

Humor Research

Salvatore Attardo

**Linguistic Theories
of Humor**

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Linguistic Theories of Humor

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by

Salvatore Attardo

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Neque satis ab ullo explicari puto
Quintilian Inst. Or.

I have had great difficulty
in determining what 'funny' is.
Lt. Comm. Data, Star Trek—The Next Generation

Two people are laughing together, say at a joke.
One of them has used certain somewhat unusual words
and now they both break into a sort of bleating.
That might appear very extraordinary to a visitor
coming from quite a different environment.
Ludwig Wittgenstein

à ma mère
a mio padre

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As it is customary to note, none of the above bears any responsibility for any errors and omissions.

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Preface

This book is the result of almost a decade of research in several related aspects of the linguistics of humor. As such, it is inevitably a composite and the result of a compromise between my desire to cover, on the one hand, as much as possible of the scholarship pertaining to humor research in linguistics and, on the other, my own research interests in the field.

The book combines a representative, if not exhaustive, survey of the literature in the linguistics of humor, with critical analyses of the more significant approaches and my own original ventures. For the most part, I hope I have provided enough indications to indicate which is which. No chapter is any one of those three things exclusively, but the beginning of the book clearly tends towards the survey, the middle towards the critique, and the end towards original work.

The intended audience of the book is similarly composite: theoretical linguists interested in the applications of linguistics to humor research and in its implications for linguistic theory; applied linguists, looking for empirical results and analytical methodologies to be applied to humor studies or exported from humor studies to other areas; non-linguist academics interested in the interdisciplinary role of linguistics, both as a substantive field and methodologically (i.e., what linguists have found out about humor and how they do it); and, last but not least, the educated non-academic wishing to inform him/herself about humor research from the point of view of the study of language. This broad audience has dictated some choices in organization, but primarily it is reflected in a special care in defining all non-elementary technical terms (or providing pointers to such definitions) so that non-linguists may be able to follow the discussion, or may decide to skip some sections in which the technical aspects of the discussion offer few insight into humor research (but many into a linguistic issue). From the linguists' perspective this may give the impression that at times I am defining the obvious or oversimplifying the issues, but close reading will reveal, I hope, that even when I have simplified definitions and discussions for the sake of clarity, this never affects the substance of my arguments.

Because a large part of the book consists of a survey of the scholarship on humor, this has imposed certain restrictions on the organization of the chapters. For example, an entire chapter is dedicated to a survey of the research on puns (Chapter 3) because this genre has been the center of an extraordinary, if not always insightful, amount of writing. For the same reason, the main focus of the book is on jokes and puns, while other humorous genres, such as riddles, irony, satire, etc., are not dealt with specifically.

Other choices were dictated by what I saw as lacunae in the available scholarship. For example, the issues surrounding register humor, in direct connection with the revision of the "script theory" of humor, have received much less attention from scholars than puns or other preferred topics, as have the issues concerning the analysis of texts other than jokes. Chapters 7 and 8 were written in the hope of making some progress in these directions, which strike me as central to the development of the linguistics of humor.

In some cases, the linguistic tools themselves were found lacking. For example, the concepts of "register" (Chapter 7), "isotopy" (Chapter 2), and "narrative function" (Chapter 2), were redefined and clarified before these theoretical tools could be applied to humorous phenomena.

Chapter 1 is designed to bring the pre-contemporary scholarship into the picture, as an attempt at historical inclusion as it were. Chapters 2 – 4 show some geographical unity by dealing mostly with European structuralist scholarship. Chapters 5 and 6 outline the semantic/semiotic basis of my approach to humor research. Chapters 7-10 can be seen as case studies of sorts, in which I venture in several directions, attempting to complement the theoretical basis in what I hope are relevant and useful ways. Chapter 11 is a look into the future and suggests directions for future research.

From a different perspective, the book loosely follows the traditional arrangement of introductory textbooks in linguistics: excluding the historical survey, the first three chapters deal with surface phenomena (Chapters 2-4), namely the organization of phonemes and morphemes (e.g., position of the punch line, processing of the ambiguity); the next two chapters deal with the semantics of the joke (script theory, text theories, (Chapters 6 and 5, respectively), and the remaining chapters deal with the pragmatics of the texts, first in terms of registers (Chapter 7), then of broader texts (Chapter 8), and in terms of their pragmatic mechanisms (Chapter 9), and finally in terms of their use in interaction with other speakers (Chapter 10).

Despite my efforts at completeness, I am sure that there are many areas

that have been covered insufficiently and that some materials that should have been included have been missed. I will be grateful for any communication on overlooked sources, and errors of fact and interpretation.

• • •

A few technical notes: mentioned terms are either in *italics* or between quotes (" "). Semes, features, scripts, and other metalinguistic constructs are in SMALL CAPS. Texts are quoted from the most recent edition mentioned in the bibliography; all translations are mine, unless otherwise mentioned. Translations appear in lieu of the original text without any note, unless they follow the original, and then they are between slashes /.../. The indexes cover the entirety of the book, with the exception of the bibliography and the appendices. The subject index does not provide entries for terms such as joke, humor, language, linguistics, etc., that appear almost on every page. The table of contents, however, should help the reader locate the relevant sections of the book. All humorous examples are listed in appendix A. A list of acronyms appears in appendix B.

Introduction

Before discussing humor in detail it will be helpful to address some preliminary issues, namely how to define humor and its subdivisions. Since these matters are properly metatheoretical, the reader uninterested in epistemological hairsplitting may safely skip this introductory chapter altogether, provided he/she is willing to take this writer's word on a working definition of humor as a "competence"¹ held by speakers to be further specified by the theories that will be examined, and trust his claim that it is unnecessary and even counterproductive to attempt further subdivisions in the field of humor at this time.

0.1 Metatheory of humor

Where do linguistic theories fit in the type of investigation that is common in humor research? Simplifying a little, there are three types of theories used in humor:

1. essentialist theories,
2. teleological theories, and
3. substantialist theories.

