

Book review

Attardo, Salvatore (2020). *The Linguistics of Humor. An Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This is the third major book on linguistics of humour by the most authoritative researcher in the field in the last 30 years (following his 1994 and 2001 books on humour; see also my reviews of these: Chłopicki 1996 and 2003), if one does not count the edited volumes – the groundbreaking *Handbook* (2017) and the interdisciplinary *Encyclopedia* (2014; see my review Chłopicki 2015). Attardo’s consistency in delineating the field has been remarkable from the very beginning – the sections empty or semi-empty in 1994 have become filled with research over the years, although, as he admits, not all his prognoses have fleshed out (e.g. the research on humour and the implicit did not; p. 163). Still he makes some interesting suggestions for further research which are worth mentioning here, e.g. the *keying* of humour (after Goffman), and specifically “how the type of situation and the production of humour interact” (p. 52) as well as sociolinguistics of humour, particularly age, social class and dialect as factors affecting humour.

The book – a must for linguists and humour scholars alike – is intended to assess the current state of research and “set it out clearly in as comprehensive a framework as possible” (p. 384). It consists of four logically planned parts – the theoretical and terminological groundwork (I), the two complementary parts on humour competence (II) and humour performance (III), and the selected applications of humour research (IV – humour in literature, translation and teaching), followed by the glossary of major terms, bulky list of references and three helpful indices, with “Further readings” sections following each individual chapter. This structure is not only logical, but also well known in linguistic textbooks (such as the classical Yule, now in its sixth edition, 2017), while the applications bring to mind the now somewhat forgotten *Real World Linguist* by Bjorkman & Raskin (1986). Attardo’s volume aims to be seen as a textbook, although not a textbook in linguistics, of which there are many, including his own co-authored linguistic textbook (Brown & Attardo 2000).

The book’s major distinction is that between humour competence and humour performance, with the former largely reasserting earlier major claims, going back to Raskin’s fundamental 1985 study, and the latter bringing together a novel summary and new contribution to what the author sees as a growing subfield of humour study (the best part in my modest estimation, even though he, equally modestly, admits that separating the chapters on Conversational Analysis and Discourse Analysis was not easy and maybe the decisions he made were not right).

The general approach Attardo takes in the book is somewhat eclectic and embraces what he calls the complex systems theory. In line with it, he argues that essentialist approaches of three major humour theories should be combined with the informality and intersubjectivity of the discursive, ethnomethodological approaches (p. 76) under the umbrella of the complex systems theory and what he calls “transdisciplinarity,” i.e. the systematic collaboration of various pertinent disciplines to achieve progress in humour research (p. 383). This is a very timely and pertinent thought, especially given the preparation of the state-of-the-art *Handbook of Humour Research* (Ford et al. forthcoming).

In his view, humour is not only complex but contextually driven; accordingly, he endorses the “triangulation approach” (p. 55) to identify humour, using as many contextualizing and situational cues as possible – e.g. paratextual cues, facial expressions, and other humour markers (he claims it does not make sense to attempt to list all the markers) – and even interviews and ratings so as to limit the chance of misinterpreting humour.

Apart from these general claims, what draws attention are certain important and far-reaching statements, although perhaps not obvious for every humour scholar, which might escape the cursory reader. Firstly, “[l]inguistic humour is a subclass of semiotic humour,” which includes visual, musical, multimodal, and physical humour (p. 25, also Figure 1.3, p. 26) and thus broadens the scope of Attardo’s analysis of humour (beyond the GTVH). Secondly, “[h]umour is a property of the stimulus, the text (competence level). Humor appreciation is a property of the situation (which includes a specific speaker and hearer, the context in which the humour is produced, etc., i.e., is the performance level)” (p. 49). This claim is central to the book as it emphasises the existence of the *system* of language as distinguished from the way it is used by speakers, e.g., for humorous effects. Thirdly, along the same lines, the humorous “laughable” is defined as meeting “semantic/pragmatic requirements for humour,” without taking the reaction of the audience into account, which would already be the domain of performance (p. 245).

Nonetheless, the competence/performance distinction is not always so clearcut as it seems from the above. For example, Attardo claims, somewhat controversially, that “competence of humour is not only semantic, it is also pragmatic” (p. 111), because pragmatics is part of semantics (p. 134), and the SSTH should in fact be redefined as “Semantic Script and Pragmatic Theory of Humor” because “humour may arise from the violation of pragmatic rules alone” (p. 157). Further on, he claims as follows, which may just as well speak for the performance side of the central equation: “All humour is intentional, either in the intention of the speaker, the hearer, the audience or any combination thereof” (p. 174). Now, this may be right with regard to the speaker, but the question arises what kind of intention can the hearer or the audience have? Even though it is true that “[s]omebody has to intend the situation as humorous” (p. 175), and even though the terms *speaker* and *hearer* are used in very broad senses, as not necessarily those directly involved in the act of communication, the above claim is also misleading.

Humour competence (i.e. the ability of the speaker to recognise and generate humour) can only indicate the *potentiality* of humour as identified by script oppositions. Furthermore, Attardo seems to believe that this is not the skill that is separate from other language competence skills as some researchers claim (cf. the discussion in Chapter 15). He also seems to support the similarity of general language processing and humour processing since he argues there are “no humour specific constructs” in the SSTH or the GTVH: “both theories are relational: it is special combinations of features that acquire humorous potential” (p. 138) – this brings Attardo in line with the general argument of cognitive linguists (e.g. Brône et al. 2006: 204 argue that “(humorous) language is not to be treated as an isolated, autonomous cognitive phenomenon”), and explains his triangulation approach. Relatedly, he also claims that a theory of humour performance needs first a general theory of performance as its basis, and he adopts Gumperz and Hymes’s (1972) ethnomethodological interactional approach as such basis. Still, he agrees with Goatly (2012) that “humorous violations of the CP do not generate implicatures, or if they do, they are not the same kinds of implicatures that flouts generate outside of humour” (p. 165), thus supporting the uniqueness of humour processing.

