Book review

Constantinescu Mihaela-Viorica, Măda Stanca & Săftoiu Răzvan (eds.) (2020). *Romanian Humour*. Kraków: Tertium.

Romanian Humour is the fifth volume of the series *Humour and Culture* of the Cracow Tertium Society. It includes twenty-one chapters by sixteen authors organized in five sections: *An overview of Romanian humour*, *Humour in the media*, *Humour in everyday conversation and institutional interaction*, *Ethnic humour* and *Humorous approaches in literature and cultural studies*. The texts within gravitate around the following disciplines: humour studies, pragmatics, discourse analysis, literary studies, social studies, translation studies and psychology.

In the first part of the volume, *An overview of Romanian humour*, in the chapter titled "Romanian humour in a nutshell", Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu and Violeta Rus trace the beginnings and the present-day research on the various manifestations of humour in jokes, cartoons, literature, television shows, the press, stand-up performances, etc. Research on political humour, targeting the former communist regime and politicians of today, parliamentary humour, produced by politicians from the late nineteenth century up to the present day, conversational humour, ethnic humour, humour in the workplace, humour and translation; all represented, with a few exceptions, in the present volume. A great part of previous research – numerous articles in academic journals and monographs – has been published in Romanian.

In "An overview of individual differences in humour-related traits in Romania", Sonja Heintz, Stanca Măda and Răzvan Săftoiu discuss how humour is conceptualised as a personality trait and a psychological state through the concept of cheerfulness, as a character strength, as benevolent and corrective humour and thorough the concept of gelotophobia. Standard questionnaires for each trait and state were completed by respondents and then statistically assessed. The results show the specificities of the Romanian context compared to humour measurement in other cultures. Romanian samples indicate higher seriousness, more corrective humour and higher awareness of the laughter of others.

In the second part of the volume, *Humour in the media*, Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu, in the chapter "Framing war in the humorous press", explores how the traumatising events of the Russian-Ottoman war of 1977-1878 and Romania's involvement in the war are humorously represented in a number of magazines of the time. The preferred theoretical perspective on humour in the chapter is the interplay between the incongruity, the superiority/disparagement and the relief theories. In funny stories, jokes, cartoons, short news reports and telegrams, the targets of the press are mostly Romania's opponents and allies, and the predominant types of humour are ridicule and satire brought about by parody. The humour techniques mostly employed in the analysed texts are faulty reasoning, wordplay, upgrading (adopting the high-register tone of a news agency report in the description of an insignificant event), the sublime reduced to the mundane, etc. A conclusion is reached that the humorous framing of the war at the macro-level functions as a morale booster for the receiver of the humorous text. Humour analysis is preceded by an accurate account of the political context on the Balkans before, during and after the war as well as the growth and the spread of humorous publications in Romania.

Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu is also the author of "Pictorial-verbal interplay in Romanian cartoons", in which she examines the complementarity and interdependence between the verbal and the pictorial components of Romanian cartoons from the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In her theoretical approach, Constantinescu makes use of the two basic relations between text and image: the anchorage relation, when the text (cf. the presumed supremacy of the verbal code) enables the interpretation of the image, and the relay relation, when text and image are interdependent and each facilitates the interpretation of the other (Barthes 1977). Analysed are editorial and playful cartoons that address political, social and moral issues through their targets: the freedom of the press, suicide and criminality rate, a mother-in-law perceived as a cat, and a fortune hunter. The caption under the cartoons introduces the targeted person/issue and the pictorial representation is the trigger of humour. The political and the social context of the historical period, the importance of publishing (political) cartoons and the influential position of cartoonists in society is given due consideration. What is missing in the two chapters however is information about the approximate number of texts and cartoons studied and viewed before selecting some for analysis.

