Book review

Delia Chiaro (2018), *The Language of Jokes in the Digital Age. #like #share #lol.*
Abingdon/New York: Routledge.

As Christie Davies (from Chiaro's personal communication with him, p. 4) has maintained, humour "takes the temperature of a society at a given moment more than serious discourse could ever hope to do." In *The Language of Jokes in the Digital Age*, Chiaro elucidates this statement by examining thoroughly the place of jokes in modern society. In this endeavour, she is also interested in whether the digitalisation of communication, through texting, emails, and social media posts – all of which privilege reading and writing – has had any bearing on jokes. Drawing on a range of theoretical frameworks, and analysing a wealth of verbal and visual examples, Chiaro achieves wonderfully in providing a panoramic sweep of contemporary humour.

In her brief introduction, Chiaro puts forward two compelling arguments in view of social media and their affordances and constraints. First, nowadays, more than ever, it is the medium that has become the message. Second, compared to the past, the language of jokes has not radically changed. Instead, what has changed is that "we have shifted from slow humour to fast humour" (p. 3), which Chiaro astutely terms "McHumour." She then specifies that she has chosen to investigate the language of jokes through three topical matters, namely, translation, gender, and the internet. She concludes, in a humorous way of course, with emphasising the value of humour as a research topic.

The book is comprised of four chapters. Chapter 1 provides the theoretical cruxes which are essential for the discussion that follows later in the book. Chiaro delineates what she calls "humorous discourse" by considering the multifacetedness of the notion of "humour," its difference from "sense of humour," the role of incongruity and ambiguity, and the social functions of humour (i.e. as a means of enhancing affiliation, alleviating tension, coping with certain situations, and exercising critique). She continues with outlining the rudiments of the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH) by Attardo & Raskin (1991) and Attardo (1994). After describing the joke structure, the author lists the most common joke topics which include the stupid underdog, canniness, sex, religion, disasters, and suspending disbelief.

Chapter 2 revolves around humour in audiovisual texts that emanate from the American and the British context. In the first part of the chapter, Chiaro is concerned with unscripted TV entertainment discussing examples from cookery programmes, talent and reality shows, and lifestyle shows. She observes that in these programmes the presenters build intimate relationships with their audiences by means of using saucy puns, foreign words and accents, and facial expressions as well as by teasing the participants through irony. Despite the spontaneity that characterises the discourse of such programmes, Chiaro does not disregard that a certain amount of scripting is unavoidable.

The second part of the chapter tackles the translation of humour for the movies and television, and is built upon the premise that those whose native language is English "may not be aware of the fact that we live in a verbally translated world" (p. 63). Relying on a rich set of data, she explores the strategies that translators have developed in order to render purely linguistic verbal humour, visually conveyed verbal humour, culture-specific verbal humour, lingua-culturally based verbal humour, and verbal humour with a visual anchor. In so doing, she highlights that the ignorance of linguistic and cultural nuances can change a serious message into a comic one and vice versa.

Chapter 3 deals with gender-related humour. Chiaro starts with an interesting collocation analysis with a view to discerning whether certain laughter words are more associated with one gender rather than with another (e.g. giggle, guffaw). Following Shifman & Lemish (2010), she proceeds to classifying jokes based on gendered humour in sexist (which target certain women in terms of a number of stereotypical characteristics, e.g. blondes, wives, mothers-in-law; dirty and rape jokes are also included in this category), feminist (which parallel conventional male sexist jokes) and post-feminist (which hinge on the differences between the two sexes promoting the idea of "equal but different"). Her dataset consists of gender-related jokes and images that have gone viral in social media, YouTube videos of stand-up female comedians who skilfully build a self-deprecatory discourse, as well as instances from films, stand–up comedies and shows in which men are dressed up in women's clothing. For Chiaro, "[e]verything we do implicates gender" (p. 70) and, concomitantly, the ways in which we do and accept humour, even our very sense of humour, are bound to be marked in terms of gender.

