Book review

Yus, Francisco (2023). *Pragmatics of Internet Humour*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Humour is part and parcel of humanity, fulfilling numerous psychological and social functions. As such, it manifests itself in various forms, which undergo constant change as the society develops and transforms. The digitisation of communication in the recent decades has accelerated the speed of this change, the internet becoming a worldwide playground for people to express and share mirth. The fact that humour is ubiquitous and prevalent on the internet is supported by statistics which suggest that more than 60% of posts on social media are shared with humorous intent (cited in Elayan et al., 2022; referred to on p. 195 of the volume under review). Surprisingly, a phenomenon which has become strongly embedded into our everyday lives has so far received very modest attention from scholars. *Pragmatics of Internet Humour* by Francisco Yus is a timely one-of-a-kind monograph, consolidating research on various aspects of humorous discourse creation, expression, and interpretation in different online environments.

The book draws on Yus's several decades' long scrutiny into humour and internet-mediated communication within a cognitive pragmatic framework, bringing the insights of these strands of research together and providing an elaborate relevance-theoretic (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) account of humorous effects online. Yus is known for his unconventional approach to cognitive pragmatics, advocating for the extension of the theory to encompass non-propositional effects including the analyses of emotions and attitudes, whose importance in human communication can hardly be overestimated. The volume contains eight chapters addressing different types of humorous discourse and the machinery behind them in a top-down manner, gradually unfolding from more general theoretical claims to their specific empirical instantiations.

The book opens up with an Introduction, which provides the outline of the issues tackled in each chapter of the volume and states its main goal: to elucidate the processes of humorous effects generation and comprehension on the Internet through a cognitive pragmatic lens. The underlying claim of the relevance-theoretic (henceforth RT) analysis of humour is introduced here, namely that a humour creator has the ability to predict the inferential path the addressee is going to follow based on the cost-benefit comprehension heuristic ingrained in the human mind. The author stresses that the specific features of the online communicative environment play an essential role in internet humour production and reception, and delving into those is one of the main functions of the work under review.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical background. The author introduces the main tenets of RT treatment of humour, laying the foundation for the analyses discussed in the subsequent chapters. Importantly, Yus highlights that humour lies in the *inferential mechanisms* involved in humorous discourse and its *contextualisation* rather than in the features of the discourse itself. The claims about interpretation strategies and mechanisms at work are exemplified by several instances of humorous online discourses, serving as a demonstration of the suitability of the proposed approach to address the phenomena involved. An insightful RT reinterpretation of the incongruity-resolution (henceforth IR) model of humour is offered here as well (originally in Yus, 2016) with a taxonomy of IR patterns in jokes based on the distinction between frame-

based and discourse-based incongruities. While inferential mechanisms of internet humour are said to be universal and not different from those involved in any ostensive behaviour, it is the specificity of digital platform affordances and audiences that distinguishes online humorous discourses. Peculiarities of the internet environment and their impact on humour production and comprehension are the focus of the next chapters.

Thus, Chapter 3 zooms in on the main subject, internet humour, whose scope is delineated and defined here as "any discourse (verbal, visual, multimodal) with an underlying humorous intention that is either autonomously produced on the internet or created offline for the sole purpose of being uploaded and interpreted online" (p. 60). Three types of internet humour are identified on the basis of the interaction of online and offline aspects of humorous discourse creation. Those are *replicated humour*, *spontaneous internet humour* (the prime representative of the phenomenon and the cornerstone subject of the present study), and *hybrid internet humour*. The chapter finishes off with the comparison between face-to-face and online humorous discourse, concluding that the differences between the two lie in the modes of performance, medium, and constraints involved. Yus also claims that humour online is not less rich than face-to-face humour, as internet communicators are skilled at making efficient use of digital affordances and adapting them to their needs.

The fourth chapter extends the discussion of internet humour characteristics, focusing on the issue of *contextual constraints*, a term first introduced by Yus (2011) as a proposal to augment the relevance-theoretic tools for internet-mediated communication analysis. Various interface-related constraints pertaining to messaging, as well as social networking sites' affordances which promote certain interactive practices and curtail others, are discussed in the first part of the chapter in detail, while the second part deals with user-related constraints revolving around different aspects of users' personalities. A case analysis of sex roles is presented in the final part of the chapter, revealing thought-provoking research insights into sex-role connoted humour on the internet, such as the controversial role of *context collapse* in strengthening or undermining social stereotypes and the recontextualisation of sexist jokes in (post-)feminist humour.

Chapter 5 explores humour in messaging interactions, largely on the basis of Yus's exhaustive research on WhatsApp communication carried out from 2003 to 2022. After establishing terminological clarity on the use and preference of the term *interactive humour*, the author proceeds with arguing for the expansion of the application scope of RT research to embrace the study of multi-party exchanges instead of merely exemplifying its claims by (mostly fictional) dyadic conversations. The chapter unfolds with the discussion of functions of interactive humour as a "social lubricant" and presents key elements of humorous interactions analysis proposed by Chovanec and Tsakona (2018). Laughter and its expression in messaging through *laugh particles*, specific constraints imposed on messaging app users, turn-taking patterns, as well as emoji types, functions, and use are all explored here in depth. Finally, the chapter rounds off with a comparative case analysis of WhatsApp and WeChat humorous interactions, revealing interesting differences between Spanish and Chinese users' perceptions, tendencies, and experiences in relation to humour in messaging.

