2011) calls this the “allegorical impulse”, which can be defined as a cognitive phenomenon that motivates people to draw connections between ordinary events and larger symbolic themes. This indeed is related to a metaphoric way of thinking since both of them point to comprehending one thing in terms of another, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) stated in their seminal work¹³. Because human beings think metaphorically, it is possible to claim that they also think allegorically.

In that sense, allegories could be regarded as a type of extended, more complex metaphors in which an entire story is based on a certain source domain (Gibbs, 2011; Ritchie, 2017). However, what differentiates allegories from any extended metaphors is the fact that its core is a narrative that maps its features in a way consistent with the source domain in question. In the words of Ritchie (2017, p. 93), “allegory is a metaphorical story organized around one or more unifying concepts”.

The narrative nature of allegories allows them to portray metaphorical meaning without using metaphorical language *per se*¹⁴. This strategy is also adopted in the video we analyze in this article, as COVID’s personification tells a narrative in a way that is similar to how artists/ celebrities talk about their lives. Although allegory usually refrains from mentioning the source domain(s), Gibbs (2015) claims that this is not always the case, and in fact many political allegories do address their source domain explicitly in order to reinforce the intended meaning. This is the case of the video “Corona’s Live”. There are several clues that clearly guide the viewer towards a specific interpretation of the message, and they are not subtle. The video employs multimodal resources that prompt our understanding of what is happening, guiding us in this specific case towards the interpretation of COVID-19 as a celebrity. For instance, the video starts with the personification of the coronavirus in front of a screen filled with coronavirus’ pictures in glowing, vibrant colors. The narrative presents COVID-19 as a very successful artist who has gone on a world tour – and it is particularly famous in Brazil. This allegorical narrative aims to satirize Brazilians’ behavior, which is not consistent with the reality of a pandemic that has already taken millions of lives worldwide. In order to do so, the comedian also relies heavily on verbal irony. We will discuss how those two tropes are intertwined in this context. In the first place, we must examine the concept of irony.

¹³ According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980): “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.” (p. 3)

¹⁴ Even though Orwell’s *Animal Farm* does not make any explicit reference to the Soviet Union, the text adopts strategies in order to ‘misdirect’ readers and force them to connect the story with a larger symbolic theme (Gibbs, 2015), in this case, the Soviet Revolution. One of the ‘misdirecting’ techniques is presenting characters in the story with features and behaviors that resemble those portrayed by important figures in the source domain – communists, in Orwell’s story.

4 Irony immersed in millions of deaths

Irony is a plural, complex phenomenon that can be expressed in a variety of ways. Verbal irony, a topic widely discussed in linguistics and philosophy, is often considered as the act of saying something in order to mean something else. Wilson and Sperber (2007) claim that this definition, provided by traditional semantics, is incomplete. The authors state that, in fact, verbal irony arises in many different forms, through which a speaker is able to dissociate himself/herself from what is being uttered while also expressing an attitude of ridicule and scorn (Wilson & Sperber, 2007).

Cognitive accounts of irony define verbal irony as not being the only kind there is. For instance, Gibbs (1994) also mentions the existence of tragic irony, comic irony, rhetorical irony, and dramatic irony, among others. Nonetheless, there are certain features that allow us to provide at least a basic, more straightforward definition of irony. According to Gibbs (1994; 2021), irony arises from an incongruity between expectation and reality, and psycholinguistic studies allow us to define that irony is not merely rhetorical, but it is a cognitive process that represents an important aspect of the way human beings think and, consequently, speak (Gibbs, 2012; Bryant, 2012).

