

Joyful Wit on Screen: Uncovering Playful Humour in *Cecilia* for Spanish Heritage Language Learning

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Abstract: Humberto Solás's 1982 film *Cecilia* has largely been read through racial politics, colonial critique and melodramatic adaptation. Much less attention has been paid to the verbal wit, situational irony and conversational play that run through the work. The present study looks at exactly that overlooked dimension, asking what this playful humour can offer Spanish heritagelanguage (HL) education. The inquiry draws on the HumourIntegrated Language Learning (HILL) framework^[1], three classical humour theories: incongruity, superiority and relief^[2], and recent empirical work on teaching verbal irony to HL learners^[3]. A qualitative discourse analysis of key dialogue sequences brings out four kinds of joyful, non-malicious wit: ironic roleplay and pragmatic manipulation, selfdeprecating mockery, double entendre and wordplay, and incongruous juxtapositions that unsettle social scripts. What emerges is that the film's humour does not simply provide comic relief. It creates a finely textured site for observing linguistic creativity, for negotiating power imbalances, and for performing identities under colonial conditions. The paper proposes a theoretically grounded teaching framework that turns such cinematic humour into classroom practice, arguing that it can lower affective barriers, sharpen pragmatic awareness and spur metalinguistic reflection. Ultimately, *Cecilia* gives heritage learners a chance to connect with the wit and resilience embedded in Spanish, a side of cultural heritage too often eclipsed by canonical narratives of suffering. Concrete suggestions are offered, including ironydetection tasks, pragmatic comparison exercises and creativeresponse activities.

Keywords: Spanish heritage language; humourintegrated language learning (HILL); verbal irony; playful wit; pedagogical humour; pragmatic competence; *Cecilia*

Online publication: May 15, 2026

1. Introduction

A recurring difficulty in Spanish heritagelanguage teaching is how to reach learners whose oral skills

frequently outpace their conscious metalinguistic knowledge, and whose feelings about their heritage variety are tangled up with social marginalization, subtractive bilingualism and scarce exposure to formal registers^[4]. Standard classroom materials, namely textbook dialogues, cultural snippets, grammar exercises, often miss the lived reality of these learners' linguistic experience. Everyday Spanish, with its rich store of playfulness, remains largely absent, so heritage learners have little guided access to the very conversational resources that give their communities' interactions much of their vitality.

One under-examined pathway into this world is the humour woven into Humberto Solás's *Cecilia*. A free adaptation of Cirilo Villaverde's 1882 novel *Cecilia Valdés*^[5], the film is a touchstone of Cuban cinema: it was entered at Cannes in 1982, noted for its ambitious scale, lavish production, and pointed depiction of nineteenth-century colonial Cuba^[6]. Yet the rich verbal irony, wit and conversational fun that pepper the film have never been systematically examined for languageteaching purposes. This gap is worth filling, precisely because *Cecilia* contains some of the most linguistically sophisticated and culturally telling examples of playful humour in the Cuban film canon.

The argument put forward here is that *Cecilia* provides heritage learners with a rare commodity, namely a cinematic archive of joyful, resilient, linguistically rich humour born inside a brutally oppressive colonial order. Engaging with this material means tapping a counternarrative of Cuban history, one in which wit operates as a tool of survival, a mode of critique, and a means of community building. At the same time, working with such humour nurtures the pragmatic and metalinguistic abilities that heritage learners need most: recognizing irony, shifting register, deciphering culturally loaded wordplay, and using humour purposefully in social interaction. Jorge Mañach, in his 1928 essay *Indagación del choteo*, described the distinctively Cuban verbal play known as *choteo* as something that “attacks or avoids by way of poking fun at what is too serious”, functioning either to express solidarity and respect or to unsettle the power relations that people at the bottom of the social order contend with (Mañach, 1928, Mañach, 1928, as discussed in Maguire, 2020). That twin capacity, namely affiliative and subversive, makes the film's humour an especially rich resource for heritage learners who are trying to navigate the sociolinguistic complexity of their heritage language.

The paper continues as follows. Section 2 surveys theoretical work on humour in L2 and HL acquisition, foregrounding the HILL model and recent pedagogical interventions on verbal irony. Section 3 introduces *Cecilia* as a text, locating it within Cuban film history and outlining its story and main characters. Section 4 explains the methodological approach, which combines pragmatically informed discourse analysis with close attention to selected dialogue. Section 5 forms the analytic core: four types of playful humour are identified and their linguistic-pragmatic features examined. Section 6 translates the findings into classroom practice, describing concrete activities and justifying them theoretically. Section 7 draws conclusions, points out limitations, sketches future research, and elaborates the idea of “joyful wit” as a distinct pedagogical category.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Theories of Humour: Incongruity, Superiority, and Relief

Scholarship on humour regularly returns to three classical theories, each capturing something different about what makes us laugh^[2]. The incongruity view, linked to Kant, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, holds that humour springs from a sudden clash between what we expect and what we encounter, a break in a mental

script. When that dissonance is resolved harmlessly, the result is pleasure. The superiority tradition, traceable to Plato and crystallized by Hobbes, sees humour as a flash of glory at perceiving ourselves as better than others; this account often sits behind analyses of satire and mockery. The relief theory, rooted in Freud, treats humour as a safe outlet for pent-up psychic energy, allowing tensions and forbidden impulses to be discharged in socially tolerated ways.

