

## “Critical Parents Against Plaster” The MMR vaccination drama as satirical parody

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MedieKultur 2020, 68, 4-24

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | [www.smid.dk](http://www.smid.dk)

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### **Abstract**

*In this study, I propose to regard written news satire as a vital vehicle in combating scientific disinformation. But in order to do so, we must examine the construction of spoof news. How does written news satire convey its social criticism by way of language, discourse and style? And what happens to the content? My case is a spoof article of the 1998 MMR vaccination scandal as rendered in the Danish news satirical website Rokokoposten (2015). The analysis is based on Jakobson’s communication model (1960), Raskin’s semantic model of humour (1985) together with Ermida’s (2012) and Simpson’s (2003) analyses of the discourse of satire. To this will be included a novel approach which regards satire as a kind of intralingual translation. Thus, this paper sheds light on the issue of the news satirist as a knowledge broker.*

### **Keywords**

*Satire, discourse, style, humour, science communication, translation*

## 1. Introduction

Science communication aims at spreading knowledge of scientific results to the general public in order to inform them about truths and to advocate against misinformation (unintentionally inaccurate information) as well as disinformation (false information intentionally created to deceive) (Fallis, 2015, p. 403; Leßmöllmann et al., 2020, p. XII). One of the most impactful cases of disinformation in medical history took place in 1998 when British MD Andrew Wakefield published proposed findings that linked the combined childhood MMR vaccination with the development of autism (1998). This news spread rapidly in worldwide mass media, on the internet and in social networks to such a degree that large groups of parents began to distrust the vaccination and even campaign against it, which caused serious health risks. Wakefield's results were retracted 12 years later as they were finally exposed as a medical hoax based on seriously manipulated evidence. But the damage had been done: some parents still distrust childhood vaccines (DeStefano & Shimabukuro, 2019).

The mass media have, in part, been blamed for the global vaccine hesitancy, as they have paid too much credit to the study (Dobson, 2003; Jackson, 2003; Speers & Lewis, 2004). The mass media's misinformation of Wakefield's disinformation has appealed to people who "tend toward complete mistrust of government and manufacturers, conspiratorial thinking, denialism, low cognitive complexity in thinking patterns, reasoning flaws, and a habit of substituting emotional anecdotes for data" (Poland & Jacobson, 2011, p. 98). And since the disinformation had the chance to spread like a virus for 12 years, the attempt to change these people's minds seemed like an enormous headache:

There is no guarantee that debunking the original study is going to sway all parents. Medical experts are going to have to work hard to try to undo the damage inflicted by what is apparently a rogue medical researcher whose work was inadequately vetted by a top-ranked international journal ("False autism study has done untold harm" *The Montreal Gazette*, 2011).

If scientific evidence to the contrary is not convincing enough, other means of science communication must be called for. And this is where satire comes in. The purpose of satire is to expose, by way of ridicule, the ailments of society and to confront the public collective misconceptions (Ermida, 2012, p. 191). Thus, satirical takes on the vaccination scandal may serve as knowledge education for the public. This article addresses this issue with special attention to the language of written news satire: As a kind of intralingual translation of science results into a new kind of discourse where fact and fiction are blended and blurred, satire might cure readers of their sick apprehensions, as it were. But exactly how is this done by way of language and style?

This study will perform text analysis of a Danish spoof article of this particularly poignant case of disinformation. The article was published in the Danish news satirical website *Rokokoposten* [The Rococo Post] in 2015, equivalent to the American *The Onion*,

and here the hysteria is presented as health fanatic parents' absurd fear of exposing their children to plaster casts in case of bone fracture. The article has been carefully selected, as analyses of *Rokokoposten* are unexplored territory in both Danish and international research, and as it represents a right-wing take on the vaccination drama.

### 1.1. Related studies

Disinformation is misleading information that has the function of misleading (Fallis, 2015, p. 403) – that is, there is an *agenda* behind dissemination of the false information. Whatever Wakefield's medical agenda might have been, the scientific publication was fraudulent and thus had the function of misleading the receivers into believing that the results were correct. And even if science communication aims to convey so-called "truths" of tested theories based on gathered data and their interpretation (Callon, 1999), previous studies have concluded that when trying to change people's minds, opinions and attitudes towards health science issues, such as hoaxes, the attempt may backfire (e.g., Betsch et al., 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). When people are met with rules, suggestions and guidelines which threaten or limit their personal behavioural freedom, they may experience strong reactions termed *psychological reactance*. This is an arousal which in fact strengthens the individual's preexisting view or attitude and causes the person to resist being persuaded. This is the conclusion in a study that investigates to which degree hesitant parents would change their views of the disinformation that the MMR vaccine leads to autism when presented with informational messages (Nyhan et al., 2014). New information seems to be analysed in consistency with one's prior beliefs and convictions (Kunda, 1990). Thus, if you hold certain opinions about vaccines, you are going to process new truthful information in such a way that your preexisting opinions are preserved and confirmed – even though this means turning the blind eye to the persuasiveness of scientific evidence. To use a classical rhetorical appeal form, such people will not be persuaded by *logos* alone.