As we have already mentioned, there are different types of irony, but it is important to distinguish at least two: verbal and situational irony. According to Gibbs (1994, p. 362), verbal irony is traditionally defined as “a technique of using incongruity to suggest a distinction between reality and expectation – saying one thing and meaning another [...]”. It is based on an opposition between the expression per se and what the speaker is really trying to say, and it typically conveys a negative evaluation of a target person or topic. Whereas verbal irony is defined as a linguistic technique, situational irony takes place in events that are ironic by nature, when there is an opposition of schemas in a certain scenario (Colston, 2017). Gibbs (2021), for instance, describes a situation in which it was said that “COVID-19 is killing the death business”, meaning that even though one should expect that the funeral industry would profit from a pandemic that has taken millions of lives, that was not the reality because, due to the virus, most of the deceased people were buried without funeral service of any kind. According to Colston (2017), the irony in this situation lies in the outcome people would expect from the combination of these two schemata: (1) the funeral industry which profits from death; (2) a pandemic which causes many deaths. However, since the result of this situation does not correspond to people’s expectations, they understand this situation as ironic, and frequently employ verbal irony to point that out. Again, the most important feature shared by all types of irony is incongruity: a “confrontation or juxtaposition of incompatibles” (Gibbs, 1994, p. 363)¹⁵.

Verbal irony is employed to shed a negative light on certain phenomena, therefore it can be a powerful persuasive tool in discourse (Gibbs, 2021). Simultaneously, one’s ability to identify irony in a situation triggers a positive effect on a person, as human beings react pos-

¹⁵ In 2020, as the world faced its worst pandemic since the Spanish Flu in the early 20th century, we came across several ironic events. As we mentioned earlier in this paper, Manaus, a city wedged in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, known as the ‘lung of the world’, ran out of oxygen tanks, causing a huge number of people to asphyxiate to death. However, even though there is enough evidence available for people to recognize irony in the case of Manaus, this does not mean that they will identify it automatically. Hence, people will likely find different ways to call out irony.

itively to the fact that they are able to interpret the complexities of life. Thus, an important aspect of the way people deal with irony is how they are able to perceive it and draw others' attention to it (Gibbs, 2021).

Irony can be highlighted by one simply asserting "Wait, this is ironic!". However, there are other ways of calling out irony. Gibbs (2021) presents an interesting description of how the pandemic was responsible for creating a myriad of ironic situations, some of which might not even be instantly perceived as ironic. Because of that, we are able to notice many creative ways of pointing out situational irony in a scenario. Our goal in this article is to describe how a comedian group was able to criticize several aspects of Brazilian politics and behavior in times of COVID-19 by means of allegory. Combined with various instances of verbal irony, the allegory depicted in the series of videos 'Corona's Live' represents a complex way of drawing people's attention to the ironic, paradoxical behavior of the Brazilian population towards a pandemic scenario.

5 Analysis and discussion

The videos (Laham, 2020a; 2020b; 2021) are set to resemble a live streaming, a multimodal resource that has become quite popular worldwide due to the necessity of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of our analysis focuses on the first video released by the comedian group in June 2020, but we will also briefly discuss extracts from two more recent videos. The first video begins with a personification of the virus counting the number of people joining in until it reaches a million participants, in a clear reference to the amount of people infected by COVID-19 in Brazil at that moment.

- (2) *People are arriving.* One person, two. One hundred people, one thousand people. Eight hundred thousand people. *One million people. It's a hit! It's a hit!* (Laham, 2020a, 00:04).

This opening will set the tone for the whole story and guide the viewer towards the intended allegorical meaning. The personified virus speaks in a way that resembles how artists address their audience in a live streaming. However, it is a specific kind of artist: the actor, clearly a male, talks about himself using the feminine gender, which demonstrates the intention of portraying the virus as a 'diva'. Even though the virus employs literal language in most part of the video, there are several clues that allow us to perceive that the allegory is based on the metaphor COVID-19 IS A CELEBRITY (ON A WORLD TOUR)¹⁶.

¹⁶ According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), conceptual metaphors are those metaphors present in our conceptual system which motivate metaphorical expressions in language. Conceptual metaphors are written in capital letters.