Nowadays most researchers see these three angles not as rivals but as complementary lenses, each highlighting mechanisms that can operate together in a single humorous moment^[2]. For classroom purposes, incongruity theory is especially handy because it directs attention to observable cognitive moves: schema disruption, expectation violation, mental resolution. Yet this paper takes an integrative line, mobilizing all three theories as tools for unpacking different kinds of humorous moments in *Cecilia*. Added to this, Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH)^[24] identifies six knowledge resources, namely language, narrative strategy, target, situation, logical mechanism, script opposition, that interact when verbal humour is produced and understood. That multi-layer framework suits cinematic dialogue very well, since several dimensions of linguistic and situational meaning converge in any given scene.

2.2. Humour in Second Language and Heritage Language Acquisition

The place of humour in language learning has garnered growing interest in the last two decades. Research reliably shows that well-judged humour can lower anxiety, build rapport, help vocabulary stick and boost motivation^[7]. A systematic review by Lee and Amini found that humour positively influences learners' motivation and self-esteem, reducing anxiety, increasing enjoyment and fostering a supportive classroom climate^[29].

HeidariShahreza's HumourIntegrated Language Learning (HILL) framework pulls these threads together, offering an "umbrella term for diverse attempts to employ pedagogical humour in language education"^[1, p. 2]. HILL distinguishes humour as a *means*, humorous content that aids language acquisition, from humour as an *end* – building learners' own humorous competence. As HeidariShahreza puts it, HILL designates "a diverse suite of methods, tools and techniques where humour serves as a means (and/or an end) in language learning"^[13]. More recently, the framework has been extended through the notion of "playful creativity" in TESOL, positioning pedagogical humour as a way to channel creative language use inside instructional settings^[14].

A key lesson from this body of work is that humour comprehension and production lag well behind general language proficiency^[8]. Secondlanguage learners frequently miss verbal irony, get culturally specific jokes wrong, and produce clumsy humorous utterances^[7]. This gap is especially tricky for heritage learners, whose oral fluency can hide deficits in pragmatic and metalinguistic knowledge^[9]; they may produce perfectly grammatical sentences that nevertheless carry unintended pragmatic weight in real interaction.

Directly relevant here is the study by Shively and colleagues^[3], who tested the impact of a pedagogical intervention on humorous verbal irony in Spanish with 40 secondlanguage and heritage speakers. After just 2.5 hours of instruction targeting ironic cues and contextual interpretation, both recognition and production of irony improved measurably. The researchers observed "no significant group differences", suggesting that the teaching worked equally well for both groups^[16]. That result indicates that explicit, structured work on humorous language pays off and that heritage learners are well able to benefit from it.

2.3. Verbal Irony and Pragmatic Competence

Verbal irony, saying something that diverges from, or runs counter to, the literal meaning, is a dense site for language learning because it demands simultaneous attention to several layers: the proposition on the surface, the intended meaning, the speaker's attitude, and the social relationship between interlocutors. In Spanish, irony pops up frequently in ordinary talk, often signaled by prosody (exaggerated intonation), morphological markers (think of *claro, faltaría más*) and contextual mismatch^[3]. Shively and Acevedo have done important empirical work on assessing L2 humour production, showing that the Discourse Completion Task can reliably measure learners' capacity to produce context-fitting humorous utterances^[5].

Not all irony is alike. It forms a spectrum from light, affinity-building banter to hostile, face-threatening sarcasm. The classroom value of a particular ironic exchange hinges heavily on its social function. The playful end of the spectrum, what this paper calls "joyful wit," builds solidarity, signals group belonging, and generates shared enjoyment. Malicious sarcasm does the opposite: it can entrench hierarchies and cause hurt. In selecting classroom excerpts from *Cecilia*, the present analysis deliberately prioritizes the former kind, in line with the positive psychology turn that emphasizes learner well-being and constructive emotional engagement^[10].

2.4. Affective Engagement and Heritage Language Learning

Affect looms large in heritagelanguage education. For many HL learners, the heritage variety is tightly woven into family history, early memories and cultural identity, but it can also carry associations of shame, correction and linguistic insecurity^[11]. Research on bilingualism and emotion shows that heritage speakers often feel stronger emotional resonance in their HL than in their dominant language, yet at the same time they may experience anxiety when using the HL in formal or public settings^[12].

The recent move toward positive psychology in applied linguistics puts a premium on enjoyment, well-being and strengths-based approaches^[10]. Within that frame, humour becomes a potent tool for reshaping learners' affective connection to their HL. When learners encounter their heritage variety not as a site of shortcomings but as a medium for wit, invention and shared laughter, the emotional terrain of HL learning can shift dramatically.

