

Book review

Tsakona, Villy & Chovanec, Jan (eds.) (2018). *The Dynamics of Interactional Humor*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Villy Tsakona is an Assistant Professor in Social and Educational Approaches to Language in the Department of Early Childhood Education at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece. She has published various articles on humour within different theoretical frameworks such as pragmatics, Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis. She has also analysed humour in different contexts or genres, both face-to-face interactions and online communication.

Jan Chovanec is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. He has published various articles on both written and spoken media discourses and on humour in such contexts.

The book they edited is divided into two parts, after a first introductory chapter. Both parts deal with the construction and negotiation of humour but in different contexts: in oral interactions for the first part (*Designing humor in oral interactions*, Chapters 2-6), and in mediated interactions for the second part (*Designing humor in mediated interactions*, Chapters 7-12).

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 is entitled “Investigating the dynamics of humor: Towards a theory of interactional humor”. Presented apart from the two other sections of the book, one could think that this chapter is an introduction. But it is more than that. Villy Tsakona and Jan Chovanec have written a real theoretical article proposing a new approach to interactional humour.

This first Chapter is divided in five sections, but they could be divided into two larger parts. On the one hand, the authors present a synthetic overview of the literature on humour in various linguistic fields. This overview allows them to highlight five relevant elements for the analysis of humour (framing devices, reactions to humour, sociocultural parameters of humour, goals and functions of humour, and genres where humour is included). They also present a clear synthesis of the twelve chapters of the book, focusing both on their similarities and on their differences. But more importantly, each chapter is presented as *part of a larger agenda*. On the other hand, the authors open their chapter by proposing a new and audacious terminological and theoretical approach to *interactional humour*. The cornerstones of this approach are the notions of *negotiation* and *co-participation*. Since humour needs actions in terms of both production and reception, humour is interactional, whether it is spoken, written, produced in face-to-face interactions, in mediated assisted interactions, and so on. Enlarging the notion of interactional humour, the authors enlarge also the notion of interaction itself, which is no longer considered only in face-to-face situations, and not even only as oral.

Part 1

In Chapter 2, “Reactions to jab lines in conversational storytelling”, Rania Karachaliou and Argiris Archakis analyse *recipients’ responses to a humorous part of a storytelling in conversation*. Their original approach combines fruitfully two distinct theoretical and methodological frameworks: *humour studies* – more precisely the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo 1994, 2001) – in order to identify the *jab lines* which constitute the humorous

parts of the narrative on which they focus their analysis - and *conversation analysis* to analyse recipients' responses and, more broadly, the construction of the storytelling by both participants. Based on one conversation in Greek between three female friends, the authors have identified two different humorous jab lines produced by the teller: the jab line framed as humorous by the teller, and the jab line framed as humorous by the recipient. Interestingly, the same two kinds of recipients' responses have been highlighted, whether the jab line is framed as humorous by the teller or by the recipients: *an immediate one* allowing recipients to align and affiliate themselves immediately with the teller, and *a postponed one* showing recipients' difficulties in accepting the incongruous part of the narrative, i.e. in aligning and affiliating with the teller. Another interesting finding is the fact that, even when recipients produce a dispreferred response to make sure they understand, they finally align with the teller.

Ksenia Shilikhina's Chapter 3, "Discourse markers as guides to understanding spontaneous humour and irony", deals with the switch from a bona-fide communication to a non-bona-fide communication and vice versa. Shilikhina's analysis is based on face-to-face interactions and computer-mediated interactions. The aim of this chapter is twofold: showing how the mode of communication can be negotiated through specific discourse markers such as "I'm joking" and "I'm serious" and showing the range of functions such discourse markers may have. The author claims that metalinguistic comments about the mode of communication participants are using are *necessary* in order to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding. She thus shows that the stake of indicating which mode of communication the speaker employs and with which mode of communication the hearer associates what s/he is hearing, not only allows participants *to give coherence* to the current talk, but also *to negotiate* the mode of communication they have to adopt. To this regard, the author analyses various functions of metalinguistic comments indicating the nature (serious or non-serious) of the mode of communication, whether they are produced by the speaker or by the hearer.

In Chapter 4, entitled "The pragmatics of humor in bilingual conversations", Marianthi Georgalidou and Hasan Kaili analyse various devices of *code alternation* used in order to produce humour in bilingual conversations. Based on a corpus constituted by everyday conversations between participants from the same generation and from different generations, the authors apply the "conversation analysis approach of code-switching and mixing practices" proposed by Auer (1998). Thus, the association of a conversation analytic approach, of humour studies, and of a sociolinguistic framework concerning the notion of identity is particularly fruitful for analysing both code alternations as a humorous resource, and humour as a resource for the construction of identities. This chapter highlights various functions of code alternation used humorously and shows that the structural organization of humour and the construction of the identity are highly linked in conversation.

