

Book review

Ritchie, Graeme (2018) *Comprehension of Jokes: A Cognitive Science Framework*, London and New York: Routledge.

Graeme Ritchie is an established scholar of the cognitive analysis of humour: he is an author of multiple articles and a monograph (2003) on the topic. Still, the book under review is more than just a logical continuation of his research: in a way, it is a wrap up of the major cognitive theories of humour with useful examples of how their combination can be applied to the analysis of the particular joke texts.

The 222-page book consists of 14 chapters, each with 4 to 10 subsections, in addition to the preface, two appendices, references and an index. At first sight, this division might seem too fractional, however, it fully corresponds to the pragmatics of the book. The chapters and subchapters serve as a coherent structure for defining the main theories of humour, which is the first and foremost aim of the book. As such, the monograph can serve, first of all, as a handbook or a reference book of contemporary theories of humour comprehension, and the fractional contents allow for the easy search for the particular topics. So does the handy index which includes the main humour-related terms as well as the names of the main humour theorists who have worked on them. Finally, Appendix B “Terminology” is a useful reference part reminding the reader of the meaning of different humour theory-related terms if needed.

Such contents may make an impression of a book aiming to enumerate the main theories highlighting their major positive and negative sides or to find the most accurate theory of humour. However, from the very beginning, Ritchie states that he does not aim to find an empirically accurate theory of humour; rather, he wants to establish a set of concepts which are pertinent to the process of getting a joke. In other words, his goal is “to develop a repertoire of related constructs which are suitable for giving a theoretically sound and precisely specified description of what is going on when someone understands a textual joke” (p. 1). It is already the introduction which makes a very positive expression by explicitly setting out the premises and goals of the book; this impression also persists throughout the rest of the very clear and well-structured text, presenting an intelligible plan of action, with integral chapters ending with very clear summaries as well as exhaustive final conclusions and tasks for further research.

The seemingly fractional division of the book is also well-justified, as the author needs to go through the major concepts related to the comprehension of humour as developed by previous scholars to see, in the end, how they “can be combined in a consistent fashion” (p. 3). After setting the premises and goals of the research in Chapter 1, Ritchie goes on in clearing some basic issues around the quest for the general theory of jokes and setting terminology (Chapter 2) as well as in describing the process of joke comprehension in general terms (Chapter 3). This first part lays down the foundation for later chapters. They concentrate on the general model of text processing (Chapter 4) and prediction (Chapter 5), logic (Chapter 6), incongruity and resolution in jokes (Chapter 7), the role of surprise (Chapter 8), language (Chapter 9), impropriety (Chapter 10), superiority and aggression (Chapter 11) in joke comprehension.

Despite so many aspects of the joke comprehension considered, the chapters are not designed to be read in isolation; as Ritchie convincingly shows, if isolated, these aspects are not sufficient to characterise the comprehension of jokes. Instead of concentrating on the drawbacks of each theory, Ritchie suggests a more relaxed way of looking at the downsides by concentrating on the benefits so as to sketch what he calls a “broad brush theory” attempting to integrate disparate ideas (p. 6). It is to become “a rough draft of a fuller cognitive/affective model of the process of joke comprehension” (p. 168). At the same time, the book does not fail to dig into the commonly accepted concepts which are not properly defined, such as the widely accepted idea of faulty logic inherent in jokes and contributing to their funniness (Chapter 6). Ritchie shows that the faultiness of jokes that many authors have commented upon is located in the internal logic (propositions and relationships within the joke world) rather than the audience inference (the cognitive process of making sense of the joke). “The faulty reasoning is often localised to a particular viewpoint within the joke world, such as the viewpoint of a stupid character, while the rest of the joke world operates with a non-faulty logic” (p. 84). Reconsidering another dominant theory of humour, that of incongruity, Ritchie draws the following conclusion from the review of works on the issue: “all the various configurations of [incongruity] that have been proposed as crucial to the creation of humour can be found in the comprehension of non-humorous text, and hence cannot be sufficient conditions for humour” (p. 109). He also revisits concepts at least as old as to have been mentioned in the works by Aristotle and Cicero, such as the role of surprise in jokes, similarly showing that the notion of “surprise” is of doubtful value given the variety of definitions that have been attached to it since (p. 126).

