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Humor, creativity and lexical creation

Introduction

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Introduction

Lucile Bordet and Frédérique Brisset

- 1 Language as a whole is marked by its communicative function and lexicon is part of this function thanks to its denotative referential potentialities. But there is a language skill that goes beyond mere communication, and in which lexicon plays a full role: the ability to play with words in order to exploit their ludic potential and make a humorous use of them. One of the recurrent problems when attempting to define humor lies, however, in the difficulty in drawing its limits, which often leads researchers to define it by default. This issue of *Lexis* therefore apprehends humor in its wider sense, including, for instance, comedy, irony, satire, parody, sarcasm, to name but a few of its many variations. Within this framework, it aims to approach it via the paradigm of lexical creation, meant as a tool used to provoke laughter. Indeed, humorists enjoy playing on words, but also playing with words, which implies a taste for lexical creativity, whether willingly or not, as stated by Freud [1963] in his famous essay *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. The former class of wordplay encompasses all figures and tropes devised to manipulate lexemes and syntagms at different levels, as reminders of a subtext operating *in absentia* or *in praesentia*, sometimes even involuntarily (e.g. spoonerisms or liaison errors) or accidentally (e.g. *lapsus linguae*).
- 2 How are such humorous effects achieved with the lexicon? Derivation, compounding and blending mechanisms, phoneme or letter inversion processes, paronymic neologisms, among many other lexicogenic operations, although revealing the great creativity of their enunciators, obey lexical and morphological rules. If such rules were not followed, they would not work, be efficient and understood by their addressees. The Bergsonian precept [1914: 37], used to describe one of the mechanisms initiating laughter – “something mechanical encrusted on the living” – applies to language indeed: the double tension between creative impulse and linguistic constraints is paramount to the reflections of the thirteen international researchers who have contributed to this thematic issue.
- 3 It thus comes as no surprise to find slang among the areas in which lexical creativity gives rise to humor: such cryptic jargons are sometimes based on highly rigid creation processes (one thinks of *verlan*, *Javanese*, *louchébem* cants in French, or of rhyming slang

in English), but they may also play on metonymy, borrowing, clipping, or acronyms, and so on. This topic is investigated in **Fabrice Antoine**'s opening article, based on very diverse corpora: he analyzes the word-formation rules of slang and colloquial language lexical series, in a diachronic and comparative French-English approach; such processes are based on a "semantic equation": the intersection of formal matrices, quite limited in number, and semantic matrices, mostly resorting to metaphor and metonymy. The playful, creative but quite mechanical escalation, by way of iteration, or even deformation, leads to "the new, the original, the unexpected, built from existing material, supposedly known to everyone", as illustrated by the various case studies supporting Antoine's demonstration, which sweeps through the most diversified lexical fields, ranging from lexicons meant to designate the police forces to words and collocations referring to menstruation...

- 4 Slang vocabularies frequently participate in the construction of sociolects as they are often derived from professional jargons; the corpus collected by **Craig Hamilton & Anne-Sophie Foltzer**, who focus on euphemistic vocabulary and expressions in the field of economics, fall into that latter category. These lexical sets correspond more or less to what Allan [2019: 21] describes as "artful euphemisms [...] which make a striking figure, but which are the everyday vocabulary of a particular jargon". Crespo-Fernández [2019: 43], on the other hand, gives the following synonyms for this rhetorical figure: "euphemistic – i.e., implicit, vague, or polite-sounding alternatives". Hamilton & Foltzer, using an admittedly limited but very interesting survey that paves the way for further research, show how the nominal compounding process allows for a great deal of playful creativity; this works especially well through the use of metaphors and innuendos, both typical traits of euphemisms (see Allan [2019: 2]), for the production of a kind of verbal humor that is sometimes caustic and very often guided by the circumvention of societal and professional taboos.
- 5 Proper names, although deemed to be rigid designators (Kripke [1980: 48-49]), do not escape lexical creativity either, as **Manon Philippe** demonstrates by probing their humorous potential via theories of humor based on the incongruity principle, mainly the Bergsonian approach combining rigidity, repetition, exaggeration, and the resolution of said incongruity. She details the *a priori* irreducible opposition between the pragmatic effect of humor and the morphosyntactic fixedness of proper names, their seemingly unachievable semantic analysis and their high degree of lexicalization; thanks to numerous onomastic examples taken from the Anglophone press and literature, she comes to the conclusion that humor in proper names is mainly based on metalinguistic script oppositions. The slightest morphological modification, a quasi-homonymy with some common nouns or a co-text highlighting their referential properties, shedding light on their capacity to become paragons sometimes close to caricature, allow for the actualization of underlying humorous potentialities. A proper name will then take on a discursive and pragmatic value that goes way beyond its strictly denotative referential quality.
- 6 An anthroponym can thus indirectly characterize its bearer in the field of fiction, but characterization may also involve the lexical creation of occasionalisms for characters whose humorous "talk" then becomes a recognizable trait, prone to imitation (see the "Slayer Slang" in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for instance, or the slang spoken by the characters in the *Série Noire* novels). Certain genres are particularly productive in that respect, first and foremost children's literature, which is studied in two contributions