Studies have shown that turning to *pathos* in the shape of narrative statements, or *pathos* in combination with *logos* by, e.g., combining narrative statements with statistics, may be more persuasive (Hopfer, 2012). As an example, humour has proved to have an almost healing effect as it may minimise anxiety and the urge to assume a negative and critical attitude (Nabi et al., 2007; Young, 2008).

A recent study, which takes this path, examines the reception differences in parent audiences confronted with either a Jon Stewart message from the satirical TV series *The Daily Show*, or being presented with a more informative text about the MMR vaccine (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2018). They find that the satirical message reduced psychological reactance and increased the parents' awareness of the seriousness of the diseases being targeted by the vaccine to a larger degree than when presented with the serious text. The study, however, suffers from the limitation that it does not distinguish between satire and other types of humour, but just uses the term "humour" as a broad category includ-

ing satire, even though different types of humour may elicit different types of responses (e.g., Cline & Kellaris, 2007; Frymier et al., 2008; Wanzer et al., 2010; Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). One study to testify how specifically satire works in the communication of science, such as climate change, is Becker and Anderson (2019) who conclude that exposure to one-sided satire, such as an article from the American spoof website *The Onion* claiming that climate changes are a hoax, is much more persuasive and engaging than exposure to two-sided satire presenting a more balanced view between believers and non-believers of climate change.

Thus, this study sets out to further probe the nature of written news satire especially as a science communication vehicle for correcting disinformation about the MMR vaccine. Even though some recent studies about the use of satire to communicate science in the media have emerged (Feldman, 2017; Yeo & Brossard, 2017), they never take on linguistic or stylistic approaches to satire. And rather than being a quantitative study of structuring reception trends as in the above-mentioned study by Moyer-Gusé, Robinson and McKnight (2018), this study will attempt to scrutinise the texture of satirical language and style in order to reach an understanding of the tools needed to maybe alleviate and nuance readers' preexisting ideas and convictions.

### 1.2. News satirists as "knowledge-brokers"

Journalists working with science play an important role as "knowledge-brokers" (Nisbet & Fahy, 2017, p. 3). Thus, the mediation of science, including health science, aims at conveying scientific research and results to the public with a critical view to the functions of institutions, assumptions and political issues:

Rather than portray science and scientists as truth's ultimate custodians, knowledge brokers reveal for readers how science really works. When controversies related to fraud, bias, interpretation, scandal, hype, honest errors, or conflicts of interest emerge, those who are attentive to this form of journalism are more likely to be able to judge when such behaviors are outliers or the norm (Nisbet & Fahy, 2017, p. 3).

As an example of satirical news taking on exactly this role, Feldman has demonstrated how American satirical television shows may cut through controversies which the public struggle to find heads or tails in:

Whereas traditional news coverage of debates over issues such as climate change, evolution, and vaccine safety has been criticized for employing a he-said/she-said approach that parrots talking points from each side rather than evaluating the merits of these claims", *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* in fact side with the scientific consensus by way of mockery of biased and unsound skepticism (Feldman, 2017, p. 4).

The shows may offer more time to accessible in-depth exploration of the issues than the brief traditional news coverage of scientific matters. In this way, this type of news satire

may foster more active engagement and critical reflections in the viewers (Feldman, 2017, p. 6). On the other hand, the shows are often politicised, taking one side instead of another, and thus satire might not always raise the desired awareness, especially when it is viewed by audiences with different political and ideological agendas than the ones represented in the satirical show.

But is this comparable with written spoof news articles on the internet? They do not set out to offer more lengthy disentanglement of current controversies and misconceptions, but rather present the matter in an almost unrecognisable form of artful critique. Even though they mimic traditional news articles in form, their content parodies real or fictionalised news stories with a strongly hilarious and corrective purpose. But before analysing the above-mentioned Danish case, a greater understanding of satire is called for.

Research questions:

- How does written news satire of scientific disinformation in the Danish news site *Rokokoposten* convey its social criticism through language and style?
- What happens to the content of the satirised in such satire?

## 2. Theories of satire

In order to answer the basic questions *what* satire is and *why* it is used, we may consult *The Oxford English Dictionary* where we find the following definition:

A poem or (in later use) a novel, film, or other work of art which uses humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticise prevailing immorality or foolishness, esp. as a form of social or political commentary (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2020).

One of the most famous examples of a satirical essay is Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal For preventing the Children of Poor People From being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and For making them Beneficial to the Publick" (Swift, 1729) in which he anonymously suggests that poor Irishmen may increase their fortunes by selling their children as food to the rich. This may furthermore alleviate the population problem of the country. The text is well-known for its flagrantly shocking ideas such as cooking specific dishes and for its dry and heartless style on such a delicate matter, no pun intended.

