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Book review

The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes

Graeme Ritchie, Routledge, London, 2004, 244 pp., hardback, £60

Graeme Ritchie's book is definitely a learning experience. Reader-friendly, written in a lucid style, and yet rigorous in argumentation, it is a pleasure to read. Ritchie takes his readers on a tour of selected sights of the complex world of humor research and shows them his perception of things: this is the perspective of a formal linguist, who spent most of his professional life dealing with artificial intelligence (AI) and computational linguistics. And from that vantage point, the state of the art of humor research looks rather disheartening, even though Ritchie focuses on the analysis of simple jokes: we are still very far away from being able successfully to formalize joke generation, not to mention joke understanding. From my vantage point, however, that of a researcher working on the interface of linguistics and literature and trying to handle texts longer than jokes (such as humorous short stories) in terms of humor analysis, this state of affairs has a blessing: successful, complete formalization achieved by AI alone could be a setback for the interdisciplinarity of humor research.

Since the time of the heyday of generative linguistics, which as Ritchie admits is his "conceptual frame of reference" (p. 11), literary scholars and other social scientists have found it difficult to find a common language with linguists, precisely due to the key assumption of the latter: "The descriptions that a linguist builds up should be sufficiently well defined that it would be possible for a machine to follow the grammatical rules" (p. 11). A machine could not possibly follow the paths of human creativity as expressed, e.g. in literary works, the literati argued. Luckily, in recent decades the world of linguistics has opened up to non-linguists thanks to the rise of the cognitive strand of research. As is well known, cognitivists (such as Langacker) no longer focus on morphology and syntax; instead they talk of the primacy of semantics, the role of metaphor, iconicity, and prototypical, non-discrete categorization. Admittedly, they have not gone much further than sentence-level research, but what counts most in their approach is "studying specific linguistic facts in detail" (p. 11), which is a perspective they apparently share with the Chomskyan tradition. What also counts is the reaching out towards non-linguists, and dropping of the notorious "linguistic imperialism", which has poisoned the inter-disciplinary relations for decades.

Graeme Ritchie's book is not part of this new trend, and not surprisingly so, as adopting the cognitive assumptions could put the AI goals even further away. Indeed, he is mainly interested in structural properties of propositional and linguistic jokes (his generative-

biased variant of the traditional verbal-referential dichotomy), and in their more detailed classification, putting the study of the jokes' content aside. He does reject Chomskyan distaste for semantics, however, and in the penultimate Chapter 12 offers some "speculations on joke structure." There he finds it premature to answer the questions of "what causes humor in general or why jokes are funny" (p. 175). Nonetheless, in that chapter, and in fact throughout the book, he seems to be concerned with the issues which are (or at least should be) absolutely crucial in humor research: is there anything essential in humor? How do the humorous and the non-humorous differ? Is it the form or the content that determines the humorous nature of texts? He does not provide his answers; instead, he speculates that there might not be a "single core structure for all jokes" (p. 179) and postulates a number of factors which might enhance the humor but are not crucial to it, as they are features of non-humorous texts too: inappropriateness, the question-answer structure, embellishment, dramatic tension, facilitation of processing, or ingenuity. It is the consideration of these basic questions which prompts his critique of General Theory of Verbal Humor (first formulated by Attardo and Raskin, 1991): out of the six parameters of the theory, four—Language, Narrative Strategy, Target and Situation are not typical of humor. This is indeed the crucial issue. If one assumes that the core of humor is semantic (as Raskin's semantic script theory of humor seems to assume), then one postulates semantic script oppositions as sufficient and necessary; if one assumes that it is semantic and at the same time discursal and pragmatic then one postulates the other parameters too (as Attardo and Raskin, 1991 do); if one assumes that it is formal (phonetic, morphological and syntactic) than one focuses on structural properties, as Ritchie does in the book under review (admittedly, Ritchie sees content research as a future perspective, but as a very distant one). My heart would tend to sway onto the semantic-pragmatic-discursal side, but I do recognize the difficulty of the issue (cf. Chłopicki, 2001).

Ritchie's criticism of script-based approach requires further comment. He is generally right in pointing out the weaknesses of the theory: imprecise definitions of the basic terms such as script, script opposition or script overlap, although he does welcome the notion of salient/foregrounded parts of scripts (recently introduced by Attardo, 2002, which are to be the ones to overlap in humor (p. 73)). He is also right in noticing another weakness of the theory: "no theoretical definition of what it means for a script to describe scenarios which are actual/non-actual, normal/abnormal, possible/impossible. Even if it were intuitively clear what it meant for a text to describe actual/non-actual contexts, the role of scripts would still be obscure" (p. 73). What he fails to say is that the script-based theory shares its weaknesses with other theories of discourse processing: we still do not know how the "text-meaning mapping" (p. 45) works and how we can arrive at a semantic (not to mention pragmatic) representation of a text without relying mainly on intuition. In Ritchie's words, large-scale computer modeling of humor (as well as discourse analysis as such) is held up by the lack of several capabilities: "being able to produce/interpret natural language, being capable of subtle and flexible inferences, and having a vast store of knowledge about the real world" (p. 188).

