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Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L.F. Nilsen. 2019. *The Language of Humor*. Cambridge: CUP

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Humor is an essential element in personal communication. While it is merely seen as a way to induce amusement, it also has a positive effect on the mental state of those using it and can improve their activity. Humor has therefore received a significant amount of attention from philosophers and researchers alike, covering fields as diverse as linguistics, psychology, and philosophy. If we can laugh at ourselves and take pleasure in life's absurdity, we tend to feel happier. We may forgive more readily, love more easily, feel more grateful, and have more fun. If we have a good sense of humor, we will have an overall feeling of peace because we are less likely to react with anger to everyday stresses and disappointments. If we could all laugh a little more, we would get along better.

The book under review is about various kinds of humor in today's communication. The authors, Alleen and Don Nilsen, make an attempt to understand this phenomenon in various academic areas. It consists of 25 chapters, and they follow one another logically. The authors use their own theory of "Features, functions and subjects of Humor" to analyze humor across all disciplines, as they provide a detailed account of the interaction of emotion, language play and jokes, culture and discourse. The book promotes an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural understanding of the complex issue of language of humor in different academic areas. It addresses the role and expression of humor across a wide variety of contexts, presents the reader with a balanced mix of theoretical and empirical discussions, and gives voice to researchers from various theoretical paradigms.

Each chapter closes with "Supplemental PowerPoints", which are available online, taking many of the insights from the chapters for further interactional discussions with the students. The first chapter "Introduction and overview"

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answers the question: “How can we determine a person’s “sense of humor”? It shows a well-designed and careful methodological approach, since it covers the features of humor, such as “ambiguity, exaggeration, understatement, hostility, incongruity, irony, or surprise of humor” (p. 15); the functions of humor – “to amuse, to tease, to test limits, to establish superiority or gain control” (p. 15); and the subjects of humor.

The part “Anthropology and Ethnic Studies” in Chapter 1 focuses on humor created by and about Native Americans, who are also referred to in the book with such terms as “First Nation” people and as “American Indians.” Humor differs from culture to culture and from individual to individual. On the one hand, it develops social cohesion, fosters positive relations, and increases the self-identification of the individual in relation to other ethnic groups; on the other hand, it functions as an acceptable and tolerated form of aggression in a particular society. The most common paradigms of humor in social discourse are ethnic jokes or cartoons that are often built on fixed ethnic/racial stereotypes leading to social categorization but also to fast and correct decoding of semantic information by an audience.

Chapter 3 “Art” represents Arthur Koestler’s (1964¹) descriptions of artistic originality, scientific discovery, and comic, as well as expressionism, minimalism, and the Dada movement. Other items include humorous architecture and a history of artists who have incorporated humor, irony, parody, and /or satire into their work. In Chapter 4 “Business” two kinds of humor are explored: the use of humor inside businesses and what businesses do “to develop positive feelings between themselves and their customers” (p. 18). Some activities are offered to create a better atmosphere inside a company, to get acquainted with employees and figure out ways to relate to them.

“Computer Science” (Chapter 5) focuses on how computers and other new technologies are revolutionizing the creation and distribution of humor and the way witticisms, as well as art and photographs, can be sent simultaneously to millions of people. The chapter also discusses the idea of “recycling” new words with the appearance of new concepts (e.g., “Godzillagram” meaning “huge packet”; “Munchkin” standing for “a teenage techie”; “Trojan Horse” denoting “a program that infiltrates a computer”; “Tree Killers” from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*).

Chapter 6 “Education and Child Development” is devoted to what and how new kinds of information are taught to students from pre-schools to sophisticated graduate programs. Humorous content was found to have better results than non-humorous content in a learning paradigm. Studies advocate humorous techniques to be used in educational settings.

“Gender Studies” (Chapter 7) explores a vital issue of sexual harassment – some of it under the guise of humor – which recently became a huge political issue, and the idea of using “humorous cartoons and quips to bring up the subject” (p.20)

¹ Koestler, Arthur. 1964. *The Act of Creation*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Patriarchy has always prevailed as a symbol of authority and power ... Social statuses and traditional cultural roles have played a significant part in determining the upper hand that males have over women. It is also important to note that all of the visual or literary evidence that is present corresponding to humour, is created by men either on women, or at the expense of women (Sanghavi 2019: 52).

In chapter 8 “Geography”, the authors discuss the formation of ideas by means of humor, the way they attain their meanings in various sociocultural situations. The research themes and approaches in the geographical studies of humor are relatively often entangled with sociopolitical problematics (Ridanpää 2014).

Chapter 9 “Gerontology” covers the question of humor about old age which is undergoing considerable changes. The therapeutic benefit of humor and laughter on the physical and psychological health of elderly people is of vital importance nowadays.

“History” (Chapter 10) describes the many recent developments in humor about minorities and the kinds of humor that became popular through television sitcoms and professional comedians. The authors refer to these jokes as an example of “survival humor”, because they relieve the tension that is part of everyday life, which includes becoming acquainted not only with different people but also with new customs and technologies. Humor in its broad sense, including irony, sarcasm, satire, and grotesque, is an important reflective and critical tool of culture, and therefore it is widely represented throughout history.

