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A Pragmatic Analysis of Humor Mechanisms in *Yes, Prime Minister*

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

The TV series *Yes, Prime Minister*¹ is a well known British sitcom that has been present on British television as well as TV stations abroad for decades, and is familiar to the Croatian audience as well. Although the show deals with politics, it is still very relatable to audiences worldwide. Its particular and recognizable humor and memorable characters make it easier for the audience to connect with the show. The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the humor mechanisms in the show - and there is indeed a great number of ways in which it amuses the audience, whether through puns, riddles, sarcasm, doublespeak or any other way of playing with language. The analysis of the dialogues will serve to showcase how the three main characters play with the language in a clever and often confusing manner. Grice's Cooperative Principle with the accompanying maxims, as well as conversational implicatures will be introduced in order to conduct a pragmatic analysis that will show how, although demonstrating frequent violations of these maxims, these violations do not take away from the humorous effect of the lines in the show. The humorous effect is achieved mainly by using various humor mechanisms which only serve to emphasize the quality of the dialogues and the fundamental principle of cooperation among participants in spoken exchange (Cooperative Principle).

Key words: humor, humor mechanisms, Cooperative Principle, conversational maxims, conversational implicatures, *Yes, Prime Minister*

¹ *Yes, Minister* is the original series that ran from 1980 to 1984, while *Yes, Prime Minister* is the sequel that ran from 1986 to 1988 ; it followed the same characters with the only difference being that the main character was first a minister and later became the Prime Minister

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Introduction

In this day and age, there is a great variety of content that attracts audiences around the world. Nonetheless, there is still enough room for old TV shows, especially sitcoms. Well written and presented content has the ability to last long after its original run. This is especially true of comedy series because humor helps attract an audience, it makes the audience not only laugh but also think about the topics and characters presented in a particular episode or a longer story arc. Thus, TV shows become a topic of conversation among viewers who then start incorporating the language, or more specifically, the jokes in everyday communication. This only proves that the shows are not relevant solely because of their plots and characters but also because of dialogues and monologues which are full of various humor mechanisms. This thesis analyzes dialogues specifically in the British TV show *Yes, Prime Minister* and through a careful selection of dialogues the thesis will demonstrate how the series achieves humorous effect by actually contradicting the general conversational framework set out by the philosopher Paul Grice. Grice's Cooperative Principle and the accompanying maxims, as well as conversational implicature, are used in order to analyze communication in a more formal way.

1. The series *Yes, Prime Minister*

1.1 About the series

The TV show *Yes Minister*, and its sequel *Yes, Prime Minister*, is a 1980s sitcom that deals with politics in the UK in a satirical manner. The show gives a behind-the-scenes look rather than what is presented to the public, although this perspective is marginally present as well. To avoid any confusion about the title of the sitcom it should be pointed out that the original show was called *Yes Minister*, which had three seasons and followed the main character Jim Hacker during his time as a minister as well as Bernard, his private secretary, and Sir Humphrey, the Cabinet Secretary. This series was continued as *Yes, Prime Minister*, which introduced Hacker as the Prime Minister, with Bernard and Humphrey remaining in the show as well. These characters each have a specific role and very early on it becomes obvious who has the upper hand and who does not. This primarily applies to Sir Humphrey and the Prime Minister and their dynamic. It can be said that the show revolves around their relationship or it is, at least, one of the focal points of the show. Their relationship is based on Humphrey always winning arguments and getting what he wants, while Hacker is convinced that he is the one who has the upper hand. This is because Sir Humphrey uses Hacker's

naivety for his own gain. However, this dynamic changes and we see that by the end of the show the Prime Minister is becoming more experienced in these political games, so it makes it that much funnier to see Sir Humphrey confused, desperate and mumbling which is amusing in itself since he is always in control. In the episode “A Real Partnership” Sir Humphrey is trying to get a large pay rise for the civil servants, including himself, but he must present it to the PM in a different way so that it would not be obvious what he is trying to do. So, when discussing the pay rise at a meeting, Hacker is mistrusting of Humphrey’s intentions and tries to provoke him to see if Humphrey would admit what he is really trying to do:

Hacker (to Humphrey): You’d stand to gain quite a lot personally.

Sir Humphrey: Prime Minister, that is not a consideration.

Hacker: You’d be happy to be personally excluded from this rise? I know the Cabinet Secretary would be.

