"Expats' Talk": Humour and irony in an expatriate's travel blog

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1. *Introduction*

Travel blogs are becoming very common and so are the 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 humour and irony are commonly used in their online travel journals as preferred rhetorical strategies to carry out several social and rhetorical functions (Attardo 2000; 2001a, Yus 2003).

The article is a case study and is divided into two main sections. First, I identify and discuss the linguistic means through which irony and humour are coded at different levels of the language system in a small corpus of blog entries. This 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, 2001a) and by the Relevance-theoretic account of humorous phenomena (Giora 2003, Wilson and Sperber 1992).

The final part of the article discusses the functions of irony and humour in expatriates' blogs and the reasons why these latter can be rightfully seen as a new genre contributing to tourism discourse.

2. *Rebecca's Views: The corpus*

"Rebecca's Views" is a collection of travel blog posts written between 2003 and 2006 by an American woman who has permanently moved from Chicago to a working farm in Umbria.

It is a collection of 19 texts, mostly narrations or discussions of some controversial topics.

A word of caution is necessary. The study focuses on a small corpus (approximately 40,000 running words) written by a single writer and therefore generalizations in terms of the linguistic strategies of verbal humour in expatriates' blogs at large are probably risky. However, although not investigated in depth, other expatriates' online journals seem to make a similar use of humour and irony. For this reason, I believe that, although the style in the corpus may be the result of Rebecca's personal talent and wit, the functions of irony and humour in this genre can be generalized.

A few words on travel blogs as a genre are in order. Travel blogs pertain to what Dann (1996) calls the *on-trip* stage of the tourist cycle: they are electronic journals written by travellers while they are still "on the road" and made freely available online. From a linguistic point of view, they are an expression of the tourist's voice: they are written by travellers who are eager to share their experiences with their peers. Bloggers act as living testimonials to the quality of a destination or, in the case of expatriates, of a life experience (Cappelli 2006).

Because they are a kind of personal writing, they have been neglected by the literature on the language of tourism. Travel blogs can however be seen as the contemporary heirs of a long tradition of travel literature (Vestito 2005, Crystal 2006) that gives sound to a subjective voice, often witty and rich in humour.

3. *Register humour and irony in the corpus*

Pointing out the elements responsible for the humorous nature of the texts included in the corpus is not an easy task, as is always the case with complex, larger linguistic units in which

humour is the result of a number of interacting elements on a number of different levels (Attardo 2001a, Alexander 1997).

Much research literature has focused on jokes (Norrick 2003, Chiaro1992); this analysis deals with context-bound humour. The most pervasive forms of humour in the corpus are irony and register humour, i.e. humour produced by the clash between the register used and the register that would be appropriate or expected in that situation. The border between them is indeed very thin: research shows that basic mechanisms are shared (Giora 1995, Attardo 2001a) by irony and those forms of humour that cannot rely on clear unique disjunctors and that therefore depend significantly on encyclopaedic knowledge and pragmatic processes.

In order for the receiver to be able to understand and process humour, he must be able to recognise the intentions of the speaker and to understand the humorous attempt (Wilson and Sperber 1992)[1]. Humorous communication can be considered just another way of implicitly expressing the speaker's attitudes towards some aspects of the world[2]. Speakers use humour to "lead hearers to entertain mental representations that are attributable to someone other than the speaker […] while simultaneously expressing towards such representations an attitude of self-distancing" (Curcó 1996:10).

Whereas humour has a semantic and a pragmatic facet, irony is said to be a purely pragmatic phenomenon without a semantic counterpart (Attardo 2001a, 2001b). However, oppositeness is central to both phenomena. Thus, whereas irony represents a form of indirect negation, from the semantic point of view, humour is seen as an antonymic opposition between two scripts

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[1] Ruskin (1985) calls this skill "humour competence".
[2] Curcó (1996) stresses the role of metarepresentational abilities in humour understanding. For the importance of metarepresentational abilities and attitudes in communication and cognition see Sperber (2000) Bertuccelli Papi (2000) and Cappelli (2007).

which are both at least partly compatible with the text[3]. Humour is based on lexical and local antonymy, and since scripts/frames and conceptual and lexical opposition are dynamically construed in context-sensitive modalities (Croft and Cruse 2004, Wilson and Carston 2007, Bertuccelli Papi and Lenci 2007), a remarkable amount of pragmatic work must be involved in humour too.

