

Book review

Chovanec, J. & Ermida, I. (eds.). (2012). *Language and Humour in the Media*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 260 pp.

As the title implies, the volume aims to chart the points of contact between humour and the modern media. To the best of my knowledge, it is the first collection of essays concentrating on the interface between media discourse and humour studies. In the introduction, titled “Humour, language and the media”, the editors underline a number of research questions central to the history of humour studies and they briefly describe the two main approaches around which the research of the language of humour has spun: on the one hand, the structurally-oriented approach; on the other, the pragmatically-oriented one. The volume is divided into three parts and includes both core references in the field and up-to-date references.

Part I, titled *Responses to Mass Media Humour across the Disciplines*, includes three papers and favours an interdisciplinary perspective, probing various approaches to humour in different contexts. The three papers included in Part I draw on written discourse data: forwarded emails, academic literature, Internet mailing lists. First, Patricia Andrew’s contribution, titled “Laughter is the best medicine: The construction of old age in ageist humour”, focuses on the identification of recurrent categories and cultural discourses used in the ageist humour that appears in forwarded email messages, and on its social functions. Her analysis brings to the surface that such humour appears in specific thematic contexts. The author claims that old people often make ageist jokes about themselves and this tendency may indeed help them to cope with the negative stereotypes about old age existing in contemporary western culture.

Melody Geddert’s “Toward a cross-linguistic analysis of humour in academic reading” is an empirical pedagogical study that examines the reasons for English language students’ inability to identify humour in academic reading materials in English. She also investigates whether or not this lack of recognition varies depending on the students’ mother tongue or correlates with the time they have spent in the target culture. The theoretical framework used in her analysis is *schema theory* (Anderson 1977) and the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (Attardo & Raskin 1991). The author concludes that the problem of (not) recognizing humour in academic areas is important among second-language speakers who have been in Canada less than three years, because, being non-native speakers, they have not adequately developed their humour competence.

Victor Raskin's contribution, titled "The hidden media humour and hidden theory", focuses on the humorous texts appearing on Internet mailing lists and aims to explain and systematically study the premises, parameters and other components a theory of humour must have. The paper starts with the informal analysis of three jokes and proceeds with their formal analysis, based on the theoretical framework of the *Ontological Semantic Theory of Humor* (OSTH; Raskin et al. 2009). Another issue emphasised in this contribution is joke sophistication, which is accounted for in the frame of the OSTH. The main aim of the paper is to underline the importance of a unified, mostly linguistic, theory of humour that will be used for the analysis of more or less sophisticated jokes and will be able to trace the missing links leading to their interpretation.

Part II, entitled *The Mechanisms of Humour in the Mass Media*, consists of five studies on the linguistic analysis of mass media humour. The genres analysed come from different digital and multimodal environments: TV shows, advertisements, films and sitcoms. In his paper, "Dialects at the service of humour within the American sitcom: A challenge for the dubbing translator", Christos Arampatzis underlines the importance of reproducing sociolinguistic variation in the Spanish version of American TV shows. As shown in the analysis, dialect-related humour reflects social stereotypes linked to the language varieties involved: on the one hand, British English is linked to positive stereotypes, such as elegance, but also to negative ones, such as snobbishness. On the other hand, the New York dialect is associated with the opposite stereotypical features, namely low-classness and lack of elegance. The comparative study reveals specific translation strategies, such as the levelling of the user-related dialect variation, the paralinguistic compensation for the use-related dialect variation, as well as the generalisation and explicitation of references to British English.

In her contribution "Humour on the House: Interactional construction of metaphor in film discourse", Marta Dynel explains how witty creative/novel metaphors are interwoven into the fictional discourse of the TV series *House* for the viewers' entertainment. The humorous value of creative metaphors is contingent on their *diaphoricity*. Diaphoric metaphors "convey new meaning based on the similarity between two concepts, yet initially emphasising dissimilarities, i.e. incongruity, between the two concepts" (p. 85). In particular, the humorousness of diaphoric metaphors relies on their incomprehensibility, which results in other humour-oriented communicative strategies (e.g. the speaker's elaboration of a metaphor, the hearer's obliviousness to a metaphor). Moreover, the author suggests that the humorous potential of metaphors may be rooted in the ways conversationalists interweave metaphors into their verbal exchanges.

Milena Kozić's paper, "Framing communication as play in the sitcom: Patterning the verbal and the nonverbal in humour" focuses on the link between humour and play in two US sitcoms, in terms of linguistics, psychology and media studies. More specifically, the article looks into the various ways, both verbal and nonverbal, that play frames are signalled within the sitcom to facilitate a humorous interpretation of the text. She suggests that verbal and nonverbal elements interact and the play-frame is realized on the level of form (repetition, multi-part lists, marked lexis), meaning (metaphors, semantic relations, false antonymy), language use, voice play (voice as costume, voice as prop) and through metalinguistic comments ensuring the preferred reading of the text as humorous.

