Humor in Language ⓕⓡⓔⓔ

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Summary and Keywords

Interest in the linguistics of humor is widespread and dates since classical times. Several theoretical models have been proposed to describe and explain the function of humor in language. The most widely adopted one, the semantic-script theory of humor, was presented by Victor Raskin, in 1985. Its expansion, to incorporate a broader gamut of information, is known as the General Theory of Verbal Humor. Other approaches are emerging, especially in cognitive and corpus linguistics. Within applied linguistics, the predominant approach is analysis of conversation and discourse, with a focus on the disparate functions of humor in conversation. Speakers may use humor pro-socially, to build in-group solidarity, or anti-socially, to exclude and denigrate the targets of the humor. Most of the research has focused on how humor is co-constructed and used among friends, and how speakers support it. Increasingly, corpus-supported research is beginning to reshape the field, introducing quantitative concerns, as well as multimodal data and analyses. Overall, the linguistics of humor is a dynamic and rapidly changing field.

Keywords: humor, smiling, laughter, irony, sarcasm, GTVH, joke, jab-line, punch line

1. Humor in Language

Scholarly research on humor goes back to Plato and Aristotle and extends to practically all fields of inquiry, including mathematics and medicine. There exist several scholarly societies for the study of humor, and numerous journals and book series are dedicated entirely to humor research. Linguistics has had a privileged role in humorology (or gelotology), both because of its contributions, which this entry will review, and because language is the medium of much humor. Even humor that is produced entirely outside of language (for example, visually or musically) needs to be discussed and explained in language by scholars wanting to analyze it. In what follows, only humor expressed linguistically will be considered. Likewise, irony and sarcasm will be given only a very cursory treatment (Section 2.3.1), despite their obvious connections to humor, due to the exceedingly large literature on the subject and its complexity.

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2. Critical Analysis of Scholarship

One of the earliest linguistic discussions of humor is found in Cicero, who distinguishes between humor "de re" and "de dicto." The distinction is fundamental and matches precisely modern-day differentiations between "referential" and "verbal" humor: the former is purely semantic/pragmatic and does not depend on the linguistic form (the signifier), whereas the latter crucially does. In practical terms and simplifying a little, verbal humor is comprised of puns, ambiguity-based humor, or humor that is based on repetition of parts of the signifier (for example, alliteration). All these forms of humor exploit characteristics of the signifier to bring together incongruous semantic or pragmatic meanings. Referential humor on the contrary is based only on semantic/pragmatic incongruity. Consider the following riddle:

(1)

What is black and white and red all over? A newspaper.

Example (1) exploits the homophony between the morphemes [red] and [read], which brings together (overlaps) the incompatible meanings of the color "red" and the past participle of "read." In psychological terms, this is called an incongruity. The incongruity is also "resolved" because the homophony allows the text to playfully "claim" that the coincidental phonetic overlap of the two different morphemes justifies the presence of the two meanings in the text. It should be noted that all discussions of the "resolution" of humor point out that it is only a playful, non-serious, para-logical resolution.

Linguistic humor research initially focused on puns, which are obviously a linguistic problem. Most of the research was taxonomic, building elaborate classifications of phenomena, primarily based on the linguistic factors at play—for example puns are often classified as paradigmatic or syntagmatic, depending on whether the two strings involved are co-present in the text or not. Other classifications focus on distinctions such as homonymy (homophones and homographs), paronimy (partial homonymy), etc. The semantic aspect of humor was neglected until two approaches, one developed in Europe and one in the United States, brought attention to linguistically based humor research on meaning.

2.1 The Semantic Turn: The Isotopy-Disjunction Model

In the 1960s, renewed interest in lexical semantics led numerous semanticists to postulate the existence of meaning units "smaller" than morphemes. A morpheme such as /dog/ could be analyzed in semantic features, such as [+animal][+adult] [+canine], etc. A. J. Greimas, a French structural linguist, in the context of proposing to differentiate between types of features, proposed the idea of isotopy, which would account for the selection of the feature [+animal] or [-human] in the lexeme "bark" (consider the contrastive pair: "the dog barked" vs. "the sergeant barked [at the recruits]," which would select [+animal] and [-animal], respectively). In passing, and without any serious discussion, Greimas (1966) mentioned that some jokes functioned by switching isotopies. Several European

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scholars adopted this model, which was soon enriched by the use of narrative functions, such as the idea that jokes consisted of three functions: the first one setting up the story, the second one introducing an incongruity, and the third one resolving it with the punch line.

