Review of *Cognitive Linguistics and Humor Research*. Edited by Geert Brône, Kurt Feyaerts and Tony Veale. Applications of Cognitive Linguistics 26. Berlin / Boston: Walter de Gruyter Mouton. 248pp. ISBN: 978-3-11-034615-2.

It is not easy to write about humour. First of all, the academic analysis of humour is not in itself funny and is something more akin to perpetually scrutinising a menu without ever eating the meal itself. Furthermore, any (potential) humour event embraces and is sustained by a broad range of variables. These variables might be linguistic, cognitive, social or cultural in provenance. Not all of us share the same humour reflex therefore, and it is the interplay of these variables across cultures that makes the academic study of humour so intriguing. Add into the mix additional influences like age, gender and ethnicity, then a heady cocktail of contributing factors emerges which renders any single or one-directional analytic model either idealistic or over-ambitious. And finally, as Nash acerbically points out, responses to humour vary over time and changing contexts, such that the nuanced political satire of, say, a year ago is today no more than an “instance of red-hot topicality gone stone-cold” (Nash 1985: xii).

With all necessary caveats in place, this collection, edited by Geert Brône, Kurt Feyaerts and Tony Veale, brings together the work of scholars who are well-known in the academe for their research in what might be loosely termed *humorology.* In a cogent introduction, the three editors reassuringly point out that this volume, whose principal stimulus is cognitive linguistics (CL), is “ideally positioned to *support* the study of humour in language” (p.2, my emphasis). CL is therefore cast not as a universal panacea, but as a key and central framework for the analysis of verbal humour. Moreover, the editors make clear the contribution that the linguistic analysis of humour can make to our understanding of the systems and structures of everyday “normal” language. This position constantly requires re-articulation in language studies, not least as an antidote to Habermas’ conjecture that humorous language is “distorted communication” which not only interferes with ideal interaction but which “threatens the outcome of dialogue” (Habermas 1990: 58, 106). It is refreshing then that both the editors’ introduction and the individual contributions in the book consistently affirm the diverse, complex and indeed subversive nature of humorous language when it is set against the broader backdrop of human communication. Elsewhere in their introduction, Brône et al*.* invoke an IT software parallel when they characterise humour as the ultimate “killer app”. This they do because in their opinion no other application of human cognition displays so markedly the diverse functionality of its underlying hardware. This parallel is then broadened into an assessment of the explanatory potential of cognitive mechanisms in humour analysis before the editors, who have fuller contributions of their own later in the book, provide helpful overviews of each of the ten remaining chapters of the volume.

The first main analytic chapter of the collection (listed as chapter 2, with the editors’ introductory overview billed as chapter 1) is by Eleni Antonopoulou, Kiki Nikiforidou and Villy Tsakona. In the first of two chapters loosely connected by a focus on different kinds of grammatical models, these three authors probe the intersection between cognitive grammar and discoursal incongruity. With Langacker’s framework (e.g. 2008) at the centre, they argue that conventional discoursal associations form the bedrock on which humour is processed; that is to say, grammatical constructions become sufficiently “entrenched” in one space to be exploited in a different genre for humorous effect. Admittedly, this discussion does naturally (and quickly) stray into pragmatics and discourse analysis in its coverage of switches in register or discourse genre. For instance, Sinclair and Coulthard’s model of exchange structure (1975) is pressed into service in the analysis of the famous Latin lesson from Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, but the authors do stay broadly within the overarching CL categories across the paper as a whole.

Benjamin Bergen and Kim Binsted’s chapter further underscores the importance of humour analysis for our understanding of “neutral” language and of the formal and abstract systems of communication (p. 50). As in the previous chapter, a version of cognitive grammar, in this instance *Embodied Cognitive Grammar*, is employed, and again, there is reliance on Langacker’s work on construction grammar. However, in contrast to the focus on dialogue and register of the previous chapter, the data here largely comprises grammatical “teasers” such as classic puns, word play and double entendres (*One morning I shot an elephant in my pyjamas. How he got in my pyjamas I don’t know*). It is suggested that embodied construction grammars and mental imagery are key determinants of linguistic humour. More specifically, the idea of the “embodiment of language” is based on how language is used by humans with particular sorts of brains and bodies, and with particular physical and social goals in specific social contexts. This contextually situated account of humorous language is not in itself new and is even somewhat of a commonplace in pragmatics research: for instance, all of the papers in Dynel’s collection (2011) explore the pragmatics of humour across a whole range of such social contexts. In fairness though, the main thrust of Bergen and Binsted’s argument is to position humour analysis outside more mainstream theories of language where the emphasis is on the formal and abstract nature of linguistic structures.

