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*The importance of not being earnest: The feeling behind  
laughter and humor (review)*

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**The importance of not being earnest:** The feeling behind laughter and humor. By WALLACE CHAFE. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007. Pp. xiv, 167. ISBN 9789027241528. \$149 (Hb).

Reviewed by NEAL R. NORRICK, *Saarland University*

This is a very important, groundbreaking book on humor from a linguistic perspective. It differs from other linguistic research on humor in two main ways: first, in the attention it pays to the precise description of laughter, and second, in its attempt to set out a complete theory of laughter and humor, including their place in human evolution and consciousness, rather than simply to account for humorous texts. It is Chafe's thesis that neither laughter nor humor can be understood apart from the feeling that underlies them both. C calls the feeling nonseriousness, noting that English has no lexical item covering the area intended, though terms like *exhilaration* and *mirth* have been proposed by others. C seeks to show that this feeling is a mental state that prevents people from taking some event seriously, so that they exclude it from their world knowledge. As in previous publications by C, laughter is a disabling mechanism, inhibiting both serious thought and action, but it has positive survival value, because it is an expression of the feeling of nonseriousness (see Chafe 1987). Laughter communicates the feeling of nonseriousness to others, thereby averting potential unpleasantness and conflict. Further, human beings have developed humor as a set of devices designed to trigger the feeling because it is so pleasant and distracting.

The book contains a preface and an introduction, and then the rest is divided into three sections: Part 1, 'How we laugh', Part 2, 'Why we laugh', and Part 3, 'Pulling things together'. The volume closes with references and a combined index of both names and subjects.

In his introduction, C relates laughter to a feeling of nonseriousness often elicited by a perception of pseudo-plausibility in a state of affairs, which we ultimately exclude from our (serious) vision of how things are. Pseudo-plausibility has been called 'local logic', 'sense in nonsense', or 'appropriate inappropriateness' by other writers on humor.

In Part 1, C concerns himself with the articulatory and acoustic phonetics of laughter, with special sections on varieties of laughter and laughing while speaking. His findings are based on recordings from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English. Audio samples of the data analyzed are available at C's website. By contrast, with questionable claims by Provine (2000) about the sounds of laughter, C demonstrates, in consonance with Bachorowski, Smoski, and Owren (2001), that the vowels of laughter are within the mid-central range, or very close to schwa. C finds no phonetic basis for the folk tradition of distinguishing laughs like *heehee*, *haha*, *hoho* and the like, and similar transcriptions of laughter, especially those following Jefferson 1985 and others in the conversational analysis tradition.

By contrast with past writers, C demonstrates the phonetic complexity and individual character of laughter along with the significance of the final inhalation to replenish air in the lungs. His description of laughing while speaking breaks new ground in focusing on specific features of laughter like tremolo and creaky voice. Still, it seems odd that C spends so much time on the phonetics of laughter in such a relatively brief book, given that his purpose is to investigate the feeling behind laughter and humor. It would have served his theoretical purpose simply to have shown that laughter is physically disabling and that laughter prevents us from acting in serious ways—just as the psychological state of nonseriousness prevents us from thinking in serious ways. The rest of the discussion simply serves to fill in the picture of how human laughter works, sounds, and interacts with speech. C further relates laughter to smiling, and discusses internal changes in the body during laughter, interaction with the brain, and the often-claimed positive effect of laughter on health.

The second part of the book focuses on the feeling behind laughter and humor. C discusses emotions and their description, and the evolution of the feeling of nonseriousness in a Darwinian vein, just as one might speculate why humans developed a behavior like crying or why cats developed purring. Then there is a long consideration of nonseriousness without humor. On the one hand, laughter is not the only possible reaction to the feeling of nonseriousness; on the other

hand, laughter does occur in cases of embarrassment, self-deprecation, word-finding difficulty, awkwardness, and the like, where humor is not involved. Laughter even bubbles up in many situations where it is not appropriate, like regret and bereavement. When laughter occurs in undesirable or abnormal situations, it continues to express a feeling of nonseriousness and to keep the interaction moving ahead on a more comfortable level by dissipating negative feelings.

