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Book review

Isani, Shaeda and Michel Van der Yeught (Eds.) (2023). *English for Specific Purposes and Humour*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

When the recent book by Isani and Van der Yeught was announced, I was instantly intrigued thanks to the novel connection between two of the fields that are really academically and professionally close to my heart, namely humour and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). I instantly volunteered to the EJHR reviews editor and communicated my willingness to write a review, if needed. However, my enthusiasm somewhat waned when the publisher decided to provide only a PDF but not an actual hard copy of the book. Technical developments cannot be reversed, that's for certain, but I just could not imagine spending the summer (yet again, after the covid years!) in front of a computer and reading a complete book off the screen – a sentiment which seemed to be shared by the editor. What a surprise it was, then, when on the opening day of the International Pragmatics Association conference in Brussels last year, I met the reviews editor in person and received a very neatly packaged present – which turned out to be nothing else but a hard copy of this very book!

The book brings together eleven chapters in six broad sections, framed with an introductory text in which the editors lay out their rationale for triangulating three disciplines: linguistics, subject-domain specialisms and humour studies. One of the points of departure is the situational context of the workplace, characterised by unequal power dynamics that are reflected in the forms and functions of workplace humour (and linked to the superiority theory of humour). The often stressful nature of some professions, such as law enforcement, is then seen as being reflected in their transgressive and affiliative humour (and linked to the relief/release theory of humour), which is documented in many of the chapters that follow. The editors suggest that specialised humour often involves gatekeeping functions (constructing the insider/outsider dichotomy) and relies on the technical nature of domain-specific knowledge. The editors propose a general cross-disciplinary approach; they do not root for any specific methodological framework. ESP is offered as a general unifying perspective on the various registers of professional communication and the relevant discourse communities. However, in a couple of chapters ESP is also explicitly related to the pedagogical/applied linguistic implications of humour in specialised domains, i.e. the perception of such humour by students and the application of the humour in the teaching process.

Part I contains two texts which – although both addressing legal language – can be taken to provide a framing perspective on the whole volume. In Chapter 1 "Learning legal language through humour: I wish you a (reasonably) Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year (twelve (12) months from the date hereof)", Miguel Ángel Campos-Pardillos opens up the hitherto underdeveloped issue of how humour can be used in the teaching of legal English. Noting the omnipresence of law-related humour in the United States, he relates the phenomenon of lawyer jokes to the negative stereotype that is associated with this profession in the US culture. Although humour tends to be avoided in the language teaching profession, the author argues that the existence of this particular culture-specific aspect of the US legal system can be helpful in the teaching context of English for Legal Purposes (ELP) because humour can motivate

students and help them relate to the difficult subject matter at hand. In his text, Campos-Pardillos reports on his approach to using humour as a pedagogical tool. He does so on the basis of a survey carried out in an international group of postgraduate students in courses on ESP and Institutional Translation, whose findings show that, while some jokes did provoke laughter, students often reflected on them in a metapragmatic way, commenting on the acceptability of such humour in public. The author then shares many examples of how he incorporates humour in actual exercises in ELP classes, before finally summarising the benefits and implications of humour in teaching.

Chapter 2 by Shaeda Isani, titled "'He's not. I am. You do': Bench and bar power dynamics in curial humour of common law cultures", extends the general topic of law-related humour to the issue of judicial humour, which she identifies as the most frequently explored line of research in the area of ESP-related humour. Isani approaches the topic by highlighting the power dynamics underlying communication in the courtroom. Although judges and attorneys operate within a highly hierarchical context of institutional discourse that tends to be very formal and ritualistic, it is in no way an exception for humour to emerge in their interaction. An overview of previous research documents a wealth of very interesting examples from numerous US legal cases and reveals a surprisingly rich tapestry of functions which such humour serves, both positive and negative ones. In the courtroom, humour is not only a means of expressing empathy but also of asserting one's judicial superiority and putting down the weaker or less experienced parties (p. 36). Additionally, there are many situations of self-deprecating humour, which can also be read as *faux humility* that induces forced *neutral laughter* (cf. Priego-Valverde, 2007) from the other, lower-status participants, who may thereby wish to avoid having to react in some other way. Isani provides an insightful interpretation of the role of power asymmetries in humorous exchanges, where humour and the relationship between the parties oscillates between affiliation and disaffiliation and where complicity, deference, resistance and impertinence are involved, all in various degrees of explicitness.

