

Teachers College, Columbia University Working Papers in TESOL & Applied Linguistics, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 35-39.
Book Review

Jokes and the Linguistic Mind. Debra Aarons. New York, New York: Routledge. 2012.
Pp. xi +272.

It is often said that understanding humor in a language is the highest sign of fluency. Comprehending *de dicto* jokes, specifically, demonstrates our tacit knowledge of and competence in that language. In Aarons's *Jokes and the Linguistic Mind*, multitudinous examples of humor are examined in regard to the wide range of linguistic concepts they address. The text is based on Chomsky's (1965) definition of *competence* as our implicit knowledge of the rules of language; it aims to show that when, for example, a joke about the ambiguity of a certain article is funny, it is precisely because it brings a rule governing article use to our consciousness. Aarons' detailed analyses of jokes play on semantic, phonologic, pragmatic, and syntactic rules, and are therefore of interest to the linguist. At the same time, her analyses are of equal importance to the language teacher, considering that many of these rules and explanations are of pedagogical use.

In her new book, Aarons analyzes *linguistic jokes* – jokes that play on some aspect of language – with a view to showing that they present “evidence for the idea that there is knowledge we have about language that is not directly accessible to consciousness” (p. 1). The humor in these jokes comes from principles of language that readers might not have examined before. Although this text centers on humor in English and is about the English language, the claims made can be extrapolated to any language. As Aarons states, “Any person who knows his or her language can, in principle, get a joke” (p. 8). The fact that many different features of English are examined makes this text relevant to students across a number of fields, including theoretical linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive science, as well as applied linguistics. In addition, the text provides much information that can help fluent speakers of English reflect on the complexities of the language; it also offers educators a rich source of material for lessons. The reasons why certain jokes are funny are presented in such a way that those familiar with linguistics terminology will find it easy to understand. In particular, it sheds light on a number of important issues, ranging from “aspects of semantic knowledge that are easy to use but not explain” (p. 91), to the rules of phonology and morphology in English. The author's analyses are thorough and very detailed. Considering the fact that the investigation itself may well overshadow the humorousness of each joke, Aarons carefully ends the first chapter with this comment, “Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind” (p. 18).

The book is organized into nine chapters. Chapter 1 sets the stage with relevant research on the linguistic aspects of humor and the basic cognitive science theories necessary for readers to understand the analysis in the successive chapters. This opening chapter discusses the topics of language play, grammar, (un)translatability, as well as issues related to the processing of humor. Chapters 2 through 5 look at the aspects of language that different jokes can play to: pragmatics, semantics, morphology and phonology, and syntax, respectively. Chapter 6, a case study on the way these different aspects of linguistics can intersect in one piece, is centered on word association in a Monty Python skit. Chapters 7 and 8 focus on jokes that use more than one language and

those that are about language. The final chapter expounds on the mechanics of cryptic crosswords and the convergence of written and spoken English found in their clues.

Chapter 1 presents background research and foundational theories on which Aarons bases her main arguments. A large section is devoted to the theories purported by Chomsky (1965) including *universal grammar*, as well as the distinction between language *competence* and *performance*. According to Aarons, the former is the more important element in understanding jokes. She also notes the inability of jokes to be translated despite the retention of linguistic meaning. This is a topic of importance to those interested in language learning; after all, learners cannot simply transfer their humor into the target language. The discussion of how non-native speakers relate to linguistic jokes is also of interest to those studying and researching in applied linguistics, even though the author only speculates on the relationship but does not mention research done on this topic. For instance, Aarons presents a short joke: “What’s brown and sticky? A stick.” She shares that “many users of English as a second language do not find it particularly funny,” possibly because “their knowledge of English does not draw on the same source as children’s does” (p. 13). She speculates that as part of their development in language, children create utterances that are based on their intuition of language and its rules; non-native speakers, however, do not do this with the same ease. The chapter ends with resources related to humor studies and a reiteration of the overall goal of the book, which is not to delineate “what language tells us about jokes,” but rather, to find “what jokes tell us about language” (p. 17).

