HUMOUR, LANGUAGE AND THE MEDIA

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Humour and the media are such intertwined phenomena that it may be hard to tackle one without resorting to the other. From cartoons and comic strips, through Internet gags and humorous adverts, to sitcoms and funny remarks in editorials and opinion articles, the media do thrive in linguistic manifestations of humour. Whether or not it serves as a playful distraction, a marketing strategy, or an instrument to make a point, attack indirectly or voice the unspeakable, humour in the media deserves attention both as a discoursal device and a sociolinguistic phenomenon. At the same time, it also requires a consideration of the forms it assumes and the linguistic structures it deploys, be it with regard to wordplay or to the stylistic and rhetorical devices of which it makes use. Actually, the humour in the media stands out as a particularly challenging topic that not only congregates a number of research questions central to the history of humour studies but also addresses the two paradigms around which the linguistics of humour has spun: on the one hand, structurally-oriented approaches; on the other, interactional and pragmatic ones.

Originally studied within the area of rhetoric, the language of humour was regarded as a useful tool for nimble orators, provided that its use was prudent and balanced. Actually, moral issues were not detached from the teachings of such masters as Cicero (55 BC) and Quintilian (AD 95), who advised against comic excess and bad taste when propounding the unexpected as a triggering device of the laughable (geloion). Aristotle himself, in Rhetoric, established four centuries earlier that the comic effect only supervenes if language contains novelties of expression and deceptive alterations in words in face of which "the hearer anticipates one thing and hears another" (3.11). The Renaissance revived the classical tradition and authors such as Robortellus (1548), Madius (1550) and Trissino (1562) defended a clear, unaffected, and natural style for comic orators, as well as the introduction of an element of surprise (see Herrick 1950). In the 18th century, James Beattie (1764: 629-630) established that the principles guiding "ludicrous composition" involved "mean or common thoughts

delivered in pompous language" or "a solemn expression unexpectedly introduced in the midst of something frivolous."

However, besides its study within the art of public speaking, the language of humour was meagrely examined before the 20th century. In fact, for a long time it was literary studies that absorbed much of the scholarly input into linguistic forms of humour. The characteristic heterogeneity of literary inquiry makes the vast bibliography on comedy focus on a variety of types and authors spanning over a long diachronic line, from classical theatre comedy, including Greek Aristophanes and Menander and Roman Plautus and Terence, through the comedy of manners of Molière, the satirical plays of Ben Jonson and the landmark Shakespearean phenomenon, to Restoration authors, such as Behn, Vanbrugh and Dryden, and the 20th-century theatre of the absurd (with Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco). But the comic also assumes other forms besides playwriting, as is the case of poetry and prose fiction, and the wide array of genres, including parody, farce, satire and burlesque, amounts to a great diversity of literary approaches to the study of humour.

The research into comic incongruity, mainly by way of such philosophers as Kant (1793), Schopenhauer (1818) and Bergson (1900), was finally put to linguistic use, especially in terms of the semantic structures necessary for humour to occur in a given text. At long last, after a few scattered linguistic studies, such as those by Brown (1953), Fry (1963), Kelly (1971) and Hockett (1977), which were rather superficial and exploratory, more systematic linguistic treatments of the humorous phenomenon saw the light of day in the fourth quarter of the 20th century. Important contributions include, besides Raskin's 1985 groundbreaking semantic script theory of humour, Attardo and Raskin's 1991 "general theory of verbal humour" and Giora's 1992 model of marked informativeness in jokes involving lexical puns, all of which take semantic opposition, or contrastive meanings, as a defining feature of comic language. Alexander (1997) and Ritchie (2004) offer, instead of a model of verbal humour, a descriptive account of its workings: the former focuses on lexicogrammatical aspects of jokes and allusive punning, whereas the latter provides a general revision of the language devices used in jokes. In a similar vein, other approaches – such as Nash's 1985 analysis of stylistic techniques in humorous texts, Giora's 1992 account of verbal jokes, Crystal's 1998 inquiry into verbal play, and Ross's 1998 overview of linguistic resources of humour – give a structural, micro-textual, view of the mechanisms of humour in verbal texts, though they do not necessarily ignore the contextual setting of the humorous speech act. Likewise, Chlopicki's 1987 script-informed study of Polish comic stories,

Holcomb's 1992 analysis of "nodal humour" in Twain and Wodehouse, and Attardo et al's 1994 "linear" approach to joke-texts, all share a sequential perspective of the structure of textual humour.

