Goatly, Andrew 2012. *Meaning and Humour.* (Key Topics in Semantics and Pragmatics, volume 1). Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

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This is the blurb for the cover:

How are humorous meanings generated and interpreted? Understanding a joke involves knowledge of the language code (a matter mostly of semantics) and background knowledge necessary for making the inferences to get the joke (a matter of pragmatics). This book introduces and critiques a wide range of semantic and pragmatic theories in relation to humour, such as systemic functional linguistics, speech acts, politeness, and relevance theory, emphasising not only conceptual but also interpersonal and textual meanings. Exploiting recent corpus-based research it suggests that much humour can be accounted for by the overriding of lexical priming. Each chapter's discussion topics and suggestions for further reading encourage a critical approach to semantic and pragmatic theory. Written by an experienced lecturer on the linguistics of the English language, this is an entertaining and user-friendly textbook for advanced students of semantics, pragmatics, and humour studies.

Meaning and Humour

*Covers areas of social meaning often neglected in textbooks
* Uses over a hundred jokes as linguistic examples
* Contains activities, discussion questions and suggestions for further reading
* Includes a glossary giving basic definitions of key terms with extra examples

## Extract from the book:

## *11.7. Theories of humour and the meaning constraints of language.*

There are numerous humor theories (see Martin (2007) for a useful survey). Attardo (1994: 47) suggests three families grouped under the cognitive, social and psychoanalytic (Table 11.9). It might be predicted that I would subscribe to the incongruity theory of humour. However, I actually see incongruity/contrast or the over-riding of priming as a cognitive technique for creating humour rather than an explanation of why humour occurs in society, the functions it serves, and the reason it gives emotional pleasure (Billig 2005: 65). In the short space available I would like to explore the apparently contradictory theories of humour as social control, and of liberation or release, and how these relate to language and meaning.

**Table 11.9. Families of humour theories.**

| Cognitive | Social | Psychoanalytical |
|---|---|---|

| Incongruity | Hostility | Release |
|---|---|---|
| Contrast | Aggression | Sublimation |
|  | Superiority | Liberation |
|  | Triumph | Economy |
|  | Derision |  |
|  | Disparagement |  |

It is interesting that Attardo lists all the traditional social humour theories with negative names, but the psychoanalytical ones with positive. This contrasts with his discussion of social humour functions. Though these include social control by embarrassment and the communication of social norms by highlighting taboos, arguably negative, most of the functions he lists are positive – play to build social cohesion, ingratiation, creation of common ground, repair (See 6.3, Table 6.1). Indeed, over the past two decades there has been an almost obsessive emphasis on the positive aspects of humour, not only in its psychological (and physiological) effects, but also in terms of its enhancement of social relationships (Billig 2005: 10-34). The already-noted claims that humour generates intimacy (Cohen 1999) or rapport are also found in Hageseth (1988), Du Pré (1998), and Hay (2000). They all stress the empathetic, solidary, and communicative enhancement functions of humour, with Attardo himself (1994) suggesting the role of decommitment in softening criticism and mitigating face threats.

Freud's theories of humour can be regarded as a theory of release or liberation from the psychological tension between the subconscious desires or the id, and the control over these by the superego. Freud suggests that much humour targets the sacred, the taboo and the disgusting, because these are normally topics which we repress our feelings about. Humour, then, resembles a temporary carnival, a form of rebellion against normal prohibitions. Jokes may also be ways of expressing aggression, even if our motive remains disguised by humour (Oring 2003: chapter 4). We may believe we are laughing at the technique or incongruity in the humour, whereas in fact we are laughing because the joke indirectly expresses an impulse – it releases a repressed desire in a hidden way (Billig 2005: 155-159).

Earlier Victorian theorists of humour had stressed not only its role in the release and regulation of nervous energy (Spencer 1864), but also its socially rebellious or liberating aspects. Bain (1865), for example, saw the pleasure in degrading persons of dignity as a liberation from the normal constraints which compel us to honour and respect them. Humour, might, then, express a rebellion against social order (Billig 2005: 96-98**)**. Heine's joke, as interpreted by Freud, about the poor lottery agent boasting that Baron Rothschild treats him as an equal – in fact quite "famillionairely" – implies a sly criticism of the Baron's patronizing condescension. According to Freud the technique of this joke works by combining two forms *familiarly* and *millionaire*. He calls this "condensation", equivalent to the incongruous conjunction of two opposing scripts or schemas. But the replacement of the first meaning, a compliment about the Baron's friendliness, with an implied criticism of his condescension, amounts to a substitution, involving a speech act ambiguity, and this Freud refers to as "displacement". This looks like a resolution of the ambiguity in one direction rather than another, rather than simply a disjunction.

