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# Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

A Pragmatic Approach to the Study of Humour:  
The Flouting of Gricean Maxims in the American  
Sitcom *Friends*

Author

Paula Cristina Catediano Narro

Supervisor

María Rosa Lorés Sanz

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras / Grado en Estudios Ingleses  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the creation of humour in the American TV sitcom *Friends* through the flouting of H. Paul Grice's conversational maxims (Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner). The purpose of this study is to analyse which maxims are – intentionally or unintentionally – violated by characters in a number of scenes and how such violations contribute to generating humorous communicative situations. The corpus gathered consists of the written transcripts of nine exemplary episodes from seasons 1, 3, 7, 8, 9 and 10 of the TV series, which yielded data that were then carefully analysed from a pragmatic approach, more precisely from the perspective of the Cooperative Principle posited by Grice. The results of this research revealed that characters tended to disobey at least one of the conversational maxims in interaction for humorous effects and that, in the case of some characters like Phoebe or Chandler, such flouting could be regarded as being in line with specific traits of their different personalities and senses of humour. Furthermore, the results suggested that the breaking of the Cooperative Principle did not prevent speakers from achieving successful communication; rather the contrary: characters proved to be perfectly capable of deciphering the hidden meanings or implicatures behind each flout. This research therefore concluded that speakers in conversation can still be thought to be cooperative despite their deliberate disobedience of the Cooperative Principle.

**Keywords:** humour, sitcoms, H.P. Grice, conversational maxims, flouting of maxims

## RESUMEN

Este estudio explora la creación del humor en la comedia de situación americana *Friends* por medio del incumplimiento (*flouting*) de las máximas conversacionales de H. Paul Grice (Cantidad, Calidad, Relevancia, Modo). El objetivo de este trabajo consiste en analizar qué máximas incumplen los personajes, de manera intencionada o involuntaria, en una serie de escenas, y cómo esto contribuye a crear situaciones comunicativas humorísticas. El corpus recogido en este análisis consta de los guiones de nueve episodios modelo de las temporadas 1, 3, 7, 8, 9 y 10 de la serie, de los que se obtuvo información que más tarde fue minuciosamente analizada desde un enfoque pragmático, en particular desde la perspectiva del Principio Cooperativo propuesto por Grice. Los resultados de este estudio demostraron que, en el transcurso de la interacción, los personajes tendían a desobedecer al menos una de las máximas conversacionales con fines humorísticos y que, en el caso de algunos personajes como Phoebe o Chandler, podía existir una relación entre dicho incumplimiento y ciertos rasgos de su personalidad y sentido del humor. Asimismo, los resultados indican que el incumplimiento del Principio Cooperativo no impedía que los personajes lograran una comunicación exitosa; más bien lo contrario, pues demostraron ser perfectamente capaces de descifrar las intenciones ocultas o *implicaturas* (en palabras de Grice) detrás de cada incumplimiento. Por tanto, este análisis demuestra que los interlocutores pueden seguir siendo cooperativos a pesar de su incumplimiento intencionado del Principio Cooperativo.

**Palabras clave:** humor, comedias de situación, H.P. Grice, máximas conversacionales, incumplimiento de las máximas

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Humour can be described as a particularly interesting and multi-faceted social phenomenon considered to play a prominent role in the performance of a long series of linguistic functions and in human communication in general. Defined by *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* as “the quality in something that makes it funny”, humour as a human expression is universal to all cultures, ethnicities and geographical locations. To this universality we must add its exceptional complexity and versatility, which draws scholars to define it as “one of the most difficult subjects to study” (Apte, 1985: 13). Consequently, and considering the tremendously significant part humour has been proved to play in human interaction, it comes as no surprise that this has become a worthwhile and truly profitable object of study for a wide range of scientific research across several disciplines (Eckardt, 1991; Kotthoff, 2006; Martin, 2007), especially within the field of interpersonal pragmatics. Accordingly, recent studies on humour and its role in communication (Bell, 2007; Gulas & Weinberger, 2006; Holmes & Marra, 2002) conclude that humour fulfils a wide variety of emotional, social, and cognitive functions, which therefore contribute to making it a useful instrument aimed at improving communicative exchanges and relationships among speakers and hearers.

Closely linked to the concept of humour in pragmatics is that of context. When considering context, we should remember that this notion involves both context of culture and context of situation, and that both of them have an impact on humour. Pragmatics essentially deals with the study of meaning in context and the incongruity between what is said and what is really meant. In most communicative exchanges, what speakers actually mean is much more than what they say in a strictly semantic sense. This assertion is even more meaningful and accurate when it comes to humour and it leads us to the concept of implicatures, which will be later discussed. Also relevant for the understanding

of humour in human communication from a pragmatic perspective is the concept of the Cooperative Principle, posited by H. Paul Grice (1967). It is understood to be a principle at work in human communication whereby those involved in conversation assume both parties will normally seek to cooperate with each other to establish agreed meaning. Throughout the years, Grice's well-known theory has been recurrently revisited (Horn, 1984; Levinson, 1983; Sperber and Wilson, 1995), and it is still believed to have exerted an unquestionable influence in contemporary pragmatic theories (Mey, 2002). Grice proposed that, whenever we enter in speech interaction with another person, mutual cooperation is assumed by both speakers. This implies that, in order to ensure successful communication, participants in conversation are always assumed to conform to a series of principles. The Cooperative Principle is formulated as follows:

*Make your 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 you are engaged.* (Grice, 1989: 26)

In formulating this principle, Grice stated that if participants were to reach a successful proceeding of human communication, they were expected to conform to what he referred to as the four maxims of conversation or the four cooperative maxims, which constitute the Cooperative Principle. These maxims (i.e., that of Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner) are unstated assumptions that speakers have in conversation and which apply under normal situations. According to these maxims, individuals in interaction will, as a rule, seek to be informative, truthful, relevant and clear.

