

# ‘HA-HA’ AND ‘REALLY?’ OR ABOUT THE SERIOUS IN THE HUMOROUS IN THE TV COMEDY SHOW *MASTERS OF THE AIR*

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DAFINA GENOVA

University of Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria

**Abstract.** In the paper a discourse analytic approach is used to analyze the humour in a Bulgarian TV show in its cognitive and social context. In the show, fragments from TV news programmes are incongruously recontextualized to expose, criticize and mock the follies of the powerful. Humour is also used for placing under scrutiny injustice, voicing a public opinion or expressing citizens’ standpoint on important political and social issues. The communicative goal of the show in relation to viewers is not to believe politicians, public figures and TV news presenters blindly, but to critically scrutinize the news and form their own opinion. The humour in the show goes beyond entertainment: it laughs with the viewers at the powerful.

**Key words:** humour and entertainment, humour and satire, humour in spontaneous errors

## INTRODUCTION

Humour or funniness does not reside in things *per se*, neither is it only a mental state: funniness resides in how a person relates to things, to other human beings and to herself/himself. In spite of the complexity of humour as the object of research, the tripartite division in the approaches to the study of funniness – superiority, incongruity and release – has been generally accepted. The Superiority Theory (Hobbes, [1651] 1968) concentrates on the motivation and the target of humour; the Release Theory (Freud, [1905] 1975) discusses humour from a psychoanalytic perspective; the Incongruity Theory (Suls, 1972, 1983; Schultz, 1976) focuses on the cognitive aspects of humour and there are two theories of humour – the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (Raskin, 1985) and the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo and Raskin, 1991) that study humour from the linguistic point of view. Most humour research has been done in psychology, linguistics and comparative anthropology, compared to other fields.

The author holds the view that verbal humour has to be simultaneously analyzed from three different perspectives as a theoretical minimum: cognitive, social and linguistic – from the cognitive to the linguistic and then

to the social context (Genova, 2011). From a cognitive perspective, humour is analyzed through the concept of *incongruity* and by it is meant the clash of two incompatible perspectives on an object, situation or idea, a violation or divergence from expectation, or two alternative meanings that are forced together (Suls, 1972, 1983; Schultz, 1976). From a social point of view, humour is the result of the transgression of a social norm or convention (Kuipers, 2006) and sociological approaches to humour accentuate on the social consequences of humour and how humour influences interpersonal, in-group and out-group relations (Martineau, 1972; Zillmann, 1983). Humour is the result of an incongruity, transgression of a norm or the presence of both. Language is only the means to express humour, but not the cause for humour, word play included. As a form of communication, the humorous mode is grounded in the serious; the former constantly makes explicit and implicit references to the latter and in this respect the serious mode of communication is relatively more autonomous compared to the humorous mode. In the paper, the terms *humour*, *funniness* and *the humorous* are interchangeably used.

If one takes a look at humour research in Bulgaria, s/he is left with the impression that no unified terminology is followed which, in fact, is the case with researchers of humour elsewhere, although to a lesser degree. One such difference is in the use of *the humorous* and *the comic*. In contemporary humour research in English *the comic* is usually used by scholars in literary studies and also in sociological research on humour, for example, by Michael Billig (2005), where he juxtaposes it to 'the ultra-serious'. Sociologist Peter Berger (1997) also uses *the comic* in opposition to *the serious* and as a synonym to *the humorous*, *the laughable* and *the ludicrous*. For other researchers (Attardo, 1994), the comic is only a type of humour and *humour* is the generic term that encompasses all its positive and negative manifestations such as wit, pun, joke, tease, whim, mock, irony, sarcasm, etc. In *Humour: International Journal of Humour Research*, in print since 1988, issued by the International Society for Humour Research – a journal publishing research on humour from all over the world and from different fields, *humour* is also used as a generic term. In Bulgaria some researchers use *the comic* interchangeably with *the humorous*, but for others *the comic* is the narrower term. Also, traditionally *the comic* has been analyzed as an aesthetic category in opposition to *the tragic*. To avoid the ambiguity of *the comic*, the term *humorous* is used in the paper in opposition to *the serious* or in opposition between serious and non-serious discourse, having in mind that most of the humour research has focused on verbally expressed humour. It is also a fact that not every humour researcher in Bulgaria makes a distinction between *anecdote* and *joke*. An *anecdote* is a humorous story about a well-known real person, in which there might be more than one funny utterance and a *joke* is a fictitious story with a more complex structure in which there is only one humorous element in the punch line. Some humour researchers in Bulgaria, primarily in literary studies, focus on the analysis of laughter, but to analyze laughter without analyzing humour means to put the cart before the horse, since humour, as a cognitive process,

