

Book review

Nilsen, Alleen Pace & Nilsen, Don L.F. (2019) *The Language of Humour: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

“Humour is everywhere” or “Humour across disciplines” could be alternative titles for this book, as it deals with the function of humour in important domains of everyday life, such as education, business, politics, etc., without using a strict academic methodology or a single theoretical tool for the investigation of humour in each aspect of human life. It thus maintains a more descriptive than research orientation. Focusing mainly on verbal humour and drawing upon examples from various well-known theories of humour, such as Relief Theory (e.g. Freud (1991 [1905]; Critchley 2002), Superiority Theory (e.g. Raskin 1985), Incongruity Theory (e.g. Raskin 1985; Davis 1993; Attardo 1994; Critchley 2002), the Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humour and the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo & Raskin 1991; Attardo 1994), this book comes to prove that humour exists in every option of our life and in many disciplines, even in areas in which it is not easily detectable.

Specifically, the book consists of twenty-five chapters, including the introduction (Chapter 1), in which the authors delve into the main domains of human activity where humour plays an essential role. In their brief introduction, the two authors acknowledge the difficulty of finding a universal and acceptable definition for a person’s “sense of humour”, as it is examined through a different prism at every single aspect of human life. Furthermore, they underline that the notion “sense of humour” is not the same for everyone (p. 1). They also stress that some scholars focus their attention on features of humour, while others on functions or subjects of humour. In addition, they highlight the “sacrifice” of humorous taboo aspects, to which they briefly refer in this book, for the achievement of “political correctness” (p. 3). They also inform us concisely in the introduction about the content of every chapter of this book, giving a brief overview and exposing the reader to the domains in which they detect the existence and function of humour.

In Chapter 2, the authors deal with humour in Anthropology and Ethnic Studies and, especially, with the humour created by and about Native Americans, such as Navajo Indians, and also with African-American, Gaelic, Hispanic, and Jewish humour. In Chapter 3 they discuss the function of irony, parody, and satire in Art, in other words, how humour provoked by incongruity, distortion, or exaggeration is utilised in different categories of art, such as caricatures and cartoons, by different artists and movements, such as the Dada movement. In Chapter 4, they explore the positive effect of humour in business and how it is used in business for the increase of employees’ productivity and during the interaction with customers. They also refer to negative humour at work and its contribution in ‘bridging the gap’ among different people. In Chapter 5, they focus on the forms of humour in computer science and in the digital era, which emerges through puns, memes or spell-check mistakes, as well as on how internet changes our humour and TV experience. In Chapter 6 they investigate the presence and role of humour in educational contexts and children’s literature, the utilisation of children’s humorous literature in the media, and, more specifically, how humour alleviates the ‘generation gap’ between teachers and students, and what benefits it offers to the educational process.

Chapter 7 reveals the main characteristics of gender humour, plus the offensive side of sexist humour against women, according to feminists, while Chapter 8 refers to humorous place names and to the diversity of humour across the world. In Chapter 9, making use of their own experience from post-retirement period and their teaching and presentations at senior citizens' classes, authors examine the positive effects of humour in old age and how the sense of common age identity among old people and the identification with their peers' experiences relieve negative feelings. Chapter 10, under the title 'History', revolves around the evolution from radio shows to soap operas, sitcoms and TV dramas, and their focus firstly on family issues and secondly on more youth-related issues. Furthermore, the authors discuss folk humour, revealing the changes in humour characteristics and content in time, and, in addition, they also discuss "survival humour" related to taboo themes, which are difficult to talk about, such as disabilities, diseases, etc. Chapter 11 examines humour as a basic part of contemporary journalism, focusing mainly on humour in newspapers (e.g. in cartoons, obituaries, columns) and describing the context, its evolution, and its main characteristics. Chapter 12 demonstrates aspects of legal humour, such as jokes about lawyers, funny state laws, and humorous TV shows with legal content.

Chapter 13 deals with the study of jokes in linguistics, presenting briefly the script opposition concept for the analysis of a funny text, according to Attardo & Raskin's (1991) theory, as well as some of the main rhetorical devices for the provocation of comic effects (e.g. antithesis, metonymy). Chapter 14 provides us with some information about the function of humour in literature, elucidating the existence of humour not only in comedy but also in tragedy. It also presents the function of humour in best sellers, such as Harry Potter, and in children's literature, and additionally it displays the humorous schemes and tropes that are most used. Chapter 15 reveals the benefits of humour for health: even if it is not a panacea, humour functions as a way of treatment and lightens up unpleasant sentiments due to illness. Chapter 16 discloses the position of humour in music art, such as in musical theatre, songs, composition. Chapter 17 unfolds the humorous dimension of names and, especially, the processes of lexicalisation and language change, the humorous use of eponyms, the change of someone's name due to its funny connotations, just for fun or for underlining their transition to adulthood in the case of young people, the recycling of names and also the existence of humorous names for commercial purposes and for referring to political scandals.

