

Explorations in Humor Studies

Explorations in Humor Studies:

Humor Research Project

Edited by

Marcin Kuczok, Anna Stwora
and Mariola Świerkot

Language Editor Taylor Breckles

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-4208-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4208-2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I	1
Introduction to <i>Explorations in Humor Studies: Humor Research Project</i> <i>Marcin Kuczok, Anna Stwora, and Mariola Świerkot</i>	
Chapter II.....	16
Culture and Comedy Among Disney Deuteragonists: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Humour in <i>Mulan</i> <i>Taylor Breckles</i>	
Chapter III	31
Analysis of Humour Translation from Chinese to Polish in <i>Balzac</i> <i>and the Little Chinese Seamstress</i> <i>Izabella Drozd</i>	
Chapter IV	50
“Hey, why aren’t you laughing? ‘At the same time’ and ‘colleagues’... Do you get it?!”: The Understanding of Chinese Word-Play by Polish Students <i>Katarzyna Knoll</i>	
Chapter V	62
“Who put the sword in the stone in the first place?” – Humor in Subverted Tropes in Terry Pratchett’s <i>Discworld</i> Series <i>Mariola Świerkot</i>	
Chapter VI.....	78
The Dangers of Ethnic Humor – The Curious Case of Irish Stereotyping <i>Małgorzata Furgacz</i>	
Chapter VII.....	98
“If we don’t have a sense of humor, we lack a sense of perspective”: Hi/story of Humor in Visual Arts <i>Małgorzata Wronka</i>	

Chapter VIII	117
Types of Comic and Stereotypes in Ion Luca Caragiale's Play <i>A Stormy Night</i> <i>Irina Vrabie</i>	
Chapter IX	129
The Thin Invisible Line – Between Funny and Distasteful Multimodal Advertising Discourse <i>Anna Stwora</i>	
Chapter X	152
Towards Enhancement, Distraction or Oblivion – Studying the Impact of Humorous Language in Advertising <i>Anna Stwora and Grzegorz Zemelka</i>	
Chapter XI	176
Understanding the Online Humour in the Example of American Political Cartoons <i>Beata Bury</i>	
Appendix A	190
Contributors	192

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO *EXPLORATIONS IN HUMOR STUDIES: HUMOR RESEARCH PROJECT*

MARCIN KUCZOK, ANNA STWORA,
AND MARIOLA ŚWIĘRKOT

The aim of this chapter is to present the contemporary approaches to humor found in linguistics, culture and literature studies, as well as media studies. The first part of this chapter focuses on the various theories of humor that dominate in contemporary language studies. Next, the problems related to studying humor from the perspective of culture and literature studies are presented. The subsequent section discusses the roles and functions of humor in the mass media. Finally, the chapter provides an overview of the studies included in the present volume.

Key terms: humor, linguistics, culture studies, media studies

1 Introduction

By way of introduction, it should be stated that humor, as such, is a broad term with many a definition, for it may refer to “(...) a feeling of amusement, a response of laughter, and a disposition to engage in a humorous or good-humored manner. Therefore, conceptually, humor can be viewed in the forms of a stimulus, response, or a disposition (Plester 2007)” (Kim and Plester 2014:2). However classified, it is always considered a part of a broader set of stimuli engaged in providing people with pleasure and enjoyment.

Wyer and Collins (1992), following Long and Graesser (1988), define a humor-eliciting stimulus as “a social or nonsocial event, occurring purposely or inadvertently, that is perceived to be amusing” (Wyer and Collins 1992:663). Though this definition is far broader than many might

accept, it points to the important understanding that humor is part of a constellation of message factors that might provoke pleasure, including music, fun people, cartoon characters, animals, children, an upbeat mood, surprise, warmth, and so on. An analysis of humor is incomplete without looking at the relative importance of this broader entertainment construct (Gulas and Weinberger 2006:95).

The entertaining factor *per se* is ubiquitous in human life and communication, permeating cultures and societies; it is an axiom that providing or being provided with enjoyment or amusement is what human beings crave, as well as that humor is universal and powerful a phenomenon of not only entertaining or communicative value, but also of the sociological and psychological one. Funny though it may be, humor is a serious issue because it is not only about levity; rather, it should be seen as a gate to human mind and soul, and, consequently, to the products of human culture. Given the abovementioned, the following paper is intended to shed some light at basic considerations related to humor and language, at the cultural aspect of humor, and, last but not least, at the panoply of research areas in contemporary humor studies. It will therefore serve as a useful introduction to the subsequent collection of papers that cover various topics oscillating around culture, language, literature, and media studies, with humor being an overarching thread.

2 Humor in language studies

Undoubtedly, language plays a very important role in creating and expressing humor. However, when trying to answer questions about how funniness and humor are related to language forms and linguistic interactions, linguists have managed to produce a number of different theories. Generally speaking, any type of investigation into humor from a linguistic standpoint can be classified as either essentialist or teleological in nature (Attardo 1994:1-2). Essentialist theories of humor aim to explain the essence of humor; that is, the sufficient conditions that must be fulfilled in order to understand something as humorous. Teleological theories focus on the goals of using humor and how its mechanisms are determined by those goals. Additionally, among the so-called metatheories of humor we can also list substantial theories whose aims are to identify the specific contents of humor, the modalities that influence humor, and its reception and development; however, the substantial theories are mainly employed in psychology and sociology. When it comes to approaches to humor in linguistic studies, it is possible to distinguish three main groups

of theories: incongruity theories, hostility theories, and release theories (Attardo 1994:46-50; Critchley 2002:2-3).

