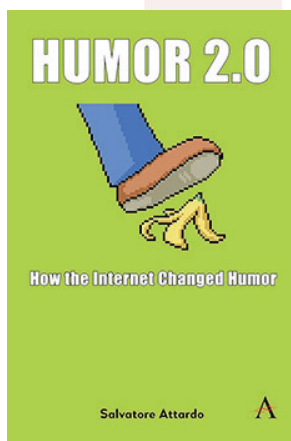# New dimensions of humor:
The online world

BY: **Bianca Alecu**

Attardo, Salvatore

Humor 2.0: How the Internet Changed Humor

London: Anthem Press, 2023, 294 pp. $35.00 (pbk, ISBN 9781839993626), $110.00 (hbk, ISBN 9781839988561)

S alvatore Attardo's most recent book on humor is an insightful case-by-case study of several digital entertainment contexts, from memes to videos, from imagined communities to political movements. The reputed linguist applies qualitative and quantitative research methods in analyzing how digital media and humor interact to form a complex social phenomenon. As the fourth book-length study solely authored by Attardo in the field of humor studies (see the major theoretical works in Attardo 1994, 2001, 2020), *Humor 2.0* is a necessary book that addresses one of the most salient – and unpredictable – forms of humor to surround us on a day-to-day basis: digital humor.

Written in a familiar, yet eloquent and theoretically rich style, with humorous and reflexive adagios, this book is the work of a master of humorous theory at play. A useful resource for students of the linguistic theories of humor or curious internet users, this volume features a rich bibliography, author, and subject indices. Moreover, internet researchers will find the book to be an indispensable reference for understanding various digital phenomena, from the most popular (i.e., memes) to the relatively more obscure ones (*Boaty Mc-Boatface*). The key concern of this book, as the author states several times, is to offer an answer to the question: how does

the internet affect how we produce and consume humorous discourse? (p. 18). The answer, as highlighted in the well-articulated introductory remarks, is that humor has changed... a little, yet not so much, due to the internet, despite what many might think:

> There is a widespread perception that humor on the internet is different than it was before [...]. The internet has obviously brought changes, such as references to spoilers, emojis and memes, but at a deep level, the deep semantic mechanisms of humor are universal and do not change. (Attardo 2023:14)

Four major themes emerge to document this observation, giving way to the four parts that structure this book. To begin with, the internet is characterized by *new genres of humor* (Part I), from which memes are considered to be the most important semiotic form (Part II). A core feature of digital humor is *multimodality* (Part III), which is explored through detailed analyses of images and videos. The discussion is extended to the relationship between the content and its consumers (photobombing, cringe humor). In this vein, a bigger picture is provided to account for using digital humorous media to propagate political agendas, especially agendas of the far-right political groups in *the dark side of internet humor* (Part IV). It is worth mentioning that this book is US-centric, a fact acknowledged by the author, leading to an inevitable discussion of mostly English-language, US-relevant online phenomena (p. 1). However, as noticed from the study of what may be considered local humorous products (Romanian memes, for instance), the analyses presented in this book highlight global trends useful for the successful problematization of other particular geopolitical and social spaces.

The introductory chapters are focused on establishing the terminology, theoretical concepts, and main ideas behind a linguistics-based theory of digital humor.

Chapter I, 'Humor and the Internet,' is the *locus* of a historical and theoretical account of the evolution of computer-mediated communication. The author stresses that the adoption rates regarding mediated communication vary across time and space. People interact differently not only *on* the internet, but *with* the internet, as different generations seem to use the web in their own, particular ways (see also McCulloch 2019). This individual and social variation consequently affects how people produce and consume humorous discourses online.

While the first chapter is essentially an overview of the book's central themes, Chapter 2, "Memetics," focuses on the forms, functions, and historical transformations of memes. Starting from the Dawkinsian original meaning of the word *meme* (Dawkins 1976), the author presents a conceptual toolkit for handling the shapeshifting of online memes. This theoretical kit includes: *produsage* (Bruns 2008) and *affordance* (Gibson 1979), *user-generated content, memetics, memeiosis* (i.e., meme production), and *anchor meme* (i.e., the original meme of a series). Digital memes are the product of memeiosis,

the process by which a meme is created or an anchor meme is remixed (modified) and further shared online. For instance, the affordances of a visual element in memes (a gesture, an index or a symbol, a still-frame, or a color) stimulate memeiosis, i.e., help with the production of different connotations.