Thus, satire is the use of mockery in order to display and criticise human wrongs and foolishness rather than communicating these things directly and precisely. And "humour and laughter, especially if directed at others, can serve the function of teaching social norms and values through embarrassing others" (Riesch, 2015, p. 771). Satire is not the same as irony, which is a tool to be used in order to convey meaning through language which ordinarily signals the opposite of the intended meaning in order to elicit a humor-

ous or emphatic effect (Wales, 2001, pp. 224-225). Satire is also different from parody, which is an imitation that does not really aim to make a statement but is only used for the purpose of being funny (Wales, 2001, pp. 286-287). Parody may, however, be used as a tool in satire in order to mock or criticise – hence the title of this article. Finally, sarcasm is also related to but differs from satire as it is a kind of irony which purely intends to convey contempt.

It is also important to stress that satire must not be confused with disinformation. When you use jokes, sarcasm and satire, you know what you say is false, but you do not intend to mislead the receiver, and you expect the receiver to understand the non-literal meaning: "Hence, satire and disinformation are mutually exclusive categories" (Young, 2018, p. 130). However, as Reisch stated, satire is not for the sake of mockery only. The mockery has a corrective or educational function which will be elaborated on below, but first I would like to explain the nature of humour in general from Raskin's point of view which has paved the way for an understanding of satirical style.

### 2.1. *Humour*

Raskin's semantic theory of verbal humour has gained wide precedence due to the explanatory power of the idea of scripts, formerly known as schemas or frames, which was presented in full in 1985 and later revised and extended together with Attardo in 1991. The 1985 definition of the so-called script-based lexicon is the following:

The script is a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it. The script is a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker and it represents the native speaker's knowledge of a small part of the world. Every speaker has internalized rather a large repertoire of scripts of "common sense" which represent his/her knowledge of certain routines, standard procedures, basic situations, etc., for instance, the knowledge of what people do in certain situations, how they do it, in what order, etc. (Raskin, 1985, p. 81).

Besides scripts of "common sense", every individual has scripts determined by their personal background and lifeworld as well as scripts shared with certain groups, such as family, workplace, etc. Since Raskin and Attardo's model of joke representation is vast, intricate and carries threads to many corners of philosophies of science, I will solely aim at explaining how the above notion of script may contribute to this study's task of analysing satirical techniques and style.

First, jokes are based on the principle of incongruity, meaning that a surprising clash or opposition must occur to create the effect of humour. On an abstract level, jokes rely on an opposition of scripts, such as the *real* vs. the *unreal*, the *actual* vs. the *non-actual*, *normal* vs. *unnormal*, and *possible* vs. *impossible*. On a lower level, these can be manifested through contradictions such as *good* vs. *bad*, *life* vs. *death*, *sex* vs. *non-sex*, *money* vs. *no-money*, *high stature* vs. *low stature*, etc. (Attardo & Raskin, 1991, p. 308). These catego-

ries are, however, not cast in hierarchical stone as our perceptions of them depend on the chunks of information surrounding the words used to represent these dichotomies in a joke. For instance, *life vs. death* and *money vs. no-money* may be perceived as subcases of *good vs. bad* depending on the speaker's and listener's lifeworlds of internalised knowledge and experience. This means that the understanding of a joke depends on culturally shared presuppositions of what is "common sense" to the speaker and hearer for the joke to be successful.

A joke, then, is a partial or complete overlap of or clash between two or more scripts evoked by a certain choice of words in a way so that it somehow makes sense to combine them. Raskin's own joke may illustrate this: "Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in" (Raskin, 1985, p. 100). This joke can be interpreted as involving two scripts: *doctor* and *lover*. If the listener were to take the story at face value, s/he would only hear the obvious *doctor* script, but when the implied *lover* script is evoked and given prominence in the punchline, even though it is not made explicit, the point of the joke will be understood by the listener. To this can be applied the scripts of *marriage* and *disease*, which may be viewed as one and the same thing depending on the speaker's and listener's opinions about them. And there might be more scripts at stake here, but I will limit myself to the above. So, to repeat, all four scripts may only be possible if the two parties share the culturally presupposed scripts surrounding the words "doctor", "patient", "bronchial", "whisper", "young and pretty wife" and "come right in", that is. In other words, the success of this joke is only possible if doctors and lovers are not perceived as diametrically opposite, but as sharing overlapping features so that it makes sense to pair them: Doctors and lovers are both humans, adults, occasionally male, they both *treat* the people they are in touch with so that they may feel better, and there is a level of physical contact involved. The same is the case with the scripts of marriage and disease, which may rely on shared perceptions of being trapped in a locked position which one would like to escape, not being one's true self and not feeling well and happy. Finally, all these scripts may on a more abstract level express what is good and what is bad based on what is culturally regarded as common sense.

## 2.2. *The language of satire*

Literature on satire defined as mockery with the purpose of displaying and criticising human wrongs and foolishness, especially literary satire and television satire, are abundant. Less attention has been paid to the question of *how* such mockery is in fact created. One major work on the language of satire is, however, Simpson (2003). He designs, among other things, an abstract structure of satire consisting of 1) a thesis (also called a prime), i.e., the echo of a real anterior discourse event such as a text, person, situation, discourse etc.; 2) an antithesis (also called a text-internal dialectic), which is the very collision of ideas – that which generates the incongruity and oppositional irony; and 3) a synthesis, i.e., the

satire itself which is regarded as a new point of view on what is being satirised (Simpson, 2003, pp. 88-90).