Incongruity theories, also called contrast theories, were initially proposed by Immanuel Kant, the outstanding German philosopher from the Age of Enlightenment, who claimed that “laughter is an affection arising from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Morreall 1987:47). Arthur Schopenhauer, another German philosopher who strongly influenced Western thought, expanded the theories by defining humor as an incongruity between a concept and real objects that have been thought through that concept (Morreall 1987:47-52). Salvatore Attardo (1994:48), a leading scholar investigating the linguistics of humor, proposed that since incongruity theories of humor focus on the discrepancies between concepts, they can be also perceived as cognitive theories. This is often applied to the analysis of verbal humor because, when observing people’s communication, there is evidence of conversational joking – including puns, banter, and wordplay – as well as personal anecdotes and canned jokes (Norrick 2006:425). When analyzing those humorous language features, it is possible to identify a conceptual incongruity in the clash between semantic scripts – certain cognitive structures internalized by the speaker – which provide information about how things are organized or done, which structures joking (Raskin 1985). For instance, in the joke: “A panhandler came up to me today and said he hadn’t had a bite in weeks, so I bit him,” the phrase “had a bite” belongs structurally to the build-up and functions as the script-switch trigger, the unit around which the joke’s dual meaning is constructed. The clash can be seen in the buildup, a panhandler seeking help from a passer-by, which disappears in the punchline, wherein a backgrounded script emerges, with the passer-by becoming the attacker and the panhandler becoming the victim (Norrick 2006:425).

The second group of theories, hostility theories, also appears in the literature as aggressive, disparagement, superiority, triumph, and derision theories. Attardo (1994:49-50) points to two famous Greek philosophers, Aristotle and Plato, as the pioneers of these theories, saying that the two agreed that humor has an aggressive aspect to its functionality. A similar view was presented by Thomas Hobbes, a 17th-century English philosopher, who argued that humor arises from the superiority of laughter towards some objects, also known as the superiority theory. The superiority theory of humor was also emphasized by Henri Bergson, a 20th-century French philosopher, who claimed that humor was a social corrective used by society to correct deviant behavior. This theory of humor is often used in sociolinguistics, which concentrates on the interpersonal relations between

language users. It is necessary to view joke telling, punning, and teasing in connection with context, gender, power, solidarity, and social distance, as well as the principles of politeness and cooperation, in order to understand how verbal humor can express aggression. It is worth noticing that, according to sociolinguistic findings, humor can function not only as a means for marking superiority, but also as a way of establishing rapport: joking allows people to show their affiliations and to align themselves with them. Additionally, conversational humor may revolve around the so-called inside jokes, shared only between group members who have the necessary background knowledge to understand the joke (Norrick 2006:425).

Finally, release theories – also called relief, sublimation, or liberation theories – present the idea that humor releases various psychic tensions and liberates people from inhibitions caused by laws and conventions. An important figure that supported such claims was Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, who suggested that the energy that is relieved in laughter gives people pleasure because it economizes on energy that would normally be used to repress psychic activity (Critchley 2002:3). In language studies, this theory is used to explain the nature of jokes and wordplay, which are said to liberate speakers from the rules governing language use (Attardo 1994:50). For instance, recurrent conversational situations call for formulaic witticisms like “Born in a barn?” said to someone who leaves a door open; typical joking strategies like hyperbole, “I had about a thousand books to return” said to emphasize that one simply has a lot of books to return to the library; or irony, “I love it when it sleets” said in order to express one’s annoyance with the weather (Norrick 2006:425).

3 Humor from the cultural standpoint

When analyzing humor in the contexts of literature and cultural practice, it is impossible to omit the role of the human condition. Even though the definition of humor as something “funny” is a relatively new phenomenon, the manifestations of humor as we know them today, such as laughter, smiling, and characteristic body language, have accompanied people since the dawn of humanity (Morreall 2009:29). The importance and validity of humor can be traced back to the earliest of human societies, when humor played an essential role in their survival. John Morreall describes some of the earliest functions of humor – and more specifically, the physiological manifestation of laughter – as a means of releasing energy that had been built up as a reaction to perceived danger. When the

danger turns out to be a false alarm, the pent-up energy changes from panic into relief and is often released as laughter (Morreall 2009:28-29), which demonstrates both the merits of relief theory and the fact that humor has been present as part of the human experience for many millennia.

The role of humor in more contemporary societies and their cultural practices is not to be underestimated either. Henry Jenkins, in his study of fan communities and their participatory culture, notes that “the use of humor contributes actively to the articulation of a group identity, the invocation of shared experiences, and the creation of common feelings” (Jenkins 1992:266). Thus, humor is deemed a factor that is crucial to building a sense of community and reinforcing social bonds between people, such as in fan communities (also known as fandoms), which originally often might have been formed only on the basis of a common interest in a particular literary or cultural text, but subsequently, according to Jenkins, would develop stronger and deeper bonds.

Just as humor can promote unity within societies, it can also mark discord, express hostility, and highlight conflict. Some examples of such types of humor are cartoons, caricatures, and forms of satire that, by using humor, underline the existing social divides between classes, ethnic groups, and other social categories, and can contribute to reinforcing negative stereotypes that already exist in the social consciousness. Such humor exhibits traits characteristic of the superiority theory: “in our competition with each other, we relish events that show ourselves to be winning, or others losing, and if our perception of our superiority comes over us quickly, we are likely to laugh” (Morreall 2009:6).

