

Book review*

Thielemann, Nadine (2020). *Understanding Conversational Joking: A Cognitive-pragmatic Study Based on Russian Interactions*. John Benjamins.

The study of humour in interaction has been a growing field of research in linguistics (e.g., see, Hay, 2000; Norrick & Chiaro, 2009; Bell, 2017; Mullan & Béal, 2018). One can name several key figures, many emerging scholars, and multiple analytical approaches in the field. The variety has made it possible for linguists to gain a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon, ranging from the significance of the speaker's intention to the contextual elements for success or the cognitive aspects of the reception.

Nadine Thielemann's book aims at taking on the ambitious project of developing "an analytical approach capable of encompassing conversational humour in terms of a basic concept that embraces joking in all its various guises" (p. 3). While arguing that humour is both a cognitive and a communicative phenomenon (p. 259), Thielemann takes incongruity as the basis of her argument to present an approach addressing diverse forms and genres of conversational humour, even those without a punch line.

The main claim of the book is that humour is a phenomenon commonly described in either purely cognitive or purely pragmatic terms; however, it is best conceptualised from a joint perspective (p. 259). To reconcile these two perspectives, the author lays out an eclectic project to *combine* concepts and approaches drawn from discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics (p. 259), because, the author claims, combining the approaches enables us to explain how cognitive processes and utterance features come together and contribute to the humour-specific construal of meaning-in-interaction (p. 3). The book is corpus-assisted in the sense that it puts forth arguments and then presents selected examples from the corpus of Russian casual interactions to highlight certain uses of language or to prove the said arguments.

The book is divided into five chapters of which the first is an introduction and the fifth is the conclusion. Chapter 1 begins with an overview of the field in terms of a grouping of three main approaches of conversational humour: a) the first approach, Thielemann writes, starts from the assumption that humour can be attributed to the configuration of a verbal stimulus (p. 2), mostly wordplay or puns (realised in the concept of incongruity), therefore, humorous effects are explained as resulting from the violation of rules concerning syntagmatic combinability or paradigmatic exchangeability, on various levels of the linguistic system; b) the second group identified is a discourse analytic approach which, the author argues, tends to classify humorous sequences in terms of play, focusing on the indicators of a playful modality observable on the discourse surface and characteristic of the performance (p. 2); c) the third group is the cognitive approach that conceives of humour as a recipients' phenomenon and the fact that humour results from the way a stimulus is processed (p. 2). While one must admit that most studies in the field

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of conversational humour do not limit their scope of analysis to only one of these approaches, this is a well-informed taxonomy to begin the discernment of strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to verbal humour.

In Chapter 2, Thielemann unpacks the discourse analytic perspective to conversational joking. She leverages Schiffrin's (1994) proposal that discourse analysis is used in the book as a cover term for various approaches to language above the sentence level (p. 13). From the outset, the author distinguishes between two frameworks: conversation analysis (CA) (section 2.1) and interpretive sociolinguistics (section 2.2). CA is elaborated in detail, although it is followed by a list of shortcomings of the approach for the study of humour in terms of CA's exclusive focus on laughter and laughables. Instead of addressing reasons for laughter, CA focuses on practices which often attract laughter; therefore, CA defines responsive laughter as a phenomenon oriented to such practices (p. 25). Similarly, CA does not have much to offer in cases where recipients withhold laughter. Moreover, CA-based analysis rarely attempts to trace laughability back to an utterance's inherent properties, as Thielemann claims (p. 25).

On the other hand, CA has been shown to present some advantages. The main one is that it approaches the data without preconceptions or imposing the analyst's prefabricated categories nor resorting to any kind of background knowledge beyond the sequential context (p. 26). Thielemann describes how humour scholars can leverage CA fruitfully once they add an *interpretive depth* to the approach by including ethnographic background knowledge in the analysis. While CA focuses more on a turn eliciting laughter rather than humour, interpretive sociolinguistics is used to promote a better understanding of conversational humour in terms of a discourse modality established by the interlocutors themselves using various (contextualisation) cues (p. 16).

In section 2.2, interpretive sociolinguistics is elaborated through a detailed discussion of contextualisation. With respect to humour, the utility of contextualisation theory seems to be that it can provide a framework to describe, as the author writes, how specific cues characterising humorous utterances signal that the stretch of talk is not meant to be interpreted seriously (p. 30). From this point on, the discussion turns to sociolinguistic features of the Russian language and examples of Russian conversation are presented. To examine the contextualisation of conversational joking, special attention is advised to be paid to a multitude of cues that co-occur with humour features. Such cues are divided into four groups: a) *prosodic and paralinguistic cues*: e.g. laughter and related phenomena; b) *linguistic cues*: e.g. strategies of poetic talk, shift to a register, repetition, wordplay, etc.; c) *pragmatic cues*: e.g. cooperative co-construction of jokes, speakers shift footing, exaggeration and overstatement; d) *cues relating to content*: e.g. choices regarding the topics of conversation and their presentation may also contribute to the contextualisation. Chapter 2 ends with the author arguing that such a combination of conversation analysis with interpretive sociolinguistics would avoid giving *a priori* definitions of the phenomenon in terms of necessary and/or sufficient conditions for a stimulus to be humorous (p. 99); and instead, it can model humour as a members' category by revealing what speakers themselves orient to, when interpreting or marking a non-serious turn (p. 99). This is a sound proposition by the author as interpretive sociolinguistics would add an analytical depth to CA, and vice versa, CA could give a methodological rigour to sociolinguistics in terms of a detailed metalanguage for the description of *talk-in-interaction*.

