

Book review

Brône G., Feyaerts, K. and Veale, T. (eds.) (2015). *Cognitive Linguistics and Humour*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 248 pp.

The relationship between Cognitive Linguistics (hereafter CL) and humour resembles – to use a metaphor – a long-lasting flirtation. There is certainly mutual interest and also a well justified potential for this to grow into a fully developed romance, yet this is not actually the case; the reason being that there is a long-term “significant other” and that is the General Theory of Verbal Humour (hereafter GTVH), the offshoot of Raskin’s Semantic Script Theory of Humour as developed by Attardo (1994). The book at hand comes as one more attempt to demonstrate how CL qualifies as a suitable (or at least promising to be one) partner – in literal terms, how CL can prove an appropriate unified framework for the analysis of verbal humour. This endeavour builds on previous attempts made by the same editors in the past, in which they have aimed to pinpoint weaknesses and limitations of the GTVH and to showcase, instead, the strengths and assets of CL (Brône & Feyaerts 2004; Brône et al. 2006). This volume sets out to further explore the four directions for humour research as outlined in Brône et al. (2006), namely humour and creativity; construal operations in humour; an interplay of qualitative and quantitative findings; and empirical methods on the processing of humour.

The volume consists of contributions from a number of cognitive linguists who have worked (some of them extensively) on humour and/or its different manifestations (e.g. irony) and contains also a chapter by Attardo. As expected, a handful of concepts that are central in the cognitive linguistics literature, such as constructions, frames, metaphors, construals, mental imagery, embodiment, intersubjectivity, etc., are recruited in order to account for the conceptual structure and understanding of humorous utterances, as well as of particular humorous phenomena, such as irony and teasing. Similarly, different methodologies are implemented, including corpus analysis and experimental studies. As the editors explain in their Introduction (“Humour as the *killer-app* of language”), the ten chapters of the book revolve around four sections. Although not explicitly articulated as such, they certainly amount to four easily identifiable themes that can be summarised as follows: (a) constructional approaches to humour (Antonopoulou, Nikiforidou & Tsakona; Bergen & Binsted); (b) the role of metaphor and other construal operations in humour (Veale; Attardo; Müller); (c) experimental evidence for humour interpretation and figurative language understanding (Giora, Fein, Kotler & Shuval; Bryant & Gibbs; Coulson); and (d) corpus approaches to interactional humour (Dore; Feyaerts, Brône & De Ceuckelaire). The volume thus aspires to cover a variety of theoretical and methodological issues derived from CL and pertinent to humour research, with the aim to remedy what the editors deem the malady of most humour research: essentialism and reductionism. Different labels such as *incongruity resolution*, *appropriate incongruity*, *relevant inappropriateness*, *benign violation*, and *mutual vulnerability*, all seem to reduce humour to “an essentialist core” (p. 2) as the editors suggest in their Introduction, which, according to them, does not do full justice to “the interesting

nuances that the underlying theories have to offer” (ibid.). That said, the editors clarify that, although the GTVH assigns a key role to incongruity resolution, it aims to go beyond “*just* incongruity resolution” (p. 3; emphasis in the original) and at the same time they tacitly imply (as one can easily guess) that CL can provide us with an alternative to this. In what follows, I aim to offer a brief and inevitably sketchy description of the contributions in the volume and then attempt to evaluate them against the overall aims of the volume as set by the editors.