Being an integral part of the human experience, humor claims an important place in literature and art, which are both mirrors of the human condition. Sometimes straight, sometimes crooked, but always meaningful, by reflecting people and societies, art includes humor as it is defined by all three major theories: relief, superiority, and incongruity. Thus, all three can be included in theoretical and methodological frameworks for the analysis of literature and art. However, scholars throughout the years have found problems with each theory, and have consequently proposed numerous solutions to fill the methodological gaps to allow academics to treat humor in literature and art with all of the seriousness that it deserves.

One of the most significant problems faced by scholars while applying these three traditional theories is the number of stipulations they require to be applicable to humor (Farber 2007:68). Feelings of superiority are not exclusively expressed through humor, relief can result not only in laughter, and not everything incongruous is universally amusing. Jerry Farber

attempts to complete the incongruity theory – the one that many scholars have deemed the most useful in modern analyses of humor – by including the recipient in the process of creating the amusing effect; which is a factor not to be omitted or undervalued when analyzing art and literature. Farber claims that to complete the incongruity between two elements in a manner that creates amusement and evokes laughter, there must be a “link” rooted in the receiver’s perception of such incongruity, which subsequently must contain an element of play. The receiver’s satisfaction stems from dissolving the pre-conceived restriction between the incongruous elements and results in amusement or laughter (Farber 2007:69-71).

The element of play also appears in John Morreall’s approach to humor, as he claims that, in order to achieve amusement while perceiving a given situation, the recipient needs to enter the state of what Morreall refers to as “comic disengagement.” Morreall defines this concept in terms of freedom from emotional involvement in the situation (in particular from emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, etc.), which allows for emotional distance between the situation and the recipient and opens the door for amusement and laughter (Morreall 2009:52-53).

Humor in literature and cultural practices can be encountered in many forms; some of them conditional, such as any forms of satire, comedy, caricature, and the like. Its prevalence in society shows that, for recipients of art and literature, humor constitutes a factor that is significant, if not crucial, to their enjoyment. However, humor is also an indispensable tool for creators. The articles contained in this volume will explore diverse uses of humor employed by authors and artists, and the effects humor has on their audiences.

4 The humorous factor in media studies

Having taken a brief look at humor as it is seen through the lenses of linguistics, culture, and literature, one can proceed to the last research field to be touched upon here: media studies. Due to its entertaining power, humor is a particularly prolific phenomenon in mass media, especially in new media like the Internet. Its realizations can be found across various channels of communication thanks to the fact that, in this day and age, messages are expected not only to simply inform, but also to surprise, impress, evoke emotions, and provide enjoyment. In line with the three basic currents of humor theories, Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004), inspired by Berger’s writings from 1976 and 1993, identify as many as seven categories of humor in audiovisual media. Surprise, misunderstanding, and

clownish humour constitute the first triad that can be assigned to a larger category of incongruous mechanisms engendering humor; as far as superiority theory is concerned, it may encompass such techniques as irony, satire or parody, whereas relief theory is said to include slapstick, for example (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004:162-163). No humorous message is constrained to one category, however, and it is possible for one category to be explained by several theories simultaneously as they are not mutually exclusive.

Because of the fact that both traditional broadcast media, like television or radio, and new media are by their very nature short-lived and fleeting (Bové and Arens 1992; Kotler 2000), it is imperative for media content to stand out from the information clutter so as to reach increasingly demanding and jaded audiences more effectively (Gulas and Weinberger 2006). That is why humor is widely welcomed and appreciated in mass media, which in turn motivates researchers in the field of media studies to inspect the operation of humor in diverse channels more closely. Integrating various aspects of knowledge gained through the study of humor through linguistic and cultural paradigms, as well as drawing from the resources of culture, numerous scholars have been inspired to take humor in media more seriously and, as a result, treat it as an important and informational area of cultural and communication studies.

Media studies, as such, require a multimodal approach to the material being studied, which means that analyzing the content of mass media messages should involve looking at verbal, visual, and sometimes even auditory aspects to comprehend the message and arrive at the final, compound meaning. The use of multiple semiotic codes (Hoffmann 2010) means that different modes, such as socio-culturally shaped resources for making meaning (Kress 2010:79), interact and thus should be viewed as meaningful wholes. The dominating role of pictures, and especially of motion pictures, however, cannot go unnoticed since it is the visual that offers unrivalled sensual immediacy, connotes further information, and arouses stronger emotions (cf. Mirzoeff 2002). As Dyer says, “pictures are ‘easier’ to understand and have more impact than words, and they generally offer greater opportunity for the communication of excitement, mood, and imagination” (Dyer 1982:69), which explains the success of televised content because it provides viewers with many images in rapid succession. These images are capable of carrying additional, non-verbal realizations of humor that could not have been substituted by words and still retain their jocularly.

Research into humor in films, TV series, and/or commercials is usually centered on audiences’ engagement with humorous content or perceptions

of humor (cf. Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004; Mills 2005; Bore 2012), yet some studies are also purely theoretical and are thus concerned with the humorous techniques being applied. Some pieces of research, on the other hand, foster the application of the incongruity, superiority, and/or relief theory to the televised material in order to understand its operation (cf. Vandaele 2002; Bednarek 2010; Dynel 2013). No matter the technique for humor elicitation, the use of funny jingles, disparaging jokes, and/or surprising visuals may simply fail if the audience is not taken into account. It should be kept in mind that humor is affected by a variety of sociocultural aspects, including demographic, psychographic, and educational factors; these interact with both the type(s) of humor and the very medium used, hence adding to the complexity of humorous realizations (cf. Gulas and Weinberger 2006:19). Let us note in passing that the actual usage and appreciation of humorous content differs cross-culturally as well, making it even more context-dependent (Alden et al. 1993; Toncar 2001).