Figure 1 – The personification of the 'Coronavirus' counts how many people there are in its live streaming, which was the number of infected people in Brazil in June 2020.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4xgW4ajFXM>

Metaphor guides the way we reason, perceive, and interact with the world, and it is all around us: metaphor is present in our everyday lives, in language and thought. The reason why metaphor is so pervasive is the fact that it is partially responsible for structuring the way we think (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). We are used to speak metaphorically because we think metaphorically. This is also true for tropes such as allegory, as defined by Gibbs (2011).

Our tendency to look for allegory in all instances of our lives also guides the way we comprehend narratives as the one told in the video 'Corona's Live'. The personification of the virus as a celebrity is a complex, sophisticated manner of calling out irony and revealing the negative aspect of how Brazilians have been dealing with the pandemic. The virus' cheerful personality, the feminine gender, and the use of certain metaphors usually associated with artists are all elements that build a personification of COVID-19 intended to ironically describe the behavior of part of the Brazilian population.

It is expected that the presence of a deadly, highly contagious virus in a country with a large – and to a great extent vulnerable – population would cause anxiety and concern to its people and authorities. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case in Brazil. The situation itself is unintentionally ironic, and the comedian uses language and multimodal resources to point that out.

In order to elaborate on the idea of the virus as a celebrity, the comedian employs the metaphor PANDEMIC IS WORLD TOUR. After introducing itself the virus apologizes for being on a tight schedule claiming that things were 'crazy' since it reached Brazil, having 'traveled' all the way from China through Europe until it reached Brazil. In fact, after it was identified in Wuhan, China, COVID-19 surges were reported throughout Europe, reaching the Americas afterward. The comedian compares the virus' trajectory to that of an artist on a world tour in Example 3.

- (3) This live today will be quick. I just want to say thank you. *I've been crazy busy. Traveling all around the world.* Oh my god, I'm going crazy. *I haven't stopped for a minute.* (Laham, 2020a, 00:14).

There is also another culturally grounded layer of irony in this situation since Brazil hosts important music festivals and is regarded as a country whose concerts are particularly exciting, and appreciated by artists all over the world. It is no coincidence that the source domain ARTIST/CELEBRITY was chosen by the comedian, as it allowed him to present several instances of irony and criticize different aspects of the pandemic scenario in Brazil.

In the following lines, the personification of Sars-Cov-2 addresses the Brazilian federal government. According to recent World Health Organization (WHO) figures from January 2021, one in every four infected people in the world lived in Brazil. However, many Brazilians act in their everyday lives as if they were not amidst a pandemic at all. It is possible to observe a strong negationist discourse among the population and politicians that claims that economic activities should not be shut down because of a disease. One should expect that, given the current circumstances, this discourse would be endorsed by a minority alone but that is not the case. It is in fact supported by the federal government and even by the Brazilian President, who believes that the economy should prevail at any cost.

We can point out the reasons why Bolsonaro's behavior can be regarded as ironic. In the scenario of a pandemic, it is expected that prominent figures such as the head of state would follow measures that are known to reduce infection rates and save lives. In the case of COVID-19, the most important protection measures recommended then – since the number of vaccines available at the time was not enough to curb the pandemic – were very simple to adopt: wearing a facemask and keeping social distance. However, Brazilian former President Jair Bolsonaro, as well as former U.S. President Donald Trump, constantly disregarded prevention measures since the beginning of the pandemic, joining rallies and gathering with their supporters. This situation is similar to the one described by Gibbs, in which the author talks about New York City Mayor, Bill de Blasio, who despite publicly endorsing the use of face masks and the adoption of social distancing guidelines, has been seen several times disrespecting such measures in his personal life (2021). In the case of Brazil, the comedian group *Embrulha Pra Viagem* departed from the aforementioned allegory to specifically criticize the Brazilian government. The COVID-19 character claims to be very thankful to Brazil since it has been the first country in the world whose federal government is supporting its career, another case of verbal irony employed in the allegorical narrative:

- (4) Today, *I'd like to thank one country.* And it's called Bra-Brazil, right? Brazil is the name of this country. Thank you very much. Why am I saying thanks? *Because this is one of the first countries... Maybe the first or the only country where the federal government is supporting me! It's institutional support, right?* (Laham, 2020a, 00:24).

