Translating “English Humour” into modern English: An 18th-century perspective

HOP 2017 - TRANSLATING AND ADAPTING HUMOURS OF THE PAST: FROM PRACTICE TO THEORY

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AIMS

• How can we improve our understanding of humour(s) of the past, including humour terms/concepts from the past?

• How can this type of understanding be applied to the study of humour more broadly:
  • across linguistic and cultural boundaries?
  • across disciplinary boundaries (inside/outside field of humour studies)?

• How do we negotiate between broad/generic and culture-bound/historicised versions of terms/concepts like “humour”?
  ➢ [New Historicist approaches (e.g. Greenblatt 1980, 1988; Pfister 2002; Halsall 2002)]
  ➢ [Reception theories (e.g. Iser 1989)]
  ➢ Translation/“translation”, foreignizing vs. domesticating (cf. Venuti 1995)
THE (BROADER) PROBLEM

- Humo[u]r studies as a maturing/mature field:
  - Established and growing body of academic literature, research communities
  - Recent publications as flagships for the field, e.g. *Primer of Humor Research* (2008), *Sage Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (2014); book series (Mouton, Benjamins…), thematic and/or chronological collections on comedy/humour topics
- But (beyond “defining humour”) exchange among scholars can be problematic:
  - (Increasingly recognised?) lack of standardised terminology between fields
  - Difficulty negotiating between languages, and between scholarly traditions
  - General versus specific usage: does our broad use of “humo[u]r” erase potentially valuable cultural and historical specificities?

➢ Need to find a way to bring the past to bear on the present!
“In fact, there are so many terms, synonyms, partial synonyms, and overlapping definitions of humor and humor-related subjects [...] that a common understanding has been reached in the field of using the word humor as an umbrella term to cover all the synonyms. The word itself comes from the medieval theory of humors [...] but that is irrelevant in the technical sense just discussed.”

Attardo, introduction to Sage Encyclopedia of Humor Studies (2014)

“What in my view the encyclopedia lacks is a glossary of major terms giving pithy definitions, but since neither Raskin nor Attardo have so far attempted this, maybe it has not been feasible.”

WHY 18TH-CENTURY HUMOUR?

• Gradual drift in usage of “Humour” in English, from Elizabethan times:
  • Humoral imbalance > Character trait/Mood > Voluntary eccentricity > Stimulus for laughter
• Gradual development of association with laughter/ridicule and wit
• Influence of (a “domesticated” vision of?) select 18th-century thinkers over more recent theories of humour, e.g.:
  • Shaftesbury, Sensus Communis: read as response to Hobbes’s “superiority” theory, and thus (in a domesticating reading) as precursor of modern “incongruity” and “relief” theories
  • Hutcheson, Reflections upon Laughter: “the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas” read as precursor of modern “incongruity” theories
➢ But need to remember (cf. Billig 2005) that it’s anachronistic to talk about “humour theory” in the modern sense, and that aggressive/cruel laughter (cf. Dickie 2011) is alive and well.
➢ In what sense are we using the term “humour” here?
SO WHAT IS “ENGLISH HUMOUR”?

• Evolution (and domestication?) of “humour” in English has tended to erase conceptual and historical specificities…

• “English humour” easier to categorise in French:

  • Voltaire, 1761 « ces saillies qui échappent à un homme sans qu’il s’en doute » : older usage, but highlights debate over perceived « Englishness » of the term/concept (cf. Hölzle 2014, Minois 2000, Gifford 1980)

  • Mme de Staël, 1800 « cette gaîté qui est une disposition du sang presque autant que de l’esprit ; elle tient à la nature du climat et aux moeurs nationales ; elle seroit tout-à-fait inimitable là où les mêmes causes ne développeroient pas. Quelques écrits de Fielding et de Swift, Peregrin Pickle, Roderick Random, mais sur-tout les ouvrages de Sterne, donnent l’idée complète du genre appelé humour.»
SO WHAT IS “ENGLISH HUMOUR”?

• More recent tradition of *humour anglais* in French corresponding to “Shandean” definition, combining elements of reflexivity, generosity and eccentricity:
  - *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*; 1932-35: « Mot emprunté de l'anglais. Forme d'ironie à la fois plaisante et sérieuse, sentimentale et satirique, qui paraît appartenir particulièrement à l'esprit anglais. »
  - Escarpit (1960): « humour » and « self-consciousness »

Aims

• A readable account of 18th century forms and genres of humour, mainly in France and Britain, aimed at native and non-native speakers of English

• Explore history of term/concept in English
  • “Domesticating” vs. “foreignising” approaches
  • Emphasis on how the period has influenced modern usage and concepts

• Explore/interrogate categories discussed: contrasting examples, groups of texts

• Reconcile historical, literary/cultural approach with an interdisciplinary humour studies framework

PROPOSED VOLUME ON HUMOUR IN 18TH CENTURY LITERATURE AND CULTURE (WITH R. PHIDDIAN)
PROPOSED VOLUME ON HUMOUR IN 18TH CENTURY LITERATURE AND CULTURE (WITH R. PHIDDIAN)

PART 1: 18TH-CENTURY HUMOUR: HISTORY, THEORY AND DEVELOPMENT
1. Cultural and philosophical context
2. From “humours” to “humour”
3. Humour and Englishness
4. Humour and the Enlightenment

PART 2: SATIRE TO SENTIMENT? CASE STUDIES IN 18TH CENTURY HUMOUR.
5. Broadsides, pamphlets and the press
6. Satire and the Scriblerians
7. Philosophical tales: Candide and Rasselas
8. The rise of the novel
9. The rise of the anti-novel
10. Drama, performance, ballad opera
11. Graphic humour
12. Humour and taste, influences on the Romantic/realist traditions
TOWARDS A TERMINOLOGY OF HUMOUR?