Sir Humphrey: Well, of course, the question is...in essence...not as a precedent...thinking of the service as a whole...fr-fr-fr-from the long-term point of view...as a matter of principle...(mumbling in panic)

Hacker: Go on.

(S01E05 25:32 – 26:01 Hacker, Sir Humphrey)

Furthermore, some characters, such as Bernard and the Prime Minister, seem surprisingly naïve considering their line of work, and it leads to hilarious confusion and misunderstandings. At times it may seem deliberate, but on other occasions it becomes apparent that it is simply naivety. This way of understanding usually reflects what anyone outside of politics questions and does not understand, especially when left in the dark about the reality of certain situations. For example, there is a scene in which the Prime Minister wants to leak some information and he denies he ever does that while in a way he actually admits it, which only leads to Bernard’s confusion:

Bernard: When’s he going to leak it?

Hacker: Did I ask for a leak, Bernard?

Bernard: Well, not in so many... No, you didn’t.

Hacker: No, I didn’t. I occasionally have confidential press briefings, but I have never leaked.

Bernard: Another irregular verb – I give confidential press briefings, you leak, he’s been charged under Section 2A of the Official Secrets Act.

(S02E01 20:40 – 21:04 Bernard, James Hacker)

As for the show in general, it is known for its “heavily verbal nature of each episode” (Berman 2011, 45) and it does not shy away from long dialogues. Considering the fact that long dialogues can fatigue people, in order to hold the viewers’ interest they should be done in a way that is somehow unique. In *Yes, Prime Minister*, as Garry Berman points out, there is a scene in which the dialogue is seven minutes long and there are many such examples throughout its five seasons (ibid.). On their official page for *Yes, Prime Minister*, the show’s broadcasting company, the BBC, also directs attention to its verbal nature by pinpointing the most important motifs of the show such as “Hacker’s use of catastrophically mixed metaphors, his Private Secretary Bernard’s fondness for awful puns and maddening pedantry, and Sir Humphrey’s laconic wit, [...], and his catchphrase, usually after totally defeating Hacker, of muttering ‘Yes Minister’ to close the show.”² These factors are also the reason behind choosing this show in particular as the basis for the thesis. Its verbal nature and specific mechanisms used for humorous effect give a perfect opportunity to analyze around 480 minutes of the show and its language.

1.2 Political framework of the series

The series is known for never explicitly revealing which political party is in power and for not leaning towards any side. In his article “*Yes, Prime Minister's* Jonathan Lynn remembers Margaret Thatcher,” Patrick Day interviews one of the creators of the show, Jonathan Lynn, and reports his comments about the original idea of making the show. According to Lynn, the idea was to create a politically neutral show that would be a “satire of people and their relationship with power” (Day 2013). The show became extremely popular with some of the most influential politicians, including the then PM Margaret Thatcher, which for Lynn was not a very positive thing because he feared that the show would end up being seen as a “conservative” show (ibid.). The LA Times article further reflects on the relationship the show and its creators had with Thatcher and concludes that it did not in any way affect the popularity of the show (ibid.). There are still reruns, plays and new versions which only proves how the show is still relevant 30 years later. Lynn states in the article that the show has “remained topical [...]. Nothing has really changed. Nothing much will. It’s about people and their relationship to being in power. That doesn’t change” (ibid.).

Lynn’s words still ring true today when the UK is going through a politically controversial period caused by Brexit. At the time of the much discussed vote, a clip from *Yes*

² [bbc.co.uk.](http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/yesminister/index.shtml), accessed November 23, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/yesminister/index.shtml>

Minister went viral, and one of the articles it was mentioned in is titled “*Yes Minister* Clip Gains New Found Fame After EU Referendum Brexit Vote” (York 2016). The clip is from an episode in which Minister Hacker’s civil servant Sir Humphrey Appleby explains to the minister why Britain joined the European Union in the first place and it appears to be a prophecy of what happened in 2016.

“**Sir Humphrey:** Minister, Britain has had the same foreign policy objective for at least the last 500 years: to create a disunited Europe. In that cause we have fought with the Dutch against the Spanish, with the Germans against the French, with the French and Italians against the Germans, and with the French against the Germans and Italians. Divide and rule, you see. Why should we change now, when it’s worked so well?

Hacker: That’s all ancient history, surely?