includes first a cognitive component or incongruity, followed by an emotional component, mirth, and laughter serves as an indicator of the understanding and the appreciation of humour. Laughter is the expected response by the recipient of humour, but it is not obligatory. Neither is humour the only reason for laughter: for example, one can laugh out of nervousness or embarrassment. In our culture there is also a laic understanding of satire, according to which the latter is not a species of humour, but coexists with it, that is, both are of the same order, as in the newspaper rubric *Humour, Satire and Entertainment*. In addition to the ambiguity of *the comic*, humour researchers have another difficulty to face – humour terms refer to categories that have fuzzy boundaries. To this one can add the limited explanatory tools available to dictionary makers for the explication of word meaning; for example, to explain *lampoon* through *ridicule* does not tell us much about the meaning of the two words (*lampoon*: ‘a written attack ridiculing a person, group, or institution’, *The Free Dictionary*). In the paper, *mock*, *ridicule*, *lampoon* and *satire* are interchangeably used as overlapping synonyms to mean ‘laughing at’ and not ‘laughing with’.

In the paper, a discourse analytic approach is used in the analysis of humour in the TV show *Masters of the Air* with greater emphasis on meaning implicitly conveyed in addition to incongruity as a defining feature of humorous discourse.

## HUMOUR IN MASTERS OF THE AIR

There is a fairly large number of entertainment and humorous TV shows in Bulgaria after the democratic changes in 1989: *The Coo Coo Show* and *The Street* at the beginning of the 90s, followed by *Canaletto*, *The Channel One Show*, *Masters of the Air*, *The Comedians*, *Absolute Madness*, *A la Minute*, etc. Some have been on air for years, such as *Masters of the Air*, *The Channel One Show* and *The Comedians*, while *Absolute Madness* and *A la Minute* had been on only for months. Most of the shows consist of funny sketches and routines that recreate recent and daily events, including sketches targeting politicians and other public personalities. Since the shows are meant for the mass viewer, the humour is far from being refined or intellectually challenging. For example, in *The Comedians* and *A la Minute* one often hears old jokes, frequently in the sketches there are coarse, if not vulgar, almost explicit references to sex; in *The Comedians* male actors impersonate women the way it was during the Bulgarian Revival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when women were not allowed to act on stage. In *The Comedians* and *Masters of the Air* scantily-clad women (in the latter the women dancers are called ‘adrenalin raisers’) dance between the sketches or at the beginning or at the end of the show. Gypsies, old men and women and blondes are often the target in the sketches and because ambiguity is an inherent property of verbal humour, it is not always obvious whether the sketches reproduce or denounce the negative stereotypes associated with those groups, such as stupidity, inadequacy and sexual promiscuousness. In addition to the verbal, there is visual humour in the sketches, too: heavy make-up, exaggerated facial expressions and bodily movements.

Humour as a form of communication is used not only for entertainment, but also for voicing an opinion, a point of view or a citizen's position in *Masters of the Air* – a TV show whose producers define it as 'a comedy show'. The goal of a comedy show is, undoubtedly, to make the audience laugh. But can verbal humour be humour for humour's sake alone? The speaker in humorous discourse uses language to target an object, a person or situation from the three worlds we live in: real, social and private, and conveys a message – social or political or general. If this is not the case, the humorous remains on the level of tongue twisters, such as *She sells sea shells at the sea shore*, where the recipient laughs when the speaker fails to pronounce the twister correctly, i.e when s/he violates phonological rules, but there is no message.

*Masters of the Air* has been broadcast first on the TV channel 7 Days, then on the New Television channel, the bTV channel and since September 10, 2012 it has been broadcast again on the New Television channel. Designed at the beginning as an approximation of a journalist style programme with the goal to help solving various social problems, today *Masters of the Air* has its own recognizable presence: in it the humorous is cleverly used to ridicule institutions and public figures, to air investigative reporting of news and to voice a public opinion. The show differs from other humorous and entertainment TV programmes in the following:

- humour is not based on negative stereotypes of ethnic, gender and age minority groups;
- there is no use of props or costumes; only two actors present the show for a certain period of time and then they are replaced by other actors;
- humour in the show is not created by the presenters themselves, it is sought after in the political and social incongruities of everyday life.

