

# THE HUMOUR STUDIES DIGEST BOOK REVIEW

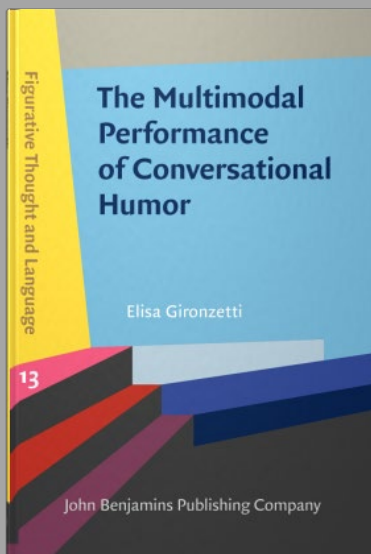
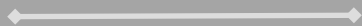
May 2023

Review of Elisa Gironzetti. 2022. *The Multimodal Performance of Conversational Humor: Figurative Thought and Language*, No. 13. xix+235pp. Amsterdam & New York: John Benjamins. ISBN 9789027210999 Ebook: 9789027257857 <https://benjamins.com/catalog/ftl.13>



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Back in the mists of time, Kendon (1967) published a ground breaking paper on patterns of gaze during conversation. Gironzetti (from the University of Maryland) follows in this tradition with a fascinating review of her research on gaze and smiling during a ‘getting to know you’ interaction. Six pairs of participants volunteered for the study in which their talk, smiling form and intensity, and direction of gaze were all closely recorded. This allowed the words uttered, the nature of the smile, and visual fixation point of both members of the dyad to be examined at intervals of fractions of a second. The format of the interaction was left open with only one particular suggestion being offered, that each participant tell the other a joke, the two jokes, one for each member of the dyad, being supplied by Gironzetti.

The amount of data gathered was impressive and only the barest summaries of the findings is possible. Generally, participants took account of the content of their partners’ utterances, their facial expressions, and their direction of gaze in order to achieve an appropriate frame for the utterances. For example, humorous utterances were typically marked by increases in the intensity of smiling by at least one, and usually both, participants. The importance of joint activity was demonstrated by the significantly higher rates of synchronised smiling during humorous utterances. Results also suggested that, during humorous talk, gazing at the listener’s mouth by the speaker was significantly higher than gazing by the listener at the speaker’s mouth.

The data revealed the high degree of individual variation in smiling and gaze activity, as well as influences attributable to the dyad. Also apparent was the difficulty in collecting reliable data on these actions

with data from 16 of 22 pairs failing to meet the criteria for inclusion in the study for a variety of reasons. Despite these problems, the review of the measures provides a rich resource for those interested in the complex interrelationships that exist between the content of talk, smiling, and gaze.

More problematic is what the results reveal about humour. Two significant interrelated issues require resolution before Gironzetti's findings can be integrated into our understanding of conversation, humorous or otherwise: what sort of talk constitutes humour, as opposed to less serious chat; and whether or not a semantically oriented, script-based approach can be stretched to cover the latter. Before fleshing out these issues using two of Gironzetti's examples of failed humour, her application of the semantically oriented account of humour requires a brief mention.

Gironzetti identified three types of humorous text, punch lines, jab lines and irony. Within the verbal context of a joke, punch lines are clearly defensible as instances of humour, but jab lines (... he won't count **your underwear**) and irony (... well we think he is **the best mayor** we've ever had a::nd ..) are not immediately obvious examples of amusing content. The occurrence of laughter after *underwear* and the realisation that the ironic utterance concerning the mayor was a segment of mimicry strongly suggest that Gironzetti was relying heavily on cues beyond the text to pick out her humorous utterances. The principal cue was laughter, a somewhat paradoxical strategy given Gironzetti's admirably concise review of the vexed relationship between humour and laughter. There is nothing inherently flawed with using both verbal and nonverbal cues to inform us of the general nature of the interaction but it surely causes one to wonder about the adequacy of purely semantic criteria in designating humour.