The category of Quantity refers to the "quantity of information to be provided" (Grice, 1975: 45). Grice holds that according to the first of these maxims, one's

contribution should provide sufficient, but not too much information. Hence, this maxim includes two more specific submaxims:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

According to Leech (1983), the maxims “Be Informative” and “Be Brief” are in a natural state of tension with each other. In the attempt to be as informative as possible speakers must automatically rely on a certain amount of redundancy and wordy explanation, which some people would argue is not really necessary.

The second maxim is that of Quality, which states that one should “try to make (their) contribution one that is true”. It encompasses two more specific maxims:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

(Grice, 1975: 46)

The maxim of Relation is formulated as follows:

1. Be relevant.

(Grice, 1975: 46)

Finally, the maxim of Manner encompasses the “supermaxim” – “Be perspicuous” – and four different maxims:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression
2. Avoid ambiguity.

3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)

4. Be orderly.

(Grice, 1975: 46)

According to Grice (1967), speakers unconsciously apply these principles in the process of verbal communication, generating implied meanings which are then recognized by hearers in the form of inferences. Levinson (1983) argued that these inferences derive from interlocutors' intentional or unintentional observance or non-observance of these maxims. The primary expectation on the part of the addressee is that we are conforming to the maxims and therefore trying to be cooperative. Nonetheless, despite Grice's conclusion that successful interaction stemmed from observing the four maxims, communication has been proved to proceed very frequently through the flouting of such principles. Grice (1967: 49) described flouting a maxim as the process when a speaker "blatantly fails to fulfil it". Speakers often flout the Cooperative Principle for communicative purposes and are still thought to be cooperative, since their non-observance of the maxims often gives rise to what Grice coined as conversational implicatures, some extra meaning not explicitly contained in the utterance but derived from the observance or flouting of the maxims, that is, on the basis of conversational principles and assumptions. This notion is pivotal in the study of pragmatics.

In this regard, some scholars have conclusively evidenced that a high percentage of humorous conversations is attributed to the flouting of one or more of Grice's conversational maxims (Attardo, 1994; Raskin, 1985). This implies that interlocutors very often intentionally break some of the maxims in the course of interaction with the purpose of stirring others' laughter (Wu & Yong, 2010: 55), giving rise to humorous conversational implicatures. Grice, as cited by Attardo (1994: 271-276), sees humour as

non-cooperative, considering that humorous exchanges occur as a result of non-cooperative interaction among speakers. Contrary to expectations, however, hearers are actually perfectly capable of inferring the right implicatures from presumably non-cooperative humorous exchanges. This may be due to the speakers' assumption that the flouting of the Cooperative Principle is by no means compromising the basis of the communicative situation. This view was also shared by Horn (2004) and Brown and Levinson (1987), who, according to Kotthoff (2006: 6), thought that "violations of the maxims should not be seen as special cases, but rather as normal ways of processing meaning". When a maxim is flouted for the purpose of creating humour, speaker and hearer are still thought to cooperate in a sense: the hearer still assumes that the speaker is being cooperative and then infers that he or she is trying to mean something distinct from the literal meaning. In other words, "speakers signal to each other that they want their intentions to be understood and rely on the others to do extra-inference work" (Kotthoff, 2006: 6). This idea could also be linked to the Relevance Theory, posited by Sperber and Wilson in 1986 as one of the most influential alternatives to Grice's theory. The basic assumption is that human beings are endowed with a biologically rooted ability to maximise the relevance of incoming stimuli, which means that the human cognitive system works so as to extract the maximum relevance with respect to communication. Participants in conversation will always interpret what they are said as relevant, which therefore implies that the principle of Relevance cannot be followed nor violated. If, according to the Cooperative Principle, speakers assume cooperation under normal circumstances, when they are confronted with a case of uncooperation, they are encouraged to seek reasons for it or, in other words, to look for that maximum relevance.

Henceforward, the present dissertation aims to demonstrate both that humour in sitcoms is very often created through the non-observance of one or more of Gricean



conversational maxims and that by means of breaking these maxims, speakers are also being cooperative and therefore contributing to put their message across.

To fulfil the aim of this study, I am addressing two questions: how conversational maxims are flouted in the situation comedy *Friends* and how this non-observance of the maxims contributes to generating humour. To explore these two questions, I have selected a number of scenes which appropriately illustrate such violations, and which will later be carefully analysed.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Firstly, I give an overview of the methods employed in the process of carrying out this study. Secondly, I provide a complete analysis of a series of selected scenes from *Friends*. Finally, I conclude by introducing a brief discussion which seeks to summarise the results obtained in the analysis.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

For the current purpose of this paper, I selected a convenience corpus consisting of a series of clips from the situation comedy *Friends* which, in my view, can neatly illustrate how maxims are manipulated with the intention of creating humour. The flouting of the conversational maxims will thus be exemplified with dialogues from the series. The data on which this study is primarily based was collected by downloading and watching a number of episodes from seasons 1, 3, 7, 8, 9 and 10 and then downloading the written transcripts from <https://fangj.github.io/friends/>.