The book opens with a chapter by Antonopoulou, Nikiforidou, and Tsakona, who put forward a constructional analysis of humour in accordance with previous research along these lines (Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2009, 2011). Construction Grammar being a model that also extends to discourse phenomena, it can adequately explain, according to the authors, how discourse incongruity gives rise to a humorous effect “provided that the audience recognises the original genres and context” (p. 42). The authors examine cases whereby language users exploit discourse patterns (both schematic and substantive) that are conventionally associated with well established genres (such as literary editions) or discourse settings (e.g. “We need to talk” in couple talk) and transfer them to another genre or discourse context. Construction Grammar therefore appears as a unified framework for the analysis of humour, whether this is associated to words, grammatical and syntactic patterns, and discourses. Bergen & Binsted’s contribution, next, is also situated in a constructional context, although that of embodied theories of language, which assume that language understanding involves simulating perceptual or motor content enacted by linguistic structures. Such mental imagery, they argue, seems to apply also to humorous utterances and, in particular, either to their humorousness or to their interpretability. Mental imagery is thus combined with constructional pragmatics, as well as metaphors and frames, to enable a joke to make sense or to be funny. Veale’s contribution that follows after stands quite distinctly in the volume in that he makes a rather provocative claim, namely that jokes are similar to thought experiments, i.e. conceptual scenarios developed in a scientist’s mind (rather than in a laboratory) with the aim to test the validity of a theory. The bulk of Veale’s argument is that both jokes and thought experiments “take aim at the limitations of received wisdom” (p. 69), thus calling the hearer to switch to an alternative scenario and revisit existing category boundaries. Many jokes, according to Veale, are humorous thought experiments and, conversely, many thought experiments are philosophical jokes and, like jokes, can have an interpersonal dimension apart from their subversive role.

The next three chapters are dedicated to humour and metaphor, whose relationship has long been considered that of conceptual similarity since both phenomena arise from bringing together different and often opposing scenarios. Attardo delves into the much debated category of humorous metaphors, suggesting that this is rather an umbrella term covering as diverse cases as inherently funny metaphors and failed metaphors that are involuntarily funny. Attardo adopts Oring’s (2003) view of humorous metaphors as mappings “in which the incongruity [...] is not fully resolved by the interpretation (finding appropriateness/resolution) of the metaphor” (p. 95). Although such an account of metaphor as fully resolved incongruity would hardly be accepted by most cognitive linguists, Attardo prefers to remain theoretically neutral, claiming that no single theory can capture the diversity of the cases that fall under the label ‘humorous metaphors’. Rather, he formulates the hypothesis that “metaphors, blends, metonymies, and similar cognitive phenomena may be a class of Logical Mechanisms” (p. 108) (yet, on criticism on the Logical Mechanism see Brône & Feyaerts 2004). Müller, in the following chapter, is also concerned with the relationship between humour and metaphor, which he tackles by looking at the metaphorical mappings used by speakers to talk about humour (e.g. ‘comic relief’). Based on a corpus of German novels, the author offers a qualitative analysis of the data, which remains essentially descriptive. Although his review of the literature is comprehensive and thorough, in his

analysis Müller prefers to abstain from addressing (admittedly complex) theoretical issues and subscribing to particular theories. Metaphor is discussed also in the contribution by Giora, Nein, Kotler & Shuval, yet this time from the angle of psycholinguistic research. The authors examine the Graded Salience Hypothesis (i.e. the model for the processing of figurative language developed by Giora) in relation to the “speakers’ pursuit of aesthetic effects” (p. 133) and argue that optimal innovativeness (rather than figurativeness) accounts for the pleasurability of a metaphor. The explanation they offer is that language users are most pleased when they surprisingly recognise the salient in the novel.

Again in the context of psycholinguistics, Bryant & Gibbs report on findings from behavioural studies on how language users judge an utterance as humorous, in particular ironic, suggesting that laughter and prosody serve as such indicators. Acknowledging the complexity of the phenomenon, the authors argue that any account needs to take into consideration linguistic, social, and cognitive factors, including the interpersonal function of humour in everyday communication. To this end, they point to the need to adopt a mixed methodology in humour research, combining acoustic analysis, social network analysis, and conversational analysis. In the following chapter, Seana Coulson elaborates on the space structuring model and how this can explain joke comprehension in terms of frame-shifting (Coulson 2001). Although not unique to jokes, frame-shifting amounts to the reorganisation of the semantic and conceptual content of an utterance involved in humour interpretation. In this respect, Coulson reviews findings from self-paced reading times, eye tracking and event-related brain potentials, as well as from neurolinguistic studies, all of them corroborating the psychological reality of frame-shifting. Finally, the last two chapters of the volume represent approaches to interactional humour as manifested in American sitcoms. In the former, Margherita Dore focuses also on what is perceived as a prominent phenomenon in CL yet a contested one in relation to humour: humorous metaphors. Examining data from *Friends*, she attempts to combine metaphor theories from CL (namely Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Blending Theory treated as complementary frameworks) with the GTVH. Her analysis, however, falls short of showing what insights are offered by each theory (“identities are accessories” can hardly be considered an entrenched metaphor) and, although intuitively plausible, in what way(s) they are complementary. Last, but not least, Feyaerts, Brône & De Ceukelaire turn to a particular manifestation of humour, teasing, that they treat as “a complex socio-semantic phenomenon” (p. 222). On the basis of data from four sitcoms (*The Nanny*, *Spin City*, *Friends*, and *Married with Children*), they offer both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of teasing along five parameters: the teaser, the target, the trigger, layering, and the relation between the interactants. Crucially, in their analysis the authors aim to do justice to both cognitive-semantic and social-interactional aspects of meaning construction.