Most of all, *Masters of the Air* is notable for its pronounced political and social engagement compared to other humorous shows. According to Judy Halvajan, the producer of the show, its goal is 'to ridicule injustice' and 'using the mechanisms of humour and satire to try to inculcate some justice in the country in situations where it is often lacking' (Online 1) – an understanding of humour that goes beyond mere amusement and entertainment. A frequent strategy in the show is to show flashes from news programmes in which the same politician says the opposite of what s/he had said before, for example, how Maya Manolova, deputy president of the 42<sup>nd</sup> National Assembly, denies in *Hullo Bulgaria*, on the New Television channel, what she had said before in *More of the Day* on the Bulgarian National Television channel, namely that Momchil Nekov's return to the European Parliament was a 'technical mistake' (Online 2). Such a strategy is not possible in a regular news programme, whose main goal is to inform, but not compare news fragments to put under scrutiny political and public life. When a humorous show targets the news, it enables the viewer to single out elements of what a politician says or does that depict him usually in a negative light, it looks for incongruities to provoke the viewer's critical thinking

and might further influence the viewer to change her/his opinion. Undoubtedly, in such a context humorous discourse fares better than serious discourse in maximizing implicitness; although implicit messages are indeterminate and their interpretation varies from recipient to recipient, they are often more important than explicit messages. Their interpretation demands a greater cognitive effort and as a result they are better remembered and have a more lasting effect. And, most importantly, in this context, implicitness serves the speaker's intention to ridicule.

Predictably, the episodes of *Masters of the Air* before and after parliamentary, presidential and European Parliament elections are among the most politically engaged ones. In the episodes there are humorous variations on the warning, by act of Parliament, that 'buying and selling votes are a crime' that appears on the TV screen at the end of each canvassing clip: 'The selling and buying of logs is with VAT' (Online 3), 'Cutting the carcass of a calf is not a crime' (Online 4), 'There is no doubt votes are bought and sold' (Online 5), 'Buying and selling votes continues' (Online 6); some of the variations make implicit references to events discrediting the party in power, while others explicitly state that votes are bought. Emblematic in this respect is the episode from November 18, 2013 (Online 7), most of which is a commentary on two party rallies that took place at the same time: one organized by the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms in support of the Oresharski government and the other by GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria, a centre right party) against the government. The episode unambiguously shows that in spite of diametrically opposed goals, the two rallies are very similar. Flashes show how buses and trains bring people from the provinces and how those interviewed have no idea which party has organized the rally, whether they have come to support a strike or a football match and how one of them does not even know who the Prime Minister of Bulgaria is. The interviewees are, of course, representatives of a certain ethnic minority group who, because of their political ignorance and social marginalization, are the voters most easily subjected to manipulation.

Incongruously, one hears the same phrases in the speeches of the leaders and party functionaries of both parties that are used to lampoon the other party: according to the Bulgarian Socialist Party, GERB's followers are 'criminals', while, according to GERB, the followers of the Bulgarian Socialist Party are 'mafia'. Each party calls the other a 'clique' and as one of the presenters of *Masters of the Air* wittily concludes, there are two cliques in Parliament. The episode accentuates on the public apology at the rally of the leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party to the leader of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms for the forceful conversion of Bulgarian ethnic Turks to Christianity back in the 80s of the last century (called by the Bulgarian Communist Party 'the process of revival'). Yet, flashes are shown to achieve an incongruous effect how MPs of the Bulgarian Socialist Party voted in Parliament in 2012 on the declaration of the Democrats-for-a-Strong-Bulgaria Party that denounced the conversion – 122 MPs voted for the declaration, but there were only 6 MPs of the Socialist Party present and 3 of 6 abstained from voting.