It was only in recent years that a pragmatically oriented approach to the language of humour gained prominence. Dolitsky (1983), Hunter (1983), and Dascal (1985) took a few preliminary steps back in the eighties, by respectively looking at the unsaid in humour, the construction of comic witticisms from a Gricean perspective, and the sociopragmatics of language use in jokes. Then, in 1993, Norrick offered a book on conversational joking which examined how the communicative situation and the "surrounding conversation" influence joking behaviour and, a year later, Palmer (1994ab) investigated the pragmatic, situational, and cultural elements involved in the production and reception of humour. In this century, several contributions revolve around the role pragmatics plays in the understanding of humorous language. Attardo (2001) puts forth a pragmatic, as well as semantic, analysis of comic texts, followed by an edited special issue entitled The Pragmatics of Humour (2003); Simpson (2003) writes on the discourse of satire by investigating its dually "prime" and "dialectical" nature and how the two discursive subjects (the satirist and the "satiree") negotiate their positions; and Partington (2006) analyses the strategic use of so-called "laughter-talk" to achieve specific pragmatic and rhetoric ends, such as making an argumentative point or threatening someone's face. More recently, Ermida's 2008 linguistic model of comic narratives assumes a substantial pragmatic alignment, and Dynel's 2009 pragmatic-cognitive study of humorous garden-paths, as well as her edited collection of papers (2011) on the pragmatics of humour across different discursive domains, constitute important contributions to the establishment of a pragmatic trend in humour studies. Last but not least, Norrick and Chiaro's (2009) Humour in Interaction, which includes material from the media, focuses mostly on authentic conversational exchanges, whereas Chiaro (2010) explores translation and humour issues in the realm of the media, with a view to setting a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comprehension of humorous communication.

The present volume follows up on this rich tradition and takes an admittedly broad stance, considering the various roles humour plays in print and audiovisual media, as well as the forms it takes, the purposes it serves, the butts it targets, the implications it carries and the differences it may assume across cultures. Structure and effect are therefore regarded as compatible angles in this interdisciplinary endeavour. Early versions of some of the papers in this book were presented in a thematic workshop convened by the editors at the 10th conference of the European Society for

the Study of English in Torino in August 2010. The research perspectives adopted include discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, intercultural studies, pragmatics, communication studies, and rhetoric. The phenomena described range from conversational humour and word play to humour in translation and news satire.

As such, the volume brings together two areas that have not been previously subject to extensive attention by researchers: the interface between humour studies and media discourse analysis. Humour analysts have previously tended to concentrate on the understanding of the mechanics and the functioning of various types of humorous texts (e.g., canned jokes, conversational humour, comic narratives, etc.) rather than on the application of humour in particular domains. Media discourse analysts have, on the one hand, been aware and critical of the role of amusement in the media for a long time (e.g., the humorous and light-hearted presentation of serious content, the trends towards "infotainment", etc.), but, on the other, there has been little systematic research into the uses of humour in the modern media.

This book sets out to start mapping out the points of contact between these two areas. The individual chapters explore some of the diverse forms that humour takes (e.g. word play; canned jokes; conversational humour; satirical humour; humour in translation; etc.) across equally diverse forms of the modern media (traditional print and broadcast media, such as magazines, sitcoms, films and spoof news; as well as electronic and internet-based media, such as emails, listserv messages, and online news). The contributors to this book do not limit themselves to a single analytic perspective: although the individual chapters will mostly appeal to linguists, they will also be of interest to scholars from other disciplines that deal with humour, most notably media studies, psychology, and cross-cultural communication.

The book is organized into three thematic parts. The first section discusses the phenomenon of humour from an interdisciplinary perspective, probing different responses to humour in different groups and at different times. The second section deals with the workings of humour in various kinds of the mass media, with a focus on a linguistic analysis of data. The final part offers a critical commentary on the forms and functions of humorous discourse in social and political contexts, e.g., humour as a form of social critique.

