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A Pragmatic Analysis of Linguistic Humor: Understanding Situation Comedy

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to shed light on how linguistic humor is understood. The starting point of the paper is the supposition that viewers of humorous television programs must engage in some form of quasi-pragmatic analysis of language if they are to comprehend the linguistic humor with which they are presented. Through the application of theories of language use, linguistic data from television comedies are analyzed, and possible ways of viewers' comprehension thereof are suggested. Episodes of the television series *Blackadder*, *Only Fools and Horses*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *The Two Ronnies* are the sources of data. The findings show the importance of context and schemata in the interpretation of meaning, and the distinction between pragmatic and semantic meaning is also highlighted as a method of comprehension. It is demonstrated that Grice's Cooperative Principle provides an appropriate analytical framework for understanding a wide range of humorous interactions. In addition, the implications that the presence of various speech acts in comedy programs have for meaning are also touched upon.

Keywords: context, Cooperative Principle, linguistic humor, pragmatics, situation comedy

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Drawing on theoretical descriptions of language use, the present paper endeavors to analyze some, albeit not all, of the ways in which linguistic humor can be interpreted. It is hypothesized that humorous language use has the desired effect on an audience only if those at whom humor is directed understand the intended pragmatic meaning of the humorous excerpt. In humor research, Incongruity-Resolution Theory has gained prominence as an analytical framework: Suls (1983) suggested that it is the resolution of the incongruity between one's expectations in a given situation and the unexpected deviation from those expectations that gives rise to amusement. The resolution may take place in a multitude of ways, but it will be shown in this paper that pragmatic theories can be called on to provide insights into the processes which underlie the understanding of humor.

In this study, linguistic humor will be analyzed in the context of comedy: more specifically, in television situation comedies. Unlike interlocutors in face-to-face dialogues, viewers of television programs cannot rely on interaction of any sort. Therefore, humorous television comedy provides no opportunity for viewers to reach an interpretation through the negotiation of meaning. This appears to emphasize the importance of the analytical processes in which viewers engage to detect and understand the humor targeted at them. The analysis of humor conducted by viewers as they watch situation comedy is largely subliminal and almost instantaneous; nonetheless, a pragmatic understanding of language is a prerequisite. Although pragmatic analyses are carried out by researchers rather than by viewers of television programs, the process of understanding the intended meaning of humorous language use bears resemblance to pragmatic analysis: The comedic intentions of writers can be decoded in similar ways by television viewers and by researchers; the chief difference is that viewers understand linguistic humor intuitively and spontaneously, whereas researchers make a concentrated effort to put forward theory-based explanations of how the intended meaning is understood. In so doing, researchers who draw on linguistic data can validate models of language use developed by theoreticians.

In what follows, an overview of some pragmatic theories that lend themselves to application in the analysis of linguistic humor is presented. Subsequently, the theory discussed in the first part of the paper is put to use in a dissection of extracts from humorous television programs.

Theoretical Framework

Pragmatics and Semantics

Before a pragmatic analysis of humorous language use can be conducted, the term that is the focal point of the investigation (i.e., pragmatics) ought to be disambiguated. Pragmatics has been defined, broadly, as the "study of the knowledge and procedures which enable people to understand each other's words" (Cook, 2003, p. 130). In essence, pragmatics is concerned with human understanding, but Cook's definition can be elaborated on in order to arrive at a more comprehensive description of what pragmatics entails. In Korta and Perry's (2019) view, pragmatics is an intricate subfield of applied linguistics that involves the examination of what speakers say and what they mean by it, the intent that lies behind their utterances, and the circumstances under which the utterances are given.

Pragmatics can also be conceived of in terms of what it is not. To this end, pragmatics may be contrasted with semantics as these two strands of language study can be delineated in relation to one another. Semantics is concerned with meaning in a more literal sense and can be defined as "the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and entities in the world; that is, how words literally connect to things" (Yule, 1996, p. 4). Semantics, then, is the study of form and meaning at an abstract level (i.e., what words may denote in a particular language). It is, thus, a descriptive field of linguistics, and in this regard, semantics resembles natural science; it describes meaning in much the same way as, say, chemistry describes the properties of elements. Pragmatics, on the other hand, "is the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and the users of those forms" (Yule, 1996, p. 4). Consequently, a pragmatic analysis of linguistic forms is centered on the social aspect of language use, which is, to a large extent, about understanding the contextual meaning of

language. The primary concern of pragmatics is not what words mean on their own but what a speaker means by an utterance in a particular context of use. Although semantics and pragmatics examine different aspects of meaning, they are inseparable as meaning is created when language is used (i.e., meaning is a product of use). From a semantic perspective, "honey," for example, may be food or a term of endearment; however, neither meaning can be assigned to the lexical item unless it is used in context.