Simpson's compositional method of the collision of ideas may be characterised by way of the intradiscursive principle of metonymy and the interdiscursive principle of metaphor. They are points on a continuum, i.e., not contradictions: The intradiscursive principle of metonymy operates by way of either a) saturation (more of the same, inflation), e.g., oxymoron, exaggeration, parody, caricature, sarcasm, burlesque, hyperbole; b) attenuated focalisation (less of the same, deflation), e.g., understatement, diminution; and c) negation (inverting positive polarity to negative), e.g., reversal, inversion. The interdiscursive/cross-generic principle of metaphor operates by way of either a) combination, e.g., juxtaposition, allusion, analogy or irony; b) merging; and c) interdiscursivity (mixing discursive elements). And these methods may use various stylistic hooks, such as tone, wit, puns, labelling, etc. (Simpson, 2003, pp. 127-140).

For the purpose of this study, Simpson's model provides a foundational understanding of what language can do to make a text with one apparent surface meaning reveal by way of hybridity that deep down it is a sly criticism of something completely different.

### 2.3. News satire

To Raskin's understanding can be added Ermida's more recent and detailed linguistic model of written news satire which will be unfolded later. Her definition of this genre is as follows:

spoof news in the press can be regarded as a *parodic form* (an intertextual game wherein two texts – the original one and the fake one – are set against one another resulting in comic incongruity) with *satirical content* (i.e. with a critical intention of laying bare, by way of ridicule, the wrongs of politics and society) (Ermida, 2012, p. 191).

Thus, unlike Raskin's joke which consisted of overlapping scripts that were grasped by the listener in the end, news satire imitates a certain text type, but with a completely different content and agenda, resulting in a multivoiced type of discourse in which fact (the real) and fiction (the mimetic) are blended and blurred. Indeed, the intersection of criticism and entertainment becomes incongruous or directly absurd (Ermida, 2012, pp. 186-187). In this way, satire can be clearly distinguished from parody, which is merely an exercise in humorous imitation. But satire makes use of parody as a vehicle with a pedagogical aim, "ridiculing society into improvement" (Ermida, 2012, p. 190).

Such spoof news typically take the form as articles written in mainstream journalism, especially on April Fools' Day, or as entire fake newspapers or online websites. The American website *The Onion* and the British *Private Eye*, for example, are notorious. The Danish online counterpart *Rokokoposten* [The Rococo Post] will be the subject of investigation in this study.

#### 2.4. *Satire as intralingual translation*

Another way to regard parodic news satire, I propose, is to see it as a kind of "intralingual translation", to use Jakobson's term, or a type of rewriting, which is "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language" – unlike interlingual translation, which is translation between different languages (Jakobson, 1952/2002, p. 114). Examples of intralingual translation may be easy-readers for children, subtitling for the deaf, localisation, *précis*-writing, summaries, reporting, paraphrases, retranslations of classics and expert-to-layman communication which is quite central in health communication, such as patient information leaflets, etc. (Zethsen, 2018, p. 83). Satire may be included here, I suggest. For the readers to react in a certain way about a certain topic, the satirist translates a message into a different message by way of words from the same language, which are furthermore very similar to the words which might have been used if the satirist had decided to state his or her message directly and clearly instead.

To reformulate, in contradiction to proper interlingual translation, which aims at *equivalence* of both form and content, satire translation strives to disrupt equivalence and to play by the rules of *incongruence*. In a given medium, interlingual translation transfers the content of a text into familiar content in a new form of expression (language), whereas satire translation turns the content of a "text" (situation, event, text, discourse, person, etc.) into new content in a familiar form of expression in a given medium. In fact, satire translation's main purpose is to defamiliarise the familiar. To use familiar terminology in translation studies, the overall strategy of satire translation can be characterised as *target-text oriented* rather than *source-text oriented*, meaning that it a) hopes to achieve a certain target-text effect rather than blindly retaining the source text's form and content; b) functions as a mediation between parties in a communication rather than communicates loyally what the source text says; and c) is produced as a covert translation rather than an overt translation (Schjoldager et al., 2010, p. 72). Finally, satire translation not only reverses things, it does so in a multivoiced, hybrid, or double-voiced manner, to use Bakhtin's term (Wales, 2001, p. 286). So next, we need to consider the linguistic composition of the creation of such a voice.

#### 2.5. *A linguistic model*

To return to Ermida's model of spoof news, we learn that she, too, makes use of Raskin's script theory and is well aware that the notion of script is essentially a pragmatic one, as scripts depend on the participants' worldviews:

Indeed, unlike the lexicon, which is listed in dictionaries, scripts cannot be "dictionarised", exactly because the correspondences which bring them together, or the nodes on the script web that connect them, depend on each speaker's frames of references, living experience, and general culture (Ermida, 2012, p. 191).

