Book review

Bell, Nancy (2015). *We Are Not Amused: Failed Humor in Interaction.*
Humor Research 10. **Berlin, Boston, Munich: De Gruyter Mouton. 184 pp.**

In her recent book, Nancy Bell has taken up a novel and promising area of research, namely the topic of failed humour. This work represents the first comprehensive study dedicated to failed humour, placing it in the broader category of miscommunication. Bell describes the different levels of interaction on which humour can fail, the strategies that speakers and hearers use to avoid and manage failure, and last but not least brings to the fore the important role humour plays in social action.

Failed humour is a subject that has not yet been investigated to the extent it deserves. This can be partly attributed to the fact that humour researchers are still struggling to fully account for the universal but very varied phenomenon of humour, and are thus not ready yet to tackle the instances where humour fails, considering this a more marginal aspect of humour research. In addition to that, humour (and thus also the failure of it) has for long been seen as a "non-serious" research topic, which has hindered its recognition in the academia. However, as Bell has demonstrated in her previous studies (Bell 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2013 and elsewhere), failed humour is no doubt an important part of (humour) communication, providing insight about the social norms underlying all linguistic behaviour and showing that people are willing to take considerable risks in terms of face and social status when attempting at a joke. As the examples in this book amply demonstrate, the study of failed humour should thus reserve an established place in humour research. Studying utterances that are intended to amuse but do not succeed in doing so (see Bell's definition for failed humour on p. 4) contribute also to the understanding of how and why humour works in general. I cannot but agree with the author as she states that "no theory of humour can be complete without taking into account its failure" (6).

The book is meant for those interested in the study of humour in general, and humour researchers will be happy to find plenty of references to previous studies of humour. Above all, incongruity theories from the so-called triad of humour theories should be reviewed in light of the conversational material presented in this book. Bell has focused on the kind of data that is not very often used in humour research (as canned jokes offer an easiest — but no doubt limited — approach to the topic), but constitutes what people actually do when they use humour in their daily communication. Secondly, the book will benefit linguists who will definitely find insights into the intricacies of conversational interaction. The author's methodological toolkit comes from the area of applied linguistics and encompasses a number of methods that are mostly qualitative in nature, such as interactional sociolinguistics, discourse and conversation analysis. From time to time Bell has also turns to quantitative data, for example, in the chapter about managing failure in interaction. Her data comes from a number of sources, motivated by acquiring as wide range of data as possible. In fact, this is a benefit for the analysis, as the following chapters show. She refers to (1) observations of interactions, recorded in fieldnotes, (2) self-reports in the form of diaries, (3) data published in

previous studies, (4) extracts from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), collected through searching for key words identifying a failure of a humorous intent (*just/only kidding*, etc.), (5) scripted interactions from the media (e.g., movies), and (6) data gathered from elicitation experiments, where a joke prone to fail was presented to unsuspecting subjects. There were no limitations made to the data collection besides the criterion of omitting children's humour and humour that succeeds in the moment but later fails (for another audience or after reconsidering the point of the joke). For the kind of applied linguistics research Bell aims at, audio or video recordings could be backed up by interviews with the speakers and audience members to identify the intentions of both sides involved in the interaction. As such data is not easy to attain, the idea to include multiple data sources pays off. At the same time, her data, however broad, does not yet allow for making conclusions about gender, ethnic or other group differences or people with different personality characteristics or psychological profile. This can and certainly will be addressed in research inspired by Bell's work.

The structure of the book is logical and easy to follow. Helpful introductions and conclusions in the beginning and end of every chapter neatly wrap up the focal points. The introduction is followed by the conceptualisation of failed humour in chapter two, placing that in the larger model of failed communication in chapter three. Chapters four and five analyse potential triggers of humour failure, first those inherent to all communication (chapter four) and then those particular to humour communication (chapter five). Humour management is the focus of chapter six, which in chapter seven is set to a wider context of social norms and values.

The study yields to a number of valuable conclusions, summed up in chapter eight. These are centred around the social norms and values triggering humour failure, comparison between communication failure in serious and non-serious discourse, the systematic, but very complicated strategies of repair and failure management, and the context (most notably the interlocutors' social relationship) that influences the way people react to failed humour. A number of fascinating details that did not make it to the official conclusion remain to be found in the text, including the observation that creativity, however valued a characteristic, should have its limits, because humour that is too creative often fails. She also reports that people do not hold back in expressing their displeasure at humour they consider lame, responding with retorts that can be downright aggressive. What is more, the probability of an aggressive response rises together with the degree of intimacy between the interlocutors. One would expect more polemisation with other, adjoining or parallel theories (e.g., Billig's 2005 ideas about unlaughter, which is mentioned in passing on p. 159). A nice example is given in the last chapter, where Bell briefly introduces Wolfson's (1988) bulge theory of social interaction and discusses her results from the study of failed humour to the backdrop of Wolfson's theory. At times the reader would expect more details and elaborations on previous findings from other (psychological, sociological, folkloristic) studies that would make the text more easily approachable from other disciplines than linguistics.

On the whole, the book provides a foundation from where new questions can be derived from and on which to build further research. Given the novelty of the topic, there are plenty of directions to move towards. Bell lists some of these in her last chapter about future research (168), but the list is by far not complete — in fact the chapter feels much too short compared to the potential of the subject matter.

Bell's research vividly shows that trouble spots in communication can be particularly revealing when we think of social norms, roles and ideas about humour. Folk ideas about humour and its failure are strong, but they cannot capture the process in full detail, which makes her systematic, empirical enquiry reveal unexpected and even counterintuitive functions of language. Bell elegantly achieves what she sets out to do — to introduce a new interesting

topic that provides valuable insight into the phenomenon of humour. By addressing a wide range of questions, she marks down potential areas of fruitful research, which no doubt she will set out herself to answer, among others who are convinced, after reading this book, about the usefulness of the study of failed humour.

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