On the Discourse of Satire

Paul Simpson

Linguistic Approaches to

On the Discourse of Satire

Towards a stylistic model of satirical humour

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John Benjamins Publishing Company

Amsterdam/Philadelphia

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Simpson, Paul, 1959-
On the discourse of satire : towards a stylistic model of satirical humour / Paul Simpson.
p. cm. (Linguistic Approaches to Literature, ISSN 1569–3112 ; v. 2)
Includes bibliographical references.
1. Discourse analysis, Literary. 2. Satire--History and criticism--Theory, etc. I. Title. II. Series.

P302.5.S56 2003
808'.0014-dc21 2003055682
ISBN 90 272 3333 0 (Eur.) / 1 58811 439 2 (US) (Hb; alk. paper)
ISBN 90 272 3334 9 (Eur.) / 1 58811 440 6 (US) (Pb; alk. paper)

John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

Preface

I suppose it would be accurate to say that the "idea" for this book arose out of an experience during a university seminar which took place, alarmingly, over two decades ago. I was then still a fresh-faced and follically-unchallenged undergraduate reading a degree in literature and linguistics, and the episode in question occurred during the week when we were "doing" that (in)famous Anglo-Irish writer, Jonathan Swift. Swift of course cannot be "done" without some reference to his famous skit, the "Modest Proposal", in which an unassuming persona urges the eating of children in order to solve the problem of Irish overpopulation. A programme advocating the lessening by cannibalism of "the number of Papists among us" proved to be as contentious a hot potato, so to speak, in the Northern Ireland of the late nineteen seventies as it no doubt was in eighteenth century Dublin. As to Swift's ironic purpose in the skit, everyone, bar one student, reached a satirical interpretation. Unusually for an otherwise parochial undergraduate community, the student who "didn't get it" happened to have been born and raised several thousand miles away from Northern Ireland. His objection to Swift was resolutely framed: the proposal was "disgusting" and that if this was the best Ireland could do literary-wise, then it was a very poor show. The tutor's riposte to this was perhaps the predictable one. But Swift didn't really mean it, it was literature, it was, well, ironic. To which the student replied, with inexorable logic, that of course he meant it because he *said* it. And so it went on, as an ever widening interpretive chasm pushed the two positions further and further apart. Some twenty five years later – such it seems is the necessary gestation period for my academic output these days – I came to the idea of a project which explored the interpretative chasm between the two positions taken up in that seminar. No-one was wrong in that interchange, although no-one was completely right either; both arguments could be sustained with some degree of validity. Quite why such a duality of interpretation is possible, and what that says about the particular form of discourse that is satirical humour, is one of the main preoccupations of this monograph.

The book comes principally out of the academic tradition of modern stylistics. That simply means that it applies to text a variety of models of language, linguistics and pragmatics. While that tradition reflects best the type of methods used and the sorts of analytic frameworks applied, this study departs from much other stylistic work in that its principal emphasis is neither specifically, nor necessarily, on literary discourse. The emphasis is, rather, on satire's status as a culturally situated discursive practice. This direction has not been taken because of any antipathy towards "classical" literature or towards the practice of literary criticism. It is simply that satire's "everydayness" as a vibrant and dynamic form of verbal humour has been significantly neglected in terms of the amount of attention it has received within the academe. It is indeed a central argument of this book that a "non-literary stylistics" of satire is much needed, simply because continued interest over the decades in canonically literary examples has tended to draw a veil over the day-to-day functions of satire in contemporary social and discourse contexts. That said, it is hoped that the broad design of the model proposed is sufficiently watertight theoretically to be applied across to the canon of classical satire, although such a study is of course well beyond the remit of the present project.

Writing about humour can be a strange and somewhat disorientating business. Humour is glued into social, cultural and even national contexts, so writing a monograph which hopefully draws an international readership forces one to tread a fine line when "unpacking" humour texts; a fine line that is between, on the one hand, stating the obvious in the explication of humorous material, or, on the other, risking losing readers because the topically and culturally situated references within those texts have not been made sufficiently transparent. In this book, although the data derives primarily from humour practices in Britain, Ireland and the USA, the theoretical model advanced is designed to have generalised application. In the design of that model I hope to have contextualised sufficiently the data so as to make it accessible without insulting the intelligence of my readers. But please forgive me if I do.