Situation comedies, often shortened to sitcoms, are a genre that has proved convenient to study the creation of humour through the non-observance of Gricean

maxims. Being widely regarded as an artistic form of expression, a sitcom is defined by the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* as “a regular comedy programme on television that shows the same characters in different funny situations”. By definition, sitcoms are expected to provoke laughter in the audience, which thus makes them a particularly suitable genre for the analysis of interpersonal and interactional humour from a psycholinguistic point of view (Molon et al., 2005). The object of study for this paper is the long-running American situation comedy *Friends*, created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman. *Friends* was first aired in 1994 and ended in 2004, having televised a total of 10 seasons and 236 episodes. This TV show mainly revolves around the lives and adventures of six friends living in Manhattan –Rachel Green, Monica Geller, Phoebe Buffay, Joey Tribbiani, Chandler Bing and Ross Geller– and the humorous stories they go through as they navigate through life. Because these six characters are characters of a sitcom, they all are, in consequence, producers of humour. In a series of concrete situations which I will later analyse, it is possible to appreciate how each character's humour relies on the manipulation and flouting of specific conversational maxims. In this analysis, and considering we are talking about a sitcom, it will also be convenient to pay special attention to extralinguistic factors such as visual performance and body language, that is, non-verbal codes.

Although a considerable amount of scientific research has focused on the phenomenon and the theory of verbal humour from different perspectives, including that of translation (Attardo, 2002) and teaching (Ali Fadel & Al-Bargi, 2018), not so many studies have actually attempted to approach the subject from a pragmatic point of view.

Next follows an analysis of some highly illustrative examples of the flouting of Grice's conversational maxims in *Friends*.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF EXAMPLES

#### 3.1 FLOUTING OF THE MAXIM OF QUANTITY

The maxim of Quantity states that, in the ordinary course of ongoing human interaction, one should always make his contribution as informative as is required, which therefore implies that speakers are expected to provide just the right amount of information for the exchange. Based on Grice's theory, Cutting (2002: 37) argued that there are two different ways in which a speaker can flout the maxim of Quantity: giving too much information or too little information than what is required.

(1) [Context: Ross' marriage is brought to an end after his wife confesses to being a lesbian. He walks into Central Perk coffee house carrying an umbrella with a pained, dazed look.] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weEHDpQjrY>, min 1:10]

**Monica:** Are you okay, sweetie?

**Ross:** I just feel like someone reached down my throat, grabbed my small intestine, pulled it out of my mouth and tied it around my neck...

**Chandler:** Cookie?

(Season 1, Episode 1, The One Where Monica Gets a New Roommate)



From the dialogue above, we see Ross' deliberate non-observance of the maxim of Quantity, as he wilfully provides far more information than is required in the conversation. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to mention the close connection that is very frequently established between this maxim and the maxim of Manner, according to which speakers are expected to be brief and to avoid unnecessary wordiness. In this sense, one can argue that it is not expected of people to provide such an elaborate answer to a question like Monica's "are you ok?", which could have perfectly been responded by uttering a mere 'yes' or 'no'. Nonetheless, Ross decides to expand on his answer by describing in an excessively detailed and definitely unneeded manner the way he feels, which contributes to making him sound much more melodramatic and afflicted. Ross' unnecessarily graphic description of his misery as compared to the removal of his own intestine, however, does not seem to impress Chandler, who quickly goes on to change the topic of conversation by offering him a cookie. This last utterance can also be regarded

as a flouting of the maxim of Relation, as the speaker changes the topic by formulating a question that is totally unrelated and out of context. Therefore, it implicitly evidences that Chandler is not excessively worried about his friend's gloomy mood, since he does not seem to be taking his words seriously.

Ross's flouting of the maxim of Quantity is further used as a source of humour in many other episodes, as in the following example:

(2) [Context: An attractive new girl has just moved to Ross' block and he tries to flirt with her by offering to show her around.] [Not available in YouTube]

**Ross:** Kristen, hi. Are you uh, new to the area, 'cause if you are...I'd love to show you around sometime.

**Kristen:** I...I uh, actually just moved from four blocks over.

**Ross:** Ah.

**Kristen:** But-but this block is like a whole other world.

**Ross:** Y'know actually it does have a very interesting history. Uh, this street is the first street in the city to have an underground sewer system. Before that sewage and waste would just flow right down the street. Yeah, sometimes ankle deep!