In the first of three linked papers which offer CL perspectives on metaphor, Tony Veale focuses on the humour of “exceptional cases” describing jokes as instances of compressed *thought experiments*. An interesting two-part model is advanced: a thought experiment (TE) is classed as a cognitive activity something akin to armchair reasoning (where someone draws on concepts alongside instincts and emotions). A second activity is humour which, like a TE, probes the limitations of received wisdom. Developing a case study from the lexical database WordNet, it is Veale’s contention that both activities subversively expose and surpass the inconsistencies of habitual thinking. He concludes by arguing that both forms of discourse are similar because they destabilise habitually held world-views. Moving beyond the familiar understanding of humour as a juxtaposition of frames or schemata, Veale sees humour as somewhat more pointed because of its ability to probe the boundaries of existing categories. As conventional wisdom is contained within conventional categories, it is the linguistic creativity inherent in humour that, according to Veale, subverts these conventional categories.

Metaphor is also at the heart, so to speak, of Salvatore Attardo’s chapter. Attardo is interested particularly in humorous metaphors, from which he excludes metaphors that are taken literally, concentrating instead on metaphors which are funny in themselves (*His thoughts tumbled in his head, making and breaking alliances like underpants in a dryer without Cling Free*). Also included are metaphors with inherently funny referents (*As independent as a hog on ice*) or “failed” metaphors which humorously self-map their own source and target domains (*The red brick wall was the color of a red brick Crayola crayon*). In the latter category, the failed metaphor can be involuntarily funny or can be delivered in such a way as to pretend to be involuntarily funny. Attardo’s thought-provoking analysis is supplemented with a valuable taxonomy which includes these and other categories of humorous metaphors (p.106). Noteworthy among the additional categories are *overdone metaphors* which violate ordinary metaphorical relations (*A lame duck, lame from stepping on a landmine*) and *mixed metaphors* which exhibit separate and multiple entailments (*Throw a monkey wrench in the procedural apple cart that has already left the station*). Attardo’s conclusions are cautious, acknowledging that there remains no unified theory to explain why some metaphors are funny and some are not. Calling for further research involving a range of linguistic parameters, he suggests that a more eclectic solution is needed which matches a variety of models in semantics, pragmatics and cognitive linguistics to the kind of taxonomy he posits for different types of humorous metaphors.

Ralph Müller’s chapter rounds off the three on metaphor and humour. Müller interrogates a widespread belief that there is a connection between metaphor and humour. He highlights the everyday practice of characterising humour through metaphor, although I have my doubts that an expression like *comic relief*, which intimates that humour be understood through physical release, can be understood as a fully developed metaphorical mapping.

Müller then proceeds to discuss the “duality” of metaphor in relation to incongruity theories of humour. The chapter concludes with a useful case study, drawing on a 1.4 million word corpus in German that includes the work of “Jean Paul”, the alias of Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (1763-1825). Jean Paul, we are told, is the most renowned master of metaphor in German (p.118). Muller’s corpus-driven exploration is robust and insightful, although there does remain however the age-old problem in humorology in deciding what is actually funny. For instance, I am still scratching my head over Jean Paul’s “funny” metaphor: *Wit in its narrowest sense is the disguised priest who marries every couple* (p. 111, 126).

The three chapters which follow explore humour from a more experimental point of view, using quantified data, informant-based analysis and the sorts of empirical testing techniques common in experimental psychology. Rachel Giora, Ofer Fein, Nurit Kotler and Noa Shuval extrapolate from Giora’s notion of the *graded salience hypothesis* (1997) moving into the *optimal innovation hypothesis*, according to which optimal innovations are most pleasing because of the surprising recognition of the salient in the novel or new (p. 134). This approach is bolstered by two informant-based experiments whose results suggest, amongst other things, that while familiar metaphors are just as pleasing as their familiar literal interpretations, it is only novel metaphor that is viewed as “likeable” Unfortunately, we are referred to an earlier publication (Giora and Fein 1999) for detail on both the experimental apparatus and its materials, but in the present chapter the broad distinction between metaphor and non-metaphor is drawn through a scenario like the following: in a medical discussion about the elderly, the utterance *Their bone density is not like ours* is bothfamiliar and non-metaphorical, whereas the same utterance in the context of two women talking about the difficulties at work experienced by one of their husbands (and hence *men* as a category), it is unfamiliar and metaphorical. Using a 7 point scale, informants rated novel metaphors as significantly more pleasurable than their familiar literal interpretations.