Chapter 5, "Laughing *at* you or laughing *with* you? Humor negotiation in cultural stand-up comedy", deals with humour produced during one stand-up comedy show in English in Rome. As the author, Margherita Dore, mentions, even if stand-up comedy has already been studied, the way that expatriates perform humour in such shows has not so far received much attention. To this regard, this study is innovative. But more interesting is the aim of the author: she wants to show how (and to what extent) humour, even partly written in advance, can be and has to be negotiated between the comedian and the audience in order to succeed. To do so, the author highlights four humorous devices which simultaneously or successively target the comedian him/herself and the audience (among others, play on shared stereotypes, self or other disparagement). Such devices show that the comedians try to strike the right balance concerning the humorous targets, in order to negotiate their humour and make it successful.

Chapter 6, "Teasing as audience engagement: Setting up the unexpected during television comedy monologues", deals with teasing in televised comedy monologue performances. On a basis of thirteen instances of teasing, Sarah Seewoester Cain highlights six general

characteristics of teasing (*both serious and playful; a co-present target; contextualization cues; recognition of teasing as such, varying styles; and broader social function*). The author manages not only to determine the specificities of teasing in comedy performances –in comparison with teasing in conversations– but also to highlight the crucial role of the audience even in what is framed as a “monologue”.

Part 2

In Chapter 7, “Laughter and non-humorous situations in TV documentaries”, Jan Chovanec proposes a study of laughter and (this is worth noting in this book) non-humorous situations in TV documentaries. For the author, documentary programmes have recently started to be considered a hybrid form of programmes mixing entertainment and seriousness. The data consists of programmes recorded in 2012 in which “[the presenter] relies on the professional guidance of experts from various fields of technology” (p. 159). Investigating the role of laughter in such programmes, and applying methods from Conversation Analysis and Interpersonal Pragmatics, the author analyses laughter triggered by different situations: *failure to achieve a task, after a successful attempt, as a mark of disbelief or in disgust*. In each (thoroughly analysed) case, the author investigates the incidences of laughter in the ongoing interaction (alignment of the participants, disalignment, humorous co-construction, etc.) and highlights the various social functions laughter has in such documentary programmes. The strength of this chapter is to show the essential role of laughter in any kind of interaction – whether it is linked to humour or not– and at the same time to demonstrate that laughter can be a useful tool in order to investigate documentary programmes as a hybrid form of TV show.

In Chapter 8, entitled “‘Cool children’ and ‘super seniors’ cross into youth language: Humorous constructions of youthfulness in Greek family sitcoms”, Theodora Saltidou and Anastasia Stamou examine the ways in which the construction of youthful identities is represented in two different Greek comedy sitcoms. Mixing many different theoretical frameworks from both sociolinguistics and humour studies, the authors propose a quite complex (but complete) analysis of two interactions of the two sitcoms studied. The authors’ approach to the data and the results obtained exceed the limits of a study about sitcoms. Besides the various linguistic devices which contribute to the construction of the youthful identity (including humour), the authors show the ways in which the new myth of a “perpetual adolescence” is created and maintained by sitcoms.

In Chapter 9, “No child’s play: A philosophical pragmatic view of overt pretence as a vehicle for conversational humour”, Marta Dynel analyses the broad notion of *pretence* through different disciplines, mainly Philosophy of Language and Pragmatics. She applies this notion to fictional interactions (in the American TV show *House*). More specifically, the author analyses two subcategories of pretence: *covert pretence*, which deals with deception in the sense that it is an activity oriented toward inducing false belief; and *overt pretence*, primarily linked to irony. Through the analysis of the TV show, the author shows that both overt and covert pretence can be related to conversational humour. She also interestingly highlights the fact that these two categories of pretence can be manifested both verbally and non-verbally.

In Chapter 10, entitled “Online joint fictionalization”, Villy Tsakona analyses an *online joint fictionalization* and compares it with *oral fictionalization*, i.e. produced in face-to-face interactions. This chapter is a case study. On the basis of a single –but delightful– example collected on Facebook, the author analyses ways in which people who do not know each other but who momentarily share a common interest (here, the unexpected discovery of a crocodile in Crete) build a joint fictionalization. Applying a four-stage model of joint fictionalization (Winchatz & Kozin 2008), the author shows the important similarities between oral and online joint fictionalization. More interestingly, she also highlights a major difference which, however, does not diminish the significance of the common points: while oral joint

fictionalization emerges in face-to-face interaction in which participants who know each other are already engaged, in online joint fictionalization, participants who do not know each other join Facebook groups with the aim of co-participating in them. More broadly, through this case study, and considering that genres are dynamic, the author investigates the notion of *genre*, and more particularly, the *digital genre*.