Given the severe criticism Ritchie offers of script-based approaches, the expectation is that he is going to postulate a novel and far-reaching theory. Nothing of the kind. Raskin's underdefined notions of "script," "opposition" and "overlap" are replaced in Ritchie's

theorizing by a set of primitive notions, the definition of which he (very much like Raskin, and just as regretfully) delegates to future research which—it is hoped—will develop the true humor (and discourse) theory. These are: context, concept, linked, similar, linguistically appropriate, interpretation as well as those more typical of humor: obviousness, conflict, compatibility, contrast, inappropriateness, absurdity and taboo (pp. 61, 141). Clearly, the perspective is even more daunting than that offered by Raskin (1985), although with such notions as “context” or “concept” interesting steps have recently been made to define them within the cognitive paradigm (cf. Dilley, 1999; Dirven and Verspoor, 1998).

Ritchie discusses in detail the properties of a number of specific joke-classes (especially in Chapters 8 and 9) and comes up in the end with quite interesting generalizations about his two major joke categories (p. 183):

A propositional joke has a *delivery mechanism* which indicates how the linguistic processing of the text can give rise to a *pair of interpretations* (loosely, pre- and post-punchline). It seems that such a joke must involve *either* CONTRAST between these two interpretations *or* some degree of INAPPROPRIATENESS in—or indirectly suggested by—exactly one of these interpretations. A linguistic joke, on the other hand, is defined by a configuration of linguistic elements, involving notions such as phonetic similarity, segmentation into words, etc. It has no comparable component of delivery mechanism.

This is Ritchie’s main practical contribution to joke research in the book. As such it is quite compatible with Raskin (1985), especially if one substitutes the notion of “interpretation” with that of “script”. Nonetheless, the detailed analysis of propositional jokes and their delivery mechanisms and the isolation of puns as a separate category do complement Raskin’s broad, bird’s eye view and as such should be welcome as a desirable step towards understanding of the workings of humor.

There are a few further points that are worth making here. Ritchie seems to make a breach in his structuralist categorization and accept more cognitive-like thinking in terms of non-discrete categories when, facing the problem of double class membership of one joke, he admits that his goal is not to partition “jokes into *disjoint* classes within a strictly hierarchical taxonomy. . . . [Rather he is] looking for conditions which, when applied to linguistic forms which are otherwise well formed, indicate whether the form is a joke or not. If certain texts . . . meet more than one set of conditions, that is not problematic” (p. 137).

Incidentally, he also claims that humorous texts need to be “grammatically well-formed” and perhaps also “semantically and pragmatically well-formed” (p. 124); if they happened to be malformed than the malformation is due to “a small amount of license from the playful use of language” (p. 125). I think this is not the case and this postulate results from Ritchie’s generative-influenced conviction of the primacy of grammar over meaning. I am quite convinced that jokes can violate any normal conventions of language use (especially the lower levels of well-formedness: phonetic, morphological, syntactic, but also pragmatic conventions—cf. second and third order jokes (Attardo, 1994)) if only their dominating semantic and pragmatic layer demands it.

Another welcome breach in Ritchie's strictly structural approach is made when he argues that the membership of a joke in a joke class is in fact pragmatic and "dependent on properties which are *relative to the knowledge and perceptions of the joke audience*. Hence, if the audience's knowledge, beliefs, and attention are such that the 'obvious' answer is *not* noticed, then the classification of the text is, for that audience at that moment, not a FR [forced resolution] joke" (p. 169). Thus, this is the another factor which relativizes the rigidity of joke classes postulated in the book.

Still another promising, although undeveloped strand in the book, concerns the role of joke characters in joke texts (or rather in joke understanding, although Ritchie's focus is more on "jokehood" than on "funniness" as he himself states again and again). In Chapter 8 he keeps referring to the fact that it is of importance where the crucial inappropriateness is placed in the text. For instance, he conjectures that "linguistic ambiguity . . . will occur not in the supporting narrative, but only in an utterance by a character in the story (reported directly or indirectly) or within some written material quoted within the story" (p. 92). It is precisely so, perhaps because it is more "natural" to attribute the ambiguity or other inappropriateness to the characters (with all their foibles and weaknesses) than to the narrator, who, at least superficially, needs to stay impartial. The role of the characters grows along with the increase in the length and complexity of the narrative, so much so that humorous short stories are hardly possible to analyze without resorting to the textual entities such as characters (cf. Chłopicki, 2000).

Summing up, I must strongly recommend Ritchie's fascinating study, which both enriches our understanding of joke mechanisms and (more arguably) shows us that the emperor of humor research (and consequently discourse analysis) has indeed no clothes.

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Władysław Chłopicki published in humor studies (in *Humor*), advertising, English and is also interested in translation studies and business communication. He is the author of *O humorze poważnie* (Taking humor seriously), Kraków: PAN, 1995, and co-author of *Poradnik ortograficzny dla Polaków: Język angielski* (Spelling and punctuation guide for Poles: English), Kraków: PWN, 1995, and *Angielski w polskiej reklamie* (English in

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