

## Book review

**Duskaeva, Lilia (ed.) (2021). *The Ethics of Humour in Online Slavic Media Communication*. Routledge.**

The edited volume by Lilia Duskaeva, as she explains, was conceived after a 2019 conference organised by St. Petersburg University. During this event, a consensus emerged among the participants regarding the necessity for further exploration of the ethical dimensions of humour. Duskaeva's aim, as outlined in her introduction, is to set a typology of deontic discourse concerning humour in mass media, predominantly in the digital sphere. The book, translated into English from several Slavic languages, is structured into an introduction followed by two chapters and two parts, each comprising four chapters, which feature case studies drawn from various Slavic media sources, and a concluding chapter.

In the first part of the introduction, 'Theoretical framework for the analysis of the ethics of humour in mass media discourse', Lilia Duskaeva establishes the theoretical framework for analysing humorous discourse within mass media. The ethical aspects of humour emerge through a historical review of philosophical thought on humour and laughter. The target, boundaries, the success or failure of humour, and the violation of social norms that trigger its production are the parameters that Duskaeva extends into digital media communication. She argues that digital media has changed the way social communication functions, referencing the increased audience size and the enhanced interaction among participants via humorous discourse. This shift has led to a deeper involvement of the author and greater engagement of the audience in communication.

Building on this assumption, Duskaeva proposes a three-stage framework for analysing deontic humorous discourse. This framework comprises: 1) the proto-situation, where the sender's environment is examined, including information about the target, along with the initiating ethical violation that caused the humour; 2) the humorous act as an ethical assessment of the proto-situation, which includes the humorous text, its modes, and signs; and 3) the responses to the humorous action by the recipients as they ethically evaluate the humour act in their comments. Therefore, the ethics of humour are discussed on two parallel levels: the initial violation of moral norms that triggered the production of humour, and the subsequent ethical evaluation of the humorous act by the audience (or receivers).

In the second chapter of the introduction by Danuta Kępa-Figura, titled "Multimodality of internet-mediated communication behaviour", the focus lies on multimodality, which refers to the semiotic heterogeneity of messages in media communication. Kępa-Figura's intent is to provide readers with a guide for decoding humorous acts presented in the form of media messages, laying the foundation for subsequent analyses in the following chapters. The chapter effectively illustrates that in addition to the interplay of words, images, and sound, internet communication technologies play a vital role in shaping the environment where humorous messages are created.

The first part of the book, "Ethical evaluation of humour in mass media", comprises four chapters, each presenting case studies from the Russian mass media. The cases refer to existing

types of humorous discourse where authors (or the subjects of humour) try to attract large audiences in what is described in the introduction as *involvement in communication*.

In the third chapter, “Humour as mockery”, Lilia Duskaeva and Ksenia Shilikhina analyse the deontic discourse that emerged as a response to two media scandals that dominated the Russian mass media. The first scandal involved the satirical treatment of a terrorist attack on a Russian airplane in 2015 by journalists from the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Russian readers expressed their anger and strong criticism, disapproving of the humorous act that mocked the deaths of innocent people. The second scandal revolved around allegations made by foreign media against the Russian government regarding the poisoning of the politician Alexei Navalny. Russian readers responded with a humorous discourse characterised by irony and parody, expressing their disbelief, suspicion, and doubt concerning the foreign media’s claims. While the first case provides a clear illustration of the three-stage analysis, where the proto-situation (terrorist attack) triggers a humorous act (the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons) that is ethically disapproved of by the Russian audience, the second case features more blurred stages. In this instance, the deontic discourse formed by Russian readers offers an ethical evaluation of the proto-situation, while the ethical assessment of the humorous act is replaced by trolling, provoking scandalous discussions.

In the fourth chapter, “Humour in prank telephone conversations”, Lilia Duskaeva and Ekaterina Shcheglova investigate the deontic discourse that evolved around two telephone pranks orchestrated by the renowned Russian pranksters, Vovan and Lexus, and uploaded on YouTube, garnering a vast audience. These pranks targeted an elderly congresswoman who had previously supported accusations against Russia for intervening in the US presidential elections in 2016. The analysis revealed that while the first prank received positive evaluations from the Russian audience, who polarised against such accusations as a national attack, when the pranksters repeated a similar prank targeting the same individual, criticism emerged. Many people expressed reservations about whether the pranksters were acting in alignment with official propaganda and condemned the off-limits humour directed at an elderly woman. The chapter concludes that predicting the positioning of an involved audience can be challenging.

The fifth chapter, “Humour as Izdevka (Gibe)”, by Lilia Duskaeva and Liubov Ivanova, explores the discourse of gibe within the Russian *Telegram*. Two case studies are analysed in which *Telegram* users react in a malicious and highly aggressive manner. The first case revolves around the Russian Minister of Industry expressing in Bloomberg that the fall of the Russian currency is beneficial. According to the authors, users expressed their anger on *Telegram* to an extreme degree because they could not confront him in person. The second case relates to users’ sarcastic reactions to the new requirements for nomination by the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Although *Telegram* seems to be a controversial ‘alternative’ communication platform, with accusations of fostering conspiracy theories, illegal activities, and child pornography, the authors do not pay much attention to the platform’s low ethical standards. It might be valuable to explore further the platform’s very nature (Peeters & Willaert, 2022).

The sixth chapter, titled “Humour as an evaluation of Poshlost’ and cynicism in others’ speech” by Victoria Vasileva, examines how the use of vulgarity and cynicism as destructive forms of speech can result in a cycle of ethical violations and effectively engage large audiences in discourse. A significant portion of the chapter is dedicated to explaining the cultural significance of the Russian term *poshlost’* (vulgarity), which remains, in practice, untranslatable. This practice of addressing cultural nuances is followed by most authors in this volume. Recognising the cultural diversity of humour aids readers in comprehending the findings of the analyses and applying them to their own cultural experiences.

