

Book review

Gironzetti, Elisa (2022). *The Multimodal Performance of Conversational Humour*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

The Multimodal Performance of Conversational Humour is a book written by Elisa Gironzetti, Assistant Professor in Spanish Applied Linguistics at the University of Maryland. The book presents in an organic fashion a series of studies conducted by the author on the multimodal performance of humour in conversation. The focus is specifically on the role of smiling (manually annotated) and gaze (measured through eye-tracking) in the process of negotiating conversational humour, investigated by combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The volume sets the basis for a model of humour (multimodal) performance that can complement the currently available models of humour competence (e.g. the General Theory of Verbal Humor; Attardo & Raskin 1991). All the work presented is carefully contextualised in the broadest panorama of communication, social interaction, multimodal meaning, psychology of emotional expression, and behavioural alignment studies. The insights from all these disciplines are exploited for rich and multifaceted interpretations of all the results presented. My first personal comment about the book is therefore that the title is highly misleading: a reader will find in it much more than what the title promises!

The book opens with a thorough and interdisciplinary review of the literature related to the study of humour and its potential cues. The starting point is the need to consider multiple modalities in the study of interaction, generally, and in humour performance, more specifically. The author offers a review of humour research from a linguistic, cognitive and conversation analysis perspective together with the definition of three main types of humour observable in conversation: punchlines, jab lines, and irony. This is then followed by a second part reviewing works on linguistic and non-linguistic humour cues. Focused sections are dedicated to the (complex) role of prosody and laughter as cues of humour, and to studies investigating specifically ironic intentions cues.

The second Chapter consists of two main parts. In the first part, the data collection procedure on which all the studies that will be presented are based is described: conversational recording setting and eye tracking instrumentation installation. The corpus consists of six video-recorded naturalistic dyadic interactions, three of which involve participants with a North-American background and three involve participants with a Mexican background. The difficulty in coupling natural interaction recording with the use of technical instrumentation and the precautions to be taken in the experimental set-up are discussed, and the trade-off of such a combination is considered in detail. In the second part of the chapter, the author dives into the heart of the subject of interest presenting an overview of all the studies that will be presented in detail in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 begins with a review of the study of smiling. This spans from presenting smiling as an emotional expression, to a clear illustration of debates in the field of emotion studies. In particular, the author focuses on the debate opposing the Basic Emotion Theory (Ekman 1992), for which facial expression are direct signs of underlying emotional states, and the Behavioural Ecology View (Fridlund 1994), for which facial expressions are communicative displays

produced for the interlocutor, therefore not correlated to underlying emotional states. The author then illustrates how the objective study of smiling has been approached in the past, focusing especially on the Facial Action Coding System (Ekman & Friesen 1978), a framework for describing facial expressions based on the activation of individual facial muscle units. This constitutes the basis for the holistic Smiling Intensity Scale (SIS) elaborated and applied by the author to quantify smile intensity on a 5-point scale. The SIS scheme is then applied on the collected corpus in order to investigate the relationship between smiling intensity and humour performance at the individual level. The main results point to the fact that humour is not cued by smiling *per se*, but rather by an increase in its intensity, regardless of cultural background and gender. Of interest is also the finding that subjects, when presented with utterances in isolation, cannot identify smile-speech in short audio-clips.

In Chapter 4, the use of smiling as an interpersonal semiotic sign to negotiate humour between interlocutors is investigated. A detailed literature review is presented, linking studies on behavioural alignment and comprehensively discussing not only empirical findings from previous literature, but also the theoretical accounts proposed to explain alignment occurrence and its effects on the interactions. The main results of the study show that the use of sustained smiling (more than 1 sec) from participants (one or both) is more frequent than peak smiling patterns in framing humour and that often interlocutors converge on smiling during humorous segments. A highly interesting observation is that the smiling negotiation is not necessarily initiated by the speaker, but also by the interlocutor. Longer smiling synchrony is observed during humour compared to non-humour portions of the dialogue, often even before the delivery of the humorous phrase. This highlights the fact that smiling synchrony is not just a mere reaction to the interlocutor's actions, but a potential signal of enhanced cooperation supporting negotiation. The results, therefore, corroborate a view of dialogue as a synergic system (Fusaroli et al. 2014), where interlocutors do not align to each other blindly, but as a function of context and reciprocal conversational negotiations at play.

Chapter 5 focuses on the study of eye gaze in conversational humour. It opens with a review of the methods used to track eye gaze over the centuries, followed by a synthesis of studies on how people look at each other's faces, on the role of gaze in social coordination and conversation managing (e.g. turn-taking), which is concluded with the presentation of possible explanatory theories about gaze aversion. The main results of the study concern the observation of increased gaze aversion during humorous sequences as compared to baseline. A closer examination of sub-types of humour reveals distinct eye-gaze patterns, particularly in relation to irony, which are discussed in integration with the observed smiling patterns.