Stanca Măda is the author of three contributions to the volume in this section. In "Interpreting humorous adverts in online media", she focuses on how the public debate campaign, launched in the UK in 2013, in regard to the lifting of restrictions for Romanians to work in the country from January 2014, is reflected in the media. And, more specifically, a focus on humorous adverts in *The Guardian* webpage posted by readers as a reaction to public fear of an approaching wave of Romanian immigrants. Their message to the Romanians, derived from short comments that describe life in the UK only in negative terms, is to stay home. In response to *The Guardian*, the Romanian newspaper *The Thought* launched a befitting public campaign under the title *Why don't you come over?* While British humorous adverts are ambiguous between *Life in Britain is no good* as a put-off and as an earnest statement, Romanian ones are uncontroversial in their interpretation: *Life here has its advantages*.

Stanca Măda, in "Building identity in humorous media interactions", analyses conversational humour in television shows. The chapter aims at showing how journalists use conversational humour in the construal of their identity in relation to the participants present in the interaction, on the one hand, and their audience, on the other. The text revolves around conversational humour, social identity and social functions of humour. Representative bibliography is cited to frame the analysis theoretically. Seven transcribed conversations are studied from two television talk shows, selected from sixty-five hours of television shows and news reports. The participants in the first five excerpts are the same: a male presenter of the show, two male journalists and a former female top model as guests. The presenter and the journalists dominate the conversation (of the thirty-two turns, some of which consist of only one utterance, the former top model is allowed only four). In giving advice, male participants reproduce the dominant stereotype of what it takes to become a female star in ten steps, which is the topic of the show, and the top model endorses the stereotype when agreeing to what the men say. The female presenters in the second show are friendlier to their male guest. In spite of the author's claim that the presenters and the journalists in the shows know their audience, it is questionable if the construal of a positive identity in a television talk show is as successful as in the context of stand-up comedy, where good comedians are in full control of their audience in live performances.

In "Construction and negotiation of humorous meaning in radio journalistic texts", Stanca Măda dwells on infotainment in radio morning shows that combines "the informative and entertaining functions of journalistic texts". In this hybrid format, listeners are expected to be

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familiar with news from reliable media sources; otherwise, they might fail to recognise the journalist's humorous intention and could mistake parodic news for serious news. Ideally, the genre allows for distancing from the reported events and elaboration and humorous recontextualisation of the news. In the excerpts analysed, there is an incongruity in the reported news prior to their parodic comments and reinterpretation.

The chapter "Comical intertextual memes as a tool in cultures of protest" by Adrian Stoicescu is about internet memes as reflections on protests in 2017 and 2018, prompted by the attempts of the parties in power to decriminalise political corruption as well as dissatisfaction and disagreement with the government's policies. The selected internet memes function as an ongoing in-group and out-group conversation on the political situation and the actions and personalities of the politicians and the president. Since internet memes are a relatively new topic of research, some clarifications have to be made in regard to the use of terminology. A *viral artefact* is taken to mean any text, image, song, etc., spreading on the internet without transformation (Shifman 2014: 58). A *culture meme* spreads "from brain to brain" by behavioural imitation (Dawkins 1976) and *internet memes* are multimodal artifacts, transformative reappropriations of existing texts, created collectively and spreading and circulating on social networks (Milner 2016: 5). These terms are not always explicitly differentiated in the chapter.

In "Subtitling humour: The case of *phrase play*", Raluca Sinu dwells on the challenges translators face and the solutions they resort to in the translation of paradoxically modified literary texts, songs, films, proverbs and anti-proverbs in Romanian in the television subtitles of two American sitcoms, *Seinfeld* and *Nanny*. As stated, rendering such texts into the target language is not possible without the reconstruction of the original text. This is necessary, since there are clues to the original not only in the dialogue, but in the image and the music as well. Results support the findings of other translation studies on phrase play.

In part three, *Humour in everyday conversation and institutional interaction*, in the chapter "On the sequential organisation and functions of laughter", Răzvan Săftoiu studies the way laughter is used in three types of small talk: "keep in touch", "before business talk" and "transitional" talk in naturally occurring face-to-face interactions and phone calls. In addition to the listeners' spontaneous laughter as an appreciation and evaluation of the speaker's utterance as laughable or their declining to do so, laughter has other functions. Participants negotiate laughter and, when they laugh, it may set up the tone of the conversation, and laughter may be interpreted as a turn in its own right. In the study, the following functions of laughter are singled out: establishing common ground, confirming established social relationships or one's humorous intention, avoiding speaking on a controversial issue or break social conventions. The author contends that laughter is used by participants as a communicative and regulatory mechanism in the sequential organisation of the interaction.

