

Book review

**Ford, Thomas E., Wladyslaw Chlopicki and Giseline Kuipers (Eds.) (2024).
De Gruyter Handbook of Humor Studies. De Gruyter.**

A psychologist, a linguist and a sociologist met up and edited one of the most convincing and up-to-date handbooks on Humour Studies. The core ingredient of such a valuable work lies in the balance between plurality and unity, which is the underlying aim described in the preface of the book. On the one hand, an extensive number of experts have written the 33 chapters plus postscript and preface. Fifty-seven contributors have explored an array of scientific approaches to humour and contexts, with each chapter referring to many bibliographical sources (on average almost 68 per contribution) to satisfy the curiosity of any reader, who would like to look further into the topic. On the other hand, this polyphony is harmonised through echoic cross-references among the chapters - proving that humour is an inter-and-multi-disciplinary topic – and through the fine-tuning of each chapter to a homogeneous length and structure. Each chapter opens with a summary of the state of the art, which usually takes the form of a mini review, continues with a focus on interdisciplinary connections, and ends with a view on new avenues for research. The resulting symphony lasts 636 pages and unfolds into two parts, namely “Essence of humour: What makes something funny?” and “The functions of humour: How do people experience, perform and share humour?”, each with three sections.

The question raised by the first part of the book, “What makes something funny?”, is approached from three perspectives: psychological processes (Section 1), text properties (Section 2), and social and cultural contexts (Section 3). Section 1 opens with Chapter 1 (“Psychological approaches to humour: The interaction of cognition and motivation”) by Thomas E. Ford and Julie Woodzicka, who explore the psychological processes involved in humour understanding by focusing on the interplay between motivation and cognition. The authors provide an overview of the classic motivation theories of humour and on the early cognitive approaches to incongruity perception, which is a key ingredient for the understanding of humour. They then focus on contemporary models that reconceptualized the perception of a humorous incongruity in the light of an integration between motivation and cognition. New avenues for humour research are outlined, bearing in mind that thoughts and affective reactions are driven by the motivation, i.e. the psychological need, aroused by the situation.

Another ingredient that makes something funny is sense of humour, as pointed out by Sonja Heintz in Chapter 2 (“Personality approaches: Beyond the ‘sense of humour’”), where several models that approach and assess sense of humour are described. These include the conceptualisation of humour as a character of strengths within the framework of Positive Psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and the 8 comic styles assessed by the “Comic Style Markers” (Ruch et al., 2018), which stand out as the most comprehensive ones. Chapter 3 (“Evolutionary approaches to humour: Critical review and new advances”) by Gil Greengross and Aaron Kozbelt, investigates the evolutionary basis of humour. Evidence supporting the explanation of humour according to the natural and sexual selection theories and alternative theories is provided and discussed. The first section ends with Chapter 4 (“The neuroscience of humour”) by Yu-Chen Chan. The author investigates psychological processes of humour from

the neuroscientific perspective, which encompasses the cognitive experience of humour comprehension, the affective experience via appreciation and the behavioural experience in laughing. Moreover, the author provides an overview of studies on neural correlations regarding the threefold experience of humour and creativity, and also points to humour applications in educational and clinical settings as increasing avenues of research.

The second section of the first part of the book revolves around text structure. Producing humorous texts through computational models anchors to text structure, as pointed out in Chapter 5 (“Computational humour models and applications”) by Christian F. Hempelmann and Max Petrenko. The authors discuss deductive and inductive computational approaches to humour, namely knowledge-based humour models (derived from theories and research on humour) and machine learning models (based on corpora of texts classified as humorous). Hints for future research directions take into account the recent debate on AI in generating humorous texts.

Whether they are produced by machines or by humans, humorous texts are shaped by incongruity, as discussed by Salvatore Attardo, Władysław Chłopicki and Giovannantonio Forabosco in Chapter 6 (“The role of incongruity in humorous texts”). The authors provide a historical exploration of what today is referred to as *humorous incongruity*. They summarise the debate around its necessity and its connection to resolution, and focus on the sociocultural interpretation of incongruity. Suggestions for interdisciplinary directions of research encompass eye-tracking, neurology, computational linguistics, and discourse analysis.

