Book review

Dynel, Marta (2018). *Irony, Deception and Humour: Seeking the Truth about Overt and Covert Untruthfulness.* **Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.**

Marta Dynel's book sets out to discuss irony, deception, humour, and the relations between the three in terms of H. P. Grice's theory of the cooperative principle and associated conversational maxims. The common ground of the communicative phenomena under question is untruthfulness. Furthermore, the distinction between covert and overt untruthfulness is important in determining the communicative effects. Covert untruthfulness serves deception, while overt untruthfulness can be used to create irony and humour. The framework is neo-Gricean, presenting "a modified and extended version" of the seminal theory (p. vii).

Dynel uses the television series *House M.D.* as data to illustrate and argue her claims. *House* is set in a New Jersey, USA hospital, where Gregory House, an acerbic and antisocial but brilliant doctor played by the British actor Hugh Laurie, searches for diagnoses much like detectives search for culprits in crime shows. Although *House* is categorised as a drama or drama-comedy, Laurie first became famous for comedic roles, teamed up with Stephen Fry in the series based on the works of P. G. Wodehouse, and the sketch show *Fry and Laurie.* Dynel notes that using scripted TV episodes as data carries the benefits of providing a somewhat closed world where on the one hand the thoughts and motivations of characters are more transparent than in every-day social interaction and, on the other, the dialogue provides more verisimilitude to real-life speech than examples invented or prompted by the researcher. This kind of data is closer to an ideal model of communication – which analysis often relies on as well – that is less messy than real-life talk, but also linked to a richer context of social relations and situations than data invented by the researcher.

Grice's theory examines the cooperative principle as the foundation for communication. Actual communicative acts (verbal and nonverbal) are only the tip of the iceberg, since people rely on extensive contextual knowledge and cultural convention to interpret signs. It would be time-consuming and cumbersome to explicitly express everything in exact detail so that all potential ambiguity is eliminated. To explain how conversational meaning works, Grice offers a framework of the responsibilities placed on the speaker; these maxims ensure that speech forms a rational contribution to the discussion. The maxims refer to the quality, quantity, relevance, and manner of saying. The speaker is expected to make contributions that are relevant, appropriate in manner and style, and to give the right amount of information, neither too much nor too little.

The most important one for Dynel's book is the maxim of quality, which refers to the truthfulness of communication. This is sometimes stated in the form of a supermaxim: try to make your contribution one that is true. The supermaxim can be split into two submaxims: do not say what you believe to be false, and do not say what you do not have adequate evidence for. Truthfulness refers to what the speaker believes to be true, sincerity rather than objective truth – lying requires a contradiction between what the speaker believes and asserts, not a contradiction between what is said and the actual state of affairs, as long as the speaker takes responsibility for trying to make the statement true.

Of course, communication is much more complex and nuanced than just stating true or untrue things. While covertly violating a maxim can be intentionally misleading or otherwise noncooperative, a speaker may also "flout" or "opt out of" a maxim for communicative purposes. For example, if someone says something apparently irrelevant, the hearer will search for possible interpretations – the speaker may want to communicate that they do not want to talk about the subject, for example. A covert violation may lead to deception, while an overt one, where the speaker explicitly communicates the lack of sincerity or truthfulness, or chooses a blatantly inappropriate style of expression, is commonly used for purposes of irony and humour. This may be done in several ways, for instance, by nonverbal expressions, such as tone of voice or facial expression, contextual cues, where both speaker and hearer can observe the contradiction between what is said and the actual situation; or through conventional language use, such as metaphor or other tropes.

One intention of this book is to bring out the complex relations between humour, irony, and deception more fully than in previous literature. Dynel points out that while there is extensive research on each of these issues, they are mostly considered apart, and juxtaposing them offers a chance to understand the phenomena and their relations better through comparison. The book is organised into five chapters, starting with two chapters explaining the theoretical foundations, the various neo-Gricean applications of the theory, and how Grice and others using Gricean theory have addressed irony, deception, and humour. These are followed by three chapters, each devoted to one of the phenomena at hand, demonstrated through examples from *House*, and finally, a brief epilogue. The chapter on humour is the shortest one, reflecting the larger amounts of scholarly attention that irony and deception have received within linguistics.

The book offers a wonderfully thorough discussion of Gricean analysis and various applications of the theory on irony, deception, and humour, as well as critique of different views and an original analysis to illustrate the author's position. In providing an in-depth overview of Gricean and neo-Gricean approaches to the issues at hand, this is an extremely useful book. However, at some points, I was not quite convinced of the details of definition – it is difficult to try to put the varied phenomena of irony, humour, and untruthfulness into absolute categories. While Dynel acknowledges the heterogeneous nature of the phenomena, the relation of this variability to a rigid categorising system presents difficulties at times. The problem with House is that it seems that almost everything he says is indirect, ambiguous, and ironic. It is a bit hard to tell at times whether the examples that are meant to represent the different tropes are really all that different.