It is very difficult to claim that the irony in Example 4 is formed by the speaker saying the opposite of what he means. What makes us comprehend this example as ironic is 1) the situational irony of having a head of state who acts in a manner that is incoherent with his position, causing a break from people's expectations; 2) the fact that COVID-19 satirically echoes Mr. Bolsonaro's actions, clearly expressing a negative evaluation. This corresponds to the way Sperber & Wilson (1981) comprehend irony as an echoic utterance which has the

goal of distancing the speaker to what they are saying. In this case, not only the virus is a 'star', but also the Brazilian government seems to provide institutional support to COVID-19's so-called career, as in Figure 2.

In another excerpt filled with irony, the virus tells the story of how it all began. In order to imitate the way artists talk about their careers, COVID-19 employs metaphors that are typically used by celebrities when they talk about their lives. The virus claims that its career has "been a huge battle from the beginning". We can identify two metaphorical mappings in this excerpt, namely, CONTAGION IS CAREER, which is mentioned from the beginning of the video and helps build irony in the allegory. Also, CAREER IS BATTLE, which is intended to represent the 'difficult' trajectory of a virus in terms of the difficulties faced by an artist to reach success.

Figure 2 – COVID-19 claims that the Brazilian Federal Government supports its career. Additionally, there are also multimodal metaphors employed in the narrative.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4xgW4ajFXM>

Forceville (2006) defines multimodal metaphors as "metaphors whose target and source are each represented predominantly in different modes" (p. 384). While the metaphorical process of transferring meaning tends to be conveyed mostly in the verbal mode, most multimodal metaphors also rely on visual cues. Sometimes either the target or the source is represented exclusively through language but more frequently verbal metaphors in video or cartoons are used as a means of highlighting some aspects of a primarily visual metaphor. The genre also plays a role, as well as contextual information. Therefore, cartoons or videos constitute a suitable genre to express a critical perspective on a political issue in a striking manner with high cognitive impact (Morais & Ferreira, 2021). In the case in point, the video aims to draw attention to the ironic aspects of the pandemic scenario in Brazil while also addressing a specific figure – President Bolsonaro – highlighting the negative features of his behavior and policies. In the video, it is possible to notice how COVID-19 attempts to

present a negative perspective, criticizing not only the population but also its authorities, by calling out the ironic character of their attitudes. Those targets are often depicted in a sarcastic, humorous and ironic manner with the goal of criticizing a bizarre situation, e.g., the lack of oxygen tanks in the ‘lung of the world’.

There are also metonymic colors highlighted in the background. Green and yellow, the colors of the Brazilian flag, have been adopted metonymically in the past few years as a nationalist symbol by far-right Bolsonaro supporters. One of President Bolsonaro’s main campaign slogans was “Our flag will never be red”¹⁷, in a clear metonymic association of red with communist parties around the world, and also the Brazilian Worker’s Party.

Today, green and yellow are worn by those who want to show their support of Mr. Bolsonaro. In the video, these colors are mentioned in another moment, when COVID-19 asserts that it was very happy to see that many people were on the streets to support its career and that they were all in their ‘beautiful green and yellow shirts’, as in Example 5.

- (5) *And they were dressed in Brazil shirts! I found this so beautiful. Because they really wanted to show they were Brazilians. It wasn't Bolivia, Venezuela, Argentina... No, it was Brazil! (Laham, 2020a, 01:34).*

The personification of COVID-19 ironically adopts the perspective of a naïve person who is not aware of the Brazilian political scenario and believes that people who gather in the streets wearing green and yellow are just proud Brazilians, not members of a negationist far-right movement (see figure 3). COVID-19’s behavior is coherent with the idea that the virus is an ‘international artist’, and we will address this with more detail further on the text (see Example 8).

