

Book review: Linares Bernabéu, Esther (ed.) (2023). *The pragmatics of humour in interactive contexts*

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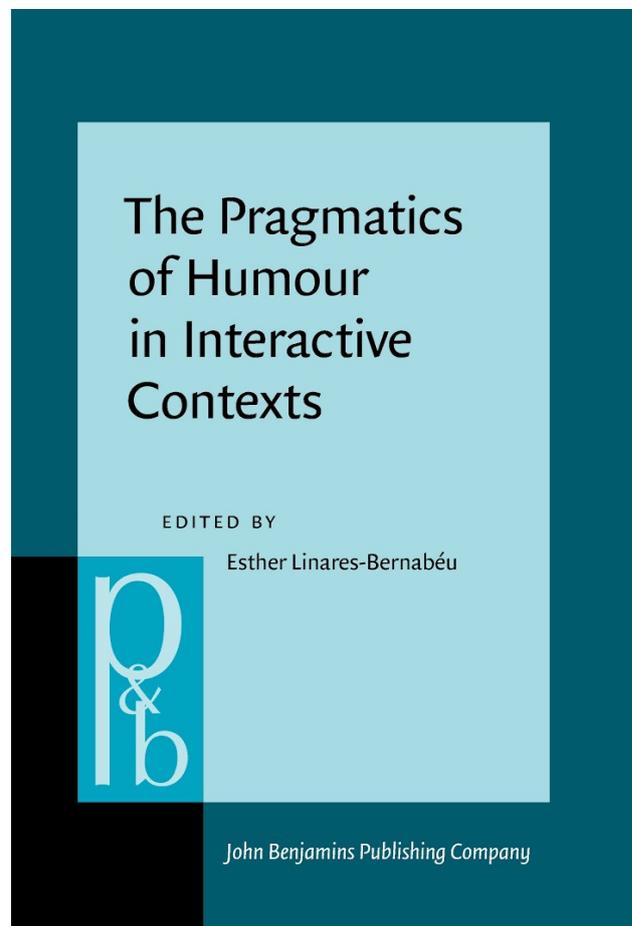
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The way we interact with other people is determined by the specific context in which we find ourselves. In this case, the growing prevalence of social networks that are progressively integrating into

our interpersonal interactions entails that language adapts to new communicative situations. Consequently, there is an increasing interest in the study of humour as a more dynamic phenomenon, in which individuals

contribute to, respond to, or shape comedic content in real-time.

The focus of this volume has two aspects: firstly, to compile recent works on humour in interaction using (meta)pragmatic approaches, and secondly, to illustrate the various methodologies and perspectives applicable to the study of this complex phenomenon.

The book's structure is divided into three sections, each dedicated to different aspects of interactive humour: digital environments, everyday interactions, and fictional scenarios. The first section, divided into four different chapters, delves into humour in digital environments, exploring everything from Covid-related memes to political memes on Twitter, including ironic interactions and humour in YouTube comments. The second section is formed by another four chapters, and it examines humour in initial intercultural conversations, the negotiation of humour in sequences, masculine conversational humour, and phatic forms of humour in service encounters. These chapters explore the interplay of knowledge, courtesy, and emotional engagement in various conversational contexts. The third and last section contains two more chapters, and it explores the co-construction of humour and alternative gender identity in live comedy interactions, as well as the construction of fictional interactions in humorous narratives written by children. The chapters offer insights into the negotiation of humour, audience interaction, and metapragmatic competence in planned genres. The structure and content of each section contribute to a comprehensive understanding of humour in interactive contexts, revealing the richness and complexity of this multifaceted phenomenon.

Taking a look at the internal structure of the book, the first thing we find is the introductory chapter by the editor, Dr. Esther Linares Bernabéu, in which she discusses the broad and diverse nature of interactive humour, highlighting its importance in relation to gender, age and ethnicity. Moreover, the editor outlines the focus of the present volume and its relevance to the current field of research. Following this introduction, Professor Francisco Yus and Dr. Carmen Maíz-Arévalo

begin the first chapter of the book, titled *Interpreting Covid-related memes. The role of inferential strategies and context accessibility*. It's worth highlighting the relevance of the analysis conducted in this chapter on the Covid memes that were highly successful during the pandemic. This precisely underscores the idea that humour can serve as an escape from reality (Berk *et al.* 1989; Kuiper & Martin 1993; Martin *et al.* 1993; Martin 2007; McGhee 2010; Losada & Lacasta 2019), providing relief from the stress and general discomfort that affected a large portion of the Spanish population during that time due to confinement and uncertainty. However, the question addressed in this study by the researchers pertains to the possibility that these types of memes differ from memes unrelated to COVID, and if so, what these differences might be. The analysis, conducted with the classification of types of Incongruity-Resolution (Yus 2016), reveals that a notable percentage of Covid memes lacks an Incongruity-Resolution (IR) strategy, contrasting with the lower percentage in regular memes. The humour in Covid memes predominantly stems from the collective mutual awareness of pandemic-related information and the humorously exploited behaviours imposed during lockdown. These results, therefore, highlight in a way the effectiveness of turning to shared and collective information that we have as a society, which precisely allows us to empathise with others and find a sense of support through the feeling of affiliation, a success that other IR strategies do not possess in these cases.