1.	2.	3.
<p><b>Intertextual/translational component</b>                      (thesis/prime + antithesis/ dialectic – parodic imitation of form + change of content) = translation/rewriting/ defamiliarisation/ disruption/ incongruity</p>	<p><b>Critical component</b>                      (judgmental nature: disapproves, criticises certain aspects of society or social agents)</p>	<p><b>Comic component</b>                      (the following arrangements are responsible for the humorous style)</p>
<p><b>I.a.) Structural component</b>                      (parody of the conventional news layout, format, story, formal textual organisation)</p> <p><b>I.b.) Stylistic component</b>                      (parody of the type of language, register, syntax, vocabulary, etc. of a news article)</p>		<p><b>III.a) Lexical component</b>                      (the words must evoke, trigger or activate scripts that are opposite and overlap)</p> <p><b>III.b) Pragmatic component</b>                      (the text must be constructed in such a way that the reader’s general culture or frames of reference are important players in interpretation. Carries knowledge, presuppositions, allusions etc.)</p> <p><b>III.c) Rhetorical component</b>                      (must be constructed in such a way that the text not only creates script incongruity but also intensifies it -  <i>Compositional method/techniques (two points on a continuum, i.e. not contradictions):</i>  <b>Metonymic (intradiscursive):</b>                      a. Saturation (more of the same, inflates) e.g. oxymoron, exaggeration, parody, caricature, sarcasm, burlesque, hyperbole                      b. Attenuated focalization (less of the same, deflation) e.g. understatement, diminution                      c. Negation (inverting positive polarity to negative) e.g. reversal, inversion  <b>Metaphoric (interdiscursive/cross-generic):</b>                      a. Combination, e.g. juxtaposition, allusion, analogy, irony                      b. Merging                      c. Interdiscursivity (mixing discursive elements)</p>

Table 1: A linguistic model of the synthesis of written news satire operating by way of various scripts of culturally preconceived common sense.

And as with Simpson’s thesis, antithesis and synthesis, she, too, includes three components in her framework: the intertextual component, the critical component and the comic component (Ermida, 2012, pp. 194-195). First, the intertextual component consists of the text’s absorption and transformation of another text or event upon which the satire is built, and thus it includes the subcomponents of parodic structure (format, layout) and style (register, syntax, vocabulary). This component, I propose, is a stage

of intralingual translation. Second, the critical component consists of the judgmental nature of the text. And third, the comic component includes the linguistic material which imbues the text with the humorous flavour, such as the subcomponents of lexis, pragmatics and rhetoric. Thus, the flexible model merges Ermida’s framework and descriptors with Simpson’s distinctions and my added view on written news satire as a kind of intralingual translation. It is my hope that this model may serve as a dynamic linguistic toolbox to unpack the underlying scripts which cause the humorous effect in the piece of written news satire I have selected as my case of an atypical piece of science communication.

### 3. Method

My method of analysis will follow the above linguistic model which has been based on the theoretical framework in all of section 2. This consists of theories of humour, news satire and the discourse of satire as well as my own contribution of intralingual translation where the satirical effect of the target text is achieved by way of a kind of defamiliarisation. As for the first component, I will analyse the communication situation based on Jakobson’s model of communication as it emphasises the relevance of the contextual setting.

### 4. Textual analysis

#### 4.1. The intertextual/translational component

The satirical article may be placed in the following communication model based on Jakobson’s 1960 model of interpersonal communication. I have extended it with Simpson’s structural components as well as embedded it in a translational situation (ST = source text; TT = target text) in order to emphasise the model’s significant interrelationship with my theoretical frame of reference.

<u>The ST situation:</u>			<u>The TT situation:</u>	
	ST context		TT context	
	(thesis)	(antithesis)	(synthesis)	
ST sender	ST (the satirised)	ST receiver/sender (satirist)	TT (satire)	TT receiver (satiree)
	ST code (language)		TT code (language)	
	ST medium		TT medium	

Figure 1: Communication model as intralingual translation.

In this case, the ST is not a specific text in itself, but rather the whole ST context. As described in the introduction, the subject of ridicule is the worldwide MMR vaccina-

tion scandal based on Wakefield's fraudulent article in *The Lancet*. Further studies have ensured that there is no link between the MMR vaccination and the development of autism, but the then sensational news spurred a worldwide distrust in childhood vaccinations epitomised in the so-called anti-vaxxers:

"Anti-vaxxers" are parents around the nation who believe that vaccinations are a "human rights violation." There's Guggie Daily, the blogger name of a Missouri mom, and Meghan Heimer, a single mother of five, who asks in her blog, "Has there ever been a single study proving that our current vaccination schedule is safe for our children? No. There hasn't. Not. A. Single. One." (Canal, 2017).

We are talking about parents who present themselves as health experts, even after the truth of the matter has been revealed. Guggie Daily continues: "They [vaccinations] are an optional, experimental product based on an unproven theory. Informed, consenting adults can choose to take them if they want. But it's medical malpractice to force them onto non-consenting children." In the American context, such parents are typically wealthy, non-Hispanic white, educated and married couples covered by private health insurance. They are misled by the massive "noise" of disinformation on the internet which represents the rhetorical fallacy that if many think so, then it must be true. Such noise fuels conspiracy theories and general distrust in the healthcare system, and as such the anti-vax movement is identified by the World Health Organization as one of the top ten global health threats of 2019 (Georgiou, 2019).

