

Cunnilingus Take a Joke? Or How Introspective Are We about Linguistics?

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Abstract: This commentary piece associates the seriousness of scientific enquiry with the ability and possible inability of linguistic researchers to be introspective of their theoretical assumptions. I advance an argument concerning epistemology and research awareness and suggest being aware of one's assumptions of what language is and how it operates can be helpful to creating a more introspective, and possibly funnier, linguistics. The polemic considers a spatialization of humor as part of understanding elements of the linguistics of humor and our ability as researchers to laugh at the role and importance of our work. My hope is that such (less serious) linguistic research will lead to a more developed understanding of the role of mindfulness in appreciating scientific endeavours.

Keywords

Epistemology, language ontology, metaphors, seriousness, spatialization of humor

Dropping a joke

In honor of lightening what can sometimes be a restrictive game of academic writing, I have attempted on several occasions to inject humor into my published work. The funny I remember most fondly to have made it through editorial into a serious academic environment dealt with the role of linguists and anthropologists in language documentation work. I alluded to my observations that (Australian) anthropologists and linguists are not the best-dressed cohort of academic researchers:

By the end of [the] article...I started getting the feeling that perhaps [the writer] poses linguists as the zombies rather than the languages they are meant to be saving. Although this may indeed be true, considering that neither (living) anthropologists nor (dead and/or living) linguists generally have great dress sense, it is definitely not the case that 'linguists as linguists' and 'only the linguists' are to blame, if indeed there is any blame to be given at all. (Nash 2013: 112)

Perhaps linguists are to blame for more than bad dress sense? Maybe they are more guilty of the sin of not being introspective about their own research biases and allegiances than the wearing of dodgy duds? Through humor, which I hope was not taken as being overly flippant, I hinted at the possibility of a more significant epistemological argument associated with humor:

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are we as (linguistic) scholars able to take a joke, laugh at ourselves, and not take our theoretical positions so seriously? If we are not, what do these inflexible theoretical positions mean for the non-dogmatic future of our theories, philosophies, and ultimately fields of research? If we are, why is there such a lack of humor, large amounts of over-seriousness, and a distinct lack of self-awareness of our implicit and explicit theoretical assumptions and metaphors we live by in published linguistic research?

Some academics come equipped with gags and quick quips. I recall the name of a paper my former PhD supervisor wrote: 'Exploring the missionary position' (Mühlhäusler 1999). The work addressed both the role of language in a historical summation of missionary language documentation at the same time as being a humorous slight at a well-practiced sexual position. What this piece addresses are certain assumptions about scientific endeavours associated with missionary linguistic enterprise and minority languages at the same time as couching this directive in humor. 'Lightening things up' can certainly 'lighten the load' of writing, researching, and theorizing.

I believe being more aware of our own intellectual assumptions, more aware of our ontological recourse bases in our own disciplines, and more conscious of the role of the theories, methods, and metaphors we use and adhere to will make us as linguists and researchers more epistemologically mindful. By taking such steps the theoretical ground upon which we stand should become firmer, steadier, and we might even become funnier. As I am arguing, it is in humor and even jest that we often can get to the heart of where our theoretical, dogmatic, and even semi-religion-like assumptions about the correctness of our work lie. Theories are just that: theories. They have no truth value nor are they representations of reality. They are tools which help us do work and often do work. To the extent theories do and can do work, we should keep them. If such theories and suppositions do not work, they should be discarded or refined so they do continue to do the work we intend them to do.

When we look back and possibly balk at our previous work and possible youthful sinning, we should definitely smile and even laugh. If we do not progress and change with our own work and refine our positions and question the ontology and epistemological foundations of our work, how can we measure our own scholarly and intellectual evolution? Directly related to humor research, what fun are we? And if we are not funny, can we be good linguists? And if we are not funny linguists, *cunnilingus take a joke*?

Theories, place, and the situatedness of humor

There are a several takes on linguistic theories focusing on the semantic structuring of humor (e.g. Attardo 1994) which order linguistic levels in terms of the work these levels can do to

understand the linguistic composition of humor. Goddard's (2009) 'not taking yourself too seriously' semantically-directed take on insider perspectives and humor and Plester and Sayers's (2007) positive view on language socialisation in the workplace and 'taking the piss' build on 'an anatomy of humor' (Berger 1993) within humor research. While such research focuses on how humor is operationalized in and through language, my interpretation of humor and language prioritizes more the researcher and their own awareness and introspection in interpreting their own assumptions in science. In short, I am more interested in the researcher and how they perceive their research object rather than the research object the researcher is researching.

In a review of sociopolitico-linguistic theories of space and humor, Ridanpää (2014) does well to relate research and theory in humor to social marginalization, popular geopolitics, cultural geography, and gender studies. Where Ridanpää claims that although geographical studies on humor have been a highly marginal field of study, although increasing in size recently, we see that a more developed social critique of laughter (e.g. Billig 2005) and recognition of the psychological benefits of humor (Capps 2006) has led to a developed spatially institutioning of humor within social science research and the reality of humor in the world.