At a very general level, essentialist theories strive to provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for a phenomenon to occur, and these conditions are taken to define the "essence" of the phenomenon, i.e., what makes the phenomenon what it is. Teleological theories describe what the goals of a phenomenon are, and how its mechanisms are shaped and determined by its goals. Substantialist theories find the unifying factor for the explanation of the phenomenon in the concrete "contents" of the phenomena .

¹That is, something that speakers know how to do, without knowing how and what they know.

Faced with the problem of describing a bicycle, an essentialist theory would describe it, in part, as a lever and a mechanism to redistribute animal force. A teleological theory would describe it as a means of transportation, and a substantialist theory would describe it as an arrangement of wheels, pedals, a frame, etc.

Let us note that all three types of theories are reductive/explanatory theories—that is, they all account for large scale phenomena by reducing them to simpler, better understood phenomena; similarly, they are predictive, in the sense that they can account for data outside of the corpus used to establish the theory. All three types of theories can be formalized since formalization is independent of the type of theory and is an independent metric.

Generally speaking, linguistic theories of humor are either essentialist or teleological (sociolinguistic approaches). This fact differentiates linguistic theories from sociological, literary and (some) psychological approaches which are not concerned with the essence of the humorous phenomena, but with the modalities of their production and reception, as well as their development. The major exceptions to this classification are incongruity theories in psychology whose cognitive accounts of the mechanisms of humor are clearly essentialist. Often psychological or sociological theories are substantialist; for example, aggressiveness, superiority (e.g., Hobbes) or inferiority (e.g. Bakhtin) theories focus on the concrete psychological “contents” of the phenomena.

Needless to say, this classification of theories is only a heuristic tool, and each theory end up incorporating some elements of the other types. The differences between the three types of theories may only be different types of emphasis in the data, and may depend on the observer’s attitude. It remains the case, however, that a linguistic approach will tend to favor essentialist theories and will necessarily foreground essentialist problems.

The next section is a good case in point since it examines attempts at definitions of humor (defining is the essentialist activity *par excellence*).

0.2 The Definition of Humor

An important preliminary step to the discussion of the applications of linguistic research to humor will be to specify what is meant by the key term

“humor” and how this category is determined. Discussion of this issue is divided into two sections. The first section shows that it is impossible to define “a priori” the category of humor, let alone to provide more detailed internal subdivisions. The second section rejects the use of laughter as a defining criterion for humor. Finally, the use of a “humor competence” as a working solution is advocated.

0.2.1 Internal Subdivision

Humor research has seen several discussions both about the internal subdivisions of the subject matter and its definition (see Keith-Spiegel (1972)). Ultimately, it seems that, not only has it not been possible to agree on how to divide the category of “humor” (e.g. “humor” vs “comic” vs “ridiculous”), but it is even difficult to find a pretheoretical definition of “humor” in the most general sense. As a matter of fact, the claim that humor is undefinable has been advanced several times (see Escarpit (1960: 5-7) and references therein).

An Impossible Definition

The issue can be put simply as: “What counts as ‘humor’ ?” The problems for an essentialist theory of humor are manifold, and the definitional issue (that is, the choice of the corpus of phenomena in the world that the theory will account for) is far from straightforward. A number of different approaches will be examined briefly to give an idea of the variety of issues at stake, and then a case for an essentialist approach will be made.

Ducrot and Todorov (1972:154) note in passing that comedy, a literary genre, should be distinguished from “the general category (...) of the comic.” If we look at the issue from this viewpoint, it appears that all the historical literary genres and modes are manifestations of the “general category” of “the comic,” or humor. Unfortunately, Ducrot and Todorov did not elaborate on what kind of “general category” humor was, or what the other general categories were, for that matter. Chateau (1950) argues that humor should be contrasted with seriousness, rather than with the tragic (or tragedy). A vast tradition (mostly German, see Cometa (1990)) argues for the opposite view.

Linguists, psychologists, and anthropologists have taken humor to be an all-encompassing category, covering any event or object that elicits laughter, amuses, or is felt to be funny. For instance, Raskin (1985) proposes to consider "humor" "in the least restricted sense" (Raskin (1985: 8); see also Apte (1985)).

In other fields the importance of clear subdivisions is more keenly felt. Literary criticism is a good example. Sinicropi (1981) clearly expresses the need for a rigorous definition of humor:

The lack of a rigorous, or at least reliable, definition of humor and of its categories causes (...) another difficulty that hinders research; it is represented by the fact that denominations of processes usually considered sources of humor (...) are often used as if they were synonyms or if they shared a semantic space. This denotes that the semantic field to which they belong does not have precise boundaries.

Sinicropi is referring to the differences among such literary modes as parody, irony, satire, etc. The argument could be broadened to include humorous literary genres, such as the "Fabliau" (e.g., Noomen 1978), the "farce" (cf. Bermel (1982) for an example of overgeneralization, as his definition encompasses humor), the humorous novel of 17th century France (Debaisieux (1988: 169) "the humorous story (...) evades any attempt at a strict definition"), etc. For a survey of some of the "modes" of literary humor, see Jardon (1988).

Eclectic theories of "literary humor" have been proposed, such as Gourévitch's claim that "comedy is a miscellaneous genre activated by a plurality of impulses: farce, humor, satire, and irony" (Gourévitch 1975: 13). This type of non-definition only strengthens the problems pointed out by Sinicropi.

Psychologists have tried to subcategorize humor on the basis of its subject matter (scatological, aggressive, sexual), in what are typical substantialist theories, or in some cases on the basis of structural factors, as in Aubouin's attempt at distinguishing humor and the ridiculous by the lack of "justification" (i.e. resolution) of the latter (Aubouin (1948), see also below). Other attempts have been made at discriminating between humor consisting of incongruity alone and humor with incongruity and resolution (see Forabosco 1992, and references therein).

