

Book review

Ruiz Gurillo, L. & Alvarado Ortega, M. B. (eds). (2013). *Irony and Humor: From Pragmatics to Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. vi+270 pp.

Among all the specifically human conceptual attributes, humour appears as the most resistant to any categorisation attempt. It is indeed extremely difficult to define the main properties of humorous processes – and that happens for two reasons. The first and most immediate one has to do with the transversal nature of the humorous event. In addition to being manifold and heterogeneous, the factors which promote humour are linked to processes associated with various cognition levels. That is the reason why humour has been subject to study by numerous academic disciplines, among which biology and medicine stand out, because this mental mechanism is anchored at specific neural connections which –according to biologists and ethologists– are not owned by any other animal. In fact, humour is so closely linked to the neural network that certain pathologies such as Asperger’s syndrome can cancel it. After all, the noun *humour* has its etymological root in the Latin word *humor*, which originally meant ‘liquid’ and was often used to refer to the different fluids contained by the human body – for instance, blood. The current meaning of this term (‘joviality’, ‘willingness’) did not appear until the Middle Ages, when *humour* was first used to describe the character or temper of individuals. Thus, *good humour* would be associated with human beings who are happy because their internal liquids are healthy, *bad humour* –the opposite– being its inevitable complement. Nevertheless, it has already been anticipated above that medicine is not the only discipline to deal with humour; extremely deep reflections about humour have been expressed from philosophy, psychology and, of course, linguistics.

The second reason which explains the complexity of humour stems from the fact that it becomes impossible to suggest a definition of humour from a series of necessary and sufficient conditions. Any definition which might be proposed will suffer from partiality, since a counter-example can always be found. By way of example, it could be thought that humour is everything that triggers laughter among the audience, but it immediately becomes evident that this is not necessarily the case, because it often happens that what seems funny to someone causes nothing but indifference to someone else. Therefore, that feature can under no circumstances be compulsory. The same applies to other features, such as the idea that humour only occurs when a more or less surreptitious mockery exists, or the belief that humour requires a special talent on the part of the comedian or an active attitude; for instance, a humorous effect is usually triggered when someone stumbles and falls and, of course, the person who has just fallen had no humorous intention whatsoever.

The study of ironic utterances faces difficulties which resemble those mentioned so far, because, despite being a less changeable phenomenon than humour, irony also defies any kind of rigid definition. Even though irony has been defined for many centuries as the act of meaning the opposite of what is stated, the truth is that a detailed exploration of any set of ironic utterances reveals how superficial –and, at times, incorrect– such a characterisation is.

Furthermore, irony and humour are semiotic events that frequently become confused and overlap in discourse, due to which the task of accurately determining where humour starts and where irony does becomes even more difficult.

The book reviewed here –coordinated by the University of Alicante Professors Leonor Ruiz Gurillo and M. Belén Alvarado Ortega– represents an extraordinary effort aimed at understanding how irony and humour work from the perspective of linguistics. The papers collected in this book make a great contribution –both theoretically and descriptively– to the study of verbal humour and ironic communication, and show the most recent lines of research which are being developed around these slippery concepts.

The book consists of an introductory text by the editors and ten chapters organised in three parts. The aim of this preliminary section written by Ruiz Gurillo and Alvarado Ortega is to contextualise the volume as a whole, offering a concise state of the art on this matter, along with a brief summary for each one of the contributions that the reader can find in the different sections of the book. This work carried out by the editors highlights the comprehensive and eclectic nature of this book, which contains analyses performed from the most diverse domains of linguistics.

The first part, entitled *Irony and Humour: Pragmatic Perspectives*, comprises three works with a markedly theoretical character. The first one is authored by Susana Rodríguez Rosique and has as its title “The power of inversion: Irony, from utterance to discourse”. One of the pragmatic models most often utilised to study irony is H. P. Grice’s *Cooperative Principle* (Grice 1989). It is widely known that, according to Grice, communication is governed by four maxims that speakers must observe so that their message can be valid, the inferred meaning being a natural consequence of infringing those maxims. If someone states that “The weather today is ideal to go to the beach” while it is pouring with rain, the ironic content of the utterance would derive from the explicit violation of the Maxim of Quality (“Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence”). Well, Rodríguez Rosique has actually created an alternative theoretical model based not only on Grice’s model but also on the works of other neo-Gricean authors, such as L. R. Horn (1989) and S. C. Levinson (2000).