How humour is produced in online live text commentary of sports events is the topic of Jan Chovanec's study "Conversational humour and joint fantasizing in the online journalism". His analysis shows that the audience are entertained not only by the game but also by the language used to report the football match. In this context, humour is crucial and can be

jointly constructed by the journalist, through word play, witticisms, joke telling, etc., and the readers via their textual contributions received by e-mail in real time. It is argued that humour is important for various purposes: on the one hand, it enhances the interpersonal dimension and solidarity between the journalist and his online audiences, while, on the other hand, it provides entertainment in the dull moments of the game.

In Moeko Okada's paper, "Wordplay as a selling strategy in advertisement and sales promotion", the effective use of wordplay as a selling strategy is discussed. Based on a stylistic framework, she analyses examples of wordplay and punning phenomena observed in English and Japanese advertisements and sales promotional activities. More specifically, as punning in the Japanese culture is strongly associated with folk beliefs about good or bad luck, it is exploited in advertisements to attract the attention of students when they feel they need to have luck on their side, namely during university entrance exams. Hence, Okada's analysis establishes a link between the wordplay strategies employed in the advertisements of certain products sold during university entrance exams, and the concomitant sales increase of these products.

The final part (i.e. III) of the volume, titled *Mass Media Humour as Political and Social Critique*, brings together three papers that share a preoccupation with the relation between humour and politics. Specifically, this part contains articles that concentrate on contexts where humorous discourse is used as a means of political and social criticism. Isabel Ermida, in her paper "News satire in the press: Linguistic construction of humour in spoof news articles", proposes a tripartite linguistic model of parodic news satire in an attempt to describe this media genre. The model includes an intertextual, a critical, and a comic component. Drawing on eight texts from a Portuguese mock newspaper, the author presents the components of the model in detail. The analysis of the texts indicates that parodic news satire is a genre reflecting contemporary reality with a critical approach and a humorous flavour.

In her contribution "Ethnic humour and political advertising", María Jesús Pinar Sans discusses the production of humour in British political advertisements through the analysis of visual metaphors and of the intertextual relations between the billboards and ethnic humour about Jews. The author opts for a multimodal discourse approach and uses *Relevance Theory* (Sperber & Wilson 1986) and the incongruity-resolution theory of humour as tools for her analysis. The analysis shows that the interpretation of ethnic humour included in the advertisement depends on the viewer's background knowledge and ideology. In particular, the potential decoding of a billboard as humorous is associated with identifying the source- and target-domains of the metaphor involved, as well as with establishing a link between the prototypical visual referents and their parallel prototypical encyclopaedic referents.

In the final study, entitled "Humour as a means of popular empowerment: The discourse of the French gossip magazines", Jamil Dakhlija focuses on the humorous devices used by French gossip magazines in order to appear more attractive to the readers. The analysis brings to the surface two main discursive strategies for this communicative goal: on the one hand, the editor and the journalists of the magazines choose to create a sense of familiarity with the stars via referring to them in an informal tone; on the other hand, they may use humour to convey an aggressive, sarcastic tone and an ironical stance, thus targeting celebrities. The author concludes that humour in French gossip news gives the audience an alternative perspective on the world of show business.

The major strength of the present collected volume is that it brings together various studies on humour coming from the fields of discourse analysis, communication studies,

sociolinguistics, pragmatics, computational linguistics, intercultural and translation studies, and rhetoric. The contributors of this book examine a variety of humorous genres. They investigate the various functions humour serves not only in traditional printed texts, such as magazines, but also in audiovisual media, such as TV shows, advertisements and films. Moreover, online and digital humour is also investigated (e.g. forwarded email messages, Internet mailing lists, online newspapers and web spoof sites).

This volume could have benefited from more studies on how the audience perceive humour in media texts, following the line of research proposed by Geddert (see above). Humour researchers' analysis could be complemented with different approaches focusing on the audience's interpretations of media discourse, since humour is always interpreted on the basis of each recipient's cultural and social stances or even prejudices. At the same time, it remains to be seen how the creators of humorous media texts themselves perceive and assess their own humour, since this would give the researchers the opportunity to confirm, revise, and, hence, offer a new perspective on their analyses (cf. El Refaie 2009, 2011; Kramer 2011). Another promising area of research could involve the exploitation of humorous media discourse in education (on the exploitation of humour in education, see, among others, Bell 2009; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi 2008). In particular, the findings of media humour analysis could be used for the development and assessment of learning material at school in order to facilitate students' acquaintance with media humour and its meanings. Surely, this approach is not an explicitly stated aim of this volume, but it could be suggested that viewing language as a tool for communication entails not only scholarly research on language use in authentic contexts, but also the exploitation of such texts in teaching (about) language.

Finally, the authors discuss the different forms that media humour takes, the purposes it serves, the people it targets, the stereotypical implications it carries, as well as the differences it exhibits across cultures. Thus, this book is a very significant contribution to the rapidly evolving research on media discourse and humorous texts. In my view, this collection of papers is a first-class volume, highly recommended to all researchers interested in the uses of humour in modern media.

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