IMPRESSIONS FROM THE 26TH CONFERENCE
OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR HUMOR STUDIES
IN UTRECHT, NETHERLANDS

The 26th Conference of the International Society for Humor Studies was held at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands from July 7 to July 11, 2014. The conference was hosted by Sibe Doosje from the University of Utrecht, with essential support from professors Jeffrey Goldstein and Giselinde Kuipers. 133 participants from a number of European, Asian and American countries took part in the event, along with a few participants from Australia and Africa.

The University of Utrecht provided its historic University Hall for the main conference venue. The five-day conference started off with pre-conference tutorials. The grand old men of humour research, Victor Raskin and Christie Davies, together with the local organiser Sibe Doosje, gave lectures about recent trends in humour research in the fields of linguistics, sociology and psychology.

The following four days were filled with interdisciplinary symposia and paper presentations. One of the key topics was a follow-up to the question posed by Victor Raskin at the 2012 conference in Kraków: identifying what is funny to whom and why. Several presenters tried to pin down the essential features of the humorous. For example, Julia Taylor from Purdue University applied the Ontological Theory of Humor (Raskin & Triezenberg 2005; Taylor 2009, 2010) to witticisms in online social media like Facebook. The fuzziness and contextuality of these data explains well why not many humour researchers want to go outside canned jokes, into studying speech (or CMC) instead.

In fact, many of the papers used internet humour as the main source of their data. A number of these explicitly tackled the unique aspects of this material, focusing on its intertextuality, multimodality and globality. Limor Shifman and Lilly Boxman-Shabtai identified six textual attributes that augment polysemy in mediated humour, including the display of un-stereotypical stereotypes applied to joke targets, self-deprecating humour, or the situation in which a negative character "wins" a situation, etc. Among others, they pointed at polysemy embedded in the intertextuality of the text. Although this term has a different and wider array of connotations in literature studies, it describes the processes that enable the globalisation of humour quite adequately. Jan Chovanec from Masaryk University in Brno also argues that much of the humour contained in YouTube videos is intertextual and relies on background knowledge assumed to be shared by the recipients; the success of such a meme is, to a great extent, decided by the success of the references it contains. It follows logically that the more various references there are, the greater are the chances of its appeal to wider audiences, as also mentioned in the presentation of Liisi Laineste.

Among the various genres discussed during the conference was stand-up. Sharon Lockyer from Brunel University in the UK gave an overview of the first year of the Centre for Comedy Studies Research, which has recently launched a project on comedy and disability. Disability has a long history within comic discourse – from court jesters to freak shows to the disabled making fun of their own disabilities. She has conducted interviews with disabled stand-up comedians and studies the questions of laughing at the forbidden, self-deprecating humour and empowerment in comedy. Eddie Naessens from Trinity College in Dublin, also a stand-up comedian himself, elaborated further

on the interaction between the performer and the audience, stressing that a comedian has to "manage the room", i.e., work with the audience to create the atmosphere. He or she can be seen as performing on a stage that is missing the fourth wall – the invisible line between him/her and the onlookers.

When talking about the audience's reactions, the question of failed humour inevitably arises. Moira Marsh from Indiana University in the US has dwelled upon this topic for several years by now, and gave her presentation on public reactions to a century-old hoax that was referred to as "gruesome" by the journalists of that time. Studying the context and reactions, she suggested that amusement is not something that happens to us, but something we choose to do, sometimes thoughtlessly, sometimes deliberately. She also claimed that an essential constituent of humour perception is disagreement – a sudden comprehension that there is something wrong in this picture; not for "us", but for "them". Of course, a joke can also function without a target, but laughing at someone adds enjoyment.

Through the past decade, there has been a growing number of participants from Asian countries. For instance, Japanese humour research is on a very high level, especially in describing humour from a folkloric perspective.

For those interested in the whole range of topics addressed at the 26th ISHS Conference, the programme and abstracts are available at the conference home page at http://www.eventure-online.com/eventure/welcome.do?type=public&congress=7_14015.

According to a long-standing tradition, several young researchers received awards for their work in humour studies. This year Jennifer Hofmann received the Don and Alleen Nilsen Young Scholars Award for her paper, *The Perception of Facial Features of Intense Laughter in Animations*. Three students received Graduate Students Awards (GSA) for their work: Tristan Miller for *Towards the Automatic Detection and Identification of English Puns*, Sarah Seewoester Cain for her *When Comedians Laugh: Laughter as a Signal for Meta-Communicative Shifts in Monologue Performances*, and Dick Zijp for *Humor, Authenticity and Absorption: Re-Thinking the Conservative Functions of Humor*.

Awards were allocated not only to students of humour research, but were also presented to long-standing members of the ISHS. Victor Raskin received a well-deserved ISHS Lifetime Achievement Award for his service and scholarly work in humour studies.

The next ISHS conference will be held in Oakland, California, on June 29 – July 3, 2015.

Liisi Laineste

References

Raskin, Victor & Triezenberg, Katarina E. 2005. *Ontological Semantics of Humor: Pre-Conference Tutorial*. ISHS-05: The 17th Annual Meeting of the International Society of Humor Studies. Youngstown, Ohio: Youngstown State University.

Taylor, Julia 2009. SO in OSTH: Ontological Semantic View of Script Overlap/Oppositeness Support. In: A. Bippus (ed.) *Abstracts of ISHS'09, the 2009 Annual Meeting of the International Society of Humor Studies*. Long Beach, CA: University of California.

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