**Chandler:** (To Ross) Smooth.

(Season 7, Episode 17, The One With The Cheap Wedding Dress)



In this example, Ross is once again providing more information than is required, this time as part of one of his attempts to ask this new girl out. Taking advantage of his profound knowledge of history, he tries to impress Kristen by giving her a detailed account of supposedly interesting facts about the history of the neighbourhood's water sanitation systems. This wealth of additional information is entirely unnecessary considering the overall context in which the conversation is taking place. On top of that, it is not a particularly appealing or fascinating topic of discussion, which is easy to notice from the way Kristen crinkles her nose at his comments. Ross is so focused on boasting about how cultivated he is that he does not realize he's talking far too much. Consequently, we could argue that Ross is flouting the maxim of Quantity but also that of Relation, as he seems to be providing information that is not really relevant for the current purpose of the exchange. Indeed, he stops talking as soon as he realizes he's giving awkwardly irrelevant and unpleasant facts that by no means are helping him to impress

Kristen. This is pretty obvious and comical to Chandler, who ironically highlights Ross' 'smoothness'.

Phoebe is also very frequently responsible for the breaking of the maxim of Quantity. The following example from the pilot episode illustrates this tendency:

(3) [Context: Joey and Chandler are coming over Ross' apartment to help him put together his new furniture] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BN6hgpv9rI>, min 0:41]

**Joey:** Hey Pheebs, you wanna help?

**Phoebe:** Oh, I wish I could, but I don't want to.

(Season 1, Episode 1, The One Where Monica Gets a New Roommate)



In this exchange, Phoebe is clearly deviating from the conventional rules of human social interaction, as she does not seem to realize that her excessive sincerity can offend others and that, in order to avoid being impolite, she should be less straightforward and open. It is thus possible to argue that Phoebe's answer to Joey's request works as an instance of 'unintended impoliteness'. Lakoff (1972: 910) defined politeness as "... what we think is appropriate behaviour in particular situations in an attempt to achieve and maintain successful social relationships with others." Also related to the theory of politeness is the concept of 'face', which Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) defined as "the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for itself", and which can be lost, maintained or enhanced in interaction. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), Face-threatening acts (FTAs) are acts (either verbal or non-verbal) that intrinsically run contrary to the wants of the addressee or the speaker, an example being Phoebe's refusal to help her friends. According to the norms of conventional social interaction, for a refusal not to result in a face-threatening act to the hearer's positive face – that is, his or her desire to be liked, appreciated, approved, etc. –, it should always be accompanied by some kind of justification or excuse. In this case, the expected thing would have been for Phoebe to say something like "Oh, I wish I could, but I'm in a hurry right now", for example. However, it is precisely this breaking of the audience's expectations that is the main source of humour in this interaction, as the justification she chooses to use is actually an open confession that she simply doesn't want to help. In this sense, it could be argued that Phoebe is not observing the maxim of Quantity, as she is giving more information than required at a time when she was expected either not to justify herself or to formulate a justification which could serve as a means of compensating a face-threatening act. Therefore, considering what is expected from a justification, it could also be said that she is not observing the maxim of Relation either.



### 3.2 FLOUTING OF THE MAXIM OF QUALITY

In some cases, humour emerges from the flouting of the maxim of Quality. This principle states that each contribution to human interaction should be truthful, which therefore presupposes the speaker not to say anything which departs from reality or truth. It is interesting to notice how, in ordinary daily conversations, it is not always easy for the hearer to notice whether the speaker is being truthful or not, whereas in sitcoms this is greatly facilitated by the incorporation of exaggerative facial expressions or the insertion of artificial canned laughter. The conversation below serves as an example of a humorous situation achieved through the self-evident flouting of the maxim of Quality.

(4) [Context: Not having fully got over his ex-girlfriend Rachel yet, Ross walks in on her and his best friend Joey kissing. He finds out they have started a relationship and tries to pretend he is OK with it – which he is clearly not.]

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72iLbafxPes>]

**Rachel:** Ross, this is not how we wanted you to find out about this.  
You have every right to go nuts.

**Ross:** I'm not going nuts. Do you see me go nuts?

**Rachel:** No, but you know what I mean.

**Ross:** Hey, hey, hey... If you two are happy, then I'm happy for you. (Squeaky.) I'm fine!

**Joey:** Really?

**Ross:** Absolutely. (Very Squeaky.) I'm fine! Totally fine. I don't know why it's coming out all loud and squeaky, 'cause really, (deep voice) I'm fine. I'm not saying I wasn't a little

surprised to see you guys kissing. I mean, at first I was like..

(Screams.) But now that I've had time to absorb it; Lovin'

this.

(Season 10, Episode 2, The One Where Ross Is Fine)



From the dialogue above, it can be seen that Ross has deliberately violated the maxim of Quality so as to hide the truth that he is definitely not OK with this bizarre couple. However, in doing so he also violates the maxim of Quantity. He goes on and on far too long about his being fine, thus providing more information than required, which at the same time clearly makes it obvious for the audience that he is not telling the truth and therefore flouting the maxim of Quality. He strongly but ineffectively tries to prove to others, and in a way also to himself, that he's 'fine' with the new relationship, although it is easily noticeable that he is not, which thus demonstrates that he is openly trying to mask the truth. His feigned happiness is perhaps even more evident in the way he does not simply say that he approves the new romance, but also ventures into asserting that he's "lovin' this". In his struggle to maintain that he is not affected by what he has just seen, he even admits to be noticing the way the word "fine" keeps coming out "all loud and squeaky", which, together with the length of his explanation, makes it even more obvious to everyone that he is lying. This high-pitched and squeaky voice is combined with sudden changes in intonation and exaggerated gestures and facial expressions resulting from his overreacting, which emphasize the significant role non-verbal language plays in this scene by contributing to evince his deliberate non-observance of this maxim. Indeed, the relevance of body language when considering the flouting of the maxim of Quality is particularly worth mentioning in sitcoms, as they usually enable spectators to fully appreciate characters' overstated facial gestures, thus helping to judge whether the speaker is being truthful or not.

