
Salvatore Attardo is a name linked to humor studies. He has put forward the well-known General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) with Victor Raskin (Attardo & Raskin 1991) and authored a number of articles and monographs on the linguistic studies of humor. He presents us with a new book in 2020. Readers may be curious as to how this book differs from the author’s earlier contributions to humor studies given that he has produced a sizable body of work on the subject. According to Attardo, “this is the first book on the linguistics of humor that attempts an integrated approach encompassing all the fields of linguistics, both theoretical and applied, on an equal footing” (xiv). Prioritizing comprehensiveness over depth, this book is primarily for an advanced undergraduate course or a graduate seminar on humor. It is also meant for scholars with limited familiarity with linguistics, who are interested in the contribution of linguistics to humor studies (idem).

1 Lessons on the Language of Humor

The working title of this book was “Lessons on the language of humor” (xiii). Its organization and content are therefore designed to meet pedagogical goals. Chapter 1 introduces some necessary terminology and presents the field of humor studies. Chapter 2 offers methodological preliminaries. The basic linguistic methods and concepts are introduced first, followed by their embodiment in humor studies. Chomsky’s distinction between “competence” and “performance” is highlighted, in order to distinguish the essential factors and the accidental factors in humor.
The essential factors refer to the necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be funny, which are discussed in Chapters 3–9. The author describes the evolution of theories about humor production. The three primary theories of humor – i.e., incongruity, hostility, and release theories – the Semantic-Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) (Raskin, 1985), and the GTVH are thoroughly discussed in Chapters 3, 5, and 7. The key concepts in humor theories are all clarified. For instance, the author presents the development and possible misinterpretation of “resolution” in the incongruity-resolution model and points out that not all humor has a resolution. Readers can thus grasp this concept accurately at the outset and avoid detours. A “case study” is provided in Chapter 9, illustrating how linguistic theories and methods are used to investigate puns, a common kind of verbal humor. The accidental factors, namely how speakers perform humor, are covered in Chapters 10–13. Readers can find what linguistic devices have been used and can be used to analyze the performance of humor. In this book, Attardo proposes that GTVH, claimed to be a theory of competence by Attardo (2001), can also contribute to a theory of the performance of humor. In addition to his own research, Attardo also presents three proposals of other scholars to expand GTVH to deal with the performance of humor.

Chapters 14–16 deal with humor in literature, translation, and teaching. The topics chosen are perfectly appropriate given the overall trend in linguistics to combine linguistics with literature, linguistics with translation, and theoretical linguistics with applied linguistics. These three chapters exemplify how linguistic studies of humor can be applied to various research areas, allowing readers to choose topics that need further study. And finally, while the empirical studies presented in Chapter 16 argue that using humor during teaching will not lead to massive improvements in learning and retention of new information, readers can still find witty expressions in this book. Reading it is similar to being in a live class, where the teacher occasionally shares humorous personal anecdotes. This may improve the students’ perception of the learning experience (idem).

2 Presentation of the Contribution of Linguistics to Humor Studies

Three areas of this book can provide significant information for scholars interested in the contribution of linguistics to humor studies: humor studies in various linguistics branches; humor studies with various methodologies; and applications of the linguistics of humor.

This book presents attempts to study humor from the perspectives of semiotic, semantic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistics. The “semantics of humor” is
given a well-deserved priority because the most influential theories – SSTH, which develops GTVH, and the incongruity-resolution model – are much closer to the semantics. However, it is noted that even SSTH does not exclude a pragmatic component, since “humor competence is primarily semantic and pragmatic”. (p. 197) In “pragmatics of humor” (Ch. 8), the speech act theory and Grice’s maxims are brought into the analysis of humor production. However, as a pragmatic-cognitive theory, the Relevance Theory (RT) is not discussed in this chapter. The reason for this could be that this book will subsequently describe RT’s approach to humor translation or that RT’s account for the production of humor (represented by Yus 2003) is closely tied to the incongruity-resolution model. From the semiotic perspective, a humorous text is a connotative semiotic, connoting solely “humor” beyond the primary meaning of the signs used in the text. The “defunctionalization” of the signs explains in turn all the pragmatic uses of humor. The sociolinguistics approach demonstrates how factors like gender, age, socioeconomic class, and dialectal repertoire influence humor performance. Without a doubt, readers will obtain a thorough understanding of linguistics’ contribution to humor studies based on these presentations.

