

This book presents a very solid semantic theory of humor which takes the topic out of the realm of philosophy to clearly disclose its linguistic make-up. R.'s book should be added to the list of classics in the study of humor that he himself cites.

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Marlene Dolitsky, *Under the tumtum tree: from nonsense to sense, a study in nonautomatic comprehension*. (Pragmatics & Beyond V: 1.) Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984. 119 pp. \$19.00.

The problem of language comprehension has been tackled in the last years especially by psycholinguists who developed quite sophisticated tests and theories to get at least some insight into this area of linguistic research (see e.g. Marslen-Wilson (1984), Hawkins and Schriefers (1984:24–46)). Marlene Dolitsky's book contributes to this branch of our discipline, starting from the following considerations: "comprehension (...) takes place so automatically under usual conditions that no conscious thought is lent to the problem of how speech is imbued with meaning". With "nonsense (...) the name commonly used when word-to-world relations are obscure (...)" (p. 1) there is no such automatism; the language comprehender's efforts to "invest nonsense with meaning" (p. 2) should shed some light on the mechanisms of word-to-world relations and thus on the strategies of comprehension, or, to be more specific, on the strategies pursued in 'nonautomatic comprehension'.

With these basic ideas given in the introduction of her book, Dolitsky proceeds with a closer look on what is called 'nonsense'. She does not only find rule-governed structure in nonsense, but also classifies three types of it ((1) free morphemes with no conventionally coded meaning; (2) semantic contradiction, and (3) metalinguistic contradiction). Thus, at least the 'emitter' of nonsense must know that there is some 'sense' in the nonsense produced; if this is not so, the emitter's production is not nonsensical, but absurd. This leaves us with nonsense being defined as a problem of hermeneutics, as a link between absurdity and meaning, the two extremes of what Dolitsky understands as a continuum of speech perception.

The core of Dolitsky's book (chapters 2-5) presents the set-up and the results of rather simple and straightforward experiments with adults and/or children being confronted with pieces of 'literary nonsense' and their hermeneutic strategies to find sense and meaning in these texts.

Chapter 2 presents the first study: 74 adults, all living in France, were confronted with the French translation of Lewis Carroll's poem 'Jabberwocky' (Carroll (1975: 154ff., Appendices 1 and 2 in Dolitsky's book)). The 'nonsense' poem chosen for the experiment should serve as a good example of a text that 'separates produced meaning from comprehended meaning' (p. 15) -- this is the gist of a rather longish justification for the poem selected. The subjects were asked to write up their interpretation of the story, assigning meaning to the text as a whole as well as to the single 'nonsense' words therein. The analyses of these interpretations reveal the following 5 different meaning-finding strategies:

- Match a free morpheme to a conventionally coded homonym and assign the result to the 'unknown slot'.
- Translate prelinguistic associations and feelings into linguistic thought.
- Translate the unknown into a simile or a metaphor.
- Skirt the problem by referring only to the macro-events of the narrative; otherwise remain vague.
- Establish the known, and infer from the globally known to the unknown.

The subjects tried out different strategies successively, though generally one strategy dominated a participant's approach. Dolitsky summarizes her interesting findings as follows: "Those who can see the gestalt of the nonsensical speech event will have a good chance of perceiving meaning therein. Those who focus on the parts and who are unable to refocus on the whole will find the overall text meaningless" (p. 25).

