

CROSSCULTURAL HUMOUR: “HUMOUR THAT DIVIDES; HUMOUR THAT UNITES”. AN INTRODUCTION

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Abstract:

In the current scientific research paradigm, within the European context, there are but a few studies on Humour with a focus on cross-cultural differences perceived from a multidisciplinary perspective across periods. “Studying Humour: A Cross-Disciplinary Project” has focused on the following major aims: (1) to broaden the scope of analysis towards a local, national and international focus and (2) to undertake an innovative but enriching dialogue among several disciplines. This is of paramount importance in order to promote intercultural communication based on the assumption that the European sphere is the privileged space for a meaningful dialogue between traditional and cultural maps, especially reflected on the perception and understanding of humour.

The project was launched in 2007 and there were two major conferences held: one in January 2008, at the University of Madeira, and another in April 2009, in Italy. Furthermore, in July 2008, the workshop run at the University of Sheffield, during the PALA Conference, entitled “Time and the Text”, granted the ideal forum to discuss the nature and textual representation of humour given the crisscrossing domains in stylistics approaches and ever-developing research paradigms, such as cognitive studies and corpus analysis. The latter intended to (1) look for responses to humorous passages with a focus on layers of meaning among the participants in the session; (2) foster cooperation and collaborative research among researchers and scholars from this multifaceted area of studies; (3) enhance the understanding of individual communities by mapping out European traditions across periods and territories.

The current volume comprises a selection of papers presented at The 1st International Conference on Crosscultural Humour: “Humour that Divides; Humour that Unites” (Madeira, January 2008). The set of papers both points to an emergent research cline on looking at humour strategies - from production to reception - and presents some reflection on culture, intercultural communication and the underlying perceptions of humour by drawing on an multidisciplinary framework as well as evidence collected from diverse linguistic contexts and multicultural settings, in the line of the research project “Humour Studies in a Crosscultural Perspective”. Disambiguating the shift from referential to representational levels and backwards necessarily entails the interweaving of expertise and revisiting of seminal constructs in linguistics, cognition, culture, literary criticism and philosophy, so as to shed some light on the mis/understanding of humorous turn-takings.

The papers in the current edited volume provide theoretical, empirical and practical bases for an understanding of the crucial relation between production, reception and the role played by humour on culture. Some common themes are highlighted in a wide array of texts, for example, advertisements, TV, cinema and political cartoons, meant to lead the reader to ponder on the possibility of translating humour as a cultural phenomenon. The analysis of a multimodal corpus, either in the written or in the oral modes of

discourse, has featured most authors' main concern. This has contributed to a better understanding of humour, be it as a subject or a means of communication.

Some authors, on the one hand, address issues related to humour as part of tradition, emphasising its crucial role from the classical period (Reis, Pinheiro) up to the modern one, also referring to Ben Jonson's definition of humour and Sterne's tradition in what caricature is concerned (e.g. McRae and Marcheschi). Hence, some case studies illustrate the importance of the tradition of humour, not only in a number of national literary traditions and authors, such as in the Italian and Portuguese ones (Marcheschi, Antunes), but also in literary genres (McRae), for instance in children and juvenile literature (Lombello, Sousa). Other papers interweave literary and critical perspectives, namely the literary representations of cultural stereotypes (Bulger), also imbued with enriching insights from stylistics, pragmatics and cognitive studies (Bazenga, Ermida and Sousa). On the other hand, humour perceived either as threat or denunciation (Lopes), linked to extreme situations, such as the fight for freedom of speech (Emonts), is addressed by several scholars stemming from different countries and domains (i.e., culture, literature, philosophy and history), sharing the message that humour plays the role of aggregating wills against injustice and violence (Bazenga, Castro). Issues related to morality, prejudice and political bias (Ermida) commonly associated with humour lead to division among groups.

Moreover, humour, as a way of getting to know the subject and "the other" may be endangered by misunderstanding and consequently trigger conflict, given the lack of awareness of extratextual situations and cultural data (Bazenga, Lo-Cicero). This is particularly striking in translating humour across languages and cultural codes (Calafat) for instance in canon-breaking texts (Arranz) and in a wide panoply of discursive practices. López-Rúa and Rittaud-Hutinet discuss linguistic strategies, such as code-mixing in word formation and play on sounds (→ homophonie), respectively. Katayama draws on stand-up comedy to discuss the audience perception of humorous turntakings cross-culturally, in diverse settings such as America and Japan. Hoyer presents another insight into cultural stereotypes by resorting to the analysis of non-standard varieties of English as used in Scottish cartoons.

In fact, the cultural aspect is of utmost concern for many researchers in this collection of papers which seems to challenge the universally benign character of humour favoured by others. In this respect, Possenti advances that memory plays an otherwise crucial role in individual's processing of humour which, in his stance, is a universal feature. At the core, humour figures as a way for the subject to question his/her human condition towards the acknowledgement of his/her limits and possibilities (Salgueiro, Almeida) Equally, in the line of Todorov, Levinas and Bergson, laughter presupposes minds in contact, awareness of one and the other as a strategy for identity construction, be it on an individual and/or national scope.

The boundaries between the explicit and the implicit/unsaid, as evidenced in Arts, contribute to the subject's perception of humour. Also, in the pedagogical context, humour contributes to in-group relations and facilitates cross-cultural interaction and learning. This perspective is enriched by insights shared from linguistics, sociology and culture (Kulinich, Escallier). The unifying feature is that the various approaches invite the reader to earnest reflection and challenge him/her to find answers to the questions posed throughout this volume.

Instead of a conclusion, it seems important to identify yet another essential issue pertaining to a diverse conceptual framework often contested by linguists, literary scholars, critics and history scholars working on humour, i.e. the difficulty of a mutually shared understanding and usage of a common terminology (generated by the translation of key concepts, like humour, humour tradition [→ humorismo] into the various languages in which the papers are written: Portuguese, Italian, French and English). This can be only overcome by careful reading of the texts in this collection, crossing insights and positions, thereby trying to unite the otherwise dis-unifying concepts that can divide, in this case the theoretical stances of various disciplines involved, including dissimilar perceptions in the academia.

Keywords: *Cross-cultural humour; Corpus linguistics; Cultural stereotypes; Multimodality*