Returning to two of the three examples of failed humour discussed by Gironzetti, the first comprised the utterance (p.159; @ - laughter pulses), "... of course, it costs like 25 bucks to have lunch in @ Palo @ @ Alto @ laughter @ it's really expensive". It is hard to see how the content of this utterance, in and of itself, is humorous according to the tenets of any semantic oriented approach. It is clearly not the punch line of a joke, nor is it ironic and, if it is a jab line, Gironzetti does not describe it as such. We are forced to rely on the speaker laughter as an indicator of humour, which is problematic. As Provine and others have shown, speaker laughter is the commonest form of laughter in dyadic interaction, it rarely accompanies talk that could be classed as humorous, and typically is not followed by laughter by the listener. The patterns of smiling and gaze of the participants identified by Gironzetti remain relevant to the unfolding interaction but unless one is prepared to broaden the idea of humour to include any talk that might be offered by a person "in a good humour", these patterns have nothing to say about humour *per se*.

The second example of failed humour also reveals the curious positions one must adopt through an excessive reliance on a semantically oriented approach to understanding humour. In this case the "humour" failed when neither interlocutor smiled or laughed while telling one of the jokes provided by Gironzetti. One is prompted to

ask whether if two people exchange a joke and neither laughs nor smiles, has an instance of humour actually occurred. The answer must surely be no. If the speaker is not telling or ‘using’ a joke to prompt laughter but rather relating or ‘mentioning’ one, a possibility that Gironzetti fully acknowledges, then no joke has been offered.

Rather intriguingly, but not pursued by Gironzetti, the recipient of the joke in the above example prompts laughter by the teller with a single utterance of “OK”. It seems likely that this phrase was offered with a degree of irony, hence the laughter, but I would be loath to class it as humour despite it satisfying the basic criteria for a humorous utterance within Gironzetti’s scheme.

To resolve these intertwined issues would, in my view, require Gironzetti to fully accept the ‘constructivist’ approach that she dallies with throughout her exposition. The idea that the conversational frame is a product of negotiation of all participants should be applied more broadly to serious, non-serious and humorous content. What is said, how it is said, who says it, and the context of the talk all play their part. Requiring her framing notions to play second fiddle to the content of the utterance severely constrains the value of her contribution to understanding conversation generally. Her concluding remarks would suggest that she would prefer to grant the idea of framing significantly greater theoretical prominence; however, this entails downplaying the semantically oriented ideas on which the study was originally based. Yet Gironzetti’s own data would suggest that she could confine the script-based approach to explanations of particular forms of verbal humour. She could then work towards an understanding of both humour and less serious talk that would afford the intentions of the actors their rightful role. As the playwright Jonathan Miller (1972) remarked, following Strawson, “... it is *people* who mean and not *expressions*”.

Overall, then, I remain unconvinced by Gironzetti’s attempt to relate humour, as she defines it, with smiling and laughter, however, the wealth of data she provides and the theoretical perspectives she adopts are worth grappling with. I have no hesitation in recommending this text as a challenge to all those interested in understanding how verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication fuse to establish the meaning of an utterance in its fullest sense, including instances of humour.

## References

- Kendon, A. (1967). Some functions of gaze-direction in social interaction. *Acta Psychologica*, 26, 22-63.
- Miller, J. (1972). Plays and players. In R. A. Hinde (Ed.), *Non-verbal communication* (pp. 359-372). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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## ANGUS MCLACHLAN



Angus McLachlan, who is now retired from Federation University Australia where he taught psychology for some thirty years, continues to potter along the academic highways and byways of laughter and humour, as an Honorary Senior Research Fellow. He is still convinced that tickling is the means by which laughter becomes part of talk, from which all forms of humour develop. In an effort not to get too carried away by his grand theory, he has joined the Victorian CFA as a volunteer firefighter. A long-standing member of the AHSN Review Panel, he served as its Chair from 2018 until February 2023 when he stepped down to become Deputy Chair.