

Book review

Tsakona, Villy. (2020). *Recontextualising Humour. Rethinking the Analysis and Teaching of Humor*. Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

As one of the founding members of the Villy Tsakona World Admiration Society, one may assume that my views may not be entirely impartial, but given that Tsakona spends a significant part of her book disagreeing with yours truly, I can promise absolute objectivity in this review.

Chapter 1 is a discussion of context, in the work of some humour scholars. The goal of the chapter is definitely not to be exhaustive, as there are any approaches to context in humour studies that are not reviewed, some of which Tsakona takes up in later chapters. Nor is the goal to provide a critical analysis of the idea. In the end, I was left with the feeling that the main purpose was to get Tsakona thinking about her approach, which is focused on (1) “participants’ verbal responses to humorous discourse,” (2) the participants’ “sociocultural assumptions,” and (3) the genres of humour.

Chapter two is the theoretical backbone of the book. It consists of a concise but detailed and deep discussion of metapragmatics and its application to humour. The theoretical analysis is then applied to a corpus of “crisis jokes,” i.e., jokes about the economic crisis in which Greece has been mired since the 2008-2009 financial markets crash. The speakers evaluate joking about those topics positively; they consider the jokes to be a pretty accurate representation of reality; and they consider humour a coping mechanism (p. 44).

A good example of the duality of metapragmatic stereotypes comes from the discussion of an advertisement for mobile phones in which the gag is that one can return one’s phone like one can/should be able to return one’s wife if she does not perform satisfactorily (her cooking is sub par in the advertisement because the wife cooks okras). How the deeply sexist nature of the idea did not stop this from being produced, let alone broadcast, is amazing in and of itself. But broadcast it was and it predictably elicited a groundswell of commentary. Tsakona considers the discussion, using a corpus of about 300 documents she gathered, focusing on the arguments that both sides take to debate whether the joke is funny or unfunny, whether one should be allowed to joke about anything, etc. In other words, the speakers debating the issue articulate an implicit theory of humour appropriateness, i.e., a metapragmatics of humour.

A thought, not considered by Tsakona, crosses this reviewer’s mind: might the cell phone company cynically have planned the fracas, predicated on the theory that all publicity is good publicity? In today’s day and age, “going viral” is more or less the holy grail of advertising, since it could be described, in the case of advertising, as the hegemonisation of publicity in which the consumers actively engage in their own brainwashing and do the advertiser’s job for them. Each time that someone forwards a funny commercial (or a provocative one), one is doing the job that advertisers normally have to pay for for free and with a smile on their faces.

Chapter 3 discusses humorous genres. Tsakona's scheme is well-thought out: humour may be "typical" or "indispensable" for certain genres (for example, stand up comedy), "severely restricted" in others (most formal and legal settings), and intermediate level in which "humour is not obligatory but may occur whenever speakers think" it is a good idea (p. 68). The intermediate level is further divided, on the one hand, in genres where the presence of humour is not required, but frequent (for example, conversations) and, on the other hand, in genres where humour may occasionally occur, but it is not expected/frequent (for example, sports commentary)

But what is a genre? Tsakona uses a sociocultural definition based on conventions. The idea is that whenever a speaker uses or encounters a text, which is inscribed within a generic reference matrix (I paraphrase), i.e., displays some linguistic feature *and* is associated with a given context/type of text, the convention is reinforced (p. 66). The recurrence of such interaction creates what Bourdieu (1991) would call a habitus (Tsakona does not use the term, but I guess she would agree with the characterisation). Tsakona is at pains to stress that conventionalisation does not entail rigidity (p. 67): indeed, speakers are at liberty to make adjustments to the genres, to fulfil their discursive goals. Sufficiently large modifications may impact the genre itself and modify it. Tsakona calls this "renewal" or "recreation" of the genre.

This is solid stuff. The only place I found where Tsakona ventures on uncertain ground is in the claim that in "contemporary postmodern societies", genre remixing and hybridisation are "common practice" and "seem (...) to gain prominence" (p. 68). First, Tsakona is here walking a well-trod path, her list of references for this claim is large and star-studded. Yet, I find this idea to be in error. Let me mention the genre of the *cento* which is documented from the 3rd century of the Christian Era (hardly postmodern times). The centos (or centones) consisted of poetry written by borrowing lines from other poets, most famously Virgil and Homer (see for discussion McGill 2005). In fact, even a passing acquaintance with Classical and Medieval grammatical works would completely destroy the idea that texts used to have anything resembling a "single author", as the texts resemble more a Wikipedia discussion page than someone speaking their mind. At least this is true for pragmatically oriented texts. Remixing is much older than the idea of post-modernism.