This paper puts forward "joyful wit" as a specific pedagogical category. Joyful wit, as I define it, refers to humour that is (a) cognitively incongruous, (b) socially affiliative rather than antagonistic, (c) linguistically inventive, and (d) emotionally uplifting in its classroom effects. This notion brings together incongruity theory (the cognitive side), a reframed superiority theory, turned toward self-deprecation rather than othermockery (the social side), and positive psychology (the affective side). Casting joyful wit as a pedagogical resource in this way extends the HILL framework into the heritagelanguage domain and provides a principled basis for selecting and analyzing humorous material from *Cecilia*.

2.5. Choteo, Signifyin(g), and the Cultural Politics of Cuban Humour

To grasp what *Cecilia*'s humour can offer in the classroom, one needs to place it against the background of Cuban verbal play. In his 1928 essay *Indagación del choteo*, Jorge Mañach dissected a form of wordplay he saw as distinctively Cuban. Maguire summarizes it as "a kind of spontaneous *burla* (joking or poking fun), the *choteo* is fundamentally performative in nature, improvised wordplay that makes fun of something or someone" Maguire(2020). Mañach linked *choteo* strongly to Afro-Cuban culture (Mañach,1928,as cited in Maguire,2020) and stressed that it goes further than simple humour: "it attacks or avoids by way

of poking fun at what is too serious”, serving either to express solidarity and respect or to unsettle power relations enacted from below (Mañach, 1928; Maguire, 2020).

This tradition shares intriguing parallels with what Henry Louis Gates Jr. called “Signifyin(g)” in African American language use, a pervasive mode of indirect, ironic, creative wordplay that achieves social ends that direct speech cannot (Gates, 1988; see Maguire, 2020). Both forms operate through indirection and the deft manipulation of linguistic resources. In *Cecilia*, the verbal behavior of figures like Cecilia herself and Mercedes illustrates exactly this lineage: the talk is entertaining and strategic, funny and subversive at the same time. Recognizing that cultural backdrop enriches both the analysis of the film’s dialogue and the way its humour can be used in HL classrooms, where learners may well encounter comparable forms of wordplay in everyday family and community conversations.

2.6. Cuban Spanish: Linguistic Features and Humorous Affordances

Cuban Spanish has certain features that create distinctive opportunities for humour. Colloquial Cuban Spanish has been called “quite a peculiar, perhaps a unique phenomenon”, an “amalgam of imprints of many languages, as well as of a host of ethnic and religious traditions”^[6]. Among the relevant traits are the aspiration or loss of syllablefinal /s/, the neutralization of /r/ and /l/ in coda position, characteristic intonation contours, and a rich vocabulary drawing on African languages (especially Yoruba and Bantu), as well as English and French influences^[18].

For the analysis of *Cecilia*, the presence of AfroCuban religious terms, namely items linked to Santería (also called *Regla de Ocha*), is particularly relevant. Solás deliberately inserts Santería scenes into his adaptation “to underscore the ongoing role of blacks and mulattos in Cuba’s cultural and political life”^[10]. In the dialogue examined in Section 5.3, Mercedes invokes *Babalá* (a Santería deity) and *los santos* (the saints or orishas) as a humorous warning directed at a white police officer. For heritage learners of Cuban background, or for HL learners from other Spanish-speaking regions wanting exposure to dialectal diversity, these words open the door to discussions about linguistic variation, cultural syncretism and the pragmatics of indirect speech acts.

Cuban wordplay also makes heavy use of polysemy, homophony and creative deformation of standard forms, as in Mercedes’s whimsical shift from *misericordia* to *caricordia*. This type of linguistic inventiveness echoes what KobielaKwaśniewska has identified as the mechanisms of literary wordplay in Cuban literature, “anagrams, palindromes, neologisms, polysemy and ambiguity”^[6]. By examining such moments in *Cecilia*, heritage learners sharpen their metalinguistic awareness of how their heritage variety twists and reshapes linguistic forms, an awareness that can deepen both their appreciation of Cuban cultural expression and their own ability to produce playful, contextsensitive language.

3. *Cecilia* (1982): Narrative, Context, and Characters

3.1. Historical and Cinematic Context

Humberto Solás, a key figure of the New Latin American Cinema movement and director of the acclaimed 1968 film *Lucía*, directed *Cecilia*. The picture was a Cuban-Spanish co-production between ICAIC (Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos) and Impala S.A., and it represented the largest financial commitment ICAIC had ever undertaken at that time^[14]. Solás himself described his approach as a “historical” take on melodrama, using the genre’s conventions to probe the racial and social tensions of 19th century Cuba^[15].

The 1982 megaproduction was ICAIC's costliest project yet, simultaneously released as a six-hour miniseries for Spanish television, a four-hour cinema version for Cuban viewers, and a two-hour cut for international distribution^[9]. Film historian Michael Chanan remarked that "no Cuban film ever prodded a raw nerve more insistently than this one, revealing in the process the dangers of interfering with certain types of cultural icons"^[9]. Critics were largely united in their outrage at Solás's *versión libre* of Villaverde's canonical novel, though Solás personally regarded *Cecilia* as a success until his death in 2008^[9].

Set in Havana during the first half of the 19th century, the film unfolds against a backdrop of expanding sugar plantations, an intensifying slave trade, and mounting frictions between colonial authorities, native-born criollo elites, and both enslaved and free Black and mulatto populations^[16]. The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) casts a long shadow, and the film repeatedly alludes to conspiracies, uprisings and the heavy surveillance that saturated colonial life. Duke and Block note that Solás directed *Cecilia* "with the aim of spurring interest in a recovery of national identity, culture, and historical memory within Cuba"^[30].