Here the character's aim is not really to create humour but mainly to pretend he is okay with a situation he is clearly not, which we can easily glimpse through his exaggerated reaction that however does result in a humorous situation. Consequently, we

could argue that humour emerges from Ross' numerous exaggerated attempts to break the maxim of Quality. The comic element is further reinforced by the fact that both Rachel and Joey are as perfectly aware as Ross himself that the latter is totally going crazy.

This self-evident flouting of the maxim of Quality is similarly reproduced by Phoebe and Joey's exaggerative reaction in the following example:

(5) [Context: Rachel eventually tells Ross that she is having his baby. Although everyone already knew about this except for him, they pretend not to so that Ross wouldn't feel he is the very last one to find out.] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKVKCgC2iyc>, min 0:17]

**Ross:** Okay, okay look you guys know that Rachel and I slept together, but there's something else. Rachel's pregnant.

**Joey:** (simultaneously) Oh my God!!! I can't believe that!!

**Phoebe:** (simultaneously) Holy mother of God!!!

**Ross:** With my child.

**Phoebe:** That is brand new information!!

**Ross:** You already know don't you?

**Phoebe:** A little bit.

(Season 8, Episode 3, The One Where Rachel Tells...)



In the example above, it is blatantly obvious that Joey and Phoebe are flouting the maxim of Quality by hiding the truth that they already knew about Rachel's pregnancy and who the father was. In their struggle to sound as surprised as possible to Ross'

breaking news so that he wouldn't catch on that they knew about it, Phoebe and Joey end up going too far by visibly over-reacting to his friend's confession. This is evidenced not only by their simultaneously uttered interjections of surprise, but also, and perhaps more significantly, by Phoebe's crying that Ross' announcement is "brand new information", which sounds unequivocally too unnatural, and which therefore proves that both had already been informed. This statement could be also be said to be flouting the maxim of Quantity in a sense, as it constitutes an unnecessarily over-elaborate answer, much more informative than it would be expected by the speaker under normal circumstances. Her unmistakably fake perplexity is so obvious that it even sounds sarcastic, which additionally contributes to reinforcing Phoebe's repeatedly exploited characterization in the series as a very bad liar. Reasonably, Ross is not deceived in the slightest and he is perfectly capable of drawing the correct conclusion too, considering his friend couldn't have been any more obvious. This comical episode was popularized by *Friends* fanatics through memes and gifs which are frequently used as a means of being sarcastic or feigning surprise at some already known or given information.

### **3.3 FLOUTING OF THE MAXIM OF RELATION**

According to this maxim, speakers in interaction are expected to provide only the information that is relevant to the conversation. In other words, the information which is related to what is being talked about, that is, to the topic of discussion. This principle thus implies that one should omit those facts that might be regarded as irrelevant to the current exchange. Phoebe's recurrent flouting of this maxim is definitely one of the most exploited means of creating humour in *Friends*, as can be seen in the following dialogue, taken from the pilot episode:

(6) [Context: Having just left her fiancé at the altar after realizing she is not in love with him, Rachel moves to her best friend Monica’s apartment. To make matters worse, Rachel’s father cuts her off financially over the phone, and she is forced into the “real world” by her new group of friends.]

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMmZ9Mc0YK8>, min 0:34]

**Monica:** C'mon, you can't live off your parents your whole life.

**Rachel:** I know that. That's why I was getting married.

**Phoebe:** Give her a break, it's hard being on your own for the first time.

**Rachel:** Thank you.

**Phoebe:** You're welcome. I remember when I first came to this city. I was fourteen. My mom had just killed herself and my step-dad was back in prison, and I got here, and I didn't know anybody. And I ended up living with this albino guy who was, like, cleaning windows outside port authority, and then he killed himself, and then I found aromatherapy. So believe me, I know exactly how you feel.

**Ross:** The word you're looking for is 'Anyway'...

(Season 1, Episode 1, The One Where Monica Gets a New Roommate)



In the conversation above, we can notice how Phoebe provides a response that does not seem to be exactly related to Rachel's problem. However, in this specific case it could be argued that Phoebe is not really flouting the maxim of Relation but rather violating it unintentionally. She establishes a connection with the topic being talked about – being independent – and from that starting point she moves off in a totally different direction. This connection, however, seems to be quite vague and irrelevant to the rest of the group, as can be seen from Ross' following utterance. Phoebe is striving to be supportive to her friend by confessing that she went through a similar situation, although in fact her experience is by no means comparable to Rachel's. We can say that in this case humour emerges from Phoebe's beating around the bush by telling a story that does not bear much relevance to what Rachel is living through.



