Preface

Conan Doyle's *Silver Blaze* story, while a relatively minor component of the Holmes' canon, contains a memorable expression, namely "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time." The curious incident turns out to have been that said dog did not bark, while a race-horse was being stolen. Holmes deduces from this negative fact that the dog knew the perpetrator of the crime and proceeds to unravel the mystery.

Holmes does well to emphasize the importance of negative facts. Probably the biggest lesson of the Chomskian paradigm, cheerfully ignored by linguists of all persuasions, is that what sentences your grammar does *not* generate matters as much as those that it does. This applies particularly well to humor. To investigate what humorous texts do not succeed as such, and why, will both advance and complement our understanding of how humor works in a way that other studies, however good, cannot match.

It has been said that humor research suffers from an optimistic bias, so that researchers focus on the positive aspects of the phenomenon, ignoring, relatively speaking, its darker, negative aspects (Billig 2005). Billig's discussion is not without its flaws, but one point about which he is unquestionably correct is that the field of humor research had, until recently, systematically favored successful humor, humor that goes off as planned, that achieves, as I described it with a catchy definition, its perlocutionary goal. Very little attention had been paid to humor that somehow fails to achieve its perlocutionary goal, i.e., to elicit amusement or at the very least the detection of the intention on the speaker's part to do so.

In fact, in Attardo 2008, I had noted that failed humor was one of the areas of humor research that was badly under-researched and for no good reason, as the topic hid some interesting theoretical issues, as witnessed, for example, by Janet Holmes' (2000: 163) lucid and coherent throwing in of the towel on the matter. I myself, did little more than waving said towel in the air, but Nancy Bell has taken the towel, washed it, dried it, folded it, and put a little sprig of lavender on it. In all seriousness, we have now a treatment of failed humor that is definitive, comprehensive, and un-avoidable. Young scholars have now taken the habit of simply side-stepping research they don't like. To avoid this book on failed humor would be such an obvious mistake that it seems safe to predict that this will not happen.

Bell ties in the topic of humor failure with the more general category of miscommunication and shows convincingly and in painful detail that humor may fail at every level of communication (linguistic and not). This is a significant theoretical move, as it anchors the descriptive work and imbues it with explana-

tory power. Humor fails because communication fails and the latter fails because systems powerful enough to express what humans need to express cannot be fail-safe (i.e., they have to rely on input from the speakers/hearers).

Bell's book encompasses also the reactions to failed humor, or as she terms it its "management." The term is inspired because failed humor turns out to elicit a gamut of reactions ranging from the polite to the aggressive. Here Bell has recourse to face theory, the politeness approach that sees speakers "managing" their face (perceived social standing). Finally, Bell addresses how social variables affect the management of humor failures, with particular emphasis on social status and degree of intimacy.

Bell's work is thorough and detailed, and she must be congratulated for this, but where her dedication goes off the scale, in my opinion, is in one daring methodological innovation she introduced, i.e., the elicitation of responses to failed humor by exposing herself (and later her students—it builds character) to the willing humiliation of producing deliberately bad humor in order to record the reactions of the hearers. Much like the pioneers of vaccination research, who often inoculated themselves with their tentative concoctions, risking their health or worse their lives, Bell, in the spirit of science, risked her reputation as a funny person.

As with all good research, this study opens more questions than it closes. For example, now that we know that humor may fail at any level of the communicative edifice, it will be interesting to see how those who used laughter or smiling as the identifying feature of humor will deal with the fact that their methodology has a gaping hole at every level of the communicative gamut, since obviously some failed humor will not be accompanied by laughter or anything like explicit comments along the lines of "well, THAT attempt at humor failed!"

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