In Part II, Chapter 3 "A study of the psycho-social functions of humour in English for police purposes" turns its attention to police humour, in particular its psycho-social functions. In his text, Audrey Carton argues that humour, as a constitutive element of workplace culture, is related to the release function, namely it reduces stress and helps police officers become detached from the negative aspects of police work. Humour, with its cathartic properties, is thus an important coping mechanism. However, humour also works on an institutional level: as is common in other professional discourse communities, it "cements group cohesion by reinforcing the dichotomy between insiders and outsiders" (p. 65) as well as creates and reinforces a shared socio-professional identity, e.g. in the case of induction jokes and pranks that serve as rites of passage. Last but not least, humour (particularly disparagement humour) can subvert authority, and thus is a form of resistance, as shown in the existence of humour located within the hierarchical gap between operational officers and police management. The chapter presents much interesting data, e.g. abbreviation jokes (humorous acronyms) and public-oriented police messages that rely on humorous forms of presentation, and includes a relevant discussion of some problematic and unethical aspects of police humour, such as sexist and racist joking.

A similar analytical framework, which probes the psycho-social functions of humour, is found in Chapter 4 "US military humour as a specialised social and linguistic register", where Anthony Saber deals with US military humour. The text provides a very good description of the institutional context, where the military is seen as a *total institution* in Goffman's (1981) sense, i.e. as consisting of a group of individuals separated from the main society for a prolonged period of time, which is subject to internal hierarchies (between soldiers and civilian employees as well as between soldiers themselves). Saber's motivation for writing the chapter is to probe the

question of whether US military humour can, in the context of ESP, be considered as an element of a specialised social and linguistic register. Very many interesting and little known examples of humour in the military, as well as military-themed humour, are provided, be they barracks humour or cabaret-style ‘barracks comedy’, movies, comic strips (such as *The Sad Sack* and *Beetle Bailey*), Walt Disney cartoons (*Blitz Wolf*), and even nose-art on WWII USAAF bombers. Similarly to the police chapter, evidence is given of the existence of comic rites and rituals, humorous “tactical brevity codes” (often with humorous “facetious intent”; p. 115), but also recreational songs and cadences. What emerges is that, while some humour is dark and coping, a lot of it qualifies as affiliative and bonding humour. It is argued that it is often characterised by its dysphemistic quality, transgressive nature, irreverence, and disregard for political correctness. Within the community, there is a “surprising degree of tolerance shown for jokes that can be very offensive” (p. 123), hence such humour qualifies as specialised discourse because it remains within the discursive norms negotiated and tolerated by the particular professional community, i.e. within its distinctive ‘culture’ (cf. Fine & De Soucey, 2005).

Part III of the book consists of two chapters from the world of business. Chapter 5 by Laurence Harris, titled “‘My word is my CDO-squared’: Bankspeak humour in the Governor of the Bank of England’s Mansion House speeches”, focuses on a very specific genre: the annual speeches by the Governor of the Bank of England (so called “Mansion House speeches”). The analysis identifies examples of release and incongruity from a dataset of 74 speeches, which indicate that humour in the early speeches was mostly self-deprecatory, though building an in-group that “recognises the mock nature of the self-deprecation” (p. 147). More recently, there have been some changes: speakers have been building up rapport through games and quizzes, while references to sport (epitomised early on through cricket idioms and metaphors) have disappeared in the past decade, most likely as a result of the gradual retreat of explicit display of hegemonic masculinity. In relation to the central topic of the volume, Harris concludes that “display and performance of humour in a public speech creates confidence: a speech laced with the right dose of release, incongruous and bonding humour evidences self-confidence as the speaker is viewed as mastering their specialised subject” (p. 154).