The target of humour in *Masters of the Air* is politicians, institutions and public figures and its recipients are citizens and the powerful. Its other target is blunders of TV news programmes presenters. When the target of the show are the actions or statements of politicians and public figures, the implicit messages of the show directed to viewers are not to believe them (and TV news presenters) blindly, but to critically scrutinize the news and form their own opinion. Often, whenever there is a drastic mismatch between the statements and deeds of politicians and institution officials, one hears the sceptical comment 'Really?' of one of the presenters of the show as a signal to distance and to think critically. Verbal humour as a communication tool can go beyond amusement and entertainment and can perform serious social and political functions: it can express disagreement, disapproval or critique on the powerful – the ultimate goal of *Masters of the Air* to be recognized by viewers.

In other episodes of the show something unimportant in the life of a politician is presented as something exceptionally important: what happens is a figure-ground reversal, one of the standard techniques used to achieve funniness in the punch line of jokes (Attardo et al., 2002). For example, the same flashes are shown several times how Boiko Borisov, the leader of GERB, the opposition party, insists that the Socialist Party, the then party in power, give him back a coffee percolator after they locked one of the rooms of Borisov's party in the Parliament building. The coffee percolator (not the same one, certainly), miraculously, is found by the President of the Republic in a park in Sofia where the President is picking litter, an annual spring initiative organized by the bTV channel.

*Masters of the Air* not only criticizes politicians and political parties, its other goal is to expose and solve social problems. In this respect the reporters' segment of the show deserves admiration. In the segment, a telephone number appears on the screen for viewers to use and indeed many do. Sometimes citizens ask the show for help when regular efforts have failed to resolve an issue. Frequently, a reporter exposes some social injustice, a fraud or a corruption scheme, for example, the embezzlement of European funds for the cultivation of agricultural land by two mayors. In another episode, a surveillance camera recording from a police station in Sofia is shown to refute the allegations of a policeman that a woman had torn the sleeve of his uniform in her unlawful behaviour. In a later episode (Online 8) a letter from the Ministry of Interior is read that informs of the inquiry completed at the police station proving that the policeman himself and not the woman has torn the sleeve. In such cases the presenters of the show voice their position as citizens (for example, in relation to taking off air the documentary *Uncle Tony, the three fools and the State Security Police*) (Online 9):

Gladnishka: Regardless of the reason for taking off air this documentary, we from *Masters of the Air* think this is a case of censorship, unthinkable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Silvestrov: It's more than that. This is repression that reminds us of the times we've been trying to forget for the last 25 years.

Gladnishka: We hope impartiality will prevail and the film will be given due attention at home and internationally (translation mine).

Often the reporter segment of the show is parodic, especially the one of Popolina Vox. She interviews people in the street on sensitive social issues such as corruption, cruelty to animals, the legalization of prostitution or how to win elections parodying existing negative conceptions of values not only of politicians but of regular citizens as well: for example, Popolina Vox tries to persuade citizens to vote for her *Party for Rapid Wealth and Personal Profit* on the election day for the European Parliament on May 25, 2014 (Online 10).

The humour in some segments, for example, *Kaleko Aleko, Three in Parliament* and *Our Big Brother* is based entirely on character impersonation. *Kaleko Aleko* ('kaleko' is a dialect word for 'uncle'), as the title suggests, is a modern version of Bai Ganyo, a character in a novel from 1895 in which the author pokes fun at the negative personality traits of Bulgarians that have turned into a kind of a negative national stereotype which is topical even today. *Kaleko Aleko* is ill-mannered, uneducated and insolent, yet at the same time he has a very high opinion of himself. He travels around the country and the world but instead of collecting wisdom, he spreads vulgarity.

It is worth noting that most of the humour in *Masters of the Air* is the result of an incongruous selection of flashes of news programmes already aired and in this sense the merit of the humour lies with the script writers and directors rather than the presenters' performance. The presenters play the role of announcers that weld together the segments of the show. Certainly, whenever necessary, they make comments and improvise: there are also elements of visual humour, such as exaggerated bodily movements and facial expressions typical of clowns – in other words, presenters alternate between serious comments and clownish behaviour. In their original context the flashes are not humorous but they become humorous when compared with other flashes, also taken out from their original context and assigned a new interpretation in the new context. Thus, what is said and done in serious discourse is transformed into an incongruity, into a deviation from a norm, in this case a moral one on the part of the powerful, in humorous discourse. To be precise, *Masters of the Air* not only exposes, but it criticizes the foibles of political and economic elites for their arrogance of power, incompetence and corruption and in this respect it alternates between satire and comedy: humour in it is both playful and allusively serious, entertaining and indirectly evaluative. Satire at its best is a form of social corrective (Billig, 2005), since the intention of satirists is to criticize negative aspects of political and social life and encourage a change for the better. As a form of humour, satire thrives in democratic societies, while underground political jokes thrive in authoritarian and totalitarian states and both types of humour stand closest to serious discourse in their function to directly and indirectly criticize the powerful: the former flourishes in political freedom and the latter in relative oppressiveness. Here is an example of a recontextualization

of what Antonia Parvanova said on TV channel 1 when she was running for the European Parliament (Online 11):