After going through the main theories and issues around the comprehension of jokes in the Chapters 2–11, Chapter 12 provides their final review and once again demonstrates that there is no real case for any one of the factors related to the joke comprehension considered as being necessary and sufficient for jokehood or funniness. Moreover, they are not mutually exclusive. This allows Ritchie to bring together the described separate strands in order to contribute to an integrated framework that “should allow the construction of fuller and more precise analyses of jokes, in order to illuminate more clearly what is going on in any specific joke” (p. 167). He illustrates how this can be done in Chapter 13 by applying the aforementioned constructs to describe the comprehension of certain jokes. In every joke, Ritchie shows, several elements are crucial for their comprehension. In most of the examples that he analyses, the most recurrent factors are fanciful internal logic (uncovered as a result of post-text inference) and relative anomaly in the final revelations. Setting the way forward, in Chapter 14, Ritchie establishes directions for further research, such as expanding descriptive coverage, testing these hypotheses empirically, and generalising beyond jokes.

In this last part, Ritchie also acknowledges that the book is a product of an armchair research (p. 185), and, indeed, many field researchers of humour would question some of his methods and arguments. The book claims to study verbal jokes, but none of the examples analysed have actually been recorded in the verbal performance: these are the jokes reprinted from one analysis of humour to another. Also, the examples are very scarce throughout the book and mostly concentrate in Chapter 13 (all the jokes used in the book are also reprinted in Appendix A). As such, it is often difficult for a reader to follow the theoretical assumptions without any examples and illustrations, and even if the examples are given, the question rises: is this how the printed jokes work in real life? Finally, since the choice of jokes exemplary of Ritchie’s assumptions is rather random, these conclusions can hardly be applied to verbal jokes in general.

The jokes being detached from real life might be the main issue of the book, as it looks at a rather abstract phenomenon outside its context. The joke as it is performed is a much more vibrant matter and its comprehension and appreciation may depend on so many factors. For

instance, the book discusses the role of belief in joke comprehension without any concrete examples from everyday life. A question is what happens if jokes carry a set of beliefs opposite to that of its audience? What happens if a conservative political joke is told to a liberal audience, a sexist joke is told to feminists, or a joke about racists is told to racists themselves? What about failing jokes? Why and how they fail? These very vital questions from real life, depending on issues far more diverse than just the comprehension of the joke structure, remain unexplored. Another crucial question relates to the object of the verbal joke *per se*, which Ritchie does not really define. In real life, a verbal joke can be both a narrative joke and a conversational joke, and the book tends to concentrate on the narrative one only by default. Would the conclusions of the book apply to impromptu conversational jokes, too?

However, the issues raised are well acknowledged by the author himself, as he admits that jokes are not the only form of humour and other varieties of humour may have different properties (p. 183). He also argues that his assumptions should indeed be tested by empirical research, and mentions the need for some carefully designed psychological experiments to check the correctness of the proposals put forward. To be fair, the book does not ignore the social aspects of joke comprehension completely, as it digs into impropriety, taboos and social conventions demonstrating that socio-cultural systems of conventions are too complicated and difficult to simplify so as to universally claim that they are the primary reasons for joke appreciation.

For now, the aforementioned issues fall outside of the scope of the book which pursues a different goal: to challenge the theories based on one particular aspect of humour by bringing together aspects of joke comprehension which have typically been treated in isolation within humour theorising. And the book succeeds in doing so by being a guide of the main aspects of joke comprehension as worked out by various humour theories and showing how different aspects may show up and coexist in the same joke. This densely theoretical and rigorous research goes beyond the enumeration and critique of the main theories of humour by showing how the best of them can be combined for the analysis; it is a great beginning for further empirical testing of the conclusions.

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References

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