Moving beyond these more academic concerns into the realm of philosophy, if we assess the nature of humor within modern philosophical takes, we witness many examples of the crossover between worldviews, seriousness, humor, philosophy, and science. Amir's (2014) consideration in *Humor and the Good Life: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard* presents Shaftesbury's conception of humor as an epistemological instrument capable of promoting truth and rationality. Amir poses Kierkegaard's earlier view that Christianity was a humorous worldview, a perspective he later changed concluding Christianity was inaccessible to humor. In a similar sense, my contention is that through an embracing of academic humor and an increased amount of epistemological awareness, we may be able to arrive at what Amir (2014) labels a type of humor which can help us attain some of the highest of human ideals:

For Kierkegaard, humor was the highest stage of human existence before Christian existence—the good life. Finally, Amir argues that because Shaftesbury, Hamann, and Kierkegaard held religious presuppositions, specifically Christian, their views of humor are inaccessible to contemporary readers. For this reason, she advocates for a secular disciplined use of humor that she argues can transmute suffering into a serenity and joy that rivals the highest philosophical and religious ideals. (Haglund 2014: 211 in a review of Amir 2014)

It is within this more catholic (NB lower case 'c') appreciation of humor, philosophy, science, and seeking I intend to spend the remainder of my available space.

Is more more?

I believe one of the prime causes for lack of humor and over-seriousness in academic work is the assumption that more publications and more supporters mean more validity for the concerned theory. Sometimes this theoretical validity and reliability is likened to a researcher's ability to procure research funding or a tenured job. The analogy of large amounts of research funding and published work meaning the stronger or more reliable the theory can be likened to judging the strength and longevity of a marriage based on the wedding presents. Not particularly noted for his humorous nature, nor noted for his not being humorous, modern architect Mies van der Rohe's maxim 'less is more' probably captures the import of my polemic: less seriousness, fewer (but better) outputs, and more scientific self awareness is more. This greater sense of stringency operating within the realm of less seriousness may actually lead us to better linguistic research, which hopefully will be more readable, more digestible, and potentially funnier.

A key thesis in spatialized research into humor is that if we probe humor more closely, and what I am arguing is that if we do it with awareness of our linguistic interests and positions, we reveal many socially and scientifically driven aspects that exist within humor. According to Flint (2001), self-assurance of one's socioeconomic position, and to this I would addend academic position and advantage, in the core of wealth, power, and education, provides an ability and privilege to laugh (read: the arrogant laughter of the winners), while the ability to laugh at oneself fosters interaction between core and periphery (cf. Goddard's 'not taking yourself too seriously' and Lester and Sayers's 2007 'taking the piss'). In much spatialized humor research, it is strongly emphasized that the world order and the state of things in many ways appear to be 'funny'. As a privileged academic, I assert it is this 'funniness' which could inform a more humorous linguistics and possibly a less alienating global linguistic citizenry. As Mitas et al. (2012) would have us believe in the evaluation of tourists' positive emotions in field of tourism research, 'jokes build community'.

Can linguists agree to disagree?

I intend to end this piece on a humorous note. In a 2008 graduate seminar on grammar and linguistic theory, my former supervisor used what was by then a fairly dated piece of work on linguistic theory to demonstrate several possible ways of how *not* to do linguistic theory. In his article titled '83 things linguists can agree about', Hudson (1981) puts forward 83 claims which he believes all linguists should be able to agree on. The reason I find this humorous relates to the preposterousness of the claim. First, to get all linguists to agree on one claim is ambitious,

overly hopeful, verging on dogmatic, and even humorous enough, let alone 83 such claims. Second, whether it really matters if linguists agree on any matter or not does not appear to be of great significance to founding any type of reasonable epistemology of what linguistics may be or should be about, which is what I assume Hudson's intention was. So what if linguists, and any other researcher for that matter, do agree? I doubt agreeing on whatever object they are observing and writing about will do much to improve the state of modern linguistics nor will linguist-theory and linguist-linguist agreement necessarily lead to better linguistics in general. For the record, in the two-hour seminar, the class made it to claim §10 without agreeing with a single point Hudson had made. I doubt the class would have agreed on the other 73. I cannot remember whether I went home laughing or not.

I am not sure whether agreeing with each other, creating a critical mass of scholars engaged in scholastic enterprise in order to push our chosen theories forward, and basing our judgments of the merit of our ideas and writing on the sheer and absolute number of publications which appear and followers we have will get us very scientifically, personally, and humoristically far. Our assumptions about language(s) and linguistics (and humor) are ideologically driven and focused, and we are kidding ourselves, i.e. we are not able to laugh at ourselves, if we believe we can abstract ourselves from these assumptions and metaphors. I pose if we are not able to introspect, 'take the piss' out of subjects, linguistic colleagues, and most importantly ourselves, as Lester and Sayers (2007) would have us do, we are not properly honouring our role as intellectuals, quipsters, and farceurs.

In closing, it is necessary to reflect and expand on the first part of my title – 'cunnilingus take a joke?', a phonetic allusion to 'can linguists take a joke?'. While most linguists may disagree with most of Hudson's claims and no doubt with some of mine, I would hazard many linguists reading this piece would have experienced the pun, "this is Dave, he's a cunning linguist", a hint to the noun *cunnilingus*: the stimulation of the female genitals using the tongue or lips. This insinuation is probably the most well-worn and bleached-of-meaning of all linguistic jokes. However, if such puns and jests make us not only laugh but question our own self-seriousness and other-seriousness as linguistic scholars, this humor could lead us to a greater appreciation of our own linguistic and philosophical positions. I believe it is in developing more evolved understandings of the role of mindfulness in appreciating scientific endeavours of these perspectives that a greater awareness of linguists' assumptions about what language is or may be can be arrived at. Behind the seriousness of several of my claims and their consequences for a linguistics which is more realised and more self-stringent, if nothing else, I hope I have made you laugh or at least offer a rise smile.

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