

## Book review

**Ruiz Gurillo, L. (2012). *La lingüística del humor en español* [The Linguistics of Spanish Humour]. Madrid: Arco Libros.**

Leonor Ruiz Gurillo, a professor of Spanish Language at the University of Alicante (Spain), conducts research mainly in the areas of Spanish phraseology, colloquial Spanish and pragmatics, with a special focus on humour and irony. She is also the head of GRIALE, a research group created in 2002 specialized in the pragmatics of humour and irony ([www.griale.es](http://www.griale.es)). Her latest book, *La lingüística del humor en español* [The Linguistics of Spanish Humour], aims to present a pragmatic analysis of Spanish humour. Published by Arco Libros in a collection geared towards an academic readership, Ruiz Gurillo's contribution is highly welcome in the field of Spanish linguistics as well as humour research.

The volume begins with a review of the most influential theories of humour, after which the author presents her own model and applies it to different genres. Finally, she offers an interesting comparison between humour and irony. What follows is a detailed critical review of this book in which a summary of its contents precedes a critique of the book's many selling points and its few drawbacks.

Due to the fact that diverse dimensions of humour have been explored by scholars coming from different fields, one of the most important and difficult tasks is to delimit the object of research. As just stated, Ruiz has decided to focus on a pragmatic perspective applied to Spanish humour. *Spanish* here refers only to European Spanish.

The book is divided into 8 chapters and includes both core references in the field and up-to-date references. In the introduction, the author briefly describes the main inquiries into humour research undertaken over the last 20 years, based on Attardo (1994, 2008), and she outlines the relevance of humour as a research object for other disciplines.

The first chapter, entitled *An X-Ray of Humour*, offers a critical review of the three main theories about humour, namely (1) the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH) by Raskin and Attardo (1991), based on the resolution of humorous incongruity, the concept of *script* (and *script opposition*) and the six knowledge resources; (2) *Cognitive linguistics of humour* (by Brône et al. 2006 among other contributions), an approach that understands humour as a creative use of language which succeeds on the basis of a shared experiential knowledge and uses concepts such as *mental space*, *blending*, and *frame-shifting*; and (3) *Relevance theory*, which focuses on the search for optimal relevance as a vehicle for humour comprehension.

After excluding Cognitive Linguistics, because, in her view, it does not concentrate on the purely linguistic mechanisms of humour production, and Relevance Theory for not being predictive enough (p. 36), chapter 2 presents *A Pragmatic Model of Spanish Humour* developed by GRIALE. This model is based on the GTVH because, according to Ruiz, this theory covers most cases of humour and includes several aspects such as narrative strategies, linguistic choices, communicative situation, target of the joke, etc., thus making generalisations possible. Furthermore, the author suggests an improvement of the GTVH model by enhancing two of the six knowledge resources, namely, narrative strategies and language. As for the narrative strategies, this model includes specific parameters such as

register, genre and text type. With regard to language, this resource is understood as the capacity of the speaker/writer to choose between a series of variables and to negotiate in a given context in order to accomplish a particular objective, that is, to amuse the audience/reader. These choices are reflected in so-called *humorous marks* or *indicators* which facilitate the process of inference – based on the infringement of conversational principles – and are closely bound to the narrative strategies used.

In the next four chapters, the model is applied to humorous and non-humorous genres. As Ruiz claims, this classification is merely methodological, because all humorous genres maintain the textuality of the serious original genre. Besides, serious genres may contain humorous elements, and there is a constant exchange between serious and humorous texts. Each of the genres analysed focuses on a knowledge resource: logical mechanisms and linguistic choices in jokes (chapter 4); narrative strategies in humorous monologues (chapter 5); target strategies in television sketches (chapter 6), and conversational strategies in spontaneous conversation (chapter 7).