The fundamental concept behind the aforesaid model is the so-called *Inversion Principle*, which predicts that certain scales can be inverted in specific contexts and thus generate ironic meanings. The activation of the Inversion Principle would be determined by the violation of the Maxim of Quality and would explain cases in which the marked term within a set comes to have a non-marked meaning or an even more opposed one; saying, for example, that an ice-cream is *(the) most delicious* when it actually tastes awful allows the superlative to assume a meaning opposed to the one that it really has (the lowest part on the scale of what is good). In such cases, it is said that a pragmatic inversion has taken place. Interestingly, the irony which the Inversion Principle helps to create not only acts in isolated utterances but can also make a complete text become ironic or humorous. Along these lines, Rodríguez Rosique analyses several poems where the presence of some final verses forces an ironic reinterpretation of the whole text. It could, consequently, be said that the last verses of those poems invert the discursive nature of the text and turn it into a humorous one. Therefore, the Inversion Principle can undoubtedly prove fruitful when it comes to analysing the overall functioning of highly elaborate texts such as literary ones, which is why the University of Alicante research group GRIALE is currently expanding this theoretical construct in order to take advantage of its descriptive potential.

The second chapter in the first part, written by Salvatore Attardo, is entitled “Intentionality and irony” and explores two essential aspects of irony: its categorisation and

its psycholinguistic processing. In relation to the first aspect, Attardo argues that irony cannot be defined via necessary and sufficient conditions, which is why irony becomes a concept with blurred limits that can group together multiple forms. In other words, an irony prototype would exist together with other more or less peripheral types of irony. However, the diversity of ironic formats is not endless, since there would always be recurrent aspects in the definition of this category, such as the features of evaluation, opposition, or affirmation (irony as modal judgement, as contrast, or as an assertive speech act). In turn, the second idea presented in this chapter says that irony is very often unconscious. This hypothesis goes against the rhetorical tradition, according to which ironic games were always voluntary; instead, Attardo suggests that it is not unusual at all to find examples of irony where the author does not have an active behaviour, which opens new areas of study in the efforts to describe the ironic phenomenon in terms of mental processing.

Francisco Yus is the author of the third paper included in the first part. Under the title of “An inference-centred analysis of jokes: The intersecting circles model of humorous communication”, Yus’s contribution focuses on the study of comprehension processes linked to jokes and their humorous effects. The author’s main thesis is that the humorous effect generated by jokes cannot be exclusively explained in terms of the conceptual (and cultural) manipulation carried out by speakers when they joke with one another, but must also respond to the simultaneous action of three mechanisms which favour cognitive inference: the interpretation of the joke; the presence of cultural frameworks; and the mental representation of the society where the joke takes place (cultural stereotypes, social roles, etc.). From a modularistic approach based on models such as the *Relevance Theory* of Sperber & Wilson (1986), Yus analyses the interdependence of these three aspects in the functioning of jokes, and concludes that such multiple interaction (known as *Intersecting Circles Model*) is responsible for the actual existence of joke-associated humour.

The second part of the book has as its title *Irony and Humour in Mediated Discourse* and includes four chapters. Elena Méndez-G^a de Paredes authored the paper which opens this second part, entitled “Discursive mechanisms of informative humour in Spanish media”. This study researches into the linguistic strategies used by the mass media (television and radio) to attract an audience. The author uses discourse analysis techniques in her paper and empirically demonstrates –through the analysis of Spanish television programmes– that humour is one of the most effective resources when it comes to calling the public’s attention, thanks to its capacity to generate ludic effects. In fact, even the most serious media discourses –such as those of news broadcasts– may be coated with a humorous tone for the purpose of ensuring a higher probability of success in the fulfilment of their informative role. It all has led to a redefinition of mass informative channels in post-modern society, by virtue of which programmes have been transformed into shows and journalists into clowns.

The second article in this section –written by Leonor Ruiz Gurillo– is entitled “Narrative strategies in *Buenafuente*’s humorous monologues”. The author carries out an analysis of humorous monologues created by the Spanish comedian Andreu Buenafuente, taking the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* developed by Raskin (1985) and Attardo (2001) as her theoretical framework. Based on 203 monologues, Ruiz Gurillo describes the strategies applied by this comedian and explains the reasons for his success. In accordance with the evidence provided by the author, Buenafuente’s monologues always start from current news (an idiosyncratic feature of this showman) and, on that basis, they expositoryly develop a ludic argumentation of a linear nature which is packed with gestures (kinesic information), pauses that provide a prosodic reinforcement of the text, and interactions with the audience. The outcome of this *modus operandi* is extremely dynamic and spontaneous monologues, which

favour the achievement of a humorous effect. Therefore, Ruiz Gurillo not only explains the functioning of humorous monologues as a whole –and, more specifically, those of Buenafuente– but also identifies the textual properties which make these monologues become an easily recognisable humorous genre.

