

## Book Reviews

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Thomas C Messerli, *Repetition in Telecinematic Discourse. How American Sitcoms Employ Formal and Semantic Repetition in the Construction of Multimodal Humour*. Freiburg: Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg/Universitätsbibliothek, 2021; V + 452 pp.; open access.

**Reviewed by:** Alexander Brock, *Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Germany*

The linguistic description of humorous communication – by now an established research field – is useful in at least two ways: (1) It benefits genre linguistics by generating knowledge about specific groups of texts, and (2) it reveals properties of language and discourse processes in general by exposing them to the stress test that comes with humorous incongruities, that is, an introduction of ill-fitting structures or ideas into a horizon of expectation. Messerli’s book-size investigation is designed to add to both these fields of interest.

The author formulates the aim to ‘examine the ways in which repetition of words and structures, of forms and meaning, of linguistic and non-linguistic signs contribute [sic] to sitcom humour’ (p. 1). The investigation is oriented towards multimodal and multi-layered phenomena from a microscopic and macroscopic perspective. The analysis is informed by five research questions which focus on (1) simple formal repeats, (2) complex formal repeats, (3) functions of formal repetition, (4) inter-turn semantic repetition and cohesion, and (5) repetition in larger narrative structures. The corpus material is a selection of U.S.-American sitcoms with laugh tracks.

Chapters 2–6 lay the theoretical and methodological foundation for Messerli’s investigation. Chapter 2 discusses aspects of the two levels of telecinematic discourse, that is, the communication between the collective sender of a TV comedy and its recipients (Communication Level 1 = CL1) and the scripted communication between the characters (CL2) (p. 17; 45), including the fact that TV viewers may be both naïve recipients of CL2 dialog and conscious consumers of humour from a CL1 perspective (p. 43; 388; 390). Chapter 3 introduces the main humour theories, from which the author chooses the Incongruity Theory as the basis for his analysis. He also discusses a *play frame* (p. 80ff.; 389) as necessary for the generation of humour. To the reviewer, the question remains open whether a play frame is sufficiently specific to favour a humour interpretation over other types of entertainment. In this context, Messerli also briefly discusses a neo-Gricean humour maxim to guide the recipients’ interpretation process (p. 70ff.) but

discards the idea. Here, a discussion sensitive to the discourse levels CL1 and CL2 might yield a conceptualization that does full justice to the layered nature of the communication described in this book. Chapter 4 deals specifically with humour in telecinematic discourse, the play frame constructed there, various points-of-attack for incongruities, and laughter as a humour cue. Chapter 5 reviews the relevant literature on repetition in humour and elsewhere, while Chapter 6 describes the corpus (16 episodes from eight American sitcoms between 2010 and 2016) and the method applied. Here, a humorous turn (HT) is defined as a discourse segment that starts 'the moment the respective character takes the floor' (p. 157) and finishes with a laugh signal, mainly from the extradiegetic laugh track (p. 111). While this characterization does not seriously affect the qualitative analysis in Chapters 7–11, the definition of a discourse unit which mixes the diegetic and extradiegetic levels would merit more reflection. Table 6.3 (p. 159) presents the types of intra-turn and inter-turn repetition analysed in the subsequent chapters, ranging from exact lexical repetition to structural parallelism, phonetic, prosodic, kinesic and telecinematic repetition (e.g. repeated actions and props or audio signals). All cases were double coded by two researchers, based on a codebook which is available in Appendix B. An important methodological decision is to forego computer-assisted recognition of structural repetition and to use reception-based subjective recognition of relevant repeats instead (p. 158).

Chapters 7–11 present the results of the analysis, starting microscopically with simple lexical repeats (Chapter 7) and finishing macroscopically with complex multilevel formal and semantic repetition within a whole sitcom episode (Chapter 11). The repetition of the format structures of whole episodes in subsequent episodes is not included in the analysis. While the author's focus is qualitative, he also provides quantitative data. The analysis produces a number of valuable results for example, that repetitiveness is 'usually encoded on multiple levels' (p. 255), that 'intra-turn and inter-turn repeats only correlated when they were of the same type', for example, lexical repeats (p. 256), that repetition in sitcoms is multifunctional, serving the construction of humorous incongruities, cohesion, identity construction of characters and actors as well as meta-communication (p. 303) and coherence (p. 327f.).

This book is a valid contribution to both text linguistics/discourse analysis and humour studies. It is very well structured in content and presentation and easily readable due to a transparent style and helpful chapter intros and summaries. The theoretical chapters 2–6 give enough introductory background to be useful for non-specialist linguists while providing enough depth and development of theory for humour specialists and discourse analysts. The analytical chapters contain a thorough, systematic treatment of various types of repetition. Despite the fact that chapters 7–9 predominantly look at formal repetition, the perspective taken by Messerli goes well beyond the language system and takes a discourse-analytical stance in reconstructing reception processes rather than linguistic structures only. Thus, in addition to producing new findings about humorous repetition and a sub-genre of TV comedies, the reader learns more about reception processes in general. In addition to the solid analysis given in the book, future research might focus on the repetition of text patterns of whole episodes, with an option to differentiate comedy series and serials, and on repetition connected with other humour theories, such as patterns of humorous aggression.