The interpretation of humorous discourse is here taken to be based on the same cognitive inferential processes and procedures used in the interpretation of any other type of discourse[4]. In order to resolve the incongruous interpretation[5], the hearer must be aware of the speaker's communicative intention; on the other hand, in order to attain the intended cognitive effects, the speaker will have to predict the interlocutor's capability to access certain (cultural) assumptions (Yus 2003). Shared assumptions are fundamentally responsible for the functions of humour and irony in discourse (Norrick 1986), and register humour in particular relies heavily on background cultural knowledge and on the ability to recognise connotations and intertextual references.

Ironic meanings are mostly derived via inferences and implicatures (Attardo 2001b). Irony relies on the recognition of

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[3] The term "script" is generally used as a neutral term which also includes related concepts such as "frame" and "schema". Similarly, Coulson (2001) and Ritchie (2006) speak of *frame-shifting*, a model that, despite the different theoretical background (Conceptual Blending Theory.) in which it is grounded, also relies on incongruity and opposition between salient interpretations, and so does Giora's (2003) *graded salience hypothesis.*

[4] A thorough discussion of the relevance-theoretic account of the interpretive processes at work in humorous interpretation can be found in Yus (2003) and in Giora (2003). Script/frame opposition, incongruity theories and the relevance-theoretic approach are compatible. The entertainment of contradictory propositional content, and the clash between expectations and presuppositions are mechanisms which are central in the latter as well.

[5] For a discussion of the incongruity-resolution approach see Attardo (1994).

the speaker's intentions and goals, and in particular on the awareness that he cannot possibly mean what the propositional content of the utterance literally says. Like humour, it deals with the speaker's (negative) attitudes and evaluations of a state of affairs and at least some of the hearers must be able to understand who the "victim" is. This is an important point, because irony is said to have two audiences (Clark and Carlson 1982): "one who is essentially the 'butt' of the irony and another audience who is 'in' to the ironical intent and appreciates the irony" (Attardo 2001a:117), or as Gibbs and Izett (2005) call them, "victims" and "confederates".

Identifying the factors responsible for the ironic reading of an utterance can be difficult, although ironic contexts are generally linguistically marked (Attardo 2001a). The effect usually relies on rhetorical devices, e.g. overstatement, and of course on contextual inappropriateness.

4. *The source of humour in "Rebecca's Views"*

"Rebecca's views" is certainly an excellent example of hyperdetermined humour (Attardo 2001a), i.e. the presence of more than one active source of humour. The corpus features both textual and punctual hyperdetermination, as different elements contribute to the final effect at different levels. The lexicon has a particularly relevant role but many other lexicogrammatical elements are skilfully exploited by the author. Rebecca's main talent is that of "saying things funny" although some of the anecdotes that she tells are definitely hilarious per se. Sections 4.1-4.5 below present a schematic survey of the most common strategies found in the corpus[6].

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[6] Given the limited space allowed for the article, it is neither possible to provide a large number of examples, nor to reproduce long passages. This reduces the possibility for the reader to fully appreciate the source of humour.

4.1 *Graphological, phonological and morphological level*

The general tone of the blog is colloquial. Crystal (2006: 255) identifies in the "greater level of informality and typographical idiosyncrasy" one of the distinguishing features of the "new varieties" of Netspeak, e.g. blogs (see also Yus 2007), where characteristics of written and spoken English merge.

Reproduction of voice quality and speech speed. Rebecca provides lively sketches of characters and of their way of speaking:

1. The man […] repeated his question veerrryyy slllowwwlllyy, "N---o, h----o----w m----u-------c----h i----- s t---h---e c---l---o---c----k i----n t----h----e w----i---n-d-o--- w???" My friend matched his speed, "I----t's 1---5---0,--0---0---0 l------i----r--e, a-----s m-----a-r-k-e---d."
2. I have seen my own husband […] say in his English (which sounds like a mix between Ricky Riccardo and Tarzan), "You give me good prize for dis, no?"