Antonia Parvanova: What the state can do is guarantee markets, but not intervene on the market or employ a circle of privileged companies in state and public projects.

Silvestrov (presenter): It's not a circle; it's a film in which we all have been acting minor parts for the last 25 years.

Gladnishka (presenter): With the kind of directors we have, we have to wait long for a happy end. (translation mine)

In the episode, Parvanova makes a spontaneous error and says *filmi* (films) instead of *firmi* (companies) and the presenters' response is directed to the error. The first presenter, when saying *it's a film in which we all have been acting minor parts for the last 25 years*, implicitly expresses his disappointment with the inadequate reforms during the transition period after 1989. Again, the goal of incongruously comparing flashes already aired is to bring a change in the viewer's attitude and point of view or, minimally, to distance her/him from things and distancing from things is one of the ways in which humour works. The genre of *Masters of the Air*, a 'comedy show', itself is enough to prepare the viewer for a transition from a telic (goal-oriented) mental state to an atelic one (not goal-oriented) between which the mind alternates (Apter, 1989) and the latter state, as expected, facilitates the appreciation of humour. In addition to the visual humour in the form of exaggerated bodily movements and facial expressions of the show presenters that complements the humour of their comments or stands out for itself, flashes are shown of TV news programmes involving visual humour, too: for example, how the ex-Prime Minister Ivan Kostov trips and falls to the ground when leaving the Presidential Office Building or how a huge TV camera is about to fall on the head of a TV presenter.

Spontaneous errors are also the target of humour in *Masters of the Air*. In psycholinguistics such errors are viewed not only as indicators of the structure and organization of the mental lexicon but also of the stages in the production and understanding of utterances (Fromkin, 1971; Garrett, 1980). Spontaneous errors are of different types: sound, lexical, semantic and syntactic (Garman, 1990). They are unavoidable and normally the speaker makes several per week. They are made when the cognitive processes that underlie the functioning of the language system for some reason break down. Spontaneous errors are a deviation from linguistic norms and rules but not as spontaneous as they seem. Many errors are not nonsensical but meaningful words used in the wrong context and it is their wrong use that triggers humour. Here are some more examples: *upside up* (Bulg. *s glavata nagore*) instead of *upside down* (Bulg. *s glavata nadolu*), an error made by an interviewee on a TV channel (Online 12). Programme presenters, quite normally, also make errors not spared in *Masters of the Air*: for example, *warrant* (Bulg. *order*) instead of the intended word *medal* (Bulg. *orden*) made by the presenter of a news programme on TV channel 1 (Online 13) and



a programme presenter on the New Television channel says twice *entrance elections* (Bulg. *kandidatstudentski izbori*) instead of *entrance exams* (Bulg. *kandidatstudentski izpiti*) (Online 14). The show also targets malapropisms usually made by interviewees that show ignorance, for example, when a former MP of GERB says *let's finish with this fraud* (Bulg. *specula*) instead of *let's finish with this speculation* (Bulg. *spekulatsia*) (Online 15).

Spontaneous violation of language rules might also be viewed as incongruity, but it is not the same kind of incongruity one finds in the punch line of jokes. The basic difference is that with spontaneous errors the two interpretations – erroneous and a standard one – are simultaneously available to the listener. In contrast, in the joke, the punch line introduces an unexpected interpretation that leads to the reinterpretation of the set-up part of the joke. The humour in the joke is intentional and multi-sided: it has a cognitive, linguistic, social and cultural dimension, among others, while the humour in spontaneous errors comes down to the violation of rules of language.