Continuing along this line, we find the following chapter by Dr. Ana Pano Alamán & Professor Ana Mancera Rueda, titled *Political-electoral memes and interactional humour on Twitter*. In it, they continue to emphasise the importance of a common knowledge base for the creation and recognition of humour, by analysing a series of memes extracted from the social network Twitter (currently known as X) with political-electoral content. Furthermore, this chapter contributes to the reaffirmation of the tendency that seeks to analyse all the aspects that form the humorous message, i.e., through more holistic and multidisciplinary approaches to humour research (O'Halloran

2008; Tsakona 2009; Attardo *et al.* 2011; Gironzetti 2017; Hakoköngäs *et al.* 2020). The results obtained in this study give rise to different categories of memes, some based on hyperbolic reasoning and others on the election campaign. The frequent use of parody, intertextuality, and irony, together with multimodal content, helps to resolve the incongruity in the messages. In terms of communicative objectives, humour is used precisely to reinforce the connection with the audience through a subversive tone that challenges power.

The third chapter of this section is contributed by Dr. Luca Bischetti and Professor Salvatore Attardo, under the title *From mode adoption to saluting a dead kitten. Reactions to a humorous tweet by Ricky Gervais*. In this section, the researchers focus on the study of a corpus of over 200 tweets that emerged in response to a tweet by the British comedian, actor, writer, and producer Ricky Gervais, commonly known for his role in the series *The Office*. In this tweet, the comedian makes mention of a controversial speech he gave at the Academy Award ceremony (the Oscars), thus earning a reputation for his irreverent humour and ability to poke fun at the entertainment industry. The aim here is to see precisely what users' reactions are to an ironic tweet. The results obtained through the analysis emphasise a very insightful idea about the character of this type of online interaction, classifying it as a *soft assembly* rather than a negotiation as such, as only 17% of the responses in total were of a properly conversational nature.

The fourth and last chapter of this first section is developed by Professors Jan Chovanec & Villy Tsakona, entitled *"The girl is on fire!" Interactional humour in YouTube comments on the Notre Dame disaster*. This chapter deals in a sense with a current hot topic; the limits of humour, and in general, whether humour should exist among social network users (Penney 2020). Because of its wide reach, this type of humour could affect a larger number of people than if such humour were to occur in a prototypical conversation, consequently provoking a controversial issue. The article examines humour in user comments on

YouTube regarding the 2019 Notre Dame fire. It explores how users reinterpret the disaster, creating humorous interactions on a sensitive topic that range between disaster humour and religious humour. Through a sociopragmatic approach to interactional humour, the researchers analyse 1100 comments that emerged as a response to a video produced by Matt Dillahunty, an American atheist activist, shortly after the burning of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on April 15, 2019. It is observed that, despite the topic, users do co-construct threads of jokes that start with an initial attempt at humour and continue either through similar (and sometimes opposing) attempts or through a usually positive evaluation of the previous humour, even overlooking comments that point out a failure in the humorous attempt.

The second section is opened by Dr. Amir Sheikhan and Prof. Michael Haugh, to discuss their chapter called *Epistemics and conversational humour in intercultural first conversations*. This chapter focuses on studying the functioning of humour in a rather unique situation that can occur in conversation, where the participants do not know each other beforehand but also belong to different cultural contexts. What might commonly be assumed to be impossible, unfolds in this chapter as undoubtedly feasible and having a place to be. Using the Corpus of Video-Mediated English as a Lingua Franca Conversations (ViMELF 2018), 11 video-recorded conversations were then systematically examined, and the results obtained indicated that the response to humour is linked to the epistemic status of the participants. That is, when the speaker assumes limited knowledge for the addressee, humour tends to be ignored; in contrast, in situations of shared knowledge, the humour episode expands. Thus, it is emphasised that it is crucial to explicitly consider the epistemic when theorising about conversational humour to gain a more complete perspective.