3.2. Narrative Synopsis

The story follows Cecilia (Daisy Granados), a beautiful mulatta whose mother and grandmother groom her to use her looks as a route to social advancement. She fixes her attention on Leonardo Gamboa, the nihilistic, conflicted son of a wealthy slavetrading landowner. Their tortured affair plays out in a world, as one synopsis puts it, "condemned to disappear before the vertigo of cultural and racial syncretism"^[17, synopsis], as Cuba edges toward the independence wars.

Several narrative strands intertwine: Cecilia's juggling of suitors (the elderly Don Cosme, the revolutionary Pimienta, among others), Leonardo's strained relations with his family and his fiancée Isabel, the conspiracy of the *Soles y Rayos de Bolívar* independence movement, and the constant spectre of slave rebellion. Villaverde's novel made much of an incestuous relationship between Cecilia and Leonardo; Solás suppresses that element and shifts the emphasis toward revolutionary possibility and the impossibility of cross-racial love inside the colonial order^[18]. By labelling his film a "*versión libre*" of *Cecilia Valdés* in the opening credits, Solás signaled his aim "to refigure the classic nineteenth-century novel to allow it to better meet the needs of the revolutionary present"^[10].

3.3. Key Characters and Their Verbal Styles

Several characters speak in distinctive ways that make them especially useful for analyzing playful humour:

- **Cecilia Valdés (Daisy Granados):** The protagonist, a mulatta of exceptional beauty and sharp tongue. Her speech is marked by strategic ambiguity, ironic deferral and a polished ability to channel the desires of the men who pursue her. Her humour often serves as a defensive tool for preserving agency when her body is objectified and her choices are limited.

- **Leonardo Gamboa (Ismael Arias):** The white criollo heir, an intensely contradictory figure who swings between cynical detachment and genuine vulnerability. His wit often takes a self-deprecating turn, as in his lament: "*Soy un fracaso, no sé decir las palabras justas que ablandan el corazón de las mujeres*" ("I'm a failure, I don't know how to say the right words to soften women's hearts").

- **Mercedes Ayala (Raquel Roviela):** Cecilia's friend and confidante, a pragmatic, streetwise mulatta whose humour is earthy, direct and frequently bawdy.

• **Pimienta (Gerardo Riverón):** A mulatto revolutionary, deeply in love with Cecilia but rejected by her. His humour carries bitterness and irony, as when he accuses: “*Claro, pero si yo fuera un blanquito de piel blanca te tendría a mis pies como una escalera*” (“Of course, but if I were a little white boy with white skin, I would have you at my feet like a ladder”).

• **Uribe (Miguel Benavides):** A mulatto tailor and minor conspirator, whose speech features elaborate politeness formulas and deferential irony.

• **Doña Rosa (Belinda Núñez):** Leonardo’s mother, a sharp-tongued, no-nonsense maternal figure who delivers cynical advice with a deadpan expression. Much of her humour targets the absurdities of her husband’s slavetrading enterprise and her son’s romantic misadventures.

3.4. The Politics of Humour in Solás’s Adaptation

Solás’s decision to foreground wit, irony and verbal play in *Cecilia* is itself a political gesture. By showing characters who wield irony, wordplay and strategic ambiguity as survival mechanisms within a brutal colonial system, the film pushes back against a long tradition, in both literary criticism and public reception, that reduces Afro-Cuban and mulatto characters to tragic victims without agency. The joyful wit in the film functions in the manner of what Austin and LahrVivaz, writing about adaptations of *Cecilia Valdés*, might call “refractive” adaptation: not a faithful copy of the source, but a creative reimagining that bends the original through present concerns, here including the imperative to recover and celebrate the linguistic inventiveness of marginalized groups^[18].

For HL educators, this political dimension is not an optional extra. When students analyze Cecilia’s ironic roleplay or Mercedes’s Santería-infused wordplay, they are not just practicing pragmatic interpretation; they are also connecting with a cultural tradition where humour functions as a resource for resilience, social critique and community affirmation. Keeping both linguistic form and cultural politics in view distinguishes the approach advocated here from narrower, purely instrumental uses of humour in language teaching.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive discourse-analytic approach, anchored in pragmatics and conversation analysis but adjusted for scripted cinematic dialogue. The corpus comprises selected dialogue sequences from the screenplay of *Cecilia*, supplemented by the author’s own viewing of the film (accessible through ICAIC’s digital platform and select streaming services). Sequences were chosen on the basis of three criteria: they display playful, non-malicious humour; they are linguistically dense, containing irony, wordplay or noticeable register shifts; and they are pedagogically manageable in terms of length and complexity for classroom use.

4.2. Analytic Framework

The analysis integrates several perspectives:

1. **Speech act theory** (Austin, Searle), attending to what characters accomplish with words: flattering, threatening, deflecting, mocking, and how humorous framing modulates those acts.