The second experiment, reported in chapter 3, centers on the question of "how meaning is attached to an unknown morpheme and thus how words can become meaningful" (p. 27). Again, Carroll's poem in its French translation was handed out to students at a French university; the students had to write

the story of the poem; a week later they got a list of the neologisms presented in the poem and were asked to write down definitions of these neologisms. Dolitsky reports the following results: “Two main strategies were brought into play when defining the neologisms as they appeared on the word lists. Neologisms were syntagmatically related to coded words in the text or they were associated to phonetically similar words that are conventionally coded in the language” (p. 28). The single strategies pursued can be summarized in the following way:

- Assign a script or a frame to the text and then define the meaning of free morphemes.
- Apply the following five phonetic strategies to define word meaning:
 - (a) Make a complete transfer to a homonym.
 - (b) Construct a synecdoche: if a part of the neologism is conventionally coded, transfer its meaning to the whole word.
 - (c) Find a homonymic approximation and assign the meaning of the homonym to the neologism.
 - (d) Understand the neologism as a compound and assign the meaning of its parts to the compound.
 - (e) Pronounce a neologism and associate its meaning on the basis of onomatopoeia.
- Use any kind of free semantic association in assigning meaning to a neologism.

These results are then discussed in detail; however, it is often not quite clear what distinguishes the presentation of the results of this study from their discussion. Comparing the two studies presented so far at the end of chapter 3, Dolitsky comes to the (hardly surprising) conclusion that “meaning accrues to a word both as a phonetic entity as well as a contextual one when it is taken on its own. In other words, meaning may be different depending on whether the task is, ‘tell the story’, or ‘define the word’” (p. 37). One may add here that what Dolitsky obviously – and interestingly enough – has shown in her two experiments is that the two different tasks ask for different strategies to be pursued by the subjects tested.

The third study, presented in chapter 4, is on the interpretation of nonsense by children. Two groups of 9-year-old French children were confronted with the French translation of Carroll’s poem at school, discussed it with their teacher and Dolitsky, and were finally asked to write down the meaning of those neologisms that “said the most to them” (p. 41). Moreover, one group had the opportunity to illustrate the poem in an art period that followed the experiment. The results of this study can be summarized in the following way: first of all, the children’s reaction to the text was one of rejection; their reluctance to accept it prevailed throughout the study – their teacher actually had to coerce them into reading and then discussing the poem. Finally, one

class focused their discussion on the 'Jabberwocky', while the other class focused on the dynamics of the story as a whole. In order to find any meaning in the poem, the children tried to describe the story using similes and metaphors and superimposing other stories on the poem; this even led to the reassigning of meaning to coded French words. To assign meaning to single words, the children pursued the same strategies as the adults did in Dolitsky's second experiment; here the author could find a definite preference in the children to define nominal neologisms. Moreover, the children's metalinguistic awareness became apparent in their "automatic recognition of word classes" (p. 54), reflected in the several arguments put forward in the discussion. However, when asked to produce neologisms of their own, the children failed to cope with this task. Dolitsky then interprets the pictures the children drew on 'Jabberwocky'. This section is not only rather anecdotal and highly speculative, but also difficult to follow, because the numbers given to the pictures presented before the interpretation obviously do not agree with the references given in their discussion. The chapter ends with a discussion of the results of this study in general; here, too, we find a lot of speculation. Moreover, this final section of chapter 4 reveals the important methodological shortcomings of the study presented: every psycholinguist must criticize the poorly defined set-up of the 'experiment', especially the unreflected role of the teacher. Nevertheless, Dolitsky finishes her chapter with the following noteworthy remark: "It would seem that language-to-thought relations are more fixed and rigid for children than for adults and that the ability to assign meaning consciously and not automatically is a function of maturity and language development" (p. 72).

Dolitsky's fourth study, presented in chapter 5, confronted adults and 13 of those children who participated in the previous experiment (and their teacher) with the song that Lady Galadriel sang in the "ancient tongue of the Elves beyond the Sea" (Tolkien (1968: 397–398)). Dolitsky chooses the last word of this song, 'Namarie', as its title (though it is untitled in Tolkien's classic novel), and leaves it to the interested reader to find this poetic song in 'The Lord of the Rings' – maybe out of disappointment that the trustees of Tolkien's estate refused her the permission to reprint the song (in order to make it easy for readers using other editions of the novel than I do: the song is to be found in Part One, Book II, Chapter VIII). The participants in this study were asked to answer the question 'what is the meaning of this poem?'. The results can be summarized in the following way: all participants wanted to define the language in which the song is written. Some adults had severe difficulties with the text, others reacted in the same way as the children did: they realized that "for the interpretation of such a text anything goes; and thus anything went" (p. 75). The participants either completely relied on a few phonetic associations in assigning meaning to the text or pursued the decoding strategy: go from the

