Book review

Thomas C. Messerli. (2021). *Repetition in Telecinematic Humour. How US American sitcoms employ formal and semantic repetition in the construction of multimodal humour*. **Freiburg: Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg**.

Over the past couple of decades, the sitcom genre has established itself as a very distinctive and prominent form of TV entertainment. English-language sitcoms, in particular, have enjoyed a global popularity among audiences worldwide, and each new series quickly attracts a strong fan base. The sitcom phenomenon has, not surprisingly, also attracted the attention of scholars in various disciplines, ranging from cultural studies to linguistics. Among the latest contributions is the imposing research monograph by Thomas Messerli, which offers a pragmatic linguistic analysis of humour in American sitcoms, with a focus on how various kinds of repetition are employed by the production team (aka the collective sender) for the purpose of constructing humour in individual scenes and sequences as well as in entire episodes of American sitcoms.

The research in this book is based on the AMSIL corpus, which was compiled by the author specifically for the purpose of this study. It comprises a selection of recent American sitcoms (2010-2016), all of which include a laugh track. This feature is significant because it reflects the author's basic premise, namely that the presence of studio audience laughter is a clear indication that a given scene (or, more precisely, a humorous turn) was intended by the producers as humorous. Messerli thus follows the practice common among many humour scholars of analysing humour in material that is *a priori* humorous; however, his reason for doing so is to treat the laugh track as "a methodological tool" (p. 152) in order to avoid subjectivity where an analyst might miss certain parts as being only potential carriers of humour.

The book is organised into twelve chapters that logically progress from the theoretical issues to a detailed and convincing analysis of repetition in the author's corpus of selected sitcom episodes. It progresses from formal to semantic repetition and culminates in a complex case study analysing the linear and hierarchical structure of inter- and intra-turn repetitions across an entire sitcom episode, i.e., in an extensive and structured comic narrative that goes beyond a simple humorous conversational exchange. In the author's view expounded in the introductory chapter, scripted telecinematic humour is relevant for humour research because it combines the elements of conversational humour and canned jokes.

The field of telecinematic discourse (TCD) is defined in Chapter 2 from a pragmatic perspective. While he notes the fictional and scripted nature of the productions (and, thus, aligning TCD with literary discourse), Messerli grounds his definition primarily in the communicative setting of this kind of discourse: namely, the classic conception of participation frameworks (Goffman 1979) and its current pragmalinguistic conceptualisation in terms of two communicative levels (Bubel 2008; Bednarek 2010; Chovanec & Dynel 2015). These considerations are crucial for the understanding of the construction of humour in sitcoms: the inter-character talk and its mediation to the audience are based on a joint pretence between participants (Clark 1979) and the fact that the humour is designed not for the characters but for the ultimate audience (cf. Dynel 2011a, b). Several models of participation in telecinematic discourse are outlined, including Brock's (2015) study, which postulates the existence of a

"fictitious participation slot" in various comedic genres to accommodate the viewer (p. 43), and Messerli's own ventriloquism model (2017).

Chapter 3 provides a general overview of humour in terms of the superiority, relief and incongruity theories. The chapter elaborates on the well-known theories by Suls (1972) and Attardo & Raskin (1991), and extends them by incorporating a discussion on the cooperative aspects of humour construction in view of post-Gricean pragmatics (Dynel 2008) and relevance theory (Yus 2016). The notions of play frame and humour keying (Bateson 1953; Kotthoff 1999) are identified as crucial for Messerli because he argues that an established play frame is needed in telecinematic discourse as a pre-condition for humorous incongruities. This argument is consistent with his interpretation of the role of the laugh track in TCD, and its function as a clear contextualisation cue from the collective sender to the ultimate recipient.

That issue is explored in further detail in Chapter 4, which focuses on humour in telecinematic discourse. The author considers various ways of how the play frame is established (including institutional humour cues, metacommunicative cues, the paratext of the artefact, and the laugh track). Such an establishment of the play frame is needed to enable the viewers to infer the communicative intent of the text, namely to incite humour. Viewer expectations, which feed into various kinds of "viewer knowledge" that is relevant for the construction of humour in television comedies (Brock 2004), are then connected with the language-related stimuli that lead to incongruities. Such verbal, visual or auditory incongruities do not fit the expectations of the viewers, but they are resolvable, which leads Messerli to define telecinematic humour as both the textual forms within the televisual artefact (the incongruity-creating stimuli) and the processing of humour that is triggered by such incongruities (p. 116). The discussion is followed with a theoretical discussion of laughter and its functions (both character laughter on communicative level 2 and the extradiegetic laugh track on communicative level 1). In this connection, Messerli proposes several possible constellations of laughter in TCD, depending on the presence or absence of laugher in the laugh track and on the part of the speaking character and other characters. Importantly, he describes the operation of fake laughter by other characters on communicative level 2, which is interpreted as "a failed attempt to feign the preferred response to humour" and "indicates a perceived lack of humorousness in the performance" (p. 114).