The next chapter, by Professor Leonor Ruiz Gurillo, explores *Humor negotiation in interactional sequences in Spanish*. The analysis in this chapter is interesting in that it highlights an aspect that is often taken for granted, namely that the effects of humour sometimes do not



correspond to the intentions of the humorous message (Dyrel 2016; Chovanec 2021). Using data from the VALESCO.HUMOR corpus, 148 humorous sequences were assessed in relation to three variables: the speaker's style of humour, the evaluation of verbal behaviour in terms of politeness, simulated discourtesy, discourtesy and lack of politeness, and the perception of each sequence as creating intimacy (in-group sequence) or confrontation (confrontational sequence). Thus, the observed trends highlight how politeness, impoliteness, and communication styles are used in different types of interactions, specifically within ingroup dynamics and confrontational situations, creating possibilities that perhaps we could not have assumed beforehand within these realities.

Linking up with the previous chapter we find *Communicative strategies in interactional male humour. A study of (im)politeness*, written by Professor M. Belén Alvarado Ortega. This chapter analyses interactional male humour in Spanish conversations, highlighting how humour is used as a strategy to show politeness or lack of it among participants. During the analysis, three predominant styles of humour were obtained: affiliative humour, self-humour, and competitive humour, used to maintain the unity of the conversational group. Even though some studies have found that aggressive humour may be more commonly associated with men (Kazarian & Martin 2004), it's important to note that individual differences play a significant role, and not all men exhibit an aggressive humour style, nor do all women avoid it, as this chapter points out. Moreover, each of the analysed sequences presents politeness strategies, which depend on the context in which they appear, and which affect different domains: illocutionary, stylistic, discursive, participatory, and non-verbal, which can also co-occur or occur jointly. Curiously, whether the target of the humorous message is present or not has a significant influence on the humorous production.

This part of the book closes with a chapter by Dr. Manuel Padilla Cruz, entitled *Humour at the opening and closing phases of service encounters in small cafeterias and bars in Seville. Comparing the morning and evening segments*.

As mentioned earlier, a considerable number of studies discuss the various beneficial effects of humour, both at an individual and collective level. Therefore, the focus of this chapter lies in precisely how humour influences the opening and closing phases of service encounters. By analysing a total of 16 small self-serviced establishments, an interesting sociocultural perspective is drawn, as it is mentioned that this type of interaction with staff varies depending on the timing of the encounter, customer influx, and the age of the service provider and customers. When we observe these results in light of the features of colloquial conversation (Briz 1998; Briz & Grupo Val.Es.Co. 2002), we understand that the age-related differences are precisely dependent on variations in the equal relationship among participants. On the other hand, the observation that humour was more frequent in the morning segment than in the afternoon is intriguing, suggesting a presumption that people are generally more active throughout the day (Adan & Almirall 1991).

The third and final section of the book is written by the editor, Dr. Esther Linares Bernabéu, with the chapter titled *Co-constructing humour and gender identity in live stand-up comedy*. In this chapter, the author focuses on studying kairos as a tool for collaborative humour creation with the audience in female stand-up comedy. The study of this Greek concept becomes even more relevant today due to the notable shift that has occurred within the stand-up landscape in recent years. We can observe how, increasingly, stand-up is transitioning from being a monologue to more of a dialogue with the audience, and in fact, a significant number of comedians choose to primarily base the entire comedic performance on that interaction with the audience. Furthermore, as mentioned in the chapter itself, the analysis reveals that in the 113 humorous sequences, it is sometimes the audience itself who, guided by the comedian's timing and pauses, decides whether to intervene during the stand-up comedian's discourse to contribute an idea or opinion. This way, we observe that the chapter demonstrates that this direct interaction with the audience effectively serves a rhetorical-argumentative function by establishing

connections between the performer and the audience, fostering collaboration between both parties.

In the last chapter, we come across *Fictional interaction in children's humorous narratives*, authored by Dr. Larissa Timofeeva-Timofeev. Through a qualitative study of children's narratives extracted from the CHILDHUM corpus, the chapter explores how psychosocial and metalinguistic maturity is reflected on the linguistic level by observing children's fictional interactions with invented characters in the narratives. By employing different age groups, the analysis allows for an examination of this evolution. The most revealing findings suggest a development in how children handle humour and writing as they grow. For instance, 8-year-olds often use more aggressive humour towards Martians, indicating a potential high self-esteem. However, around the age of 10, this approach shifts towards more affiliative and friendly forms of humour. By the age of 12, this trend towards affiliative humour seems to become more firmly established. Additionally, it was observed that the use of punctuation marks improves progressively, being less effective in 8-year-olds but more rigorous in 10 and 12-year-olds. This study underscores the immense potential it holds for examining both the psychosocial aspects and metapragmatic abilities in children's narratives.

In conclusion, as we have observed throughout this review, this book thoroughly explores the various facets offered by the study of humour in interaction, employing diverse methodologies that encompass both a cognitive and multimodal orientation. Therefore, it is a work that contributes to the field by expanding the numerous research possibilities this phenomenon presents, navigating through the chapters written by experts in the field.

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