In previous chapters we suggested that word play, the use of homonymic, homophonic and especially paronymic puns, as well as pseudo-morphology, are an attempt at liberation from the language code. In this chapter we have entertained the idea that the primed linguistic and discourse expectations are often overridden by humour, thereby defying convention in an act of creativity. Perhaps the greatest social control we experience is in being taught our first language, which includes acquiring its primings. Language, according to Barthes (1982), is fascist (Billig 2005: 238). It is an imposition on our bodies – our vocal apparatus is disciplined to conform to the phonological standard of our parents' speech community. And we undergo cognitive control when acquiring competence in the higher linguistic ranks extending from morphology right up to primed collocations and register/genre, which demand that we adopt conventions both of form and the relation of form to meaning and categorisation within social contexts. We explored extensively in chapters 2 and 4, and in the present chapter, how humour might be used to temporarily undermine these conventions.

However, we do not just laugh at intentional attempts to liberate us from the code and discoursal primings. Though we laugh at paronymic attempts to undermine the code we also target those who are unable to adapt their vocal apparatus (or minds) to its demands. Take the joke:

> VICAR: I hereby pronounce you man and wife.
> BRIDE: And you pwonounce it vewy nicely, vicar.

The inability to pronounce *r* is one reason for the humour here, the bride's failure to adequately discipline her vocal apparatus. But the humour also targets her inability to understand that in this generic context "pronounce" is more likely to mean 'announce that you are'. Moreover, she is apparently unaware that a compliment by the bride on the vicar's speech fails to conform to the generic structure of the wedding service and is an inappropriate speech act.

The fact that, on the one hand, we laugh at ingenious attempts to undermine the discipline of the language code but, on the other, at people's failures to conform to it, underlines the equivocal nature of humour's social functions. It appears to liberate, but it also controls, sometimes cruelly or aggressively. Aggression and cruelty, might, after all, be desires of the id which emerge from repression in disguised form in jokes. Bergson (1900), one of the great humour theorists, pointed out this double-sidedness of humour. We laugh at rigidity, using humour to ridicule those who are too conservative to adapt, to free themselves from inappropriately predictable behaviour. Humour is the soul's attempt to overcome the rigidity of the material and the biological, to adapt and spiritually evolve (Bergson 1911). The humorous release from the rigidity of collocation is a main theme of this chapter. And yet, Bergson admits that humour often targets "unsociability", the inability of imperfectly socialized people to conform. Moreover, ironically enough, the response to humour is the rather predictable and rigid bodily response known as laughter, a response beyond our control (Billig 2005: 130-2). A further paradox is that, in order to conform to social and linguistic codes we have to adapt, by abandoning our rigidity, for instance our dress and manners, or the mechanical inflexibilities of our infant phonetics – an adaptability that is beyond the best efforts of the bride.

The apparently positive functions of humour, to liberate or enhance solidarity, may, in fact, be disguises of the exercise of power. Holmes (2000) has demonstrated how bosses use joking discourse as a means of social control, especially in nominally egalitarian societies. Humour might be viewed as a coping mechanism or as a means of dealing with depression, but without challenging the (unjust) social systems which cause the depression in the first place. We may well express our aggression towards powerful politicians through humour (rather than say throwing shoes or grenades at them) but this does nothing to remove them from power. It's like shadow boxing. The temporary relief of tension, and fleeting sense of liberation, may, like an escape valve on a steam engine, to the contrary, divert and dissipate the pressure for real social or regime change. We may even become so dependent upon these powerful personages for our humour that we develop a fondness for them and allow them, as necessary targets, to exert an extra degree of control. The notion that we are rebelling through humour could be self-deception. Moreover, in the wider context of the economic order of consumer capitalism, humour, originally designed to question the power structures of society, is co-opted and becomes commodified as a consumer product in the form of joke books.

Billig (2005) presents an interesting sociological theory of humour. We become socialized through the threat of embarrassment. And embarrassment derives from situations in which strangers may laugh at us. So, as a child matures, parents use laughter and "teasing", a disguised form of aggressive control, in order to embarrass them, and to signal that they have indulged in inappropriate behaviour (Scheff 1997). The child thereby learns to laugh at others who find themselves in embarrassing situations, or mock them for inappropriate behaviour. Humans are unique in both being laughed at and laughing, in that order. In reproducing ridicule they may take pleasure in the subversion of the social codes, but also take revenge for the laughter previously used to control them by embarrassment. In these circumstances empathy is suspended, "a temporary anaesthesia of the heart" as Bergson puts it (Billig 2005: 43). Billig distances himself from Gofmann's theory that humour is usually a way of saving face and thereby mitigating embarrassment. We may like to think of it as positive and innocent, but much humour is a way of salving our conscience over our aggressive exercise of power.