Chapter 18 revolves around humorous aspects in performing arts, such as theatre, dance and music, giving emphasis on how the Gilbert and Sullivan operas influence other pieces of art and lead to the creation of parodies. It also examines the basic means for the creation of comic results (e.g. irony, satire, parody, anachronisms, exaggerated plots) in movies, even in silent movies, and the darkest, sometimes controversial, appearance of humour in some famous movies (e.g. *Pulp Fiction*). Chapter 19 deals with humour in philosophy and with the attempt of scholars to come up with a "Universal Theory of Humour", trying to choose from the three prevailing theories, that is, the Relief Theory, the Superiority Theory and the Incongruity Resolution Theory, as they suggest that other theories, such as Raskin's Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humour (1985) and Attardo & Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humour (1991), have a less universal, and thus less philosophical, character. At the end of this chapter, the authors disclose the dominant position of ambiguity in the creation of humour, the well-known philosophical joke about the chicken, and they discuss some opinions of famous philosophers about humour.

Chapter 20 presents the humorous effects which are created in the field of physical education and sports by team mascots and the comic character of their names, underlining, at the same time, the non-verbal dimension of mascot's humour, while Chapter 21 discloses the predominant position of humour in politics, towards governors and its use in late-night television. In Chapter 22, the authors are concerned with the connection between humour and

psychology, starting with the positive effects which humour has at children from an early age, and the difference between having a comic or a tragic vision for the life. Subsequently, they present different types of humour, such as affiliative humour, self-enhancing humour, self-deprecating humour, aggressive humour and self-defeating humour, in connection with each person's personality traits, underlining however that "people's traits don't always determine their states" (p. 298). They also discuss about the possible beneficial and even therapeutical results that humour has at someone's health, such as stress relief, immune system boost, pain tolerance, and about the Humour Styles Questionnaires, which help researchers determine every person's kind of "sense of humour". Moreover, they examine four types of humour (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, self-defeating), and, finally, the characteristics of sarcasm and cruel practical joking.

Chapter 23 tackles the main aspects of religious humour, the comic effects caused due to ambiguity, and the coincidental religious humour coming from children, while it highlights the contribution of humour to mild religious stress. In dealing with rhetoric and composition, Chapter 24 explores the basic rhetorical devices and the difference between unintentional errors and intentional rhetorical devices. Authors also discuss about Grice's *conversational implicatures* (1975) and how their violation leads to humorous communication and to the creation of funny characters in literature or to a dramatic effect. Chapter 25, under the title "Sociology", examines the timelessness and social dimension of clowns around the world, their evolution through centuries and their dominant position in American social life, plus some stories about creepy clowns and the relation between humour and hostility.

Completing this book review, I would like to point out that its main strength is that it is a very interesting and concise reading not only for scholars but also for non-academic readers who are interested in the function of humour in each aspect of life or who want to develop a critical point of view towards the functions of humour in various contexts. Furthermore, the book could be particularly useful for diverse teaching purposes due to its descriptive character and its simple everyday language, without difficult technical terms, which make it accessible to students and non-academics. Consequently, it is an essential reading for everyone who wants to gain a general perspective on humorous issues in important areas of human activity.

Another positive characteristic of this book is that the two authors, pioneers in humour studies and well-experienced in teaching, have transfused their observations from research, teaching and life almost in every chapter, and that is why this book has obtained an empirical and personal character, which attracts its readers and makes it easy to read. Moreover, the section "points of departure" at the end of every chapter can function as food for thought, as it suggests activities for practice and/or creative thinking related to the analysed topic.

However, I have only one reservation about this book. My concern is that this book, despite including some jokes with universal character or some helpful information and explanation of context about non-universal examples, is really focused on humour in American or, at least, in Anglo-Saxon culture and addresses mainly English native speakers. As a result, many of the jokes or the issues which are described or are utilised as examples cannot be easily understood by a wider, international and multilingual audience, as the adequate knowledge of language, history, context, etc. are essential presuppositions for the comprehension of humour. Nonetheless, authors are probably aware of this "weakness", as they refer to the fact that their textbook was written first and foremost for English classes in colleges and for advanced students of English as a foreign language, as "humour is usually the last skill that non-native speakers develop" (p. 70). Consequently, despite the fact that there are some universal jokes, it would have been really useful for non-English speakers if the plethora of examples had been enriched with jokes from all over the world.

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