Chapter 6 by Michel Van der Yeught on “Deciphering insider/outsider humour in specialised languages: The intentional approach” has a bit of an enigmatic title – it promises to decipher insider/outsider humour in specialised languages. Unlike the previous chapters, it does not contain any extensive examples of humorous interactions or provide a case study of any particular discourse data. By contrast, the chapter is a welcome theoretical contribution grounded in the “intentional approach” that is common in the French ESP community, and which connects Swales’ (1987, 2016) notion of *discourse communities* with Searle’s (1983) pragmatic theory of intentionality. Subscribing to the superiority theory of humour, Van der Yeught argues that humour in specialised languages arises from informational asymmetry. In his words, “linguistic insiders are able to make fun of outsiders because their linguistic superiority also underlines an ontological superiority since they are aware of the aspects of social reality that outsiders fail to grasp” (p. 160).

Part IV contains two more chapters that bring a wealth of humorous material related to specialised professional communities. In Chapter 7 “Humour in scientific academic discourse”, Larissa Manerko focuses on humour in scientific academic texts, identifying many examples of multimodal playfulness, e.g. in visual diagrams in which scientists occasionally include minor details that can humorously engage their readers. Wordplay and metaphors are sometimes found in the paratextual parts of academic papers, such as titles and graphical abstracts and science comics as recent genre developments related to science popularisation. Manerko analyses such situations from a cognitive perspective as metaphorical ensembles of sometimes incompatible – and hence humorous – frames, and interprets them pragmatically as essentially attention-

attracting devices. Yet, the paradox is that such humour actually violates the traditional norms of academic discourse, which revolves around clarity and seriousness in its written genres (cf. Tsakona, 2017). As a result, such inclusions of humorous content into academic texts by scholars are seen as rather ambivalent by some or outright problematic by others, least of all by reviewers of academic manuscripts.

In Chapter 8 titled "Funny tales from the sea: A multimodal and cognitive approach to humour in the marine engineering context", Silvia Molina-Plaza addresses a very peculiar phenomenon: humour produced and shared by marine engineers. The study analyses a set of cartoons and memes – as forms of cultural and social practice – from the points of view of multimodal discourse analysis, blending theory and the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo & Raskin, 1991). Though not always conceptually consistent, e.g. in distinguishing between cartoons and image macros, the chapter presents relevant data that show some interesting forms of humorous self-presentation among marine engineers. These are found to have two opposing forms: as superheroes (linked to the superiority theory) and as underdogs (linked to self-deprecating forms of humour).

Part V, which is somewhat misleadingly labelled "Stand-up pedagogy", contains two contributions on the topic of TED Talks. Chapter 9 by Katia Peruzzo titled "'Who says talking about depression isn't fun?" Exploring targets of humour in TED talks on mental disorders" focuses on the targets of humour in TED Talks on mental disorders, i.e. a genre that is not humorous *per se*, although some elements of the spoken scripted performances of TED-speakers could be co-classified with the genre of the stand-up. Based on a corpus of talks by "experiential experts" (p. 226), i.e. people who personally experienced mental disorders, the analysis identifies laughter-provoking utterances and the targets of such utterances, which include the speakers themselves as patients, medical practitioners, and other agents. The key element to understanding the operation of humour produced by experiential experts appears to be the fact the speakers, as former patients or even "survivors" (as Peruzzo refers to them; p. 245), narrate their past experiences, directing humour at themselves and the medical practitioners in whose care they had been.

The topic of TED Talks is continued in Chapter 10 on "Analysing humour across discourse domains and genres for ESP: A corpus-assisted analysis" by Belinda Crawford Camiciottoli, who compares it with related genres – lectures and Talks at Google. Using corpus linguistic methodology, Camiciottoli tracks humorous episodes across genres and disciplines, showing that humour is indeed most common in TED Talks, particularly in tourism, political science and science & technology, and less so in law and health & medicine. The presence of humour in TED Talks is interpreted as evidence of the "edutainment" nature of the genre (p. 266). The qualitative analysis identifies instances of disparagement, self-deprecation, incongruities, word play, anecdotes, teasing and black humour. Interesting are those situations where laughter appears in the data even though it is not preceded by any humorous episodes triggering such humour. Camiciottoli describes some instances of such "humour mismatch" (p. 264) as arising from the audience's embarrassment or nervousness (referencing Attardo, 2015), e.g., about how to react to the issue at hand.

