

Book review

Oloruntoba-Oju, Taiwo (Ed.) (2023). *Humour Theory and Stylistic Enquiry*. Palgrave Macmillan.

The volume *Humour Theory and Stylistic Enquiry*, edited by Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju, is an impressive collection of essays that are united by a single overarching intention: to identify and characterise the *linguistic* features that trigger humour. The authors come from diverse cultural and methodological backgrounds. They focus on a variety of genres and formats, some (e.g., literary satire, stand-up comedy, sitcom, Instagram skit or political cartoon) more overtly comical than others (e.g. children’s literature, memoir, online supplication). The joint effort to establish a robust stylistic framework for humour analysis, applicable to particular case studies, is what brings them all together.

In his excellent introductory chapter to the volume, editor Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju discusses the difficulties that accompany a stylistic inquiry into the comic. As he argues, “distinguishing between psychological, genetic, and linguistic factors in the constitution and appreciation of humour” is a challenging task (p. 1). None of the major humour theories is in itself *linguistic*, as the concepts of incongruity, hostility, relief, or play are all sociopsychological and literary constructs, respectively. Linguists, in turn, find it difficult to explain *which* verbal patterns, if any at all, elicit humour, *why* they do so, and *how* (p. 2).

Undaunted by these reservations, Oloruntoba-Oju perceives the impact of linguistic features on humour as “overwhelming,” unrestricted to verbal humour alone, and “demonstrable irrespective of factors such as intentionality” (p. 3). He acknowledges, however, that substantiating his claim poses a methodological challenge because of “attributive ambiguity” that complicates the stylistic analysis of any humorous discourse. Prototypically, the comic effect results from a perceived incongruity or anomaly, which philosophers attribute to conceptual mechanisms. However, this incongruity or anomaly is expressed verbally, which a stylistician would attribute to linguistic mechanisms (p. 10). No matter if the humour analysed is referential (dependent on the *res* or content) or verbal (dependent on the *verba* or form), the analyst’s situation is intricate, because “on the one hand, *res* and *verba* are often integral, and on the other hand, just about any comic situation, however conveyed, would excite comic feeling” (p. 11). Thus, it is difficult to isolate and explain how linguistic features influence the overall comic effect.

To solve this dilemma, Oloruntoba-Oju constructs his own model of “humour catalysis,” which integrates different levels of linguistic analysis to clarify how each contributes to comic aesthetics (pp. 15-18). He demonstrates the usability of his model based on a vignette adapted from the 1990s Nigerian comedic television series *The Tramp* (NTA, Ilorin, 1995). He concludes that it is possible to ascertain and justify “the manner in which linguistic structures function to realise or even constitute a source of comic feeling” and that stylisticians ought to avail themselves of any linguistic tools that allow them such a demonstration (p. 27).

He also states that “every instance of humour, including the so-called non-linguistic or non-verbal humour, requires the instrumentality of language” (p. 27), possibly suggesting that an analogous multilayered *stylistic* analysis of comicality might also be applicable to nonverbal

discourse. I find the remark particularly appealing, although it requires more insight, as none of the proposals in the volume, including those dedicated to multimodal humour, offers an actual *stylistic* analysis of the *nonverbal* components (for example, commenting on the visual style of political cartoons or the performative aspects of the stand-up skits). This research path is worthy of further exploration.

The texts that follow the editor's introduction have been grouped into two separate sections, the former dedicated to "Humour theory and literary texts in European, American and African contexts". This part of the book opens with an insightful and rich contribution "Unifying the humour theories: A stylistic approach," in which Faye Chambers attempts to bring psychoanalytical, social, and cognitive approaches to humour (centred around release, hostility, and incongruity theories, respectively) to a common denominator, based on the stylistic concept of *foregrounding*. The author claims that "incongruity is synonymous with foregrounding through deviation," while release and hostility theories focus on "specific types of foregrounded deviation" (p. 42). She offers insights into each of the theories in turn, describing the "patterns and types" of linguistic, ideational, and interpersonal deviation that each theory presupposes (p. 44). She also shifts attention away from incongruity resolution as a humour-triggering mechanism towards examining "how humour is encoded *in the textual meaning itself*," the text violating established norms (p. 58, emphasis in the original). Chambers's contribution is one of the volume's greatest highlights, combining clarity of thought with vivacity of examples.

