Book Review


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The ethical side often comes to the forefront in the discussions of humour – especially when the humour touches upon sensitive matters. Despite defying seriousness by its very nature, humour can nonetheless have serious consequences and cause serious offences – therefore, its ethical aspects require careful investigation (cf. Pickering and Lockyer 2005: 4). These issues become especially relevant in the public sphere, both in face-to-face and in online interactions; the latter are often marked by asynchronicity and lack of familiarity between the interlocutors, and thus open up the field for ethical evaluations from multiple perspectives.

Therefore, a study on humour in online media communication is a timely endeavour. By undertaking it, Lilia Duskaeva (the editor of the volume and the author of several chapters) and her colleagues “attempt to answer the question of how humour is used in socially and personally oriented media communication, what ethical meanings it conveys, and how its ethical properties are evaluated by speakers of various Slavic languages in online discourse” (p. x). In the Preface the editor acknowledges that humour is a double-edged sword and underscores the importance of the study of audience’s involvement and engagement in online communication in order to assess the ethical meaning of mass media humour.

The volume contributors have outlined their theoretical framework (in Chapters 1 and 2) and then adopted a common structure in most of the chapters that are dedicated to the analysis of empirical material (Chapters 3 through 10). The common structure includes a general introduction that describes a humorous phenomenon, then the presentation of two case studies per chapter (each case study consists of its context that is labelled “the proto-situation”, the humorous activities and/or reactions to humour) followed by subchapters “Findings” and “Conclusion”. The use of this structure throughout the book makes it easier to follow, but also has some serious drawbacks.

Firstly, the method of case study is understood slightly differently by different authors. Whereas for Duskaeva and Shilikhina (Chapter 3) it could be just a single Charlie Hebdo caricature and Russian users’ reactions to it, for Gasek (Chapter 7) each case study includes two tweets on the same topic and responses to them, and for Belovodskaja and Korostenkienė (Chapter 10) a case study involves identifying the
most popular topics of COVID-19 pandemic humour in a Facebook group. Moreover, even though the distinction between humour as a means of ethical evaluation and humour as an object of ethical evaluation is outlined in Chapter 1 (pp. 7–8), in the chapters that follow this distinction is rarely explicitly discussed which means that the cases where humour was the trigger for online comments (not necessarily humorous ones) and the cases when commenters responded to a serious matter with humour are analysed side by side, without taking a note in this basic difference. Finally, the aspiration to conform to the single structure of analysis has resulted in the fact that many of the findings/conclusions of different chapters also sound very similar and can in many instances be summarized as “in each case study, some users ethically evaluated the case positively whereas the others evaluated it negatively”. The strong reliance on citing and commenting the empirical material has unfortunately resulted in very superficial analysis in most of the individual chapters.

The authors decided to focus on a lesser represented cultural region, namely, Slavic countries. This focus to a certain extent determined an approach to humorous communication that they had adopted: several of the volume contributions (Chapters 5, 7, 8 and 9) present extensive analyses of particular terms that are used in Slavic languages to refer to certain types of humour. On the one hand, this enriches humour scholarship with a more nuanced cultural representation on humour, but on the other hand, it might make a reader who belongs to another culture wonder to what extent these terms – and the phenomena they denote – correlate with the more broadly used notions. In other words, the use of culture-specific terms adds another layer to the discussion about universality of humour and the possibility of cross-cultural comparison.

The reliance on Slavic countries case studies in an English-language edited volume inevitably poses the question of translatability of humour (for discussion, see Chiaro 2011). The authors of the volume mostly try to provide the context for language-specific puns – except for a few instances such as the mention that a Telegram channel’s name “NeVrotik” is vulgar but not explaining why (p. 67). An even more complex language aspect is discussed in Chapter 8 where the authors argue that the members of an online social media group have created and been using “a humorous parody of the mixed Belarusian–Russian speech” (p. 112), but only provide the English translations of all the examples they cite, and therefore it is impossible for a reader to understand how this parody speech is used. Finally, the studies based on examples that do not belong to the realm of global culture/politics have to provide an in-depth cultural translation for the phenomena they discuss. While in some cases (for example, in Chapters 7 and 9) the authors include rather extensive explanations of Polish and Slovakian cultural contexts and thus make the examples they cite understandable for international readers, in other instances (for example, in Chapters 3 and 6) more elaborate descriptions of Russian cultural
phenomena would have enhanced a reader’s understanding of the issues analysed in the chapter.

The main drawback of this volume for a humour scholar or for a researcher of online communication, however, lies in the fact that many of the authors only marginally touch upon the specificity of humorous (as opposed to bona-fide) communication and online environment where is takes place. The authors do not explore the subtleness and subversiveness of humour, do not discuss that reacting to humour seriously – even if one considers it to be unethical – can be uneasy, especially for public personae (cf. Sørensen 2013), do not always account for the playful nature of humour and its inherent ambiguity. In a similar way, they treat online communication mostly as a stream of online comments or at the very best a dialogue between several users in the comments/tweets. Ironically, despite Chapter 2 is entirely dedicated to the theoretical models of multimodality (though not focusing on multimodality in humour and not accounting for previous studies in this field, e.g. Yus 2019), the individual analytical chapters mention multimodality only in passing and do not analyse how different modes of online humour contribute to its meaning, funniness and adherence to ethical norms.

References