As for the most significant aspects of Spanish jokes (chapter 4), the author deals with several logical mechanisms based on syntagmatic relationships (inversion, juxtaposition, parallelism, etc.) and different types of reasoning. In addition, non verbal elements play a fundamental role in the communicative situation of jokes. Some of the most frequent narrative strategies implemented in Spanish jokes are the use of analogies, playing with the title of a film or play or the repetition of fixed structures. Although she makes no attempt to be comprehensive, Ruiz nonetheless enumerates a variety of humorous marks and indicators, including polysemy, homonymy, antonymy, hyperbole, phraseology, and the infringement of informativity, and illustrates them with a number of examples.

Audiovisual humour is dealt with in chapter 5. The author presents a monologue taken from *El club de la comedia*, a popular stand-up comedy show imported from American television and specifically adapted to Spanish audiences and their idiosyncrasies. Ruiz underlines the importance of the spatial frame, where the comedian interacts in a double way – not only with the theatre audience, but also with the TV audience at home. The monologue is an example of non spontaneous oral language meant to produce laughter. Therefore, an informal and more or less colloquial register is usually the case. Monologues often deal with topics taken from the news and share a common structure (setup – conflict – resolution – coda). The chapter ends with the analysis of paralinguistic marks and linguistic indicators of humour.

The last humorous genre analysed is parody, represented by a sketch taken from another popular TV show, the Spanish version of *Saturday Night Live*. Ruiz defines parody as a humorous genre based on intertextuality and closely related to satire. Thus, she applies a model by Rossen-Knill & Henry (1997: 719) that explains parody as “a highly situated, intentional and conventional expressive made up of four essential acts: (1) the intentional representation of the object of parody, (2) the flaunting of the verbal re-presentation, (3) the critical act, and (4) the comic act”.

Ruiz ends her genre analysis by casting a glance at spontaneous conversation, a genre which may contain humour but quite obviously contains many more non-humour features (turn-taking, politeness, and so on) that can be analysed from other perspectives (chapter 7). In this case the examples are taken from the corpus of the Val.Es.Co research group (Briz & Val.Es.Co 2002), which consists of 59 text fragments that reproduce verbal exchanges of ironic and humorous nature. After analysing them, the author makes a distinction between ironic interventions without response (50.8%) and ironic interventions answered by one or more speakers (49.1%). Ruiz claims that the existence of ironic exchanges facilitates the

telling of humorous short stories; in other words, humour is the consequence of continuous irony, and laughter is its most immediate perlocutionary effect (Ruiz 2012: 147).

The analysis of the last non humorous genre paves the way for one of the most promising chapters in the book: a comparison between irony and humour (chapter 8). The author starts explaining GRIALE's neo-Gricean model of irony, understood as a contextual fact that consists in infringing conversational principles. Ruiz draws the conclusion that humour and irony are indeed closely linked, but different phenomena. Both of them are further compared with regard to aspects such as their linguistic nature (irony is strictly pragmatic, whereas humour is considered both pragmatic and semantic), echoic character (explicit or implicit), contrasting nature (be it through negation or substitution), negative condition (indirect or based on antinomy), and the infringement of pragmatic principles. The author concludes that irony is essentially based on the infringement of the Quantity principle, whereas humour violates the principle of Informativity.

As far as its significance is concerned, this book fills a long-standing gap in Spanish humour research. Leonor Ruiz Gurillo has condensed the results of the first decade of the GRIALE research group into a book that serves both as an introduction to the linguistics of humour in Spanish and as an inspiration for further research.

In her own words (p. 142), the aim is to present a linguistic analysis of Spanish humour based on the GTVH. This aim is definitely achieved, although the specificity of Spanish humour (as opposed to other languages or cultures) implicit in the book's title yields to a wide range of humorous and non humorous genres and linguistic mechanisms of humour that exist in other languages, too. A thorough analysis of each of these genres and mechanisms would most probably deserve a book of its own, so the author has opted for a more representative approach in order to set the general boundaries of European Spanish humour.

In this sense, *La lingüística del humor en español* adds a local dimension to the body of humorous knowledge and bears a clear relationship to essential works in the field, especially the GTVH. Furthermore, the author presents a critical review of this theory and dares to complement the classic 6 knowledge resources by introducing some key-factors for understanding humour which include register, genre, text type, and the violation of conversational principles. This is undoubtedly one of the main contributions of this book. The author admits to having set aside important social, cultural, religious, and political factors when neglecting to tackle aspects of humour comprehension, although many of these factor are indeed considered in the explanation of some examples (yet they might be not so evident for non native readers).