Despite the frequent attempts at distinguishing areas inside the “general category” of humor, some researchers have come to the opposite conclusion: they have denied the possibility of a theoretical differentiation among some of the proposed subfields. Olbrecht-Tyteca’s (1974:19) refuses to distinguish between humorous and ridiculous, thus refusing *in toto* Aubouin’s suggestion and Eco’s claim that “the category of comic does not seem to have a possibility of theoretical differentiation from that of humor” (Eco, no date).

The pessimistic position that humor is impossible to subcategorize firmly is further strengthened by the fact that attempts to introduce distinctions or to delimit one’s field are hindered by numerous difficulties. Traditional lexical categories may lead to the erroneous belief that there are clear-cut distinctions in reality (such is the case of Jardon’s (1988) distinction between comic and humor), or the limited translatability of one author’s terminology may complicate the scholars’ activity—for instance, the problems found in the translation of Freud’s terminology (see Milner (1972: 9), and Orlando (1987) for a discussion).

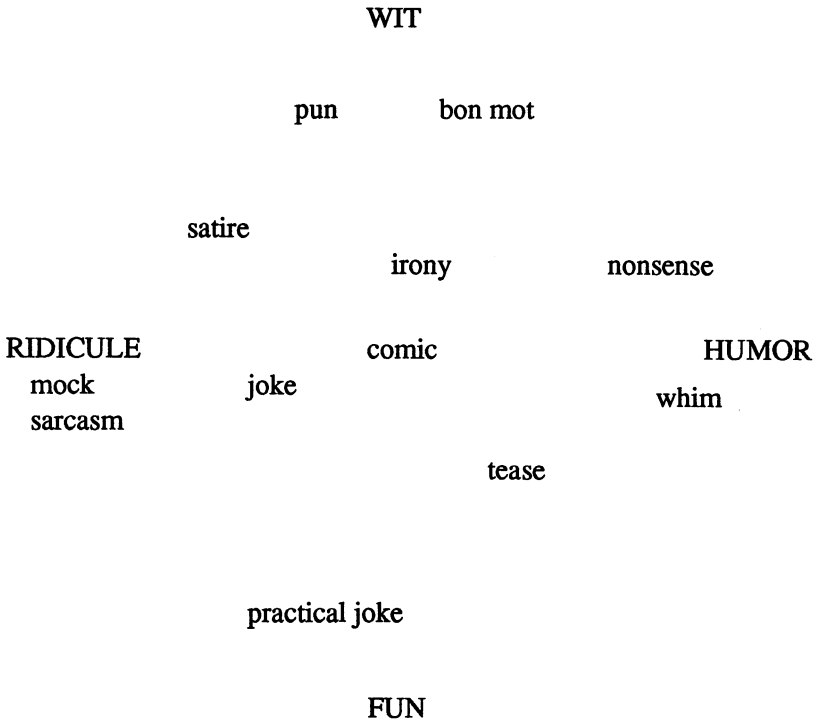
Moreover, different disciplines see the issues differently: where the psychologist sees indifferent manifestations of “humor,” the folklorist or the literary critic see “genres” like the joke, the humorous anecdote, the tall tale, etc. Thus, in transporting findings and methodologies, researchers must be careful to evaluate the scope of the research they face correctly.

For instance, in literature, “comic” and “comedy” are used in a restricted sense, often to denote “plays of humorous content,” or, more generally, literary works which deal with humorous subjects or are humorous. (cf. for example Herrick (1950), Garapon (1954), etc.)—see in particular section 1.4. Although it is perfectly legitimate to follow conventional academic partitions, Lewis (1989: 1-30) stresses the problems that emerge from ignoring the relevant research in related disciplines, even though he himself chooses to ignore the essentialist theories and focusses on the teleological, sociological, and psychological theories instead. Often researchers have adopted uncritically theories coming from one field (such as philosophy or psychology) and applied the theories of, for example, Bergson and Freud, to their subject matter, without questioning the validity of their source or taking the time to consult the literature which has been accumulating since these landmarks in the history of the field.

Lexicological Approaches

But, if these could be dismissed as merely methodological issues, the root of the problems encountered in the attempts at definition seem to go even deeper. The very word “humor” is dated; it ultimately goes back to the “theory of humors” of Medieval medicine. The issues involved are so complex that several studies using the methodology of “semantic fields” have been dedicated to establishing the words involved in the semantic field of “humor” and their respective limits; see Escarpit (1960: 10-72) on English and its international repercussions; Schmidt-Hidding (1963) on the English tradition; Schütz (1963), Böttger (1981) and Renner (1984) on the German tradition; Hempel (1963) on the Spanish tradition; Revault D’Allonnes (1966-67) for a comparison among French, British and American English and German; and Attardo (1986) for a comparison of Italian, French and English. As an example of the degree of complexity involved in these attempts, a much simplified version of Schmidt-Hidding’s (1963: 48) schema for the semantic field of humor is reproduced in picture (0.1).

Figure 0.1: The Semantic Field of “humor”



Ultimately the very things that people find humorous seems to change. Croce (1903) claimed that humor could only be understood in a historical perspective and excluded the possibility of a theoretical definition of humor (Croce (1903:286); see Eco (1985:261) and Caserta (1983)). This has led to a perhaps not unjustified pessimism on the very possibility of finding a common ground of analysis among the many socio-/historical manifestations of humor, let alone a determination of the necessary and sufficient conditions for humor to obtain.

0.2.2 Anti-Essentialist Approaches

Although most theoretical research on humor has been done in what can be loosely termed the “essentialist” paradigm, some proposals have emerged recently that challenge the feasibility of an essentialist project and invoke a “prototypical” or “polythetic” approach to humor research. Prototype theories invoke Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances” as their model of ontological foundation. Wittgenstein noted that the class of “games” cannot be defined by finding one or more features common to all games (except that of being called games, obviously; Wittgenstein (1953: 31-36)). One intuitively knows that volleyball and Monopoly have something in common that solitaire does not share, namely competitiveness between players. Chess and checkers share the feature of being played on a board, while skipping a rope doesn’t. Prototype theories do not claim that random objects are assembled to form a class, but only that while each will have something in common with some others in the class, not all of the members of the class will share at least one feature (a more detailed discussion of prototype theories will be found in ch. 7).

