Book Review: Francisco Yus, *Humor and Relevance.* 2016. John Benjamin's: Amsterdam. 367 pages.

Arthur Asa Berger[*]

Humor and Relevance is a major contribution to the linguistic study of humor and will be of interest to all humor scholars. But it isn't easy sledding. The book is an application of Relevance Theory to various kinds of humorous texts. Yus has chapters on jokes (and his own typology of jokes), stand-up comedy monologues, irony, humor and translation (and the problem of translating jokes and using them in different cultures), multimodal humor in press cartoons and advertisements and humor in conversations. So his book covers a number of important areas of humor.

The book is very technical and specialized, with long discussions of relevance theory and various components of the theory and other theories and ideas by linguists. Yus, who has been writing about relevance theory and humor since 1995 (that's when his first article mentioned in the references was published) explains that Relevance Theory focuses on the inferences needed to focus on a communicator's intentions. The mental mechanisms used in communication, he suggests, are "universal and biologically rooted in human psychology" and thus can be applied to humor as well as any other kind of discourse. Relevance Theory is, he argues, grounded in cognitive pragmatics. He uses his first chapter to discuss Relevance Theory in some detail, including an explanation of the work of philosopher Paul Grice, since Relevance Theory that informs the entire book.

In the second chapter, he explores the importance of Relevance Theory to humor research. He adds new material on Grice, mentions work by other linguists such as Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin, and offers an example of the background premises and conclusions that help us make sense of a joke. He offers the following joke:

> *A woman in bed with a man. The phone rings and she answers it. "Yes, darling…No problem…OK…See you later." The man: "Who was it?" The woman. "It was my husband. He said he's going to come home very late today because he has an important meeting with you."*

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To make sense of this joke we must recognize:

     a.   The man and the woman are lovers.

     b. The woman's husband has a lover.

     c. She knows that her husband has a lover.

     d. Her lover and the husband know each other.

     e. Her husband does not know that this man is his wife's lover.

The point is that when you hear a joke, you have to make certain inferences that help you make sense of the communication and see that it is a joke. We recognize it is a joke from the punch line, "because he has an important meeting with you."

What Relevance Theory doesn't do, it seems, is focus on the mechanisms in a text that generate humor. Yes, Yus points out the inferences someone must make when listening to a joke, but what is it, *in* the joke, that generates the humor. His fifth point suggests that it is the husband's ignorance (her husband does not know) that is the source of the humor. There may also be an element of reversal (the wife has also taken a lover) and exposure (she knows the husband is lying to her and that he has a lover). One thing that linguistic theories tend to neglect is what it is in humorous texts that makes people laugh. They focus so much on the processes receivers of texts must make to interpret a text and to recognize the text as humorous that they neglect the text itself.

The book has a number of good jokes in it, along with Spanish cartoons but, curiously, no advertisements in the multimodal discussion of advertising. Some of the jokes are variations of some classic jokes but others are one's I've never seen before. In between these jokes are long and complicated discussions of the ideas of various linguists such as Marta Dynel, Dan Sperber, and Deirdre Wilson. There are forty-six citations of articles, conference papers and books by Yus in the bibliography, the last of which, on "Relevance-theoretic treatments of humor" is in press. So Yus has been using Relevance Theory to analyze humor (and other kinds of communication) for twenty-two years, and *Humor and Relevance* is a reflection of all the work Yus has done over this period.

It is not an easy book to read. Books by linguistics professors tend to be very technical, obsessed with theories and concepts and debates among linguists, and this book

is no exception. But it is full of interesting insights and ideas and theories about many different kinds of humorous texts and is well worth the effort in reading it—and expense, since it sells for a hundred and fifty dollars.