We may thus infer that the ST sender and medium must comprise the news media reports of this situation venting the critical parents' voices. Thus, the language related to the ST situation must be the language of news interviews with these parents, either in newspapers, online or on TV. The ST receivers are the readers or viewers of these news. And among them we find the Danish satirist who decides to translate the cultural memory of the entire ST situation into a new perspective – the antithesis.

The TT is a satirical news report on a group of parents who are critical of the use of plaster casts to heal bone fracture as the American plastic surgeon Dr. Brooke Taylor – who graduated from the Turkmen Gas and Oil University – suspects a connection between plaster casts and autism. Her article from 1982 has later been retracted, which forms further proof to the parents that she must have been correct in her presumptions. They are convinced that there is a powerful plaster industry which has been pulling the strings and thus endangered the health of their children. As a result, the parents make their own natural plaster, for instance made of macerated palm leaves, soymilk and lean meat adapted to the child's specific blood type.

The TT medium is *Rokokoposten – siden 1732* [The Rococo Post – since 1732], which is a Danish non-profit news satire website which gives the following disclaimer: "Rokoko-Postens nyheder er fiktive. Enhver lighed med personer – levende, døde eller bare meget sløje – er sandsynligvis tilsigtet" [The news of the Rococo Post is not real. Any resem-

blance with persons – either living, dead or just rather unwell – is probably intentional]. It was established in 2010 and has grown into one of the country's most prominent satirical websites with over 200,000 visitors a month. The Facebook group is also immensely popular with 117,000 followers. Their articles have been published in *Jyllands-Posten* and *Berlingske Tidende*, two major right-wing newspapers, since 2012, and they have published a book collection of selected articles. The three editors, Marta Sørensen, Mikkel Anderson and Zenia Larsen – the TT senders – all have journalistic or academic backgrounds. It is unclear whether it is one of them or one of their many freelance writers who may take credit for this article.

The TT receivers are the readers of *Rokokoposten*. These are people voluntarily subscribing to a website or Facebook group which specialises in news satire. Or they are readers of their section in the above-mentioned newspapers. So, they are certainly not looking for the truth. Rather, it must be assumed that they are looking for entertainment and a good laugh. In an interview, the co-editor Marta Sørensen says that their target group is people of 24-40 years old with a higher education. She adds that their texts have an intellectual aura and may be a bit dry, semi-academic social satire that does not speak to the lowest common denominator. And the more self-righteous and rid of humour people in the public sphere are, such as vegans and anarcho-liberalists, the more they are prone to ridicule (Brix, 2017). Thus, *Rokokoposten's* target group must be willing to suspend disbelief and to understand and appreciate a collision of worldviews. However, it remains unknown whether the TT receivers' worldviews correlate with the TT senders' ditto. And this is where the educational aspect comes in: If they disagree, there is ground for learning and development, but if they agree, the decoding will merely be one of silent agreement and taunting.

The TT code will be presented in the next section.

#### 4.2. The structural component

The spoof article (*Rokokoposten*, 2015) parodies the conventional form and layout of a traditional news article. It has a catchy headline which can be translated into "Critical parents: plaster leads to autism". Then follows a concise lead which covers the questions of who, what, when, why and how of the conflict: "Brækkede arme og ben kureres ikke med farlig kemi i form af vådt kalciumsulfat, der øger risikoen for autisme, mener en gruppe bekymrede forældre, der lader deres børns knogler vokse sammen med naturgips" [Fractured arms and legs are not cured by way of dangerous chemistry in wet calcium sulphate which increases the risk of autism, state a group of concerned parents who let their children's bones heal in natural plaster].

Then it turns to an engaging personal story about the 7-year-old girl Isabella who fell from a tree in the garden three weeks ago and broke her arm. The article then integrates a supporting quotation from the girl expressing how it hurt, but that she is content now that her arm has been covered in "klistet" [paste], which is a yellow-green plant-based



**RokokoPosten**  
SIDEN 1732

☰

## Kritiske forældre: Gips giver autisme

📅 16 marts, 2015

📁 Indland, Kultur, Videnskab



Foto: Yulia, Bigstock

Brækkede arme og ben kureres ikke med farlig kemi i form af vådt kalciumsulfat, der øger risikoen for autisme, mener en gruppe bekymrede forældre, der lader deres børns knogler vokse sammen med naturgips.

*Illustration 1: The article in Rokokoposten.*

material. Isabella's parents tell the reporter that they have decided not to cover her arm in plaster, but in a natural material consisting of macerated palm leaves, soymilk and lean meat adapted to Isabella's blood type.

The ensuing sub headline "Magtfuld gipsindustri" [Powerful plaster industry] opens a paragraph of background explanation. When the parents arrived at the emergency unit, the doctor told them he would make a plaster cast, but then the parents protested as there was no doubt in their minds that it would lead to autism and that it was a completely unnatural way to heal broken limbs. The mother, Sara Nørretoft Jensen, backs it up with a reference to a 1982 article by Dr. Brooke Ridge Taylor, an American plastic surgeon, who assumed that she had found a link between dry plaster and autism. Her medical degree is from the Turkmen International Oil and Gas University, and her article was later retracted, which must be a sign that she was on the right track, according to the two parents.