For example, Dynel defines irony as meaning reversal combined with a negative evaluation. However, when Dynel argues against others' examples of irony providing a positive evaluation, at times it seems that the distinctions are a bit arbitrary, such as claiming something is only playful teasing as opposed to true irony. This made me think of uses of irony in my native language, Finnish. To give only one example, a friend of mine lives on an extremely beautiful island. She posted a lovely photo on social media, with the caption along the lines of "This is awful, I really suffer living here." I suspect that in addition to being humorous, this sort of distancing from (potentially self-congratulatory) praise is aligned with the Finnish tendency to avoid boastfulness. Based on the book, I am not actually quite sure what Dynel would make of this example. In some cases, she argues that a positive evaluation is possible when previous discourse offers a clear point of reference to make the interpretation more plausible. Given that all sign use relies on previous semiosis to some extent, it is hard to see where the line for this would be drawn. Negative evaluations are also based on previous knowledge.

Humour studies is an interdisciplinary field, and I expect this book will be useful for readers from many fields. I hail from anthropology, where Grice's maxims have faced some critique in that they do not appear to be universally applicable, as discourse may have different ends and

expectations (see among others Foley 1997: 278 et passim; Senft 2008, 2018). Expectations placed on speakers depend on how agency is understood. Local semiotic ideologies on the appropriate means and ends of sign use, as well as ideas about personhood affect how communication is construed and messages interpreted (see among others Robbins 2001; Duranti 2015). I do not mean to say that every discussion needs to consider possible variations. However, a consciousness of the variability can help illuminate why things are the particular way they are in a given context. From this perspective, the occasional and somewhat vague appeals to human cognition made in the book as an explanation were not quite convincing – this would certainly require much more data to determine.

Besides the Gricean views on humour, many of the writers that Dynel references are new to me. In some cases, the taxonomies of varieties of tropes and the different terminology used by scholars got quite dense. There are tables in the epilogue; bringing in more such varieties of representing the material, perhaps earlier in the book, would have been helpful. However, the overview on conceptions of untruthfulness and its varieties is very valuable.

I appreciate Dynel's critique of the dichotomy between serious and humorous, which has certainly plagued humour research. Her critique of Raskin & Attardo's (1994) view of humour as not cooperative, *non-bona fide* communication, shows that placing humour into a category separate from serious communication does not work. However, at times it seems that Dynel replaces this by a dichotomy of overt and covert untruthfulness, and I am not sure if the suggestion to completely get rid of the serious vs. humorous distinction does not come with its own problems. While I agree that the humorous/serious dichotomy is not a self-evidently useful tool for analysis, the opposition between serious and humorous is so pertinent to views on humour in both folk and more rigorous analytical views that, while it certainly should not be accepted as is, analysis of the idea is worthwhile. Instead of sharp dichotomies, it might be better to examine oppositions and the ways they work in specific cases carefully. As the author herself says, truthfulness meets humour in many complex ways (p. 413). Humour may communicate truthful meanings, as Dynel notes, while autotelic humour, that is, humour for its own sake, does not aim to do so.

I further disagree that humorous/non-humorous is "an objectively verifiable category" (p. 27). While a verbal joke may have a specific form, instances of humour can be created in very subtle ways, not always apparent to everyone present in the interaction. This can be seen in the examples from *House* as well. Nothing is funny in itself, but just about anything can be made funny in the right situation. If humour is created as a relation, a specific perspective, this is an act of framing, as mentioned by Dynel as well (p. 391). The same form playing on an obvious incongruity can, depending on interpretation, be an obscenity, abomination, or a joke, as Mary Douglas (1968) reminds us. I would like to add to the analysis in the book that a humorous expression often carries an incongruity within it, an internal contradiction. Further insight into how covert and overt un/truthfulness figure in humour may be gained by analysing the different aspects of the utterance and the relations between them in terms of untruthfulness. A single joke may straddle the line between sincerity and untruthful.

To sum up my view, this book offers a meticulous overview of Gricean theory as applied to the issues at hand, as well analysis of how humour, irony, and covert and overt untruthfulness are given a variety of uses in a consistent body of material. I just think either that it has to be accepted that the phenomena are not well suited for a system of categorisation that has strict boundaries and discrete classes (and there are other options for classification, such as prototype theory), or that the taxonomy itself need to be considered in more detail.

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