Chapter 5 provides a brief theoretical discussion of the link between repetition and humour. It references, among other, Norrick's (1993) functional understanding of repetition in terms of the duality of automaticity and variation, Haugh's (2010) pragmatic interpretation of the role of repetition in jocular mockery, as well as Bell's (2013) observations on the repetitions (e.g., of punch lines) in instances of failed humour. The chapter provides an interesting account on what effect repeated exposure to humour may have with respect to the humorous potential of texts since, in view of the incongruity theories of humour, such repeated exposure should reduce the underlying incongruity, and, as a result, the humorous effect should be diminished or should disappear altogether. With reference to Suls (1972), Messerli suggests that "the pleasure of familiarity" may be a plausible explanation for the retention of humorous potential in such cases, i.e., when "the particular stimulus [becomes] indexical of positive emotions" (p. 127). Indeed, there may be more to that than just the indexicality of positive emotion. Sitcoms, as is commonly the case, tend to have a strong fan base, with many viewers watching the episodes over and over again. While that practice may constitute, partly, the enactment of a communal bonding with the (often virtual) group of other fans of the series, the repeated viewings also allow them, arguably, to uncover new, previously overlooked, aspects of the humour, appreciate the acting, revel in the actor's embodiment, etc.

Chapter 6 gives an overview of the data and the method. Two important issues stand out here. First, Messerli defines the sitcom genre not only in terms of its stock humorous content,

but also on a more macro-level. Sitcoms are seen as coherent narratives that are partially generic, displaying various aspects of similarity (and hence repetition) across not only individual episodes, but also different sitcom series. This creates expectations on the part of the audience – one might say it is a kind of a template that becomes filled with humorous content. Second, he formulates an analytical framework for the classification of different types of repetitions. These include lexical repetition (exact single word, exact multi-word, single word partial, multi-word partial), structural parallelism, phonetic repetition, prosodic repetition, kinesic repetition (character gestures, facial expressions), and telecinematic repetition (visual, audio). As the list indicates, they are found on various language levels and include multimodal and embodied realisations, as well as aspects of the production of telecinematic discourse. While those six types of repetition, which operate within or across humorous turns (intra-turn vs. inter-turn repeats), are all essentially formal, Messerli complements them with semantic aspects of repetition that are directly related to the construction of coherence and cohesion of sitcom episodes in terms of the repetition of meaning.

The core of the analysis is concentrated in Chapters 7–11. Chapter 7 is devoted to the typology of simple repeats in the corpus, with the basic distinction between intra- and the more common inter-turn repetitions. The data show that repeats situated within one humorous turn consist, most frequently, of repeated gestures/actions (nodding, headshaking, hand movements) and less so of other types of repetition, notably lexical and prosodic repetition. Inter-turn repetitions tend to be cohesive, establishing a link between an earlier turn and the current humorous turn. While repetitions can also be used to establish links between various scenes, such connections are realised linguistically or prosodically (if they are intended to have a humorous effect), whereas repetitive aspects of telecinematic production, such as the camera work, lighting and the *mise-en-scène*, tend not to be foregrounded as a resource for humour (p. 207).

Chapter 8 seeks to establish correlations between the different types of repeats, suggesting that complex repetition is involved in the construction of incongruities in the humorous turns. The data do reveal that repetitiveness is encoded by means of multiple types of repeats in a statistically significant manner; e.g., in single humorous turns, phonetic repeats and gesture repeats correlate significantly with other intra-turn types of repeats, although they also serve as a resource for humour on their own. With inter-turn repeats, correlations involve, above all, structural parallelism, prosodic repeats and facial expressions (rather than lexical repetition, gesture repeats and visual telecinematic repeats) because those types of repetition are found in longer units, or, as the author puts it, in "units that need more time to unfold" (p. 219).