An introduction to analyzing online humor would be incomplete without a friendly, easy-to-follow overview of the main theories on humor (Chapter 3, "Humor theory"). The reader is gradually acquainted with release, superiority, and incongruity theories. A demonstration of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (Attardo & Raskin 1991) as a version of incongruity theories is applied to memes and a popular fad (*getting rickrolled*, pp. 44-45). Very briefly, as one may expect from a book on humor that projects a larger, more diverse audience, the social and cognitive aspects of non-bona-fide interactions are also summarized.

The first part of the book (Chapters 4 to 10) provides an overview of loosely defined internet genres, including *spoiler alerts, compilations,* and *humorous digital currencies*. The six case studies reviewed in this part are some of the most spectacular recent internet phenomena, characterized by heterogeneous themes, multimodality, and creativity.

Chapter 4, "The new language of humor," acts as a "bridge" between the theoretical introduction and the rest of the book (p. 49). Echoing other internet researchers who take a descriptive, functional approach to broad linguistic topics (Crystal 2001; 2018; McCulloch 2016), Attardo aims to reassure the nonspecialist reader about the negative effects of mediated interaction on talk and language in general (p. 51). Although online communication might initially seem very different from spoken or written communication, it does not signify the "death" of language as we know it. Online communication mainly depends on graphical and lexical elements. Internet slang is a mix of informal language, computer jargon, abbreviated patterns (e.g., *OMG*), and emoticons. Since humor is part of interaction, this chapter discusses verbal and visual "markers of humor" (p. 53), such as the smiley face or Internet slang words (e.g., *lol*).

Turning to the case studies presented as "new genres" of humor, we notice their most defining features: they are multimodal objects shared on the internet, having some degree of historical precedence in the shape of traditional media, and are at the core of specific sociocultural trends. Moreover, the author provides different case studies to explain the inner workings of humor in each case. For instance, "The compilation" (Chapter 5) of failed videos on Vine and other networks has had a television counterpart. Incongruity theory is called to explain laughter due to watching fail videos. Chapter 6, "Internet cartoons", introduces the term *narrowcasting* (Licklider 1967), an antonym of broadcasting media, i.e., spreading content to niche groups. The author believes most internet cartoonists (authors of *webcomics*) create a particular audience for themselves in the digital age, with the help of editing and web affordances. "Stuff

white people like" is the title of Chapter 7, referencing the eponymous blog (SWPL). The author discusses racial stereotypes, one of the most salient resources of verbal humor, in the blog context. In our view, the highlight of this analysis is the recuperation of classist themes hidden behind the classical rhetoric of race (p. 78). The author contrasts excerpts from the SWPL blog with a stand-up comedian's piece on race to further deliver his point. Both discourses use the pretense of a specialized voice (the anthropologist vs the nature documentary) to comment on the target of humor.

Chapter 8, "Dogecoin, the joke currency", delves into a massive sociocultural phenomenon by which a meme, Doge (a dog with humorous inner speech), became the symbol of a make-believe cryptocurrency, *the dogecoin*. At the core of humor is incongruity on multiple levels: between an animal and its anthropomorphic reflexive speech, on one hand, and between the world of memes and the world of finances, on the other. "The spoiler alert" (Chapter 9) is originally a form of letting the addressee know that the author/speaker is about to reveal important plot points in discussing a fictional product (movies, series, books). Gradually, it became arguably more of a discursive practice than a genre, since it is now used conversationally, as the author highlights in his analysis of a *Key & Peel* skit. This practice may be used as a humorous resource of metadiscursive commentary. Finally, Chapter 10 "Satirical news websites and fake news" comments on the historical vein of humorous fake news in satirical print media (e.g., *The Onion*). This case study is a lesson in establishing the cues for satirical news, such as exaggeration, press clichés, real-life or life-like details (data, location), and incongruity.

In the second part of this book, "Memes and More Memes," four memes are examined in detail: *Boaty McBoatface, Grumpy Cats, Pastafarian memes*, and *Chuck Norris* memes. An insightful theoretical discussion on meme cycles (similar to joke cycles) and the semantic bleaching of meme verbal affordances is central in Chapter 11, "Memetic drift or the alliteration arsonist." Humor on the internet may develop many forms, from the distinct semiotic ones (memes) to shared discourse practices, such as collective pranks. Users join to create several collective digital products, from Wikipedia pages to "joint fictionalization" (Tsakona 2018). Chapter 12, "The saga of Boaty McBoatface," is a commentary on how memes can have real-life consequences: an expensive British polar research ship was to be named Boaty McBoatface, as per the wish of thousands of Internet users. This is a collaborative prank on a collective agent of authority, the British Natural Environment Research Council, which eventually named the ship after Sir David Attenborough. An interesting (unintended) result of the prank is creating a linguistic pattern, which intertextually refers to the original Boaty McBoatface: Horsey McHorseface, Trany McTrainface, and so on (p. 125). In Chapter 13, "A General Theory of Grumpy Cats," Attardo discusses *anthropomorphism* as the leading resource of Grumpy Cat humor after providing the reader with an account of the phenomenon.