Context and Schemata

As it was alluded to in the previous section, the meaning that is communicated through language can be understood only in context. This becomes evident when a sentence such as "I do" is considered. Even though "I do" is grammatically well-formed and will be readily recognized by speakers of English as a declarative sentence, it is devoid of meaning in isolation. However, when the same sentence (i.e., "I do") is preceded by a question (e.g., "Do you like chocolate?") or another statement (e.g., "I don't think you should eat that Mars bar"), its meaning emerges from the context and becomes apparent. Therefore, context is of particular relevance to the forthcoming analysis of humorous language use. It is important to note that context is not created automatically by language. According to Widdowson (2007), "a first-person party (a speaker or writer, **P1**) produces a text which keys the second-person party (the listener or reader, **P2**) into a context assumed to be shared" (p. 22). What follows from this is that context does not exist independently of what language users know about the world. The assumptions a first-person party makes about the scope of the shared context have crucial implications for the amount of information that needs to be conveyed. Provided that the context required for pragmatic understanding is indeed shared, this knowledge must be invoked by the second-person party if they are to make sense of the utterance. Insufficient familiarity with the context to which the text produced by P1 alludes, then, results in an inability on the part of P2 to comprehend fully the information that is imparted to them.

The knowledge that is required for the contextualization of utterances has been referred to as schema (see, e.g., Howard, 1987). Widdowson (2007)

warned against making the assumption that meaning is encoded in texts and emphasized the importance of schemata, from which meaning can be inferred (p. 29). This was illustrated by Illés (2020), who pointed out that passers-by in Central Park, New York City will not recognize the intended meaning of the word "Imagine" in the park as the John Lennon Memorial unless they know about the singer and the song. Incidentally, the use of the definite article herein before the words "singer" and "song" is indicative of the assumptions a first-person party makes about the context they share with the second-person party (i.e., knowledge of who John Lennon was and familiarity with the song "Imagine"). Passers-by who fail to recognize the intended meaning of "Imagine" may well formulate their own interpretations of the meaning of the word. Should this happen, the intended meaning may not be conveyed, but any resultant interpretation may be legitimate with reference to the schemata on which passers-by rely to infer meaning.

"Words function as schema activators" (Widdowson, 2007, p. 31). That is to say, the lexical items that are used in a conversation will serve as a basis for the hearer to select the contextually relevant schema. For example, upon hearing the words "balance wheel," "crown," and "jewels," an aficionado of wristwatches will activate their schema of horology and interpret the ensuing conversation with reference to this background knowledge, whereas a person who is not familiar with watch movements (i.e., the particular schema that should be activated) will fail to grasp much of what is said. Alternatively, a second-person party who is not acquainted with the schema that the first-person party intends to key into may activate an altogether different schema (e.g., the schema of crown jewels rather than that of timepieces) and consequently arrive at a different and contextually incorrect interpretation of the utterance. The activation of an unrelated schema may result in amusement if, for instance, a third-party observer (e.g., the viewer of a television program) realizes that two interlocutors in a conversation (e.g., characters in a situation comedy) are oblivious to the fact that they construe the dialogue vis-à-vis different schemata. This realization can lead to the resolution of incongruity (Suls, 1983), thereby prompting laughter.

Speech Acts

Language may be used for a number of ends. One of the many purposes that language can fulfill is to effect a change in the normal state of affairs. Austin (1975) referred to these instances of language use as performative sentences or performative utterances because such sentences do not describe actions but perform them. Marriage is an example of the types of action that performative utterances can bring about: "When I say … 'I do', I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it" (Austin, 1975, p. 6). It should be noted that the list of performative utterances is extensive: Apologies, compliments, inquiries, invitations, promises, and requests are all actions that are done entirely verbally. Furthermore, Austin stressed that a performative sentence cannot be true or false; a compliment, after all, remains a compliment even if it is paid insincerely. Some difficulty, however, will be encountered if the claim that performative utterances are distinct from other utterances is to be maintained. One of the problems is that performative utterances cannot be enumerated because a speech act (e.g., an apology) can be expressed in a large—potentially infinite—number of ways. In the development of Speech Act Theory, Austin realized that a distinction between descriptive and performative utterances was not tenable because making a statement of any kind can be equated with the performance of an act. Therefore, what can be examined is the utterance itself, the communicative intention behind the utterance, and the consequences engendered by the utterance.

For a description of how speech acts operate, the introduction of additional terminology is needed. Austin (1975) differentiated between locution and perlocution, and the two are connected by the illocutionary force, which is often covert but crucial to the success of a speech act. In practice, these terms refer, respectively, to what is said, what is achieved by what is said, and what is meant by what is said. For example, uttering a question such as "Don't you think it's a little chilly?" is the locution, and the illocutionary force behind it may be a request (e.g., P1 may subtly signal to P2 to close a window), which may or may not be understood as one. The effect that the locution has upon its hearer is the perlocution, which, in this case, may be agreement followed by the closure

of the window. Speech acts can be direct or indirect (see, e.g., Green, 2014; Searle, 1969), and the previous example was an indirect one. An imperative sentence (e.g., "Sit down!") would be the archetype of a direct speech act where the imperative form corresponds to the intended meaning of request or order. Thus, when direct speech acts are used, the locution explicitly expresses the illocutionary force; therefore, what P1 says affords P2 little room for interpretation. In the analysis of humorous language use, indirect speech acts are likely to be identified more often as a source of humor than direct ones because they harbor the potential for miscommunication.