The second part of the book, “Ethics of online humour in Slavic-language computer-mediated verbal interaction”, comprises four chapters from online communities in Poland, Belarus, Slovakia, and Lithuania. This section presents cases from online communities and computer-mediated communication, where humour serves a more intimate purpose—bringing participants together. The audiences’ *engagement in communication* is now the focus of the analyses.

In the seventh chapter, titled “Humour as provocation of ‘kpina’ (mockery) and ‘wyszydzanie’ (derision) in the Polish political segment of Twitter”, Bogumil Gasek deals with the political communities that take shape within the Polish Twitter landscape, focusing on two oppositional politicians who serve as influencers. The analysis reveals that the effectiveness of provocation is influenced by the initial form given to the humorous act by authors, and the evaluation by commenters can either escalate provocation when met with positive responses or lead to a shift in the target of humour when evaluated negatively, resulting in ironic and vulgar comments directed toward the author. Gasek underscores the technological features of Twitter, which contribute to its multimodality, particularly the conciseness of messages due to the platform’s limited text size and the strategies participants employ to overcome this constraint.

In the eighth chapter, “Humour as ‘zdzek’ in the verbal behaviour of participants in Belarusian-language online communities”, Tamara Pivavarchyk and Ina Minchuk examine *zdzek*, a culture-specific form of mockery characterised by a strong sense of anger used as humorous discourse in Belarusian online communities. Participants employ *zdzek* to target female politicians for their hairstyles, which is seen as a display of superiority by those who feel marginalised within a hierarchical power system. The discourse takes on a specific linguistic form known as *LOL-trasyanka*, serving as an amplifier of laughter, an online, parodic, mixed Belarusian-Russian variety. While the authors acknowledge the stereotypical representation of speakers of the mixed variety as illiterate and socially marginalized, a deeper analysis of the ethical function of *LOL-trasyanka* as a parody of the variety would be valuable. The study also reveals that *zdzek* is not always ethically accepted, as participants express sympathy for the victims, resulting in the development of a parallel discourse aiming to establish ethical rules in online communication, a process referred to as *communicative sanitation*.

The ninth chapter, authored by Nina Cingerova and Irina Dulebova and titled “Uštipačnosť and correctness in Slovak online humour”, presents a semiotic and discursive analysis of the ethical norms that emerge within a large humorous online community called Zomri. The cases revolve around the violation of political promises by a Hungarian politician and a tragedy affecting another politician who was previously a favourite target of humour. The deontological discourse surrounding these cases reflects the ethical values that are either approved or condemned through the use of humour. The study also explores the boundaries of humour concerning its objects, establishing a more stringent spectrum of what is permitted and what is restricted.

In the tenth chapter, authored by Anastasjia Belovodskaja and Julija Korostenskiene and titled “Humour of solidarity in Russian-speaking discourse on social networking groups in Lithuania”, we encounter the most representative piece of the second part of the book, which is dedicated to online, multi-ethnic, Russian-speaking communities in Lithuania. These communities employ humour as social glue, enabling members to express solidarity while poking fun at everyday life. Censorship measures are implemented by moderators, participants, and commenters to prevent any disruption of the humour that could potentially destabilise community ties. The chapter uncovers the mechanisms through which community members prioritise solidarity and employ humour as a unifying force.

The book turns out to be a useful and concrete basis for further study of the ethical aspects of humour in mass media communication. It provides a valuable recording of the deontological

discourses that appear in Slavic media and a typology of the ethical evaluation norms that result from the involvement of the authors and the engagement of the audience in communication. The effort of all the writers of the book to provide cultural insights into the linguistic meaning of various forms of humorous discourse in Slavic languages offers speakers of languages other than English the opportunity to reflect on the translatability of humour and potentially find it easier to relate the findings to their own experiences. On the other hand, the internet and the media platforms where the humorous discourse under analysis evolves, along with the overall experience of computer-mediated communication, make it easy for the readers of the book to identify with, as it is a common, universal cultural experience.

The analyses in this book mainly focuses on how readers react to humour, which, as Tsakona (2020) has noted, is influenced by their sociocultural backgrounds. It is my impression that the sociocultural backgrounds of the audience have not been thoroughly explored in the analyses presented in this volume, except for some information about national cultures and the cultural meaning of certain linguistic elements. Participants in online humorous discussions are generally described in broad terms.

However, defining the characteristics of fragmented audiences is not a simple task, as the way the internet functions has shown. Technological mechanisms, such as algorithms, can shape audiences in ways that participants may not be fully aware of (Blommaert, 2020). For instance, *echo chambers* refer to closed environments in which internet users encounter views and opinions that match their own. Additionally, distinguishing between real user accounts and those that are automatically generated, such as chatbots, can be quite challenging. Furthermore, automatic content moderation is another aspect of online platforms that establishes extensive guidelines about what is considered acceptable or not as a target of humour and which forms of humour are permitted. I believe that a deeper exploration of this automated ethical mechanism, along with how users respond to it (for instance, the use of *algospeak*, a linguistic code shared by users to bypass content moderation systems, as discussed by Steen et al., 2023), would significantly enhance the study of humour ethics in mass media. It would be also useful to further explore the very nature of each kind of platform and its specific affordances, as -like we saw in chapter five with *Telegram*- audience behaviour can alter accordingly.

In summary, while the book offers valuable insights into how ethics is expressed by participants of humorous discourse in the context of mass media, it could benefit from a more nuanced exploration of the sociocultural backgrounds of the audience and a deeper examination of the influence of technological mechanisms on audience behaviour and the ethical boundaries of humour in digital spaces.

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