The Dynamics of Interactional Humor –
Villy Tsakona and Jan Chovanec (eds.) – 2018.

Reviewed by Alice-Magdalena BODOC[1]

This volume represents an important contribution to the research of humour as one of the most significant ways in which people interact or socialize nowadays. Different types of interactions (oral, written or mediatized) imply different types of verbal and non-verbal behaviour from the participants, as well as different types of humour. Therefore, it is the researchers' responsibility to analyse these diverse forms of humour, and to shed light on its multifaceted nature, on its *dynamics*.

The editors of this volume, Jan Chovanec and Villy Tsakona, have brought together established authors in the fields of pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, discourse and conversation analysis, in order to create an excellent volume on humour in general, and on interactional humour in particular. As defined by Jensen (2018, 239), *interactional humour* is

> a spontaneous phenomenon in social interaction different from both planned humour in staged discourse (stand-up comedy, television shows), and also from carefully developed humor in cultural products of any kind (satire, literature, film, music, commercials etc.).

The editors state that one purpose of the book is to highlight "the processes by which speakers exploit various interactional and, more generally, semiotic resources to build their humorous accounts of reality" (Chovanec and Tsakona 2018, 15). However, it seems to me that the purpose of the book is much more than that. I would say that at its core, the current volume seems to help readers make sense of the complex and context-driven nature of humour, and towards understanding the similarities and the differences that appear in the production of humour in face-to-face or in mediated interactions. The genres used by the authors

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in their analyses are also miscellaneous, alternating the broadcast dialogues, the spontaneous or bilingual conversations with media blogs, Facebook posts, stand-up comedy, TV documentaries or family sitcoms.

Overview of the book

The volume is structured in twelve chapters, followed by a *List of contributors* (pp. 305-309), and an *Index* (pp. 311-316), according to the well-known academic requirements. The chapters are organized in two thematic sections – *Designing humor in oral interactions* (chapters two - six), and *Designing humor in mediated interactions* (chapters seven - twelve) –, while the first chapter belongs to the editors of the volume. Still, the chapters of the two parts form a continuum, as the investigation moves from the way in which humour appears to be constructed or negotiated in spontaneous, oral discourse, to the quasi-spontaneous or scripted oral communication, and finally to humour in written or mediated discourse.

In the opening chapter – *Investigating the dynamics of humor: Towards a theory of interactional humor* (pp. 1–26) –, the editors introduce the key theoretical concepts and perspectives on interactional humour and put forward *a theory of humour*. They give special attention to the five factors that must be taken into consideration in the definition and in the analysis of humour: the *framing devices*, the *reactions* to it, the *sociocultural parameters* that influence its interpretation, the *reasons* why the humour is employed, its *goals*, and the *genres* where it occurs. Based on these factors, the authors enlarge the existing definitions of interactional humour (including all types of texts in which it may occur), and draw attention to the idea of humour as dynamically constructed and negotiated in everyday interactions. This section is also meant to familiarize readers with the purpose and structure of the volume, the editors providing a short presentation of each article included.

Rania Karachaliou's joint work with Argiris Archakis, *Reactions to jab lines in conversational storytelling* (pp. 29–56), opens the first part of the volume and explores the responses of the interlocutors to different humorous parts of a story told by three female friends. Based on the conversation analysis approach, two types of responses are identified and further discussed: *immediate jab line responses* and *postponed jab line responses*. The first type includes laughter, wordplay and evaluative comments of support, while the second type includes *preferred* and *dispreferred* "responses that come after elaboration on the incongruity" (p. 50). Furthermore, the authors assume a few sequential patterns through which the participants seem to 'do' and to negotiate humour during conversational storytelling.

The next contribution, *Discourse markers as guides to understanding spontaneous humor and irony* (pp. 57–76), belongs to Ksenia Shilikhina. The linguist analyses real-life dialogues and samples of mediated interactions in order to highlight the importance of discourse markers in the negotiation of the *bona fide,* the *non-serious* or the *non-bona fide* modes of discourse. In addition, these metalinguistic markers give the interlocutors the chance to assure a correct understanding of their utterances or they can function as signals of a certain social meaning.