In the wake of interdisciplinarity, Chapter 7 (“Cognitive approaches to humour: Linguistic, developmental, and affective science considerations”), by Sylwia Klos and Andrea C. Samson, focuses on the cognitive and affective impact on humour understanding and appreciation. The authors explore different aspects of humorous interpretation and production, such as developmental acquisition, frame-shifting and conceptual blending (Coulson, 2001) and their further elaborations. Moreover, the affective and emotional sphere is focused on, within the framework of Positive Psychology, as humour is an emotion regulator and a coping strategy.

The second section of the first part of the book ends with a chapter (“Humour and figurative language”) by Alberto Godioli and Władysław Chłopicki, who explore the intersections between figurative language and humour from a linguistic and semiotic point of view. The authors elaborated on the classification provided by Group μ 's General Rhetoric (Dubois et al., 1970) and produced a broader distinction between “figures of language” and “figures of meaning” (p. 146), under which they analyse different kinds of figurative humorous language, such as wordplay, puns, irony and humorous metaphors. They also integrate their analysis with the concepts of local logic (Ziv, 1984), the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo & Raskin, 1991) and the Optimal Innovation Hypothesis (Giora, 2003), among others. New avenues for research are suggested, ranging from deepening the logical mechanism and considering non-verbal humour to taking into account psychological and sociological aspects.

The third section of the first part of the book raises the question on how social relations and culture shape humour. As pointed out by Nancy Bell and Martin Lampert in Chapter 9 (“Failed humour”) failed humour, broadly defined here as non-appreciation of a humorous attempt, is a possible result of socio-cultural impact on humorous communication. The overview of the studies on this topic show that different reasons lie behind failed humour and that this is a topic less studied than humour appreciation, in particular in naturally occurring conversations. In the provided summary of initial research on failed humour, the reader would probably expect to find a reference to the pioneering work in this field by Drew (1987), who used Conversation Analysis to analyse po-faced receipts to teases defined as “playful humorous jibes” (Drew, 1987, p. 219). The chapter explores how failed (and not failed) humour is important in discourse negotiation and identity construction and ends with interesting connections with psychology,

such as psychological distance as a key variable in failed (but also appreciated) humour (McGraw et al., 2012) and reflections on in-or-out-group dynamics via failed or appreciated humour. Despite these suitable reasonings on the contribution from psychology, the authors state that psychology is a discipline “where failure of humour has been neglected” (p. 165). However, the psychological construct of *gelotophobia* (i.e., the fear of being laughed at; see e.g., Ruch & Proyer, 2008), not referred to in the chapter, has given an important contribution to the field of failed humour in a specific way. In fact, the mass of studies on gelotophobia describes a psychological attitude that leaves no space for enjoyment and appreciation of humorous attempts, to the point that the most genuine ones are doomed to fail.

The impact of cultural aspects on humour is the key concept of the last three chapters of the third section. Jessica Milner Davies and Anastasiya Fiadotava (Chapter 10, “Humour and culture”) approach the issue from different angles and point out that studies on the topic have been investigating from an Anglocentric point of view, whereas understanding of how specific cultural aspects impact on humour communication and emotional reactions is required in a globalised world. Translation can be considered a bridge between cultures and in doing this, translation faces cultural complexity and heterogeneity, as highlighted by Delia Chiaro in Chapter 11 (“Humour and translation: Cultural implications”) with the analysis of cultural humorous examples. The chapter ends with a reflection on computer-assisted translation tools, the new frontiers in the field, and suggestions for interdisciplinary connections with computer sciences, multimodal communication, cognitive translation studies and consumer studies. The section ends with Chapter 12 (“Cultural analysis of racial and ethnic humour”) by Raúl Pérez Pérez and Giseline Kuipers on racial and ethnic humour analysed from a cultural point of view. The authors provide an overview on studies based on in-group and out-group dynamics, and advance a new perspective on cultural analysis by focusing on the impact of ethnic and racial humour on social debates and conflicts in the US and in the Netherlands.