Sir Humphrey: Yes, and current policy. We had to break the whole thing [the EEC] up, so we had to get inside. We tried to break it up from the outside, but that wouldn’t work. Now that we’re inside we can make a complete pig’s breakfast of the whole thing...”

(S01E05 *The writing on the wall*, Sir Humphrey and Hacker)³

This example showcases in a fictionalized manner the UK’s stance towards the European Union as well as Europe in general in the 1980s, which proves how those words stated by a character on a TV show carry as much weight 30 years ago as they do today.

2. Humor

2.1 The language of humor

Even though a particular topic may be serious, it can still be delivered in a witty and amusing way. But how can we tell something is funny? What is humor? Considering the fact that dictionaries provide definitions even for terms that are difficult to define, it is rather interesting to look up the word “humor” in a dictionary. We will mostly find simplified definitions such as “the quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech”⁴ and “a mood or state of mind”⁵. We still do not know what humor is,

³ See Appendix 1

⁴ Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “humor,” accessed January 28, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/humour>

⁵ Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “humor,” accessed January 28, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/humour>

and also if we look at humor as a mood or a state of mind then it can be said that humor depends on one person and is more individual than it is universal. This should not imply that nothing can be described as being generally funny because there is an important factor of dominant cultures relayed on TV which is also why TV series have gained global popularity. If we asked a person what humor is, we would probably get an answer that it is something that can make us laugh or at least amuse us. This might seem as the most popular description, but it is still not a sufficient explanation. As Alison Ross elaborates, the “*response* is an important factor in counting something as humour” (1998, 3). How people react to something said or done helps determine whether it is humorous or not. Consequently, the more appropriate question would be why is something funny, why does something make people laugh (ibid.). Part of the reason is explained by Ross, and she states that people laugh when they are surrounded with other people; it creates a sense of community (ibid. 3-4). Similar observation in relation to laughing mainly in social situations is made by Robert Provine. He found that what provokes laughter in a person is more often another person and people laugh in company more than they do when alone (1996, 41). Provine describes laughter as a “powerful and pervasive part of our lives – an important component in that biobehavioral bedrock of our species known as human nature” (ibid. 38). He also claims, what we all probably noticed on our own, that laughter is contagious (ibid. 42). When we hear someone laugh we sometimes start laughing ourselves even though we do not know what the thing that the other person finds funny really is.

However, this still leads to more questions. When we watch a film or a television show or stand-up comedy or any other source of amusement, we are not always surrounded with people. It is of course possible to find something humorous even though we are not in company of other people. Whether it is because of our mood, state of mind or the type of humor we are watching and listening, when we find something amusing, we laugh. While we can find a show humorous on our own, many studies have shown that there are other ways of making something appear funnier. We often hear laugh tracks while watching something on television. When it was invented, the laugh track “was intended to help the audience watch, understand and feel comfortable with a relatively new medium” (Armstrong 2016). It is considered to be a consequence of the fact that people had been used to having others around them while laughing because humorous shows had been experienced through live performances (ibid.). This continues to be a valid point because even when we do not perceive something as funny, if we are surrounded with people laughing we will most likely also laugh.

Laugh tracks, if present in a show moderately and tastefully, can only add to the already enjoyable experience of watching the show.

Furthermore, a rather important factor in perceiving something as humorous is culture because it depends on the differences between cultures. For example, Lu & al. studied humor across various cultures in relation to creativity (2018, 2). They claim (ibid.) that creativity and humor are closely connected because they: 1) are positively associated; 2) share common antecedents (e.g. cognitive flexibility); 3) produce similar consequences (e.g. psychological health). From a cultural perspective they are both “appropriate violations of norms” (ibid.) and “require cognitive flexibility” (ibid.). Both creativity and humor violate certain type of norms and thus it is individual if a new idea or a joke is perceived as funny because it relies on individual, personal tastes. When talking about cognitive flexibility, Lu & al. explain that “one must be able to access and switch between different cognitive schemas, which are mental representations of knowledge or knowledge structures that guide human behaviors” (ibid. 5-6). In reality, it simply means that in order to understand a new idea or a joke we need to use different types of knowledge based in different parts of our brain. They are not one-dimensional. Lu & al. continue by pointing out the differences in humor and creativity between different cultures. They state that since a culture is a set of values and norms and as they have already concluded that humor and creativity violate norms, it is easy to deduce that there are bound to be differences between various cultures (ibid. 9).