Based on their previous research articles (published in 2010, 2013, 2014), Marianthi Georgalidou and Hasan Kaili explore in chapter four (pp. 77–104) *the pragmatics of humor in bilingual conversations*. After a consistent introduction, in which they present the conversation analysis framework and the bilingual Greek-Turkish community on the island of Rhodes (Greece), the authors investigate the sequential organization of conversations as well as instances of humour produced by the code-switching choices of the participants. Their findings are revealing for the understanding of humour in bilingual talk-in-interactions. According to their age, the interlocutors use different humorous code switches in the intra-generation talks or in the parent-child conversations. In the end, the authors also underline the important contribution of these humorous switches or mixes to the identity construction of the various generation groups belonging to this special community.

The question article *Laughing at you or laughing with you?* (pp. 105–126) restricts the perspective, and examines *humor negotiation in intercultural stand-up comedy*. Following the theoretical framework proposed by Ruter (2001), Margherita Dore focuses on the stand-up comedy in English at Roma's Comedy Club, and analyzes the way in which the participants interact and negotiate humour when discussing about the Italian stereotypes or about the foreigners living in Italy. By combining multiple forms of self-disparagement to general disparagement of others, the comedians transform stand-up comedy into "a fascinating and versatile way of performing humour dynamically negotiated by interactants (p.123).

Part 1 of the volume ends with chapter six – *Teasing as audience engagement. Setting up the unexpected during television comedy monologues* (pp. 127–152) –, written by Sarah Seewoester Cain. Defining *teasing* as a special genre of humorous interaction that occurs in everyday conversations between close acquaintances, the author further investigates its characteristics and social functions. Each of the 13 teasing instances extracted from the televised monologue performances was very carefully analysed and the data analysis was organized in three sections, according to the identified types of teasing: a. teasing occasioned by silence/delayed responses; b. teasing occasioned by applause/cheers; c. teasing occasioned by mixed responses. The article ends with a discussion about the social functions of teasing, the most important one being the overcoming of the discursive asymmetry between the audience and the comedian by improving their interaction.

Chapter seven, entitled *Laughter and non-humorous situations in TV documentaries* (pp. 155–180), opens the second part of the volume dedicated to mediated interactional humour. Thus, continuing his previous research on interactional humour in the genre of the TV documentary (see Chovanec 2017), Jan Chovanec handles in this chapter the functions of spontaneous humorous and non-humorous laughter. The material for his analysis was selected from the British TV series *How Britain Worked*, a Channel 4 documentary from 2012. The framework of conversation analysis is skilfully used by the researcher who pays special attention to the non-humorous situations generated by the presenter and the other participants. The idea was that laughter occurs even in situations that were not initially designed as humorous (such as failure, disbelief or disgust situations), and its role is very important, as it helps the participants to defuse the tension and to reaffirm their cooperative relationship. The conclusion of the article was that laughter may have various functions in this broadcast genre, indicating – among other things – that the information transmitted during the documentary programs can also have an enjoyable dimension.

In *"Cool children" and "super seniors" cross into youth language: Humorous constructions of youthfulness in Greek family sitcoms* (pp. 181–204), Theodora P. Saltidou and Anastasia G. Stamou investigate the sociolinguistic construction of youthful identities, using a complex framework that combines sociocultural linguistics, ethnomethodology and interactional sociolinguistics. The two popular Greek family sitcoms *Happy Together* and *At the Last Minute* are examined following the identities in interaction model of Bucholtz and Hall (2005) and the Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA). The results of the analysis revealed that "the humorous construction of the youthfulness is achieved in the two interactions through the adoption of incongruous languages behaviors, activities and roles by the fictional characters" (p. 199), but it should not be ignored the fact that the voices of the characters are just the echoes of the TV creators' intentions.

