Bell, Nancy. (2015). *We are not amused: Failed humor in interaction.* Berlin, Germany/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

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Book review

ABSTRACT

EN This review examines *We Are Not Amused: Failed Humor in Interaction* by Nancy Bell, the first systematic examination of humorous miscommunication. Situating failed humor broadly as a (mis)communication phenomenon, the text provides an impressive range of conversational data to support each level of analysis.

Key words: FAILED HUMOR, INTERACTION, CONVERSATION

ES Esta reseña examina la obra *We Are Not amused: Failed Humor in Interaction* de Nancy Bell, el primer estudio sistemático del humor en la comunicación fallida. El humor fallido se presenta en general como un caso de comunicación (fallida) y el volumen ofrece una amplia gama de datos para cada uno de los niveles de análisis de este fenómeno.

Palabras clave: HUMOR FALLIDO, INTERACCIÓN, CONVERSACIÓN

IT Questa recensione esamina *We Are Not Amused: Failed Humor in Interaction* di Nancy Bell, il primo studio sistematico sul comico nella comunicazione fallace. L'umorismo mancato viene presentato in generale come un fenomeno di comunicazione (fallace) e il volume offre un'ampia gamma di dati a supporto di ognuno dei diversi livelli di analisi di questo fenomeno.

Parole chiave: UMORISMO MANCATO, INTERAZIONE, CONVERSAZIONE

We Are Not Amused: Failed Humor in Interaction by Nancy Bell is a 184-page study of failed humor during interaction. The book is aimed at two primary audiences: people interested in the academic study of humor and people with an interest in conversational interaction. *We Are Not Amused* relies on applied linguistics but also includes work from sociology, psychology, communication, and anthropology, among others. Unique in its focus, this book makes an important contribution to both discourse analysis and the study of humorous communication. By carefully analyzing a wide range of specific examples of failed humor, Bell is able to share valuable insights as to how failed humor illuminates theoretical issues about human communication, evident in conversational partners as well as society as a whole.

Chapter 1, "Introduction," explains failed humor as well as justifies its study. Additionally, the chapter includes background information important to understanding the study, specifically the following: language and interaction, context and the emergence of meaning, linguistic creativity, formulaicity, and competence and performance, as well as face and politeness. Perhaps most importantly, the first chapter introduces the primary research method—discourse analysis of largely the qualitative variety—employed in the service of three main goals: to identify the ways humor can fail, to identify the interactive structure of episodes of failed humor, and to examine the social consequences of failed humor. The chapter concludes with an overview of the book's structure, briefly previewing each of the following chapters. Overall, the chapter accomplishes a great deal and leaves readers well prepared for the analysis that follows.

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Chapter 2, "Conceptualizing Failed Humor," delves deeper into the definition and meaning of failed humor. The second chapter begins by examining how three seminal theoretical orientations to humor contribute to our understanding of failed humor. Using superiority/hostility theories, release theories, and incongruity theories, Bell does an excellent job explaining the theories and their relationship to contemporary understandings of humor in general, and then she (to borrow her phrasing) turns "the theory upside-down" (p. 21) to reveal how each theory might make sense of failed humor. She concludes that incongruity theory is best equipped to deal with the failure of humor. This section of the book especially resonated with me as I begin teaching my class on humor and communication by examining these (and other) theories of humor. This section of the book is a perfect fit for any teacher who includes theories of humor in his/her course. After the theoretical section of Chapter 2, Bell details how competence and performance are useful for analyzing failed humor. The chapter concludes with how failed humor was identified in her study, as well as a thorough explanation of her data set, which includes data from observations, self-reports, previous publications, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008-), television/movies, and elicitation.

Chapter 3, "Failed Humor as Miscommunication," places failed humor in the context of conversation trouble, or miscommunication. The chapter begins with a review of several central concepts necessary to understand miscommunication. Afterwards, sources of miscommunication are described and a framework for addressing failed humor is presented. The framework uses and expands on Bell and Attardo's (2010) seven levels of failure that produce miscommunication. After presenting a revised framework for understanding failed humor, which includes locutionary factors, linguistic rules, ambiguity, pragmatic force of utterances, message form, humorous frame, joke incongruity, joke appreciation, joke (meta)messages, and humor support, Bell shifts her focus to research on interactional structure and how unsuccessful communication repair is negotiated. The revised framework and repair will serve as the foundation of the analyses that are covered in the remainder of the book.

Chapter 4, "Triggers of Failed Humor", expands on the first six levels of the model from the previous chapter in order to explore the ways communication can fail at each level during serious or non-serious discourse. This chapter, as well as the chapters to follow, present the main analyses of the book. With the background, definitions, and framework established, Bell offers examples of each type of trigger with accompanying analysis. Chapter 4 convincingly argues that failed humor and serious talk share many of the same triggers; however, there are important differences in how interlocutors manage the miscommunication between failed humor and failed serious conversation. For example, the interlocutors in failed humor are more likely to forego repair, perhaps because humor is perceived as less significant than serious communication.

Chapter 5, "Triggers of Failure Specific to Humor," continues the analysis from the previous chapter using Bell's framework for understanding failed humor, but the focus now is on the final four levels of her revised framework, which are triggers exclusive to humor rather than inherent to all communication. These levels include joke incongruity, joke appreciation, joke (meta)messages, and humor support. Scholars of linguistics are likely to be especially intrigued by this portion of the book as it breaks new ground in the study of humor, as well as in applied linguistics more generally.

Chapter 6, "Managing Failed Humor in Interaction," addresses in greater detail the strategies used by both speakers and hearers in the management of failed humor. Both speaker and audience management of failure are discussed. From the audience perspective, lack of understanding and lack of appreciation are considered. Failed humor is considered through the lens of face saving and face threats: speakers wish to minimize damage to face, and hearers wish to preserve their identity as possessing a good sense of humor while simultaneously signaling failure to the speaker. The analyses revealed that the type of failure largely predicts the type of response.

Chapter 7, "Failed Humor and Society," focuses on the larger issues related to failed humor. Considering failed humor and social action, the issues of humor for solidarity and humor, power, and subversion are examined. Deliberately failed humor is explored. The chapter considers the power of humor to unite and divide people and dives deeper into issues of marginalization. This chapter is particularly provocative and, without many of the technical discourse analyses presented in Chapters 5 and 6, will likely be more palatable for less methodologically sophisticated audiences.

Chapter 8, "Conclusion," summarizes the findings, presents implications for the study of language and humor, and ends with directions for future research. The chapter opens with a clever question and answer format. The results of the book are summarized by answering the research questions from Chapter 1. The implications are thought-provoking and the directions for future research will hopefully inspire other noteworthy studies.

This impressive book is a must for scholars of humor or scholars of conversational interaction. Although I am not an applied linguist and my method is experimental social science rather than discourse analysis, I found the analysis both fascinating and persuasive. The commitment to discourse analysis is a strength as well as its biggest limitation. The methodological specificity of the book will be an obstacle for scholars not well-versed in discourse analysis. However, scholars of humor can learn a great deal from the careful and thorough analyses presented in this book. Those who teach courses on humor will also find this book quite useful, whether used in its entirety or as supplementary material when discussing conversational humor and/or failure of humor. The book is smart and—it should be mentioned—a great deal of fun.

References

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