In the chapter titled "Sources and functions of humour in workplace settings", and by looking from a pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspective and employing participatory methodology, Stanca Măda focuses on the importance of humour in managing interpersonal relationships and resolving work-related issues in Romanian companies. Analysed are canned jokes, most of them one-liners, represented by incongruously transformed proverbs, sayings and slogans from the communist period, distributed in the modern context via e-mail or conspicuously displayed on office walls. Canned jokes are also told during work and office breaks either independently or inserted in the unfolding conversation usually to highlight an idea or opinion previously expressed. Conclusions are made about the typical social functions of conversational humour at the workplace: it can be cooperative or non-cooperative, supportive

or challenging, used to criticise those in higher posts, to establish solidarity among peers or to build a harmonious atmosphere in stressful work environments.

Gabriela Chefneux's aim in the chapter on "Humour in institutional talk: A comparative analysis" is to compare the way humour is used in three different Romanian institutions: a public high school, a private company for training courses for adults, and a private trading company. The chapter begins with a detailed introduction of research on institutional and organisational humour and on humorous genres. Three important categories are explored in the collected data: humour initiators, functions of humour and types of humour. In the three institutional contexts, social relations are asymmetrical: inspector and high school principal, on the one hand, and teachers, on the other; company manager and employees; regional trainer and trainees. In the high school context, humour is initiated by the teachers in order to indirectly criticise and mitigate embarrassment. Talk in the training company is dominated by the trainer who uses humour to ingratiate himself, to motivate the participants and to mitigate power. Talk in the trading company is less formal and humour is equally used by both parties. In the three institutional settings, the function and the type of humour are marked for institutional position and role.

In the chapter "Romanian parliamentary debates: Humorous action and interaction", Răzvan Săftoiu focuses on humour in parliamentary debates as a form of institutional discourse that is grounded in rules and restrictions and whose seriousness is generally presupposed because of the legislative function of the institution. Nevertheless, members of the Romanian parliament use humour as a communicative strategy. In the chapter, a distinction is made between humorous action and humorous interaction. By *humorous action* the author refers to canned jokes, allusions, intertextuality and quotations, "prefabricated' units", whose targets are context-independent. When reproduced by the members of parliament, they create a relaxed atmosphere or amuse participants. *Humorous interaction* is understood to involve spontaneous puns as humour triggers, which, if removed from context, may fail to be appreciated as humorous. In the excerpts analysed, humour is also used as a strategy in the debate of serious political issues. In addition to the target, which is usually (a) political opponent(s), the audience of parliamentary humour are fellow party members and (prospective) voters.

In part four, *Ethnic humour*, in the chapter "Ethnic identity in jokes with Hungarians and Romanians", Timea Prosan and Noemi Tudor discuss regional ethnic humour or how each of the two ethnic groups in Transylvania –Hungarians and Romanians– stereotypes the other group. The authors trace the historical and the social context and its influence on ethnic stereotyping. In spite of the fact that Hungarians and Romanians have lived in peace and agreement for centuries, the jokes conceal negative dispositions and attitudes, such as rejection of the other group and each group claiming ownership over Transylvania. The analysis shows that Romanians joke more often about Hungarians than Hungarians about Romanians: Hungarians prefer in-group humour about their own world of families, animals and friends.

Violeta Ioana Rus, in the chapter "A multimodal analysis of conventional humorous structures on sensitive topics within rural communities in Romania", deals with jokes, wedding shouts and funeral songs of a rural community speaking its own dialect. Of special interest are the last two genres, not performed at weddings and funerals any longer, but remembered and told by informants the author was able to record. The wedding shouts analysed address either the godfather or the bride and have symbolic sexual connotations. Lamentation songs were usually performed by the old women who knew the people in the village and their foibles. As shown, humour might be triggered by the funeral context itself, in which the mournful songs were performed. The contribution of paralanguage to the humorous effect of the texts is also taken into consideration.

