

○ **D. AARONS, *JOKES AND THE LINGUISTIC MIND*** (NEW YORK, ROUTLEDGE. 2012. PP. XI, 272)

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Aarons has not written this book to make us laugh, nor to teach us what is funny. Rather she uses jokes, and why we find them funny, as a way to investigate a variety of linguistic ideas. Aarons maintains that jokes can be ‘a valuable source of evidence for our tacit knowledge of the mental representations’ (p.4) of a wide range of linguistic phenomena. In this sense, Aarons has based her work on Chomskyan notions of competence and performance. The performance of a successful joke relies on the linguistic competence of the listener. The listener must be aware of the tacit rules that govern language to ‘get’ the joke; therefore, Aarons argues, an analysis of jokes can bring to light our tacit knowledge.

In the first chapter Aarons asks ‘What can the study of jokes teach us about linguistics?’ (p.3). She then attempts to answer her own question by explaining how jokes are the result of language play and that playing is fun; therefore, playing with language can be funny. Aarons confines her discussion to ‘*de dicto*’ jokes (p. 6), that is, jokes that are reliant on their linguistic form for their humour. The theoretical basis for Aarons’ analyses and other background literature into humour are covered in this chapter. She spends some time explaining Chomsky’s theories, paying particular attention to the distinction between performance and competence. This chapter draws links to other fields in applied linguistics, such as translation, first and second language acquisition and cognitive science as well as providing references to readers who wish to delve further into the field of Humour Studies.

Chapter 2, on pragmatics, is the first of four chapters that explore particular features of language in relation to jokes. After defining pragmatics to mean the use of language in context, Aarons points out that in order to understand an utterance, we rely on our ‘tacit knowledge about the way in which language is used to do things’ (p.22). She discusses different pragmatic models, focusing on Grice’s (1975) Co-operative Principle, Conversational Maxims and Implicature. Aarons then uses her analysis to show how jokes can illuminate tacit knowledge of such pragmatic rules. There are numerous examples (30 to be exact) that show how jokes exploit ambiguity, misunderstanding of illocutionary force and deixis to create humour, and the analysis is rigorous and clearly explained.

Chapter 3 begins a discussion of semantics, both lexical and compositional. The complexity of linguistic meaning is competently illustrated with examples (most of which seem to be taken from *The Goon Show* and Woody Allen) as Aarons explores sameness and difference. Through this exploration she shows that the concept of sameness can be broken down into various categories (synonymy, referential equivalence, homonymy and polysemy) and jokes are created because there are so few words that are interchangeable across all categories

simultaneously. In the second half of this chapter, Aarons explores homophony with jokes that use puns, literal and non-literal language and ambiguity.

Chapter 4, *Playing with Morphology and Phonology*, provides more in-depth analysis of how certain jokes, and our ability to get them, reveal our tacit knowledge of language rules. The analysis of first example in this chapter, ‘*My karma ran over my dogma*’ (p. 93), shows how even a bumper sticker can exemplify implicit knowledge, that spelling is not necessarily matched with phonology, that syllables can be attached to words, and that syllables alone are not required to have any meaning. Aarons notes that knowledge of lexical items is also necessary but her analysis of the joke clearly demonstrates that to get the joke is to draw on our tacit knowledge of the difference between a morpheme and a syllable. The chapter also goes through the humour derived from multimorphemic forms, morphological generalisation (‘*Do adults get as much fun out of adultery as infants do out of infancy?*’ [p. 98]), cranberry morphemes (morphemes that do not carry any meaning on their own, such as *cran*) and other phenomena. Aarons then provides a discussion of phonology, including phonological processes such as parapraxis (‘*A Freudian slip is when you mean something, but you say your mother.*’ [p. 119]).

Aarons begins Chapter 5, on syntax, by pointing out that it is our innate knowledge of syntax that allows us to enjoy *de dicto* jokes. ‘Linguistic jokes are only funny if we perceive a contrast between what we know about language and the way in which language works in the joke.’ (p.126). This explanation for why jokes are funny lies at the heart of Aarons’ argument, and this chapter is potentially the least accessible in the book – at least to those unfamiliar with sentence structure diagrams. If the number of syntactic trees does not intimidate the untrained reader, they will benefit from the interesting discussion of syntactic ambiguity and its relationship to lexical semantics, multicategoriality and homophony.

Chapter 6 provides the reader with a longer analysis of a Monty Python skit that contains examples of humour created by exploiting the many levels of linguistic knowledge previously discussed in the book. Although this chapter leaves you feeling you’re trapped with a Monty Python fanatic who insists on repeating all the jokes from *The Life of Brian* verbatim, it does clearly demonstrate how a longer piece of discourse can be broken down into its composite parts for the purpose of analysis. This is of particular value to students and others who may be new to the process involved in the various types of discourse analysis.

The following chapter deals with bilingual humour and macaronic language, which ‘relies on knowledge of the orthographic-sound system of at least two languages and the form-meaning system of at least one of those languages’ (p.180). This section of the book is quite narrow in scope, and draws on a few examples to highlight the arbitrary nature of the form of signs. Aarons uses a manuscript that has been written in such a way that it looks (to a non-French speaker) to be written in French, but when it is read aloud, it sounds like English being read

with a French accent. She also briefly discusses humorous intersections of signed and spoken language, including Mark Twain's comments on the German language. Bilingual humour differs from macaronic humour in that the listener does not require as much knowledge of multiple languages. The listener only needs to be proficient in one language, and have a little acquaintance with the other. An intimate knowledge of German, for example, is not needed by many English speakers in order to understand the following example:

A: If 9 W is the answer, what is the question?

B: Herr Wagner, does your name begin with a 'V'? (p.175)

'Jokes about language', Chapter 8, as Aarons points out, tend to not fit the form of traditional jokes but rather draw attention to the quirks and absurdities of English (p.192). Though the topic has been written about widely in recent years, there is much to enjoy in this chapter and the book would have seemed incomplete without it. The chapter discusses jokes about English orthography, recursion, double entendre, and the collision of language and logic (p.199). Aarons continues the chapter with a discussion on how some jokes can take a stand against linguistic prescriptivism, jokes that 'play with the distinction between use and mention' (p.208) and jokes about the functions of Proper Names.

The final chapter provides a detailed look into the features and mechanics of cryptic crosswords. Not only do cryptic crosswords rely on our tacit language knowledge, but also our conscious knowledge of language and the relationship between the spoken and written form. This chapter includes a detailed discussion of how cryptic crossword setters (writers) use a myriad of linguistic features in order to challenge the solvers. Solvers are required to engage a high degree of consciousness of the different ways in which spoken and written language can be structured and used (p.255). Aarons takes the time to explain the rules of cryptic crossword solving and in doing so makes clear that the pastime is very much about playing with language in the same way that jokes do.

Aarons writes in an engaging, accessible style and her use of jokes to reveal tacit language knowledge will be of interest to any applied linguist. Aarons points out that most linguistic phenomena 'can be illustrated elegantly and memorably through an appropriate joke' (p.3), something she demonstrates convincingly throughout. In the beginning of this book, Aarons apologises to the reader for killing the joke, and she does indeed do this. The examples are numerous and the analysis of them occasionally becomes tiring. That being said, it is also this detailed analysis that allows us to answer Aarons' original question of 'what can the study of jokes teach us about linguistics?' Quite a lot, as it turns out.

REFERENCES

- Grice, H. (1975). Logic and Conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics* (Vol. 3) (pp. 41-58). New York: Academic Press.