Chapter 3 examines humour as a cognitive phenomenon to shed light on what is going on in a recipient's mind and how they arrive at a contextualised interpretation of an utterance (p. 107). This chapter attempts to cover everything that pays some (or even very little) attention to *the cognitive* in the study of meaning. The author first reviews approaches inspired by Grice's (1975) model of humour as inferential communication in the sense that there is a cognitive contrast between an easily accessible (e.g., verbally encoded) interpretation and a more remote,

less accessible one, which must be inferred (p. 108). Then, this Chapter moves on to another group of cognitive approaches known as *Relevance Theory* (Wilson & Sperber, 2010). Following that, the discussion turns to more commonly used approaches in humour studies such as the *Semantic Script Theory of Humour* (SSTH; Raskin, 1985) and its follow-up, the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH; Attardo, 1994), which, to my knowledge, are not usually categorised as cognitive approaches. Regardless, the author postulates that both SSTH and GTVH approaches' scope is rather narrow since they focus on jokes, first and foremost, "to explain the humorous effect of punch lines" (p. 125). This is claim that has been rejected by Attardo (2001).

The next framework reviewed, and applied to examples of Russian conversation snippets, is the *Graded Salience Hypothesis*, that is, a psycholinguistic model of language processing focusing on lexical access (Giora, 2003). This approach, as Thielemann postulates, accounts for humorous effects in terms of a conflict between a salient meaning accessed from the mental lexicon and a contextually favoured meaning (p. 129). This transitions to the last part of the section where Thielemann reviews cognitive linguistics (CL) and what it could bring to the table for the analysis of humour. She suggests that CL theories can describe humour in terms of *derailed or de-automatised conceptualisation* characterised by the marked, non-prototypical use of everyday cognitive mechanisms (p. 134). She concludes the chapter by adding that all these methodologies have been placed under the banner of cognitive approaches because they agree on the idea that humour derives from a cancellation or restructuring of a preferred conceptualisation or mental representation in favour of an alternative, more remote and thus less accessible one (p. 139).

In section 3.3, Thielemann proposes to subsume all the diverse resources speakers use under the umbrella term *norm*. With this interesting idea, the author asserts that the function of such norms is that of orienting oneself when interpreting utterances and facilitating a particular understanding, or forecasting a specific development of talk-in-interaction (p. 141). The basis of this thinking is that *norm breaching* is the essential ingredient of humour (p. 144). The violation of these norms constitutes a cognitive dissonance and hence humour can be explained. The author proposes a list of such norms and supports them with several examples from Russian interactions. The list of norms includes linguistic conventions, textual and discursive regularities, genre, social norms, and world knowledge. In summary, the author's proposal in this chapter revolves around the concept of *cognitive contrast* that recipients of humorous stimuli perceive (p. 181). This section brings together several insightful ideas together that are specific to humour and hinges them all to the critical concept of cognitive contrast in humour studies. Nonetheless, the chapter ends with a criticism of the cognitive-pragmatic approaches and concludes that these approaches say little about the structure of the stimulus or how it facilitates the humour-specific processing (p. 182).

With that in mind, Thielemann begins Chapter 4 which is titled "Discourse semantic perspective to conversational humour" and goes as far as including some approaches that have not commonly dealt with humour or been paid much attention to by humour scholars, such as Langacker's (2001) *Current Discourse Space Model* or Clark's (1996) *Joint Action Hypothesis*. The rationale behind such odd choices, as she maintains, is that humour is a phenomenon at the interface of cognition and interaction (p. 186), so one possible starting point is to review the cognitive perspective on the various inputs facilitating and contributing to conceptualisation, in general, and on meaning as a joint accomplishment, in particular (p. 187). The other cognitive semantic theory that is expanded in detail in this chapter is Fauconnier and Turner's (2003) *Blending Theory* where mental spaces and blends in interaction are discussed first and later the conceptual configurations characterising humorous cognition in interaction are enumerated and exemplified. For instance, frame-shifting, creative blends, and dissolution of entrenched blends

are among them. This approach, the argument goes, enables the tracing of humorous cognition in interaction online and, consequently, the reconstruction of conversational joking as a cognitive-pragmatic category (p. 253). This chapter might seem unjustified to some humour scholars since much of such cognitive examination of the perception of humour has been done by cognitive linguistics mentioned in Chapter 3. Having said that, the extension of humour analysis to other theories of CL is commendable on its own.

Chapter 5 is a very brief section where the main arguments of the book are restated. The author re-emphasises that this book has shown that conversational humour is a phenomenon located at the interface of pragmatics and cognition (p. 259). This means that conversational humour cannot be explained based on purely cognitive or pragmatic terms. Therefore, this book proposes a combination of concepts and approaches drawn from discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics.

Understanding Conversational Joking by Nadine Thielemann offers a comprehensive overview of major theories and approaches to conversational humour and attempts at leveraging a variety of approaches, some of which have often been overlooked in humour studies. The extent of the review of the literature, as well as the examination of discourse examples from a variety of angles, provides a valuable source for humour scholars, particularly graduate students of humour studies. The eclectic approach of the book may not be entirely novel, but there are new, perceptive points of view offered in the book (e.g., adding interpretive sociolinguistics to conversation analysis) or some previous concepts are improved in definition, such as the very insightful discussion about norms, normalcy, frames, cognitive contrast, etc.

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