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Ilchenko O.

JAMES THURBER AS A MASTER OF PARODY: AN INTERDISCURSIVE TAKE

The present paper deals with some of James Thurber's works that feature parody. Analyzed is the collection of short stories "Ladies' and Gentlemen's Guide to English Usage." It is argued that the humorous effect is achieved through the interplay of various types of discourses. The article also addresses the terms "intertextuality", "interdiscursivity", and other relevant notions.
Key words: *James Thurber; intertextuality, interdiscursivity; parody.*

Ільченко О.М. Джеймс Тербер як майстер пародії: інтердискурсивний підхід. *У статті розглядається прийом пародії у деяких творах Джеймса Тербера, а саме, у його "Настанові для леді та джентльменів з правильного вживання англійської мови". Гумористичний ефект досягається завдяки взаємодії елементів різних дискурсів. Також приділено увагу термінам "інтертекстуальність", "інтердискурсивність" та іншим дотичним поняттям.*
Ключові слова: *Джеймс Тербер, інтертекстуальність; інтердискурсивність; пародія.*

Ильченко О.М. Джеймс Тербер как мастер пародии: интердискурсивный подход. *В статье рассматривается прием пародии в некоторых произведениях Джеймса Тербера, а именно, в его "Руководстве для леди и джентльменов по правильному использованию английского языка". Юмористический эффект достигается .благодаря взаимодействию элементов различных дискурсов. Также уделяется внимание терминам "интертекстуальность", "интердискурсивность" и прочим релевантным понятиям.*
Ключевые слова: *Джеймс Тербер, интертекстуальность, интердискурсивность, пародия.*

I'm humbled and truly delighted to submit this vignette to professor Kolegaeva Festschrift. Ever since I've known her, first by getting my hands on her brilliant book on scientific and literary communication [5] that actually ignited my lifelong interest in the language of science. Later on, meeting her in person, I have never stopped admiring her expertise, wit and sense of humor. In this paper, I try to somehow continue the **timely** tradition set forth by Iryna Mykhailivna, of, figuratively speaking, making the best of both worlds – **the scientific/academic and literary discourses.**

Parody is an imitation of a particular thing, be it a writer, a genre, or a discourse, to create a comic effect through apt imitation of the original (but, unlike satire, without direct criticizing). In our case, it is about the **interplay** of everyday and academic discourses, as **non-professional** and **professional** (or, in our case, it is what in terms of M. Bakhtin, is called "authoritative discourse" that is used to educate the addressee (e.g. a word of a teacher, a user's guide, academic book, religious discourse, etc.), which is inherently "superior" to other discourses and demands "unconditional allegiance" [7].

So why James Thurber? First, because some of his works are exactly about combining the two discourses in question. Second, because he is one of the lesser known, and hence lesser studied US writers, though this writer

definitely deserves more prominence, possibly, no less of the caliber of Mark Twain. And last, but not least, it's a great material for employing the **methods and techniques** of linguistic analysis suggested by professor Kolegaeva [4], namely the author's vocabulary repertoire, which also bring to mind both post-structuralist Derrida's deconstruction ideas [16], and more recent approach in terms of intratextuality and data mining [24].

What is so specific about **intermingling the discourses**? This inevitably calls to mind the terms "speech interference", "textual interference"(or "hybrid construction"), "intertextuality", "hypertextuality", "bricolage", "anchorage", "transtextuality", and, finally, "heteroglossia", "polyphony" and "interdiscursivity".

Let's briefly sort it out. "**Speech intereference**", as suggested by V. Voloshinov, is about meeting and confronting of **two** persons' intonations, of two points of views – the author-narrator's (ironic, sarcastic) and the characher's (lacking any irony at all) [3,148]. Now what M. Bakhtin calls "**textual interference**" or "**hybrid construction**" is more about the utterance that belongs to **one** speaker combining two speech manners, two styles, two senses and values [1, 118]. Another important notion put forth by Bakhtin was "**dialogic**", or "**dialogism**" (suggesting that all language – verbal and nonverbal – is dialogic, not just literature) [8, 90] The idea of Bakhtinian dialogism later on was creatively reworked by Julia Kristeva who introduced the semiotic notion of "**intertextuality**" [22]. It should be emphasized that Kristeva differentiated between the "two axes" of texts: a **horizontal axis** (author – reader) and a **vertical axis** (text – other texts) [21].