Figure 3 – COVID-19 talks about Brazilians gathering dressed in green and yellow.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4xgW4ajFXM>

¹⁷ <https://valor.globo.com/politica/noticia/2019/01/01/nossa-bandeira-jamais-sera-vermelha-afirma-bolsonaro-na-posse.ghtml>

Again, the virus mentions the difficulties faced in its 'career', drawing attention to certain health guidelines. COVID-19 talks about how people in Europe impaired their career by wearing facemasks and washing their hands all the time, also acknowledging Brazilians for behaving differently. The allegorical image of COVID-19 as a celebrity allows the inference of another ironic utterance with clear humorous effects, that is, those who do not want the virus around them are prejudicial, rude people, who can hinder its spread and consequently its career around the world.

- (6) But I've faced many obstacles in this journey. Many people by my side were wearing masks. People from all over Europe, they were all wearing masks! This is hard! *Prejudicial people*. When they touched something, they rushed to wash their hands. They thought I couldn't see it, but I saw it! *A bunch of bastards! Indecent people*. Many doors were shut for me. *But Brazil is showing that they're on a whole other level*. (Laham, 2020a, 01:06).

There are several instances of irony in this passage. First, as we have already mentioned, there is irony in the fact that people wearing masks and washing their hands could be seen as rude instead of cautious people who care about their health and the health of others. Another culturally grounded elaboration embedded in the allegory is that Brazilians are famous for being hospitable people, regarded as friendly and easy-going. The virus portrayed as an artist allows the viewer to interpret the ironic message of this video: Brazilians are so openhearted and welcoming to something new that they have even welcomed a deadly virus, while 'rude' Europeans prevented it by wearing facemasks. What is more, there is an idiom in Brazilian Portuguese according to which "to be masked" means to be 'double-faced'. Therefore, this term is employed metaphorically to refer to people who were double-faced with prejudice against COVID-19 while it was spreading on its 'European tour'.

Furthermore, the virus asserts that Brazilian people can embrace everything: COVID-19, dengue fever, H1N1, a military coup, all of this while gathering together to celebrate and kiss each other. This is a clear reference to both the Brazilian carnival and Brazil's political scenario, and its interpretation requires contextual information. President Bolsonaro is a far-right politician who has nominated many high-ranked military officers from the Brazilian Armed Forces in his cabinet, including the former Minister of Health, General Pazuello¹⁸. In the past, Bolsonaro has publicly complimented Brazilian's military dictatorship, a regime that was notorious for political persecution, torture, and whose leaders are blamed for the deaths of hundreds of Brazilians. In 2016, in the Brazilian Congress, Bolsonaro complimented General Brilhante Ustra, a former military officer who was accused of torture and is accounted responsible for the disappearance and death of political opponents¹⁹. Many of Bolsonaro's supporters are also strongly in favor of the Brazilian former dictatorship, and they often celebrate Brazil's 1964 military coup-d'état which led the military to power. That explains why COVID-19 mentions the AI-5 and the 1964 coup as other things that the 'kind-hearted' Brazilian people are happy to embrace (see Example 7). The fact that a population often considered gentle and

¹⁸ Eduardo Pazuello was Minister of Health from May 2020 to March 2021, when he resigned. He left his office after a disastrous administration, which Brazilian Supreme Court minister Gilmar Mendes defined as a genocide (Ventura & Reis, 2021).

¹⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36093338>

kind has elected a notorious supporter of torture constitutes situational irony, and the comedian explores this to present his stance on how paradoxical the situation in Brazil is.

- (7) *I think there's room for all of us in Brazil. There's room for AI-5. There's room for COVID-19. There's room for H1N1. For the coup of 1964.* (Laham, 2020a, 02:03).

However, in order for this comparison to make sense in the allegorical scenario of the video, the COVID-19 character mentions AI-5 and the Coup of 1964 as if they both were viruses, as shown in example 8.

- (8) *I saw some pictures. I did see some AI-5 signs. I carried out some research. I didn't know this virus. I found out that it also killed a lot of people. But that's the point, darling. I'm not jealous!* (Laham, 2020a, 01:51).