Another thing about writing about humour, a fact brought home to me midway through this project, is that while humorous texts become progressively less amusing the more one pays attention to them, research on humour concomitantly starts to seem very strange indeed. I was struck particularly by one well-intentioned experimental study, written many years ago, on the impact of conflict on the basic humour mechanism. Victims of war-induced trauma had flashed before them a series of cards containing "jokes", to which their responses were noted. As it turned out, the war veterans really didn't find the experience very funny at all; in any case, the jokes themselves are "clas-

sified" and now rest with the relevant Department of Defence of the august international power from which the research stemmed. By dint of curious coincidence, around the time of the publication of that article, an episode from the renowned Monty Python television series featured a sketch where someone had discovered a joke so funny that it had the power to wipe out entire armies. So potent was this joke that parts of it had to be shown on cards by individual soldiers in relay so as not to endanger the troops on one's own side. After spending so much time on humour research, I frankly cannot tell which of the two scenarios, the academic study or the Python comedy sketch, is the more bizarre.

Such is the nature of research into humour. An editorial comment made many years ago in the first issue of the journal *Humor* points to a central dilemma in humour research; namely, that hoping to derive amusement from an academic study of humour is akin to hoping to enjoy gastronomically the recipe for delicious meal. Well, the present book offers a fairly largish menu, comprising several courses, of a very particular type of cuisine. I can only hope that this "food for thought" does not spoil your further enjoyment of the meal.

Acknowledgments

It is not easy to find a natural starting point for a sequence of acknowledgments to the many friends and colleagues who in different ways and in various capacities have helped directly in the development of this project. It is perhaps appropriate therefore to begin by extending blanket appreciation to my colleagues in the Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA), an association with a reputation for strong academic solidarity and improbably cheap membership fees. Of my colleagues in PALA, a particular debt of gratitude goes to Peter Stockwell, Cathy Emmott, Martin Montgomery, Lesley Jeffries, Michael Burke, Joanna Gavins, Katie Wales, Mick Short, Michael Toolan and to nominal stylistician and good friend, Hilary Short. Their expertise in all manner of things stylistic, combined with their all round good *craic*, has helped, among other things, to sustain the project amid the otherwise bleak solitude of an Irish winter. I would also like to extend my thanks to my colleagues at Queen's University Belfast: Mark Burnett, Joan Rahilly, David Johnston, and especially to Moyra Haslett who generously managed always to find time for discussion of matters satirical in spite of her many other commitments. I am particularly grateful to the Queen's librarians for their unstinting patience, especially to Florence Gray at the inter-library loans desk, who processed on my behalf God-knows-how-many loan vouchers over the past year, and to John Knowles whose expertise opened up to me the arcane, Kafkaesque labyrinth that is the law library at Queen's University.

I would also like to thank my colleagues in the International Society for Humour Studies, in particular Josie Boutonnet and Sammy Basu. I am also especially grateful to Mark Kermode and Linda Williams for their help and advice with various aspects of the project; to Bill Nash, who proves that you can be both a humorist and a humorologist, and to Helen Hunter who proves that you can retain a sense of humour even when looking after Bill. A particular debt of gratitude goes of course to the Benelux quartet: to series editors Willie van Peer, Gerard Steen and Peter Verdonk, and to editor Kees Vaes at John Benjamins. I am grateful to them for their energy and fastidiousness, for their

encouragement and support, and for their searching and detailed comments on an earlier draft of this book. I hope the end product has not let them down.

I am also indebted to my friends, John and Catherine Neely, especially for allowing me to hole up in west Donegal during a silly week in Belfast when it seemed that every house in the street was undergoing major building work. And to my family I owe special debt of gratitude. Thanks are due to my son Rory for donating a few "joke bearing texts" to the project and to my son Danny for trying to donate a few joke bearing texts to the project. I'd like to thank my nearly-three-years-old daughter Ruby for, er, being Ruby. My partner Janice, I must thank yet again for putting up with another "Paul book experience", and especially for soaking up, way beyond the call of duty, the many and varied needs of our delightful though demanding young trio.