The father, Rasmus, is then quoted for saying that all he knows is that some very

powerful people in the plaster industry have been pulling the strings so that children will continue to be exposed to dangerous chemistry. He explains how he obtained the recipe for natural plaster from a woman in a Facebook group called CPAP: Critical Parents Against Plaster.

The last sub headline concludes that the body is capable of "Heler sig selv" [Healing itself]. The members of CPAP discuss how the plaster industry actually stirs up a paranoid atmosphere against natural bone healing. Rasmus and Sara agree in an impactful final quotation: "Vi stiller os meget skeptiske over for det hysteri, der opstår, når man ser en skæv arm eller et halt ben, som om kroppen ikke var i stand til at helbrede sig selv!" [We are very sceptical towards the hysteria that may arise when you see a crooked arm or a lame leg, as if the body was not capable of healing itself.]

#### 4.3. *The stylistic component*

The language of the article in *Rokokoposten* also parodies the type of language, register, syntax and vocabulary of typical news articles as it is very informative, descriptive and concise. It has a clear and easy tone including the active voice throughout in presenting a factual account of the events. Thus, there is neither a level of subjectivity nor ambiguity in the article. And yet there is, as the critical component shines through.

#### 4.4. *The critical component*

The underlying criticism and ridicule are aimed at all the parents who blindly read and accept the results of dubious research in the holy name of naturalness. Especially when this is to such a degree that they in fact themselves endanger the healing of their children's fractured limbs as we see it in the mentioning of crooked arms and lame legs, which may be the result of healing attempts without the protective hard case of calcium sulphate plaster casts. The following section will explain how this criticism comes through by way of the comic components.

#### 4.5. *The comic component: The lexical component*

The text's words must activate incongruous and overlapping scripts in order to release the humour. The lead, for instance, introduces the reader to "farlig kemi" [dangerous chemistry], "vådt calciumsulfat" [wet calcium sulphate] vs. "naturgips" [natural plaster] which activate the basic scripts of the *unnatural* vs. the *natural* as we are presented with the scripts of *chemistry* vs. *nature* – in other words *man-made* vs. *nature-made* equalling the basic script of *bad* vs. *good*, according to the parents. As opponents to man-made chemistry, the parents decide to use palm leaves, soymilk and lean meat adapted to the child's blood type. Clearly, we detect the script of dangerous chemistry vs. elements from nature which, interestingly enough, sound as if they hark from modern trendy eating habits of plant-based ingredients and low-calorie intakes. The element of palm leaves is especially funny as they are hard to come by in Denmark. The same goes for the blood type detail, as it gives associations to the hyped blood-type diet which has little evidence of success. But then again, the recipe originates from an American Facebook community which Sara and Rasmus revere faithfully. So, in all this we also have the scripts of *science* vs. *pseudo-science* in which the pseudo-science is paradoxically linked to the scripts of *food* or *eating*. This clearly emphasises that the parents' decision is rather far out.

Further on we enter the medical world of experts as we hear about the doctor in the emergency room. Immediately after that we hear about the shady plastic surgeon from an exotic university – clearly sponsored by the oil industry – apparently having assumed results about the link between plaster and autism. This triggers a script of *experts* vs. *non-experts* or *competence* vs. *non-competence*. The parents take the advice of a non-expert where they should have listened to the real doctor in the real healing environment of a

hospital. They seem to confuse a colliding script of *protection vs. violation* as their misguided trust in natural *healing* in fact results in *disabling* results.

The fact that Dr Taylor's article was retracted – like Wakefield's – rings no alarm bells with the parents. On the contrary, they take it as further proof that she was correct as they adhere to the script of the plaster industry as *the bad guys vs. the good guy*, i.e., the plastic surgeon of the Turkmen Gas and Oil University. The name of the university signals indeed a powerful industry pulling the strings, but according to the parents it is, on the contrary, the plaster industry which has a hidden agenda. The name of the university furthermore triggers the script of *north vs. south* where rumour has it that Northern universities are regarded as more competent than Southern universities. But in this case the roles have been reversed.

Towards the end of the article, we learn that the parents are "skeptiske" [skeptical] towards the "paranoide stemming" [paranoid atmosphere] created by the plaster industry, signalling the scripts of *sensical vs. non-sensical*. In total, all this brings us to the basic scripts of *us vs. them* and *truth vs. lie* which pervade the whole text – and indeed also the source situation. In this is embedded the script of *power to the medical industry vs. power to the people*.

#### 4.6. *The comic component: The pragmatic component*

At this level, the text must contain scripts that relate to the reader's knowledge of the world, culturally and/or individually. This is also the case with the article under scrutiny. We learn that the scripts centred around presuppositions of an *us vs. them* script in various versions, such as experts vs. parents, northern universities vs. southern universities, what is natural and healthy and what is artificial and dangerous. The portrayal of the parents is a Danish counterpart to the protesting American mothers mentioned previously. And these American mothers are also referred to as the Danish parents getting their recipe from them in a Facebook group carrying an English name. This makes it look more trustworthy to the Danish reader. The image we get of the parents is loaded with connotations to modern trendy eating habits and diets which have nothing to do with conventional hospital treatment. They are parents who mean well but happen to jeopardise the well-being of the children in their biased paranoia.