The same holds true for other humor-filled message carriers such as ads or various comic strips, both paper and digital ones. As far as humorous advertising is concerned, it is claimed by Strick et al. (2013) that humor can be identified as one of the most frequently applied and inspected message strategies in marketing and advertising literature; additionally, as stated by Blackford et al. (2011) and Beard (2005), one out of five TV ads is reported to make use of some kind of a humorous appeal, which testifies to how important a tool humor is. Prior research on humor in advertising covers such topics as the effects of humor on attention (Madden and Weinberger 1984; Eisend 2009), enhancement of positive affect and favorable attitudes (Chung and Zhao 2003; Eisend 2009), reduction of negative responses (Strick et al. 2012), and influence on people's involvement and motivation to process (Zhang and Zinkhan 2006). All in all, there appears to exist a positive and linear relationship between ads' funniness and brand attitudes (Eisend 2009:191) that is certainly well worth scrutinizing minutely to discover its further complexities.

When it comes to comic strips and cartoons, which will also be explored in this volume, one has to note that these are actually even more transcultural than ads due to their capability to tell stories with pictures. The humorous narrative structure in a comic strip is conveyed through a series of drawings and accompanying dialogues that assume equal roles (Inge 1990; Berger 1997) but, nonetheless, it is the picture that is given sensual primacy owing to its innate immediacy that excels in conveying narrative information (Mirzoeff 2002; Tsakona 2009; Miodrag 2013). As a

truly “original ensemble of productive mechanisms of meaning” (Groensteen 2007:2), the comic strip has risen in importance in the middle of the 20th century and is now widely perceived as a language form with its own formal properties (Miodrag 2013). It has become not only a means of entertainment, but also a way to convey history, criticize prominent political figures, and confront politicians’ power with laughter (cf. Tsakona and Popa 2013). Taking the multimodal stand again, the visual and verbal components interact here, often for humorous purposes, and thus produce unique combinations that are read as one, meaningful entity. Given this interrelatedness, accompanied by its sociocultural grounding, it surfaces that comic strips are something more than representational images to look at and more than pictorial realizations of communication; rather, they have grown to become complex meaning-making systems able of producing humorous effects and, as such, they ask for investigation. To conclude this point, multimodal humor, which is made of linguistic and extra-linguistic components, should be treated in a holistic manner, irrespective of the content studied, ranging from films and ads to cartoons. These and other creative, witty, and humorous types of expression will be investigated in the chapters to follow.

5 Humor as an overarching thread – the articles in this volume

In the light of what was said about humor in the course of this introductory chapter, it is evident that humor transcends numerous disciplines and media, permeating every aspect of human culture and communication. Working towards an interdisciplinary debate on humor and related phenomena, this book is a comprehensive reflection of the contributors’ shared interest in various dimensions of humor and its manifold applications in terms of both semantic and pragmatic functions. This book is composed of a selection of inspiring papers that provide important insights into language and its many connections to humor. Theoretical discussions are complemented by an assortment of case studies in linguistics, culture, literature, translation, and media studies. This volume aims to bring together students, PhD candidates, and young academics in various fields of research in order to exchange views on various aspects of humor in the context of language studies. For this edited collection to come into being, ten authors contributed their research papers addressing the nature of humor from a number of perspectives, which include but are by no means limited to the study of works of art and

literature, cartoons, ads, stereotyping, and cross-linguistic differences, to name but a few.

The opening contribution by Taylor Breckles focuses on the topic of culture and comedy in Disney's *Mulan*. Based on the observation that film is a crucial sociological tool, she presents a noteworthy case study on the character trope of 'the sidekick' in the said film and draws interesting conclusions as to the dynamics of humor viewed through the lens of sociolinguistics and with respect to the sociocultural paradigm. Breckles examines the language used by the primary vehicle through which humor is delivered in the film, Mushu's character, and finds that this deuteragonist follows the principles of incongruity and hostility theories of humor. Apart from the sociolinguistic and humorous dimensions covered, the findings provide overwhelming evidence for the view that Disney's films are a major cultural force to be reckoned with.

In the next chapter, Izabella Drozd undertakes an analysis of Polish translation of the humorous situations and jokes in the film *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* and applies the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). Drozd places emphasis on the workings of audiovisual translation, especially voice-over work and subtitling, and contrasts the Western and the Chinese views on humor. The subtlety and indirectness of humor in the film harmonizes with the theory on Chinese humor that is presented. The GTVH is shown to be useful in terms of both identifying humorous scenes and translating them from Chinese to Polish.

In her contribution, Katarzyna Knoll focuses on how Chinese puns are understood by Polish students of Mandarin Chinese. This study is also based on a questionnaire, in which the respondents assessed a selection of Chinese jokes that employed homonymy. Their task was to decide how funny the wordplay involved was in creating a humorous effect. The results show that understanding the jokes posed some difficulty to Polish people. Knoll explains this difficulty by focusing on cultural differences, including the sense of humor that is typical of Western culture, which rarely uses homonymy.