Finally, I would like to thank my formal sponsors. This research project has been part funded by a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Board (reference number: RLS-AN2220/APN13385). I would also like to thank *Private Eye* magazine for their cooperation with the book. All relevant illustrations and textual material are reproduced with kind permission of Private Eye Magazine.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

> There is no more dangerous symptom than a temptation to write about wit and humour. It indicates the total loss of both.
>
> George Bernard Shaw

1.1 Satire as humorous discourse

This is a book about satire. To be more specific, it is a book which develops, tests and attempts to justify a theoretical model for the study of satirical discourse. The book's emphasis on satire as discourse is significant insofar as it seeks to incorporate other associated areas of study such as "satirical technique", "the satirical text", or "the language of satire". In keeping with contemporary definitions, discourse is understood here in the first instance as a level of language organisation that supersedes that of the sentence and in the second as a type of meaning potential that arises out of the interaction between text and context. Notions like "satirical technique" and "the language of satire" are thus subsumed within this higher-order framework of discourse. By exploring specifically "the discourse of satire", this book seeks to position this type of verbal (and pictorial) humour against a dynamic, interactive framework of actions and beliefs. Satirical texts are understood as utterances which are inextricably bound up with context of situation, with participants in discourse and with frameworks of knowledge. The book's key rationale is therefore to capture the special discoursal and pragmatic features that characterise this pervasive and popular form of contemporary humorous discourse; it is, in this respect, as much concerned with "how" satire means as it is with "what" satire means.

It is a simple and straightforward assumption of this book, as of work in humorology generally, that humour is basically a good thing. Skill in the delivery of humour, in whatever its precise style or genre, is a prized asset in human societies and cultures. Wherever the particular academic vantage point may be situated, scholarly research on humour consistently affirms its importance as a solidary mechanism in the day-to-day experiences of ordinary people and its

capacity to help bond, galvanise and sustain human relationships. The possession of a good sense of humour is also much coveted, evidence for which is certainly easy to come by. The "personal ads" and "lonely hearts" columns that proliferate in our newspapers and colour supplements ask that a prospective partner possess a "GSOH" (Good Sense Of Humour); so *de rigeur* is this stipulation that the quality sought can be captured by abbreviation. The obverse, that a future soul mate possess "No Sense Of Humour", is, in the present author's of course limited experience of the genre, nowhere to be found in the small ads.

The scholarly literature constantly emphasises the absolutely central place that humour, and its sometime attendant respiratory convulsion, laughter, occupies in everyday spoken and written social interaction. The emphasis across the discipline is resolute and unwavering, irrespective of whether it stems from linguistics and language studies (Nash 1985), from sociology (Mulkay 1988), from politics (Basu 1999), from philosophy (Morreall 1987), from psychology (Goldstein & McGhee 1972) or from clinical psychotherapy (Fry & Salameh 1987). Humour accomplishes many things: it relieves embarrassment; it signals aggression; it displays courage in adversity; it serves as a coping mechanism; it functions as an instrument of social influence; it rehearses and redesigns the categories and concepts of serious discourse. Because it is perceived as play, humour also offers a "way out" in discourse because it allows a humorist to take back what he or she says: "it was only a joke" is one oft-voiced disclaimer (Kane et al. 1977:13). Given this highly variegated function, humour is, as Miller notes, a "very difficult subject to talk about, and it is an even more difficult subject to be scientific about" (J. Miller 1988:6). It is also a feature of humour that its use is circumscribed with respect to context, so, perhaps to state the obvious, not every discourse context "allows" humour and not all humorous material is suitable for every discourse context. Aside from this issue of taboo, there are occasionally certain wider, cultural restrictions on humorous communication. Bauman's study of the speech of seventeenth-century Quakers notes how their "plain style" stemmed both from a requirement always to tell the truth and from a biblical injunction against idle words (Bauman 1983:54–55). Implicit to these strictures is a distrust of verbal humour as a form of "idle" or "untruthful" talk, although one can only speculate on how this restriction was encoded, if at all, into the day to day language practices of this speech community.