As an example of the connection between embarrassment, humour and socialization, Billig (2005: 230ff.) reinterprets Freud's case study of little Hans, whose parents' laughter and the consequent embarrassment disciplined him for looking obsessively at a pretty 8-year old girl in a hotel restaurant. The adults' laughter brings about repression of Hans' sexual attraction, but it may have more complex origins. It may mask the parents' own sexual attraction to the children, a kind of reverse Oedipus or Elektra complex.

Billig's work explains a great deal of contemporary humour targeting political correctness. Since "political correctness" might be motivated by sympathy for the social groups and minorities who have suffered a history of discrimination, anti-p.c. jokes are possible only through the suspension of such fellow-feeling. Anti-p.c. humour therefore becomes the province of neo-conservatism, which tends to construct social disadvantage as a natural result of a Darwinian sociobiology, where the weak deserve to fail and might is right. In fact, it is your fault not only if you are unsuccessful or poor, but also if you are unhappy, a point underlined by theorists who believe humour has positive therapeutic value (Billig 2005: 31).[1] In this way the Right have at their disposal a larger repertoire of the "good" jokes, just as they have more of the "good" metaphors (Lakoff 1996).

## *11.8. An afterthought and hint of a theory*

It is something of a truism to point out that language and language use is driven by two opposing forces, the centripetal or forces for standardization, and the centrifugal or forces of variation. If language is fascist it is so partly by centripetally imposing standards and predictability on language users. Parents, the academy, the educational establishment, the international English as a Foreign Language industry, and copy-editors, among others, attempt to exercise their power by compelling conformity. Priming is clearly a centripetal or standardizing force, pushing the language towards conventional collocation and cliché. By contrast, the kinds of humour which override priming, though dependent upon it for their disjunction, can be seen as playful attempts at creativity. Exaggerated as this tension is in these types of humour, such a tension is always present in language. As we have seen, the standardized dictionary semantics of a word are often modified when the word is used in an actual text, which sets up its own local semantic relations. There is a general fluidity of word meanings in real texts, especially in conversation, though countered by redundancy and "graded informativeness".

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[1] Martin (2001) has shown that there is little hard evidence for the therapeutic value of humour.

This variation-standardisation tension is also manifest in the degrees of play, flexibility, or loosening of the ties between forms (column 1 of Figure 1.2) and their referents (column 3). Some form-referent bonds are very solid and allow little variation. This is the case with names, where, ideally, a one-to-one relationship exists between form and referent, and changing one's name can be a cumbersome business. One-to-one correspondence applies not only to names for persons but also ships, planes, novels, and the registration numbers of cars. But once we introduce sense, in column 2 (of Figure 1.2), we expand the possibilities for variation in the form-referent relationship. The same form may refer to different referents, and the same referent may be referred to by different forms. The degrees of flexibility, of course, vary according to the genres and sub-genres in which we are operating. Legal documents, the language of air-traffic control, technical and scientific texts use standardized or consistent forms for referring to the same phenomenon, e.g. the forms/formulae for chemicals or the forms used to refer to the different parties to a legal contract. At the other extreme we have literature and poetry where elegant variation may be *de rigueur*. However, even here different sub-genres or individual authors use this kind of variation to different degrees, Hemingway, minimally, compared with Henry James.

This literary play in form-(sense)-referent relation is mirrored in the relationships between form and sense in columns 1 and 2. The mere act of literal categorisation by which aspects of reality are forced into classes with conventional lexical item labels, a stable pairing of sense and form, is on the side of standardization and enables mathematics and the hegemony of quantification. Yet, synonymy, like elegant variation, allows different forms to be paired with the same sense, and the converse, homonymy, polysemy and other types of potential ambiguity, allow identical forms to represent different senses, partly undermining this attempt to build order and standards. More radically, innovative metaphor by unconventional reference can eventually bring about changes in sense. Humour, seems to be on the side of variation by exploiting ambiguity, making or recording mistakes (paronymy, malapropism, spoonerism, pseudomorphology, decomposition) and generally overriding priming.

In sum, standardization and predictability is reflected both in form-(sense)-referent pairing, in form-sense(-referent) pairing and in collocational and other priming behaviour. Working against it we have elegant variation, ambiguity through polysemy, homonymy and synonymy, and humour and metaphor, all increasing variation and all potentially creative.