In Chapter 11, “On-line humorous representations of the 2015 Greek national elections: Acting and interacting about politics on social media”, Anna Piata discusses the humour produced in internet memes (i.e. multimodal posts involving text, image, sound, animation) around the national Greek election of 2015. Her theoretical framework is constituted from literature on both online communication and humour. Her original approach to internet memes is an interactive one. Indeed, the author analyses both the various posts on Facebook and the reactions/comments on these posts. Moreover, she analyses them through three dimensions: *content, form, and stance* (following Shifman 2013), which leads to a complete perception of this phenomenon. Besides particular findings based on her data, the author also shows that the investigation of such data may have further interesting developments for the study of humour in general.

The last chapter, entitled “Positive non-humorous effects of humor on the internet”, is a theoretical one. Within the frameworks of the Relevance Theory analysing communication in general and of Cyberpragmatics focusing on online communication, Francisco Yus aims to extend Relevance Theory to take into account the common points between humour and online communication: both carry limited informative value, but this lack of content is counterbalanced by their *non-propositional effect*. This effect is the major element the author aims to add to the Relevance Theory. Applying it to the analysis of humour, he shows the numerous non-propositional effects of humour, which justify, in themselves, the addition of such a notion to the theory.

Humour is analysed in this book within various contexts: oral interactions (both everyday conversations and stand-up comedies), and mediated interactions (mainly online, but also fictional). While describing and taking into consideration the various specificities of each kind of context within which humour appears, the interconnection of the different chapters of the book achieves the rare combination of highlighting that humour obeys to the same dynamics. And this dynamics is deeply *interactional*. In this sense, the title of the book fulfils its promises. Indeed, making the interactional dynamics of humour the common thread of the entire book allows the editors to offer a very coherent broad study of humour, of its functions and of its mechanisms. The best proof is that the five elements highlighted in the editors’ introductory chapter (framing devices, reactions to humour, sociocultural parameters of humour, goals and functions of humour, and genres where humour is included) are all systematically analysed in all the different chapters and all highly relevant, whatever the context in which humour appears. This shows, and in a non-paradoxical way, both the heterogeneous form of humour and its homogeneous mechanism. And once again, the homogeneousness of humour is due to its interactional dimension.

Moreover, as announced by the editors, one of their aims in this book was to enlarge the notion of *interaction* itself, which one cannot limit anymore to face-to-face interactions, even if these are probably prototypical, but which includes mediated interactions, even written ones. Although audacious, or at least ambitious, this aim seems to be achieved. Deeply describing and analysing the various settings in which humour appears, this volume shows that all contexts have of course their specificities, but also a main common point: they all obey to an interactional dynamics, whether this dynamics is based on oral, face-to-face, mediated, fictional or even written sources. This interactional dynamics is highlighted by the fact that all these forms of interactions need at least one speaker/writer and at least one hearer/reader. In

this respect, humour can be considered here to be a means allowing the editors to fulfil a bigger agenda: to (re)define the notion of interaction.

This book is highly coherent and the different analyses of both humour and the various contexts in which it appears are convincing. However, if one can be effectively convinced by the fact that the notion of interaction must be enlarged, there are also some shortcuts concerning humour that remain questionable. For instance, while the presence and the importance of the negotiation of humour between comedians and audience have been shown (Chapter 5), suggesting that “from an interactional point of view, stand-up routines can be compared to instances of casual conversational humour” (p. 109) remains debatable. Moreover, and concerning specifically humour in TV shows and sitcoms, the authors ask two comparable questions: Can the results obtained through analysing humour in sitcoms be applied to face-to-face spontaneous interaction (Chapter 8)?; Can the humorous mechanisms found in a TV show highlight the mechanisms of real conversational humour (Chapter 9)? If the authors seem to answer yes (which remains debatable), the real question is maybe the relevance of such a question.

Despite these last important questions, *The Dynamics of Interactional Humour* is a major contribution to humour studies, proposing new insights and a better understanding of humour as a broad and complex phenomenon.

Béatrice Priego-Valverde

Aix-Marseille University, France
beatrice.priego-valverde@univ-amu.fr

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