The second part of the book is titled “The functions of humour: How do people experience, perform and share humour?” and comprises three sections. The first and shortest section focuses on psychological processes. Chapter 13 (“Effect of humour on cognition”), by Ching-Hui Chen, Hsueh-Chih Chen, and Thomas E. Ford, explores the functional effects of humour on memory and creativity. Humour impacts positively on memory in the sense that information delivered in a humorous manner is retrieved easier than information delivered in a serious manner, as humour comprehension is more cognitively demanding. Moreover, studies show that humour production and comprehension correlate with creativity and divergent thinking, also in relation to the induction of positive affect. Interesting applications of cognitive effects of humour on persuasive communication, teaching and learning, and clinical settings end the chapter.

Maybe the most evident function of humour is amusement, the positive side of humour appreciation. In Chapter 14 (“Humour appreciation across lifespan”), Paavo Kerkkänen and Bruce Findlay explore this acknowledged topic from an unusual perspective, namely ontogeny. The authors point out how humour appreciation changes across the lifespan, which types of humorous stimuli are more or less appreciated depending on age, and that more longitudinal and interdisciplinary studies on the topic are needed. The last chapter of the section (“Humour, health, and well-being: Is humour really good for us?”), by Ilona Papousek, revolves around positive functions of humour, in terms of its effects on health and well-being. The author summarises and discusses studies on the effect of benign humour production or reception on psychological and physical well-being and she concludes that there is more evidence on positive effects of humour on psychological than physical well-being.

The second section of the second part of the book approaches the issue of contextual factors. Chapter 16 (“The sociopragmatics of humour”), by Villy Tsakona and Jan Chovanec, focuses on the general sociopragmatic aspects of humour, which is considered as a contextually

grounded phenomenon. Recent models elaborated to capture contextual parameters from a sociopragmatic perspective are explained, and interdisciplinary connections with translation studies are proposed. Following the line of pragmatics, Chapter 17 (“Conversational humour”), by Michael Haugh and Béatrice Priego-Valverde, overviews Conversation Analysis-based studies on humour interactions and provides an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon which has been little studied so far, namely joint fantasising in conversation. The last two chapters of the section explore old and new genres of humour, respectively satire and parody (Chapter 18 “Satire and parody”, by João Capelotti) and humour in social media (Chapter 19 “New forms and genres of humour in social media”, by Liisi Laineste and Ksenia Shilikhina), which are found to be strongly intertwined.

The last section of the book is the longest one, with its 14 chapters, and is titled “Broader social context: How does humour function in social relations and culture”. The main question is approached from different angles. Generally speaking, humour has light and dark sides. Such duality is approached in Chapter 20 (“Humour as a double-edged sword: Uniting and dividing in social interaction”) by John C. Meyer, who conceptualises humorous functions as a continuum from unifying to dividing groups and individuals, depending on its affiliative versus aggressive types of humour. In its positive side, humour serves many psycho-social functions, such as reducing uncertainty and enhancing problem-solving activities, whereas in its negative side it is a disparaging tool useful for attacking others but also for reifying group norms. Practical jokes are a good example of the multifaced humorous functions, ranging from play to power, in social domains, as analysed by Moira Marsh and Gary Alan Fine in Chapter 30 (“Play or power: The social significance of the practical joke”).

In its positive function, humour appreciation and production serve to initiate romantic relationships, as outlined by Jeffrey A. Hall and Betty H. La France in Chapter 21 (“The role of humour in initiating romantic relationships”). This issue is woven together with that of gender and humour (and laughter), on which Helga Kotthoff provides an updated overview in Chapter 22 (“Gender and humour: The new state of the art”), by considering humour as a double-edged sword in conversations and in the workplace. The positive functions of humour are explored in Chapter 28 (“The art and efficacy of clowning”) by Alberto Dionigi, who explores artistic and efficacy of clowning on children, adults, and elderly patients’ psychological wellbeing in a healthcare setting. As already cited above, in its positive functions, humour has been led back to the character of strength of transcendence within the framework of Positive Psychology.