Mariola Świerkot, on the other hand, explores the application of humor by the British author Terry Pratchett in his fantasy series *Discworld*. Świerkot traces common literary and cultural tropes – in particular those prevalent in fantasy literature and well-known amongst fans of the genre – in selected *Discworld* novels and attempts to illustrate how, through the subversion of those tropes, Pratchett successfully employs humor in his works. This chapter's theoretical framework rests upon incongruity theories, investigating the relationship between the pre-established tropes,

the same tropes subverted by the author of the novels, and the connection between them that stems from the reader's pre-conceived notions.

The analysis of ethnic humor with reference to jokes aimed at the Irish community in the United States constitutes the focus of the following chapter written by Małgorzata Furgacz. Furgacz outlines the historical background of Irish immigration to America, and highlights the religious, economic, and cultural conflicts that have contributed to the animosity between the Irish minority and the other groups that dominate American society. The author then proceeds to discuss specific examples of humor targeted at the Irish minority in the form of cartoons and caricatures, describing both the harmful effects of negative stereotypes reinforced by such forms of humor, and the unifying effect they can have on the communities targeted by ethnic humor.

The next chapter contains the research of Małgorzata Wronka, which challenges stereotypes regarding the seriousness of art by presenting and analyzing examples of humorous works from across the ages. These works range in date from the times of ancient civilizations, through medieval Europe to the 18th and 19th centuries. Wronka's examples and her analysis thereof prove that humor in art is as timeless as it is relevant. By concluding that the value of art does not necessarily depend on its objective seriousness, Wronka disproves the division between humorous and "serious" art, and brings into light the cultural importance of lighthearted approaches towards works of art.

In her chapter, Irina Vrabie introduces the portrait of a Romanian playwright, Ion Luca Caragiale, and offers an overview of the use of humor in his writings and its importance to Romanian culture, literature, and society. Her analysis traces the examples of linguistic humor and witty stereotypes, through which the 19th century playwright proves himself to be a keen observer of human nature by painting a picture that, on the one hand, aims to reflect the society in a realistic manner but, on the other, lampoons and satirizes certain vices and shortcomings prevalent in the Romanian society during the 19th century.

The chapter by Anna Stwora addresses the topic of multimodal advertisements that employ borderline humor, i.e. humor that can be interpreted as either appealing or appalling. She enquires into the interplay between visual and verbal meanings that leads to humor and then attempts to investigate emotional responses to such messages. Having chosen humorous ads likely to border on distaste due to controversial themes and/or imagery, she presents the results of a survey that focused on the reception and comprehension of meaning-laden advertisements. These

results also provide deeper insight into respondents' interpretations of and feelings towards the ads presented.

Staying in the domain of advertising research, a related chapter by Anna Stwora and Grzegorz Zemełka touches upon the impact of humorous ads on brand and product recall. The chapter examines whether or not the humorous factor tends to augment or enfeeble recall; it further aims at studying the informants' subjective feelings towards the advertising material presented thanks to the application of visual self report measures.

The author of the final chapter, Beata Bury, introduces the topic of humorous political cartoons as a vehicle for social and political commentary. She explores the affiliative style of humor through the example of contemporary Trump-themed political cartoons found on the Internet. Her research addresses questions concerning the elements of humor presented in a selection of political cartoons featuring the American president and the potential impact of such cartoons, whose attention-catching drawings and captions intend to provoke discussion among the readers.

6 Concluding remarks

To sum up our introductory remarks, it is worth noting that the topics of the chapters included in this monograph represent a wide range of problems related to the study of humor. First of all, the opening essays related to linguistics analyse the language of humour in selected films, as well as show clear differences in terms of perception of Chinese jokes by Polish speakers. Secondly, the chapters devoted to culture and literature studies show various aspects of humor in fantasy literature, ethnic jokes, and stereotypes. Last but not least, chapters on media studies focus on selected aspects of funniness present in advertisements and in internet cartoons. As the contributors to this volume show, humor is an omnipresent phenomenon, permeating various areas of human life and activity.

Finally, we would like to thank all of the authors for sharing their individual approaches to the selected aspects of humor. We hope that this volume will be inspiring to everyone interested in the contemporary discussions surrounding the role of humor in our culture, language, and media. Last but not least, the editors would like to thank the reviewer, Professor Dorota Brzozowska from the Institute of English of the University of Opole in Poland, for taking the time to read the manuscript and for offering her suggestions for improvements. They would also like to gratefully acknowledge the special contribution Taylor Breckles made

to this book by meticulously going through the texts from a native-English perspective and by commenting on the papers.

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CHAPTER II

CULTURE AND COMEDY AMONG DISNEY
DEUTERAGONISTS:
A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS
OF HUMOUR IN *MULAN*

TAYLOR BRECKLES

The effects of Disney films on North American culture are undeniable and have been discussed in myriad settings. These films are important features in the study of North American fairy tales and sociological evolution, yet they remain underutilized in academia and are rarely relied upon as research materials, despite the multidisciplinary information that they provide. This essay explores the use of humour within Disney feature animated films from a sociolinguistic perspective. Specifically, this paper discusses the character Mushu from the 1998 film *Mulan* and provides a linguistic analysis of his dialogue. This analysis determined that the humour used by Mushu incorporates both hostility theory and incongruity theory in the context of an apologue/comedrama film. This paper proposes a new method to use for performing sociolinguistic analysis on Disney films so as to provide more interdisciplinary and cohesive materials for future study.

