Book Review


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The book begins with this first sentence: “This book is concerned with the study of conversational humor from a multimodal, embodied perspective.” This is true. But this book is also much more than that. It is a book about conversational humor and not humor in conversation. The difference between both expressions and the theoretical implications of such a bias are significant: humor is here always and only considered an interactional practice which has to be negotiated by both participants. And the way that smile and gaze are resources of negotiation is the central aim of the book. Moreover, the methodological approach chosen by the author is innovative. She analyzes the multimodal performance of conversational humor through a double approach which are rarely combined, both data-driven and quantitative.

This book is composed of 7 thematic chapters. Beside the introduction and conclusion, the 5 other chapters are devoted to a specific and complementary focus. Each chapter follows the same pattern: a synthetic and comprehensive review of the literature of the presented domain, a short introduction announcing the content of the chapter and a short conclusion summing up the main results and contributions of the author’s own studies. Whether it is on smile, gaze, or more generally humor studies and conversational humor, the author shows an impressive knowledge of the literature and of each domain she presents. Moreover, she does not simply describe the previous studies, she also reports on the existing discussions, giving the reader the theoretical tools to understand both their stakes and the theoretical positions she has chosen.

Chapter 1 is a general introduction where the author presents both the organization of the book and her approach, focusing on two main goals: (1) answer the question of how to negotiate humor and with which multimodal clues, (2) and correlatively, get out of the logocentrism the author denounces throughout the book (p. 5). Without fear of spoiling the end, both objectives are achieved. No question, even thorny, will be ignored but on the contrary, raised and often answered.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the multimodal performance of conversational humor. This is for me, the most destabilizing chapter. After a clear presentation of the corpus, the author presents many results about what was presented as the focus of the book, such as individual or synchronic smiling and/or gazing behavior. It could be difficult
to understand all the results without having a clear explanation about some aspects of the methodology – above all, about the Smiling Intensity Scale (Gironzetti et al. 2016) – used by the author, and without having read the author’s previous work. To get past this little first confusion, I finally decided to do what all the spectators of “Columbo” always did: watching until the end, not to discover who killed, but how the murderer is caught. Here is my approach to the book as a reader: how did the author obtain her announced results? And it worked. The confusion past, the author provides very interesting results about all the points presented (which I won’t spoil) about individual smiling behavior, smile considered a dialogical synergy, participants’ gaze.

The focus of chapter 3 is the “individual smiling behavior.” In this chapter, smiling behavior is analyzed as a resource allowing to negotiate humor. After an overview of the literature, presenting the various ways to approach this so complex phenomenon and to understand her theoretical choice: consider smile both an emotional expression and a facial feedback gesture. The whole presentation of the SIS also appears in this chapter. Going back to the origins of this scale (Ekman and Friesen 1978), the author also shows its merits, applying it to her data. Thus, this scale, extended on 5 levels (from 0 to 4, p. 66) allows an analysis of smile according to its intensity and not only through a dichotomic perspective (presence/absence). This scale thus allows an analysis which considers all the complexity of smiling. Such a powerful tool is a great help for the analysis of conversational humor. But of course, like any tool, it also raises some questions. I will address one in particular: the status of S4. Doing so, I am aware of opening Pandora’s box without having my own answers to my questions. Despite the fact that the name itself (jaw-drooped smile) can be seen as a little interpretative (on the contrary to other intensities), this S4 raises a major question: what are exactly the differences between smile and laughter? Is it only possible to distinguish them? And if yes, I agree with the author when she says that SIS is based on facial expressions. But couldn’t it be possible to consider other visual expressions such as shoulders movements (Niewiadomski et al. 2013)? This tool may definitely lead to enthusiastic larger discussions. Additionally, this chapter allows the author to answer some important questions. Not only does she not hide the individual large variability of her data, but she makes it a strength, trying to explain it through the analysis of different variables (such as language and culture, types of humor, gender). The analysis of smiling and humor is thus always contextualized.

