

Book review

Tabacaru, Sabina. (2019). *A Multimodal Study of Sarcasm in Interactional Humour*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

This book aims to provide information for individuals to better understand humour, especially sarcasm, from a multimodal perspective. It comprises six chapters divided into subsections, which illustrate the latest theories and experiments in humour study.

Chapter 1 mainly addresses background information referring to the rationale for conducting this research and establishes the wide use of humour in international communication. The author emphasises the importance of focusing on multimodal aspects of cognition when analysing humour. In this chapter, she especially states that, different from other studies, the focus of her research is not limited to gestures (e.g., hand and upper limbs' movements). Instead, she adopts another perspective, including facial expressions and head movements. Three main hypotheses (1. Common background between listeners and speakers, and speakers' expectation will help create humorous meanings; 2. Certain gestures will alert the listeners of the locutor's humorous intention; 3. Certain gestures will help listeners to identify the humorous parts of the speeches) are raised up in this chapter and the procedures for verifying these three hypotheses are clarified.

Chapter 2 on theoretical premises first discusses the salient theories and models of humour analysis. It analyses them from three aspects: of semantics, pragmatics and cognitive linguistics (CL). In terms of the semantics of humour, the models of script-opposition and script-based semantic theory of humour (SSTH) (Raskin 1985) are well discussed. The other theory mentioned in this chapter, i.e., the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH) (Attardo & Raskin 1991) is effectively overviewed by explaining the mechanism for creating jokes via six knowledge sources: language, narrative strategy, target, situation, logical mechanism, and script-opposition. GTVH is also compared to the incongruity theory. A good point is that, at the end of this subsection, criticisms on SSTH and GTVH (e.g., the similarities on these two theories) are clearly pointed out. The author points out that script-opposition is regarded just as an improved version of the incongruity theory by some scholars. The confusion in distinguishing SSTH from GTVH is that they have great similarities in both theory and application, as both share the basic theoretical idea of incongruity.

The second subsection of Chapter 2 involves the pragmatics of humour and analyses humour creation via the *Cooperative Principle* (Grice 1975) consisting of 4 maxims (quantity, quality, relation, and manner), *Relevance Theory* (RT) and pragmatic inferencing (explicature and implicature factorisation). The final subsection in this chapter mainly assesses the CL perspective of humour. The concepts of *frame* and *prototypes* are demonstrated and their similarities and differences are also discussed. However, from my perspective, another theory, *Schema Theory* (ST) proposed by Piaget (1926), could have been added to this chapter to enrich the theoretical basis. ST in cognitive science mainly talks about a pattern of categorised thoughts or actions which helps

individuals perceive information and understand the world. Similarly, in ST, controversy does exist in explaining what exactly can be counted as a frame (also schema, scenario, script, and cognitive model) and what a schema includes. Next, *Mental space theory* (Fauconnier 1984) and the *Layering model* (Clark 1996) are well explained and discussed to demonstrate how humorous intentions may be achieved and understood by individuals. *Mental space theory* (Fauconnier 1984) suggests that language processing is a procedure according to which interconnection is built among different mental spaces. On the other hand, the *Layering model* (Clark 1996) describes language processing as building the theatre stages from the bottom to the top. To enrich the whole picture, the author mentions salience and reference points' constructions to explain how individuals process humorous information. Next, construal operations are presented to talk about the conceptualisation process. Thus, in this part, three main approaches to humour are presented and well illustrated through examples.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology utilised in this study. The study has been defined as quantitative research and utilises corpus methodology. After coding and categorising the corpus, the occurrences of each type of humour were counted to assess relevance between different variables and the creation and comprehension of humour. This method for analysing their correlation may not be accurate enough and may have its deficiencies (e.g., lack of in-depth explanations) brought by quantitative research design. Next, the rationales for selecting *House M.D.* and *The Big Bang Theory* for data are briefly discussed. According to the author's, these two comedies are different in genre (medical drama and sitcom) so that humour mechanisms in different genres could be compared. However, these rationales are not strong enough for explaining why these two specific comedies are chosen and if the research results from these two comedies are applicable to other comedies or practical language use.

The critical data of the study consists of the scripted examples, but dramatic conversations in comedies are not a reflection of a natural, spoken language: the salient trait of comedies is to make all conflicts between words and actions more exaggerative and fiercer (Dan 2015), which may be different from what happens in individuals' daily life. Also, some differences in vague language, emotional language, linguistic indicators of informality, and linguistic elements of narrative may exist between language in comedies and conversations occurring naturally. Thus, the criteria of material selection should have taken this issue into consideration.