J. Culler suggested two types of intertextuality: **macro-intertextuality** (the whole world is a text) and **micro-intertextuality** (the relationship between a given text and other texts existing in a given text.) [15]. Intertextuality is basically about various borrowings (like quotations etc.). In modern computer-mediated world, we talk about digital culture **hypertextuality** that disrupts the conventional "linearity" of texts since computer-based text(s) could easily (sometimes even in one click) take the readers directly to other texts. An example of such computer-based intertextuality is **bricolage –** "adopting and adapting borrowed material from the public domain of the Web in the process of fashioning personal and public identities" [12;13].

Intertextuality is also about all sorts of **allusions**. Interestingly, Roland Barthes introduced the concept of **anchorage** to denote **allusive** linguistic elements that serve to "anchor" the preferred readings of an image, especially (but not only) in advertising, and specifically, to address text-image relationships [9, 38,41].

Gerard Genette suggested the term **"transtextuality"** as a more inclusive and broader term than "intertextuality" that involves the following five subtypes:
- **intertextuality**: quotation, plagiarism, allusion;
- **paratextuality**: the relation between a text and its "paratext" that surrounds the main body of the text (titles, headings, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications, acknowledgements, footnotes, illustrations, dust jackets etc.);
- **architextuality**: (text as part of a genre or genres);

- **metatextuality** (explicit or implicit critical commentary of one text on another text);
- **hypotextuality** (the relation between a text and a preceding "hypotext" a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends – including parody/spoof, sequel, translation). Genette also called this "hypertextuality", but as we said above, currently "hypertextuality" is used in regard to digital milieu [20].

N. Fairclough differentiated between **"manifest intertextuality"** (other texts are explicitly, or "manifestly" marked by quotation marks and other relevant textual features) and **"constitutive intertextuality"** (which refers to the complex relation of genres or configuration of discourse types' conventions when the text is produced.) [17, 85, 105; 18]. In fact, "interdiscursivity" is rooted in Bakhtinian **"heteroglossia" –** different strata of the same language and **"polyphony"** – the diversity of voices employed [1]. Today we speak of interdiscursivity mostly in terms of French linguistic traditions, i.e. relating a certain type of discourse to other discourses [14, 5], relations among discursive formations (large heterogeneous discursive entities, e.g. natural history and political economy during enlightenment) [6] or, according to M. Foucault, interdiscourse is differences and equalities across discursive formations [19]. The result of such discursive interplay is evident in neologisms, most of them are **portmanteau words**, like "infomercial" (information + commercial, which is about combining information (scientific discourse) and commercial (marketing and advertising), infotainment (information+entertainment), edutainment (education+entertainment), and advertorial (advertisement + editorial), to describe the **hybrid features of various discourses**, as is noted by V. Bhatia, who, for example, explores the cases of interdiscursivity in business advertising, news reporting and legal documents (among other things), that result in a "mixing", even "blending" of genres. Such "intense interdiscursivity" mirrors the "dynamic complexity of professional communication is the result of several factors, including the ever-increasing use of multi-media, explosion of information technology, multi-disciplinary contexts of the world of work, increasingly competitive professional (academic as well as business) environment, and the overwhelmingly compulsive nature of promotional and advertising activities" [10; 11]. Other approaches toward studying interdiscursivity include exploring cross-cultural and professional interdiscursivity [25], and also R.Wodak's "discourse-historical approach" [26].