to this issue, and then audiovisual fiction, especially television series, which provide telling examples, both literally and figuratively.

- 7 *How I Met Your Mother* is thus the object of a paper by **Adeline Terry** on occasionalisms, which she considers according to the lexicogenic categories defined by Tournier [2004: 21-25] with regard to their form, while examining their function in context. In fact, these occasionalisms are not coined to respond to a terminological need that would not yet have been met, but rather to activate the playful mechanisms allowed by the lexical material at hand. In TV series with an explicitly humorous aim like *How I Met Your Mother*, examples are of course numerous, and they even give the sitcom a true linguistic identity. Through some fifty dialogue excerpts, Terry shows how many occasionalisms may seem a failure to elicit laughter from the interlocutors of the diegetic fiction but prove to be frank hits with the audience on the interpretative level, becoming a distinctive trait that has brought the series success and fame.
- 8 The same sitcom gives **Lucile Bordet** the opportunity to investigate how the lexical mechanisms defining the humorous idiolect of Barney, one of the main characters of *How I Met Your Mother*, contribute, but are not sufficient, to characterize this protagonist. Through a corpus review, she goes over the lexicogenic processes, sorts them by frequency and shows that creative word-formation processes are not enough to create and convey humor. They have to meet the criteria of humorous discourse (incongruity, surprise, benign violation, etc.). Resorting to these strategies alone proves nonetheless insufficient when it comes to characterizing a fictional character. They also have to be combined with recurring devices and themes to truly define a fictional character's personality.
- 9 Characterization is at the heart of the article by **Inès Zorgati** too, via the vocabulary invented by Roald Dahl for his *Big Friendly Giant* character, i.e. *Gobblefunk*, to examine the humorous effects his occasionalisms are likely to produce on young readers. The lexical mechanisms that the author brilliantly uses target a very specific audience and run up against a major difficulty: their transfer into another language when the novel is to be translated. After defining the nature and functions of these creations, Zorgati conducts a comparative English-French study of various occurrences to investigate whether and how the French version manages to render the original lexical creations and convey their humor, given the particular inclination of the English language towards these playful effects vs. the morphological requirements of French, which is known to favor derivation rather than compounding, which happens to be so productive in English (see Humbley [2018: 317] for instance).
- 10 Roald Dahl's publications are also part of the corpus chosen by **Cécile Poix** to examine the concept of lexical deviance as a form of creativity in children's literature. Challenging semantic rules results in novelty and surprise in that genre, and the resolution of incongruity is at the heart of the humorous effect, stimulating the attention of readers, who are sometimes bound to accept incongruous language and linguistic incoherence to the point of nonsense. Poix draws on a collection of eleven British children's literature titles from the 19th and 20th centuries, from which she extracted 1,500 occasionalisms. She shows how children's literature's use of violated collocations, humorous schemes and tropes, and phonetic manipulations, which play on such rhetorical processes as addition, subtraction, transposition and substitution, partake of a linguistic strangeness that creates humor.