Of the four chapters about the different aspects of language that can be manipulated for humor, Chapter 2 on pragmatics is especially thought-provoking, for it contains many examples with punch lines that are difficult to explain at first glance. Aarons begins by differentiating between semantics and pragmatics: the former is “concerned with the linguistic meaning of sentences,” whereas the latter is “concerned with utterances in their context of use” (p. 20). By introducing Grice’s (1975) four conversational maxims and the idea of conversational implicature, Aarons presents a very well articulated discussion concerning why certain jokes are funny. Although 30 examples may seem ostensibly an inordinate number, several of them do touch on more than one of the maxims flouted to humorous effect, and are overall well chosen in terms of familiarity and accessibility. Issues such as referential assignment, the ambiguity of certain pronouns, and the misunderstandings of illocutionary force all serve as rich sources of data pertaining to the English language. The dissection of jokes can become very tedious, and indeed it does later in Chapter 5, with numerous sentence diagrams. This same chapter, on the other hand, contains material that clearly and succinctly supports the overall point that these jokes would not be comprehensible “without a tacit knowledge of the rules of linguistic appropriateness, especially as they pertain to the interaction of rules of sentence structure with rules of use” (p. 54).

Chapter 3, “Playing with Semantics,” complements the discussion on pragmatics with a look at aspects of semantics that are “easy to use but not explain” (p. 91). The chapter begins by examining issues of sameness – through synonymy, homonymy, and polysemy – in 23 examples. Because there are numerous issues involved in establishing semantic meaning, it does not seem excessive to include so many instances. The chapter

continues with a look at homophony, shown through an assortment of puns, literal and non-literal use of language, and ambiguity. Jokes exploiting the ambiguity in article usage are especially relevant, for they remind us of the complexity of the rules regarding their use. Aarons illustrates this point well with the example: “Every 15 minutes in New York City a man gets mugged. / If I were him, I’d leave” (p. 84).

The analysis of jokes that exploit the morphology and phonology of English in Chapter 4 is also very enlightening, given that learners and teachers of English often consciously reflect on sounds and parts of word. These two aspects of language are presented in the same chapter probably because they are exploited in jokes in similar ways. After all, both morphemes and phonemes are meaningless units when found in the wrong combination or context, and the cruces of many of the jokes presented in the book are based on the ordering of these units in words. The overgeneralization of word formation rules and the *messy cranberry-morphemes* (i.e., morphemes that do not have their own meaning, as is the *cran* in *cranberry*) will be very familiar to many in the field of linguistics. Example 10, which is about a person who appears “gruntled,” again illustrates the difficulties that may arise when we generalize rules about language.

Syntax, the focus of Chapter 5, is presented through myriad sentence diagrams. These are quite interesting to those with the appropriate training and familiarity. However, if, as the author states, that her goal is “to show that the audience for linguistic jokes is not restricted to linguists” (p. 126), then diagramming may not be the most accessible method of examination for the wider intended audience. Rewriting the jokes as contrasting sentences might have been easier to follow than the different forms of trees, at least for some of her readers.

Although the comedy team *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* is known and admired for comic genius, Chapter 6 becomes tedious and repetitive by the fifth page with the extensive analysis of their word association skit. A shorter explanation of one segment of this skit would suffice, especially when the author is not exploring several different types of jokes but rather over 50 examples of word association jokes. Chapter 7, titled “Jokes in More than one Language,” begins with a look at bilingual humor, and later, at macaronic language – language that bases its humor on the “orthographic-sound” system of two languages. The exhaustive example is of several rhymes written in nonsense French which, when read aloud, sound as they would in heavily French-accented English. This chapter furthers Aarons’ point from Chapter 4 that “a string of phonemes outside a context of use may mean nothing in one language but may have one or many meanings, depending on the languages available to joke tellers and joke listeners,” (p. 170). Again, she gives several examples that are generally well-chosen. However, the second joke is not really a bilingual joke, but more a joke about bilingualism, and “the tendency of Americans to underestimate the value of knowing more than one language,” (p. 171) which seems to have detracted from the argument in this section.