Despite broad adoption in Europe, the model suffered from a lack of clear definition of the core concept of isotopy (see Attardo, 1994 for discussion) and was largely abandoned in favor of script-based models that were richer and more flexible, semantically and pragmatically. However, a recent synthesis (Al-Jared, 2017) shows that there is still some vitality attached to the model.

2.2 The Semantic-Script Theory of Humor

Lexical semantics in the United States, under the stimulus of research in Artificial Intelligence, and following research in psychology, particularly in the area of memory, moved away from feature-based representations and adopted more sophisticated representations that allowed researchers to incorporate encyclopedic information. The terminology varied significantly (*frames*, *schemata*, *memory organization packets*, *scripts*, *situations*), but the fundamental concept was that the structures were complex semantic units that incorporated large amount of information on how to "do things," and importantly, were connected in a large semantic network.

Within the context of this research, the semantic-script theory of humor (SSTH) emerged, proposed by Victor Raskin, in 1985. Raskin's book was extremely successful, for two main reasons: first, it was the first coherent, book-length treatment of the semantics of humor; second, it linked the linguistic treatment of humor to the broader field of humor research, by providing a thorough review of the literature and a clear epistemological position within the field of linguistics. Humor studies provide the questions, and linguistics provides the answers (when it can).

Another contributing factor to the success of Raskin's SSTH is that it can be summarized in two pithy conditions. The necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be funny are:

1. The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts.
2. The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite in a special sense. (Raskin, 1985, p. 99)

The two conditions, in their simplicity, hide the complex underlying semantic theory. This has led to numerous misunderstandings. For example, Raskin's theory is, very explicitly, a theory of a speaker's competence, not of their performance. Hence, whether a given person in a given situation does not find a given joke text humorous, for whatever reason, is entirely irrelevant, much like a mispronunciation of a sound by a speaker is entirely irrelevant to the phonemic status of the phoneme /p/ in English. In other words, the SSTH predicts whether a given joke text has the potential to be perceived as humorous by speakers.

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2.3 Pragmatics of Humor

Another aspect of Raskin's theory that is extremely significant, and has been misunderstood, is that Raskin denies the usefulness of the semantics/pragmatics boundary. Hence, his theory should properly be defined as a semantic/pragmatic theory. Raskin observes, as many had before, that jokes do not follow the *Principle of Cooperation* (Grice, 1989). Raskin introduces the idea of non-bona-fide communication to characterize non-cooperative exchanges (cooperative exchanges are bona-fide).

As mentioned, the idea that jokes and humor at large are a violation of the cooperative principles, or of one of the maxims, is not new, but Raskin, and later Attardo (1994), integrated it within the linguistics of humor. There has been some scattered opposition to this view, essentially attempting to deny the reality of the violation. The most significant of these is by Goatly (2012, p. 235), who suggests considering humor as a short-term violation (or as he puts it, "a flout delayed by violation").

2.3.1 Irony and Sarcasm

Flouting the Principle of Cooperation is, of course, one of the ways of generating irony, as Grice himself noted. In this section, irony and sarcasm are briefly discussed. The first problem one encounters when addressing the subject is that the terms *irony* and *sarcasm* are folk categories, which moreover have undergone, in certain varieties of English, a recent semantic shift: it used to be that, generally speaking, irony was intended as the broad category of "saying one thing and meaning its opposite," with sarcasm reserved for particularly aggressive or biting forms thereof. However, beginning in the early 1990s, the term *irony* shifted for young American English speakers, to mean "something unexpected and unpleasant" and *sarcasm* became the unmarked term covering the field of irony/sarcasm. To what extent this affects research based on questionnaires and on corpora has not been determined. Needless to say, this does not affect other languages and varieties of English.