2. **Gricean pragmatics**, with particular attention to the conversational implicatures that arise when speakers flout the Cooperative Principle’s maxims (quantity, quality, relation, manner). Verbal irony, as Grice

noted, typically flouts the Maxim of Quality by saying something literally untrue.

3. **Multimodal awareness**, recognizing that film humour often depends on the interplay of dialogue, facial expression, gesture and miseenscène. Although verbal humour is the primary focus, brief notes are taken of how performance choices reinforce or complicate the spoken text.

4. **Humour typologies**, distinguishing among verbal irony, sarcasm, self-deprecation, parody, wordplay and situational incongruity.

5. **The *choteo* framework** derived from Mañach, which situates Cuban verbal humour within its cultural and political setting, insisting that playful wordplay can entertain and subvert at the same time.

4.3. Analytical Categories

A preliminary survey of the corpus revealed four recurrent patterns of playful humour:

- Type I: Ironic roleplay and pragmatic manipulation
- Type II: Self-deprecating mockery
- Type III: Double entendre and wordplay
- Type IV: Incongruous juxtaposition and schema disruption

Each type is examined below with illustrative dialogue excerpts, attention to linguistic features, and discussion of pedagogical relevance.

5. Analysis: Types of Playful Humour in *Cecilia*

5.1. Type I: Ironic RolePlay and Pragmatic Manipulation

Cecilia's skill lies in saying one thing while meaning another, performing deference while retaining control. A telling example comes from a sequence with Don Cosme, an elderly, wealthy suitor trying to negotiate access to her. The exchange runs as follows:

Don Cosme: “¿Bailamos? La señorita ha recibido la orden e hizo. ¿No?”

Cecilia: “Sí.”

Don Cosme: “¿Y el calesero se ha portado correctamente?”

Cecilia: “No hay ningún reproche.”

Don Cosme: “Parto próximamente por la Hacienda. ¿Al fin escogeré la señorita o visitarme en mi garsonier?”

Cecilia: “No.”

Don Cosme: “¿No? No sea cruel. ¿Es que la señorita se empieza con verbasufrir?”

Cecilia's brief “Sí” and “No” are a lesson in ironic minimalism. By refusing to expand, she flouts the Maxim of Quantity, leaving Don Cosme to fill the gap with his own anxieties and longings. The humour comes from the jarring distance between her bland, compliant surface (“No hay ningún reproche”) and the power dynamic beneath it: through her very passivity, she is asserting control. This is exactly the kind of move Mañach identified as *choteo*'s capacity to destabilise hierarchy from below; despite her subordinate position, Cecilia briefly inverts the power relation through linguistic indirection (Mañach, 1928; Maguire, 2020).

From a teaching perspective, this kind of exchange forces learners to attend to what is left unsaid as much as to what is spoken. For heritage learners, Cecilia's strategic irony offers a model of sophisticated understatement and implicature that may be missing from their previous HL exposure. The scene also invites

discussion of how social hierarchies shape language choices, and how those hierarchies can be momentarily subverted through pragmatic skill.

5.2. Type II: Self-Deprecating Mockery

Leonardo Gamboa, for all his privilege, regularly resorts to self-deprecation as a way of deflecting criticism, handling awkwardness, and perhaps giving voice to genuine feelings of failure. One striking passage illustrates this:

Leonardo: “*Cuando un hombre galantea a una mujer... ¡lo... muchas tonterías!*”

Leonardo: “*De qué manera decir si no... desde que te vi en el baile no hago otra cosa que pensar en ti. ¿Suena ridículo, verdad? Pues es cierto. No hago otra cosa que pensar en ti. He soñado con verte de nuevo. ¿Tú más literatura, pero así es como habla el corazón, ¿qué le vamos a hacer? Soy un fracaso, no sé decir las palabras justas que ablandan el corazón de las mujeres, soy tosco y voy al grano.*”

Leonardo’s confession oscillates between sincerity and ironic self-consciousness. By preemptively naming his own words as “ridiculous” and himself as a “*fracaso*,” he performs vulnerability while also insulating himself against rejection, if Cecilia laughs at him, he has already laughed at himself first.

Looking at through a superiority lens, self-deprecation lets the viewer (and Cecilia) occupy a momentarily superior position, producing a pleasurable if slightly uncomfortable humorous effect. From an incongruity perspective, the humour arises from the clash between Leonardo’s social station (son of a powerful landowner) and his abject, stumbling verbal performance. Yet what makes this more than mere weakness is its strategic deployment: apparent vulnerability is also a calculated move to win sympathy and lower Cecilia’s guard. That tension, between performed vulnerability and underlying intent, is the sequence’s most sophisticated comic layer.

Pedagogically, self-deprecating humour gives heritage learners a template for managing embarrassment and negotiating face-threatening situations. In many Spanish-speaking communities, self-deprecation is a conventionalized politeness strategy; encountering it in authentic material helps students see it as a communicative resource, not an expression of genuine inadequacy.

5.3. Type III: Double Entendre and Wordplay

The screenplay of *Cecilia* is studded with double entendres, often tinged with sexual suggestion. These moments showcase Spanish’s capacity to pack multiple meanings into seemingly straightforward phrases, depending on context, intonation and shared knowledge.