The corpus, including some general information (e.g., the duration of the episode, the number of instances and the total duration time of instances) is coded by the typology of humour proposed in Corinth corpus (Feyaerts 2013). Each category of humour is illustrated well in this chapter, but the rationale for using this classification has not been mentioned. Followed by the classification of humour in the corpus, the author utilised ELAN, a video annotation tool, for annotating the corpus. By doing so, estimated percentages in the corpus of different types of humour are calculated and presented. Although she used the laugh track and a random sample in reliability tests for finding something possibly humorous, its reliability and credibility could be enhanced by using additional tools to measure the statistics of watchers' reactions to specific clips from the episodes and comparing them.

In Chapter 4, the controversy of the definitions of sarcasm and the differences between irony and sarcasm are well illustrated, and a final definition of sarcasm is chosen for the following study: "sarcasm is instantiated by statements that are inconsistent or incompatible with the actual situation presented by the discourse, and which target someone or something specially, be they present or not" (Tabacaru 2019: 121). According to linguistic mechanisms, in this study, sarcasm is classified

into 10 subtypes: metonymy, antithesis, explicitation, metaphor, shift of focus, reasoning, rhetorical questions, repetition, perspective, and analogy. Followed by demonstrating the examples of each, the co-occurrence of different types of humour is considered and a separate subsection is used to discuss the combined humour types. Even though this chapter is well organised and clearly demonstrates the possible incongruities and clashes between semantics, pragmatics, and implications, more structured and detailed information could be provided by measuring the differences between the effect of one signal variable (a possible incongruity) and the effect of multiple variables (multiple possible incongruities) in a dialogue.

The concept of *multimodality* has been discussed at the beginning of Chapter 5, but the apparent importance of multimodality for the book's rationale could have been mentioned in earlier chapters. Then, the author mainly considers raised eyebrows and frowning as two important types of facial expressions in humour interpretation. Certain examples from the two TV series are given and some statistics (e.g., relative frequency, association ratio) are provided. However, owing to the video shooting limitation, sometimes not all body movements of the characters can be seen and recorded. This may result in inaccuracies in the findings. A good thing is that the possibility of combined facial expressions and head movements are discussed and considered, but ineffectively. Thus, the author conducts a small sample contrastive study to confirm the higher possibility of using facial expressions and head movements in humorous actions, which, to some extent, improves the reliability of the research result. The result is that facial expressions and head movements do not help in the prediction of humour and these gestures sometimes do have special meaning to express individuals' emotions, at least these TV actors' intended emotions settled in the plots. However, this methodology is still not sufficient to make this conclusion, as only some basic statistics (e.g., relative frequency, association ratio) are provided and a small-scale contrastive study has been conducted. Further investigation may be needed to confirm this conclusion.

To conclude, this study looks at humour, especially sarcasm, from a cognitive-linguistic perspective. Tabacaru's quantitative research design does explain the possible tools or tricks for creating and understanding sarcasm. It certainly contributes to the field of sarcasm perception in cognitive linguistics. Her methodology and data analysis can provide new avenues for further studies in similar areas. For instance, the video annotation tool ELAN could be utilised in video corpus studies, which can help include all the verbal and non-verbal expressions of humour in future research. Also, research results provide a good explanation on how interferences are constructed in dialogues for understanding humour, and what different layers of humorous meanings in conversations could be delivered by applying different cognitive theories and models. Some limitations and further study directions in this research are raised by the author herself. For example, the taxonomy of sarcasm can be tested in a spontaneous situation and concerns on nonverbal elements in the understanding of sarcasm could be raised.

In some parts of the book, some topics could have been considered in more depth. For example, the research design may change with the way the author situates herself in the research. TV creators tend to focus on the means of and approaches to humour creation, while the audience focus on gaining more information to help understand humour. Thus, the way the author situates herself could have been clarified and consistently kept throughout the study.

Generally, this book provides answers to its research problems and confirms the three hypotheses. It also provides insights for further studies in the areas mentioned. Thus, I do strongly recommend this book to all the possible readers (e.g., postgraduates, researchers in pragmatics and cognitive linguistics).

Xuan Li
Queens University Belfast, School of Arts, English and Languages, Northern Ireland
xli42@qub.ac.uk

References

- Attardo, S. & Raskin, V. (1991). 'Script theory revis(it)ed: Joke similarity and joke representation model'. *Humor* 4 (3/4), pp. 293-348.
- Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dan, M. (2015). 'Dialogue: Credibility versus realism in fictional speech', in Violeta, S. (ed.), *The Bloomsbury -Companion to Stylistics*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 430-443.
- Fauconnier, G. (1984). *Espaces Mentaux*. Paris: Les éditions de minuit.
- Feyaerts, K. (2013). 'Tackling the complexity of spontaneous humorous interaction'. in Gurillo, L. R. & Ortega, M. B. A. (eds.), *Irony and Humor*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp.243-268.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). 'Logic and conversation', in Cole, P. & Morgan, J. (eds.), *Studies in Syntax and Semantics III: Speech Acts*, New York: Academic Press, pp. 183-198.
- Piaget, J. (1926). 'Psychology'. *The Monist* 36, pp. 430-455.
- Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company.