There have been many pragmatic approaches to irony. Among the most followed are listed here:

1. The so-called *standard pragmatic model*, proposed by Grice (1989) and Searle (1969), which sees irony as a flout of the maxim of quality, within Grice's "Cooperative" principle. Later, the claim was broadened to the flout of any of the maxims.
2. The *direct access* theory (Gibbs, 1994), based on psycholinguistic evidence, which denies that the speakers must first access the literal meaning of the utterance, as implied by the standard pragmatic model. In the direct access model, speakers directly access the ironical meaning.
3. The graded salience theory, which claims that speakers access the most salient meaning first and the less salient one second (Giora, 2002). Between the two meanings, there holds a relationship of negation.
4. The *mention* theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1981) claimed that irony is the mention of a previous utterance with a critical stance toward the original utterance. Later, the

theory was weakened to require only an *echo* of a belief that could be attributed to someone, and eventually to a *reminder* of a common belief or social norm, to accommodate the fact that many ironies do not explicitly refer to prior utterances.

5. The *pretense* theory argues that the speaker pretends to be another speaker who would say the utterance, also with a critical stance toward the utterance and/or the speaker thereof.

There are many other theories, and new accounts are frequently added (for a synthesis, see Gibbs & Colston, 2007). For example, there have been proposals to see irony as a prototypical phenomenon, rather than as a categorical one, as assumed by all the theories reviewed here, as well as approaches that tie irony to embodied cognition. Space limitations prevent a full review; however, a consensus seems to be gathering around the idea of *contrast* (Colston, 2000). Contrast subsumes the pretense and mention theories, as well as the standard pragmatic model, as it assumes that a violation of any maxim may generate irony if it is in a situation in which the expected or preferred state of the world is in contrast with the observed one. The concept of contrast can also be usefully connected with Giora's negation. Under this view, mention, echo, reminder, pretense, etc., would be ways in which the contrast between expectations and reality is highlighted. This in turn connects back to the similarity between the contrast account of irony and the accounts of humor as "opposition" between two scripts.

2.4 The GTVH

Attardo and Raskin (1991) presented an expansion of the SSTH, called the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). The GTVH addressed two limitations of the STTH: first, the SSTH did not distinguish between referential and verbal humor, unsurprisingly, because they are semantically indistinguishable; second and most significantly, the SSTH could not account for the fact that some jokes are perceived as being more similar to one another. The GTVH accounts for these facts by postulating six *knowledge resources* (parameters or options to be selected): the *script opposition*, from the original SSTH; the *logical mechanism*, which handles the resolution of the incongruity introduced in the script opposition; the *situation*, essentially the environment in which the narrative takes place; the *target*, that is, the butt of the joke; the *narrative strategy*, which is how the text is organized (for example, many jokes have series structure in which, after two occurrences of an event, a third occurrence is different); and finally the *language*, the linguistic choices with which the previous components are verbalized.

The major claim of the GTVH was that the six knowledge resources are hierarchically organized, so that choices in the most abstract, higher knowledge resources affect the choices in the lower knowledge resources. These differences are reflected in the judgments of similarity of speakers, with jokes based on higher knowledge resources being perceived as more different (Ruch, Attardo, & Raskin, 1993). Thus, for example, two jokes with different script oppositions (for example, stupid vs. sex joke) would be felt to be more dissimilar than two jokes with different targets (say, Polish and Belgian jokes). It should be noted that most jokes rely on mythical regional stereotypes, thus both Polish

people and Belgian people are supposed to be "stupid," in the United States and France, respectively.

A further expansion of the GTVH (Attardo, 2001) expanded the SSTH/GTVH, which had been originally developed using a corpus of jokes and had remained focused on jokes in the 1991 iteration, to all kinds of humor conveyed by language. In particular, long texts such as short stories were analyzed. The main difference between short humorous texts, such as jokes, and longer ones, was found to be that the occurrence of the script opposition in jokes tends to occur at the end of the text (technically, in the last phrase of the last sentence of the text), while script oppositions occur throughout in longer texts, albeit not randomly (Corduas, Attardo, & Eggleston, 2008). To distinguish between text-final punch lines and other occurrences of humor, Attardo (2001) introduced the term *jab line*. Further research (Tsakona, 2003) showed that jab lines may also occur in jokes.