3. Pragmatic analysis of the humor mechanisms in the show

3.1. Conversational implicatures and Cooperative Principle

Pragmatics refers to “the study of language use, and in particular the study of linguistic communication, in relation to language structure and context of utterance” (Akmajian et al.1995, 361). Paul Grice contributed to pragmatic analysis by introducing “the verb *implicate* and the related nouns *implicature* (cf. *implying*) and *implicatum* (cf. *what is implied*)” (1989, 24). He talks about using intuition in order to understand what is being said, and if it is in any way ambiguous, the ability to recognize verbs and thus understand what is being implied (ibid. 25). What he is talking about here is **conversational implicature**, a term which implies that conversations have some general features that make it work (ibid. 26). The best way for participants to engage in efficient conversations is by “making their conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which they are engaged” (ibid.) and he calls this

the **Cooperative Principle**. The definition suggests that the most important factor of successful communication is the mutual understanding of what is being said by two or more speakers engaging in a conversation, or simply put, the cooperation. Under this principle Grice creates 4 subcategories or conversational maxims:

the maxim of quantity – one has to be as informative as is asked of him/her and not say more than necessary;

the maxim of quality – one has to say only things he/she knows are true, there should be no lying and no saying things one has no evidence that prove them to be true;

the maxim of relation – one needs to be relevant and say only things that make a contribution to the conversation;

the maxim of manner - one has to be clear, unambiguous, brief and orderly. (ibid 26 - 27)

Of course, it is not always possible to follow these maxims, and there are often violations or stretching of the rules, which may pose a problem for a correct interpretation of what is being said in a conversation or simply reduce the quality of the conversation. Participants may also say directly or imply that they are not willing to fulfill a maxim, for example, when people do not want to disclose information. They may also have to deal with an overlap where they cannot fulfill one maxim without violating another one, or they may deliberately fail to fulfill them. (Grice 1989, 30)

3.1.1 Violation of the Cooperative Principle and the maxims

In order to showcase how the Cooperative Principle and the maxims are violated in *Yes, Prime Minister*, the thesis will use the most frequent humor mechanisms identified in the show. The definitions of mechanisms will be drawn from various sources either in relation to this specific series or in general and, where there is a lack of elaboration, the sources will be adapted by using examples that explain the mechanisms best. One of the most important mechanisms is **wordplay**, which, according to Dirk Delabastita's definition, is "the general name for the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings" (1993, 57). This makes **playing with idioms** also a type of wordplay and we find many examples in *Yes, Prime Minister* and it can be observed that this mechanism does not follow the direction of the talk as stated by **the Cooperative Principle**. For instance, in the

following scene there is a discussion about a possible traitor, one of the ministers who is called Dudley:

Hacker: I gave him his first Cabinet post, treated him like a son! This is the thanks I get!

Sir Humphrey: How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless Cabinet colleague.

Hacker: It's envy. Dudley is consumed with envy.

Bernard: It's one of the seven Dudley sins.

(S02E01 17:59 – 18:15 Hacker, Sir Humphrey, Bernard)

Although this clearly refers to the seven deadly sins considering the fact that envy represents one of them, the idiomatic play digresses from the matter at hand, which can violate either the **maxim of relation or of quantity**. Another example of playing with idioms is in the scene in which Bernard comes to Hacker's home and tells him the news that a Christian dean was being sent on a mission to an Islamic country:

Bernard: The Bishop of Banbury and the Church Missionary Society are sending the Dean of Baillie College to Kumran on a mercy mission.

Hacker: An Oxford don? Why?

Bernard: He's an expert on Islam. It's a faith to faith meeting.

(S01E07 15:00 – 15:16 Bernard, Hacker)

In this example Bernard is playing with the expression *face-to-face* and, though it is irrelevant for the conversation, the comment is useful for a further analysis. While *faith to faith* is an **idiomatic play** adapted for the specific situation, it is also connected with similarities in sound and spelling. It was observed that “this vertical pun plays with the close sound resemblance of the words *faith* [feiθ] and *face* [feis]” (Lukaš 2013, 44). This type of wordplay is formed on **paronymy** which is “based on the similarity both in pronunciation and spelling” (ibid. 17). The double play only makes the joke cleverer. Although it may seem that by playing with language some grammatical rules are broken, Peter Farb claims that the creative use of language or language play while it toys with language rules, it does not break them (ibid. 128).