As cats took over the internet (see also *LOLCats*), the author suggests that the internet serves an inevitable lucrative purpose (pp. 135-136) as a means of spreading the popularity of cute-looking (i.e., human-looking) cats and animals in general.

In Chapter 14, "The Pastafarian memeplex: Joke religion as a system," Attardo introduces the memeplex to explain a cluster of memes on the same topic. Pastafarian memes are based on a humorous parody of religious discourse. The illustrations provided by the author in this chapter are essential for understanding the entire sociocultural phenomenon that Pastafarianism involves, from a fundamentally irreverent parody (see Figure 14.1, p. 141) to a collective protest and spiritual experience (see Figure 14.2, p. 142). Moving to the final case study in this section of the book, Chapter 15, "When Chuck Norris is waiting, Godot comes," bears the title of a joke the author himself creates (and analyzes on p. 159) based on Chuck Norris memes. The rhetorical trope of the all-powerful Chuck Norris, a symbol of boundless masculine strength, is actually a remake of a pre-digital storytelling pattern: the "tall tale." A somewhat worn-out meme nowadays, this example is used to introduce and analyze *dank memes* as memes that have reached the final stage of their popularity and spread, possibly due to overuse (p. 153). Dank memes are the focus of theoretical discussion in Chapter 16, "The half-life of a meme: The rise and fall of memes."

The third part of the book, "Multimodality," highlights the interaction between different affordances of digital media, including visual and verbal cues and more complex elements. For instance, in Chapter 17, a common feature of foreign-language movies, the subtitles, becomes a resource for digital humor. By decontextualizing a scene from a German-language movie on Hitler's defeat in the battle of Berlin, users can provide "fake" subtitles that create an incongruity with the selected visuals. Chapter 18, "Photobombing as figure ground reversal," is, in our opinion, a well-rounded theoretical treatment of a complex physical and cultural action: the disruption of a picture, willingly or unwillingly, by a third actor (person, animal, or object). The author effectively discusses Gestalt psychology concepts of *figure* and *ground*, two entities that account for how the mind perceives important versus background information.

Chapter 19, "'Hard to watch': Cringe and embarrassment humor," offers readers an overview of humorous discourse that, aside from eliciting mirth and laughter, also provokes feelings of embarrassment and inappropriateness. While cringe humor has only recently become a formal term among humor scholars (Tsakona 2023: 115), the examples chosen by the author demonstrate a consistent set of features. Therefore, cringe humor relies on the social contagion effect and involves the vicarious experience of embarrassment on behalf of the humor source or other participants (see the definition on p. 190).

Keeping in the realm of multimodality, Chapter 20 "Humor videos" comprises the ubiquitous video forms popular on the internet, from the short Vines (under 10

seconds) to Reels or longer parodic outputs. A highlight of this chapter is the analysis of music excerpts and decorum as resources for humorous discourse (see the Lego Rammstein example). "Reaction videos" (Chapter 21) form a subgenre of digital videos based on both visual and verbal affordances: on one hand, the screen of a reaction video contains both the objection of reaction and the "reactor"; on the other hand, the commentary is attuned to verbal descriptors of race, sex or gender, aiming to attract the attention of the audience, albeit in a polemic way.

The fourth and last part of the book, "The dark side of internet humor," is an exploration of "the darkest, most disturbing corners of the internet" (p. 217). Chapter 22, "The use of humor by the alt-right," presents several instances of covert propaganda stemming from the extreme right of American politics. The "cover" of this ideology is humor and, more precisely, one of its properties: the ability to "take back" a joke or a comment (called the "retractability" of humor by the author, p. 219). The alt-right movement has gained an audience via activity on platforms such as 4chan, Reddit, and Facebook, with little to no repercussions. Discussing the "just joking" argument (p. 221), the author suggests that accountability in the case of political humor must be at the forefront of the debate on freedom of expression. Furthermore, Chapter 23 explores "4chan, trolls and lulz" in the context of fascist propaganda. *Trolling* is an antisocial behavior, "disruptive, deliberate and antagonizing" (p. 228), which may use aggressive and disaffiliative forms of humor to radicalize users on various topics. An especially important point of discussion recalls the concepts of Ur-fascism (Eco 1995) or *generic fascism* (Griffin 1993). These terms describe an abstract, over-arching ideological movement, the matrix of different "historical" fascist movements that are actualized at various points in time and via different mechanisms. Forums such as 4chan are an outlet for the surge in contemporary fascist discourse, as well as for antisocial interactive behavior. Some of these discursive phenomena that channel destructive ideologies are, apart from trolling, *shitposting, flaming, hate-watching,* and *cyberbullying*.