Despite the widespread recognition of the SSTH and the GTVH as the "two most influential linguistic humor theories of the last two decades" (Brône, Feyaerts, & Veale, 2006, p. 203), they were not intended as and could not possibly have been the final word on the linguistic research on humor.

3. Current Trends in the Linguistics of Humor

3.1 Theoretical Approaches

Cognitive linguistics deployed its theoretical apparatus in the analysis of humor only fairly recently. Given the central role of semantics in cognitive linguistics, it is not surprising that it has provided interesting analyses of phenomena such as forced reinterpretation (dubbed "trumping") in examples such as:

> A: (consoling tone)   Perhaps it is a blessing in disguise, dear.
> B: (angry tone)   Well, it must be a bloody good disguise then (Brône 2017)

In this sample, the modifier "bloody good" forces a literal reinterpretation of the idiom. Just as predictably, cognitive linguistics has shown an interest in the role of metaphors, metonymy, mental spaces, conceptual blending, and grammatical constructions in humor (Brône, Feyaerts, & Veale, 2015). However, as Brône (2017, p. 262) concludes, in summing up the state-of-the-art cognitive-linguistics approaches to humor, "the studies presented thus far have been largely programmatic."

In many ways, cognitive linguistics offers great promise to solve genuine problems in humor research. For example, it has been repeatedly noted that the literalization of metaphors can be humorous. There have been several studies on metaphors and humor (see Brône, 2017 for a review of some of them). However, none has answered the seemingly basic question of why some metaphors are humorous and some are not. Obviously, this kind of question can be tackled best from within a cognitive approach. The strong

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emphasis on embodiment and on the psychological reality of the theoretical models should also favor interdisciplinary research straddling psycholinguistics and cognitive approaches (e.g., Coulson & Kutas, 2001).

Relevance theory has had to wait until Yus (2016) for a full-fledged treatment of humor, despite some early unconvincing attempts (Curcò, 1995; Jodlowiec, 1991). Because relevance theory takes the principle of relevance to be inviolable (unlike Grice's cooperative principle), relevance-theoretic accounts stress that relevance guides the inferential process both before and after the incongruity is found.

Corpus linguistics has had a very significant impact on the field of linguistics, unmatched in humor studies, where corpus-based studies are rare. Those are considered in Section 3.2.1.2.

3.2 Applied Linguistics

Even within the theoretical linguistics side, calls appeared for a theory of humor performance (e.g., Carrell, 1997), as opposed to the competence-based approach of the SSTH/GTVH. These have continued, including arguments within the GTVH (e.g., Tsakona, 2013). However, more significant contributions to the analysis of humor performance have come from several subfields of applied linguistics.

3.2.1 Conversation, Discourse, and Corpus Analyses

Probably the most significant contributions to the study of humor have come from the fields of conversation and discourse analysis, if for no other reason than from sheer amount of contributions.

Conversation analysis showed an early interest in the performance of humor and jokes in particular, as Sacks (1989) used a sexual joke as an example in one of the foundational articles of conversation analysis. Jefferson (1979) found that the role of laughter in conversation was far from being a passive reaction to humor, but that it was, in fact, used to invite laughter and to affect the structure of the conversation. A full review of the conversation analytical approach, with updates and contemporary contributions can be found in Glenn (2003) and Glenn and Holt (2013). Conversation analyses focus primarily on recorded discursive data and use close transcriptions of the conversations.

The study of laughter has since become its own field (Chafe, 2007; Trouvain & Truong, 2017), with scholars touching on such widespread topics as its acoustic description, its distribution within and around speech, and its complex relationship with humor: laughter may occur without humor and humor may occur with laughter, but the two are far from being an adjacency pair, as early speculation maintained (Norrick, 1993).

Discourse analysis broadened the perspective to how the humorous status of the exchange is negotiated (Davies, 1984) among the participants, to their different styles (Tan-

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nen, 1984), and to the social functions of the humor (see Attardo, 2015 for a review of the numerous strands of research).