Key terms: Disney, humour, genre analysis, sociolinguistic analysis, film

1 Introduction

1.1 Film as a sociological tool

In modern academia, there are very few who would suggest that there is no cultural value to be found in studying literature, regardless of the genre. Even though film is an interpretation of literature – and, for

example, the genre often blatantly relies on such a comparison to sell films by means of book-to-movie adaptations – examining films as social markers is not as popular an idea as sourcing sociological information from literature. Film critic John Gregory Dunne goes so far as to say that “[f]ilm scholarship has become a flourishing surrogate for a liberal arts education. The film department has in fact become to academe in the 1970’s what the psychology department was in the 50’s – a way to legitimize trendy mediocrity with a bachelor’s degree” (Demerath 1981:70). While this critical view of film studies might not be as prevalent today as it was in the 70’s, there is still a lot of stigma surrounding the use of films as academic resources; moreover, there is even further pushback regarding using Disney films as sociological tools.

Demerath (1981:71), however, sees films as credible resources with “sociological significance” despite any potential flaws that films present as research materials. Additionally, films present sociologists with interesting materials to study because, “most of us do not go to the movies in the same spirit that we enter the research field. Perhaps fortunately, movies are not constructed for sociologists, and most of us rarely look at movies sociologically” (Demerath 1981:71). Therefore, it can be argued that films are not necessarily made for academic critique, which makes films even more reliable as materials because they are meant to enrapture casual viewers rather than the critical/analytical intellectuals. By observing materials that were produced primarily for casual enjoyment rather than academic discourse, we can gather a more candid picture of North American culture and cultural values.

Furthermore, Disney films are even more fascinating to study because they are produced primarily for the enjoyment of children – the most malleable and least critically skilled target audience that one could engage with. Children absorb information that is presented to them; therefore, these films are intended to shape and demonstrate the very basics of North American cultural values, including themes associated with kindness, sharing, acceptance, and bravery in the face of adversity.

In his article, “Through a Double-Crossed Eye: Sociology and the Movies,” Demerath (1981) argues that films are reliable tools for communicating sociological principles to students and can be studied through an academic lens. He proposes “six basic tips on how one should (or should not) watch a film in order to optimize its sociological content,” one of which is to watch the side character of a film instead of the protagonist because “[i]n most films, the main character is engaging precisely because he or she is atypical. (...) In contrast, secondary characters frequently enact the very rules to which the heroes are

exceptions. As narrative foils, they cleave far closer to the sociological norm” (Demerath 1981:72). This suggests that the side characters of films are not only the characters to watch in terms of cultural normativity, but that they are influential in more relatable ways than those of the protagonists. While the protagonist heroically moves through the plot of the film, defying the odds and saving the day, it is the side character that portrays bumbling realism and provides a different connection between viewer and character. There are no shortages of side characters in Disney films, but for the purposes of this article the focus is on the sidekick – the character that accompanies the protagonist on their journey.

1.2 ‘The sidekick’ as a comedic sociological character trope

The character trope of ‘the sidekick’ or deuteragonist is used in genres of literature and film to provide comic relief amid the more serious themes in the main storyline. The Disney film studio is no stranger to the application of this technique in their films and is arguably known for creating lovable side characters. This is evident, among myriad ways, by how many of these side characters are prominently featured in the marketing of the Disney brand. For example, looking at official Disney merchandise, found either in any Disney theme park or in The Disney Store, side characters are heavily featured in several products ranging from stuffed animals to clothing to dishware. The presence of such items in such a broad range of products suggests that these characters are popular – at least in such a way so as to sell merchandise. If these characters and their respective films are so popular, why is there a lack of scholarship surrounding them? While there have been academic studies and articles released about specific Disney films and characters, these works typically focus on either the princesses (most commonly) or the princes; in comparison, not much has been said about the side characters.

While the study of Disney films in general is an area in which a lot of material remains undiscovered by academics, the study of the side characters specifically has garnered even less academic attention. Considering the obvious amicability of side characters, as demonstrated above, it is my belief that these characters should be further explored by academics from a range of disciplines. From my specific perspective as a sociolinguist, I have taken a particular interest in analysing the characters’ dialogue.

Amy M. Davis (2007:18), a prominent Disney academic, states that “[h]ad these films not ‘spoken’ in some way to contemporary audiences, or at least if the studio had not believed that these films had this potential,

then the films themselves would never have been made.” Following this thought, the characters found within these films must also form a connection between film and viewer, evidenced by their popularity among audiences. For example, a quick search on Google very easily produces quotes from side characters featured on fan-made images even though only the title of the film is specified in the search. Specific results – and the prominence of quotes featured on images rather than images alone – attained from such a broad search leads me to believe that what the side characters say has a memorable impact on audiences. What is it about side characters’ lines that make them so memorable? Which character traits are most favoured? Are there specific lines that are memorable, or is it the character that is more remembered?

Because the trope of the ‘side character’ typically involves alleviating tension within the main storyline by having the side character take on a more humorous nature, this paper will focus on the relationship between the side character and the associated humorous dialogue, from a sociolinguistic perspective.

This paper is part of a larger project. Due to the complexities of sociolinguistic analysis and the lack of space for discussion in an academic article, this paper will focus on one side character and one specific use of humour. I have selected Mushu from the 1998 animated film *Mulan* and I will analyze this character’s most popular utterance. The scene relating to the selected phrase will also be discussed so as to provide a more cohesive example. The process of establishing this most popular utterance, and the resulting selection, will be discussed as methodology later on.