To further examine how the **maxim of relation** is violated in the show, other frequent subcategories of wordplay will be used as well. Among them are **puns**, often used especially by Bernard, although other characters resort to this technique as well. A **pun** is a structure based on “at least two linguistic structures resembling each other in *form* [...] which have

different meanings” (Lukaš 2013, 9). In the following scene, there is a discussion about who to choose as the next bishop of a diocese:

Hacker: Is there really no other candidate?

Sir Humphrey: Well, not really. There were better jobs available recently.

Hacker: What’s better than a bishop? A rook?

(S01E07 11:31 – 11:41 Hacker, Sir Humphrey)

‘Bishop’ is most commonly used for “a senior member of the Christian clergy, usually in charge of a diocese and empowered to confer holy orders,”⁶ but it has another meaning, that of “an African weaver bird, the male of which has red, orange, yellow, or black plumage”⁷. A ‘rook’ has only the meaning of “a gregarious Eurasian crow with black plumage and a bare face, nesting in colonies in treetops.”⁸ So we see Hacker’s attempt at playing with words that is based on homonymy. The next scene takes place at Hacker’s office where the Prime Minister asks Bernard to do something:

Hacker: Bernard, I want you to put Dorothy back into her old office.

Bernard: You mean, carry her there?

(S01E04 03:06 – 03:12 Hacker, Bernard)

The phrasal verb “put back” has two meanings. The first one is literal “to return something to where it was before,”⁹ while the second one is more abstract and means “go to set something back.”¹⁰ The pun here is in taking an expression literally, while the actual meaning was to put Dorothy in her old office. In these examples, puns could have been left out because they do not contribute to the conversation and thus violate the maxim of relation. This occurs again in the following example which uses mixed metaphors to violate the maxim. According to Cornelia Müller, **mixed metaphors**, as can be deduced from the name itself, are “impermissible combinations of the underlying conceptual metaphors” (2009, 139). In the following scene in which Hacker is discussing an issue of education and how something could be done about it:

Hacker: You think I could? Grasp the nettle? Take the bull by the horns?

⁶ Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “bishop,” last accessed January 28, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/bishop>

⁷ Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “bishop,” accessed January 28, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/bishop>

⁸ *ibid.*, s.v. “rook,” accessed January 28, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/rook>

⁹ Collins English Dictionary, s.v. “put back,” accessed January 28, 2018, <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/put+back>

¹⁰ *ibid.*

Bernard: Prime Minister, you can't take the bull by the horns if you're grasping the nettle.

(S02E07 10:07 – 10:15 Hacker, Bernard)

Another way Bernard violates the maxim is by always taking every expression literally and by having the need to correct every slightly incorrect statement and say something that does not contribute to a conversation. For example, in the following scene Hacker is having doubts about what to do with a case of a British nurse imprisoned and Bernard is not very helpful:

Hacker: If we do nothing, we look heartless. And feeble. It doesn't do the government any good to look heartless and feeble simultaneously. Bernard?

Bernard: Perhaps you could arrange it so you only look heartless and feeble alternately.

(S01E07 01:25 – 01:38 Hacker, Bernard)

Bernard neither gave a concrete answer nor did he contribute to it. His suggestion was not helpful to the PM and thus it is a violation of this maxim.

Farb further mentions other subcategories of wordplay, such as riddles, wise sayings, verbal dueling etc. (1973, 4). Speaking in **riddles** or “a traditional verbal expression which contains one or more descriptive elements, a pair of which may be in opposition; the referent of the elements is to be guessed” (Georges and Dundes 1963, 116) is very much present in *Yes, Prime Minister* and can be seen in situations where characters want to avoid speaking directly concerning complicated situations. Evidently, this is a violation of the **maxim of manner**. In the following scene Bernard is trying to tell Sir Humphrey something about a secret he does not want anyone to hear:

Bernard: There has been movement.

Sir Humphrey: On what subject?

Bernard: On a subject we hoped for no movement.

Sir Humphrey: The Civil Service generally hopes there will be no movement on any subject!

Bernard: Uh, yes, what I mean is it's in relation to a subject that is normally wholly and exclusively within the control of the Civil Service that developments have developed.

Sir Humphrey: You're speaking in riddles!

Bernard: Oh, thank you.