Levin (1987), one of the prototype theory proponents, claims that

If there were any single generalization that could be applied with equal relevance to Chaucer, Mark Twain, Evelyn Waugh, Milan Kundera, Milesian tales, Jewish jokes, banana peels, mechanical toys, content analyses, laugh-counts, broadcasts, cartoons, monkeys, hyenas, and tickling, it would be much too sweeping for any plane but that of pointless platitude (Levin 1987: 6-7).

While this author, contrary to Levin, fails to see anything funny in content analyses (perhaps an inside joke for literary critics?), all of the above have been considered by the people who read, heard, or saw them, funny. Naturally, this excludes hyenas (their famous laughter is a kind of barking), and tickling induced laughter which is a physiological reaction (on the humor/laughter distinction see below). What is Levin objecting to, then?

This position seems to be a good example of the problems mentioned above. The literary theorist is interested in the differences between Waugh and Kundera (or rather between their literary works), and finds little interest in what these expressions of craftsmanship share with “folk” narratives or with some of the examples made famous by Bergson (the mechanical toy) that are

not expressed in a literary form. Moreover, if the list proposed by Levin were to stop at the first four elements included, certainly few would object to its legitimacy, which leads one to believe that the object of Levin's skepticism is not the possibility of a definition of humor but rather the legitimacy, from the point of view of the literary critic, of including in the category non-literary phenomena.

If one puts aside the "internal subdivisions" of humor and accepts a "broad" reading of the concept, it follows that humor (or the comic, etc.) is whatever a social group defines as such. At this point in the discussion, it is not necessary to be concerned with the modalities of the social construction of the "humorous object," or those of its changes and/or fluctuations among individuals. It has been claimed (Ferro-Luzzi 1990) that essentialist theories are falsified by examples of non-Indo-European cultures which do not fit the "incongruity-resolution" pattern. It appears, however, that these claims rest on terminological misunderstandings of the term "incongruity." Ferro-Luzzi's major claim is that alliteration is not incongruous. For a discussion of the incongruity of alliteration cf. ch. 3. I am not aware of any other claim that essentialist theories have been falsified by data.

Lewis's call for interdisciplinary research in humor (Lewis (1989); on interdisciplinary research in humor see also Apte (1988)) could be construed as a different "defeatist" approach. Lewis (1989) maintains a prudent attitude on the matter of an essentialist theory, but seems to imply that because of the complex nature of humor only "daring minds" (Lewis 1989: 159) attempt to propose comprehensive theories of humor which involve several fields of study at the same time. Since his example of such a daring mind is the linguist Raskin, it seems that this kind of preoccupation need not concern us excessively, since this book deals with linguistic theories and is thereby also "daring."

As a matter of fact, linguistic, philosophical and psychological analyses of humor have been the most outspoken in their essentialist approach, the most explicit example being possibly Attardo and Raskin (1991). Attardo and Raskin's claim is that a general theory of humor requires the consideration of six different and unrelated knowledge resources, each of which contributes to the creation of humor. While each discipline might be concerned with only one of the knowledge resources, or with several, a general theory must be concerned with all the six resources at the same time. The goal of a general theory is assumed to be essentialist, i.e., the identification of those

features that make a situation, a text, or an object funny.

A pre-theoretical definition either of humor or *a fortiori* of its subclasses may be impossible, and this has led to doubts about the feasibility of the essentialist approach. Yet from a linguistic point of view the essentialist approach is most promising (but see ch. 10).

Having accepted Raskin's "least restricted" definition of humor, which is also in essence a refusal to draw artificial boundaries between the humorous phenomena, it still remains to be seen how one is to decide which phenomena in the world are "humorous" and which are not. The next section deals with the most commonly accepted criterion: laughter.

0.2.3 Humor and Laughter

One common criterion seems to underlie the working definitions of humor implicitly, and sometimes explicitly: laughter. The assumption behind this identification of humor and laughter is that what makes people laugh is humorous, and hence the property is incorrectly seen as symmetrical—what is funny makes you laugh and what makes you laugh is funny. This leads to the identification of a mental phenomenon (humor) with a complex neurophysiological manifestation (laughter).

For example, Bergson clearly considers laughter and humor to be interchangeable, as can be seen from the complete title of his 1901 book "Laughter. Essay about the meaning of humor" (Bergson 1901), and so does Freud (1905: 15); see Lewis (1989: 163) for a discussion and more examples.

As Piddington says,

Very many writers on the subject of laughter (...) have failed to recognize the distinction between the two [ludicrous and laughter] (Piddington 1933: 87)

But he confuses the two terms himself later in his work:

In our analysis of the ludicrous we considered simple and even crude example of *laughter-provoking* situations" (Piddington 1933: 140; my emphasis, SA)

Even Milner, who was one of the first to introduce explicitly the use of semiotic procedure in humor research, adopts this criterion implicitly when

he claims that: "humour-based laughter is generated by discrete elements taken, not in isolation, but in conjunction" (Milner 1972: 2), and this only a few lines after having distinguished between the two by noting that "while humor is a very important element, it is only one out of a number of different detonators of laughter" (Ibid.).

This surreptitious identification of humor and laughter had in fact already been isolated in the Roman period (see ch. 1). More recently, Aubouin (1948), uncovers the aforesaid confusion in the scientific literature on humor:

Under these terms [laughter and humor] are confused very different reactions (...) which have only superficial similarities without common causes (Aubouin 1948: 12).

To summarize, laughter denotes an effect without specifying the cause (Aubouin 1948: 13). Aubouin ultimately adopts a distinction between physiologically originating laughter and intellectually originating laughter. In addition, the identification of humor with laughter has been discussed by Keith-Spiegel (1972: 37-39, with a large bibliography), Manetti (1976: 130-152), and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1974).

The most recent discussion is the most interesting as in it the author analyzes at length the possibility of the use of laughter as a criterion of humor. Olbrechts-Tyteca finds five reasons that make its application difficult, if not impossible.