The academic, intellectual and perhaps right-wing readers of *Rokokoposten* may certainly recognise such parents from the media and from people around them. They may even be somewhat aligned with them. In *Rokokoposten's* Facebook group, 1.3 thousand followers have liked this story. Most of the comments applaud the article and contribute with more satire developing or adding to the points in the text. Some comments cry out to parents to vaccinate their children as soon as possible, and some comments add that apparently "spelt" [dinkel, or hulled wheat] or tofu also lead to autism, as these are some of the preferred intakes among well-off leftist parents who subscribe to an organic and vegetarian lifestyle in the area of Østerbro in Copenhagen. Such mothers have been

called "spelt-mødre" [dinkel wheat mothers]. In this way the lexical components may not activate the same scripts in readers far away from this reality of the source text situation in the translation.

#### **4.7. The comic component: The rhetorical component**

This component consists of the compositional tools and devices which emphasise and intensify the script incongruities. Simpson proposed the two techniques of metonymy and metaphor as points on a continuum, i.e., not contradictions. The metonymical technique is intradiscursive as it stresses either saturation (more of the same), attenuated focalisation (less of the same) or negation (inverting positive to negative). The metaphoric technique is interdiscursive as it adds new material by way of, e.g., combination or merging.

In the article, the metonymic techniques are evident in the caricature of the above-mentioned segment of parents in Copenhagen. Their health and nature concerns are blown out of proportion as their remedy for fractured limbs consists of ingredients typically used in cooking. Also, the fishy Dr. Taylor's medical degree seems to originate at a dubious university whose name accentuates that oil money can buy scientific results. Also, the fact that she is a plastic surgeon exaggerates the reader's visualisation of someone who changes the shape of people's bodies drastically. This is a hilarious inflation of a more ordinary medical doctor in an emergency room. The attenuated focalisation can be seen in the parents' outrage over people's distrust in the fact that broken limbs can heal themselves. This understatement is slyly incorporated in the descriptions of crooked arms and lame legs which form a diminution of the grave matter. Negation is also present in the way all the incongruous scripts play with the inverted roles of what is *good* and what is *bad* according to the reader subscribing to vaccinations. Thus, this element is related to the pragmatic component of culturally and individually determined life-worlds of internalised knowledge and experience.

The metaphorical technique becomes obvious in the way the grotesque damages of anti-vaxxers, or anti-plasters, are presented by way of a clear, concise and dry newspaper tone of voice. So, a kind of subjective craziness is merged with objective factuality. Secondly, the far-fetched analogy between a serious disorder such as autism and a minor accident such as breaking an arm is also striking and makes the abstract more concrete. And thirdly, another interdiscursivity is found in the way the critical parents against plaster are portrayed by way of the discursiveness of modern healthy dieting. Two subjects which normally have nothing to do with each other.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

So, to answer the research questions: The written news satire of the selected article in *Rokokoposten* conveys its social criticism through a collision of opposing and overlap-

ping ideas which we may call scripts. These scripts are constructed by way of intertextual, critical and comic components which form the language, discourse and style of satirical parody. In this particular case, the text is a devious intralingual translation of the vaccination reluctance elicited by Dr. Wakefield's fraudulent study into an absurd plaster scepticism endangering the shape of children's bodies. Thus, the familiar content of the satirised turns into a defamiliarisation with overlapping reminiscences of the familiar as the form stays the same – even though the content changes. In this way, the Danish article lays bare the wrongs of certain trends in society.

But as noted in the beginning of this study, the satire is politicised, as it is a right-wing take on typically leftist or radical health fanatics' paranoid reluctance to obey medical health authorities. As with Feldman's description of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, the Danish article in *Rokokoposten* "side[s] with the scientific consensus by way of mockery of biased and unsound skepticism" (Feldman, 2017, p. 4). This double-voiced fictive mockery has a corrective and educational function, as it conveys the silliness, or downright stupidity, of MMR vaccination distrust.

To conclude, I propose that news satirists may serve as knowledge-brokers in the way that they, as Nisbet and Fahy suggested (2017, p. 3), may be able to *both* cut through the ailments of scientific lies, scandals, fraud and bias in the pursuit of scientifically proven "truths", *and* charge public reactance to new insight. The article in *Rokokoposten* testifies to this as it confronts some established alternative truths of the public and awakens diagnostic contemplation on health choices. The linguistic and stylistic technique of translating the familiar into something which is unfamiliar is a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt* [alienation effect] which forces the reader to perceive and contemplate the familiar in a new way. Thus, satire is called for, as we need to be able to cut through the noise of scientific disinformation to a much larger extent than before and challenge people's habitual expectations. We need to establish that critical thinking skills are of the essence – that *pathos* must give way to *logos*.

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