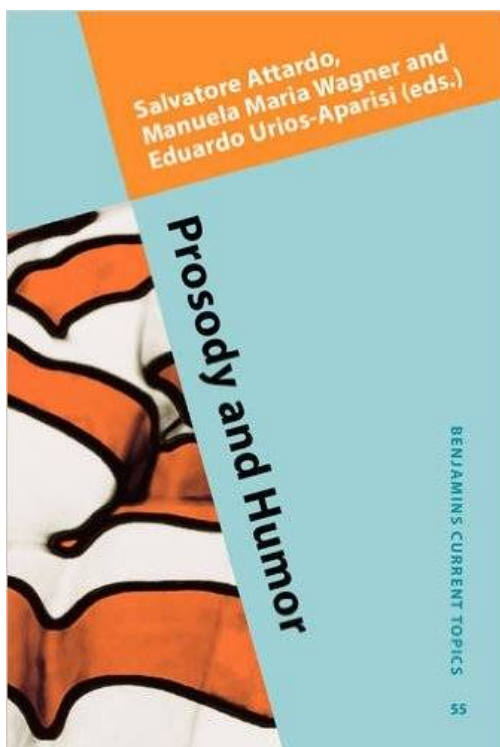# Salvatore ATTARDO, Manuela Maria WAGNER, Eduardo URIOS-APARISI (eds), *Prosody and Humor*, John Benjamins Publishing Co, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2013, 192 p.

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Combining humor research and discourse analysis, *Prosody and Humor* is a collection of articles that take on a subject that has only recently received adequate attention, namely "whether and how prosodic and multimodal features are used to 'mark' humor" (Attardo 2013:8). The volume is comprised of eight articles that tackle these issues from a variety of angles, and while in most cases the authors point out how their research is only a stepping stone or some first attempts in a research area that still needs work, this caveat is not meant to be demoralizing in any way. On the contrary, each study presents an air of opportunity, making *Prosody and Humor* as a whole feel like an open invitation, a way of saying "this is what little has been so far, so come, join us in our explorations".

The book itself opens with an introduction that reads like an article in and of itself, written by Salvatore Attardo, the main editor of the volume, whose work in linguistic theories of humor has gone a long way in legitimizing humor studies as a worthy academic endeavor (which was not always the case). After this introduction, where the author goes over the main topics that the reader should expect going forward, the first article per se, entitled 'Recognizing sarcasm without language', describes the results of a meticulous experiment conducted by Henry Cheang and Marc Pell. Here the two researchers seek "to determine whether certain speaker intentions conveyed through prosody in an unfamiliar language can be accurately recognized" (Attardo 2013: 15). More specifically, they wanted to know if certain prosodic markers exist that would allow a person to recognize sarcasm when it is uttered in a language that they do not understand. What Cheang and Pell found was that, despite the fact that each sarcastic utterance had elements that would indicate them as being distinct from the other categories, these elements were by and large picked up only by native speakers, both in the case of English and Cantonese. This would suggest that prosody in and of itself provides insufficient information to the hearer for him to determine whether or not the utterance was spoken sarcastically or not.

The second article 'Prosodic and multimodal markers of humor in conversation' is written by Salvatore Attardo, Lucy Pickering and Amanda Baker. Here the authors endeavor to determine whether pitch and speech rate in conversational humor differ from those of non-humorous parts. For this, a pair of volunteers was asked to talk to each other via computers, while wearing headsets and microphones so that everything is recorded. Each volunteer had to "tell one another [a] respective joke and continue talking for five or ten minutes, until told to stop" (Attardo 2013: 42). The resulting exchange was then analyzed to see whether there are differences in pitch, volume, speech

rate and pause length before and during the voicing of a punch line, a jab line (conversational witticism) or an instance of irony. In all cases, the researchers found no significant differences. While this might not seem particularly interesting at first glance, it is nevertheless important, as it serves as concrete evidence that the common presumption whereby we change our speech patterns when being humorous is wrong.

What follows in *Prosody and Humor* is the study by Thomas Flamson, Gregory Bryant and Clark Barrett on 'Prosody in spontaneous humor'. Here the researchers use recorded conversations to check for prosodic markers that would indicate humorous productions in a non-humorous environment. The data itself was collected by recording the business meetings that took place in a Brazilian collective farm. There were around 64 participants at these meetings and their discussions "consisted of extended, free-flowing discussions of problems confronting the farm" (Attardo 2013: 64). Although these conversations were meant to be serious in nature, the researchers did manage to collect a total of forty brief samples of humorous statements. What they found was that in fact instances of humor are rarely accompanied by any prosodic signaling. The reason for this is possibly in order to limit the number of members who understand that a statement was meant to be humorous to those individuals who "share a similar cognitive environment" (Attardo 2013: 69).