In (1) the victim of the humour is a North American tourist who is trying to bargain for a clock that he has seen in a store. The price is clearly marked as the shop keeper has already explained in perfect English. The tourist repeats his question slowly as if the shop keeper could not understand English, and she provides the same answer as before, but matching the tourist's speech speed.

In (2) the victim here is the Italian tourist abroad who perpetrates the stereotype (the husband is bargaining for a toothbrush in an Osco Drug store). His accent is described by resorting to two famous characters associated to a particular way

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The author is aware of the limits of this choice, which is certainly not ideal for the discussion of this type of context-bound humour.

of speaking that most Americans will recognise. The reproduction of the husband's accent also evokes the typical Italian-American accent.

Reproduction of informal pronunciation. The phonological level is exploited in the reproduction of colloquialisms, often in metanarrative disruptions as in (3) or in jab lines as in (4):

3.   c'mon Holden, get a grip
4.   That'd make 'em green.

Exploitation of similarity of pronunciation that creates misunderstandings as in the funny dialogue between Rebecca and the Italian father-in-law, who cannot hear her properly because he is sitting on a noisy tractor:

5.   [Rebecca] "How's the olive harvest this year?"
      [Ugo] "No, thanks, I don't want a beer!"
      [Rebecca] "No, the OLIVE HARVEST THIS YEAR!"
      [Ugo] "Yeah, the sky sure is clear"

The graphological level is involved through the **use of capital letters** to signal that the speaker is shouting, as is common in Netspeak. Capital letters are also used as irony markers to bring attention to certain concepts and make them relevant as in (6):

6.   [Frances Meyes] uses her sojourns in Italy as a temporary respite from Real Life.

Creation of compounds. The main morphological process found is the creation of hyphenated compounds as in (7):

7.   Now, I'm not one of those new-agey-miracle-believing-Celestine-Prophesy-chatroom-folk.

4.3 Syntactic level

The level of syntax is exploited in a number of ways, and in many cases it is difficult to say whether a strategy should be considered to operate at the discursive or syntactic level, e.g. parenthetical clauses or repetition.

Repetition and syntactic parallelism. Repetition is recognised as a significant strategy in humorous texts, although its role in jokes has also been investigated (Attardo 2001a, Norrick 1993). In the corpus this technique is accompanied by slight variation: the same structure is repeated incrementally and usually concluded by a jab line as in (8)-(10) and (16) below:

8. in a group of eight there are inevitably two who want an antipasto and primo, two who want an antipasto and secondo served with the others' primi, one who wants a pizza served with the antipasti, one who wants a primo and contorno but the contorno as an antipasto, one who wants a secondo and contorno, but the contorno as a primo, and the poor guy at the end of the table who caught a bit of a chill on the back of his neck two evenings ago and hasn't digested since and can he just have a bit of riso in bianco with perhaps a little lemon?

9. which you then have to take to the hospital and wait in line to book an appointment, then come back for the appointment, then come back for the results of the appointment, then go back to your family doctor for follow-up, because Italy is many things, my friends, but user friendly ain't one of them

Use of syntactic structures typical of spoken English. (10) is a case of **ellipsis** (the blogger is describing a friend):

10. Nobel prize winner last year, adopted 12 Brazilian street children, recently sold an investment property for six million.

Other rhetorical devices would be better treated in the section dedicated to the discourse level. I will however mention the **juxtaposition of long complex sentences and simple clauses** here in the syntactical level section as well. The simple clause is generally a jab line which exploits the surprise effect by providing a totally unexpected conclusion to an articulated thought as in (11):

11. Likewise, I may have a skewed picture of things sometimes, I may not see the forest for the trees, I may be completely lost in a haze of mist, but it will still be what I see from my vantage point, honestly reported […] really lived.
My mom will read it, anyway.