Tsakona is back on solid ground when she discusses "online joint fictionalisation" a "new" genre, which is essentially joint fictionalisation carried out in an online platform. The example she uses is one of my all-time favourites on the rich set of data discussed. In 2014, a crocodile was found on the island of Crete. The media frenzy that ensued is chronicled very engagingly, but, more significantly, Tsakona shows how the thousands of followers who posted and reposted memes, tweets, articles, and other media, including traditional press, co-constructed a narrative, which included naming the crocodile "Sifis," a local name, and describing it as a member of the Cretan community, often completely at odds and in fact antagonistic to the authorities' narrative, arriving at actively preventing the herpetologist charged with capturing the crocodile by driving to the lake where the crocodile was hiding and turning on their lights to prevent the capture. Tsakona argues that "humour underlies most of participants' contributions and keeps their interactions going even though participants may not necessarily be in the same place or may never meet offline" (p. 99).

Chapter four discusses the contextualisation of humour theory which is then applied to the returning-the-wife ill-conceived advertisement campaign already discussed in chapter two. The chapter argues for an expansion of *the General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH), proposed by Attardo & Raskin (1991), along the lines of proposals by Canestrari (2010), Tsakona herself, and Ruiz-Gurillo (2012; 2016) (all succinctly but effectively discussed in the chapter), which consist essentially in adding new knowledge resources to the original six in the GTVH to handle meta-

textual knowledge, contextual information, and, generally speaking, other aspects of the performance of humour with the goal of “accounting for the sociocultural context of the humorous text” (p. 111). It would be too long to go into the technical details of why I think that there is a better approach (which I have developed in Attardo 2020) but, in a nutshell, the point is this: I have compared the GTVH to a rake before: if you need to rake leaves, a rake is the best tool for the job. If you need to dig a hole, a rake can accomplish the task, but only inefficiently. A spade would be a much better tool for digging a hole. In my view, rather than trying to expand the GTVH and treat competence and performance in one big super-GTVH, we will be better off leaving the GTVH to do what it does best (in Tsakona’s words, “explain what humour is” (p. 115); in my terminology, humour competence) and use a full-blown ethnomethodological approach, such as Hymes’ (1972) SPEAKING model to handle humour performance (competence-in-context).

The book is completed by a chapter on humour in teaching. Tsakona develops the idea of critical literacy and of teaching *about* humour, as opposed to *with* humour (p. 147), the prevalent focus of the field, so that students may develop a critical view of humorous texts in light of uncovering the ideological underpinning of humorous discourse: “humour is never ‘just for fun’” (p. 156). The influence of critical discourse analysis should be evident and Tsakona calls her approach “critical humour studies” (p. 156). One cannot but share the goal of helping students and humourists alike “detect, scrutinise, and critically discuss more or less latent ideologies and stereotypes pertaining to diverse forms of social inequality” (p. 154). The chapter is complemented by hands-on detailed guides to help interested teachers implement such a programme. My only doubt about such endeavours, and I had the same problem with a proposal to teach humour competence to non-native speakers, is that the competencies that need to be taught are largely shared with serious discourse and that the humour-specific set of competencies ends up being very small. In other words, is humour the best place to teach about racism? Wouldn’t it be easier to teach about racism by reading, say, about the Ku Klux Klan or the Holocaust?

Overall, Tsakona makes a very convincing case for a discourse theory of humour (she overgenerously credits me for the term) and makes serious inroads establishing it by showing how the approach can enlighten the kind of multi-agent, decentralised, collaborative discourse community that creates the Sifis joke cycle, for example. As I said, Tsakona and I differ on how we would organise the discourse theory of humour, but we agree largely on what the moving parts would be, as do the other authors mentioned above.

In my mind, it is the presence of both a sophisticated theoretical discussion and of several case studies that make the book stand out. The cases studies are some of the best ones I have ever had the pleasure to read. They remind one of the best work of Elliott Oring and the late Christie Davis. They alone would be worth the price of the book, but, as I have said, there is so much more in it. The book, Volume 4 in the *Language Play and Creativity* series edited by Nancy Bell, another *grande dame* of humour research, is well produced down to copyediting. I noticed virtually no typos. There are two excellent indexes (authors and subjects), a must for a scholarly book. A pleasant surprise nowadays when, due to the laborious and expensive process of indexing, publishers (and authors) tend to skimp on indexing. The illustrations (also a must for a book like this) are of varying quality, as is to be expected since they come from the web, but they are well reproduced and are very readable, and they add substantively to the pleasure of reading about Sifis, the rebellious crocodile, and the other topics. My only complaint is that there are not more of them.

Humour scholars should drop anything else they may be doing and go purchase Tsakona’s book (or, more likely, go to their web bookstore of choice and order it). The publisher should plan

a paperback edition as soon as feasible. This is an exemplar, field-establishing book that will affect the field for years to come. Meetings of the Villy Tsakona World Admiration Society are every Thursday and are open to all members who are in good standing.

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