3.2.1.1 The Social Functions of Humor

Before discussing how humor is integrated in the socialization process, it is crucial to note, as Holmes (2000) does, that "all utterances are multifunctional (…) Hence, a humorous utterance may, and typically does, serve several functions at once" (p. 166). In fact, as Priego-Valverde (2003) argues, humor can be used to "do" almost anything. Obviously, the functions of humor vary in relation to the setting. Studies have focused primarily on workplace humor (especially the Language in the Workplace project, by Janet Holmes and her associates), conversations among friends, and classroom discourse.

The most obvious function of humor is to create solidarity among the participants. As Davies (1984) showed, humorous exchanges are co-constructed, with participants taking up the humor produced by another speaker, elaborating on it, repeating it, commenting on it, or merely signaling their appreciation, thereby reinforcing it. Extreme forms of this phenomenon have been dubbed "joint fantasizing" (Kotthoff, 2009). The longest reported sequence of joint fantasizing extends to 13 turns. However, conversations do not generally evolve into non-stop joking. Attardo (2015) reviews studies that show that a majority of humorous exchanges are under 3 turns, and many instances are single turn. Obviously, participating in a shared activity produces solidarity.

Another way of showing solidarity with the speaker is to engage in humor support (Hay, 2001). Humor support consists of discursive strategies meant to acknowledge and support humorous turns. Obviously, laughter and the production of more humor are supportive, but so are echoing (repeating the humorous turn or parts of it), increased backchannel activity, and in the case of self-deprecating humor, expressions of incredulity and/or sympathy. An extreme form of humor support is mode adoption, which, for the hearer of a humorous remark, consists of engaging in the same kind of humor (i.e., adopting the speaker's mode of communication). Thus an ironical response to an ironical statement would count as mode adoption, whereas laughter or saying "That's funny!" would be support but not adoption (Attardo, 2002; Whalen & Pexman, 2010). Support and mode adoption must be seen in a broader framework, as presented in Hay (2001). Hay notes that, when faced with a humorous utterance, the hearer must undergo four different processes, which bear an implicational relationship among them. First, the hearer must recognize the intention to produce humor, then he/she must understand the humor stimulus. Only after the humor stimulus has been recognized and understood may the hearer engage in the appreciation of the humor and, eventually, react to it. As is clear, appreciation of humor presupposes that the humor has been recognized and understood. The study of failed humor shows that humor may fail at each of these levels. For example, a speaker may recognize the intention to be humorous but not understand the joke (Bell, 2015).

Moreover, humor often creates an in-group vs. out-group division. For example Haugh and Bousfield (2012) found that *jocular mockery* (humorous teasing) created solidarity by building an in-group of friends: one could not mock a stranger without risking serious of-

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fence, hence if A mocks B, A and B must be friends. Plester and Sayers (2007) find the same dynamic on the workplace, where employees of an IT company bonded over humor touching on taboo and sensitive topics. Everts (2003) documents the use of aggressive humor to create solidarity within a family. See Haugh (2017) for an overview on teasing.

Within the workplace, the issue of connections between humor and power becomes very significant. Humor "cuts both ways" when it comes to relationships with a clear power differential. It can be used to reinforce and uphold the power imbalance (e.g., employees laughing at the boss' jokes) or simply to "get things done," or it can be used in a "subversive" fashion to challenge authority and undermine it (Schnurr & Plester, 2017).

Crucially, humor may function as a tool to challenge authority because of one of its features, namely retractability. Essentially, this consists of the ability to discount one's remarks as having been uttered non-seriously ("just kidding"). This option is called *decommitment* (Attardo, 1994, p. 325–326; Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi,1977) and provides the opportunity to test behavior that might be socially or interactionally "risky" (Emerson, 1969). For example, Walle (1976) reports that customers trying to pick up waitresses in a bar couched the request in humorous terms, to avoid embarrassment if they were turned down.

The relationship between humor and politeness is also an interesting issue. Early approaches (Brown & Levinson, 1978) saw humor as a face-saving strategy. More recent work (e.g., Culpeper, 2005) shows that both humor and impoliteness violate social norms. For a discussion of the connection between humor and politeness, see Simpson and Bousfield (2017) and references therein.

