

Andrew Goatly, *Meaning and Humour*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 361+xvii pages. 216×138 mm. 25 b/w illustrations, 40 tables, 90 exercises. £60. ISBN 9781107004634.

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Meaning and Humour is described by the publisher as “an entertaining and user-friendly textbook for advanced students of semantics, pragmatics and humour studies”. This is an accurate statement of the book’s virtues. The problem for the general reader lies in the word ‘advanced’, which means that it is geared to the needs of undergraduates in their final year of studying linguistics or of post-graduates who have completed a degree in that subject. If you do not have this level of background knowledge, then you will find the book difficult.

Fair enough. Humour studies has advanced to the point where it is dividing into separate specialisms. When the author briefly (pp 308–312) departs from his own area of expertise, linguistics, to consider sociological and psychological perspectives on humour, it is he who is at a disadvantage, not because of any intellectual failure on his part but simply because he does not know enough. He knows even less about political economy for he writes: “Moreover in the wider context of consumer capitalism, humour, originally designed to question the power structures of society, is co-opted and becomes commodified as a consumer product in the form of joke books.” Reading sentences like this I could not help feeling that it would have been better if he had simply omitted this section altogether. It detracts from the book.

But I am being very unfair. We live in an age of ever increasing specialization. Why should an acknowledged expert on semantics and pragmatics be expected to have an equally good understanding of the way in which societies work? What is important is that he has a thorough understanding of his own subject and expounds it systematically to enable those with the requisite basic training further to expand their knowledge and insight.

Christie Davies is the author of *Jokes and Targets*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.

