

Book review

Linares Bernabéu, Esther (2023) *The Pragmatics of Humour in Interactive Contexts*. John Benjamins.

This collective work edited by Esther Linares Bernabéu is titled *The Pragmatics of Humour in Interactive Contexts*. Comprising 238 pages, it begins with a short introduction followed by 10 chapters divided into 3 sections, each referring to specific contexts.

The first part, consisting of 4 chapters, is dedicated to *digital settings*, the second (4 chapters) focuses on *everyday interactions*, and the third addresses *fictional settings* through 2 chapters. Despite the diverse settings, the work remains very coherent. As noted by the editor in her introduction, it is entirely dedicated to the analysis of interactional humour, with only the last chapter potentially serving as an exception.

The contexts analysed are varied: the COVID-19 pandemic, the Spanish elections, and the Oscars ceremony are covered in part 1. Face-to-face interactions, whether conversational or transactional, are analysed in part 2. The last part is dedicated to stand-up and narration. Furthermore, this volume covers a wide theoretical field. For example, it includes Cognitive Linguistics, pragmatics and sociopragmatics, the GTVH (General Theory of Verbal Humour; Attardo, 2001), politeness frameworks, and relevance theory. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methodological approaches are also applied.

In the short introduction of the volume, the author E. Linares Bernabéu recalls how interactional humour is considered in this work, i.e., as *intrinsically human* (p. 1), which could be discussed in light of ethological literature as negotiated and influenced by cultural and social factors. Then, the author presents each chapter of the book, highlighting the overall thematic coherence.

The article written by F. Yus and C. Maíz-Arévalo, titled “Interpreting covid-related memes: The role of inferential strategies and context accessibility”, focuses on memes that circulated on the Internet during the covid pandemic, specifically during the first lockdown in Spain. The authors analysed 150 memes in terms of both their construction and the functions they served during this period. Following the “incongruity/resolution theory” (Suls, 1972, 1983), which states that humorous incongruity must be resolved to create a humorous effect, Yus (2016) had already categorised 7 types of I/R. In the present study, the authors applied this categorisation to specific memes related to Covid-19. Beyond this “simple” application with heterogeneous results, the strength of the article lies in the systematic multimodal study of examples, highlighting the complementarity of images, texts, and context.

This same multimodal analysis of memes is found in the second article written by A. Pano Alamán and A. Mancera Rueda, “Political-electoral memes and interactional humour on Twitter”. This time, the context, still Spanish, is that of the November 2019 political elections. Applying the GTVH (Attardo, 2001), the article aims at analysing reactions to political memes in Twitter. The focus on *reactions* is particularly relevant as it reveals not only the deeply interactive dimension of memes, but also their functions when dealing with political themes. Although this chapter is more descriptive than analytical, it confirms existing results on the construction and functions of humour.

The third chapter, “From mode adoption to saluting a dead kitten: Reactions to a humorous tweet by Ricky Gervais”, is written by L. Bischetti and S. Attardo. It analyses reactions to a single humorous tweet by R. Gervais in the United States. Over 200 responses to this tweet were analysed using quantitative and qualitative methods based on the GTVH (Attardo, 2001). 10 response categories were identified, ultimately grouped into 4 main categories. The strengths of the article include: 1) a focus on reactions, which is not common; 2) a theoretical proposal worth exploring (the notion of “soft assembly” replacing “negotiation”); and 3) the fact that only a few responses prove to be interactional (17%). This last result is particularly interesting because it is surprising and raises questions about so-called “social” networks and the limited presence of interaction.

Chapter 4, entitled “‘This girl is on fire!’: Interactional humour in YouTube comments on the Notre Dame disaster”, is written by J. Chovanec and V. Tsakona. It analyses humorous comments posted on YouTube following a video by a militant atheist after the Notre Dame de Paris fire in 2019. The study takes a deeply interactional approach to humour, tracing the trajectory of what the authors aptly call a “joking thread” sequence. Through rigorous methodology, the authors identify a structure for this type of sequence while maintaining a “macro” view that includes social dimensions. The perspectives presented in the conclusion suggest “more to come”. The study is fascinating and perfectly demonstrates that a case study can be as fruitful as a large corpus study.