(S01E05 14:01 – 14:27 Bernard, Sir Humphrey)

In that scene, Bernard is trying to say something about a delicate situation without stating it clearly, which strongly resembles a riddle. The message is not conveyed in a direct manner and is not clear to the listener, in this case to Sir Humphrey which violates the rule of mutual understanding. The violation of the maxim of manner and of the Cooperative Principle in general can be seen as well in the following example, in which Hacker and Humphrey are discussing which room to use as a waiting room for visitors. Humphrey wants only one in particular because it suits him for his scheming:

Hacker: People can wait in the lobby. Or in the state rooms.

Sir Humphrey: Some people. But some people must wait where other people cannot see the people who are waiting. And people who arrive before other people must wait where they cannot see the people who arrive after them being admitted before them. And people who come in from outside must wait where they cannot see the people from inside coming in to tell you what the people from outside have come to see you about. And people who arrive when you are with people they are not supposed to know you have seen must wait somewhere until the people who are not supposed to have seen you have seen you.

(S01E04 06:10 – 06:41 Hacker, Sir Humphrey)

Humphrey is obviously not brief, he is not even orderly and thus he is clearly violating the maxim. He is a character most known for his wit and his ability to deceive with his long and often ambiguous sentences, which is actually just another way of telling lies. This mechanism is known as **doublespeak** or as William Lutz defines it, “language that pretends to communicate but really doesn’t. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, [...]” (1990, 254). Lutz states that the purpose of doublespeak is to “mislead, distort, deceive, inflate, circumvent, obfuscate” (ibid. 255). Doublespeak often leads to misunderstandings which clearly violate the **Cooperative Principle**. How the maxim of manner is violated is also demonstrated by a type of doublespeak frequently used in the show, **inflated language**. Lutz explains that this type of language “is designed to make the ordinary seem extraordinary; to make everyday things seem impressive; to give an air of importance to people, situations, or things that would not normally be considered important; to make the simple seem complex” (1990, 258). In the following scene Humphrey uses this method to make something sound more important. The scene has already been mentioned, and in it the PM takes the keys of his office away from Humphrey, so he wants to get them back:

Hacker: Humphrey, to what do we owe this pleasure?

Sir Humphrey: Prime Minister I must strongly protest in the strongest possible terms, my profound opposition to a newly instituted practice which imposes severe and intolerable restrictions upon the ingress and egress of senior members of the hierarchy and which will in all probability, should the current deplorable innovation be perpetuated, precipitate a constriction of the channels of communication and culminate in a condition of organizational atrophy and administrative paralysis which will render effectively impossible the coherent and coordinated discharge of the function of government within her Majesties United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Hacker: You mean you've lost your key?

(S01E04 26:20 – 27:08 Hacker, Sir Humphrey)

Humphrey often speaks in a way that no one really understands what he is saying, but he does it so that it sounds convincing to others and he uses it to confuse others, and his sentences remind us of labyrinths but it is often simply gibberish. Garry Berman described him as a “master of double-talk and gobbledegook, and when need be, can effortlessly create a verbal labyrinth leaving Hacker dizzy with confusion” (2011, 44). **Gobbledegook** is one type of doublespeak (Lutz 1990, 257) and is defined as “a matter of piling on words, of overwhelming the audience with words, the bigger the words and the longer the sentences the better” (ibid.). This is also an example of the violation of the **maxim of quantity** and it can be seen in the following example in which Sir Humphrey wants to stop the PM from supporting the anti-smoking policy by reminding him that he was present at different events organized by tobacco companies which, if made public, would make him look like a hypocrite:

Sir Humphrey: Notwithstanding the fact that your proposal could conceivably encompass certain concomitant benefits of a marginal and peripheral relevance, there is a countervailing consideration of infinitely superior magnitude involving your personal complicity and corroborative malfeasance, with a consequence that the taint and stigma of your former associations and diversions could irredeemably and irretrievably invalidate your position and culminate in public revelations and recriminations of a profoundly embarrassing and ultimately indefensible character.

Hacker: Perhaps I can have a précis of that?