Getting back to James Thurber as a master of parody, we should note that his literary works are rooted in the literary traditions of Charles Dickens and his predecessors, namely, Henry Fielding, Tobias George Smollett, and especially Lawrence Sterne. Also, not to be forgotten are Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain, Bernard Shaw, and also Rabelais and Cervantes. For instance, Lawrence Sterne in "The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman" humorously refers to John Locke's "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding." It's one of the first cases of the language of science parody – starting with the fact that Tristram Shandy, who narrates about his life, is unable to explain anything in simple words. Another interdiscursive feature of Sterne's book is reference to Cervantes's Don

Quixote (whose character stunningly resembles Uncle Toby) and Rocinante. An good example of interdiscursive parody is Mark Twain's essay "The Awful German Language" (1880) published as an Appendix D in "A Tramp Abroad" [28], which is a parody of educational discourse, namely, a person trying to study the German language, and, for that matter, German textbooks, and musing on how awfully difficult and different German is from English. Twain describes eight humorous examples through the lay person's perceptions of various language aspects of German and reflects the frustrations a native English speaker has with learning German as a foreign language. Here we also observe the clash of authoritative/professional and non-professional/lay discourses.

James Thurber, one of the most popular humorists of his time, is best known for his short stories, fairy tales, and fables. He was also a brilliant cartoonist:

"Well, if I called the wrong number, why did you answer the phone?"

Like Anton Chekhov, Thurber humorously portrayed the frustrations and eccentricities of ordinary people. Among his favorite subjects were the psychology of man-woman relationship (e.g. the fable "The Unicorn in the Garden") and the English language (e.g. "The Spreading "You Know" (the phenomenon noted in 1960, and still with us), "The New Vocabularianism", and, of course, "Ladies' and Gentlemen's Guide to English Usage", published in 1931 as part of the book "The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities". It is a parody of Henry Watson Fowler's 1926 "Dictionary of Modern English Usage", which is a good example of professional/"authoritative", and somewhat opinionated discourse. "The Guide" includes nice short stories on usage: "Who and Whom"; "Which"; "The Split Infinitive"; "Only and One"; "Whether"; "The Subjunctive Mood"; "Exclamation Points and Colons"; "The Perfect Infinitive"; and "Adverbial Advice". Let's analyze some of the pieces. In the examples below we observe the use of elements of academic discourse (underlined) to create humorous effect *(italics)*:

"A common rule for determining whether "who" or "whom" is right, is to substitute "she" for "who," and "her" for "whom," and see which sounds the better. Take the sentence, "He met a woman who they said was an actress." Now if "who" is correct then "she" can be used in its place. Let

<u>us</u> try it. "He met a woman she they said was an actress." That instantly rings <u>false</u>. It can't be right. <u>Hence</u> the proper usage is "whom." <u>In certain cases</u> grammatical correctness <u>must often be subordinated to</u> a consideration of taste. […] <u>You might say</u>: "There is, then, no hard and fast rule?" ("was then" <u>would be better, since</u> "then" refers to what is past). <u>You might better say</u> (or have said): "There was then (or is now) no hard and fast rule?" Only this, that <u>it is better to use</u> "whom" when in doubt, and even better to <u>re-word the statement</u>, and *leave out all the relative pronouns, except ad, ante, con, in , inter, ob, post, prae, pro, sub, and super.*" (Thurber)

The humorous effect in the last lines is achieved by the reference to the old-fashioned ways of studying Latin: "*ad, ante, con, in, inter, ob, post, prae, pro, sub,* and *super*" is a list that schoolchildren used to be required to memorize, because verbs compounded with these prepositions generally govern the dative case. Thurber has left off "… and sometimes *circum*", but he seems to have managed to make his way in the world nevertheless." [23]

Another example:

The Perfect Infinitive

<u>It is easy enough to say</u> that a person should live in such a way as to avoid the perfect infinitive after the past conditional, <u>but it is another matter to do it</u>. <u>The observance of</u> the commonest amenities of life <u>constantly leads us into</u> that usage. <u>Let us take a typical case</u>. *A gentleman and his wife, calling on friends, find them not at home. The gentleman decides to leave a note of regret couched in a few well-chosen words, and the first thing he knows he is involved in this: "We would have liked to have found you in." Reading it over, the gentleman is assailed by the suspicion that he has too many "haves," and that the whole business has somehow been put too far into the past. His first reaction is to remedy this by dating the note: "9 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 21, 1931."* <u>*This at once seems too formal*</u>*, and with a sigh he starts in again on the sentence itself. That is where he makes a fatal mistake.* <u>*The simplest way out*</u>*, as always,* <u>*is to seek some other method of expressing the thought*</u>*.* <u>*In this case*</u> *the gentleman should simply dash off, "Called. You were out. Sorry," and go home to bed.* (Thurber)