Finally, Chapter 24, "Pepe, Kek and friends," highlights the mythical figures of far-right propaganda, born and popularized by meme culture. One may draw a parallel between the satirical cult of Kek and Pastafarianism: both can be seen as collective parodies of religion, using different concepts and unlikely scenarios to mimic the elements of a cult that is shared and grows on the internet. However, only the cult of Kek is linked to right-wing propaganda. Humor plays a crucial role in this phenomenon, since memes featuring Pepe, the avatar of Kek, are used to recruit new followers and influence opinions (see also Trillò and Shifman 2021). The author highlights the "cast of characters" in these memes: Pepe, Chad, Wojak, and his alternates (NPC Wojak, SoyJack). We are thus reminded of the insightful introductory remarks on how memes feature a variety of changing faces, much like the "maschere" of commedia dell'arte (p. 18).

As a conclusion (pp. 249-225), Attardo reviews four ways in which humor has been changed, or at least shaped, by the advent of the internet: the creation of the humorous meme, the emergence of cringe humor, the "destabilization of the boundary between play and real-life aggression" (p. 250) and, lastly, the growing role of the crowd in creating collective pranks and other shared humorous experiences.

The diversity of case studies in this book is essential to discussing how the Internet changed humor. In considering novel ways of approaching contemporary humor and humor studies, Tsakona (2020) discusses online humor as a rich ground for collective practice and joke cycles. The online world of humor seems to emerge as a distinct genre or, at least, a distinct medium in which digital affordances shape how humor is produced and consumed. Memes are the prototypical humorous product associated with the internet. Like other recent works on internet humor (Chiaro 2018, Yus 2023), this book offers a plethora of applied discussions on different humor and media genres. However, memes shine throughout any book on digital humor, and Attardo's study is no exception.

We are in awe of the diversity of applied linguistics approaches that are showcased in most of the chapters. Complementing the theoretical discussion, the qualitative analyses using incongruity theory and script opposition to explain the mechanisms of humor (see p. 160) are thoroughly welcomed by both students of humor theory (this author included) and the general public. Moreover, the author uses quantitative analysis and novel annotation models, from the most descriptive (failed compilations, pp. 65-67) to the most complex approaches. From a methodological point of view, these latter approaches are closer to corpus linguistics: see, for instance, the empirical test for cringe humor (p. 192) involving sentiment analysis of comments on a YouTube video.

Last, but not least, the "voice of the author" is revealed to be a particular spirited disposition – jocular and knowledgeable in "all things internet," yet competent and authoritative in theoretical discussions. These latter instances are mostly on linguistic and social topics. However, explanations on extralinguistic topics, such as the world of finance (p. 87), provide necessary contextualization for analyzing the *dogecoin*, in this case. As a researcher of internet communication phenomena, I deeply feel the tension between contextualizing the object of study and articulating its analysis, emerging from the particular "niche" or "trivial" nature of the topic. Especially in the world of Advice Animals and Doge, researchers need to be able to shape-shift into a competent, yet worldly storyteller to deliver their interpretations of internet discourse and interaction. The breadth of cultural and linguistic topics this book tackles involves a lot of historical and cultural background knowledge, which needs to be distilled for the audience for each case study. The way the author delivers this contextualization, rich in detail and balanced in narrative, is to be appreciated.

Another highlight of the author's style is the metadiscursive and humorous reflexive commentary. As Tsakona (2023: 118) points out, the "funny asides" emerge from the research topic. Most of these comments involve the author, employing a postmodern "breaking the 4th wall" technique: a humorous take on digital and real selves (p. 20), a meme created by the author (p. 24), a picture of the author's family being photobombed by a stranger (p. 188). By subtly self-disclosing at times while emphasizing the task at hand, the author creates a book that is both engaging and insightful. The audience and the researcher share the initial goal of the project: to explore how the internet has changed humor. We look forward to the scholar's future work in the online realm. Given that most humorous genres resemble pre-digital discourse (see satirical news, compilations, and others), memes and cringe humor are likely to remain topics of interest for the author, as they are, at least in part, products of the digital environment and its possibilities. Considering the "fast pace" of humor on the internet (p. 16), we are compelled to echo the author's sentiment: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose...*

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