A workable formal taxonomy of humour, accounting for its many different discourse functions, is admittedly not easy to find. This in turn has implications for how satire might be located and classified within a global framework of humorous discourse. Ziv does offer a useful starting point, however, in his

study of that most elusive of discourse practices, humour in married life. He proposes five key humour functions: the aggressive, the sexual, the social, the defensive and the intellectual (Ziv 1988:225; see also Ziv 1984). Of these categories, the sexual function, where laughing about sex is seen as a way of dealing with the topic in a socially acceptable way, is probably better classed as a subcategory of the defensive mode, given that that function accommodates the use of humour to deal with a whole range of "anxiogenic" or difficult topics. It is the remaining three functions which appear to be most directly relevant to satirical discourse. The aggressive function always ridicules or makes fun of a victim, allowing the non-victim a feeling of superiority. The social function can serve to reinforce intra- and inter-group bonds, strengthening the cohesiveness of interpersonal relations. The intellectual function, which is based on absurdities, word play and nonsense, provides pleasure in "the temporary freedom from strict rules and rationality" (Ziv 1988:225).

Ziv's classification, like many comparable taxonomies in humorology, assumes that the functions are relatively discrete and anticipates that a particular type of humour normally manifests in a specific function. What is significant about satire is that it synthesises at least three functions and carries them out simultaneously. The precise means by which satire performs this "multifunctionality" will be justified thoroughly over the course of the book, but it is worth making a few more informal observations here. Satire clearly has an aggressive function. It singles out an object of attack; in fact, it cannot, strictly speaking, be satire unless it demonstrates this capacity. Satire also has a social function, in the terms of Ziv's model, because inter-group bonds, in particular, are consolidated in "successful" satire. Yet it also has, perhaps in greater or lesser degree depending on the particular satire, an intellectual function because it relies upon linguistic creativity which extends the full resources of the system of language. Compared to "racist humour" where the aggressive function dominates (Davies 1988), "coping humour" where the social function dominates (Henman 2001) or "absurdist humour" where the intellectual function (arguably) dominates (Simpson 1998), satire simply cannot readily be assigned a single discourse function.

Even when satire is mapped onto other taxonomies of basic humour functions, the same multi-functional characterisation emerges. Take for example Basu's classification, which renders down the basic humour mechanism into three functions: as "lubrication", "friction" or "glue" (Basu 1999:391). Humour acts as a social lubricant, venturing ice-breaking goodwill and demonstrating an ability to laugh. Humour may also act as "a fine-grained social sandpaper", because comedy makes frankness less threatening and conveys criticism less

contentiously. Thirdly, humour can act as a social glue in that this rhetorical skill can relax and entertain, and can incline one towards empathy with others (Basu 1999:390–394). There is again good cause for aligning satire with all three functions, as the glue, lubricant and sandpaper engendered by a particular kind of discourse phenomenon. And as will be argued at length throughout this book, satire is a preeminent form of humour which, when successful, accomplishes simultaneously a number of humour functions. It is odd, in the light of these remarks, that satire is so rarely the object of scrutiny either in the broader tradition of humorology or within that narrower tradition of linguistic research on verbal humour. True, satire has received a great deal of attention in literary criticism, as chapter three of this book demonstrates, but in comparison with specifically focussed humorological studies of jokes, witticisms, puns, humorous anecdotes and narratives, its coverage has at best been marginal. This is indeed strange given that, as will be argued below and *passim*, satire is as much a common part of everyday spoken and written interaction as any of the other easily recognisable humour practices.

The term *satire* is itself a curious and rather elusive one, perhaps fitting of its enigmatic position in the broad inventory of humour types. Scholars seem unsure about the precise etymology of the word but it seems most likely that it emerged as a blend of two unrelated words, *satyr* and *satura*. The former refers to the Satyr, to what Carpenter calls the "boozy, randy half-goats, half-men of Greek mythology" (Carpenter 2000:91). The latter, from the Latin expression *lanx satura*, describes a platter of mixed fruits offered to the deities at festival time (see further Hendrickson 1927:46–60; Clark 1991:51; Draitser 1994:101). The term "satyr", with a meaning roughly approximating the contemporary sense of the term, was allegedly first used in the English language in 1509 in Barclay's prologue to *The Ship of Fools* (Campbell 1971:85), although much writing before that period had of course been satirical in all but name.