Furthermore, it may also be argued that in this dialogue, Phoebe is flouting the maxim of Quantity as well, as she clearly provides far more information than is required in the current exchange. This information could have been acceptable and even expected if the episode she is recounting was somehow comparable to Rachel's circumstances. In this case, however, the comparison of Rachel's fears facing the 'real world' with Phoebe's relatively trivial experience contributes to her flouting the maxim of Relation and consequently the maxim of Quantity, too, however resulting in a humorous scene.

The maxim of Relation can also be flouted for other purposes, such as to avoid answering an uncomfortable question.

(7) [Context: Joey ends up spending the night with a girl he has just met. The morning after they have slept together, Joey asks his roommate Rachel to show her the door, because he does not dare to break things off with her.] [Not available in YouTube]

**Joey's Date:** You must be Rachel, I'm Erin.

**Rachel:** Hi.

**Erin:** Hi. I don't mean this to sound like high school, but did he say anything about me?

**Rachel:** (pause) Would you like some pancakes?

(Season 7, Episode 7, The One With Ross' Book)



In the dialogue above, Rachel's 'answer', which actually is formulated as a question, is apparently completely unrelated to Erin's question, as it does not answer to it at all. Her utterance flouts the maxim of Relation by not answering to what she was asked and instead choosing to ask something unrelated to the first question. The connections which these two utterances lack linguistically are however achieved by means of using our knowledge of the world and of this situation in particular. We are aware that Joey is no longer interested in keeping any contact with this girl, so the implicature that Rachel is trying to avoid answering the question is quite clear, as she understandably does not want to be the one to tell Erin what Joey really thinks of her. In this example it is particularly interesting to consider the way in which we as spectators are completely able to derive the right inference despite Rachel's non-observance of the maxim of Relation. This is closely connected to a key component in this analysis: Sperber and Levinson's Relevance Theory. As it was aforementioned, the primary claim of this theory is that "the

expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise enough, and predictable enough, to guide the hearer towards the speaker's meaning" (Sperber & Wilson 2004: 607). They argued that, because relevance is an inherent part of our human cognitive abilities, speakers in conversation will always interpret and process the received input in a context that maximizes its relevance.

### **3.4 FLOUTING OF THE MAXIM OF MANNER**

According to this maxim, speakers should formulate their message in a brief, direct, clear and orderly way, that is, in what is considered to be an idealized way of communicating. Nonetheless, in real life human interaction, people very frequently resort to ambiguity or obscurity as a means of expressing in a less obvious manner what is not explicitly uttered. In many cases, interlocutors opt out of this maxim by formulating a sentence in an indirect or obscure manner, as is the case with Chandler's answer in the following dialogue:

(8) [Context: Chandler enters hungover and groaning] [Not Available in YouTube]

**Monica:** How ya feelin'?

**Chandler:** Well, my apartment isn't there anymore, because I drank it.

(Season 3, Episode 11, The One Where Chandler Can't Remember Which Sister)



In this conversation we again find a character flouting two different maxims simultaneously in one single utterance. Monica's question could have easily been answered simply by saying "Not great", for example. In this case, however, Chandler chooses to formulate his answer in a more indirect way, apparently changing the topic of conversation from his current mood to such a trivial matter as his apartment. However, it is easy for listeners to derive the right implicature and assume that what he's implying is that he is not feeling good because he is feeling hungover. Indeed, we say that he is being obscure because he is exaggerating. It is obvious that he cannot have possibly drunk his apartment, but this is just a way of implying that he drank excessively. Firstly, he seems to be providing irrelevant information by bringing up his apartment in the conversation, on the basis of which we could argue that he's flouting the maxim of Relation, and at the same time he's being obscure by not uttering a straightforward response, so we can say that he's also flouting the maxim of Manner, as he is not being direct and brief in his answer.

As can be seen from the dialogue above, Chandler possesses a wonderful sense of humour, which he admits he started using as a “defence mechanism” when his parents got divorced. Indeed, it is his magnificent sense of humour that his friends frequently consider to be his main defining feature. Hence, he could be labelled as “the funny one” in the show. Furthermore, Chandler is a master of irony and sarcasm, which constitute the basis of most of his jokes or funny comments. According to Alba Juez (1995: 28), cases of verbal irony seem to have an off-record nature and consequently a certain degree of implicit ambiguity, which therefore makes them instances of the flouting of Grice’s maxim of Manner.

The example above also contributes to exemplifying the existing contradiction among Gricean maxims. As Wangne (1998: 92) believes, “properly understood, the Quantity, Quality, and Relation maxims are consistent. But the maxim of Manner often clashes with the other three. In case of irony, for example, Manner clashes with Quality”. Consequently, what is really meant by the speaker’s utterance cannot be grasped by following a literal interpretation because that would jeopardise the Quality maxim.

When a speaker deliberately chooses to be obscure or not as straightforward and concise as one could be, our first assumption is that this person is trying to hide something or tell something in a way that will not threaten the hearer’s face. This is illustrated in the example below, in which Chandler flouts the maxim of Manner by providing only some information hints for Monica to foresee what he is about to announce.

(9) [Context: Chandler falls asleep in the middle of a work meeting and ends up accidentally accepting a job offer in Oklahoma, so he struggles to find the best way to tell

Monica they are moving to Tulsa.] ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEBo\\_V-b9Ik](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEBo_V-b9Ik), min 1:00)

**Monica:** Okay, what's up?

**Chandler:** Okay. You know we always said it would be fun to move to Paris for a year? And you could study French cooking, and I could write and we could picnic along the Seine, and go wine-tasting in Bordeaux.