(S01E03 21:05 – 21:40 Sir Humphrey, Hacker)

It is obvious that Humphrey could have used much less information and still give an answer required of him and he could have used less words than he did to express his thoughts, but in

this instance, as in many others, he is trying to sound important and knowing, and what matters even more to him, he wants to show his superiority over Hacker. Because of too much elaboration on the topic he is also violating the maxim of manner, but the maxim of relation as well because some of the information is irrelevant for the discussion. This is rather noticeable in the following example as well, in which Humphrey uses subtle **sarcasm** or “speech in which (...) speaker’s meaning can come apart from sentence meaning” (Camp 2012, 587). In the scene, Hacker wants to tell Sir Humphrey about his idea to reward his colleagues:

Hacker: You know, Humphrey, I’ve been thinking.

Sir Humphrey: Good.

(S01E01 16:13 – 16:16 Hacker, Sir Humphrey)

Humphrey’s sarcastic comment is unwarranted, since the sentence before does not require an answer. The comment’s meaning is not positive and its sole purpose is to downgrade the other person.

Peter Farb devotes a lot of attention to the use of language play for deceiving and lying. But, he calls **lying** an “inefficient and hazardous strategy to play with the conventions of language” (ibid. 156). He believes that lying is always discovered and leads to losing any credibility like, for example, in politics (ibid.). This is something we can affirm, because when we find out about the lies that politicians had told us, we stop trusting them. The problem is, we do not always discover them. The truth does not always come out. Not in real life, not in fiction. Which is why in *Yes, Prime Minister* lying is used to get the upper hand, to convince someone of something. This is done in a humorous way, and not every character in the show finds out about the lie, and although it is only fiction it reflects the real life situation in which some goals are achieved through deception. This mechanism violates the **maxim of quality** and since many characters in *Yes, Prime Minister* are involved in scheming for their own gain, we encounter a great number of untruthful conversations. In the following scene, Sir Humphrey gives a suggestion to the PM about what he should do to become more popular with the public and Humphrey is purposefully lying to him and giving him false information so that he would go along with the plan and eventually help Humphrey achieve his goal:

Sir Humphrey: I was about to suggest that you might intervene personally to save that poor little doggie on Salisbury Plain.

Hacker: Are you serious?

Sir Humphrey: Of course.

Hacker: It certainly would be very popular. Would it be very expensive?

Sir Humphrey: Surely not.

Hacker: Could we cost it?

Sir Humphrey: Well, I gather that time is running out for little Benji. We have to make a decision this morning. There are times when you have to act from the heart, even as Prime Minister.

(S01E08 23:11 – 23:42 Sir Humphrey, Hacker)

Sir Humphrey is suggesting this to the PM although he knows it would cost a lot of money and he does it not because he wants the PM to gain popularity but because he wants to use this expense later on as an argument against him. This common immediate aim, although the ultimate aim of the conversation participants may be different, is the first conversational feature out of three that together distinguish cooperative transactions (Grice 1989, 29). The second feature is the mutual dependency of the participants (*ibid.*), i.e. the Prime Minister and Sir Humphrey. And the last feature is an understanding that the conversation continues until both sides decide it is over (*ibid.*).

In regard to doublespeak, there is another type also frequent in the show, **euphemisms**. A euphemism can be defined as “an inoffensive or positive word or phrase used to avoid a harsh, unpleasant, or distasteful reality. But a euphemism can also be a tactful word or phrase which avoids directly mentioning a painful reality, or it can be an expression used out of concern for the feelings of someone else, or to avoid directly discussing a topic subject to a social or cultural taboo” (Lutz 1990, 255). In the show it is mostly used to appear politically correct or in order not to admit something embarrassing, or insulting. For example, in a scene in which Humphrey provokes Hacker for being indecisive about what to do with a minister he believes is plotting against him, Hacker defends himself by stating that he is not being indecisive, but says “I just can’t make up my mind” (S02E01 18:58 – 19:00 James Hacker). Another instance, when discussing a politician who is not very intelligent, instead of ‘stupid’, ‘unintelligent’ or similar, in order to avoid clear insults, he is described as someone with “obsolete intellectual equipment” (S01E02 24:23 – 24:26 Sir Humphrey). Insults violate the maxim of quality because they are usually unwarranted and also the maxim of manner in cases where they are not expressed in a clear and direct way, but are implied. Insults are usually popular with viewers because of whom they are directed at. It is not a culture-specific habit because in many countries people use them to deal with political institutions they do not agree with. In Britain, many of the negative remarks are aimed at well-known public figures so they are particularly amusing to the audience. In the following

example, Sir Humphrey and Sir Wharton are trying to explain diplomacy and how much information ministers need to know:

Sir Richard Wharton (RW; Permanent Secretary to the Foreign Office): It's too dangerous to let politicians become involved with diplomacy.