1) "Laughter largely exceeds humor." (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974: 14) Olbrechts-Tyteca summarizes Aubouin's (1948) argument distinguishing between physiological laughter (originating from sodium pentathol or hallucinogens, for instance) and laughter originating from humor.

2) "Laughter does not always have the same meaning." (Ibid.) Olbrechts-Tyteca points out the phenomenon of ritual laughter and that laughter in Africa is more a sign of embarrassment or bewilderment than of amusement. Aubouin mentions the courtesy smile of Orientals with regard to this point.

3) "Laughter is not directly proportionate to the intensity of humor." (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974: 15) Olbrechts-Tyteca directs her attention to "the remarkable difference among individuals regarding the attitude toward laughter." (Ibid.) Aubouin mentions that age and education teach us to "hold back our impulses, to conceal our reactions" (1948: 14) He also notes that someone familiar with humor will tend to react to it more with a "blasé" attitude.

4) "Humor elicits sometimes laughter, sometimes a smile" (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974: 15). Olbrechts-Tyteca notes that there is no agreement among scholars about viewing smiling as an attenuated form of laughter (see also Keith-Spiegel (1972: 40)).

5) Laughter or smiling cannot always be observed directly. Olbrechts-Tyteca notes that laughter can be simulated, and that it must be interpreted, i.e., its social meaning must be assessed (see Jefferson's research on laughter, ch. 10).

These facts would render the use of informants problematic in assessing the humorousness of a text. It should be noted that the situation is not exactly parallel to that of psychologists measuring the funniness of a stimulus, in which the experimental setting is such that either the humorous quality of the text is presupposed, and the subjects are evaluating the degree of funniness, or the subjects rate texts for funniness, with some unfunny controls in the group. The linguists' position is closer to that of someone observing a videotape of a conversation, and trying to determine which of the remarks are funny or not.²

Olbrechts-Tyteca notes that tradition is a sort of "mutual guarantee," meaning that the fact that others have assumed that a given text was funny entitles us to the same assumption, but she finally falls back on introspection. The presence of a text in a collection of humorous texts, such as a joke book, allows one to infer that the text will in all likelihood be humorous, and this can be a sufficiently reliable empirical criterion. However, this criterion will be unable to assess new instances of texts (for instance, a new joke).

Introspection is not a reliable criterion, for obvious reasons, but linguists are faced with a similar problem concerning the data for semantic or syntactic analysis. Leech (1981: 71) points out that it is a problem of "intersubjectivity" i.e., shared intuition of a group of speakers, rather than a matter of subjective judgement.

Raskin appeals to the intersubjective judgement, expanding on Chomsky's "grammatical competence" and postulating a "humor competence" which is the linguist's task to make explicit (i.e., formulate its grammar). A

²Recent research in psychology, and in the physiological correlates of emotions, seems to disprove the claim that there are no reliable correlates of humor, since it appears that there are fail-safe physiological correlates to humor perception (Ruch 1992, 1993). It remains the case, however, that one may fail to be amused by an otherwise humorous stymulus for theoretically irrelevant reasons, cf. the notion of humor "competence" in ch. 6.

more detailed discussion will be undertaken in ch. 6. Let us note as a temporary conclusion that Kerbrat-Orecchioni's (1981) and Roventa-Frumusani's (1986) pragmatic definition of humorous text—a text is humorous whose perlocutionary effect³ is laughter—once one takes “laughter” with a grain of salt, is reducible to the humor competence of the speaker. For the usefulness and heuristic power of Kerbrat-Orecchioni's definition see Attardo (1989) and Attardo and Chabanne (1992).

³I.e., extra-linguistic, as opposed to the locutionary (what is said) and illocutionary (what is implied) effects. The terminology is Austin's (1962).

Chapter 1

Survey of the Literature

1.1 Introduction

The goal of this introductory chapter is to provide a survey of the field of humor research from the point of view of linguistics. It begins with a short discussion of the necessity and criteria for the survey. The survey itself is divided into two parts: 1) a chronologically organized overview of the classical theories (Greek and Latin) and their tradition up until the Renaissance; and 2) the modern theories of humor. With the latter section, the organization becomes theory oriented rather than chronological. The chapter surveys the three major types of theories of humor as well as some influential thinkers who deserve individual attention.

1.1.1 Why Have a Survey?

Beyond the tradition of beginning a scientific discussion of a topic by reviewing the literature, there are some topic-specific reasons to do so in the case of humor research. These issues are of some relevance in the interdisciplinary perspective of humor research, but a reader uninterested in these may safely resume reading in section 1.2.

There are some facts about research on humor that would discourage one from writing such a survey. To begin with, the usefulness of this particular survey might be questioned since reviews and syntheses of the literature on humor are available. The most authoritative is commonly held to be Piddington's (1933: 152-221) who lists and reviews 49 authors. The broadest

review is probably Bergler's (1956) who touches upon about 80 authors, although in a rather imprecise and questionable way. Milner (1972) depends on Piddington (1933) but adds several authors who published after 1933. A particularly helpful review is that of Keith-Spiegel (1972), which is probably the best known one, having appeared in the canonical Goldstein and McGhee (1972). McGhee (1979), Raskin (1985), and Morreall (1987) also provide reviews of the field. Nevertheless, none of these reviews of the literature exhibits a specifically linguistic perspective, i.e., attention to those aspects of a theory that are likely to be directly applicable to a linguistic analysis of humor. Raskin's survey comes the closest to this goal, but it was deliberately limited in scope (Raskin, p.c.).

Another problem facing a survey is that the body of literature concerning humor is so large that it is not pragmatically possible for any single scholar to cover it in its entirety. Goldstein and McGhee (1972) quote about 400 works concerning humor published between 1900 and 1971, but remarkably, their bibliography only covers the Anglo-Saxon world. Chapman and Foot (1977) include a bibliography of more than 30 pages. Davies' (1990) bibliography is longer than 50 pages (but also includes sources of examples). In its first four years of existence (1988-91), the journal *HUMOR* published 85 articles and reviewed 70 books, all of which had humor as their major topic. One could multiply the examples of the proliferation and variety of published research on humor.