Initially, researchers focused almost exclusively on the affiliative aspects of humor, but subsequent research (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997; Priego-Valverde, 2003) was extended to include the disaffiliative aspects as well. Failed humor is another example of a topic long ignored by discourse and conversation analysis but that has undergone a recent efflorescence of research, summarized in Bell (2015). Failed humor presents an obvious difficulty to conversation and discourse analysts, since by definition it cannot be identified by the presence of laughter or smiling. Despite these problems, methodologically, failed humor is crucial because analyzing only successful humor would arbitrarily restrict the landscape of humorous interactions only to those that succeed. Bell shows that the reactions to failed humor range significantly, from ignoring the event to strong criticism. Causes of failure range across the communicative gamut and can be likened to misunderstandings.

3.2.1.2 Corpus-Assisted Approaches

In recent years, corpus linguistics has had a renaissance, which has been reflected, to some extent, in the linguistics of humor. Several of the studies on the social functions of humor, reviewed in Section 3.2.1.1, rely on (very small) corpora of a few conversations. However, in the case of Holmes' Language in the Workplace study, a reasonably sized corpus of conversations was created and utilized for the project. Other research, based on

corpora created not directly for the purpose of studying humor, include Günther (2003), based on the British National Corpus, the Corpus of American and British Office Talk (ABOT; Koester, 2006, 2010), and Chafe (2007), which uses the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (about 250,000 words). Nesi (2012) examines laughter in lectures within the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) and in the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus. She finds significant differences in frequency of laughter among lectures.

Corpora offer the advantage of allowing the researcher to make generalizations based on relative frequencies. However, these sorts of conclusions are warranted only insofar as the corpus is representative of the population that one wishes to generalize to. Obviously, size tends to be a good predictor of validity in this sense. Limitations of size may be overcome by using a balanced corpus. Some of the results that have emerged from these studies have significantly challenged the status quo of humor research in some areas. For example, Holmes found that: "the overall amount of humour produced by the women is greater than that produced by the men" (Holmes, 2001, p. 93). Likewise, Günther finds that women laugh more, but do not support humor more, and that there is no difference in the number of canned jokes they tell. These results are antithetical to previous studies on gender and humor, which assigned women a passive role in humor production and reception (see below). Other results, such as that single-sex settings are more conducive to humor, are not novel, but they receive statistical confirmation.

Partington (2006) sidesteps the issue of identifying humor by focusing on *laughter talk*, defined as speech adjacent to or interspersed by laughter. He uses a corpus of White House briefings. He finds that speakers at the briefings need to project both competence and congeniality. He finds that talk that leads to laughter tends to be performed with those purposes in mind (Partington, 2006, pp. 97–98). A new approach to stylistics includes the use of corpora (Partington, Duguid, & Taylor, 2013). Partington et al. (2013) find that Wodehouse's humorous style can be differentiated from other non-humorous samples, and that some stylistic traits typical to the author emerge: for example, the mixture of formal and colloquial style and the use of hyperbole.

Finally, a progressive broadening of corpora to include audiovisual data and multimodal analyses can be noted. Obviously, technological progress has lowered the price-point of audio and video recording devices and storage media, so that increasingly scholars can afford to build multimodal corpora. This trend has manifested itself in humor research in the beginning of corpus-assisted multimodal studies (Attardo, Eisterhold, Hay, & Poggi, 2003; Attardo, Pickering, & Baker, 2011; Attardo, Pickering, Lomotey, & Menjo, 2013; Feyaerts, 2013; Feyaerts, Brône, & Oben, 2017; Pickering, Corduas, Eisterhold, Seifried, Eggleston, & Attardo, 2009).

The results of studies on the multimodal aspects of humor have been rather unexpected. Whereas a considerable literature predicted that humor should be marked in discourse (see a review in Attardo & Pickering, 2011), the analysis of elicited canned jokes and of naturalistic conversations shows that speakers do not mark prosodically punch lines or

jab lines at all, neither by higher pitch or volume, nor by pauses or slower/faster speech rate. Laughter does not reliably occur near humor: in one conversation, analyzed in Attardo et al. (2011), laughter occurred in only 5 out of 26 possible instances. Conversely, early results seem to show that an increase in smiling intensity correlates with the presence of humor (Gironzetti, 2017).