COVID-19 adopts the perspective of someone who is not aware of what AI-5 is, which makes sense because the virus did not arise in Brazil, and therefore it is depicted as an 'international artist' who is not exactly aware of Brazil's history. The irony in this excerpt is particularly interesting because it leads viewers to the interpretation that COVID-19 is not the only 'star' that is celebrated by Brazilians: there is H1N1 which was responsible for the Swine Flu in 2009 but there are also 'viruses' such as AI-5 and the Coup of 1964, both events that, like COVID-19, have been responsible for killing many people in Brazil. In this scenario, Brazil is simultaneously a grim and cheerful country, whose population celebrates death in its different forms.

In order to fully explain these contradictions and the irony depicted, we must resort to sociological studies on Brazilian social thought. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, one of the most prominent Brazilian sociologists, introduced the concept of the "cordial man", which was further developed by other authors. Cordiality, in this sense, refers to a very particular set of features that explain certain specificities of Brazilian society. In sum, the most important aspect of Brazilian cordiality is a certain lack of distinction between the public and private domains. It is reflected, for example, in the loose way Brazilians deal with formalities, Brazilians' usual "disrespect" for social hierarchies, and a prevailing tendency to think about issues related to the public arena – politics, for instance – in an emotional, almost passional way (Monteiro, 1996).

As Monteiro (1996) describes, for instance, one would never find in Brazil any habit resembling the Japanese practice of bowing down in order to show respect for a person in a higher "level" in the social hierarchy. In Brazil, an unarguably unequal country, it is obvious that social positions are relevant for a number of reasons. However, an interaction between people from different positions in society would not be mediated by any formalities, on the contrary, it would likely occur in a very informal manner – in which, despite inequalities, they would treat each other as equals. This does not mean that these social differences cease to exist; rather, they are masked.

These attributes concerning the concept of the "cordial man" are also related to the way Brazilians perceive themselves: as warm, informal, open-hearted people, but it brings obscure consequences, for instance, people's lack of appropriate reactions in order to protect others from the virus. In a moment when social distancing is one of the most important actions that can be adopted, Brazilians insist on gathering in rallies and going to illegal parties, even if this results in the death of thousands of people every day. Brazilians' 'loose' way of dealing with law-determined practices and formalities may not normally have imme-

diate consequences, but the pandemic presents a whole new scenario, one in which simple individual actions – such as wearing a face mask and avoiding crowds – can be the difference between life and death. Still, many Brazilians do not take these measures seriously. Of course, this can only be understood as the result of a negationist stance on COVID-19, but it is also part of very complex social dynamics, which can be partly explained by research on Brazilian social thought.

Sperber & Wilson (1981) claim that irony is a kind of echoic utterance employed in order to express the attitude of the speaker in relation to the opinion which they echoe. According to Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1981), those echoic interpretations are relevant because they inform the listener about what the interlocutor thinks about a certain topic and what is their attitude towards it. For Sperber & Wilson (1981), irony is not defined as ‘a sentence that means the opposite of what is said’, but rather it is a way for a speaker to express that they believe the opposite of what they are saying. First of all, such expression depends on the echoic nature of an ironic utterance; second, it depends on the source of the opinion mentioned; and third, it depends on identifying that the speaker attempts to keep the distance of the opinion echoed. Wilson & Sperber (2007) claim that despite their classification of irony as echoic, “the thought being echoed may not have been expressed in an utterance; it may not be attributable to any specific person, but merely to a type of person, or people in general; it may be merely a cultural aspiration or norm” (Wilson & Sperber, 2007, p. 41). That seems to be the case in this allegory, as COVID-19 does not echo specific utterances, but thoughts attributed to those who behave recklessly in relation to the pandemic.