The next paper, “Cartoons in Spanish press: A pragmatic approach”, is written by Xose A. Padilla García and offers a research study focused on the creation and comprehension processes linked to the humorous phenomena which come into play in the graphic jokes (or comic vignettes) of the Spanish press. After defining vignettes as multimodal texts which combine words and images and are intrinsically humorous (which distinguishes this genre from others where the presence of humour has a contingent nature), the author analyses all the marks used by the artist who draws the vignette to guide the humour comprehension process. In Padilla García’s view, vignette humour comprehension is not monolithic but gradual, which would explain the existence of different comprehension levels ranging from a superficial understanding of humorous play to a deep understanding through which the reader could access all the pragmatic shades contained in the vignette. For Padilla, the fact that vignette comprehension is gradual has great relevance because it shows that this humorous genre is polyvalent, since it activates both ephemeral and superficial humorous effects (after an insufficiently careful reading) and much more complex political or social criticism. This is why comic vignettes in the press can eventually act as discourses which are in a position to change their readers’ opinion or point of view, as long as they examine the vignettes carefully and search for the interpretation patterns used by the artist.

The last paper in this second part is authored by Javier Muñoz Basols, Pawel Adrjan, and Marianne David, and is entitled “Phonological humour as perception and representation of foreignness”. These authors have as their aim to describe and interpret the humour involved in phonetic games, especially in those cases where comedians imitate the sounds of a foreign language in a parodic fashion. Muñoz Basols, Adrjan and David use 30 languages as the empirical basis for their work, seeking to ensure that their results are valid for linguistic comparison. They, additionally, take into consideration non-linguistic factors, mostly of a cultural nature. After a thorough analysis, these three researchers come to the conclusion that phonetic jokes constitute a specific humorous category which each language community uses according to their own social conventions. The path opened by these authors is extremely interesting, since the research on the combination of sounds and words to generate humour can still bring highly valuable outcomes if it is applied to linguistic systems other than those analysed in this paper.

The third and last part of the book is titled *Irony and Humour in Conversational Interaction* and consists of three chapters which have as their common denominator the fact that they deal with humour appearing in oral discourse. M. Belén Alvarado Ortega signs the first one of them: “Failed humour in conversational utterances in Spanish”. Alvarado Ortega analyses various excerpts from real conversations (extracted from the database of the group Val.Es.Co, in charge of which is A. Briz, at the University of Valencia) in which humour has failed, either because the addressee did not understand his/her interlocutor’s humorous intention or because the said addressee has deliberately decided not to react before that intention. The paper also deals with those cases in which failed humour is related to the actual speaker (humour toward oneself), to the communicative situation, or to absent individuals. Alvarado Ortega’s inquiries show that the presence of failed humour does not by default imply that a conversation is unsuccessful: on the contrary, failed humour is a structured linguistic strategy which can be used as a courtesy mark (to avoid damaging the public image of a specific person, for instance) or as a sociolinguistic predictor because, in the author’s

opinion, failed humour is often utilised as a gender mark, since men and women use this pragmatic mechanism with different frequency and for different communicative purposes.

Amadeu Viana is responsible for the following paper, which is entitled “Humour and argumentation in everyday talk”. The study has as its starting point the assumption that, in the course of everyday spontaneous conversations, speakers can refer to the same subject seriously or humorously depending on their interests. According to the author, this duality allows humour to own a large argumentative potential, insofar as it can be used as a tool to make a particular idea or point of view sound more convincing. Based on a theoretical as well as empirical analysis, Viana maintains that humour has proved useful when providing arguments and reasoning in spontaneous dialogues, which widens the traditional vision of this phenomenon and places it inside the group of language persuasion mechanisms.

The last chapter of the book has as its title “Tackling the complexity of spontaneous humorous interaction: An integrated classroom-modelled corpus approach” and is written by Kurt Feyaerts. This paper investigates humour from a framework which, even today, has hardly been approached in this field, namely cognitive linguistics, and, more precisely, the socio-cognitive approaches to language. Unlike other more formalistic proposals, cognitive linguistics holds that humour is, first and foremost, the result of an interaction between multiple speakers who share common interests and use language functionally seeking to satisfy those interests. Therefore, Feyaerts conceives humour as a dynamic and intersubjective phenomenon which cannot possibly exist in isolation from the context. The research work carried out by Feyaerts, which is supported on real cases coming from Corinth (Interactive Humour Corpus) –a data corpus for Dutch spoken in Belgium which Feyaerts himself has developed with his collaborators– additionally offers interesting reflections on how to use corpus linguistics to do research into such abstract notions as irony and humour.

In short, the book edited by Ruiz Gurillo and Alvarado Ortega provides the scientific community with a set of highly valuable materials. In light of the depth achieved in the analyses performed, the diversity of theories used, and the large number of original (both theoretical and empirical) contributions contained in it, there is no doubt that the present work fills an important gap in the linguistic bibliography on irony and humour. Moreover, it will surely become a solid reference for all those researchers interested in further exploring the complex limits of the most evasive human communication, that which causes smiles and perplexity at the same time.

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