Mulan was selected for two main reasons: the time in which the film was produced and the recognisability of the film. 1998 was near the end of what Disney fans term The Renaissance (the period of film production between 1989 and 1999). This era of film production is, arguably, the most famous in Disney production history because it was during this time that the majority of the Disney princesses were created. The associated films containing Ariel (*The Little Mermaid* 1989), Belle (*Beauty and the Beast* 1991), Jasmine (*Aladdin* 1992), Pocahontas (*Pocahontas* 1995), and Mulan (*Mulan* 1998) were all produced during this 10-year period, in addition to those featuring the unofficial princesses Nala (*The Lion King* 1994), Esmeralda (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* 1996), Megara/Meg (*Hercules* 1997), and Jane (*Tarzan* 1999). Many of the films produced during this time are among the most recognizable Disney animations, and *Mulan* is no exception to this.

2 Genre

Carolyn Miller (2015:57) initially suggested that genre is “a meditation between private intentions (purpose) and socially objectified needs (exigence)” and that “[g]enres are categories, or types, of social action.” Even though her theory did not initially engage with film, the basis that establishing genre is important for understanding a work more thoroughly can also be applied to this new medium. Therefore, ascertaining into which film genre *Mulan* best fits is important because it reinforces the significance of humour in the context of the genre of the film. Based on a search online, the genres that *Mulan* were categorized under include animation, family film, drama, adventure film, musical, war film, fantasy, martial arts film, and comedy-drama/comedrama. For the purposes of this article, I suggest looking at the film as a collaboration of two genres: apologue (a moral fable that features personified animals) and comedrama.

Mulan heavily features personified animals as primary characters. Mulan’s three companions are her horse, Khan, her lucky cricket, Cri-kee, and her dragon guardian, Mushu, all of whom have personified qualities; however, the most personified character is Mushu because he is able to emote as well as speak in a way that is understood by the human Mulan as well as the Fa family ancestors. Cri-kee and Khan are both able to emote, but they are not able to speak, although it is contextually decided that Mushu is able to understand Cri-kee.

Mulan is also a moral fable; the story is about more than the larger plot concerning Mulan training for war and saving China. The genre features of an apologue include personified animals, as previously stated, at least one moral that underlies the plot, and it is often brief. Arguably, *Mulan* is a lesson in accepting yourself and gaining confidence in your unique personality that is told by having Mulan defy traditional social roles by becoming a soldier and ultimately saving her country. Oh My Disney (an official website created by the Walt Disney Company) confirms this in an article concerning the life lessons that audiences can take away from the film. Among others, the website names “Stand up for what you believe in,” “Everything happens in its own time,” “Don’t be afraid to be yourself,” “Take charge of your own destiny,” “You never know who might end up being a friend,” and “You’re stronger than you think” as morals found in *Mulan*¹.

¹ This article can be found here: <https://ohmy.disney.com/movies/2014/06/19/10-life-lessons-from-mulan/>

Mushu, Mulan's dragon sidekick, is an aid in delivering these morals by acting as the antithesis to Mulan's timidity. Mushu possesses confidence from the beginning of the film, but he is not able to properly perform his duties as a guardian due to the interference of his ego. It is only after he accepts his mistakes and flaws that he is able to thrive in his duty as Mulan's guardian. Even though Mulan and Mushu appear to be opposites in the film – one not having enough self-confidence and the other too much – they change together and are able to find a balance between self-confidence and reliance on each other in order to productively complete the storyline (by saving China).

Due to Mushu's consistent use of humour, as well as other humoristic features like songs and physical comedy, however, I argue that the genre of apologue is not enough to sufficiently categorize *Mulan*. The main storyline is consistent with the genre of drama because it is more serious and weighted in terms of conflicts (character/character, character/society, and character/supernatural), inter-character relationships (Mulan/army, Mulan/family, Mulan/town, Mulan/Shang, and Mulan/Mushu), and general themes (war, death, law, and gender roles). If one were to disregard the comedic features of *Mulan*, the film would be the story about a female social outcast in war-torn China who disguises herself as a man, which is against the law, in order to fight in place of her ailing father. This is not a comedic plot. The addition of songs and a humorous side character, however, changes how the story is portrayed/viewed; therefore, the prevalence of comedrama features also needs to be noted in order to cohesively discuss this film.

The use of humour within the film, therefore, is worthy of discussion. Arguably, the primary vehicle through which humour is delivered is Mushu's character. While songs and the additional side cast (Mulan's three friends, Ling, Yao, and Chien Po) are also comedic features, Mushu remains the largest contributor to the humour of the film. Without this humorous presence in the film, the tones of the story would be quite different, despite the other (lesser) comedic features present throughout.

3 Partial film summary

In order to provide extensive context for the chosen scene, I will summarize the film up to the point wherein it occurs.

Mulan is set in China in roughly the 5th century. The film opens with a brief scene involving the antagonist of the film, leader of the Huns, Shan Yu, and his army invading the Great Wall of China. After lighting a fire

and prompting an alarm, a guard warns Shan Yu that the entire country will know that he has invaded. Shan Yu is pleased.