- 11 Linguistic deviance, which is inseparable from the notion of norms, is nevertheless a concept that has been called into question, as experienced in the Norwegian novel chosen by **Luise von Flotow, Ida Hove Solberg & Enora Lessinger** to deal with feminist puns and neologisms, Gerd Brantenberg's *Egalias døtre*. As Yaguello [1992: 7] reminds us, "language is a symbolic system engaged in social relations, so the idea of a 'neutral' language is to be rejected and the notion of conflicting relations has to be emphasized", which is what Brantenberg's novel does with mastery; her point is to deflate the conventional language, the predominant "malespeak", in the feminocentric fictional world she has conceived. Such processes as compounding, derivation, neology, modifying the agentivity of existing verbs or inverting genders in supposedly fixed idiomatic expressions, do serve a political agenda, in the broad sense: by laughing at the language created this way, one also laughs at the standard patriarchal norms of the "real" world. How, then, can this idiom, with its multiple issues and its humorous potential, be rendered in translation? The solutions chosen in the English version of the novel¹ underline all the power of the lexical creativity needed to take into account, as stated by Simon [2005: ix] in 1996, "the importance [...] of a critical reframing of gender, identity and subject-positions within language", and to support militancy, by way of laughter through a fictional utopia.
- 12 However, lexical creativity intending a subversive humorous purpose is not a recent phenomenon, as can be seen with **Adrienn Gulyás's** article on François Rabelais' *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*. Gulyás, a translator of both works into Hungarian, relies on the translational notion of equivalence theorized by Koller to understand how the specific lexical constraints of allophone language systems can hinder or facilitate the translation of the two texts into English and Hungarian. Rabelais' games with affixation and blending, and his taste for the accumulation of rhymes and alliterations have led to creations that have, in some cases, been integrated into the French language and are all the more sensitive to the lexicogenic rules of foreign languages for their translational transfer. This compels translators to renew their perspective on their own language, as can be discovered in the examples chosen and commented on by Adrienn Gulyás in a contrastive approach, thanks to her combined experience as a translation practitioner and scholar.
- 13 The durability of lexical creations can be built through lexicalization, which makes them enter the language in the same way as other non-humorous lexical creations do, but also via the establishment of a literary tradition: the Rabelaisian carnivalesque heritage is thus found in three American novels by Rikki Ducornet, where the nonsense dear to Lewis Carroll, already quoted by Zorgati and Poix, surrealism, and the grotesque also break through, as demonstrated by **Élodie Trole** in her research on the links between lexical creativity and creation, and literary creativity and humor in literary texts. In Ducornet's writing, tropes and rhetorical figures question a relationship between signifier and signified pushed to the point of ambiguity, compelling the readers of these fictions to a properly metalinguistic reflection, for the author performs a true experimentation on language. Its modalities and effects are explored by Trole in detail through numerous examples, including portmanteau words, paronomasia, or neologisms, whose comic and subversive impact works both at the textual and metatextual levels.
- 14 Navigating through textual genres, linguistic areas, and times, this issue of *Lexis* offers readers the opportunity to gather and cross-reference numerous approaches to

lexicogenesis through the prism of humor. It should therefore be of interest to linguists, particularly scholars in lexicology and comparative linguistics of course, and translation theorists, but also to stylisticians and researchers on verbal humor. The quality of the reflections conducted, the heterogeneity of the theories drawn on, the originality and variety of the many corpora under study, as well as the wide range of audiences targeted by the lexical creations analyzed, are proof that these constantly reactivated humorous processes provide a fruitful ground for research and deserve the full attention of academics.

- 15 This thematic issue is followed by a paper in the “Varia section” of the journal, in which **Rio Rini Diah Moehkardi** proposes to focus on the formation of English acronyms used by students to name school events and institutions in an Indonesian context. Relying on Mattiello’s and Soeparno’s frameworks for her morphosyntactic and semantic analysis of the different patterns observed, she emphasizes, in a contrastive English-Indonesian approach, the combined linguistic and cultural influences of both languages; it shows most of all in the length and position of the items extracted from the source words to build the resulting lexical creations and lead to what she has coined “*Indonenglish*” acronyms.

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NOTES

1. Recently translated in French by Jean-Baptiste Coursaud under the title *Les filles d'Egalie*, Paris: Zulma, 2021.

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