The methodology used is primarily corpus based. Therefore, it entails specific problems such as the reliability of results obtained from a corpus of only 59 text fragments of spontaneous conversation, or the balance between written and oral language. Even though the study has yielded valid and reliable results under the given circumstances (corpus), these data enable us to make broad generalisations about Spanish humour that need to be confirmed by future research, be it strictly theoretical or based on case studies. However, the reader should bear in mind that the book does not aspire to be comprehensive in the first place, but simply to shed some light on the field of humour in Spanish (p. 20).

One of the challenges of humour research is the use of precise terminology. Ruiz not only follows the common trend by choosing *humour* as an umbrella term, but also contributes significantly to the development of a humour research vocabulary in Spanish by translating key words such as *script*, *knowledge resources*, *jab line*, *punch line*, *humorous plot*, etc. successfully. However, her translation of *marks* and *indicators*, and her inconsistent use of these terms when applying them to monologues (marks are defined as paralinguistic, whereas indicators are linguistic) and to irony (in this case, marks are elements that contribute to ironic

interpretation, whereas indicators are ironic by themselves) is problematic. Something similar occurs with the shortcut that guides the reader from parody to satire in chapter 6, or with the definition of humour as a series of ironic interventions (p. 97).

Regardless of terminological inconsistencies, Ruiz presents a wide spectrum of humorous and non humorous genres that link the linguistics of humour in a traditional sense with related disciplines such as media studies (in the case of audiovisual monologues or sketches), literature studies (in the case of written monologues), and even cultural and translation studies (in the case of imported genres such as stand-up comedy). Thus, the book reflects the interdisciplinarity of humour studies. Interacting with other disciplines and looking over the boundaries of each one of them is the best way to achieve the complexity that humour research deserves. Ruiz does so in a twofold manner: opening windows for linguists, so they can have a look into other fields, and clearly explaining a linguistic model of humour that might become a useful instrument for related disciplines. Especially interesting in this regard is the comparison between the written/read and the represented version of the same monologue in chapter 5. The use of pauses and non verbal language and their oral/written expression in order to achieve the humorous effect are good clues for further investigation.

Readers might be surprised by the chapter entitled “A strange couple: Irony and humour”, that somehow collides with the previous definition of humour as a sequence of ironic interventions in chapter 6. Being aware of the fuzzy limits between humour and irony, Ruiz tries hard to explain both phenomena according to pragmatic parameters (irony violates the principle of Quantity, whereas humour breaks the principle of Informativity), again using a set of examples that do not necessarily allow more than some generalisations (p. 141). It goes without saying that such a complex subject deserves one or even more books to deal with it effectively. Nonetheless, this chapter is based on the long research tradition of GRIALE and is primarily intended as a motivation for further research. Interested readers should keep their eyes open for what emerges next from their atelier, as the group has done, and will continue to do, pioneering work in Spanish humour research from a linguistic perspective.

As for its style and structure, the book is well written and balanced, with conclusions at the end of each chapter that help readers to follow the argument. Moreover, it contains 25 figures that contribute to illustrate the main findings and an up-to-date bibliography that allows not only in-depth knowledge of the GTVH, but also insight into other theories such as Cognitive Linguistics and Relevance Theory.

On the whole, this book is what every Spanish humour scholar was waiting for, because it is both a good summary for experts and an excellent introduction for students and newcomers in the field of linguistic humour research. An expert reader might yearn for more depth in some of the analysis. In this sense, a title like “Introduction to the linguistics of Spanish humour” might have been more precise. However, *La lingüística del humor en español* will from now on be a must in every Spanish bibliography on humour. Non native speakers with a sufficient command of Spanish, particularly those studying Masters degrees or those in their final years of undergraduate degrees in modern languages, linguistics or translation studies, will also benefit from the way this book puts the full store of current knowledge on linguistic studies of Spanish humour into a convenient, and inviting, single volume.

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