**Monica:** Yeah.

**Chandler:** Okay. You know how people say that Tulsa is the Paris of Oklahoma?

**Monica:** What? Who says that?

**Chandler:** People who've never ever been to Paris.

**Monica:** What's going on?

**Chandler:** We're moving to Tulsa!

(Season 9, Episode 2, The One Where Emma Cries)



Chandler once again flouts the maxim of Manner by knowingly delivering his news in a totally obscure and roundabout way. One may conclude that being indirect is Chandler's politeness strategy used to mitigate the impact that his final announcement may have on Monica's face. In a way, it could be said that Chandler is trying to save her positive face, for he is constantly struggling to show closeness by claiming common grounds and attending her needs. He uses in-group identity markers when referring to their shared interests and future plans as a couple and uses humour as a means of creating a homely and convivial atmosphere. He also attempts to mitigate the face-threatening act to Monica's negative face by trying not to make the news sound as an imposition or an intrusion on her own freedom of action. In his attempt to avoid making Monica angry at him, Chandler refuses to admit he made a terrible mistake accepting the offer and instead he tries to sound as eager to move to Tulsa as possible, making it sound as a life goal for them.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As was aforementioned, this paper sought to address two main questions as regards the production of humour in *Friends*: in which ways were Grice's conversational maxims flouted or violated, and how this non-observance of the maxims contributed to creating humorous situations.

Consequently, and through the study of humour in the situation comedy *Friends*, three main conclusions have been drawn. Firstly, it has been demonstrated that the show broadly relies on the deliberate violation or flouting of Grice's conversational maxims for the creation of humour in conversation, for it has been shown that each humorous statement analysed, uttered by different characters, disobeys one or more of the four maxims proposed by Grice. To start with, the maxim of Quantity was flouted in those occasions in which the speakers provided more information than required by the hearer. In this sense, Ross was found responsible for two of the three examples analysed of the violation of this maxim, be it as a way of exaggeratedly expressing his profound sense of sadness (example 1) or as part of his attempt to impress a girl by boasting about his wide encyclopaedic knowledge and intelligence (2). Phoebe is also responsible for the flouting of this maxim in example (3), where the character disobeys the maxim of Quantity so as to justify her answer, although she ends up crossing the line and being unnecessarily – and even impolitely – honest in her excuse, which certainly contributes to making hers a humorous and definitely unexpected reaction. The maxim of Quality was shown to be flouted either by not telling the truth, as a means of trying to hide one's true feelings, as is the case with Ross in example (4), or by hiding the truth by pretending to ignore some already known information, as with Phoebe and Joey in example (5). In both cases, the violation of this maxim results in genuinely comic situations. The maxim of Relation was



shown to be violated by changing the topic of conversation, either unintentionally as Phoebe's unsuccessful attempt to show empathy with a friend in distress (6) or clearly intentionally as with Rachel in example (7), where she deliberately chooses to change the subject in order to avoid an uncomfortable conversation. Finally, the reasons that have been found to justify the different violations of the maxim of Manner are either the wish to express in a more obscure, ironic and humorous manner what is not explicitly uttered, as is the case with example (8) or the need to mitigate the impact of a face-threatening act on the hearer, as with example (9).

Secondly, it has also been shown that specific characters are intimately linked to particular types of humour, which in turn are generated through the flouting of specific maxims. It could therefore be concluded that certain kinds of flouts are characteristic of particular characters in the series, and that the motivation behind a character's tendency to flout one specific maxim more frequently than others appears to be related to the particular personality traits or characteristics of the character in question. This is perhaps more evident if we take the characters of Phoebe and Chandler, whom I consider to be the two most clearly outlined ones. As has been proved through the analysis of specific examples, there is a kind of mutual and direct relation between a character and their sense of humour. In other words, it could be argued that, just as each character's personal humour is strongly marked by their charismatic and engaging personalities – probably the most distinguished ones in the show – so are such vibrant personalities, in turn, profoundly shaped by their humour. In the case of Phoebe, who “has always been somewhat of a question mark”<sup>1</sup>, it seems fair to say that, in many respects, she is just different from the rest. She could briefly be defined as “the weird one”, eccentric and

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<sup>1</sup> The One Where Chandler Can't Cry – Season 6, Episode 14