To complicate matters further, contributions to humor research are widely diversified and range over a variety of disciplines, including (but not limited to) psychology, anthropology, sociology, literature, medicine, philosophy, philology, mathematics, education, semiotics, and linguistics. It is widely recognized that humor research is an interdisciplinary field and that its central problems are better understood if one takes into account diverse contributions that come from a variety of fields and subfields.

Therefore, it seems logical to cover some segments of the bibliography from different vantage points, of which linguistics is one, in order to provide the necessary specificity and manageability. It also should be kept in mind that the field of humor research is interdisciplinary brings up methodological issues related to the cross-disciplinary borrowing of methodologies and of criteria for evaluation of theories and proposals. It is important that the practitioners of other disciplines be aware that each discipline has its own

set of methodological requirements.¹

Raskin (1985: 51-53) addresses the same issue, albeit from a different point of view, i.e., the application of linguistic theory to the problem of humor, thus setting the issue in terms of “applied linguistics.” His point is that the problems to be solved should come from the field of humor, whereas the methodologies (and the evaluations) should come from the respective disciplines—in the present case, linguistics.

From another side of the issue, it appears very clear that the field of linguistic research on humor is plagued by repetition of acquired results by researchers unaware of previous research, and by the fact that often a scholar will make one contribution to the field, but will not follow up on his/her idea(s). This leads to duplication of effort, both on the part of those who repeat observations that have already been made and by those who have to read redundant texts. A representative survey may help to cure this particular ill.

A further reason for this endeavor is that some of the relevant material is not readily available in English, and in some cases is not available in any language other than, say, the original Latin.

1.1.2 Introduction for Linguists

Little of what follows in this first chapter is directly relevant to linguistics. One may then question the utility of having a survey at all. There are at least three reasons:

- if the problems to be solved by the linguistics of humor are to come from the field of humor research, only a survey of the literature may provide the necessary background for discussion;
- it is important to position the linguistic theories of humor in the broader context of the general theories of humor. For instance, the isotopy disjunction model (ch. 2), the structuralist analyses of puns (ch. 3), and even the semantic theory of humor proposed by Raskin (ch. 6) can

¹This claim can be taken either from a positivist point of view, as the requirement that a theory meet some given standards that vary among the disciplines, or from a “post-modern” stand as the rhetorical manipulation of cultural shibboleths. Be that as it may, a discipline must maintain its identity, especially when engaging in an interdisciplinary endeavor.

be seen as instances of the so-called “incongruity theories.” To what extent this is correct (not really), and how enlightening (not very) it is to view them in this light cannot be decided unless one is familiar with the general background of humor research;

- however small the amount of linguistically relevant research to be gathered in the survey of Western thought about humor may be it is not irrelevant, as the survey itself will show.

1.1.3 The Criteria of the Survey

Since this book is oriented primarily towards linguistic theories of humor, and secondarily towards the kinds of materials that might be useful from the perspective of linguistic research on humor, some remarkable exclusions have been necessary. For example, Pirandello’s (1908) book on humor will not be made the object of detailed analysis because it bears little interest from a linguistic perspective. Needless to say, such exclusions are not value judgements. The importance of Pirandello’s essay for the understanding of his career and of the theories of humor developed in the first quarter of the century puts him on par with Freud and Bergson, as the already considerable amount of critical literature suggests (see Asor Rosa (1982), Borsellino (1982), Cappello (1982), Dombroski (1982), Geerts (1982), Schulz-Buschhaus (1982), Caserta (1983), Guglielmino (1986), Roić (1988), De Marchi (1988), and references therein.)

1.1.4 The Survey

The order of works presented will be almost strictly chronological, and the subject will be subdivided into periods. The purpose of the review is not to provide original solutions to the problems, but rather to show how some questions concerning humor have evolved and how the answers have changed. The review is not, and should not be construed as, a history of humorous literature, or even of the theoretical thinking on humor (although it may provide some hints as to how the latter task could be performed).

Instead, some moments in the development of the critical discussion on humor through Western history will be discussed in the hope that the consideration of different positions will yield a coherent image of the development of

the issues in humor research. An interesting conclusion of the survey is that there are some strands of research that keep resurfacing in the scholarly literature. These ideas seem to be fairly independent of the authors' historical and cultural environment, and their "fashionability" shows little apparent motivation. These strands are often overlooked in scholarly surveys, and some effort will be put into highlighting some of them.

1.2 The Greeks

Analysis of the Greek texts is rendered problematic by several issues. Often classical scholars disagree as to what exactly the original text was, let alone its meaning. In what follows, an attempt will be made to ignore the philological debate as much as possible. The goal of this text is not a philological one, nor is it intended as a history of Greek humorous literature, but rather as a presentation of some important phases of the development of the theories of humor in ancient Greece.²

1.2.1 Plato

The literature is unanimous in considering Plato (427-347 BC) as the first theorist of humor (see Piddington (1933: 152); Morreall (1987: 10)). According to Plato, humor is "a mixed feeling of the soul" (Piddington 1933: 152), i.e., a mixture of pleasure and pain. The following passage from the *Philebus* gives an idea of Plato's position. Socrates is speaking:

...Our argument declares that when we laugh at the ridiculous qualities of our friends, we mix pleasure with pain, since we mix it with envy; for we have agreed all along that envy is a pain of the soul, and that laughter is pleasure, yet these two arise at the same time on such occasions. (*Philebus* 50A)

²The critical edition of the text which is followed is always indicated in the bibliography, and the editor's work is relied on to establish the text. Passages will be quoted in the English translation, along with the original, wherever the passage warrants enough interest. Quotations in the original texts have been referenced with the traditional methods in use in the field (for instance by Book and Chapter). If a translation is indicated in the bibliography it means that the English text quoted comes from the translation. The translations have been modified to make them more literal without explicit mention, whenever this author felt the necessity to do so.