Overall, the contributions in the volume justify CL as a holistic paradigm for the study of humour, taking into account grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and discourse features; metaphor has, as expected, a central position (Attardo; Dore; Müller; Veale; Giora, Nein, Kotler & Shuval); the role of constructions and frames is adequately addressed (Antonopoulou, Nikiforidou & Tsakona; Bergen & Binsted; Coulson); and the social dimension of humour is also discussed (Feyaerts, Brône & De Ceukelaire; Bryant & Gibbs). In this way, the volume lives up to what the editors have programmatically claimed elsewhere, namely that “(humorous) language is not to be treated as an autonomous, isolated cognitive phenomenon” (Brône, Feyaerts and Veale 2006, p. 204). However, the question still remains and begs for an answer: How do cognitive linguistic accounts of humour relate to the GTVH, admittedly the most influential framework for the analysis of humour thus far? Are the two approaches complementary or antagonistic? And if the former is the case, is it possible to subsume the GTVH under all-encompassing models of meaning making, such as

constructional pragmatics and/or Blending Theory (risking, though, to boil down to another reductionist view)? Or, alternatively, is it likely that cognitive phenomena (like metaphors, metonymies, and blends of any sort) serve as mechanisms for incongruity resolution, as Attardo tentatively suggests in his chapter? Some of the contributions in the volume acknowledge the GTVH as the main paradigm for humour analysis (e.g. Veale, Dore) while others tacitly refrain from positioning themselves and/or criticising it (cf. Coulson). Metaphor in its humorous manifestation seems to lend itself for exploring affinity of some sort between CL (which has thrived on metaphor research) and the GTVH. Indeed, Attardo makes an attempt to reconcile the different models available in the market, suggesting that each type of humorous metaphor is to be accounted for differently in theoretical terms. The editors themselves also recognise that Attardo's perspective on humorous metaphors is not antagonistic with CL. Certainly, this is an empirical question and calls for further investigation in the future.

The present volume is not (and actually cannot be) exhaustive in terms of how CL can illuminate the study of humour; for example, metonymy is absent from the contents of the volume (cf. Barcelona 2003) while theoretical frameworks (such as Blending Theory) and particular discourses (e.g. multimodality) that a reader would reasonably expect are significantly under-represented. It would also be interesting to see what CL can contribute to a more discourse-oriented approach to humour (cf. Antonopoulou, Nikiforidou & Tsakona), like, for example, when humour is used for argumentative purposes or as a positive politeness strategy. Nevertheless, this volume makes a significant contribution to the dialogue between CL and humour research. It is possible, in fact, that the difference between CL and the GTVH is a matter of construal; while the GTVH is interested in finding out "how humorous discourse *differs* from serious discourse" (Attardo 2006, p. 344; emphasis in the original), CL is focused instead on how humour relates to other figurative language and how its interpretation relies on general cognitive processes. Such criticism (which has been levelled against CL also in relation to metaphor; see Tsur 1992) legitimately points to the need to account for the uniqueness of each figurative phenomenon; yet, such an approach does not mutually exclude a more holistic perspective to humour as another manifestation of figurativeness. In this sense, this book marks an advancement in the long-lasting flirtation between CL and humour research, leading, at least for the present, to a good friendship and some mutual respect.

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