The next chapter, *No child's play: A philosophical pragmatic view of overt pretense as a vehicle for conversational humor* (pp. 205–228), is written by Marta Dynel, whose intention was to examine the fundamental categories of pretence – *overt pretence* (irony) and *covert pretence* (deception) – in order to account for the interpersonal functions of humorous pretence. Special attention is given to one of these functions, namely to those situations in which overt pretence may serve *disaffiliative humour*. In fact, as the author herself declares, the principal objective of the paper is to shed light on the interface between overt pretence and conversational humour. The episodes investigated were extracted from the American TV series *House*, and contained various types of humour: parody, role play, fantasy humour, trumping, and absurdity. The conclusion was quite intuitive: indeed, the pretence (especially the overt pretence) can function as a vehicle for all types of conversational humour.

Villy Tsakona's contribution – *Online joint fictionalization* (pp. 229–256) – is particularly important as it brings into attention a less investigated genre of humour, namely the *online joint fictionalization*. As this humorous genre is quite recent, the author dedicates an entire section to its description, and to its four phases (identified by Winchatz & Kozin ever since 2008): the *initiation*, the *acknowledgement*, the *creation of the imaginary*, and the *termination*. The other sections of the article contain an extensive analysis of each of the four phases using a complex corpus that contains data collected from different sources (July 2014-April 2015) related to the discovery of a crocodile on the Greek island of Crete: online news articles, posts, memes, cartoons, and other online humorous texts, such as jokes, poems, stories, commentaries. Very interesting were the elements selected from five Facebook communities (one of them entitled *Sifis the Crocodile and His Friends*), as the participants of these communities build their online humorous fictionalization. The case study revealed many similarities between oral and online fictionalizations, and, at the same time, it confirmed the role of "humour as a significant cohesive device among the group members" (p. 251).

Another chapter dedicated to online humour belongs to Anna Piata and is entitled *On-line humorous representations of the 2015 Greek national elections: Acting and interacting about politics on social media* (pp. 257–282). As the title itself suggests, the researcher approaches a political topic, and a newly emerged, mediated genre – *internet memes* – combined with the responses produced on them by the Facebook users. Based on Attardo's *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (1994; 2001), the analysis of political memes highlights the humorous representations of people's attitudes towards the election results. Considered a special type of interactional humour, online (mediated) political humour has a clear advantage, as it develops both a subversive and a reinforcing role. This dual function of politically-based online memes allows the users to critique politics, to challenge the existing power relationships, and, at the same time, it animates solidarity relationships among the participants.

The last chapter of the volume – *Positive non-humorous effects of humor on the internet* (pp. 283–304), by Francisco Yus –also brings to front the solidarity relationships, but using the cognitive pragmatics and the relevance theory perspective. The focus of the article is on that part of a discourse that produces *(non)-intended non-propositional effects* at the personal or at the interactive level. The author considers that this concept (the *non-intended non-propositional effects*) should be added to the general relevance-theoretic and cyberpragmatic models especially when analysing the effectiveness of humour on the internet. The motivation is clear: "while humor often has little informational value, the lack of content-centered relevance is compensated for by the offset of non-propositional effects, which are not necessarily non-humorous" (p. 303).

Evaluative remarks

As a reviewer, I fully appreciate the editors' effort to bring together the articles of a significant number of established authors in various fields, in order to create and to share a valuable source of information about the dynamics of interactional humour. A very strong point of this volume is the authors' decision to include case studies, examples, and extended references in their articles. All these are meant to support their hypotheses and the theoretical assumptions, thereby, making the volume helpful and attractive to both researchers and practitioners interested in humour studies. The articles are written in a concise, clear and convincing way, and the volume is perfectly organized, with one chapter dedicated to each important aspect of interactional humour. In addition, the chapters create a continuum, covering both oral and scripted, spontaneous and mediated discourses, as it is well-known the fact that "humor is a prevalent feature in many forms of interaction", and a "complete theory of humor must include its exploitation in and effects on interaction (*humor competence* and *humor performance*)" (Norrick 2009, 261).

In conclusion, the volume convinces the readers that humour is a very important part of everyday communication, and, at the same time, a social practice that influences the construction of individual or group identity. Furthermore, humour facilitates friendly interaction and even helps participants to negotiate their identity. Interactional humour relies inextricably on the sociocultural context, and on the cooperation among the interactants, even when their communication is mediated.

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