Take the exchange between Nemesia and Cecilia:

Nemesia: “*Pues ve cambiando la cara, que te traigo un buen recado. ¡Mira, allí! Se llama Leonardo Gamboa. Te quiere conocer.*”

On the surface, *te quiere conocer* is a harmless “he wants to meet you.” But the phrase can also carry the implication of carnal knowledge. The humour intensifies with Nemesia’s knowing delivery. This is a textbook example of what the GTVH calls “script opposition”: the same utterance activates two incompatible interpretive frames, and the comic charge comes from their collision^[24].

A more overt instance surfaces in the confrontation between Mercedes and Tonda, a police officer:

Tonda: “*¿Pero qué coño está pasando aquí?*”

Mercedes: “*Nada que puedo. ¡Portúrte ni a ti ni a tus hombres! Anda, arrancá a quié como un rayo. A no ser que quieras que... a despertar a Cantalapiedra.*”

Tonda: “*¡Ay, Babalá!*”

Mercedes: “*Sia, cara, mi-caricordia, misericordia para tu espíritu. ¡Sí, sí! ¡Sí, sí, cara! ¡Ye tu ves? Eso te pasa por meterte donde dije te llama. Con los santos no sé juega.*”

Mercedes’s appeal to Santería, namely *Babalá, los santos*, works as a humorous threat. She never says outright, “I will curse you,” but her performative utterance, delivered with evident authority, is enough to terrify Tonda. The comedy hinges on the incongruity between Mercedes’s low social status (a mulatta woman in colonial Havana) and the rhetorical power she wields in this moment, drawing on Afro-Cuban spiritual authority to unnerve a white policeman.

This sequence is a pedagogical goldmine. It introduces heritage learners to Afro-Cuban religious vocabulary (*Babalá*, the playful deformation *caricordia* from *misericordia, santos*). It models the pragmatic technique of indirect threat through ritual speech, communication that operates through allusion and shared cultural knowledge rather than blunt assertion. And it embodies the *choteo* tradition at its most politically pointed: wordplay that entertains while unsettling power relations (Mañach, 1928; Maguire, 2020).

5.4. Type IV: Incongruous Juxtaposition and Schema Disruption

Some of the film’s most memorable comic moments result from the collision of different discursive registers within a single dialogue, what can be termed incongruous juxtaposition. The exchange between Leonardo and his mother, Doña Rosa, is a case in point:

Doña Rosa: “*Pero has estado llorando, Leonardo! Eso sí que no lo puedo creer. Ante mis ojos veo la reedición del pasaje de Cristo y la Magdalena. ¡Quién me lo iba a decir! El duro, calculador y viril corazoncito de Leonardo Gamboa se estremeció y conmisericordia ante la suerte de una infeliz mujerzuela. ¡Vaya, hombre! Que se ve que hay dos Leonardos y que uno trata de que el otro no salga a flote, porque el Leonardo que da la cara es un cobarde y se avergüenza del otro y no encuentra otra solución que aplastarle.*”

Leonardo: “*¿Pero qué coño dices, miserable? Que seas valiente y te muestras tal cual eres. ¡Vete al carajo! ¡Déjame en paz! ¡Maldito calor! Habría que planchar mil chaquetas al día para poder pagar el alquiler y la carne, las viandas. ¡Vida de perro!*”

Doña Rosa’s speech careens from mockbiblical grandiosity (“*la reedición del pasaje de Cristo y la Magdalena*”) to a kind of psychoanalytic dissection (“*hay dos Leonardos*”), all wrapped in exaggerated theatricality. Leonardo’s response shifts abruptly from outrage (“*¿Pero qué coño dices, miserable?*”) to an absurd lament about ironing a thousand jackets to pay the rent: a worry wildly at odds with his reality as a wealthy heir. The clash between his actual privilege and his performed identification with the urban poor produces humour. The sequence also illustrates the relief theory: the explosive burst of profanity and absurdist complaint releases the tension built up in the preceding heated exchange.

For learners, the scene models several linguistic phenomena: register switching (biblical → psychoanalytic → profane), the use of vulgarity for comic emphasis (“*coño,*” “*carajo*”), and the ironic deployment of class discourse. Analyzing this sequence gives heritage learners a chance to reflect on how social position influences language and how incongruity can generate both laughter and critique.

5.5. Summary of Findings

The analysis reveals that *Cecilia* offers a varied and rich assortment of playful humour, spread across characters and contexts. Four main types emerged, each with its own linguistic profile and social function:

Type	Primary Mechanism	Characteristic Features	Social Function
Ironic roleplay and pragmatic manipulation	Flouting of Gricean maxims (Quantity, Quality)	Strategic ambiguity, understatement, minimal responses	Maintaining agency under constraint
Self-deprecating mockery	Superiority (self-targeted)	Explicit failure labelling, anticipated rejection, strategic vulnerability	Facesaving, affiliationseeking
Double entendre and wordplay	Semantic ambiguity, script opposition	Polysemy, homophony, ritual speech, playful deformation	Ingroup bonding, indirect critique
Incongruous juxtaposition	Schema disruption	Register clash, anachronistic references, abrupt topic shifts	Social commentary, catharsis

Crucially, the humour identified is overwhelmingly joyful rather than malicious. Even when characters mock each other, or themselves, the humour does not systematically demean or exclude. This is consistent with the “light humour” styles that psychological research associates with agreeableness, extraversion and well-being^[19].