general to the specific, start with the form of the text, then assign function to form, then assign meaning to the text. Here, 'function' is the key-word of the strategy, because – as Dolitsky found – “it is only when a function is assigned to form that a text can be judged meaningful” (p. 77). This was realized by the children, too; they also realized that “function was dependent on the intonation lent to the poem” (p. 78). If the subjects relied primarily on phonetic associations, they also pursued the strategy of finding a “word-for-word homonymic-type translation” (p. 77) that often enough resulted in another type of nonsense-text. All participants stated a kind of emotional reaction the text aroused in them.

After this experiment Dolitsky confronted the children only with two other types of nonsense-texts (see Appendices 4 + 5); here the children showed that they “had understood the mechanisms of the ‘game’” (p. 84). The ‘game’-character of these last two tests shifted the children’s interest from the words of the text to the fantasies aroused by it – especially by its form. Thus it is form, together with phonetic associations and what Dolitsky calls “projections” from an individual’s “own world and view of reality and irreality” (p. 91) that trigger meaning-finding strategies and so contribute to the comprehension of different types of ‘nonsense’ texts – even if these texts are written in a foreign language.

After a chapter on ‘nonsense in our daily lives’, where Dolitsky presents an annotated list of ‘nonsense’ examples that include neologisms in science fiction and in advertisements, malapropisms, *contradictiones in adiecto*, and oxymora, chapter 7 presents the author’s conclusions on ‘nonsense’. Here, she summarizes the strategies her subjects pursued in approaching nonsense, having redefined once more the concept of literary – nonsense. The importance of the concept of ‘projection’, introduced in chapter 5, is emphasized, being “the strategy that permits one to interpret another’s words by means of what one has already stored in the domain of word–word and word–world relations” which is “always at work during everyday discourse exchange” (p. 105). It is this strategy that is “déployed automatically” and that is only noticed if “meaning assignment becomes (...) elusive”. Thus “comprehension is based, at least partially, on projection” (p. 105). On the basis of this hypothesis, as confirmed by her experiments, Dolitsky concludes her book, summing up as follows: “Whatever triggers the projection may call forth an idiomatic association which may agree with the context the speaker has in mind. Thus an interlocutor may ‘understand’ a speaker’s discourse and yet not understand what the speaker has encoded. This type of (non)communication is what was brought out most clearly in the work on nonsense and unknown language” (p. 105).

Even though Dolitsky’s conclusion, as presented in her résumé, is not strictly

speaking, original,¹ and despite the obvious shortcomings of the study, this is a stimulating book that may increase our general awareness of what is going on in language comprehension – especially when readers of this book are confronted again with either a foreign language or with literary nonsense.

The interested reader, especially the psycholinguist, misses a more detailed presentation and more sound linguistic analyses of the data gathered; moreover, the kind and number of typographic errors is rather annoying (e.g.: Table of contents: read *The unknown language* for *The nonsense of an unknown language*; p. 1: read [ə speid] for [ʌ speid]; p. 9: read *only* for *ony*; p. 31: read *five* for *four*; p. 104: read *an* for *and*; pp. 73, 110: read *Tolkien's* for *Tolkiens'*; p. 118: read *Tolkien* for *Tolkiens*; there is no subsection 3.2.1, and there are two subsections numbered 4.3).

To sum up, Dolitsky's book "twas brillig" and invites the reader to rest "by the tumtum tree" and to stand there "awhile in thought" (cf. Carroll (1975: 154ff.)).

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¹ The overall problem was already discussed comprehensively at the beginning of the last century by Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1838.