Part One, entitled "Responses to Mass Media Humour across the Disciplines", consists of three papers. Patricia Andrew concentrates on the understanding of ageist humour from a sociolinguistic perspective. Drawing

on a sample of pass-along email messages, she identifies some of the main stereotypes and cultural discourses that underlie such practices. She notes that old people often joke about themselves and that such self-disparagement in ageist humour serves a positive function for them, helping them to cope with the negatives of old age. Melody Geddert reports the findings of an empirical pedagogical study into the perception and understanding of humour. The inability to identify humour is particularly acute among second-language speakers who may, as a result, find themselves excluded in native-speaker interactions or, more prosaically, be unable to perform academic tasks. Victor Raskin offers a strong argument in favour of theory in humour analysis, claiming the need for an explicit and systematic account of the tenets, body and specific constituents of a theory in any scholarly discussion of humour. In a rich methodological article, he lays out the formal mechanisms of Ontological Semantic Technology as applied to the most widespread type of humour, that from the Internet mailing lists, setting the bases for a computable treatment of humorous texts.

Under the title of "The Mechanisms of Humour in the Mass Media", Part Two brings together five papers that share a preoccupation with how humour is constructed in media contexts for the benefit of mass audiences. Christos Arampatzis deals with the role of dialects in American sitcoms in general and the interlinguistic transfer of this phenomenon through Spanish translations in particular. The analysis reveals a trend towards the levelling of user-related variation, paralinguistic compensation of use-related variation, as well as generalization and explicitation. Marta Dynel notes how creative witty metaphors are constructed in film discourse and how they contribute to the recipient's amusement. The entertaining potential of metaphors is shown to consist, among other factors, in how they are skilfully interwoven into the interlocutors' verbal exchanges. Such metaphor-based humour is complex since it is oriented at both the characters within the film and the actual audiences. Milena Kozić considers how communication in US sitcoms is framed as "play" on the basis of both verbal and non-verbal signals. She notes how the two channels are co-patterned, i.e., how they complement, contradict and substitute each other, and how play is realized on the levels of form, meaning, use, and through metalinguistic comments. Jan Chovanec explores humour in online journalism. Using data from the genre of live text commentary of sports events, he notes how humour is built cumulatively over extensive stretches of text in both the journalist's comments and the readers' emails. In such pseudo-dialogical exchanges, the participants jointly construct conversational humour and fantasy that

serve for bonding as well as mutual entertainment in dull moments of games. Last but not least, Moeko Okada considers the function of wordplay in advertising. Based on data of international products marketed in Japan, she notes how wordplay is used intentionally by advertisers with reference to the Japanese cultural traditions of using metaphor and sign-reading.

Part Three—"Mass Media Humour as Political and Social Critique" — contains contributions whose authors link humour and politics: they either focus on material from political contexts or discuss how humour can achieve political and social critique. Isabel Ermida deals with parodic news satire in spoof articles. Using data from a Portuguese newspaper, she focuses on what linguistic devices are involved in the construction of such satire. She postulates a model of analysis comprising the intertextual, critical and comic components and incorporating several subcomponents (structural, stylistic, lexical, pragmatic and rhetorical). María Jesús Pinar Sanz concentrates on ethnic humour in western societies. Drawing on the pragmatic relevance theory and the incongruity-resolution theory of humour, she analyses visual and multimodal metaphors in political advertising (election posters). She notes that the interpretation of the humorous components is relative, depending on the recipients' ideology. The collection closes with Jamil Dakhlia, who offers an interpretation of humorous devices in French celebrity magazines, arguing that there is a tension between the two trends of presenting celebrity content: laughing at the stars and laughing with the stars. Nevertheless, humour serves as a release of the readers' anxieties, pointing out the essential equality between human beings.

Taken together, the contributions to this volume bear witness not only to the multiplicity of humour manifestations in the media but also to the wealth of theoretical and conceptual angles from which to analyse the phenomenon of humorous language. Hopefully, they will also inspire future reflections on the comic as mediated by such heterogeneous channels as the press, television and the Web.

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