There are other instances of language use that are interesting for our analysis and link to humor in this allegory. In her study on the effects of puns on irony, Batoréo (2017) explores polysemy in jokes in two different varieties of Portuguese with the intention of showing how polysemy/ homonymy and cultural pragmatic information mingle in order to portray irony and, finally, to produce humor. There are two similar cases that occur in this video and they are worth exploring.

First, concerning the word ‘viral’. In example 9, it is possible to notice that the ‘virus’ claims that its career went viral, meaning that it was a huge success.

(9) Then, I went *viral*. And when I went *viral*... (Laham, 2020a, 01:00)

Metaphorical concepts related to viruses are commonly used in technology. First employed to address possible threats to computer software, today – with the popularization of streaming services such as YouTube – viral has another meaning: the unexpected spread of a video or internet memes. In the context of the COVID-19 allegory, ‘viral’ was employed as a metaphor, since COVID-19 presents itself as an artist whose career ‘went viral’. However, there is irony in the fact that the speaker is the personification of a virus, and the comedian draws from the polysemous sense of the word ‘viral’ in present days to cause the intended humorous effect.

Another instance of polysemy that stands out is present in the comedian’s second video, entitled ‘Second Wave’. In this one, COVID-19 talks about its second world tour in Europe, making a clear reference to the second wave of infections that swept Europe by the end of 2020. In the video, the virus mentions its agent but soon explains that it is talking about its career agent, not a sanitary agent. In Brazilian Portuguese, sanitary inspectors are called sanitary agents which leads to ambiguous interpretations of the word ‘agent’ as polysemous.

- (10) I have to talk to my agent... not a *sanitary agent*, I'm not crazy! My *career agent*, my *manager*. (Laham, 2020b, 00:22).

Therefore, an agent could be both a career agent and sanitary agent. The use of polysemous words in a vague way are clear attempts to convey humor within the allegory 'COVID-19 is a celebrity'. These elaborations show how allegories, as a sort of extended metaphor, provide a structure that allows the speaker to introduce irony through several other mechanisms, such as metaphors and even polysemy.

Figure 4 – The 'virus' asserts it can share Brazil with other "viruses", such as H1N1 and A1-5



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4xgW4ajFXM>

Bolsonaro, who was aligned with former U.S. President Donald Trump, denied the pandemic from the beginning and adopted a negationist stance on COVID-19. For a long time, he was supported by a large share of the Brazilian population. However, as mutations of the new coronavirus appeared and infection rates rose, Bolsonaro's popularity dropped considerably. In January 2021, only 31% of Brazilians approved his government (Gielow, 2021) since a major part of the population related the negationist stance and not having planned sanitary measures on time, such as buying enough vaccines to immunize²⁰ the population, to the economic chaos as a consequence of the pandemic. While Bolsonaro traveled all over Brazil without a face mask and told his supporters that the coronavirus was a 'little flu', pandemic figures rose exponentially throughout the country. That behavior, followed by disastrous sanitary measures and foreign policies, led the Brazilian federal government to delay deals with other governments and pharma concerns to purchase vaccines. As a consequence, for months the Brazilian population had to deal with the fact that they did not have enough vaccines to immunize Brazil's population.

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/18/world/americas/brazil-covid-variants-vaccinations.html>

Brazil's federal system is in charge of a public healthcare system, which has the British National Healthcare System (NHS) as a model. The Brazilian healthcare system, called *Sistema Único de Saúde*²¹ (SUS), is free for every citizen and owns a well-structured vaccination system that carries out vaccination campaigns across Brazil every year. In fact, the coronavirus crisis revealed to the public how Bolsonaro's government is not able to cope with the responsibility of planning to deal with a crisis of this magnitude. Therefore, any discussion about how the COVID-19 crisis developed in Brazil cannot be disconnected from the Brazilian political scenario.

- (11) In our live tomorrow, I'll talk about my *complete schedule for Brazil*. [...] At the opening, we'll have *Dengue Fever*, *Achoo-Sneeze* for the children! [...] (Laham, 2020a, 02:21).