The setting changes to a seemingly quiet farmhouse wherein Mulan lives. She is studying for her interview with the town matchmaker, the woman who decides her fate by determining the quality of her marriageability. Mulan arrives late for her dressing appointment, so the characters in the salon hustle her through the routine while singing. The film quickly establishes the social expectations for women in this first song, "Honor to Us All." The song outlines how women should look and act in order to be attractive to men, as well as establishes women's duty of marrying a suitable man and bearing sons. Mulan appears lost and/or confused throughout. Cri-kee, the lucky cricket, is introduced as a creature to accompany Mulan.

Mulan's meeting with the matchmaker ends with her setting the matchmaker's clothing on fire. She is called a disgrace and told that she is unworthy of being a bride. Mulan's duty is destined to be unfulfilled. Desolate, Mulan returns to her house and sings "Reflection," a song about Mulan feeling that her personality and her appearance/expectations of her gender do not match.

A messenger from the Emperor comes to Mulan's village and declares that one man from every family must serve in the army to fight against the attacking Huns. Mulan's father, Fa Zhou, is the only man in the Fa family. He was injured in war and is barely able to stand. Mulan realizes that if her father goes to war again, he will die. She interrupts her father and the messenger with her concerns and is told to learn her place and remain silent. During the night, Mulan sneaks into the room wherein her father keeps his armour. She cuts off her hair, puts on the armour, takes her horse, and rides off to the army camp. Her mother reveals that if the army discovers that Mulan is female, she will be killed. Mulan's grandmother asks the family ancestors to protect Mulan.

The setting changes to where the ancestors rest. The First Ancestor rouses Mushu and tells him to wake the other ancestors. It is revealed that Mushu was once a guardian but was demoted to a gong-ringer. The ancestors debate which family guardian should accompany Mulan and help her. Mushu volunteers and the ancestors laugh. They decide that the Great Stone Dragon is the best choice and send Mushu to wake up the guardian. A disgruntled Mushu ultimately destroys the Great Stone Dragon and lies to the ancestors by pretending to be the guardian. Mushu decides to go save Mulan by himself, but Cri-kee joins him. The two go after Mulan.

Mulan reaches the army training camp. She is on a hill above the camp practicing how to act like a man with her horse. Both Mulan and Khan doubt her ability to convince the other soldiers that she is male. Mushu introduces himself as a miracle sent by Mulan's ancestors to help her. It is after an illusion put on by Mushu and Cri-kee wherein Mushu appears exceptionally tall and powerful that he reveals himself to Mulan. In reality, Mushu is under two feet (60.96cm) tall. Mulan is underwhelmed.

It is immediately after Mushu's reveal that the chosen scene takes place.

4 Methodology

In his discussion surrounding characters in fairy tales, Vladimir Propp (1968:9) says that “[t]he question of what a tale’s dramatis personae do is an important one for the study of the tale, but the questions of who does it and how it is done already fall within the province of accessory study.” Now that Mushu has been established as a dramatis persona of interest to the story as an agent of humour, the “how” will now be investigated by analysing the dialogue used in the scene containing Mushu’s most memorable line. The entirety of the associated scene will be examined, thereby allowing for an analysis of the line itself as well as the context surrounding its usage.

Mushu’s most memorable line was determined by a search on three major websites: Google Images, Tumblr, and Pinterest. I selected these three in order to ensure the inclusion of a popular search engine, a common website for fandoms (specific fan communities/subcultures), and a prevalent website for fandom-related ideas and crafts. Additionally, an image or idea that is popular on one of these websites typically surfaces on at least one of the other two as well; for example, if a quote is popular on Tumblr, it will often also show up on Pinterest.

Due to the humour-focused nature of this analysis, I searched “Mushu funny quote” on all three websites and made note of which lines were featured in the first three results. The following table displays my findings:

Search Engine	Quote Featured in Result 1	Quote Featured in Result 2	Quote Featured in Result 3
Google Images	“They popped out of the snow! Like daisies!”	“I’m not tiny [sic], I’m travel sized for your convenience.”	“Play nice. Unless one of the other kids wanna fight, then you have to kick the other kid’s butt.”
Tumblr	“Say that to my face, you limp noodle!”	“Dishonor. Dishonor on your whole family. [sic] Dishonor on you. Dishonor on your cow.”	“Look, you get porridge! And it’s happy to see you.”
Pinterest	“You missed! How could you miss?! He was three feet in front of you!”	“Say that to my face, you limp noodle!”	“Dishonor! Dishonor on you, dishonor on your cow, dishonor on your whole family [sic]”

Table 2-1 “Mushu funny quote” Results Table.

As we can see from Table 2-1, there were two common results relating to the quote using the insult “limp noodle” and to the series of lines about dishonour, even though the result from Pinterest was misquoted. As a way to select which of these two quotes could be called most popular, I searched Google Images further to see which of these two options would appear first. The quote featuring dishonour was the first to appear – the “limp noodle” phrase followed it by approximately four images – and so that one was selected. The actual quote from the film is: “Dishonour! Dishonour on your whole family! Make a note of this. Dishonour on you! Dishonour on your cow!”².

What is especially interesting about these quotes is that their interpretation as humorous is reliant on the film’s context. This lack of obvious humour is very telling in terms of the humour that resonates with fans the most. The fact that these lines were taken out of context and still featured on three different websites suggests that the scenes in which the lines are used are memorable enough that an out-of-context quote can be

² The author transcribed this quote from the version of *Mulan* released on DVD. The previous mentions of this quote were spelled using the American version of dishonor/dishonour to maintain result accuracy, but for the remainder of this essay the quote will be spelled using Canadian/British spelling.