

## Book review

**Balakrishnan, Vinod and Venkat, Vishaka (2023) *The Language of Humour and Its Transmutation in Indian Political Cartoons*. Palgrave Macmillan.**

*The Language of Humour and Its Transmutation in Indian Political Cartoons*, co-authored by Vinod Balakrishnan and Vishaka Venkat, aims to review and theorise the language of humour in political cartoons in India, particularly following the NCERT controversy which prompted this study. In May 2012, various political parties in India stormed Parliament demanding a ban on Keshav Shankar Pillai's cartoon of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar from the NCERT 11<sup>th</sup>-grade political science textbook, which aimed to promote critical thinking through visual texts in its 2006 edition. Based on the theoretical works of Roland Barthes, Roman Jakobson, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, the authors design a model to explore the language of humour, in particular to explore how humorous communication goes wrong and the initial humorous intent of the cartoonists transmutes into a pernicious sentiment. The model is versatile and accommodates various factors such as context, ambiguity, and directness, and how these elements interact to produce humour. The interdisciplinary background of the authors provides a rich theoretical framework as the book combines the insights from psychology, linguistics, communication, and humour studies. By situating humor within the socio-political landscape of India, the book highlights the cultural specificity of humor and its implications for political engagement, thus enriching the existing literature in these fields.

The first chapter, titled "Understanding humour," serves as an introduction to the book, outlining its key themes and setting the stage for the discussions that follow. The second chapter, titled "The performance of humour in political cartoons," investigates the dynamics of political humour, positing that language is inherently violent and serves as a double-edged sword in satire. It explores how political cartoons function as both a critique of authority and a safety valve for democracy, navigating the fine line between amusement and offense. The discussion includes significant controversies, such as the Danish cartoon crisis and the Charlie Hebdo attack, highlighting the cultural tensions surrounding freedom of expression. Additionally, it draws on interviews with prominent Indian cartoonists, emphasising the challenges and the persecution they face. The chapter concludes by referencing Navasky's (2013) "art of controversy," suggesting that understanding the rhetoric of political cartoons is crucial for analysing their impact on public discourse and the health of democratic societies. Ultimately, it underscores the vital role of humour in questioning political power while also reflecting societal tensions and the risks of censorship.

The following chapter, "A communicative framework of humour," presents a communicative framework for analysing humour in political cartoons by integrating Roman Jakobson's linguistic communication model and Roland Barthes' visual rhetoric. Jakobson's six functions of language (emotive, conative, referential, poetic/aesthetic, phatic, and metalinguistic) and Barthes' concepts of the coded and non-coded iconic message are used to decode humour's verbal and visual elements. The framework is multimodal, considering both language and imagery. The study includes the Incongruity-Resolution Model by Jerry M. Suls (1972), applying it to the Ambedkar cartoon that sparked the NCERT controversy. It emphasises

the cognitive and affective dimensions of humour, exploring how it functions as a linguistic act and how cultural perceptions influence its reception. The chapter concludes by proposing the inclusion of metaphor to measure visual humour's rhetoric.

The fourth chapter, "Metaphor: The rhetorical frame of humour," examines metaphors as a tool for the evaluation of transgression of humour, particularly through the lens of Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) in *Metaphors We Live By*. It explores the relationship between humour and metaphor, addressing why metaphors are crucial to humorous language and how they function similarly. The chapter critiques CMT's linguistic focus and cultural generality, proposing a triadic model with source, target, and matrix domains. This model incorporates representational aesthetics to analyse cultural and aesthetic interactions in visual metaphors, as exemplified by the Ambedkar cartoon. The integrated model is presented in full with corresponding coordinates, illustrating the dynamic interplay of politics, social attitudes, and individual perceptions in metaphorical representation.

In the fifth chapter, titled "Application of the Model," the study applies an integrated framework to analyse Indian political cartoons recommended for deletion by the Thorat Committee, which was responsible for evaluating the cartoons included in all social science and political science textbooks. The chapter examines common features and conceptual maps to measure potential interpretations and humour's transgressive potential. The analysis focuses on themes such as language, caste, gender discrimination, corrupt bureaucracy, and the Nehruvian and Indira Gandhi regimes, using key examples such as Shankar's Ambedkar cartoon. This highlights the complexities of humour within the socio-political context, including the dynamics between cartoonists and audiences, as well as the interplay of linguistic, coded, and non-coded iconic messages. Ultimately, it consolidates the common factors that contribute to humour's transmutation, whereby joy can transform into hurt sentiment or positive emotions can shift to negative ones.

Finally, as a conclusion for the book, the "Language, context, and operation of humour" chapter evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of the model and addresses the difficulties encountered during its development. Additionally, it explores potential future applications and improvements for the model.

Balakrishnan and Venkat make a significant scholarly contribution by providing a unique model to analyse humour in Indian political cartoons. It bridges the gap between linguistic theory and practical analysis of visual media, offering insights into how humour functions and transforms across different contexts. The clarity and readability of the book vary throughout. While the academic tone is appropriate for a scholarly audience, it may alienate general readers due to its complexity and heavy use of specialised jargon. However, the structured layout, with clear chapter divisions and headings, guides the reader through the arguments effectively. Some sections could benefit from simplification to enhance comprehension, while the engaging use of case studies and examples adds to the overall reader experience. Overall, while the book is a rigorous academic work, a more reader-friendly approach could enhance its appeal to a broader audience.

In conclusion, *The Language of Humour and Its Transmutation in Indian Political Cartoons* is a significant scholarly work that offers valuable insights into the nature of humor in political discourse. The impact of this work is significant, particularly in light of current events where political cartoons often provoke controversy. Its strengths lie in its detailed theoretical framework and practical analysis, while its weaknesses are mainly related to accessibility and depth in certain areas. This work is particularly valuable for scholars in fields such as linguistics, media studies, and political science, as it presents a new framework for understanding the interplay between humour, context, and audience interpretation. Moreover, the theoretical

frameworks and models proposed could inspire further research into humor in various cultural contexts, fostering a deeper understanding of its role in political communication worldwide.

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