Whatever its linguistic origins, it is a key point of departure for this book, affirmed constantly throughout forthcoming chapters, that satirical discourse suffuses the general humour resources of modern societies and cultures. It is not an alien form of humour, not something remote from everyday social interaction, but is as much part of the communicative competence of adult participants as puns, jokes and funny stories. While satire may be relatively complexly ordered and structured, that complexity does not place it beyond the ken of ordinary participants in discourse. Although justification for this point will, again, be offered as the book progresses, here is an informal illustration of what I have in mind. The series of excerpts below are taken from *Radio Times* magazine (web), a weekly British publication which lists televi-

sion schedules for all terrestrial and satellite broadcasts. The excerpts have been culled from the two pages which cover the programming schedule for a single evening. That evening has no special significance other than to underscore just how routine and unexceptional is the place of satire in ordinary mainstream television viewing.

> **9.00** (BBC 2) New series. **The Friday Night Armistice.** The acclaimed comedy show returns, aiming its *incisive and topical brand of satire* against a wide range of public targets ...
>
> **10.00** (Film Four) **Primary Colors.** American *political satire* that follows an idealistic first-time aide as he manages the election campaign of a presidential candidate.
>
> **10.20** (BBC 1; N. Ireland only) **Two Weddings and a Ceasefire.** Radio Ulster's comedy troupe, the Hole in the Wall Gang, present this *satirical comic* tale ...
>
> **11.05** (Sky Premier 3) **Fight Club.** This *visceral satire* stars Brad Pitt as a bare-knuckle moralist.
>
> (*Radio Times* magazine; listing for 9/01/2000, my emphasis)

What is remarkable about this pattern is that the concept "satire" is not only clearly well within the interpretative compass of the several million television viewers who read this magazine, but that it is also amenable to subclassification in terms of the particular humour function it serves. Witness, for example, how premodifying elements are used narrow down the scope of reference of a particular satire: Sky Premier's satire is "visceral", BBC2's is "incisive" and Film Four's "political". Aside from the general recognition of satirical topicality, other insightful indicators of the popular conceptualisation of satire draw out its aggressive (viz. "incisive") function. Also highlighted is satire's capacity to manifest in different genres of discourse: the BBC2 "comedy show" format is clearly differentiated from the narrative format of BBC1's "comic tale", for example. True, its boundaries may be blurred and the term may possibly be over-used, but satire is clearly a concept that has some real currency in everyday usage.

Furthermore, it is especially important to the rationale of this book, as will argued in detail later, that the discourse of satire be wrested away from existing academic studies of "classical" satire and, by imputation, from qualitative judgments about what constitutes "good" or "bad" satire. Rather, satire should be viewed as a familiar part of the territory of everyday humour practices. It is of course very difficult to assess what proportion of this more generalised praxis is

made up by satire. In the context of the television listings exercise above, a poll conducted by Market and Opinion Research International (MORI, web) indicates that comedy is the preference of 32% of all television viewers in the UK, so it is feasible to suggest, as the admittedly informal evidence above indicates, that a solid component of this comprises satirically-oriented humour. Moreover, there is no reason to think that this type of humour preference would not be replicated in televisual cultures around the world.

A final question, perhaps the most challenging, concerns the sorts of theoretical issues that satirical humour poses for the discourse analyst. What, in other words, does an analysis of the discourse of satire involve? Consider in this respect the following short example, Text A. This (complete) text is the first of a number of examples developed across the book to be taken from the British satirical magazine *Private Eye* (see below §1.3, for further details). I make no particular claims in advance of this somewhat unprepossessing little text other than to say that it is satirical and that it is, at the time of writing, topical. The impetus for the text, for the record, comes from the satirist's perception of the poor performance of the British Labour party since its election to power in 1997.

Text A

PRODUCT RECALL

New Labour™

Placed on market 1 May 1997

The manufacturers of the above product wish it to be known that a large number of faults have developed in the New Labour™. Under certain circumstances, the New Labour will bend, buckle and fall to bits, rendering it wholly useless. Customers are advised that the New Labour cannot in any circumstances be returned, and that no claims for compensation will be considered.