In the following chapter "The Rasch model in humour research," Matthias Springer addresses the fundamental question of humour appraisal; i.e., the task of measuring "how good a joke, a cartoon or a comedy is" (p. 63), although it evokes different responses from different recipients. The author believes that the recognition and appreciation of humour, i.e., "the ability to perceive nonsensical stimuli" and "to process them in an emotionally and cognitively humorous way" requires receptive skills that are describable in terms of *competence* (p. 64). Hence, competence measurement models can be used to assess both humour quality and people's appreciation of humour (p. 64). Springer develops a stimulus-response model of the mental processes involved in experiencing humour, including emotional/cognitive and conscious/unconscious dimensions (p. 66). He conceptualises humour as a problem-solving process that requires cognitive, motivational, volitional, and social skills. Subsequently, he discusses a survey administered among 148 persons who were exposed to thirteen stimuli, which they subclassified as representative of three humour classes (release, hostility, incongruity). Convinced that "the humour appreciation tests must be regarded as proficiency tests and the appraisal of the stimuli as tasks to be solved," (p. 71), Springer uses the Rasch model to assess stimulus difficulty and humour competence in respondents, thus making a valuable methodological contribution to humour research.

Katie Wales's chapter "Humour and the 'Mooreeffoc Effect': Inversion and subversion in Charles Dickens' *Holiday romance*" explores the use of topsy-turviness and defamiliarisation in Dickens's collection of four tales addressed to young readers. Wales discusses the inversion and subversion mechanisms employed by the writer, concluding that he upturns "normality," undermines conventions, and produces a humorous effect by casting children as internal authors and imitating their typical mind-style in his narrative (p. 88). Wales discusses Dickens's contribution against the backdrop of the proliferation of nonsense literature in the 1860s and 1870s, with Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll as the most prominent representatives. What distinguishes Dickens, however, is his consistent adoption of a child's perspective, as reflected in his language style, which encourages readers to put themselves in children's shoes and adopt their inherent values (p. 96).

Another contribution inspired by children's literature is Danson Sylvester Kahyana's study of the uses of humour in the famous Ugandan *Moses* series, written by Barbara Kimenye. The

storybooks present diverse (mis)adventures and misdemeanours of three boarding school pupils. Humour is deployed to help readers sympathise with the teenage transgressors, and Kahyana presents a detailed analysis of linguistic and literary devices (such as irony, satire and figurative language) which Kimenye uses to fulfil this uneasy task.

In another insightful contribution, titled “Ridicule and scorn in David Sedaris’s “Standing By”: The responsibility of humour,” Lynn Blin analyses humour used by the American author David Sedaris in his essay originally published in *The New Yorker* (2010). Referring to Attardo’s (2001) taxonomy, she colour-codes jab lines, strands, stacks, combs and bridges recognisable in the text and sets out to check “what makes this funny” (pp. 126-127). She explains that it is Sedaris’s “comic ear” or “ear for spoken syntax,” which she defines as “his innate sense of how to organise syntax for the necessary rhythm, pace, intonation scheme, and general prosody” so that it “replaces the stand-up comedian’s facial expressions, body movement, pauses, use of smiles and laughter” (p. 127). Following Tannen (1982), she posits that incorporating the elements of unplanned spontaneous conversation violates the reader’s expectations and enhances the experience of authenticity. She discusses the application of seven oral strategies in the essay which maximise readers’ engagement, and she elaborates on stylistic elements that contribute to the comic effect. Blin concludes by remarking that “if the incongruity that is essential in most humour is not to be found in punch lines, it is discovered in the very syntactic and semantic construction of the text” (p. 134).

In the following chapter “Satire, humour, language and style in Nigerian literature,” Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju discusses the challenges of stylistic analysis of satire by examining the work of three eminent Nigerian authors: Wole Soyinka, Niyi Osundare, and Olatunji Dare. He thereby intends to demonstrate that “satirical humour or humorous satire” can utilise diverse linguistic sources, apart from irony, parody, and incongruity, which are often associated with the genre(s) (p. 145). First, he explains the etymology of satire and traces the evolution of the genre back to Antiquity, discussing Anglophone approaches to the Horatian and Juvenalian traditions. He subsequently examines the fuzziness of its “object”, the term pertaining to the humorous situation satirised, the target of the satire or the purpose behind it, or a blend of those elements. The purpose, he claims, is “to attack, and even rail at, folly and vices,” as satire “never approves” (p. 147).