Chapter 6 addresses humour on social networking sites (SNS). In comparison to instant messaging discourses, where humour is always interactive, SNS exhibit a wide array of the types of humorous exchanges, from serving as joke repositories and single-user humour creation platforms to providing ground for generating mirth collectively in comments, as well as using humour as a marketing ploy on corporate sites. The author discusses all the aforementioned discursive modes, revealing the impact of interface affordances on humorous strategies employed on SNS, namely incongruity resolution, self-deprecation, and jocular mockery. The claims are exemplified with numerous examples from corpora studies. Some attention is devoted

to the exploration of non-propositional effects referring to phatic communication, which is defined as one of the main sources of relevance in humour on SNS.

The seventh Chapter titled "Meme-mediated humorous communication" delves into the aspects of image macro memes, one of the most ubiquitous multimodal genres on the Internet. The types of memes based on their purpose and modality interplay, their spread, and their typical characteristics are the focus of the first part of the chapter. Then, the author zooms in on the inferential implications of humorous text-image combinations in memes, elucidating the patterns of incongruity-resolution, as well as the strategies of visual referents adjustment. The case study of COVID-19 memes created during the first lockdowns in Spring 2020 rounds off the chapter. It is claimed that the specificity of this types of memes lies in their main purpose being the alleviation of collective distress in a highly anxiety-inducing pandemic reality. A comparative study of COVID-19-related memes against thematically heterogeneous corpora of memes reveals interesting observations, e.g., that a large proportion of pandemic memes do not rely on any incongruity-resolution strategy for evoking humorous effects.

The final chapter explores non-propositional effects (i.e., *affective attitude* and *affective effects*) arising in internet communication. Yus advocates the view that their nature is inherently non-conceptual, and stresses that they are part and parcel of internet humour, bearing relevance regardless of being intended or unintended by the sender user. A taxonomy of non-propositional effects based on the participatory level is offered here, comprising a bunch of psychological and social benefits of humour within internet communities. In particular, bounding and bonding functions of humour are shown to contribute to group formation and marking.

Overall, the book is well-structured and easy to navigate. The volume is aimed at scholars and students of linguistic pragmatics, so a degree of familiarity with the fundamental concepts in the area is expected from the reader. The sections can be read separately, as they present self-standing research into particular issues. The monograph strikes a good balance between theorisation grounded in a thorough literature review, and discussion of empirical studies' results. The author presents a plethora of original corpora analyses, both qualitative and quantitative, to ensure a multifaceted investigation of what is at stake in various internet humour phenomena: e.g., a survey on Twitter about laugh particles to reveal cultural differences and users' perceptions (p. 127); a compilation and analysis of a corpus of humorous exchanges to distinguish turn-taking patterns (p. 146), and many more. Although cognitive pragmatics, typically associated with the quest into "how more gets communicated than has been said" (p. 1; after Yule's 1996 definition of pragmatics) serves as the main methodological basis for the study, the author does not shy away from other analytical tools, e.g., conversation analysis, as in studying turn-taking.

One of the main achievements of the present volume is the adjustment of the RT approach to accommodate the specific features of the online communicative environment, which is an essential step for conducting an adequate and all-encompassing cognitive analysis of what is involved in online humour. The analytical strength of this monograph lies in distinguishing the constituent features of different communicative phenomena as well as variations within them, neatly reflected in numerous taxonomies and classifications, which is generally the hallmark of Yus's research.

The book provides a framework for, and welcomes further research in the area of internet pragmatics. Most examples presented come from Spanish language data, and although they support mostly universal claims about the mechanisms of humour comprehension, it is nevertheless clear that more cross-cultural studies are needed to trace linguistic and sociocultural variations. Furthermore, taking into account the revolutionary speed of technology development across several generations, which has divided internet users into digital nomads and digital immigrants, the age of internet users plays a tremendous role in determining communicative

practices they are likely to engage in. This is, therefore, an important parameter to be taken into consideration by internet communication researchers whenever possible. Thus, for instance, the study of humorous interaction patterns offered in the volume (p. 145) is based on the data provided by 40-60-year-olds, and such a study could bear very different results from teenage user data, which is something Yus acknowledges himself.

Overall, the *Pragmatics of Internet Humour* is a groundbreaking work providing insight into "how humour is devised, coded, manipulated and ultimately inferred online" (p. 8). Yus gives good credit to the most prominent phenomena related to humour in various contexts of internet-mediated communication, and stresses the importance of non-propositional effects, which have only recently started deserving some scholarly attention from cognitive pragmalinguists.

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