Chapter 6 presents the analysis of three cases of failed humour that occurred in the corpus combining the observation of smiling and gaze behaviours. The discussion of the data is preceded by a detailed review of the available literature on failed humour, from a multimodal perspective and in relation to alignment. The case studies presented suggest that behavioural misalignment might be a recurrent pattern in failed humour. Building on previous work highlighting how humour can fail at different levels (recognition, understanding, appreciation), and integrating the pattern of (mis)alignment observed in her data, Gironzetti proposes a four-level graded taxonomy of failed humour: *upfront failure*, *failed humour negotiation*, *joint failed humour* and *successful humour*.

The book is concluded with a summary of the main results presented, together with discussions about some limitations and desirable or interesting further paths opened by the author's original work in the field of humour studies.

I deem this book to be a great contribution not only to the field of humour studies, for which it establishes a pioneering and foundational work for modelling multimodal humour performance, but also to neighbouring fields such as conversation analysis, dialogue semantics,

multimodal communication, cognitive and emotional psychology. In particular, this volume can be considered as a manifesto for the need to go beyond a speech-centred analysis of conversations when the goal is understanding interactional dynamics and dialogue modelling, both in terms of semantics and their unfolding. Gironzetti's book manages to tackle with rigour and clarity some of the most elusive, and under-investigated, behaviours to be studied in interactions. The methodological procedures are clearly detailed, to the extent that some book sections can also serve as a reference for students or researchers approaching for the first time the use of portable eye tracking while aiming at getting as ecological as possible conversational data.

I believe that one of the noteworthy merit of this book, apart from the highly valuable original studies presented, is the presence of in-depth, interdisciplinary, clear, exhaustive, but at the same time concise and easy-to-read, literature reviews proposed in the first chapter and throughout the book when introducing each study. The author often takes a historical perspective to illustrate the origin of some questions, and the debates within and between fields, prior to the presentation of the approach embraced. These reviews constitute an extremely valuable resource, not only for students interested in the field of humour studies (given the extreme simplicity with which complex questions are presented), but also for established scholars from different backgrounds since it might be enlightening and able to open new perspectives in different neighbouring fields.

I deeply appreciated the attention and care that the author dedicated to the integration of her work with insights from various disciplines, and the meticulous and thorough discussion of her quantitative and qualitative observations, which highlight all the subtleties to be considered when studying non-verbal behaviour in interactive contexts. My only regret is that I would have appreciated a more thoughtful consideration of the relationship and distinction between smiling and laughter. As acknowledged by the author, laughter can co-occur with the facial expressions investigated, especially with those that in the current book are referred to as high-intensity smiles. I believe that the discussion of the observed patterns might be in the future importantly enriched by elaborating on the differences between smiling and laughter semiotics and on how facial expressions linked to smiling (at different intensities) might differently impact interlocutors' multimodal behaviour when co-occurring with laughter (at different intensities).

The original and pioneering content of this book will constitute the basis and inspiration for a wide range of further studies. For example, it would be interesting to integrate the results obtained by the author in relation to smiling, gaze and humour with those observed in other studies in relation to laughter, gaze and humour. Furthermore, building on the study showing that subjects perform at chance when asked to identify smile-speech in isolated video-clips, it would be interesting to explore whether exposing participants to longer segments, where acoustic variations compared to a base-line might be perceived, can improve their smile-speech recognition performance.

As a superficial note related to the structure of the book, I felt that the summary of the main results reported in the second chapter is slightly redundant with the conclusive chapter and might lead the reader to be overwhelmed with questions since all the methodologies adopted are still to be described. The reader should, however, be reassured because most of them will be surely carefully answered in the following chapters. On the other hand, I believe it would have been helpful to have the procedure for data collection accompanied by a detailed description of the humour annotation procedure adopted in terms of scheme, guidelines and inter-annotator agreement before moving to the studies description.

This book overall highlights not only how, in order to get insight into humour (production and perception) in conversation, there is a need to take a multi-modal and interdisciplinary approach, but also the fact that studying humour can give important insights about different

behaviours, and their cognitive underpinnings, from various perspectives. I am looking forward to further studies that will build on the innovative work presented in this volume. From my perspective, I see great potential for it to be integrated and intertwined with work on dialogue semantics more broadly, exploring whether smiling and gaze patterns (and the eventual alignment between participants) interact also with the semantic content and function of the humorous segments.

Given the above, I would strongly recommend this volume not only to scholars in humour studies, but also to scholars in other fields given the broadening of perspectives it might trigger. It is a very accessible book also to non-experts or students since throughout the book every tackled topic is introduced by a comprehensive and, at the same time, concise and pleasant-to-read review, methodologies are carefully explained and results clearly interpreted.

I really enjoyed reading this work and I thank the author for this, since it has already been an incredibly useful resource also for my own work not necessarily related to smiling, gaze or humour.

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