Chapter 9 provides a discussion of the functions of individual repeats and complex repetition. Four functions of repetition are distinguished: constitutive (i.e., being indexical of humour, e.g., establishing the humorous frame, evoking viewer expectations or creating an incongruity), cohesive (i.e., providing linkage between scripts or frames), constructional (i.e., contributing to identity construction of fictional characters or real actors), and communicative (i.e., expressing a stance with respect to a previous turn). Each of those functions is elaborated in terms of more specific sub-functions and richly illustrated with examples (e.g., in the case of constitutive repetition, the author identifies instances where repetition facilitates production and comprehension, where it constitutes the humorous incongruity, where it creates humorous escalation or accumulation, and where it establishes a series that is violated by incongruous variation). The chapter also introduces the notion of a "call back": the recycling of humour from previous humorous episodes. This is indeed an important concept that the author interprets as "nostalgic humour", where "the repetition of the frame and of the incongruous element […] reminds the viewers that […] it is now part of the television series' repertoire of humorous stimuli" (p. 291).

Chapter 10 shifts to semantic repetition (or, more precisely, "semantic relationships of equivalence", p. 309), exploring the ways it contributes to humour cohesion and coherence in sitcoms. The discussion maps this concept onto the two aspects of humour in the incongruity tradition of humour research, namely the expectation-evoking frame and the incongruous element. Importantly, the author enriches this approach with a perspective from film studies, where continuity and "a smooth flow" (p. 312) create genre-based viewer expectations. The relation between telecinematic continuity and repetition is dual: on the one hand, it allows for coherent storytelling even without repetition (since the onscreen diegetic world bears likeness to viewers' expectations through evoked frames), but it also encourages repetition (since various aspects of the *mise-en-scène* remain the same).

As the last analytical part of the book, Chapter 11 extends the account of repetition from formal and semantic aspects to the larger narrative structures, i.e., scenes, sequences and entire episodes. Drawing on previous pragmalinguistic analyses of comic narratives by Attardo (2001) and Ermida (2008), the author provides a case study of a randomly selected episode from his corpus, focusing on semantic ties and text cohesion across the scenes and the sequences with the aim of identifying the hierarchy of semantic frames in the episode and, thus, the overall narrative structure of the humour therein. The analysis convincingly shows how the humorous turns construct the hierarchical and linear structure of the episode, how the main semantic frames are juxtaposed, and how the semantic and formal repetitions are involved in the production of humour on both communicative levels (the level of the characters and the level of the collective sender and the sitcom audience).

As the above outline of the book indicates, the monograph paints a surprisingly rich – and complex – picture of the role of formal and semantic repetition in sitcom humour. The author is very systematic in devising his analytical framework, specifying a very detailed typology of repetition and then applying it to his dataset. It is very positive that attention is also paid to multimodal aspects of communication, both as regards the actors' embodied performance and the practice of film production. Integrating these dimensions is no easy matter, and neither is their insightful interpretation against the various disciplinary strands of pragmatics and humour studies, which the author navigates with a remarkable degree of insight, sophistication and analytical prowess. The meticulous discussion of the examples indicates, among other things, that different types of repetitions tend to co-occur in intra- and inter-turn positions and that repetitions serve a striking number of macro- as well as micro-functions (see their summarisation on p. 393), which Messerli teases apart with an almost surgical precision (see particularly the central chapter 9). There are very many fine observations throughout the book, e.g., concerning the echoing of prosodic repetition between characters, the relationship between viewer expectations and repetition, the interplay between the various communicative levels, the audience's suspension of disbelief and the joint pretence about the reception of the onscreen diegetic world, etc. What some readers will find very relevant is the identification of what the author refers to as "call backs": instances of humour that are repetitive, referencing an earlier humorous act and recycling the same frame or incongruity. Such call backs appear to be crucial in the successive escalation of incongruities within the overall narrative structure of the entire humorous text, e.g., a sitcom episode. It is rightly pointed out that such instances of humour should be treated differently from humour proper, and it remains to be seen in future studies how, for instance, they "can operate outside the conditions that are normally necessary for humour" (p. 291).

All in all, the book is a significant contribution to (pragma)linguistic research on telecinematic discourse in general and sitcom humour in particular and is likely to serve as an important source of inspiration for much of future research on humorous interaction in televised sitcoms.

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