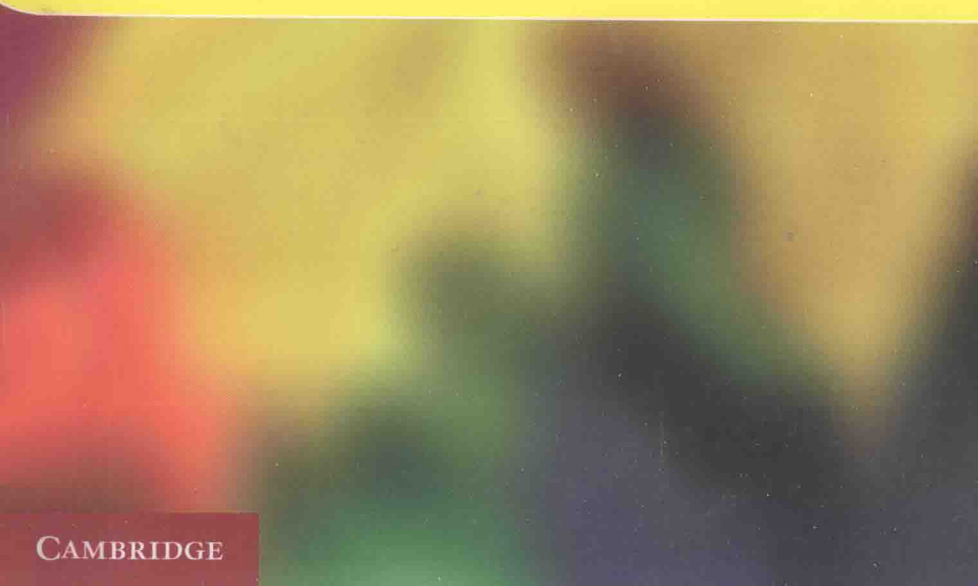
Meaning and Humour

Andrew Goatly

KEY TOPICS IN SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS



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ANDREW GOATLY

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To my family: past, present [and future?]

For me humor studies is fundamentally an interpretive exercise. It is an attempt to say what people are talking about even when they don't say so themselves. It is an attempt to wrest meaning – sometimes significant meaning – from ludicrous and seemingly discountable expressions. (Oring 2003: 146)

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And whatever Force or Being it was who distinguished animals from humans with a sense of humour.

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And not to forget the Pope and Sarah Palin ...

Typographical conventions

- *italics* for word-form as type
- //slants for phonological form as type
- 'single inverted commas' for meaning
- "double inverted commas" for words as token
- SMALL CAPS for lexemes
- *asterisk** after the initial uninflected part (stem) of a lemma
- [+ CAPS IN SQUARE BRACKETS] for componential features of meaning
- * before grammatically unacceptable sentences
- * at the end of lemmas
- ^ for 'followed by'

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1 Introduction

1.1. ABOUT THIS BOOK

1.1.1. Why write this book?

Anyone interested in semantics and pragmatics, the way meanings are coded in language and produced or interpreted in context, notices that jokes exemplify various kinds of ambiguity or risk to meaning. Of particular interest, as an object of study, is the question of what knowledge is necessary in order to understand a joke. This might be knowledge of the language code (a matter mostly of semantics) or background knowledge for making the inferences necessary for getting the joke (a matter of pragmatics). Teaching semantics and pragmatics over the years, I realised that jokes can be analysed by using semantic and pragmatic theory, an attempt which prompts one to question and develop theory when the joke is difficult to explain. But the converse is also true: jokes might be a useful way into teaching semantics and pragmatics.

At the most banal level the present book uses jokes as a peg on which to hang theoretical concepts, but it aims to achieve more than that. At least jokes might function as a mnemonic – helping students remember the theoretical concepts through remembering and enjoying the joke. Moreover, for students for whom English is not a first language, humour might be a useful pedagogic tool in developing competence (O'Mara, Waller and Todman 2002). "The use of humour in the classroom has been shown (e.g. Ziv 1979) to increase ease of learning and to be a good pedagogical resource overall (Gentilhomme 1992)" (Attardo 1994: 211). But most crucially, distinct from other books in the series *Key Topics in Semantics and Pragmatics*, it explores the interface between humour theory and linguistic theories of various kinds, especially the pragmatic Relevance Theory, and the psychologically tinged corpus/text-linguistic theory known as priming theory. It does, however, exploit other

linguistic approaches quite eclectically, touching on systemic functional linguistics, speech act theory, conversational analysis and genre theory. I hope that, above all in Chapter 11, it might contribute to linguistic theory in its own right.

One of the advantages of using jokes as an introduction to the study of meaning is that jokes are authentic texts, whereas many semantics and pragmatics textbooks use made-up examples. There has been a minor revolution in linguistics since computers facilitated the storage of large text corpora, and the interrogation of these corpora with concordancing software for collocational data. Originally the scientific study of meaning was undertaken in the tradition associated with the twentieth century's most famous linguist, Noam Chomsky, where data consisted of the intuitions of an ideal native speaker. However, this tradition has been challenged, since the 1980s, with an approach which takes real recorded textual evidence more seriously. Jokes and humorous narratives belong in the category of authentic texts. Nevertheless, many are as short as the traditional made-up examples in semantic textbooks (none quoted in this book is more than one page long).

In step with these developments in linguistic theory, this book, though beginning by introducing basic traditional categories in semantics and pragmatics, extends to recent text-oriented theories. In particular, it progresses towards a discussion of the work of the late John Sinclair on collocation and the theory of lexical priming that Michael Hoey (2005) has recently built upon it. The semantic notion of ambiguity comes under scrutiny, along with an exploration of the extent to which ambiguity is present in most authentic texts, and whether it is rather artificial in humour. Moreover, by the use of judicious discussion topics, the book persists in challenging traditional semantic and pragmatic approaches, and, further, ends with a critique of Hoey's text-based theory itself.

This book is designed for advanced undergraduates or students on taught post-graduate courses in English language, (applied) linguistics or the philosophy of language. It attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of theories of different kinds of meaning and how they are encoded or implied in texts. It could therefore be a core textbook for courses in semantics and pragmatics. However, the jokes and activities, in particular, provide a resource to be used selectively in other linguistics courses, such as discourse analysis, morphology or even phonology. It should also be of use to students of humour studies, and less specifically of cultural studies, communication studies, and stylistics.