Sir Humphrey Appleby (HA): Diplomacy is about surviving until the next century. Politics is about surviving until Friday afternoon.

RW: There are 157 independent countries in the world. We've dealt with them for years. There's hardly an MP¹¹ who knows anything about any of them.

HA: Tchh... Show them a map of the world; most of them have a job finding the Isle of Wight.

(S01E06 14:46 – 15:10 Sir Humphrey, Sir Richard)

In this example it is apparent that these statements come from personal observations and opinion and are not stated in answer to any question regarding how knowledgeable politicians are.

Moreover, not only politicians in general are being discredited, but also departments, state policies, other countries and so on. One example of this is the following scene in which the Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Office complains about the Dean of Baillie saving a British nurse from imprisonment in an Islamic country. The Foreign Office had not done anything about it so the Permanent Secretary is offended that the newspapers asked of them to be more patriotic, which is a concept the Foreign office does not approve of:

Sir Richard Wharton: People have said a lot of unpleasant things about the Foreign Office, but we've never been accused of patriotism!

(S01E07 19:39 – 19:44 Sir Richard)

Of course, they were not asked to comment on the Foreign office's patriotism.

Since the show was made by the BBC, it is funny how at times they even mock that same broadcasting corporation, but it is simply implied, which makes it a violation of the maxim of manner. For example, in the following scene, Hacker has to make up to a politician for a promised promotion that did not happen:

Hacker: We got to give him something, I promised.

Sir Humphrey: Well, what is he interested in? Does he watch television?

Hacker: He hasn't even got a set.

¹¹ MP – “a Member of Parliament,” Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “MP,” accessed February 28, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mp>

Sir Humphrey: Fine, make him a Governor of the BBC.

(S01E01 17:12 – 17:20 Hacker, Sir Humphrey)

It is implied that this position is irrelevant and can, thus, be offered without any complications.

Conclusion

While humor will always remain one of the things that intrigue us, we are still able to recognize it and recognize the forms in which it appears. Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule, but the popularity of comedy today proves that now, more than ever, there is something that attracts us to it. Since it is healthy to laugh, it is more than welcome we find sources of comedy which suit us best. That is why *Yes, Prime Minister*, as a well-known show, serves as a useful subject of analysis. Its highly verbal nature and particular dialogues help produce a pragmatic analysis based on Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle. The principle suggests that speakers while communicating cooperate and expect each other to behave according to the conversational maxims. These maxims are often violated both in everyday communication and in fiction, or in this case, in *Yes, Prime Minister*. However, this does not imply that violating these maxims should be avoided at any cost because it neither takes away from the quality of the spoken exchange nor does it destroy the humorous effect, which is noticeable in this show as well. The natural flow of these exchanges is also supported by various humor mechanisms which serve to provoke positive reactions from the viewers and are not as simple as they may seem at first. Humor can be hard to define, but it can easily be described as complex. Nevertheless, its complexity allows the audiences to appreciate it even more.

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Appendix 1

From "The Writing on the Wall" (1980)

Sir Humphrey: Minister, Britain has had the same foreign policy objective for at least the last 500 years: to create a disunited Europe. In that cause we have fought with the Dutch against the Spanish, with the Germans against the French, with the French and Italians against the Germans, and with the French against the Germans and Italians. Divide and rule, you see. Why should we change now, when it's worked so well?

Hacker: That's all ancient history, surely?

Sir Humphrey: Yes, and current policy. We had to break the whole thing [the EEC] up, so we had to get inside. We tried to break it up from the outside, but that wouldn't work. Now that we're inside we can make a complete pig's breakfast of the whole thing: set the Germans against the French, the French against the Italians, the Italians against the Dutch... The Foreign Office is terribly pleased; it's just like old times.

Hacker: But surely we're all committed to the European ideal?

Sir Humphrey: [chuckles] Really, minister.

Hacker: If not, why are we pushing for an increase in the membership?

Sir Humphrey: Well, for the same reason. It's just like the United Nations, in fact; the more members it has, the more arguments it can stir up, the more futile and impotent it becomes.

Hacker: What appalling cynicism.

Sir Humphrey: Yes... We call it diplomacy, minister.