There is a further tension in linguistic and discoursal behaviour between arbitrariness and motivation, which connects, in quite complex ways, with the standardization-variation tension. Names tend to be arbitrary and unmotivated in their meanings, especially as they avoid column 2, (despite attempts to re-motivate them by buying meaningful number plates, or like one of my students, Sze Ling, calling herself "Ceiling"). Form-sense pairings for lexical items constituted by one simple free morpheme are largely arbitrary, except for the relatively few iconic forms. Variation, whether through elegant variation, synonymy, or homonymy draws attention to this arbitrariness. If the same form can be used for different meanings or the same meaning be represented by different forms, this seems even more arbitrary, though less so in the case of polysemy. Similarly, priming, especially collocational priming, appears demotivating – underlining one tendency of language to create semi-fixed phrases, phrasal compounds or idioms in which the original meaning of the individual orthographic words becomes partly irrelevant. By contrast, some linguistic humour through decomposition and false etymology, rather like poetry, pretends or tries to find meaning in sub-morphemic patterns. So we have extremes of genres: conversation and news reports where clichés and predictable collocations abound, with word-forms demoted to the equivalent of a collection of phonemes; and creative and ludic genres which seek out extra levels of motivation.

One of my major academic interests is metaphor and both humour and metaphor can be creative. However, there is a major difference between them. The latter can be processed in a leisurely way so that the implications of its novel meanings are teased out, whereas jokes, if not all humour, tend to be sudden and instantaneous in their effects. Moreover, metaphor, much more than humour, potentially brings about permanent changes in meaning, even if, paradoxically these eventually become lexicalised and standardized. But if humour liberates, its liberation is something of a fleeting illusion.

## *11.9. Summary*

After a brief introduction to the technical meaning of 'information' we discussed how redundancy might be useful both interpersonally and ideationally. We proceeded to relate predictability to collocation and other textual patterns. After contrasting Chomskyan linguistics with text-linguistics in the Sinclair-Hoey tradition, in terms of data and the role of intuition and creativity, we proceeded to explain a recent text-linguistic development, priming theory, which suggests that ambiguity is less common in actual text data than often assumed. We listed the priming hypotheses drawing special attention to the claim that when the most obvious primed meaning is over-ridden to create an unusual ambiguity the result can be humorous. Such ambiguities were seen as necessary for the script opposition, incongruity and forced reinterpretation theories of (the mechanisms of) humour. The incongruous overriding of priming was the basis on which we explained a selection of the jokes and humorous examples from earlier in the book, both as a way of testing priming's role in humour, and giving an overview of the areas the book has covered. The chapter ended with a short discussion of the functional theories of humour as either release/liberation or social control, and I attempted to relate these to the undermining of collocational priming. Finally, I brought together a few thoughts on the relationship between humour, language, standardisation v. creativity, and motivation v. arbitrariness.

### Discussion

a) Does the fact that humour creatively overrides priming suggest that priming theory and its hypotheses are fundamentally conservative and anti-creative? Is it any less creative than a theory of semantics like Chomsky's that, on the one hand suggests that grammar gives rules for producing an infinite number of different potential sentences, but which on the other rules out as semantically ill-formed sentences like "Colourless green ideas sleep furiously". The latter might, after all, allow a metaphorical or metonymic interpretation. Can you find one?

b) How methodologically sound is the reliance on computer-generated statistical data from the surface of large (often newspaper) corpora, using the orthographic word-form as the key unit? Does this distort the nature of the variability of the textual boundaries of lexemes? Does it ignore the nature of language in use and the contextual contributions to meaning through pragmatics? Does it tell you more about the world than about language as a system of meanings?

c) Corpus stylistics has been seen as having the advantage of giving evidence of how people actually use language, rather than relying on intuitions about how they think they use language. But if corpus linguistics is used to account for priming, which is presumably about the intuitions of native speakers, does this value disappear?

## *Suggested readings*

- Hoey (2005) is an obvious read for anyone interested in a fuller account of lexical priming theory. Sinclair (1991) is an indispensable introduction to corpus linguistics and the use of collocational data, which was instrumental in establishing the tradition on which Hoey builds.

- Attardo (1994), which has been a major inspiration behind this present book, is worth reading in full, but especially relevant for his discussion of the various humour theories touched on very lightly in this chapter, and for his account of the unexpectedness of the disjunctor in joke structure.

- Ritchie (2004) is a more recent development within the script opposition tradition, elaborating a theory in which the triggering of an unexpected second script forces a reinterpretation of the text.

Chapter 9 of Billig (2005) elaborates the theory of humour as social control through embarrassment that I sketched briefly above. Chapters 6 and 7 are thoughtful discussions of Bergson and Freud respectively, forming the basis for his own theory. The book is interesting as a whole, and redresses the tendency within humour studies to celebrate humour as a social lubricant and a uniquely human life-enhancing phenomenon, rather than a tool of, or to be used against, the powerful.