Review of Villy Tsakona. *Exploring the Sociopragmatics of Online Humor.* John Benjamins Publishing, 2024. $163. 267 pages.

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How are we to interpret and analyze humor given its profuse production and reception in online formats? Why does the same humor instance trigger mirth in some and offense in others? What impacts on social group formation and solidarity does humor play, and conversely why does humor sometimes solicit resistance and calls for regulation?

Villy Tsakona, a professor of Social and Educational Approaches to Language at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, seeks to address these and other questions through the explication and application of a "sociopragmatic" analytical model that sits at the intersection of sociolinguistic and pragmatics. In practice sociopragmatic approaches involve the study of the making and interpreting of meaning in ways that are attentive to the rules and constraints of the relevant social contexts, values and hierarchies. This is a burgeoning recent research approach, and one to which Tsakona makes a valuable contribution. Her model, which she dubs the "Discourse Theory of Humor," truncated to "DTH" in the book, has emerged incrementally from her notable published work over the past 15 years.

Notwithstanding romantic notions about the universality of humor, and while the mechanics of the three main humor theories—incongruity (on which Tsakona relies mostly), superiority, release and relief—are arguably generic, to function effectively in practice each version of humor depends on socio-culturally specific performative and linguistic background assumptions and expectations. To get a given joke one must already know and/or rapidly navigate that context. In developing and demonstrating her analytic model Tsakona focusses on online Greek humor, occurring variously as interactions in social media, memes, and written satirical news. She provides the reader with the translated thick description presumed by the humor even as she thereby repeatedly illustrates the importance of context.

Each of the six main chapters here are devoted to unpacking a particular set of issues. In Chapter 1 the DTH is explicated in terms of the dimensions of context that interact with humor in practice. The DTH model (pp.32ff) involves three analytical foci. First, there are sociocultural

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assumptions and norms, including about humor and its appropriateness, that are presumed to be shared. Second, there are genres of texts typically associated with particular communicative settings in which humor is expected, such as the canned joke in a standup routine, and others, such as religious or legal speech at a judicial trial, less so. Third, there is the actual semiotic text through which humor is intentionally expressed.

Tsakona summarizes and engages with both classical (Raskin, Attardo, Norrick, Oring) and current (Kuipers, Weaver, Yus) scholarship on humor, which she helpfully summarizes, and is persuasive in justifying her synthetic model. I would however have liked to see Tsakona also situate her "novel" DTH within a larger canvas of seminal literary and philosophical approaches with which more readers might be familiar. In my view, in particular, Bahktin has already emphasized the dialogic, polysemic, and contextual nature of communication including humorous communication, in consonant ways.

In Chapter 2 we learn that establishing if the humor was well-received or found unfunny involves identifying the metapragmatic stereotypes used as indicators, such as laughing, in the audience response. Online, these indicators are often subsequent comments. Tsakona demonstrates that the three foci of the DTH can be used to differentiate what it was in a given humor instance that failed for a particular recipient.

Memes (using two online examples, Master Chef Greece and the translation of English loanwords into Greek) are the focus of Chapter 3, and Tsakona does a fine job of demonstrating that these seemingly superficial and typically funny online floaters may carry depth charges. In her words, memes are "often used nowadays as metapragmatic commentary on various linguistic phenomena" (67). The DTH proves useful here too especially where memes with linguistic content are concerned, to show how they cumulatively shore up, or conversely challenge communicative stereotypes and expectations.

Given ethical concerns about humor content and its social impacts, Chapter 4 develops some useful observations, pushing beyond script opposition, on the polysemous, ambiguous, and even ambivalent nature of humor where contextual assumptions about race are concerned. The examples here are from the genre of satirical news stories, against racists and in support of migrants, appearing on popular Greek websites. Tsakona disagrees with scholars who regard humor as obviously non-factual in nature and hence impotent in generating discriminatory views. On the contrary, she argues that humor can sustain or subvert stereotypes, while also noting that

even in the latter case it may nonetheless reproduce and concede something prejudicial. This is an excellent and insightful chapter even if I may not entirely agree that newly jocular and evasive racist humor is a more serious or dangerous form of racism than the overt and violent one of old.

Though ephemeral in many respects, online humor that addresses public events can also, as Chapter 5 illustrates, rely on serious intertextual legacies and have long interpretive afterlives. As such humorous criticism and its rejection can figure as resources through which individuals coalesce, define, and distinguish their social identities. This is especially true of online humor in what is literally functioning as *social* media.

Chapter 6, the final substantive chapter, seeks to demonstrate that DTH could be deployed within a critical literacy framework to enable teachers to better convey to students how humor works. While a pedagogical chapter feels like a bit of a tangent to me given the earlier ones, the focus on humorous memes addressing COVID-19, makes its presence in this monograph worthwhile.

Minor quibbles aside, Tsakona has provided a lucid, sensible, and subtle treatment of humor, and her analytical model of humor merits being taken seriously. While the DTH is illustrated on Greek online humor, it applies to all humor in providing categories for analysis, namely, sociocultural assumptions, the genres in play, and the text itself.