Subsequently, Oloruntoba-Oju problematises the stylistic analysis of satire in relation to humour. He defines satire as “an expression in any form and of any length, in which criticism, ridicule or contempt is a prominent objective” (p. 148) and models it as comprised of two components: the *base component*, which subsumes, amongst others, the encoder and their ideological/moral stance, the corresponding satire object(ive) and human/situational target, the sociocultural and literary ambience, humour strategies, etc.; and the *output component*, which subsumes the decoder, receiver/target who reacts with amusement/lesson learnt, as well as sociocultural ambience, language, literature and world competence/knowledge. Humour stylistics focuses on the former, examining specific aspects of linguistic encoding. Oloruntoba-Oju demonstrates the effectiveness of his “united levels of linguistic analysis approach,” searching for linguistic patterns used by Nigerian “masters of the satirical form” (p. 172) to achieve both satirical and humorous effects. His methodological proposal serves as a good model for the stylistic analysis of both satire and humour, while also pointing to the brilliance of multilingual Nigerian literature.

Following this theoretical introduction, illustrated by prose examples, the second section of the volume titled “Language, Humour, Society and Media in Africa” zooms in on this continent, providing a plethora of non-literary case studies.

In his contribution “The linguistic style of Nigerian mediated comedies in English,” Ibukun Filani explores the impact of language choices on the performance of humour in Nigerian

sitcoms, stand-up comedies, and online comedy skits disseminated via social media platforms. First, he presents the multilingual situation of the country, concluding that the Nigerian comedic voice is predominantly constructed with mesolectal Nigerian Pidgin and basilectal Broken English, which signal lowered or lacking competence in Standard English, prototypically associated with education and social prestige. The author follows the assumption that “Nigerian comics have strategically chosen a linguistic code which in their socio-political context indexes the marginal social class” (p. 190). Stand-up comedians predominantly use Nigerian pidgin, which facilitates “talking with the audience rather than to them” (p. 189). Sitcoms adopt a more varied approach, some including mostly Broken English, while others also use the architect. Summing up, the author claims comedic products “deliberately create the image of the comic through a language variety that reflects the Nigerian struggle to surmount the challenges imposed by English” (p. 190).

The author then discusses stylisation in Nigerian online comedies, which use a wide range of “sub-standard Englishes,” claiming that “the grammatical infelicities in the skits reflect the linguistic realities of English in Nigeria as they indicate the lectal range of Nigerian English speakers” (p. 192). The author observes that Nigerian online comedians “perform marginal identities,” and he focuses on the use of Broken English in the *Ug Toons*, *Omo Ibadan* and *Kiekie* shows, explaining how the comicasters employ ungrammaticality to “sustain shared identity,” reinforce the construction of a comic character and highlight ethnic-based stereotypes of particular nationalities in an act of self-deprecation (p. 199). Filani’s chapter is a well-planned, highly informative contribution that explains the nuances of Nigerian sociolinguistic spectrum.

In the chapter that follows, “Humour and language in the era of crisis: A socio-pragmatic analysis of Cameroonian women’s humour styles during the Anglophone crisis,” Comfort Beyang Oben Ojongnkpot offers a case study of the healing powers of humour in the face of the 2016 humanitarian crisis in Cameroon. The author investigates how sixty women from the southwest Region of the country used verbal and non-verbal humour to cope with physical and mental tensions. The investigation involves structured interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions to explore how Cameroonian women employ humour in their storytelling, songs, dance, simulations, proverbs, and riddles. Perhaps less focused on stylistic nuance, this proposal offers rich insights into Cameroonian women’s culture, partly resembling an ethnographic report.

In the next chapter “Humour and the many worlds of Nigerian political cartoons,” Oyinkan Medubi explores how the verbal components of those art forms contribute to their humorous perception. Since the meaning of such artworks is by nature open-ended, authors can “get away with brutal sociopolitical truths in [their] messages while seeming to entertain” (p. 228). Following Huenig (2002), Medubi claims that cartoons clash social and abnormal realities (p. 228). This clash may be triggered by visual, verbo-visual, or verbal means and often results in humour while simultaneously conveying political critique. The recognition of both requires of their recipients “cartoon literacy,” especially since much cartoon humour involves metaphorical projection. Medubi observes that it is important to “map the mental process by which language users leap from constructed spaces, or bridges, to arrive at the particular meanings of words and other linguistic outputs” (p. 234) and uses Parallel Worlds Linguistics, adapted from Hugh Everett’s Many Worlds Interpretation theory (p. 230, cf. Vaidman 2008), for the purpose. She analyses three selected Nigerian political cartoons, first recognising the metaphors underlying the verbo-visual messages, and subsequently retracing step by step how “the interaction between subjects and structures within cartoons results in the creation of myriads of worlds” and how “the appropriate meaning is perspectivised for the readers through the social experiences shared with the cartoonist” (p. 229). These experiences include, for instance, familiarity with former

Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari's debatable style of governance or acquaintance with Nigerian preconceptions concerning self-indulgence of public servants. The recognition of humour resulting from the process is usually doubled with the recognition of the "invective" (p. 246), which lies at the very essence of political cartoons.