In the chapter "Histories and signs: on semiotic manipulation in Romanian folk jokes" Romulus Bucur takes on a folkloristic meta-analysis of the jokes studied. The author reduces the joke scenario to action and interaction; in regard to action, the characters are assigned the roles of Agent, Anti-Agent and Spectator and, in regard to culture (same traditions-values/different traditions-values), the roles of the Insider and the Outsider. The Insider's cleverness usually wins over the Outsider's formal education.

In part five of the volume, *Humorous approaches in literature and cultural studies*, Cristina-Ioana Dima's chapter, titled "The Philosopher's smile and the Devil's laughter: Values of humour in Dimitrie Cantemir's writings", is dedicated to the first novel in Romanian literature, *Hieroglyphic History*, written in the early eighteenth century by the Moldavian prince Dimitrie Cantemir. The historical figures and characters are symbolically depicted as animals and birds and so are the three territories referred to in the novel. The narrator sees the world upside-down, "dominated by evil and laughter". The humour in the novel, according to the author, is of the Renaissance carnivals – allegorical, parodic and satirical.

In "Dadaism – the art of kynical and cynical humour", Rodica Maria Ilie dwells on the contradictory aesthetic, social and cultural dimensions of Dadaism in the early twentieth century. Dadaists' understanding of freedom is an utter denial and rejection of the existing methods of artistic expression. What the movement proposes instead, in the manifestos of Tristan Tzara, referred to in the chapter, is transgression of genres, styles and language. The cynical component of discontinuity and destruction, interspersed with irony and self-irony, is balanced with a kynical component, a concept introduced by Sloterdijk (2001) – one of realism, productivity and wisdom that is playful and childish.

In "Why Ion Luca Caragiale lost his sense of humour and how the communists brought it back", Eugen Istodor discusses the reception of Caragiale's satirical works in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, during the communist era and after the democratic changes in Romania in 1989. Humour as a social phenomenon is conceptualised as a relation between a humour creator/performer and a community with its social codes and cultural practices that are historically bound. Additionally, the reception of satire as a social act is seen as dependent on the institutions, the media and the educational level of the public. During communism, Caragiale's works were reinterpreted to serve the ideology and the propaganda of the new political system and the doctrines of social realism in the arts. In the present context, as stated, Caragiale is of interest to researchers and not accessible enough on the internet, which is the major source for information for the new millennium generation.

In "Intertextual irony and humour in Romanian postmodern literature", Liliana Hoinărescu focuses on intertextuality and parody as a strategy in the achievement of irony and humour in the *Onomastic Dictionary* and the *General Bibliography* by Mircea Horia Simionescu. Reporting and quoting as discursive strategies in dictionaries and bibliographies are employed for the recontextualisation and the imitation of scientific knowledge to create an absurd and illogical world. As expected, intertextuality and parody in such texts place high demands on the reader for the appreciation of the author's humorous intention.

In "Humour in intercultural encounters", Elena Buja explores aspects of intercultural and interethnic humour when one culture or one ethnic group imposes a dominant way of life on another – in the chapter, it is the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the eighteenth century. Analysed are excerpts from James Morier's works *Ayesha, the Maid of Kars* and *The Adventures of Nasreddin Hodja*. In *Ayesha*, cultural and ethnic differences lead to everyday incongruous encounters in which the characters misunderstand or misinterpret the other. Nasreddin Hodja, who is a folk personage in most Balkan cultures, builds a bridge between/among cultures with his wittiness.

In *Romanian Humour*, in addition to the various perspectives on humorous genres, targets, functions of humour, etc., in different settings, equal attention is paid to the respective social, political, cultural and historical context in which humour is experienced and shared. Undeniably, the volume is a significant contribution not only to humour research in Romania, made accessible now in English, but to humour research in general as well.

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