Towards the end of the video, the virus thanks Brazil for being so kind and receptive. Then, it talks about its 'gig schedule' in Brazil, in a way that emulates a celebrity talking about a festival where other artists such as "Dengue Fever" and "Achoo-Sneeze" are going to perform as well. Again, the elaboration is based on the idea that the Brazilian population is going to cheer for having all these diseases circulating among them since they behave as if they did want them around.

After the first video, the comedian group *Embrulha Pra Viagem* released another one which is called "Corona's Mutation". In this video, the virus talks about its second 'European tour' which is supposed to allegorically represent COVID-19's second wave of infections. Although the flamboyant personality presented by COVID-19 has the main goal of presenting humor, this aspect will be explored in the third video as the comedian compares the virus' mutation to a new outfit (see Figure 5). Therefore, it is possible to notice the existence of the metaphor TO MUTATE IS TO CHANGE CLOTHES. In the world of pop music, it is common to see singers, mostly female, who change their outfits several times in a single concert. In the most recent video, then, this metaphor is employed to further develop the allegory of COVID-19 being a celebrity in a world tour, more specifically a 'diva'.

Figure 5 – The Coronavirus presents a new outfit.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8z7m5nP7fo>

²¹ Unified Health System.

In Figure 5, the virus claims that its ‘change of clothes’ is also a change of personality adopted to promote its new album, extending the allegory from the first video as new events unfolded during the pandemic. It is widely known that viruses can be subject to mutations, and some of the mutations endured by Sars-Cov-2 have become notorious due to higher mortality rates. Brazil is a COVID-19 hotspot where several mutations are arising constantly. Manaus, a city that scientists had believed had reached at least some level of herd immunity after the disastrous outbreak of April 2020, faced an even worse situation in 2021 as a mutation of the coronavirus – the P.1 variant – caused a second wave of infections (Hamblin, 2021; Sabino *et al.*, 2021). This event motivated a new elaboration within the allegory in the form of the metaphor TO MUTATE IS TO CHANGE CLOTHES, attesting how powerful and productive this trope can be.

6 Final remarks

In this study, we presented some evidence of how allegory – with the support of other tropes such as metaphor – can be a productive way of expressing irony. Based on a live streaming video that portrays COVID-19 as a star, in which the coronavirus appears as an international ‘diva’ on a world tour, we discuss how the allegorical narrative on COVID-19 as a journey is intertwined with situational and verbal irony, as well as metaphor. Several features of the video ‘Corona’s Live’ hint that multimodal language can enhance verbal and situational irony among other figurative meanings. The personification of COVID-19 in the video describes by means of an allegory how different sorts of virus spread in Brazil recently, mixing ironic and satirical references to the far-right President of Brazil at the time, Jair Bolsonaro, the former Brazilian dictatorship – more specifically, AI-5 –, the Coup of 1964, as well as the consequences of a disastrous management of the pandemic by Bolsonaro’s former health minister, General Pazuello.

The ‘diva’ as a personification of COVID-19 wears light colors (see figures 1 to 7) in the first video launched in June 2020 on a YouTube channel. However, the virus’ colors get more intense (see figure 8) in reference to the novel COVID-19 variant that appeared in the Amazonas in January 2021, which led to an even deadlier, devastating second wave of the disease in Manaus, and then across Brazil, as federal authorities did little to prevent the city from running out of oxygen tanks. The media worldwide reported those events employing situational and verbal irony as the headlines discussed above reveal. In order to draw attention to the absurdity of this situation, the comedian group *Embrulha pra viagem* presented their version of the virus, a cheerful ‘diva’ who is thrilled by the “warm embrace” it received from the Brazilian population. All in all, those examples of multimodal language as well as the excerpts presented reveal how strong the ‘allegorical impulse’ can be, especially when it is intertwined with irony and metaphor.

Credit Statement

Luciane Ferreira: review and editing lead); writing; methodology; conceptualization; data analysis (equal); literature review (equal).

Cassio Morosini: review and editing; writing (support); data analysis (equal); literature review (equal).

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