Two further theoretical observations emerge. First, the humour in *Cecilia* is deeply *situated*: getting the joke depends on shared cultural knowledge (Santería, colonial social hierarchies, Cuban verbal traditions) that heritage learners may possess to varying degrees. This turns humour comprehension into a cultural and historical exercise, not just a linguistic one, which greatly enriches its pedagogical value. Second, the film’s humour is *strategic*: characters use irony, self-deprecation, wordplay and incongruity not simply for fun, but to achieve concrete social goals: gaining advantage, defusing tension, asserting agency, subverting power. Grasping that strategic dimension is essential for learners who aim not only to understand but also to produce context-appropriate humorous talk in their own interactions.

6. Pedagogical Implications

6.1. A Theoretical Justification for Cinematic Humour in HL Classrooms

The findings support incorporating *Cecilia*’s playful humour into Spanish HL curricula on several grounds.

Affective engagement. Heritage learners often experience their HL as a source of anxiety, particularly in academic settings where home varieties may be implicitly or explicitly devalued^[11]. Humour changes that emotional landscape: when learners laugh with the characters on screen, they undergo positive emotional engagement that lowers the affective filter and opens them up to instruction^[7]. Mercedes says to Cecilia at one point, “*Sonríe siempre y siempre serás buscada y anhelada*” (“Smile always and you will always be sought after and desired”), cynical in context, but it captures the social force of a joyful attitude.

Pragmatic development. The gap between fluent speaking and pragmatic skill is well attested^[9]. Learners may know a phrase like “*No hay ningún reproche*” without realizing when it is being wielded ironically; they may produce grammatically sound sentences that carry unintended pragmatic weight. *Cecilia* supplies a dense corpus for explicit instruction in pragmatic phenomena: irony, implicature, politeness, register shift and strategic ambiguity.

Metalinguistic awareness. Working out why a line is funny, how irony is signaled, what cultural knowledge a joke presupposes, develops learners’ capacity to reflect on language as a system. That

metalinguistic capacity feeds directly into academic literacy in Spanish, and the close examination of wordplay draws attention to phonological, morphological and semantic features that might otherwise stay below the surface.

Cultural knowledge. *Cecilia* immerses learners in the world of 19th-century colonial Havana while at the same time opening windows onto enduring elements of Cuban Spanish: Afro-Cuban religious lexicon, colloquialisms, address forms, pragmatic norms. Understanding the humour demands understanding the context, making the film a vehicle for content-based instruction. Moreover, introducing learners to the *choteo* tradition validates their home linguistic practices as objects worthy of academic study.

6.2. Classroom Applications

Building on the analysis, the following activities are proposed, moving from receptive to productive tasks:

Activity 1: Irony Detection and Interpretation. Learners watch selected scenes that feature ironic roleplay (e.g., the Don Cosme exchange). After viewing, they pinpoint the target of the irony, the literal meaning, the implied meaning, and the cues (prosodic, gestural, contextual) that mark the ironic reading. A worksheet prompts: “What does Cecilia actually say? What does she mean? How do you know?”

Activity 2: Pragmatic Comparison. Learners compare two versions of a scene: the original and a rewritten one with irony removed or replaced by literal statements. They discuss what is lost in the literal version and why the ironic version works differently. This foregrounds Gricean implicature. An extension task asks learners to find instances in their own interactions where the Cooperative Principle is flouted, linking classroom work to real-world language use.

Activity 3: Wordplay Workshop. Learners locate double entendres or ambiguous phrases in the screenplay (e.g., *te quiere conocer*), then invent their own ambiguous Spanish sentences that support two interpretations, discussing how context picks out the intended meaning. More advanced learners can explore the GTVH categories: script oppositions, logical mechanisms, narrative strategies, and apply them to their own creative productions.

Activity 4: Self-Deprecation RolePlay. Learners analyze Leonardo’s self-deprecating monologue and identify its pragmatic jobs (face-saving, affiliation-seeking, softening rejection). They then practice crafting self-deprecating turns in controlled roleplays (responding to a compliment, apologizing for a small error), with explicit guidance on cultural norms around self-deprecation in the Spanish-speaking world.

Activity 5: Register Clash Analysis. Learners examine scenes with incongruous juxtaposition (e.g., Doña Rosa and Leonardo) and identify the different registers or discourse types that collide. They then take an ordinary passage and deliberately inject a register clash (say, describing a daily errand in biblical language) and analyze the humorous effect.

Activity 6: Creative Response: Writing a Humorous Scene. Learners compose a short scene in Spanish that incorporates at least two of the four humour types analyzed. They perform or record their scenes for peer feedback, with attention to pragmatic fitness and cultural appropriateness. This activity embodies the HILL view of humour as both means and end, building comprehension and productive competence together.