4.4 *Semantics and pragmatics*

The semantic and pragmatic levels above all others are responsible for humorous effects in "Rebecca's Views". As could be expected, opposition is a pervasive phenomenon in the corpus, both at the lexical level and as a result of dynamically-construed antonymy which triggers scripts/frames opposition. It is important to underline how semantic and pragmatic aspects are often indissoluble, since context sensitive meaning construal is ultimately a pragmatic process (Wilson and Carston 2007).

Canonical lexical antonymy. In (12) the good-bad antonymy is responsible for a witticism:

12. […] the good thing is that you meet all these highly intelligent, motivated overachievers. The bad thing is that you meet all these intelligent, motivated overachievers.

Ad-hoc construed lexical relations. Ad-hoc categories and lexical relations among items which would not be canonically considered to be in such relationship to each other are commonly created. Thus in (13), Rebecca construes two types of WOMAN by listing typical features and opposing them:

13. At a certain point, middle age women who routinely dye their hair a strange shade of copper, dress in tight jeans and stilettos overnight morph into bowed little old ladies wearing Queen Mother shoes, who garden in wool tweed skirts and take bus trips to places like San Giovanni Rotondo or Lourdes.

In (14), a category of WORKERS WITH SEXUAL PREDATORY BEHAVIOUR is created to include construction workers and truck drivers as co-hyponyms:

14. […] aside, of course, from those certain subgroups which seem to include predatory behavior as part of their professional qualification the world over, i.e. construction workers, truck drivers.

Register humour. It is the prevalent type of humour found in the corpus. Hard words are used side by side with informal lexical items, a rich style alternates with short to the point sentences, generally jab lines. The examples are innumerable, and it would be impossible to do justice to the skilful use of this technique in the corpus.

15. Consider one of my favorites: *bulls**t*. […] You know, basically *male cow poop* How did that ever get *coded as an expletive* in English?

There are many passages in which trivial events or situations are described with words and expressions pertaining to a higher register:

16. […] he assumed that those too destitute to afford proper footwear and accompanying attire were being denied their God given right to a Super Big Gulp.

17. In fact, the last time I was in the barn was Christmas eve 1997, which began with an emergency 1 a.m. porcine birth, and faded out to a touching scene of me, attired in a cocktail dress and black pumps holding a slop bucket in each hand filled with squirmy, slippery newborn piglets while my husband, in suit and tie, whacked at the glowing new mother with a broomstick to get her to lie down and nurse, both of us cursing our neighbors Peppe and Gentile with all our linguistic creativity for having invited my in-laws over for a late game of cards.

Creative paraphrases and definitions. An interesting technique is that of paraphrasing certain expressions in words better suited to a different register and that of providing "metonymic" definitions that require shared background knowledge:

18. […] This section, usually stuck in between "How to Purchase Train Tickets" and "Where to Change Money", dedicated to the admirable task of helping the English speaking traveler navigate the rocky stream of acceptable behavior in Italy, is usually peppered with grave pronouncements […]

An interesting example is the list of useful gestures for bargaining in Italy, part of which is reproduced in (19):

19.　　clutch object to heart = I cannot live another moment on this earth without possessing this pair of boots/antique vase/plastic gladiator cruet set

Mockery of academic or journalistic style, which is immediately disrupted by informal and colloquial elements:

20.　　I'm going to push the envelope by immediately composing an incisive academic thesis examining the etymological and sociological implications of taboo verbiage in occidental culture, 'cause that's just the kind of gal I am.

Idioms and stock phrases:

21.　　They are mortally fearful that the other will somehow manage to get more than his share of chow, and for that reason only stick to each other like white on rice.

The references to common stock phrases are commonly responsible for irony, especially in jab lines as in (22) where Rebecca describes her husband after visiting *Taste of Chicago*, a food fair attended by "hundreds of thousands of badly dressed fat people":

22.　　He has never been the same since.

Hyperbole and overstatement. As is already evident from the examples provided, the humour in Rebecca's Views is founded on overstatement. Here are a few examples, but many more could be provided:

23.　　Sometimes these are quite accurate and helpful, but I have certainly read some over the years which have made me sputter my cappuccino all over myself and exclaim "WHAT?!?"

24. Our two dogs hate each other with a jealous passion and live for the day the other is sucked into the combine harvester and gone forever.