unconventional, still much of a child at heart and a bit naïve at times. Spiritual, activist and vegetarian, Phoebe sees the good in everything and does not really worry about conforming to any kind of social conventions or norms, to the point that her statements could be regarded as often flouting the majority of Gricean maxims. Regarding the results found in the analysis, one can conclude that her free-spirited personality does account for her sharp sense of humour, represented by her typically indiscriminate ideas and comments and her apparently incoherent and almost absurd responses. Consequently, she has been found to be most frequently responsible for the non-observance of the maxim of Quantity and Relation. Her inherent, excessive honesty results in her openly flouting the maxim of Quantity by giving too much (and too sincere) information when coming up with an ‘excuse’ to justify her decision of not helping Ross and Joey in example (3), to the point of seeming completely unaware of the norms of conventional social interaction. This kind of straightforward, careless and definitely unpredictable answer is highly characteristic of Phoebe and her somehow atypical perception of the world. Because she lives in her own world obeying only her own rules, it is common in some episodes to see her uttering seemingly irrelevant or unrelated comments, almost as if she were merely putting her arbitrary thoughts into words. In this sense, she is also commonly responsible for the flouting of the maxim of Relation. In such cases, her statements do not really help to move the conversation forward but rather act as a disturbing element that interrupts the ongoing exchange of information and diverts the others’ concentration to the randomness of her interventions. This could be said to be the case in example (6), where Ross’ last utterance evidences everybody’s perplexity to Phoebe’s rambling and seemingly out-of-context monologue. Nevertheless, however vague it is, there is a link between Phoebe’s contribution and the conversation she is involved in: in her own peculiar way, she is trying to comfort Rachel by making her friend know that she empathises with her. The problem

is that this relation between the turns is so imprecise that it becomes even invisible for listeners, though assumably not so much for her friends, who have known her for some time and are already familiar with her complex reasonings and odd but cooperative contributions.

In the case of Chandler, it seems reasonable to speak about his surprisingly quick and sarcastic sense of humour as one of the main defining traits of his charming and magnetic personality. Being undoubtedly one of the most hilarious characters in the show, Chandler is introduced from the very first moment as a master of ironic remarks, sharp comebacks and witty one-liners. He could briefly be defined as ‘the comical one’, the one who always knows how to break the ice with a funny comment, regardless of how inappropriate or out of place it may sound at the moment. He himself even admits funny is “all he has”<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, this piece of research has proved that Chandler’s quick-witted personality and sarcastic sense of humour are very often accountable for his multiple violations of the maxim of Manner, that is, his particular way of saying things. His obscure and indirect answer in example (8) is very illustrative of this character’s ability to easily come up with subtle but hilarious remarks. Instead of simply saying that he is feeling hungover and that, as a result of this, he feels terribly badly, he chooses to formulate his message in a more roundabout, implicit and clearly sarcastic manner, thus flouting the maxim in a very natural and genuine way. In a sense, this also responds to the character’s innate tendency to turn any minor situation into a joke, which further contributes to making his contributions some of the most memorable ones in the show. It is thus possible to argue that Chandler’s most common humour strategy is his deliberate non-observance of the maxim of Manner, which at the same time can be said to be in perfect correlation with his playful and charismatic personality.

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<sup>2</sup> The One With The Blind Dates – Season 9, Episode 14

As has been demonstrated, the construction of Phoebe and Chandler as characters in *Friends* is deeply influenced by their particular sense of humour and the specific comedic devices and strategies that they are prone to employ, which in this study have also been shown to involve the flouting of one or more of the maxims proposed by Grice.

Finally, I reached one last conclusion concerning the applicability of the Cooperative Principle. It could be concluded that, against Grice's conviction that the Cooperative Principle was a necessary condition to be observed if speakers were to achieve successful communication, it has been proved that the flouting of its conversational maxims can also contribute to moving the conversation forward and getting the message across. In this sense, we can appreciate that characters in the series are perfectly able to derive the right implicatures and extract the maximum relevance in each particular situation, regardless of whether a maxim is being violated. If we consider that under normal circumstances, speakers are expected to conform to the maxims, then when hearers are confronted with their non-observance, they automatically feel compelled to come up with other alternative inferences. What is more, in many cases, these inferences can turn out to be completely opposite to the expected, explicitly uttered message. This is the case with the examples of the flouting of the maxim of Quality. For instance, despite Ross' repetitive assertion that he's 'totally fine'<sup>3</sup>, it remains pretty clear both for Rachel and Joey that their friend is being untruthful. They have no difficulty noticing that Ross is purposefully flouting one of the conversational maxims in order to hide the fact that, at heart, he is deeply offended. Similarly, if we consider the non-observance of the maxim of Relation, we realize that the connections which two utterances may lack linguistically are however quickly grasped by the characters thanks

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<sup>3</sup> The One Where Ross Is Fine – Season 10, Episode 2

to their knowledge of the world and their shared and in-group information. Consequently, this piece of research has demonstrated that all characters are capable of deciphering speakers' true intentions and implied meanings behind each flout, which further shows that, in spite of such violations, participants in interaction are still thought to be cooperative. They still manage to successfully get their message across and make themselves understood, thus contributing to moving the conversation forward. To conclude, it could therefore be argued that the Cooperative Principle is not "a structural frame that restricts speech and allows no breakthrough" (Xiaosu, 2010: 22), and neither is its obedience an indispensable condition for communication to be favourable. Instead, any instance of communication can be regarded as successful as long as "the communicator provides evidence of her/his intention to convey a certain thought, and the audience infers this intention from the evidence provided by the communicator." (Kecskés, 2006: 569). In the examples analysed, we see how characters very frequently choose not to observe the maxims on purpose so as to produce a series of humorous situations based on the conversational implicatures contained in them. These implicatures are in turn generally rightly inferred by their hearers, which thus contributes to making the conversation proceed and demonstrates that the intentional or unintentional non-observance of the Cooperative Principle does not prevent speakers from engaging in successful communication. Therefore, this study has conclusively evidenced that there are certain noteworthy limitations to Grice's postulates.

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