The last section of the volume, Part VI, is playfully entitled "Marketing fifty shades of nails" and somewhat incongruously contains only one contribution. Chapter 11 titled "'Green come true': Paronymic colour name games in marketing nail varnish", written by Isabel Espinosa-Zaragoza, is an in-depth analysis of paronymic colour names in nail varnish marketing, i.e. it belongs to the area of humour in advertising. Highlighting the link between humour and brand identity, it notes that the presence of humour can become an identificatory brand trait that "not only creates consumer expectations regarding verbal play, but also gives salience to the brand" (p. 295). The analysis of a dataset of nail varnish names of the American

brand OPI focuses on English-language names with punning elements that are based on paronyms, i.e. near-identical strings where the sound sequences resemble each other as a result of various surface transformations (e.g. substitution, abbreviation, insertion, rephrasing; cf. '*Less is Norse*'). While Espinosa-Zaragoza is aware of the potential limitations of such humorous strategies, e.g. the risk that they might be targeting younger consumers, she argues (following Tanaka, 1992) that "any reaction to a pun in advertising, either positive or negative, is better than none" (p. 296).

Overall, the chapters in the volume are connected thematically rather than by virtue of subscribing to a common theoretical or methodological framework. They address particular specialised domains or, broadly speaking, registers, with all of them focusing on material in the English language. Although the individual contributions deal with sometimes very specific issues related to the use of humour, there are a number of connecting elements between the papers that justify their presentation together in a single thematic volume, thus making the book internally coherent. It will perhaps be of little surprise to the readers that, since ESP is the guiding principle of the volume, most of the authors operate with discourse analytical conception of professional varieties of English and emphasise the sociolinguistic notion of the discourse community (Swales, 1987). This is a very good common starting point because it enables the authors to explore humour against the background of the discourse norms of such communities and trace how those norms are constructed, reconstructed, affirmed and transgressed via humour, giving rise to incongruities. It is exactly those considerations that are at the core of the currently emerging socio-pragmatic approach to humour (Chovanec & Tsakona, 2018; Tsakona & Chovanec, 2024). Hence, many of the papers touch on the notion of appropriateness of humour and emphasise its identity-related and interpersonal functions (e.g. bonding, mocking). However, the strong connection of such humour to the specific discourse communities appears to be linked, as several of the papers suggest, also to the psychological function of coping.

Interestingly, much of the humour explored in the volume is directed internally into the specific discourse communities, and is often located within specific communicative practices between members of such communities. Here, the underlying common thread is the premise that much of the humour is not related to expressing personal but rather collective (group) identities, serving to delimit specific in-groups from other groups and (sub-)communities, which are often (though not always) targeted by such humour. Although many of the papers locate some of the humour in the existing power differences, it is good that they do not over-privilege the role of such power asymmetries. That is evident, for instance, from the extensive presence of self-deprecating humour within the professional discourse communities. Based on the data, it thus seems safe to suggest that the superiority underlying the humour and arising from power asymmetries is counterbalanced by a degree of humility, whether real or mock, manifested through the community members' ability to make fun of themselves.

The book shows that the exploration of humour within specific discourse domains is a fertile ground for further research that can bring some new and interesting findings. Since the volume is the first of its kind, it provides an initial survey of the ground and touches on many ideas that could not be explored systematically in the book but will no doubt be taken up in the future. Some vistas for future research can be found, for instance, in the applied linguistic perspective, i.e. how humour can be used effectively in the ESP classroom, both in terms of content and style of presentation. Another topic that emerges in several chapters is the role of humour in rites of passage, which would deserve an ethnographic study in itself to see how professional/discourse communities, particularly those that are relatively closed/inaccessible to outsiders, incorporate humour in their in-group foundation practices. Yet another issue that emerges in the final chapter concerns the role of humour in various kinds of popularisations, i.e. situations where the

enclosed discourse communities communicate externally with non-members and need to bridge the divide between professional content and the lay public. All in all, many readers will find the book a fascinating read and will be coming back to it for inspiration when working on their humour-related projects in various areas of specialised and professional discourses.

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