With regard to the General Theory of Verbal Humor, the interesting details I managed to pick out concerned Attardo’s current views on some of the Knowledge Resources. He now argues that the Language KR should better be thought of as the Semiotic Strategy KR because it also includes non-linguistic and multi-modal texts (controversially, he also thinks that it

should include the position of punchline [p. 144, footnote 5], which in my view seems the domain of the Narrative Strategy). As to the Narrative Strategy KR, he admits that he originally wondered whether it should be labelled Textual Organization KR because jokes, memes, etc. represent all kind of textual organization, not just narratives. The Situation KR, originally underdefined, is now explained in terms of mental spaces built by the narrator (p. 149), thus adopting the cognitive linguistics terminology (cf. Fauconnier 1985). As to Targets, they could differ at the performance level, which is Attardo's way of explaining why Nigerians can laugh at the blind failing to see a snake, which is unthinkable for the Europeans (p. 303). He also discusses the new KRs (context KR and meta-pragmatic KR), as proposed by Canestrari (2010), Tsakona (2013) and Ruiz-Gurillo (2016), and comes to the conclusion that these actually concern the performance and not the competence level and thus should not be added to the original six. Given that the pragmatics level is considered part of the humour competence, this claim is perhaps debatable. In 2007, I postulated the addition of Visual Logical Mechanism to account for humorous imagery, but given the understanding of Language as the Semiotic Strategy KR, this no longer seems necessary (Chłopicki 2007).

There are also passages in the book where Attardo loses his keen reader – no doubt unintentionally. For instance, in the discussion of essentialist and reductionist approaches, the terms he seems to use interchangeably, he states that “[a]n essentialist explanation is a reductionist explanation” (p. 58), and further on, he seems to make a distinction between them, while defending the essentialism as a theoretical stance: “No one said that the essence of a phenomenon may not be socially constructed. The novice may be well advised to avoid actively advertising his/her essentialist stance, while quietly pursuing reductionist explanations” (p. 59, footnote 2). Perhaps a further explanation of the advice to novices would clarify the confusion.

Hjemslev's (1953) terminology does not make the chapter on semiotics of humour (chapter 5) easy to follow, given the following claim: “Humour is a connotative semiotics, connoting humorousness” (p. 102), a connotative semiotics being perhaps understood as a system of signs after Hjemslev, but this use is highly confusing in sentences like “a connotative semiotics ... is a semiotics in which a signifier is a semiotics ... if a semiotics has as its signifier another semiotics it is a connotative semiotics” (p. 97).

Another misunderstanding across language schools (broadly structuralist versus cognitivist) is discernible in the following assertion: “since the semantics of a *humorous text remain unchanged through all the translations across semiotic systems*, the semantic requirements should be applicable, with all due changes, to all semiotic humour” (p. 104, my emphasis), especially as contrasted to the claims in the chapter on humour in translation where, after Eco (2008), Attardo argues that translation is saying “almost” the same thing (p. 344). Cognitive linguists, as myself, would frown at the idea that a humorous text can remain unchanged in translation – this hardly ever happens. I think that – on second thought – Attardo would agree, especially in the light of what he discusses in section 14.4 on stylistics, where he seems to comment approvingly on the cognitive analysis as follows:

Antonopoulou (2002)'s argument that the GTVH can be usefully augmented by attention to ... broadly stylistic choices (Antonopoulou et al. 2015) is a welcome corrective to what is an oversimplification in the GTVH due to its origins in the analysis of jokes ... However, the GTVH was not entirely uninterested in these matters, as the discussion of register humour below will show. (p. 334)

Among other small terminological inconsistencies, *verbalised humour* (p. 176) and *verbally expressed humour* (VEH) (p. 342) seem to refer to the same concepts, while *meta-humour* should not be defined in the glossary as simply the violation of the hearer's expectations because then it would be identical to the *incongruity* as per its definition there.

A remarkable fact about Attardo is that, before the book was published, he had personally contributed to numerous strains of humour research himself. Apart from the GTVH, where he was obviously the main contributor, side by side with Raskin (Attardo & Raskin 1991), he had earlier written articles or chapters, e.g., on smiling, laughter and mirth (1.1¹ and 2.3), incongruity and resolution (4), linear organisation of jokes (4.3.1), semiotics of humour (5), pragmatics and irony (8), puns (9), humour performance and prosody (10), humorous narratives (14.1), stylistics (14.4), and humour translation (15). Thus, he singlehandedly contributed immensely to the development of the field.

The book is enjoyable reading, although dense in places. To make things lighter for the reader, Attardo explains, for instance, why it is not entirely impossible to cross a cow with an inanimate object as per the joke “Q. What do you get when you cross a cow and a lawnmower? A. A lawnmooer.” In order to illustrate such possibility and “the opposite side of the debate,” he recommends the reader to listen to “the prescient song Cows with Guns” (p. 84) – I checked it out on YouTube (Cows with Guns – The Original Animation 2006) and – let me assure you – my life will never be the same again. Thank you, Sal.

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¹ Numbers refer to chapters and sections of the book under review. All the references to Attardo’s articles can be found in the book.

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