In the following chapter "Toward the analysis of online supplication and interactional stance-taking," Ibukun Osuolale Ajayi uses the theory of stance-taking proposed by Du Bois (2007) to explore the linguistic styles of internet supplicants and their respondents and to trace the mechanisms of humour elicitation. As the author rightly emphasises, the phenomenon of cyberbegging, as exemplified by social media posts that request donations, online crowd-funding campaigns, or livestreaming of supplicants, has not received much academic attention (p. 250). She addresses this gap by analysing how cyberbeggars and their respondents position and align themselves in online supplications. Regarding the former, the author analyses the linguistic styles used to establish topical and action agendas. As for the latter, she recognises three types of alignment, namely, *indifference*, *hostility* and *sarcasm*, with respondents performing acts such as evading, challenging, mocking, counter-ordering and insulting the requesters. The response part of the interaction involves humour, which is mostly deprecating and based on the superiority of the respondents.

In the next chapter, Ibukun Filani and Catherine Olutoyin Williams study intertextuality in Nigerian stand-up comedy. Building on the assumption that (lack of) familiarity with prior texts and discourses may "create communication gap and power imbalance" (p. 272) between the in-group (which fraternises by means of humour) and the out-group (which is alienated by it), the scholars investigate the ways in which Nigerian stand-uppers use intertextuality to "generate humorous grounding, contextualise their performance, establish and enhance shared identity and situate their routines in a socio-historical context" (p. 272). The authors base their analysis on recorded NSC performances in Nigerian Pidgin, sometimes mixed with Standard English. In a series of case studies, the authors illustrate the use of double-voicing and interdiscursivity (based on a Biblical reference to the *Book of Genesis*). They also explore "joke circles" that utilise the same stereotypical frames, such as social status, gender, and ethnicity. Following Fiske (1987), the authors dub the former type of intertextuality vertical, as it incorporates references to pre-existing texts, and call the latter type horizontal, claiming that it "pragmatically functions as a grounding device that helps the comedians point the audience to the relevant background knowledge for interpreting their jokes" (p. 293). In conclusion, the authors state that humorous intertextuality can take the shape of "co-textual reference, situational co-presence" or "strategies such as imitation, stereotypes or allusion" and its presence transcends humorous intention: it is indeed a manifestation of "ideological undertones embedded within the linguistic generation and/or interpretation of the joke texts" (p. 297).

Monsurat Aramide Nurudeen's study "Pragmatic acts of humour in selected series of Helen Paul's *Alhaja Donjasi* comedy skits" focuses on the Instagram skit series created by the Nigerian comedian. The author refers to Jacob Mey's pragmatic acts theory (2001) to analyse the stylistic and pragmatic manipulative strategies used by the Helen Paul for humorous and satirical purposes. She discusses structural coding, language choices, and specific pragmemes (such as rebuking, criticising, advising and threatening) used by the comedian in her skits.

Closing the volume, Lekan Christopher Olawale's chapter "An analysis of humour style in Nigerian situation comedy" focuses on verbal blunders and bombast, which are presented as "effective humour styles" in Nigerian productions (p. 322). Both are usually perceived as accidental humour, but they become intentional when the screenwriters incorporate them into comedy scripts. Olawale explains both mechanisms, referring to the status of English as the second language in Nigeria. Taught at schools, it reflects the social stratification of Nigerian society. Marked by first-language interference and marred by verbal blunder, misused English

can undermine the speaker's prestige. Grandiose and over-sophisticated, it indexes the user as an affected poser. In this context, the author presents an analysis of ten episodes derived from two popular Nigerian sitcoms: *Jenifa's Diary* and *Professor Johnbull*, focusing on the presence of two techniques, namely solecisms and bombast (p. 328).

Overall, the volume offers fascinating insights into African, European and American humour and a range of valuable stylistic and pragmalinguistic tools to systematise the analysis of language as a humour-triggering factor. Among its many strengths, I would certainly mention the interdisciplinary group of authors, who boast expertise in not only stylistics but also literary theory, empirical linguistics, socio- and pragmalinguistics, as well as cultural studies.

The weakest aspect of the volume are its editorial imperfections; it is easy to spot misprints, bibliographical omissions, misspelling names, and misgendered authors (e.g. George Lakoff, p. 226). Although not all the proposals are characterised by similar methodological insight, taken together, they make an extremely valuable contribution to the linguistic study of humour and deserve the highest praise as a truly intercultural, interdisciplinary enterprise.

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