Introduction: On the linguistics of humour theoretically

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1. Introduction

Humour research is a broad church that attracts scholars from many academic disciplines, and linguistics is one of the fields in which humour is nowadays studied most avidly. For the past few decades, much ink has been spilt on the nature of humour in the sub-disciplines of linguistics: semantics, pragmatics, stylistics, cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics and computational linguistics to name but a few. Each of these exhibits a wide spectrum of favourite theoretical frameworks, methodologies and specific research topics, which keep multiplying thanks to the diversity of humour forms and functions that show in various discourse genres. The past two years alone have seen the publication of numerous papers and several edited volumes, as well as journal Special Issues, devoted to different topics in linguistic humour research, such as: language play (Bell, 2016), humorous intent (Dynel et al., 2016), conversational humour across languages and cultures (Dynel and Sinkeviciute, 2017), or the (co)construction of humour in everyday interaction (Tsakona and Chovanec, 2017).

Part of the extensive research on humour, and likely the most important part, is orientated towards theorising on its workings and characteristics. What is traditionally referred to as "humour theories" is seen to fall into three categories: *superiority*, *relief* and *incongruity* (see e.g. Keith-Spiegel, 1972; Attardo, 1994; Martin, 2007; Morreall, 2016). All have their roots in classical philosophical writings and all seem to have been proposed with regard to not only humour but also, if not primarily, laughter. These two notions are nowadays differentiated (viz. humour need not result in laughter, and not all laughter is a testament to humour, as is the case with nervous laughter). Although the three groups of theories are usually kept separate and are endorsed in different academic disciplines, select frameworks and proposals are sometimes combined to better account for the processes of humour production and/or reception (see e.g. Dynel, 2013a; Brock, this SI).

Linguistic discussions of humour most typically refer to some form of *incongruity* that is amenable to *resolution*. Incongruity is conceptualised as a deviation from a cognitive model of reference (a cognitive view) or a mismatch/contrast between two meanings (a linguistic view). Originally proposed by the psychologists Suls (1972) and Shultz (1972), the *incongruity-resolution* model presents humour interpretation as a two-stage process: incongruity is encountered and then resolved (but not dissolved) according to an adequate cognitive rule. This all-encompassing mechanism has numerous manifestations depending on how incongruity and its resolution are realised in jokes (e.g. Dynel, 2012; Yus, this SI; Hirsch, this SI) or in other forms of humour, such as comedy discourse (Messerli, 2016, this SI; Brock, this SI).

Importantly, humorous incongruity is never fully dissolved but remains in the background (as opposed to other types of fully resolvable incongruities, for example those typical of detective stories). This idea is also partly reflected by the notion of *appropriate incongruity* (Oring, 1989, 2003; see Veale and Valitutti, this SI) or *bisociation*, which involves

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oscillating between two incompatible frames of reference (Koestler, 1964). The latter seems to have influenced the widely recognised *blending theory* or *conceptual integration theory* (Fauconnier and Turner, 1994, 2002), which has been applied to various communicative practices and which has sprouted yet another alternative framework for humour production and comprehension (see e.g. Dynel, 2011a; Jabłońska-Hood, 2015 and references therein). Albeit originally conceived of as a competing alternative to incongruity, the notion of *script opposition/overlap* (Raskin, 1985), which is one of the components of the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo, 1994; see Hirsch, this SI), is nowadays widely deemed an incarnation of the incongruity-resolution framework. The General Theory of Verbal Humour has gained quite a following over the past three decades among humour linguists despite its shortcomings (see Ritchie, 2004; Dynel, 2009).

Theorising on humour is not restricted to investigations pivoting on the concept of incongruity (see e.g. some of the contributions in Dynel, 2013b). Other research topics concern, for instance, the problem of intentionality (see the papers in Dynel et al., 2016), the production and reception processes (e.g. Hay, 2001), or the special mode of communication humour is associated with (Dynel, this SI and references therein). Researchers continue to contribute novel postulates about the mechanics of humour when accounting for its manifestations not only in face-to-face encounters but also in traditional media and new media (including social media). Additionally, in order to capture the specificity of humour in these discourse types, new proposals and theoretical approaches to humour analysis come into being (e.g. Dynel, 2011b; Messerli, this SI; Brock, this SI), and new conclusions are drawn about the applications of humour in human communication.

Indeed, a substantial proportion of the relevant scholarship in linguistics does not concern the underlying pragma-cognitive, psycholinguistic or semantic mechanisms characteristic of humour. Rather, the focus is on the socio-pragmatics of conversational humour. In a nutshell, researchers explore its diversified forms (frequently falling under the blanket term *conversational humour*) and functions in various communicative contexts (e.g. private conversations among friends, the workplace, or medical and educational settings) based on new research data from different forms of human interaction across languages and cultures. Conversational humour escapes easy classifications, and even the basic categories of humour, such as *teasing*, are difficult to define unequivocally, with many competing postulates being put forward (see e.g. Keltner et al., 2001; Haugh, 2017). On the other hand, the list of functions that humour can potentially perform has been neatly summarised (see e.g. Attardo, 1994; Martin, 2007). However, researchers never cease to provide new evidence in favour of where and how exactly these functions can be exploited (e.g. Chovanec, this SI; and Chimbwete-Phiri and Schnurr, this SI). Last but not least, the forms and functions of conversational humour are shown to be culture-dependent (see e.g. papers and references in Dynel and Sinkeviciute, 2017; Sinkeviciute, this SI).

2. This Special Issue

This Special Issue brings together nine contributions from an international group of humour scholars. The collection of papers is concerned with the linguistics of humour and will serve as a useful benchmark for the gamut of linguistic disciplines that, as of 2017, Lingua is open to. Rather than being focused solely on the structure of language, as prescribed by general linguistics (an umbrella term by default associated with the study of general structural characteristics of language from the perspective of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics), Lingua publishes (empirically validated) research that contributes to existing theory of language production and reception by shedding light on any of the innumerable constructs central to human communication. Humour (communicated by means of language) is one such construct and its different forms can be examined from numerous theoretical angles across the sub-disciplines of linguistics.

The underlying goal of this Special Issue is to offer a wide spectrum of novel theoretical insights into the workings of humour based on empirically validated findings. Two of the papers expound on the incongruity-resolution model (Yus), also in tandem with the superiority approach (Brock). Two other articles depict humour in the light of notions previously applied mainly outside humour studies, notably ventriloquism (Messerli) and (un)truthfulness (Dynel). Still other contributions approach humour from relatively new theoretical standpoints that have taken on great importance in humour research over the past few years, pertaining to language users' evaluations of humour. Specifically, these papers address: intercultural metapragmatic evaluations of jocularity (Sinkeviciute), the reception of canned jokes across languages and cultures (Hirsch), and the generation and measurement of humour and creativity in metaphor and storytelling (Veale and Valitutti). Still other authors examine the characteristics and functions of humour in new discourse types, hitherto rarely seen as venues for humour: television documentaries (Chovanec) and AIDS counselling interactions (Chimbwete-Phiri and Schnurr).

The nine contributions represent various linguistic disciplines and approaches: the pragmatics of the media, notably television discourse (Brock, Chovanec, and Messerli), and new media (Hirsch); two competing theoretical strands of standard pragmatics: relevance theory (Yus) and neo-Gricean pragmatics (Dynel); metapragmatics (Sinkeviciute);