

**COLLOQUIUM OF THE
AUSTRALASIAN HUMOUR SCHOLARS NETWORK
AT UNSW, SYDNEY**

“LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON HUMOUR”

Saturday 6th April 2002 (9.00 a.m. – 4.30 p.m.)
Australian Graduate School of Management Building (AGSM), UNSW
(Tel: (02) 9931 9200. Entry: Gate 11, Botany St, Randwick;
collect parking voucher if needed from the AGSM Front Desk on
arrival and proceed to Parking Station’s upper floors for parking)

CONVENOR AND CHAIR: JESSICA MILNER DAVIS

PROGRAMME AND ABSTRACTS OF PRESENTATIONS

TIMETABLE

9.00 – 9.25	Registration Tea and Coffee
9.25 – 10.15	Dr Graeme Ritchie , Division of Informatics, University of Edinburgh; “The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes”
10.15 – 11.05	Meredith Marra , <i>Language in the Workplace</i> Project, Victoria University of Wellington, N.Z.; “Punch-lines, Jab lines and Workplace Anecdotes”
11.05 – 11.30	Morning Refreshments
11.30 – 12.20	Dr Suzanne Eggins , Head, School of English, UNSW; “Analysing and Theorizing Humour in Children’s Prize-winning Creative Writing Texts”
12.20 – 1.10	Dr Marguerite Wells , Author, <i>Japanese Humour</i> ; “Linguistic Concepts and Terms for Humour in Japanese and English”
1.10 – 2.00	Lunch
2.00 – 2.15	Moses Bainy , Author, <i>Why Do We Laugh and Cry?</i> ; “Humour and Laughter and the Theory of Values”
2.15 – 2.30	Dr Graeme Ritchie ; “Commentary on Linguistic Theories of Humour”
2.30 – 3.30	Plenary Discussion
3.30	Close

ABSTRACTS

“The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes”

Graeme Ritchie
Leverhulme Research Fellow
Division of Informatics
University of Edinburgh

To tackle the vast and complex task of devising a theory of humour, it is methodologically desirable to find manageably small problems which are substantial enough to be of theoretical interest. I have chosen to work on the question “what aspects of a text make it a joke?”. That is, I am narrowing my attention to: (a) verbally expressed humorous stimuli, (b) the issue of being a joke, rather than the more difficult issue of

being funny. This is still a difficult and interesting problem. My methodology is closely based on generative linguistics and on artificial intelligence, in that I am trying to formulate detailed rules and definitions, with the aim of being sufficiently precise and formal that these theoretical statements could be tested by computer modelling. So far, I have mainly studied two much-discussed classes of joke (possibly overlapping) -- the pun, and the type of joke where the punchline forces re-interpretation of earlier material. This talk will set out the methodological aims and assumptions, and then present some illustrative analyses of joke structure.

“Punch-lines, Jab lines and Workplace Anecdotes”

Meredith Marra and Janet Holmes
School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies
Victoria University of Wellington

Recent research by Attardo and others working in the area of Script Theory has culminated in a new framework for analysing humorous narrative texts (e.g. Attardo 1998, Attardo 2001, Chlopicki 1997). Of primary focus within the framework is the position of the humour, especially in terms of punch lines (text-final humour) and jab lines (non-final humour). Although the framework has so far been illustrated using written material, including scripted data, Attardo claims it can be applied to all texts (Attardo 1998: 252). The question then arises, how well does it account for amusing oral anecdotes.

Our collection of spontaneous oral anecdotes, drawn from meetings recorded as part of Victoria University’s “Language in the Workplace Project” and identified as part of earlier research (Holmes and Marra 2001), is a useful data set with which to explore the extent to which Attardo’s schemata is applicable to spoken as well as written data.

References

- Attardo, Salvatore 1998. “The analysis of humorous narratives”, *HUMOR* 11, 3: 231-260.
Attardo, Salvatore 2001. “Humorous texts at large”, paper presented at ISHS Conference, University of Maryland, 6-9 July, 2001.
Chlopicki, Wladyslaw 1997. “An approach to the analysis of verbal humour in short stories”, *HUMOR* 10, 3: 333-347.
Holmes, Janet and Meredith Marra 2001. “Narrative and the construction of professional identity”, paper presented at the New Zealand Linguistic Society Conference, University of Canterbury, 30 August - 1 September, 2001.

“Analysing and Theorizing Humour in Children’s Prize-winning Creative Writing Texts”

Suzanne Eggins
School of English
University of New South Wales

In this paper I report on my work-in-progress to both analyse and theorize children’s use of humour in their creative writing stories. My corpus is several hundred prize-winning stories submitted over several years by upper primary school students across Australia to

the “Write-around-Australia” creative writing competition, sponsored by Nestlé and administered by the State Library of NSW.* Of the dozen or so text types (or genres) represented by the corpus, initial analysis reveals a striking contrast between two major categories: stories about death, and humorous stories. While children’s pre-occupation with death as suitable “literary” material has already received some attention, there has been little or no analysis of the kinds of humorous strategies emerging writers use. Drawing on critical linguistics, critical sociology and Bahktinian-influenced literary theory of the “carnavalesque” text as a transgressive practice, I will propose and illustrate a number of different categories of humorous story texts, in terms of their normative or transgressive meanings. I will suggest that the children’s acquisition of humorous writing strategies reveals young writers discovering that linguistic resources offer ways to comment on, manage, and sometimes even interrogate the culture within which they are acquiring the power of literacy.

*For details and “published” prize-winning texts, see the Nestlé “Write-around-Australia” website, <http://www.writearound.com.au>.

“Linguistic Concepts and Terms for Humour in Japanese and English”

Marguerite Wells (D.Phil. Oxon.)

Since different languages train people to divide the world up differently, languages (and cultures) have different semantic categories. Over the past 120 years or so, Japanese scholars and performers dealing in humour have been busy comparing their own ideas and practice of humour with ideas and practice in languages and cultures that derive from Europe. This paper will examine parts of the Japanese debate, offering a perspective on how absolute or relative may be our own categories of humour, such as the concept of “the funny” itself, comedy and tragedy, satire, irony, sarcasm, cynicism, nonsense, farce, high and low comedy, and types of linguistic humour.

“Humour and Laughter and the Theory of Values”

Moses Bainy (Dip. Ped., Éc. Sup. des Lett. de Beyrouth - Univ. de Lyon)

Any professional builder will tell you that if you build a house on shifting sands it will soon collapse. The shifting sands I am referring to is that magical, most admired, yet still largely unknown, and undefined word, “HUMOUR”. To my knowledge, no one has been able to come up with an acceptable definition of the word humour. Nevertheless, in the world of Academia, those who claim to be specialists in the field of humour, keep forging ahead trying to build houses and palaces and clubs and schools to tell us – and show us – all about humour. They’re eager to tell us about The Philosophy of Humour, The Sociology of Humour, The Psychology of Humour, The Semantics of Humour, The Physiology of Humour, and now *Computational Humour*... But, in my opinion, despite praiseworthy endeavours, they still fall short of the mark. In the absence of a solid foundation in the basic term “Humour”, the work will always leave something to be desired. When everything has been considered, we should never lose sight of the fact that humour can be found only in the Value System of each one of us.