Activity 7: Choteo Analysis and Production. Building on Activity 6, learners study the concept of *choteo* as a culturally embedded form of Cuban verbal humour, examine instances in *Cecilia* (e.g., Mercedes’s Santería-inflected threat), and compare them with verbal play from their own heritage varieties. They then create short dialogues that capture *choteo* in present-day contexts, paying attention to how wordplay can entertain and challenge at the same time.

6.3. Addressing Potential Challenges

Using humorous material in HL classrooms is not troublefree. Some forms of humour, especially those that lean on stereotypes or mockery, may strike learners as offensive rather than amusing. Care in choosing excerpts is therefore vital, the sequences examined here were picked precisely for their joyful, non-malicious quality. Also, learners may initially have difficulty recognizing irony or wordplay because of limited pragmatic experience. Scaffolded teaching, with explicit explanation of cues and multiple examples, helps overcome that hurdle.

Another difficulty is that *Cecilia* is a dramatic film, not a comedy. The humorous moments sit inside a larger story of suffering, oppression and tragedy. The intention is not to reduce the film to its funny parts, but to argue that noticing the humour enriches interpretation and yields pedagogical possibilities that purely tragic readings miss. Sensitivity to tonal complexity is essential. As one critic noted, the film “succeeds at times at its excessive theatricality”^[8], and it is that very theatrical excess that creates the space for the register clashes and incongruous juxtapositions analyzed above.

Learner variability also matters. Studies suggest that the links between humour, motivation and self-esteem are not identical for every learner, so individual differences need to be kept in mind when bringing humour into the classroom^[29]. Teachers using *Cecilia* should therefore remain alert to diverse learner responses and provide alternative entry points for those who do not immediately connect with the film’s humour.

6.4. Extending the Framework: From Film to Everyday Interaction

Although the focus here has been on *Cecilia* as a source of pedagogical humour, the end goal of HL education is larger than the analysis of scripted lines. Learners should be able not only to recognize and interpret humour in a film but also to produce and enjoy humorous language in everyday talk with family, friends and community. The framework can be extended beyond the film with tasks that ask learners to gather, analyze and create humorous language from their own heritage settings.

For instance, learners could record (with permission) a brief humorous exchange from a family conversation, transcribe it, and use the typology developed here to examine its mechanisms. Alternatively, they could produce digital stories or short videos incorporating *choteo* or analogous forms of wordplay, sharing their creations with classmates for feedback. Such activities bridge the classroom and live linguistic experience, treating heritage learners’ home practices as legitimate objects of academic inquiry.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Humberto Solás’s *Cecilia* is a rich, undertapped resource for Spanish heritagelanguage education, thanks in particular to its repertoire of playful humour. Drawing on humour theory, pragmatics and research on HL acquisition, the analysis identified four varieties of joyful wit in the film, namely ironic roleplay and pragmatic manipulation, self-deprecating mockery, double entendre and wordplay, and incongruous juxtaposition. Each type displays distinctive linguistic features and social functions, and each carries clear pedagogical applications for strengthening affective engagement, pragmatic ability, metalinguistic awareness and cultural knowledge.

The paper makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends HILL into the domain of Spanish heritagelanguage education, showing how cinematic humour can be systematically analyzed and turned into

classroom practice. Second, it puts forward “joyful wit” as a distinct pedagogical category, blending insights from incongruity theory, the *choteo* tradition and positive psychology to characterise forms of humour that are cognitively stimulating, socially affiliative and emotionally positive. Third, it challenges the neglect of humour in Cuban film scholarship, demonstrating that paying attention to moments of wit, irony and play deepens our grasp of the film and its characters, particularly Cecilia herself, whose strategic language use as a tool of survival and critique has been overshadowed by readings that stress her victimization.

Alongside these theoretical moves, the paper has offered a practical framework of seven classroom activities, arranged from receptive to productive, that give HL teachers concrete, theoretically grounded ways of incorporating cinematic humour into their practice.

Future research could test heritage learners’ actual responses to the film’s humour through empirical studies: Do learners pick up on the ironic cues? Do they find the material engaging? Does exposure to cinematic humour sharpen their pragmatic performance on later measures? Comparative work with other Cuban or Latin American films would also be valuable, as would research that treats the development of humorous competence as a pedagogical goal in its own right. Studies could also probe how heritage learners from different Spanish-speaking backgrounds, not only those of Cuban descent, respond to *Cecilia*’s humour, shedding light on cross-varietal comprehension and the role of shared cultural knowledge in humour appreciation.

To close, I return to Cecilia’s own words as she prays to her patron saint: “*Dame riqueza y poder, mi virgencita. Quiero un blanco que me adore y me haga su señora, reina mía.*” On one level this is a plea for upward mobility through marriage. But it is also a display of wit, a knowing, ironic enactment of the very logic that confines her, delivered with a trace of playful defiance. Hearing that edge, recognizing that irony, means hearing Cecilia as a subject rather than an object, a speaker rather than someone spoken for. That, in the end, is what heritagelanguage education should aim to nurture: learners who can hear, and produce, the joyful wit that runs through their own heritage. The Choteo tradition reminds us that humour is not a diversion from serious linguistic and cultural study but one of its most vital channels, a form of expression through which communities voice critique, build solidarity and assert their creative agency in the face of constraint.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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