Apart from the theories of humor production, this book also discusses various methods applied to humor studies, such as conversational analysis, discourse analysis, corpus-based analysis, the empirical method, and the ethnomethodological method. This can bring insight to scholars with limited familiarity with linguistics as well as linguistic researchers who investigate humor. Additionally, despite the fact that the author has already written a book on GTVH (Cf. Attardo 2001), a thorough explanation of this theory is still necessary. Dealing with how narrative texts longer than jokes function as humorous texts, GTVH can account for humor in literature and translation. The “humor in literature” (Ch. 14) discusses linguistic-based approaches to analyze humor in literature rather than literary criticism of humorous literature. GTVH offers a compelling system – with jab line, comb, bridge, and other innovative concepts – to account for humor in novels, which do not necessarily end in a punch line and incorporate more than one script opposition. The contributions of other linguistic approaches are also explored. These approaches are different from literature-based approaches in that they do not rely on researchers’ intuition to determine the humorousness of the text. Unlike humor in literature, “humor in translation” (Ch. 15) is a topic of interest to both translation and linguistic researchers. The author first outlines five approaches borrowed from the studies of translation, including faithfulness, dynamic or functional equivalence, skopos theory, etc., and then presents the linguistic approach of RT. GTVH as a tool to test the faithfulness of the translation is
only briefly mentioned. However, as Attardo (2002) demonstrates, GTVH is well adapted to studying the translation of humor. I would suggest that readers study more about how GTVH is used to analyze humor translation because, in comparison with other approaches to humor translation, GTVH gives the characteristics of humor the most consideration. Chapter 15 also discusses the translatability of puns and the practice of translating puns, which corresponds to the earlier discussion of the properties of puns as verbal humor.

Despite having substantial information, the reader benefits from the material’s cyclical presentation: A topic can be first approached in a general context and then resurfaces repeatedly. The author also notes which previous chapters have mentioned this topic, and which later chapters will address it again. Thus, readers can form an overall impression of a subject or notion. Each chapter concludes with a list of further readings for readers interested in further exploring the topic.

### 3 Other Possible Inspirations

Along with a thorough analysis of the literature, the author highlights some aspects of humor studies that have received little attention, such as the “temporal linearity” of identifying and resolving incongruity, humor’s connection with the implicit of a text (as implicatures and presuppositions), and the distinction between verbalized humor and verbal humor. He also introduces several insightful French-language studies on humor, which are read far less frequently by English-speaking scholars. Linguistic researchers that investigate humor can reflect on their own research and gain new insights from this book.

For RT’s account of humor, for example, I took some inspiration from this work. First, the distinction between “jab line” and “punch line” implies different inferencing processes of the speaker’s informative intention. Without a clear punchline, jab lines are scattered throughout referential humor, humorous irony, and certain humorous narratives. In such a case, both the scripts and resolution are presented more or less explicitly. As a result, there is less processing effort required to identify and resolve “incongruity” than there would be in a joke. However, since incongruity is not in the “central position” that draws the most attention from the addressees, the cognitive effects (i.e., humor) would likewise be less (Zuo 2020, 10). Second, the author asserts that “all humor is intentional” (p. 170). The “unintended humor” (e.g., ambiguous utterances and slips of tongues) is produced because the hearer intentionally misreads it as being funny. This may be different from RT’s viewpoint. According to RT, the hearer’s inference of the speaker’s intention results from
the natural, biologically rooted cognitive mechanism of pursuing relevance. By processing the accidentally created incongruity in their instinctive pursuit of relevance, the hearers infer that the speaker has the intention to be funny. There is no conscious control over this process. The hearers will quickly discover, after taking the context into consideration, that the speaker did not intend to produce humor, albeit by this point the humorous effects may have been produced. Third, some examples are interesting. For instance, there is a joke in Chapter 2 that might be summarized as “a man prays to God ‘dear Lord, please make me win the lottery’. After hearing this request several times, God ultimately responds ‘would you kindly go and buy a lottery ticket?’” (p. 35). In presenting the principle of commutation, the author speculates that humor in this example would disappear when “God” is changed to “Buddha”, because “Buddhism does not believe in a personal god” and “there is no tradition of asking the Buddha for personal gifts” (idem). As a Chinese reader, I do not find this joke less funny when “God” is substituted with “Buddha”. After all, people in China pray to Buddha for good health, wealth, safety, happiness, and so on. However, I am not sure if it holds true in other cultural contexts. This example offers evidence that individuals’ cognitive environment (including cultural context) plays an important role in the appreciation of humor.

In conclusion, Attardo successfully anticipates what target audiences want to know, what questions they may have, and what narrative style is optimal for them to understand the linguistics of humor. The target audience will surely benefit from this outstanding work. As for other readers, “inspiration exists, but it has to find you working”. Reading this book while reflecting on one’s own research, linguistic researchers studying humor can get insightful information.

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References