Figure 1 summarizes the intentions of the humour initiator, the target and recipient of humour in the show, as well as its emotion and cognitive effects; the last two are not obligatory:

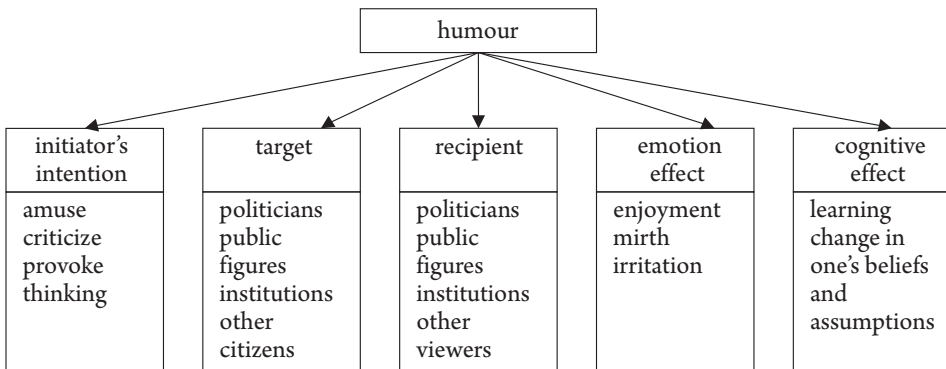


Figure 1 Humour variables in *Masters of the Air*

Humour and entertainment are related, but the latter is a more general concept than the former and this could be one of the reasons for the fewer studies on entertainment compared to extensive research in the field of humour. In communication studies, entertainment has been understood as an experience or a response to a product (a book, a piece of music or a song, a film, a show, etc.) rather than as a feature of it (Zillmann and Bryant, 1994; cited by Vorderer et al., 2004: 390). It is a complex and dynamic experience which includes interrelated psychological, cognitive and affective components: an experience that exerts an impact on viewers and, more specifically, on the way they think, feel or act (Vorderer et al., 2004). *Mirth*, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, is the emotion associated with humour and *enjoyment* is the positive response to

an entertainment product. Politicians and public figures as humour targets, most probably, will get irritated or annoyed, but their positive response to humour is not excluded.

A serious reason, I think, for *Masters of the Air* to be on air for such a long period of time – 12 years – is its design and, more specifically, the incongruous reinterpretation of fragments from news programmes and the presentation of social problems and their solution. Its conception is the result of the right judgment of the script writers and producers that it is this kind of comedy show viewers prefer to watch and not a comedy show like *Complete Madness*, where humour is based solely on the impersonation of character types. Shows like *Complete Madness* are more difficult to create, yet they are the type of show that bore viewers more easily.

## CONCLUSIONS

The humour of *Masters of the Air* goes beyond the entertainment of the viewer: its primary goal is to expose and criticize the powerful for their corruption, incompetence and arrogance; its other goal is to expose and solve social problems. Humour in it is both playful and allusively serious, entertaining and indirectly evaluative and its messages are directed to citizens and to the powerful. There is satire and ridicule whose targets are: the mismatch between the words and actions of politicians, the inertness and ineffectiveness of institutions and the foibles of the powerful. There is mockery at the physical appearance and personality traits of politicians and public figures. Politicians, public figures and TV programme presenters are humoured for the spontaneous errors they make where humour is triggered by the violation of language rules; also, politicians and interviewees are mocked for malapropisms and, finally, there is visual humour that either complements verbal humour, or stands out for itself. The interpretation, appreciation or rejection of the humorous in the show is context dependent: on the sociopolitical context, on the beliefs and assumptions of both the initiator and the recipient of the humorous, on their ethnic, gender, professional and age group. In *Masters of the Air* humorous discourse fares better than serious discourse in conveying serious messages and having a persuasive effect. But it can have an opposite effect, too: instead of being critical, the viewer might let pass the serious aspect of what is said and seen on the TV screen. Yet, it is doubtful whether the most critical satire can initiate a political or social change: in favourable contexts it can only facilitate the possibility for change.

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**Dafina Genova** (Dr. philol., Full prof. in Contemporary English (Pragmatics) at the Faculty of Humanities, the University of Veliko Turnovo). Her research interests are in the field of pragmatics, philosophy of language and verbal humour. She is the author of two books: *On Meaning Representation and Use of Language* (in Bulgarian) and *Studying Humour Seriously*. Email: [dafinagenova50@gmail.com](mailto:dafinagenova50@gmail.com)