Aarons begins Chapter 8 with the point that “many of these are not jokes as much as they are simply pithy little remarks pointing out the absurdities of English” (p. 192). As such, the chapter discusses not only recursion but also rebellion against linguistic prescriptivism, with many examples about the use of prepositions. This chapter is

relevant to those in the field of applied linguistics as it “allows us to think about language as an object, and our use of language as a phenomenon” (p. 192).

Cryptic crosswords, the focus of Chapter 9, are given the same in-depth analysis as that of linguistic jokes in the preceding chapters. A university lecturer in Australia herself, Aarons is much more familiar with this style of puzzle than the crossword puzzles more recognizable to speakers of American English. Her goal, which would be applicable to other forms of crosswords as well, is to show that these can be useful tools to “activate our tacit knowledge of the rules of our language and the necessary conscious knowledge of the rules of written English and its relation to spoken English” (p. 223). By addressing topics such as literal meaning versus non-literal meaning of words, as well as ambiguity of meaning, she very helpfully demonstrates the great amount of linguistic knowledge that must be accessed in order to successfully complete a puzzle of this kind. Surprisingly though, a discussion of culture is absent from this discussion. Aarons comments: “Cryptic crossword clues are largely based on eliciting what users know about language, primarily in the written form, but also about the relationships between oral and written form” (p. 230). This seems only partly true, as a large part of the ability to understand the clues is based on cultural awareness. This text, on the other hand, is meant to deal with the linguistic aspect of jokes. As noted by Aarons: “The consciousness of the rules of the particular code is not quite enough; the setter/solver of the cryptic clue must have (near-) native knowledge of the language as well” (p. 229). However, even native speakers of one variety of English could have difficulty completing a cryptic crossword written in another dialect, not to say encounter challenges when attempting to comprehend cultural references specific to one English-speaking region. For example, the answer to one of the crossword clues examined in Chapter 9 is Saul Bellow, the Canadian-American author. This clue may not be apparent to those unfamiliar with North American English. As such, it would not be out of place to briefly discuss the cultural component of the puzzles and how they can be addressed.

As a linguistics scholar, Aarons stresses that her work is “crucially about linguistics and not about humor” (p. 3). Yet, while humor is the secondary focus, several of the examples of jokes are not optimally chosen even though well-analyzed. On page 2, she notes: “Readers will no doubt be able to think of even better, funnier jokes to illustrate the points I have raised. If that is the case, I shall consider that my aim is well on its way to being met.” It may be that readers would prefer their own favorite jokes used as the examples. Nevertheless, the actual issue with the text is that the majority of the jokes used are not current enough. Some of the more oft-quoted comedians throughout the text, such as Spike Milligan and Groucho Marx, were the most prolific in the 1950s and 1960s. Their jokes, though funny, do not necessarily reflect the current “tacit knowledge.” Undoubtedly, English speakers all over the world are more familiar than ever with English language pop culture, but their exposure to humor is now more likely to be based on *The Simpsons* (mentioned in the examples on p. 97) than the mid-century offerings. It may be that the older jokes are simply more familiar to the audience and will allow for easier analysis, but this issue is not discussed.

According to Aarons, “jokes activate something that normal interactions don’t; they cause us to reflect on language” (p. 8). Fluent speakers of English have “aspects of

competence” that can be accessed through jokes. The discussion of such “aspects of competence” in *Jokes and the Linguistic Mind* helps place it as a companion piece to the main text in a linguistics course. The strength of the chapters on semantics and pragmatics would also render this book a supplementary text in applied linguistics courses. Linguistic concepts such as semantic ambiguity would become more accessible and easier to examine when presented in the context of a common joke. It may, of course, ruin the joke as well.

ELAINE ROBERTS

Immigrant Support Program Manager, International Center

REFERENCES

- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Grice, H. (1975). Logic and Conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics (Vol. 3)*. New York: Academic Press.