One more case:

<u>There is a simple rule about</u> past conditionals <u>which will prevent a lapse into that deep contemplation</u> which is so often fatal. After "would have liked," "would have hoped," "would have feared," etc., use the present indicative. <u>The implication of</u> non-fulfillment <u>is inherent in the governing verb itself</u>, that is, in the "would have liked," etc. <u>You don't have to</u> shade the infinitive to get *a nice note of frustration*. Let it alone. <u>Dr. Fowler himself says</u>: "Sometimes a writer, dimly aware that "would have liked to have done" is wrong, is yet so fascinated by the perfect infinitive that he clings to that at all costs." That's what it is – *a fascination – like a cobra's for a bird.* <u>Avoid</u> the perfect infinitive after the past conditional as you would a cobra. (Thurber)

Here a special emphasis is on the oxymoron "nice note of frustration", and on pictorial comparison. Now let's proceed with yet another example, this time on subjunctive mood.

The Subjunctive Mood

The importance of correct grammar in the home can not be over-estimated. Two young people should make sure that each is *rhetorically sound* before they get married, because grammatical precision, particularly in mood, is just as important as anything else. *Rhetoric and sex*, in fact, are so closely related that *when one becomes confused they both become confused.* Take the subjunctive. […] Let us examine the *all too common domestic situation where the husband arrives just after another gentleman has departed -- or just after he thinks another gentleman has departed (Suppositional Departures lead to just as much bitterness, and even more subjunctives, than Actual Departures).*

The wife, in either case, is almost sure to go into the subjunctive -- very likely before any accusation is made…Wives select the subjunctive usually because it is the best mood in which to spar for time, husbands because it lends itself most easily to ranting and posturing. As long as they both stay in it they are safe. Misunderstandings are almost certain to arise, however, when the husband goes into the indicative, as he is pretty sure to do… First he will begin with a plain past-tense indicative if-clause, "If George Spangrell was here," the husband will begin, lighting a cigarette, "I …" "Well, what would you do if he were?" demands the wife. The confusion, which begins at this point, is pretty intricate. The husband has gone into the indicative, but his wife has stayed in the subjunctive and, furthermore, she thinks that he is still there, too. Thus she thinks he intended to say: "If George Spangrell was here [that is, now] I would tell him what I think of him, the low scoundrel." […] What he probably intended to say was merely something like this: "If George Spangrell was here, I wouldn't like it, but of course I know he wasn't, dear." However, misunderstandings now begin to pile up. The husband is instantly made suspicious by her "What would you do if he were?" He considers her "were" tantamount to "is." […] There are several ways to prevent a situation like this. In the first place, when a husband says "was" a wife should instantly respond with "wasn't" at its face value, because it preserves their egotism and self-respect. On the other hand, "if … were" is always dangerous. Husbands have come to know that a wife's "if… were" usually means that what she is presenting as purely hypothetical is, in reality, a matter of fact… Husbands are suspicious of all subjunctives. Wives should avoid them. (Thurber)

James Thurber thought punctuation was no less important. Here's why.

Exclamation Points and Colons

Take the sentence "You are wonderful!" That's trite, and it's made triter by the exclamation point, but if one writes it thus: "You are: wonderful," it's certainly not trite. Nothing so closely resembles the catch in the voice of the lover as that very colon. Instead of shouting the word

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> "wonderful," as the exclamation point does, it forces a choking pause before that word, thus giving an effect of tense, nervous endearment, which is certainly what the writer is after. (Thurber)

To put it in a nutshell, all pieces by Thurber are wonderful (here I might use Thurber's technique and write "all pieces by Thurber are: wonderful") and definitely worth reading and digging deeper. They are full of wit, but "The Guide", especially, contains exemplars of parody due to intermingling of various discourses. In it, specifically, the parody is built around general advice-giving on just about everything: life, marriage, society, middle class oddities. It implies that "authoritative" literature is never perfect, just as us and everything around us. And that such prescriptive books should be treated as a potential subject to creative interpretation. As James Thurber has shown, this would probably make them devoid of some "authoritativeness", but will definitely breathe new life into otherwise way too serious stuff.

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