C then turns to what we call humor, beginning with unplanned humor, and tackling the difficult relationship of ridicule and humor. C's explanation of this relation is circular: ridicule 'places the victim, the butt of the ridicule, outside the serious world by treating him or her as someone who, quite simply, is not to be taken seriously' (94). But what about ridicule expressed in mirthless, scornful, bitter laughter? Say, that of stereotype villains and 'mad scientists'? Or racist humor, as described by Oring (2003)? Don't we all sometimes laugh in scorn while remaining in a serious frame of mind? In Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (IV, I) when the Second Apparition tells Macbeth to 'Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn/The power of man, for none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth', it is difficult to imagine any feeling of nonseriousness interfering. Indeed, it would be surprising if we were not capable of expropriating laughter for serious uses, just as we can smile to mask a disappointment or lie to hide our true purposes.

In Ch. 9, which I find the least satisfying of the book, C considers planned humor in oral traditions, initially jokes. This is the area of much linguistic and nonlinguistic research, especially over the last twenty-five years, but C does not adequately reflect the relevant research on joke structure (Hockett 1977, Raskin 1985) and timing (Norrick 2001). Given his acumen in careful discourse analysis and his past publications, especially *Discourse, consciousness and time* (Chafe 1994), it is rather surprising that C does not enter into some narrow linguistic description of joke performance to bolster his account of the 'time course of a joke'. Again surprisingly, although C says he has discussed jokes as 'oral phenomena' (101), he considers only written joke texts, where an analysis of the oral joke performance would be necessary to approach the matter of timing rigorously. In the present treatment, the notion of timing is reduced to one of reading comprehension, perhaps amenable to study through analysis of eye movements, which C briefly considers. In fact, there are important differences between written joke texts and oral joke performances, as I have shown in Norrick 2004. For one thing, jokers do not simply reel off some text committed to rote memory—far from it: they routinely alter the sentences of written joke texts in the direction of intonation groups linked with 'and' and punctuated with disfluencies such as hesitations and filled pauses. Like any other oral performance, jokers are geared to a particular audience and setting, for many different purposes and with all kinds of possibilities for listener response (compare Sacks 1974, Norrick 1993). Furthermore, prosody and gestures play important roles in the jokers' performance in comparison with the joke text.

Regarding the effectiveness of jokes, C again focuses solely on textual factors, though recent research (e.g. Oring 2003) has demonstrated that there is much more going on in joke appreciation than just a perception of pseudo-plausibility, for instance, membership in a group with specific attitudes and beliefs and the way a joke is used in the discourse context, say as an example or argument, as opposed to pure entertainment. C cites Wiseman's only partly tongue-in-cheek 'LaughLab' experiment to find the 'world's funniest joke' based on responses to an internet query. Wiseman (2002) also points to factors like the length of a joke in words and the inclusion of references to animals in the text in promoting joke effectiveness. Such considerations lead to a good discussion of elements supporting funniness, including foreshadowing the punch-line, inclusion of a taboo topic, and linguistic ambiguity through punning.

C is at his best in Ch. 10 comparing planned humor in various oral and written traditions, and humor in other (Navajo, Chinese, Iroquois, Japanese) cultures, including jokes, riddles, film, satire, and so on. The discussion of humor in other cultures is particularly enlightening. There is no universal code of humor valid for all cultures at all times. Part of our acculturation consists in learning what is humorous (and what is not, or should not be). Ultimately, we laugh at what we have been brought up to laugh at. Consequently, it is difficult to appreciate humor across cultures. All the more important is it to find a common basis for humor and laughter like the feeling of nonseriousness.

In Part 3, C pulls the threads together. After an excellent recapitulation of the evidence and the argument, C seeks to reconcile his results with those of other studies from Plato and Hobbes, through Charles Gruner and Sigmund Freud on to Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo and pragmatic approaches to humor like Neal Norrick's and Helga Kotthoff's. C convincingly defends humor based on a feeling of nonseriousness vis-à-vis so-called superiority theory, whereby we laugh because we perceive weakness in others. In a variant of superiority theory, Gruner (1997) argues that competition forms the basis of humor and winning makes us laugh. But just because Gruner CAN identify competition in any humorous event does not necessarily entail that competition is the basis of laughter and/or humor. The distinction between C's own position and incongruity theories of laughter, whereby we laugh due to perception of some incongruity or clash of frames, is less convincing, if only because it is so close to C's own account. Freud (1960 [1905]) is given very short shrift (145): there's more similarity than C seems to see, inasmuch as the joke techniques Freud describes lead to recognition of absurdity—or pseudo-plausibility in C's terms. Still, the basic critique of research based on incongruity theory in its various instantiations such as the semantic script-based theory of Raskin (1985; cf. Attardo & Raskin 1991) comes down to the primary point that all of this research fails to address fundamental questions of what humor is and the relation of humor to human consciousness and evolution. Specifically, incongruity theories of humor, like superiority theories, only address the stimulus to humor and its response in laughter, but ignore the underlying principle in human consciousness. Nevertheless, the perception of incongruity (or pseudo-plausibility) can be taken as the stimulus for the feeling of nonseriousness in many cases, and the relation between this 'humorous' source of the feeling of nonseriousness and other nonhumorous sources still needs some careful teasing apart. Finally, C discusses pragmatic approaches like Norrick 1993 and Kotthoff 2000 based on recorded conversational data, showing how humor can function to facilitate interaction and build group solidarity.