Chapter 11 “Journalism” focuses on the idea that the existence of social media covers all the news, but still local papers attempt to put some comic strips relying on both the kind of humor that grows out of daily life and out of national and world politics. From a communications approach, messages of humor often require individuals to have at least some prior knowledge of the subject matter being discussed. They are more readily accepted by those with shared knowledge and shared emotional constructs who can collectively decipher their meanings (Chiaro 1992, Oring 1992).

Chapter 12 “Law” talks about the genre of anti-lawyer jokes. They are popular because many people resent paying money to lawyers when they are already in some kind of trouble. Moreover, it reveals examples of reprinting of laws that are basically humorous.

In Chapter 13 “Linguistics” the authors focus on verbal humor, whether it is intentional or accidental. This section of the book is especially topical since linguists work with humor in many ways, because part of their training deals with learning about other languages and other cultures. This additional knowledge often lets them recognize the differences between accidental and purposely created humor and gives them more insight than most people have into the many meanings of sentences.

“Literature” (Chapter 14) shows different approaches to “literary humor” since there are as many different approaches to literature as there are people creating,

reading and interpreting literature. The authors give several examples of literary metaphor, literary allusions, gothic humor, ironic humor, Juvenalian satire, Horatian satire.

Chapter 15 “Medicine and Health” covers an important issue of using black humor as a form of coping behavior as well as paradoxical humor of medical discourse being a playful form of psychological resistance to the disease, particularly in critical situations. There exists a humour-health hypothesis according to which “there is a link between humour and health and currently that link is perceived to be a positive one which may occur by separate processes, giving rise to both direct and indirect relationships” (McCreddie & Wiggins 2008). Humour is “not about whether we can tell a joke or not: it is complex, challenging, context-dependent and an integral part of who we are and how we interact with others” (ibid.).

Chapter 16 “Music” continues the discussion of the idea of humor in professional discourse drawing the reader’s attention to the fact that many of the best comedians were first trained as musicians and continue using the skills they learned in their public performances. Even in serious and sad operas, composers often rely on music to provide comic relief.

In Chapter 17 “Names” the authors show how names can go through processes of generalization and/or specialization. They explore how the same name can have positive connotations for one person and negative connotations for someone else, proving the fact that proper names have national and cultural implications.

“The Performing Arts – Theater, Dance, and Music” (Chapter 18) continues speculating about the language of humor in this area. Artworks that make us smile and laugh are seen across galleries and art fairs. Laughing in front of an artwork can help, contributing to the joke of which the spectator can be the victim. Recognizing that humor and laughter are social activities also means acknowledging that they hold potential to break existing stereotypes.

Chapter 19 “Philosophy – Theories of Humor as a Philosophical Issue” focuses on varying philosophies about humor. The complexity of the problem makes philosophy an ideal locus for the study of humor. Philosophy is inherently interdisciplinary, since it is simply

the activity of critical reflection on what we know and on the meanings of the concepts we use. Philosophy serves as an incubator for theories of humor, working with input from all kinds of sources. Receptive to data of all kinds, philosophers critically examine and interpret what we learn in light of their particular reflections on some of the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of being human (Bardon 2005: 462).

Chapter 20 “Physical Ed and Physical Humor” discusses the correlation between physical bodies and humor. The way our bodies move – clowns in circuses and cheerleaders and mascots at athletic events – make an audience smile or respond in some other positive way.

In Chapter 21 “Political Humor”, the focus then shifts to political communication that utilizes humor, offering cognitive and affective pleasures that often lead to laughter. This approach aims to enhance information dissemination, promote distinction, and evoke sympathetic political engagement with a specific ideological or distributive agenda, as opposed to the agenda of rivals. Political humor does not use political subjects primarily as means for amusement but rather is substantial political action conducted through amusing means (Basu & Zekavat 2021). Scholars stress the conservative ways in which political humor relies upon and redoubles existing shared expectations at the expense of errant targets, they also affirm the radical ways in which it can sponsor cognitive shifts and thereby liberate human energies (see Billig 2005, Lockyer & Pickering 2005).

“Psychology” (Chapter 22) centers around the personality of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, who came up with the idea that telling and responding to jokes looks like dreaming. A modern scholar, John Morreall, specialist in humor, talks about “Comic Vision” of life vs. “Tragic Vision” of life (Morreall 1999).

Chapter 23 “Religion” explains viewing religion and mythology in Western culture: with myths people feel free to create and enjoy humor, while with religion most people have ambivalent feelings and are not quite sure what territory is permissible for joking.

Chapter 24 ‘Rhetoric and Composition’ treats writing related to obituary and funeral humor, which is mostly found in the obituaries of celebrities. It also treats other kinds of humor that are related to religion and maybe to death.

Chapter 25 “Sociology” discusses the idea of humor as a quintessentially social phenomenon. Jokes and other humorous utterances are “a form of communication that is usually shared in social interaction. These humorous utterances are socially and culturally shaped, and often quite particular to a specific time and place. The topics and themes people joke about are generally central to the social, cultural, and moral order of a society or a social group” (Kuipers 2008).

The book is well-researched and covers the ground of language of humor at a very high level. In the 25 chapters, all the main issues revolving around the language of humor are carefully and vividly analyzed, always with reference to the relevant literature and with numerous examples. The book makes a strong contribution to the fields of pragmatics, philosophy, linguistics, mass media, gender studies, literature, political discourse, and intercultural communication. The topic is valuable, the research is admirable, and the authors’ knowledge is impressive.

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