In the *Philebus* Plato presents his theory of the “good,” which is found in a “mixture” and in a condemnation of excesses. The passages that concern humor (48c/50a) are taken from a review of various emotions like anger, pity, etc. Plato puts humor in the field of the “ridiculous.” Whoever does not follow the Delphic Oracle’s admonition “Know thyself,” or in other words, lacks self-knowledge, is defined as ridiculous. Without doubt, the ridiculous is seen by Plato as belonging to the category of *πουνηρία* (perversion, evil). Not surprisingly, Plato will list excessive laughter as one of the things to be avoided in his republic, because it is seen as an “overwhelming” of the soul. (*Republic* 388e *μεταβολή*).

Keith-Spiegel (1972) notes that Plato’s is the prototype of the ambivalence theory (i.e., theories that maintain that humor arises from the perception of two contrasting feelings). It is also the archetype of the aggression theories, with its mention of “envy” and its observation (a few lines before) that the ridiculous can happen to two categories of men, the strong and the feeble. Whereas the feeble cannot avenge themselves for jests, and are thus ridiculous, the strong, who can avenge themselves, are not ridiculous, but hateful. These observations, not lacking in wisdom, albeit “too fixed on the ungracious element in laughter” (Gregory 1923: 332), offer little interest from the perspective of linguistic analysis, but need to be addressed because of their historical relevance.

1.2.2 Aristotle

Aristotle’s (384-322 BC) main text on comedy in the *Poetics* has been lost³ (see below for a discussion). The extant passage on comedy is worth quoting in full:

As for Comedy, it is (as has been observed) an imitation of men worse than average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind of the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous is something wrong (*ἁμάρτεμά τι*) and a deformity not productive of pain (*ἀνώδυνον*) or harm (*οὐ φθαρτικόν*); the mask, for instance,

³The best discussion of Aristotle’s theory of humor is without challenge Plebe’s (1952: 7-30).

that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain. (*De Poetica* 1449a)

Aristotle's definition is (with Plato's) the archetype of the superiority theories (see below). In Aristotle's definitions, it is possible to note the influence of Plato's theory which envisages humor as a part of the "ugly" and in the "emphasis on the innocuousness of the laughably innocuous" (Gregory 1923: 333). Lanza (1987b) notes that Aristotle's definition is a definition of humor (the ridiculous) rather than comedy. Lanza also points out the parallel between Aristotle's definition of humor and the third part of the "story" (μύθος), the πάθος, or "violent act" which is precisely defined as φθαρτικόν, i.e. harmful.

The differences between Aristotle's and Plato's theory are interesting as well. Aristotle "recognizes the aesthetic principle in laughter" (Piddington 1933: 153). In addition, his attitude towards laughter is much more positive. Aristotle condemns only the excesses of laughter (*Nicomachean Ethics* IV 8 1128a), whereas Plato's condemnation is much more absolute. Moreover, Aristotle disagrees with Plato's claim that humor is an "overwhelming" of the soul. Aristotle sees it as a "stimulation" (Plebe 1952: 15-16) of the soul, which puts the listener in a mood of good will.

Aristotle also considers the practical use of humor in the *Rhetoric*. According to Aristotle, joking must serve the argumentation of the orator. The speaker must be careful to avoid inappropriate jokes, however. Irony is appropriate for the speaker, and buffoonery (βωμολοχία) should be avoided. (*rhetorica* III 18, 1419b).

In a little quoted passage, in the same book of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle sketches the first analysis of the mechanisms of humor, anticipating, as Morreall (1987: 14) notes, the theories of incongruity. While discussing liveliness and surprise in metaphors, Aristotle comments on several witticisms (ἄστεϊα), puns, and on unexpected occurrence of words, and concludes: "the speaker says something unexpected, the truth of which is recognized." (III, 11 1412b). It is also extremely tempting to see in a passage like the following an anticipation of the theories of the "resolution" of the incongruity (see Suls (1983), or Aubouin's (1948) "justification" (see 4.0.1) or Ziv's (1984) "local logic" (see 4.0.2): "In all these jokes, whether a word is used in a second sense or metaphorically, the joke is good if it fits the facts." (III, 11 1412b).

Whether or not these passages anticipate modern developments is, after all, unimportant, when one assesses Aristotle's influence.

The importance of Aristotle's influence on the theory of humor cannot be exaggerated. For one thing, Aristotle is responsible for the "comedy/tragedy" opposition (albeit the division of poetry in serious and humorous is to be found already in Plato (Plebe 1952: 14)) and the corresponding "comic/tragic," which will be challenged only much later (Volkelt (1905), quoted in Propp (1976); Chateau (1950); Baudin (ed.) 1985). When humor is defined in pragmatic terms as a text with a given perlocutionary effect, it appears that the opposite of humor is not the tragic, but the "serious" or the "un-funny." The opposition "comic/tragic" appears then to be historically determined and linked to the analytical categories of the Greek thinkers who introduced it.

Because Aristotle and Plato were implicitly describing humorous practices as they were in the Greece of the 5th/4th century BC, much of the theoretical elaborations of the classical Greek thinkers on humor matches the extant anthropological observations on humor in that era. A detailed description of humor in Sparta is provided by David (1989) and several comedies and fragments of comedies, jokes, etc. are mentioned by writers to provide enough evidence for the accuracy of the picture drawn by Plato and Aristotle: most of Greek humor consists in what today would be rather crude slapstick, obscenity and profanity, insults, and puns.

The opposition between comedy and tragedy has been the background of a large part of the theorizing about humor within the paradigm of aesthetics until its 20th century turn towards poetics (Russian formalism, structuralism, etc.). For instance, in a bibliography on the tragic in German aesthetics (Cometa 1990), one finds 19 entries dealing with the opposition between comedy and tragedy.