This chapter by A. Sheikhan and M. Haugh is entitled “Epistemic and conversational humour in intercultural first conversations”. It investigates the role of common ground – generally considered necessary – in humorous sequences. Computer-mediated interactions via Skype are analysed in a multimodal manner. The authors of this chapter face a double challenge: analysing interactions between people meeting for the first time and communicating in English as a lingua franca, since they are of different nationalities and cultures. In this regard, the proposed study is particularly innovative and important as it aims to fill a gap in the field of humour studies. Another significant challenge is that the authors aim to bridge two approaches to conversational humour: the cognitive one and the discursive one. They succeed in this endeavour. Through rigorous and detailed analyses of the provided examples, the authors propose particularly fruitful theoretical insights and advancements.

The goal of this chapter, “Humour negotiation in interactional sequences in Spanish”, written by L. Ruiz-Gurillo, is to analyse how interactional humour is negotiated. The author relies on the VALESCO.HUMOR corpus (cf. Ruiz-Gurillo, 2021). Additionally, she undertakes the difficult and bold task of combining two seemingly very different theoretical frameworks: politeness theory (following Sinkeviciute, 2019) and a categorisation of humour from a psychological or at least individual perception perspective (Martin et al., 2003). However, they share a common focus on the interpersonal dimension of interactions and participants’ feelings. The author successfully exploits this common feature in her analyses, allowing her to propose a typology of the humour found in her data and to identify “patterns”.

This chapter, entitled “Communicative strategies in interactional male humour: A study of (im)politeness”, M. B. Alvarado Ortega focuses on humour among men as it appears in everyday Spanish conversations. This study follows the author’s previous research, particularly on women’s humour (Alvarado, 2014). Using politeness theories as developed by Brown & Levinson (1987), the author analyses how men’s humour is produced and how it relates to politeness (specifically, its central issue of “face”). Three types of humour are identified: *affiliative*, *self-competitive*, and *competitive humour*. It would be very interesting to compare the results obtained for women and men in future studies. However, I assume the author has already considered this.

Chapter 8 is proposed by M. Padilla Cruz and is entitled “Humour at the opening and closing phases of service encounters in small cafeterias and bars in Seville: Comparing the morning and evening segments”. It analyses humour collected in cafeterias and tapas bars in Seville, specifically during the opening and closing sequences of transactions between baristas and customers. The corpus consists of face-to-face commercial interactions collected ecologically (with ethical considerations that may surprise). The theoretical approach to analysing humorous sequences is *relevance theory* (see Sperber & Wilson, 2012), and the opening and closing sequences are studied through the notion of *phatic communion* (Malinowski, 1923). The interest of this chapter lies particularly in how the author analyses humour: through six research questions, which are variables related to the organisation of interaction (e.g., the comparison between opening and closing sequences) and the social dimensions of participants (such as age). The author highlights specificities explained by, but not limited to, the social functions of humour already documented.

This chapter, written by E. Linares Bernabéu, is called “Co-constructing humour and gender identity in live stand-up comedy”. It analyses humour in female stand-up comedy in Spain, particularly during “kairos” sequences, defined as “the capacity of the comedian to choose the precise moment to act, speak and respond in pursuing their main objective, that is, to make this audience laugh” (p. 201). The study does not focus on scripted monologue sequences but on interactional humour. As such, this chapter aligns with works revealing the importance of the audience in stand-up comedy. The author analyses 113 kairos sequences, adopting a mixed methodological approach, i.e., both quantitative and qualitative. Among other findings, the author shows that these sequences of direct dialogue between the audience and the comedian highlight the rhetorical-argumentative dimension of humour.

This final chapter, written by L. Timofeeva-Timofeev is entitled “Fictional interaction in children’s humorous narratives”. This chapter differs from the previous ones in two aspects: it is the only one in the volume that deals with written humour (narratives) and humour produced by children. 198 narratives are analysed. They were written by Spanish children aged 8, 10, and 12 years old. A quantitative description followed by a qualitative analysis is provided. Although the author notes that this is an exploratory study, it nevertheless delivers several interesting results both on how humour evolves across age groups (for example, more aggressive at 8 years old and more affiliative from 10 years old), and on the general narrative structure.

To summarise, the different chapters of this work could be described as “uneven”, as some present novel scientific contributions while others confirm existing results. However, beyond this observation, the richness of the analysed contexts highlights two important elements. Firstly, it shows how productive the community of humour scholar remains. Secondly, it also demonstrates that regardless of the context in which humour is produced—formal or informal—it remains an essential element of our daily communication.

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