

“Expats’ Talk”: Humour and irony in American and British expatriates’ travel blogs

Gloria Cappelli
Dipartimento di Anglistica
Università di Pisa
Via Santa Maria 67 - 56126 Pisa
Email: cappelli@cli.unipi.it
<http://www.gloriacappelli.it/>

Travel blogs are becoming more and more common and so are the British and American expatriates, who, after a holiday “under the Tuscan sun”, decide to move to Italy for good and live the “Italian Dream”. This paper summarizes the results of a case study which shows how irony and humour are commonly used in expatriates’ online travel journals as preferred rhetorical strategies to carry out several functions, in line with the hypotheses discussed in Attardo (2000; 2001a, 2001b).

The article is divided in two main sections. In the first part, I identify and discuss the linguistic means through which irony and humour are codified at different levels of the language system as evidenced by a small corpus of travel blogs (*Rebecca’s Views*, 40,000 running words). In particular, I describe a) the role of the lexicon, with special attention to the use of “hard words”, overstatement, understatement, hyperbolic language and litotes (Bertuccelli Papi 2000; Colston 1997); b) the humorous effects of the use in the written text of syntactic structures which are typical of the oral medium such as ellipsis, dislocation, topicalization, etc. (McCarthy 1998; Crystal 2006); c) the role of certain formulas and expressions which act as irony markers and triggers at the discourse level, with particular attention devoted to metanarrative disruption (Richard 1997; Attardo 2001), e.g. *I am/am not kidding, no, seriously, Now, [followed by some story]*, etc.; d) the role of graphological features to mimic intonation and other prosodic aspects. This first part aims at unveiling the indissoluble interaction of semantic and pragmatic processes at play in irony and humour, as is predicted by the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo 1994, 2001) and by the Relevance-theoretic account of humorous phenomena (Carston 2002, Giora et al. 1998, Sperber and Wilson 1989).

The final part of the article discusses the reasons that make irony and humour popular in tourism discourse, and in particular in the genre at issue. The hypothesis supported in the paper is that irony and humour in expatriates’ travel blogs serve both social and rhetorical purposes, in that on the one hand, they build in-group solidarity among expatriates while excluding all the other “tourists” who cannot experience “true Italy”; on the other hand they allow expatriates to distance themselves from the locals and to retain their culture while expressing their attitudes and evaluations towards the host culture in a somewhat polite and “retractable” way (Attardo 2000; 2001b).

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