Aristotle's discussion of puns is made in passing during a discussion of metaphors. The "literal reading of a metaphorical statement" will be one of the techniques commonly listed when thinkers try to categorize humor in a pre-scientific way (e.g., Bergson (1901: 88); Elgozy (1979: 99-106); on taxonomies of puns, see ch. 3). More importantly, Aristotle's theory, and especially his partitioning of the subject matter and the correlation of comedy and humor, was the paradigm upon which any theory of humor was to be evaluated for the next twenty centuries—that is well into the 17th century.

The influence of Aristotelian theory (or of what was taken to be Aristotelian theory) on those authors who deal with comedy and humor will be one of the major concerns of the rest of this chapter.

1.2.3 The Peripatetic and Hellenistic Tradition

Theophrastus

Theophrastus' (ca 373 - ca 287 BC) contribution to the theory of humor is a major one, for his name is linked with the introduction of the "comic of character" (ἥθος) which has been one of the mainstays of dramatic theory. A thorough exposition of Theophrastus' thought is to be found in Plebe (1952: 31-48); see also Janko (1984: 48-52). Theophrastus was the author of two lost treatises on humor and comedy (Plebe 1952: 31) so his views on humor have reached us through quotations and fragments, mostly of his *Moral Characters*. The "characters theory" is a literary analysis of characters, such as the boasting warrior, the drunk, etc., that are common in comedy. Each character is identified with some behavior or weakness, and comedy is seen as the use of these characters.

Of clear Aristotelian inspiration (he was the successor of Aristotle in the Lyceum), Theophrastus is original in several points—for instance, in his claim that comedy is fictional, i.e. not connected to "verisimilitude" (Plebe 1952: 35-38), whereas Aristotle had maintained that comedy had to be realistic. For the same reasons for which the characters theory is important in literary studies, it bears little relevance from a linguistic point of view, since it does not deal with the linguistic aspects of humor. Theophrastus' contribution to the theory of humor has had little recognition and little significant mention of his ideas has been found in the "humor research" literature (with the all-important exclusion of the Elizabethan theory of humors).

The Pseudo-Longinus *On the Sublime*

As is to be expected, the Hellenistic transmission of classical thought on humor involves, some elements of reelaboration of Plato's and Aristotle's theories. An example is the famous treatise on the sublime (Περὶ ὑψους) attributed to Longinus (Arieti 1985), which claims that there is a form of comic sublime. The author (ca. 1st cent. AD) subscribes to the Aristotelian

view of the comic, which is classed as a “passion” (πάθος) but which, however, belongs to the pleasant, and thus is not tragic. The comic sublime is seen as a parallel of the “serious” sublime. The author notes that “hyperboles are not addressed only toward what is greater but also toward what is lesser” (*The Sublime*, XXXVIII 6; Arieti 1985: 191-192n). This idea will be found later in Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* VIII, 6, 67).

The Problem of the *Tractatus Coislinianus*

The so-called *Tractatus Coislinianus* is a short Greek text to be found in a manuscript containing mostly introductions to the comedies of Aristophanes. Its name comes from the fact that the manuscript belongs to the Coislin collection at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Common agreement dates the manuscript to the tenth century A.D. (Plebe (1952: 115-125); Janko (1984: 4-18) reproduces four pages of the manuscript).

The importance of this short text lies in the belief that it is a summary of Aristotle's thought on comedy. Because the second book of the *Poetics* was lost, a controversy has arisen concerning its relationship to the *Tractatus Coislinianus*. Simplifying a little, three positions are to be found: 1) those who claim that there was never a second book of the *Poetics* or that we know nothing, or close to nothing, about it (e.g., Lanza 1987a/b); 2) those who claim that the *Tractatus Coislinianus* is a “summary” of the lost book (e.g., Cooper 1923; Janko 1984), and hence can be used to reconstruct fully Aristotle's views on comedy, and 3) those who take a middle stand and use only some of the materials in the *Tractatus* to reconstruct Aristotle's thought (e.g., Plebe 1952).⁴

The reliability of the *Tractatus Coislinianus* as a source of Aristotle's thought (see Janko 1984: 42-90); (Lanza 1987b)) will not be addressed here. For the present purposes it is important only to note that a number of classifications of humor mechanisms (possibly related, or similar to the *Tractatus*) circulated between Aristotle's death and the writing of Cicero's *De Oratore*, either because they came directly from Aristotle or because they were Peripatetic elaborations on Aristotle's thought. Whether or not the ideas were really Aristotle's, nothing prevents researchers from thinking that Cicero

⁴The success of Umberto Eco's fictional work *The Name of the Rose*, whose plot revolves precisely around the missing second book, has done little to clarify the situation, as have those readers who confuse Eco's fictional work and his scientific one.

(who claims to have seen several treatises on comedy) might have been influenced by these, as there are numerous correspondences between the *Tractatus* and Cicero's text (see below).

The text of the *Tractatus Coislinianus* has been published by Cooper (1922), Janko (1984), Lanza (1987a) and is thus readily available. From the present perspective, the most interesting parts are the divisions of the types of humor. The relevant passage opens with "Laughter arises from the words (ἀπό τῆς λεξεῶς) and from the facts" (ἀπό τῶ πραγμάτων). Janko (1984: 25) translates these as "speech" and "actions"; these categories can be labelled "verbal" and "referential," respectively. Cicero's division (see below 1.3.1 is mirrored in the *Tractatus*'s division (but see Plebe (1952: 25n)). Plebe claims that Aristotle's original division was not bipartite⁵ but tripartite, and that Aristotle analyzed laughter as coming from a) puns, b) unexpected events, and c) "contrast between the development of the elocution and the facts" (Plebe 1952: 26). Plebe's claim is substantiated by a passage by Hermogenes (a Greek rhetorician, see Spengel's *Rhetores Graeci* (1853-56 I, 215, 440-42)).

In the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, verbal humor is subdivided into:

 "homonyms

 synonyms

 repetition

 paronyms

 by addition

 by subtraction

 diminutives (ὑποκόρισμα)

 deformations by the voice, and similar

 figures of speech (σχήμα λήξεως)" (Janko 1984: 70, Lanza 1987: 233).

⁵Aristotle deals only with two kinds of jokes, puns and unexpected occurrences of words.