The fourth article, written by Christy Bird, is a curious piece that investigates the difference in pitch between conversational wh-questions and those found in riddles. While the data collected comes from a limited number of participants, consisting mainly of friends, family members or colleagues, the resulting corpus is extensive, with "308 wh-questions, including 159 riddle questions and 149 conversational questions asked by a total of 32 speakers" (Attardo 2013: 86) out of which fifty of each were analyzed in detail. By using a Praat acoustic analysis software, Bird was able to measure the pitch used in voicing each wh-question. The results were rather surprising: contrary to what one might expect, the pitch of regular conversational wh-questions is significantly higher than that of riddles, and Bird provides a possible explanation to this by pointing out that usually pitch is used to provide context to an utterance. In the case of riddles, where the person asking is also the person answering, context is deemed more or less irrelevant, therefore no rise in pitch is needed.

The next article of *Prosody and Humor*, entitled 'Verbal irony in the wild' brings us to another bit of research conducted by George Bryant. Here Bryant uses a form-function approach to "describe several ways conversationalists employ prosodic contrasts, laughter, and other speech characteristics in their attempt to communicate effectively" (Attardo 2013: 103). The focus is on irony on conversation and the corpus is taken from the author's 2010 article 'Prosodic contrasts in ironic speech' (though the limited number of examples provided in the present article, as opposed to the 2010 one hurts the presentation given here in my opinion). By analyzing several instances of spontaneous ironic speech, Bryant is able to determine that "prosodic features disambiguate meaning at multiple levels" (Attardo 2013: 117) and that the tone of voice of the speaker also changes in order to signal ironic intent.

The sixth article, succinctly entitled 'Rich pitch' and written by Ann Wennerstrom, argues that "intonation contributes to the humorous meaning of a certain class of jokes" (Attardo 2013:121). Here Wennerstrom makes a compelling point that, while it holds true that a joke-like text contains two compatible yet opposite semantic scripts (two opposite interpretations), in the case of some jokes the hearer's awareness that he has to shift from one script to the other relies on the speaker's choice of intonation and pitch. The examples provided show how the choice to stress a particular word and to deaccent another makes the humor work, whereas placing the accent anywhere else would cause the humor to fail. This seemingly simple observation in fact serves to place the study of jokes in a whole new light, since so far, in the study of such texts and especially of punch lines, researchers have been focusing primarily on the lexicological and semantic aspects that signal a shift in meaning. Up to now, we've been looking at what is being said, not at how it's being said. Nevertheless, I would point out that Wennerstrom's research here is strictly on spoken

jokes and it would be interesting to see whether these jokes would still work when they are read and not heard, whether someone would instinctively know how to read the joke or not.

The next article in *Prosody and Humor* is written by Roxane Bertrand and Beatrice Priego-Valverde and asks the question 'Does prosody play a specific role in conversational humor?' From the get go, the placement of this article close to the end of the volume is curious, since all the previous data that comes before would suggest that the simple answer to this question is yes, obviously. The presentation of their research does not alleviate the feeling that this text should have come perhaps at the beginning of the book, since what is presented here is overall evidence that prosodic markers in conversational humor help "speakers co-construct and switch into a humorous mode of communication" (Attardo 2013:160). The only reason that I can find for having this as the sixth article is the choice of data. Specifically, all the conversations given are in French, meaning that, for someone who does not speak the language, the examples given here by the two researchers don't really help the reader in better understanding the points that they wish to make.

What has become clear up to this point is that in *Prosody and Humor* each scholar takes on various aspects of the same theme, namely prosody indicators in the creation and perception of humor. There is however variety in the approaches illustrated. Nowhere is this more apparent than with the last article of the volume, 'Prosody of humor in *Sex and the City*' by Eduardo Urios-Aparisi and Manuela Wagner. Certainly, readers who are familiar with this show, which was highly popular in the late 90's, might be intrigued to discover what the scholars have done and discovered in their analysis. In this case, it is once again a matter of changes in pitch and tone which would indicate uses of irony. By analyzing the interactions in the first six episodes, they find that pitch and pauses vary depending on who provides the humorous utterance and that this variation is dependent on the stereotype that the respective character falls under. While these are interesting findings, even Urios-Aparisi and Wagner admit that their research is in some ways held back by the "limitations resulting from this artificial context" (Attardo 2013:191), which is to say that the conversations, while made to seem genuine, are in fact scripted. Nevertheless, this article serves as a delightful finale to a volume that provides an entire array of aspects of humor research that beg further understanding.

Overall, what truly shines in the articles presented in *Prosody and Humor* is the highly scientific approach taken. Indeed, the abundant use of technology, labs and specialized computer programs, alongside statistical analyses and the occasional graph, make it feel like this research would be better suited for the exact sciences than humanities, and perhaps that is the point. One possible downfall of these texts is that they rely significantly on the presumption that the reader is familiar with the authors' previous works. In some cases it is merely to point out what has been done so far (therefore it is information that is perhaps not vital to the understanding of the article) but in other cases references to previous work play a more important role. A case in point is the article by Bryant, where the scholar asks us to look at one of his previous articles if we want to see the actual data that he makes use of here. In addition to this, most of the work done in linguistic humor studies and in discourse analysis is mentioned only briefly in each article, the presumption being that the reader already knows most (if not all) of it. To put it simply, *Prosody and Humor* is not a book for an amateur scholar. Rather it is a compilation aimed at presenting (if only in large numbers) the veteran researcher with some of the latest work done in the field.