Irony. The common use of irony surfaces in the previous examples. (25) provides an additional example:

25. […] those black t-shirts printed with the flag of our nation and emblazoned with those immortal words: "Just try burning this one, a**hole", which make me so proud to be American.

Scripts opposition. Most of the examples presented already exemplify scripts/frames opposition, such as (17) above. (26) contains an opposition between a "noble" and a "trivial" script. A secondary opposition is also created between book-writing and winning the lottery, which are compared in terms of likelihood of the event:

26. I've been giving some thought to the whole idea of writing a book as of late (I've also been giving some thought to winning the lottery, and we can all see where that's got me) and it came to me while showering the other night that if I were to ever write a book […]

Oppositions are often based on presuppositions and connotations as in (27), where the formation (generally positive) is opposed to the language of construction workers (negatively connotated):

27. My formative months of Italian language education were spent in the company of lots of construction workers.

Reference to cultural knowledge. The effects resulting from reference to stereotypes or cultural specific general knowledge

are completely pragmatic in nature. The aim is that of making clear to the "confederates" who the "victims" of humour and irony are. Mentioning the "Super Big Gulp" or "Osco Drug" immediately evokes in the mind of the reader a certain type of American culture. Italians can also be the victims as in (28). In order to understand the humour, it is necessary to know that Americans believe that Italians cannot live without olive oil and that they are obsessed with fashion.

28.   […] my husband, who, though undoubtedly Italian (who else would pack olive oil for vacation) is not what you'd call a flashy dresser.

The corpus is dotted with sketches of characters depicted through stereotypical traits like in (13) above. This sort of ethnic derogatory satire is directed to both North Americans and Italians alike and it is intended for a third audience, i.e. fellow expatriates.

4.5 *Discourse*

Humour is created at the discourse level mostly via metadiscursive and metanarrative strategies.

Titles. Each entry has a title that generally imitates academic, literary or journalistic style through a remarkably formal register which clashes with the actual content of the post, thus creating intertextual humour:

29.   Common Myths and Misconceptions Regarding Italian Culture Fostered by Guidebooks

Metanarrative disruption. Authorial comments and interruptions of the narration flow are scattered throughout the corpus:

30.   I've only read one of her books (which I didn't particularly like, but I didn't like "Catcher in the Rye" either (c'mon Holden, get a grip) so that doesn't mean it can't be classified as an American Classic)

The author frequently addresses the audience directly with rhetorical questions as in (28) above.

Metalanguage of humour. Irony and humour markers signal that what follows is supposed to produce humorous effects. Openers and introductions often frame humour and prepare the audience for what follows as in (31). The use of "Now,…" and "anyway,…" in similar contexts is also very common.

31.   So, I had a bit of an epiphany the other day.

Frequent shifts between *bona-fide* and *non-bona-fide* discourse[7] are marked:

32.   I […] will go so far as to say he was wearing Rockports and a Tilley hat. *Just kidding.*

The most interesting result of the research presented in this quick overview is the fact that a complex interplay between the writer and her multiple audiences surfaces. Contrary to other cases in which humour and irony address two different types of audience (those who are supposed to laugh with the author and those who are laughed at), expatriates' travel blogs display a more complex interplay among the participants in the

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[7] Ruskin (1985) distinguishes between *bona-fide* communication, i.e. cases in which the speaker is not fully aware of the ambiguity that his words create and is in fact engaged in the "serious, earnest, information-conveying mode of verbal communication" (p.100), and *non-bona-fide* communication, i.e. cases in which the speaker is aware of the ambiguities and incongruities that his words create. The purpose of non-bona-fide communication is "to create a special effect with the help of the text" (p.101).

communicative exchange, in that there is a continuous shift between victims and confederates with the addition of a third party, that of expatriates and other travellers that consider travelling as something more than the "tourist" experience[8].

5. *The function of humour and irony in "expat's talk".*

The "existential status" of expatriates, torn between two worlds and two cultures, is reflected in the language. Humour and irony build social solidarity and function as gate-keepers (Attardo 2001a, Ritchie 2006, Norrick 2003), but, for this to work, it is necessary that writer and reader share similar background knowledge and assumptions. If the reader does not understand the allusions to stereotypes and cultural references, humour fails.