In a thought-provoking 'coda', C briefly addresses the matter of visual, nonlinguistic humor and a few other issues that deserve future attention, for instance, the relation of different sorts of laughter to different contexts, differences in the 'sense of humor' from one person to the next and their relation to other personality traits such as creativity and playfulness, and, finally, what makes some instances of humor funnier than others.

A word about the index. The term *play* in a book on nonseriousness and humor presumably has the sense of 'a behavior common to humans and other species', as in the correct page reference 68–69, but not the sense of 'drama', especially since the term *plays* also appears in the index in this latter sense. Nevertheless, the index entry for *play* includes: 'a play or movie' (39), and 'Mel Brooks's play' (117), along with spurious occurrences of *play* in idioms, as in 'play a role' (152), 'comes into play' (44, 64). I found just two typographical errors: *said* *be* should read *said to be* (104, line 12). In the references, the page numbers for Bachorowski, Smoski, & Owren 2001 should be 1581–97.

Perhaps the most ingratiating aspect of the book is C's personable writing style and his open-minded attitude toward his topic and materials, indeed toward the whole enterprise of linguistics and scientific inquiry.

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**The Blackwell companion to syntax.** Ed. by MARTIN EVERAERT and HENK VAN RIEMSDIJK, with editorial assistance from ROB GOEDEMAN and BART HOLLEBRANDSE. 5 vols. Pp. 4,144. ISBN 1405114851. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. \$1,299.95 (Hb).

Reviewed by LILIANE HAEGEMAN, *University of Ghent\**

The *Blackwell companion to syntax* comprises around 4,100 pages, in five volumes, with a total of seventy-seven chapters (3,285 pages), cowritten by seventy-nine authors, many of them leading figures in generative grammar. Each chapter offers a case study in generative syntax. The chapters vary in length from eleven pages for the shortest (Ch. 10, 'Bridge phenomena', by NOMI ERTESCHIK-SHIR) to over 100 pages for the longest (Ch. 61, 'Specificational copular sentences and pseudoclefts', by MARCEL DEN DIKKEN, is 118 pages; Ch. 75, 'Verb clusters, verb raising, and restructuring', by SUSI WURMBRAND, runs to 115 pages). There is a five-page preface by the editors and a 113-page index to all volumes, both reproduced in each volume, and a consolidated reference section of 160 pages at the end of Vol. 5. The accompanying CD is compatible with PC and Macintosh computers.

Though the term 'generative' does not figure in the title of this collection, the very first line of the preface, 'Generative grammar has always set its aims high' (xix), makes it clear that the *Companion* focuses on generative syntax. The *Companion* brings together a vast store of empirical knowledge accumulated in the generative tradition during the last half-century. As the editors point out, in generative syntax empirical data and their analyses remain subordinate to the theory, or putting it differently, 'data and analyses are seen as what they are: tools to help us understand the structure and properties of the human language faculty' (xix). A potential drawback of this theoretical orientation is that with a change of the theoretical perspective, or of the theory as such, empirical generalizations that at some point had been the focal point of the theory may fade into the background. Even if the original papers dealing with the relevant phenomena remain available, changes in the theory mean that earlier papers become less easily accessible to a newer generation of researchers. Also, the knowledge accumulated on a particular empirical domain is not often recorded in one paper; rather it will be scattered over a number of papers, each with its own theoretical perspective. Thus, it may often be difficult to trace all the relevant empirical material. To quote from the introduction: 'So searching for the relevant materials . . . is often hard.

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