3.2.2 Variationist Approaches

The research on variation in humor is uneven. Some areas, such as gender differences, have attracted significant research, whereas other areas, such as ethnicity, age, class, national differences, etc. have seen considerably less work. On gender differences, see Crawford (2003) and Kotthoff (2006), who present a synthesis of work focusing on gender differences. Martin (2014), in an authoritative review of the psychological literature, concludes that the similarities outweigh the differences. The recent corpus-assisted work reviewed above seems to indicate that a re-evaluation of the field is overdue. Finally, Davies (2017) presents an exhaustive review of variationist research on humor in language.

3.3 Methodological Issues

The increased use of corpora in discourse analysis has raised some methodological and theoretical issues that had been heretofore relegated to the background. These issues are addressed below.

3.3.1. Identification of Humor

As long as researchers used participant observer data, such as Tannen's (1984) famous Thanksgiving conversation, they could reasonably claim expertise on which parts of the conversations were humorous, since they were part of the in-group to whom the humor was addressed. However, when researchers start using corpora that have not been collected with humor research in mind and to which they have no special affinity, determining which parts are humorous becomes a significant issue. De facto, the presence of laughter was taken as the criterion for the presence of humor. However, it is a well-established fact that laughter and humor are not coextensive, and that the use of laughter as the sole criterion will lead both to false positives (laughter when there is no humor) and false negatives (missed humor). Within conversation analysis, some have attempted to sidestep the issue by using the term *laughable* (Glenn, 2003) and by completely omitting *humor* as a category. However, the existence of phenomena such as failed humor requires that the intentionality of the speakers be taken into account (for something to "fail" someone must have been trying to do it).

A better approach is taken by Holmes (2000, p. 163), who defines humor as "utterances which are identified by the analyst, on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants." Holmes acknowledges that this definition still fails to account for failed humor. Attardo (2012) has suggested adding the insights of theoretical models such as the GTVH, which can account for the presence of unacknowledged or undetected humor in an exchange by identifying an incongruity or a violation of the cooperative prin-

ciple. By triangulating with all the available contextual information described by Holmes, plus the semantic and pragmatic information of the GTVH, plus any metalinguistic cues in the text, it becomes relatively easy to identify the presence of the humor, regardless of its having been reacted to or acknowledged by the participants. The use of the semantic and pragmatic cues is also useful to resolve problematic cases in which the paralinguistic and contextual cues are ambiguous.

3.3.2. Keying of Humor

It is a widespread idea that the participants of a humorous exchange, will frame (Goffman, 1974, pp. 43–44) or key (Hymes, 1972, p. 62) a situation, conversation, etc. as humorous (e.g., Hay, 2000; Norrick, 1993). The concept is problematic, for several reasons. First, it is obvious that keying or framing and humor are independent. One can produce un-keyed or un-framed humor: the popular term for this is "deadpan humor." Moreover, serious content may be keyed or framed for play (for example, *Sesame Street* educational songs). Furthermore, a situation may be keyed or framed a posteriori for humor, in that, after the occurrence of otherwise un-framed and un-keyed humor that is recognized and accepted by the participants, the situation may become keyed or framed for humor. However, it is obvious that the detection, recognition, and acceptance of the first instance of humor were not helped by the keying and framing that occurred *after* the fact.

The mechanisms of keying and framing are almost entirely unexplored, beyond vague references to "tone of voice," particularly in reference to irony and sarcasm, and the above-mentioned use of laughter as a tool to invite laughter. The studies listed above, about multimodal markers of humor, as well as studies on multimodal markers of irony (Burgers & van Mulken, 2017) will probably address at least some of these issues.

Links to Digital Materials

International Society for Humor Studies.

HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Studies.

Freely available corpora cited in the text:

Language in the Workplace.

Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English.

British National Corpus.

Further Reading

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date: 15 July 2019