Exaptriates' blogs have multiple addressees. Rebecca shares stereotypes and cultural references with a) North Americans, b) Italians, c) other expatriates and slow travellers. Humour helps her to "juggle" between these realities and to express her attitudes towards aspects of the three cultures, in turn praising or criticising them.

The main function of humour is indeed evaluative. Rebecca skilfully builds solidarity with her compatriots by ridiculing some aspects of Italian culture, and few lines later the wolves and the victims swap roles and American culture becomes the target of the blogger's irony for the benefit of her Italian hosts. The audience who best can understand her attitudes, though, is made up of expatriates like her who experience both cultures, but also those travellers who want to experience the culture of the visited country and not just "hop on and off" a tourist bus. "Simple tourists" also become the target of Rebecca's witty

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[8] The distinction between travellers and tourists is crucial in tourism discourse and it is often exploited in promotional and informational material.

posts, and her confederates are those "slow travellers" that refuse any other definition.

This complex interaction between the blogger and her readers mirrors the status of the expatriate that finds herself living in another country, far from her own culture and never totally part of the host one. She is a member of three groups and of none at all: she lives in Italy, but she is not Italian; she comes from the States, but she left the States behind; she is therefore more than a traveller and less than a citizen. This is a perfect vantage point for a subtle, ruthless criticism. Attardo (2001a) mentions *sophistication* referring to the ability of the speaker to use humour to "show off" his/her detachment and superiority and his ability to use language.

Through humour, the expatriate can make fun of her complex status in a "face-saving" and retractable way. She tells her stories and expresses her opinions tongue-in-cheek, taking advantage of the rhetorical power of humour and irony.

Humour in expatriates' talk allows them to "have a foot in both camps": it creates group solidarity with Italians by laughing at Americans; it maintains group solidarity with co-nationals by laughing at Italians. Most importantly, though, it serves as in-group vs. out-group consolidation. Humour has an "initiation effect" (Ritchie 2006) by increasing commitment to the group of the expatriates who are the only ones who can fully understand the richness of the cultural interplay behind her words, even behind self-deprecation. Through humour and irony, the expatriate confirms that the attitudes expressed are held in common, and affirms the extent of the expat community's common ground. Much of the humour will inevitably escape the average readers, be they American, Italian or "simple travellers" because in the end, only fellow expatriates can access certain assumptions, and they alone really know what it means to live between two worlds.

6. *Conclusions*

The aim of this paper is to report on a case study in the language of expatriate travel blogs, one of the new genres of tourism discourse. After briefly introducing (register) humour and irony, the way in which humorous effects are created at the linguistic level is described. My claim is that humour in expatriates' blogs results from a complex interplay of the various levels of the language system, the main work being carried out at the semantic and pragmatic level. Discursive strategies also play an important role by signalling to the reader where to allocate cognitive resources in order to arrive at the intended meaning.

The choice of resorting to humour and irony appears to be connected to the status of expatriates as guests in the country where they reside permanently. Such choice is meant to create group solidarity with other people in the same situation – the only ones capable of really getting the assumptions behind this type of ethnic (self-)derogatory humour – while at the same time building or maintaining an open channel with the source and host cultures.

This opposition between different groups of people who travel - the most popularly exploited in tourism discourse being the distinction between tourists and travellers (Cappelli 2006) – seems to emerge clearly in epatriates' talk. Interestingly Rebecca's humour seems to imply (or rather to pragmatically create) an ideal gradable scale of "being-a-person-who-travels", ranging from the lowest rank, the "hop-on-hop-off tourist", to the highest level, the expatriate, via the intermediate ranks of travellers and "seasonal residents". This analysis, admittedly based on a small corpus of data, seems to confirm the rightful inclusion of expats' talk among the new genres of tourism discourse which contribute to tourism discourse itself by providing a form of reliable living testimony and exploiting the

same rhetorical and cultural mechanisms involved in the promotion of the different perspectives, namely authenticity, strangerhood, play and contrast, used in tourism promotional material (Cappelli 2006).

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