Chapter 33 (“Humourless or humour-friendly religion? Psychological theory and research”) by Vassilis Saroglou provides a sharp analysis of humour and religion as two expressions of transcendence and it concludes that both enhance positive emotions, serve as coping strategies and positive reframing. Intersections between humour and religion are also explored by Bernard Schweizer in Chapter 32 (“Humour in religious contexts: An overview”), where the author shows how the early antinomy between the two domains of transcendence, traced by previous research, has been surpassed by a more dialectic dynamic. Moreover, the chapter focuses on how humour intersects with Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism. Besides religion, humour pervades many cultural dimensions, such as politics. Chapters 26 (“Political humour”) by Jody C. Baumgartner approaches the issue in terms of political comedy and political satire and argues on how they influence political attitudes, beliefs, and engagement.

The dark side of humour is the focus of Chapter 24 (“Disparagement humour and subversion”), by Donald A. Saucier, Tiffany J. Lawless, Stuart S. Miller, Svyatoslav ‘Slava’ Prokhorets, who review and discuss empirical research on disparagement humour, also in its subversive and offensive functions. The chapter provides reflections on the offensive power of humour and on the topics on which humour risks being offensive. Among these, Chapter 23 (“Ethnic humour across cultures: Prevalence and appeal”) by Aleksandar Takovski analyses

how humour may result offensive when an ethnic group is targeted, as it displays aggression and disparagement, and, at the same time, it helps maintaining boundaries between groups. The author underlines how new technology and computer-mediated communication amplify these functions of negative humour. New and old technologies have the function of resonating humorous contents and popular culture, as outlined by Eric Weitz and Dorota Brzozowska in Chapter 25 (“Humour in media and popular culture”). The authors trace the evolution of humorous media along the centuries, from puppet shows to newspaper comic strips and television series, and point out how they have been displaying popular culture. Esther Linares-Bernabéu and Leonor Ruiz-Gurillo approach stand-up comedy as a cultural product and a humorous genre in Chapter 27 (“Culture and comedy: Stand-up across cultures”). Its connections with cultural identity and mood are highlighted both in western and eastern culture, and the authors conclude that stand-up comedy is a cultural product, whose functions are anchored to pragmatic strategies.

The dialectic between the risk of offending someone via humour and the right to laugh at everything is an ethical issue, as outlined by Sharon Lockyer and Simon Weaver in Chapter 31 (“The ethics of humour and comedy”). The authors applied five ethical theories of humour and comedy to the stand-up show “Nanette”, performed by Hannah Gadsby, a paradoxical case where self-deprecating humour is harmful for the comedian, and the category of people she represents, and amusing for the audience. The comedian’s point of view is also explored in Chapter 29 (“The dark side of stand-up comedy”, by Eric Shouse and Patrice A. Oppliger, who unfold the dark side of stand-up comedians in terms of personal tragedy, addiction, or mental illness. As an example, they also investigate the controversial situation of the comedian Hannah Gadsby.

Finally, a postscript (“Humour: Universality, genealogy, and concept formation”) by Conal Condren ends the book with reflections on humour as a universal human aspect and points of connections and divergence between laughter and humour.

In conclusion, the book is comprehensive of multifaced aspects of humour, as the length of this review confirms. The chapters devoted to clowning, satire, parody, caricature, and stand-up comedy provide a glimpse of the understudied connection between humour and art. The link between the two domains remains in the background throughout the book, probably mirroring the fact that scientific research on this connection, though well practiced by performers and humourists, has so far been a poorly beaten path. This could be an interesting aspect to explore further.

Scholars as well as students of humour studies will surely benefit from reading the handbook and having it on hand, both for updating and extending one’s knowledge on diverse aspects of humour from multi-and-inter-disciplinary perspectives.

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