As contemporary online activity is founded upon users' collaboration and content sharing, "what can be more collaborative and worthy of sharing than humour?" (p.121), Chiaro aptly asks in opening Chapter 4, which looks at online humour. Here the author provides a meticulous account of the varied types of humour we encounter online. After documenting how laughter can be signalled online (e.g. through transcriptions like *haha*, *ha ha ha*, *hehe*, smiley-type faces and emojis), she draws our attention to online ping-pong punning (i.e. sequences of semantically related puns which different participants produce in a conversation; see Chiaro 1992: 113), inventive and funny hashtags, criss-cross humour (e.g. when users who maintain video blogs, the so-called "vloggers," elaborate and comment on humorous material they discover) and humour with no offline equivalent (e.g. troll face, lolcats). She points out that the (a)synchronous nature of given websites along with their sometimes complex infrastructure (e.g. Facebook's commenting system with the multiply inserted replies) might impinge upon how humour online is noticed, perceived, responded to, and shared. A considerable portion of the chapter is dedicated to internet memes. Chiaro rightly places emphasis on the *here and nowness* of memes, especially with respect to the ironicisation of politicians. Interestingly, she also touches upon the ways in which memes, such as the "lol face," transfer offline in the form of merchandise (e.g. clothes, stationary, home furnishings). All in all, this chapter fully substantiates Chiaro's argument, as offered in the introduction of the book, that "humour is most at home online" (p. 3).

In her closing remarks, Chiaro suggests that there is no such thing as "only joking," since very often, and especially as regards politics, what underlies humour may be anger and a need to be heard.

A great strength of the book lies in its critical reflections upon humour. Given that in online environments it is impossible to know personally all the members that form our

audience, Chiaro cautions that some of them might not share our values nor find the same things funny as we do. On the contrary, they might feel offended and hence resort to verbal aggression or hate speech. So, as she stresses: "With humour, we need to tread carefully. With internet humour, more so" (p. 123). Taking *Charlie Hebdo* as a case in point, Chiaro also reminds us that some groups view humour as very powerful and subversive, wondering at the same time about the strict monitoring of humour in totalitarian societies. In Chapter 3, she provides, through exemplification, an insightful commentary on rape jokes asserting that indeed there is a very fine line between serious and non-serious discourse.

Another highly commendable feature of the book is that it can be used creatively for versatile teaching purposes. It is not an overstatement to say that Chiaro's impressive collection of jokes constitutes an ideal corpus of examples which can bolster the teaching of any course within the fields of linguistics and communication. Let me give an example from my own experience. In spring semester 2018, while I was reviewing Chiaro's book, I was teaching a course on the discourse of social media. One of the course's modules addressed online communities. In order to explain to my students how shared practices bring together the members of an online community, I used Chiaro's example and analysis of online ping-pong punning as found on pp. 131–135. The author presents the case of Rhik Sammader, a journalist in *The Guardian*, who writes a weekly column on unusual kitchen equipment he tests. A considerable number of the commentators underneath his articles are regulars, who very often include puns in their comments as a response to Sammader's humorous writing style. Chiaro zooms in on a whole sequence of ping-pong punning between Sammader's readers based on the names of different chocolate confectionary. Not only did this sequence help my students realise the gluing function of humour, but it also made them laugh out loud.

I have only two reservations regarding this book. The first concerns its cover, which is replete with emojis, in combination with its title, *The Language of Jokes in the Digital Age*, and subtitle, *#like #share #lol*. On the one hand, this combination creates the false expectation that the book focuses exclusively on the language of jokes online. On the other hand, it does not do justice to the fascinating data Chiaro has gathered from other contexts (e.g. films, TV shows, advertisements).

My second concern relates to Chiaro's distinction between "real-life" discourse and online discourse which runs through several segments in the book and in a way forms an impression that what happens online is detached from reality. Digital media technologies, however, have been "domesticated" (Barton & Lee 2013: 138) to such degree in our everyday lives resulting in an interesting intertwining of our online with our offline discourse activities (see, for instance, Chiaro's treatment of meme transference offline, pp. 152–154). Thus, perhaps it would be preferable not to differentiate between "real-life" and online humorous discourse, but offline and online situational contexts in which humour takes place.

On the whole, *The Language of Jokes in the Digital Age* is a very comprehensive and readable source invaluable for scholars and students interested in language and humour as well as for those working in the areas of language, (social) media and sociolinguistics.

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