Chapter 4 is devoted to “smiling patterns and dialogical smiling synergy.” With a convincing argumentation, the author adopts Fusaroli’s model (Fusaroli et al. 2014) of a dialog as synergy. From this starting point, she identifies different smiling patterns which highlight not only the participants’ synchrony but also its functions in humor. The most frequent is the “framing smiling pattern,” which corresponds to a sustained
smile. Showing that it is displayed in 84% of the total instances of humor, the author
defeats the theory according to which humor is generally preceded by a peak smiling
(p. 103–105). Beyond these important results, this chapter is crucial for two other
reasons: the author's approach and methodological contributions. Concerning the
former, the author shows the relationship between participants' smiling behavior
and the context in which both humor (or non-humor) and smile appear. The meth-
odological contribution concerns the establishment of the smiling synchrony scale (p.
94–95). Presented without fanfare or trumpet, this is an indispensable tool to provide
a quantitative analysis of smiling synchrony.

**Chapter 5** focuses on eye movements. It is presented as an exploratory study.
This is true, but it does not prevent the author from having some interesting and
promising results. As mentioned by the author, only a few studies exist on the role of
gaze in humor. Beyond a review of the literature, the strength of the chapter is
double: (1) it provides complementary study of gaze and smile during humor. To the
best of my knowledge, it is the first one; (2) humor (as through the entire book), is not
observed as a whole but always considered as context-dependent. Thus, analyzing
gaze direction (toward the partner's mouth and eyes in particular), and participants'
smile, the author shows that both gestures are displayed and considered differently
by participants, and that these variations are linked to the types of humor, the
language and the interactional role of each participant at the instant T.

**Chapter 6** is devoted to failed conversational humor. As for the entire book,
failure is presented as interactional: if humor fails, it is not the sole responsibility of
the speaker or of the recipient. This is a major point in the chapter. The other one is to
present failed humor as a *continuum* and not in dichotomic way (failure or success).
This point is clearly highlighted in this chapter and appears as a logical conclusion of
the author's approach: because conversational humor and its multimodal resources
are context-dependent, because they have to be negotiated, the result of this nego-
tiation is not always clear-cut. I stop here on 2 points. The first one concerns the term
“misalignment.” This is an interesting and promising word, but which also deserve
further discussions. I would appreciate knowing how the author situates this word in
comparison to other existing in the literature in Conversation Analysis for example,
such as “alignment and affiliation” (Stivers 2008). The other point concerns the notion
of “personal baseline.” This is definitively a fruitful way to investigate failed humor. It
allows us to give to give not an absolute but a relative value to the participants' cues.
But how to apply this personal baseline in initial interactions?

**Chapter 7** is the conclusion. In this chapter, the author summarizes all her major
results and projects herself in her next research. To do so, she considers various
possible scenarios which deserve to be tested (with other kinds of corpora for
instance). Thus, in the same way I used Columbo in chapter 3, I will here spin the
metaphor, saying that I am looking forward to season 2.
To sum up, this book presents a very fruitful analysis of multimodal conversational humor. As such it undoubtedly fills a gap in the current research. The methodological approach used is very innovative. Mixing both a statistical and data-driven approach, the author combines two methods which are rarely put together. Of course, one could discuss, on the one hand, the validity of a statistical analysis provided on a such small corpus and on the other hand, the absence of a systematical qualitative analysis allowed precisely because the corpus is small. This would be legitimate. But it should not minimize the strengths of this book, which are numerous: the rigorous analyses provided, the courage to tackle thorny issues without dismissing any of them, results which challenge preconceived ideas on humor and smile, the remarkable spirit of synthesis shown by the author in her reviews of the literature which makes this book a real manual both for students and more advanced scholars.

I have learned a lot reading this book, and it also made me think. For me, raising questions that allow for further discussions and avenues for future research is the sign of a book which deserves to be written. And read.

References