Gregory Bryant and Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. examine behavioural complexities in ironic humour. Quite rightly, they exercise caution in adopting a single, “one size fits all” approach to the study of irony because irony does not reside in any single cognitive (or pragmatic) mechanism. It is worth noting also their salutary warning that while linguists may apply their intuitions to judge something as humorous, this is not necessarily representative of what ordinary speakers do in naturalistic interaction. In a reasoned and productive survey, they enlist a range of methods and tools that are required to better understand how both ironic speech is used and understood and how the appreciation of irony is signalled via laughter.

In an engaging paper, Seana Coulson revisits her own *space structuring model* (Coulson 2001) in a broad exploration of joke comprehension. Coulson draws out three core assumptions from her model: the embodiment assumption (that the structure of language partially reflects bodily constraints), the immediacy assumption (that the integration of linguistic and non-linguistic information occurs rapidly) and the elaboration assumption (where language comprehension involves animating the cognitive models constructed by the listener). By way of illustration of her theoretical model, Coulson advances two scenarios, of which the first is:

*When I asked the bartender for something cold and full of rum, he recommended his daiquiri.*

In this instance, the listener builds linguistic information with background knowledge to form a cognitive model of interaction between a bartender and customer. This *frame* is however violated in an alternative scenario like the following:

*When I asked the bartender for something cold and full of rum, he recommended his wife.*

According to Coulson, this example calls for the construction of a very different model, and the semantic and pragmatic reanalysis that reorganise existing elements in the message-level representation is what Coulson intends by the term *frame-shifting*. Working from these criteria, and basing her analysis on similar “one liners”, Coulson demonstrates different aspects of frame-shifting in joke comprehension.

In the last two chapters of the book the emphasis is primarily on corpus-based investigations of interactional humour – investigations which nonetheless import concepts from CL. Margherita Dore looks at metaphor, humour and characterisation in the first series of the TV comedy *Friends.* Using a usefully eclectic range of frameworks, and cross-referencing helpfully to Attardo’s contribution in the same volume, Dore looks at metaphorical constructions in the sitcom. It is surprising indeed to see just how many humorous scenes are generated by “playing around” with metaphorical formulae.

Kurt Feyaerts, Geert Brône and Robin de Ceukelaire round off the book with their study of humorous teasing in four popular sitcoms: *Friends, Spin City, The Nanny* and *Married with Children*. After a theoretical overview of CL concepts like *intersubjectivity, common ground* and *theory of mind*, an analysis follows of 402 instances of teasing taken from 115 episodes of these series. Five parameters of teasing phenomena are identified and explored: the teaser, the target, the trigger, the interpersonal relationship and the layering of meaning structure.

In all, this is an important volume which makes for an invaluable resource for anyone working on the language of humour. Moreover, it comprises contributions from noted authorities in research on verbal humour, and the theoretical consistency of the book is consolidated by cross-referencing between chapters, and also by referencing by its authors to the previous published work of the other contributors. This delivers a pleasing coherence to the book as a whole.

As noted above, the CL model is not a universal panacea for humour analysis, but nor is it presented as such in this volume. Admittedly, the theoretical palette that informs the collection in its entirety is a broad one, and its brush strokes broad; the contribution by Giora et al, for example, while insightful in its own terms, is not immediately concerned with verbal humour at all. And as noted at the very start of this review, academic expositions of verbal humour are not in themselves funny, nor is the data covered necessarily amusing either in its original context or in its recontextualised form on the page. The deadening hand of exposition, that bane of all research on verbal humour, stalks the analyses in many parts of the book. By this I mean the kind of often unwieldy or self-evident elucidation of the encyclopaedic knowledge needed to understand a humorous text. Such knowledge would be an awareness, for instance, of the cultural traditions and transport systems of the relevant community in order make sense of this two part *What goes . . .?* formula:

*Q: What goes clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop, bang, bang, clip-clop, clip-clop?*

*A: An Amish drive-by shooting.* (p. 61).

While the essays which comprise the volume are at times variable in terms of quality and rigour, they together offer a range of vantage points from which the undeniable productivity of CL in humour analysis may be observed. And while this reviewer suggested at the outset that humour analysis is not in itself funny, it is nonetheless worth noting my favourite example from the collection. This is Attardo’s self-reflexive “failed” metaphor: *Her vocabulary was as bad as, like, whatever*. Now that produced a chuckle.

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