New project: set up a multilingual, multi/interdisciplinary and transhistorical terminology resource

Need to determine:

• Aims and approach (primary/secondary corpus; analyse for relationships, particularities, inconsistencies)?
• Scope (disciplines, languages, periods: “Humour studies of the past”…)?
• Methodology (corpus building > terminology extraction > termbase building)?
• Interface and modes of interaction for authors/contributors and end users?
• Who might be interested!
IS A MULTILINGUAL TERMBASE THE SOLUTION?

Concept
  > concept info
Index (language)
  > index info
Term
  > term info (definition/s)
  > term info (usage)
  > term info (discipline/s)
  > term info (period)
  > (etc)
HOW MUCH HUMOUR IS THERE IN TRISTRAM SHANDY?

- HUMOUR WORD CHART CF. SCHMIDT-HIDDING (1963)
- BASIC FREQUENCY/CONCORDANCE ANALYSIS OF E-TEXT
- DIGITAL TEXTS AS A SPUR TO NEW ANALYSES OF HISTORICAL HUMOUR WORDS (CF. LAVIE 2014)
- WHERE TO DRAW THE BORDER BETWEEN “PRIMARY” AND “SECONDARY” SOURCES?

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>frequency</th>
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<td>banter</td>
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<tr>
<td>bon mot</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chaff</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>farc</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fun</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
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<td>gay</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>irony</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jest</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joke</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mock (trial)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nonsens</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>pleasant*</td>
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<td>pun</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>wit*</td>
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Humour and Dispositions in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: A Range of Meanings…

- of his whole house might take their turn from the 
  - bones, marrow, brains, glands, genitals, humours, and articulations;--is a Being of as much
  - concerns you./It is in pure compliance with this humour of theirs, and from a/backwardness in my nature
- less scruple in/bantering the extravagance of his humour,--instead of giving the true/cause,--he chose
- spirits./At different times he would give fifty humorous and apposite reasons for/riding a meek-spirited
  - cold phlegm and exact regularity of sense and humours, you would/have looked for, in one so extracted
  - to be enlivened throughout with some drollery or/humour of expression, it gave wings to Yorick's indiscretion
  - in life, of scattering his wit and his/humour,--his gibes and his jests about him.--They were
  - from an honesty of mind, and a mere jocundity of humour, they/would all of them be cross'd out in course
    - into the country, in but a pettish kind of a humour. The first twenty/or five-and-twenty miles he
  - a little by vexation,/he would give so many humorous and provoking descriptions,--and place/his
    - from the mass of corrupted matter and ulcerated humours in/our constitution, which he hoped was not
  - things, has got so strongly into our habit and/humour,--and so wholly intent are we upon satisfying
  - knocking/the ashes out of his tobacco-pipe./His humour was of that particular species, which does honour
  - Truth is my/sister./This contrariety of humours betwixt my father and my uncle, was the/source
  - And in this, Sir, I am/of so nice and singular a humour, that if I thought you was able to form/the
    - should persist to the very last in this obstinate/humour of hers, in trusting the life of my child, who
  - and in the little ebullitions of this subacid/humour towards others, but particularly towards my
  - beg thy/pardon;--forgive, I pray thee, this rash humour which my mother gave/me.--My dear, dear brother
    //Trim's reason put his audience into good humour,--all but Dr. Slop, who/turning his head about
  - Nature been in one of/her nimble moods, and in humour for such a contest--and she and Dr. Slop/both
    --They serve, continued my father,/to stir the humours--but carry off none of their acrimony:--for
  - endeavour to proportion the vent given to these humours, not only to the/degree of them stirring within
  - wherefore./Great Apollo! if thou art in a giving humour--give me--I ask no more,/but one stroke of native
    --I ask no more,/but one stroke of native humour, with a single spark of thy own fire/along with
  - be wished for! and/the petulance of my father's humour, in putting a stop to it as he did,/was a robbery
<table>
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<th>Domain</th>
<th>Medical science</th>
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<tr>
<td>en</td>
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<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>the clear, watery fluid which fills the anterior and posterior chambers of the eye</td>
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<td>aqueous humour</td>
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<td>Reliability</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>fr</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>liquide transparent contenu dans les chambers de l'oeil, de part et d'autre de l'iris</td>
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humour

Domaine  
publicité

Auteur  
Dubuc, Robert, 1991

Définition  
Biases comique introduit dans une annonce.

Terme  
humour  n. m.
A MODEST (GRANT APPLICATION) PROPOSAL:

One suggestion: apply for EU COST Action ([www.cost.eu](http://www.cost.eu)) funding for research networking

- 4 year networking funding, as prelude to research funding proper
- Minimum participation of 7 COST network states, other international partners possible

➢ A good opportunity to develop a multilingual, interdisciplinary and transhistorcial framework for a future resource?

- Next call deadline: 7 September 2017 (!)
- Interested researchers please contact will.noonan@u-bourgogne.fr