The Cooperative Principle

With the indirectness of speech acts mentioned, the possibility of implying, rather than stating, one's message has already been touched upon. More light may be cast on implications, or conversational implicatures, if reference is made to the theory known as Grice's Cooperative Principle. Grice (1975) argued that conversations between two or more speakers are "cooperative efforts" (p. 45). What is meant by this is that talk is cooperatively constructed, that is to say, interlocutors contribute to a conversation with particular principles in mind. The Principle can be succinctly summarized in one sentence: "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, 1975, p. 45).

Grice (1975) devised four broad categories that are concerned with various facets of human communication. These categories, which are called maxims, are the following: "Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). The maxim of Quantity pertains to the extent to which interlocutors contribute to a conversation, and this is normally not more than what is required in a particular instance of communication. The maxim of Quality is concerned with the truthfulness of utterances. The maxim of Relation, as it may be inferred from its name, bears on the relevance of utterances in a conversation. Finally, the maxim of Manner relates to "HOW what is said is to be said" (Grice, 1975, p. 46), with particular emphasis on the opacity of meaning or the lack thereof.

A brief digest of the Cooperative Principle such as the one above may seem like a set of regulative ordinances; however, these are not rules that must be obeyed. It is precisely the deviation from the maxims that begets implicatures. If one, for instance, were to ask a waiter about the freshness of an item on a restaurant menu and the waiter started to talk about another item, it could be reasonably assumed that something is unsaid but implied. In this case, the hypothetical waiter violates the maxim of Relation, and a logical explanation for the violation of the maxim would be that the item in question is not fresh. As it will be shown in the analysis below, conversational implicatures can be exploited on television for comic effect.

Remarks on Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data analyzed in this paper were collected from English-language television comedies. The collection and the analysis of the data were carried out without adherence to some of the principles that characterize qualitative research such as seeking saturation or pursuing triangulation as such methodology would not have been compatible with the study. Instead, the analysis was conducted with reference to the theoretical background. Data were collected from four different comedy programs: *Blackadder* (Curtis et al., 1989), *Only Fools and Horses* (Sullivan & Butt, 1982), *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre et al., 2009; Prady et al., 2008), and *The Two Ronnies* (Mullins et al., 1976). In total, seven extracts were analyzed, and the objective of the study was to shed light upon the analytical processes in which viewers of television comedy engage in order to understand humorous language use. No method of analysis appears to be universally applicable as each humorous dialogue on television—much like each utterance in real-life communication—is unique. Therefore, different approaches of analysis were adopted depending on what kind of interpretation befits the particular instance of linguistic humor under scrutiny.

The theories that were briefly introduced in the overview above describe language use under ordinary circumstances. The data, however, come from television comedies. Programs of this kind are scripted; writers construct dialogues which are performed by actors, and the whole affair is filmed in a

studio. Language use that arises in this manner does not resemble language use that occurs in naturalistic settings. There are numerous differences between the language of television programs and naturally occurring language use, but two are particularly striking. Firstly, the dialogues in which characters of a television program engage are constructed by someone other than the interactants; this removes all spontaneity from the dialogues and makes the language theatrical. Secondly, television comedies are aimed at an audience; consequently, all language use featured in a television program is written and performed with the viewer in mind, which entails making the dialogues relevant to the viewer as well as to the characters who produce the language. Doubts, therefore, may be voiced about the authenticity of communication presented on television. However, such concerns are extraneous to this study because what is presented below is an analysis of comprehension rather than of production. In this sense, authenticity comes from the viewer; it can be argued that the process of understanding scripted humor is identical to the process of understanding real-life humor because fictional portrayals of language use "represent a reality that the audience recognizes and responds to based on their schematic knowledge of conversation they are familiar with" (Widdowson, 2012, p. 18). The viewer (or P2), therefore, engages with the language and makes sense of it on their own terms irrespective of whether it is seen on television or heard in person. Comprehension or miscomprehension can occur in either setting.

It follows from the approach adopted for data analysis that the findings of the study are in no way generalizable and pertain only to the excerpts under analysis. What is more, the analysis is the product of the analyst, which places an inherent limitation on the interpretation of language use. As Illés (2020) pointed out, an analyst is an outsider who can reach only their personal interpretation of an utterance because "the schemata the analyst engages, and the purpose of their activity is different from those of the insider participants" (p. 138). What this means is that an instance of humorous language use may be interpreted differently by the analyst from how it was intended by the writer. In this sense, the analyst is not different from a viewer. Conversely, all

viewers are analysts. Each analysis presented below is one of many possibilities. Nevertheless, it will be shown through the application of the theories to the data that there are some general principles that facilitate the comprehension of language in context. Humorous language use is understood in the same way as ordinary language use, and comedy writers must exploit these principles—either knowingly or instinctively—if they are to entertain their audience.

Data Analysis and Results

In order to show how comedy can stem from the exploitation of the difference between semantic and pragmatic meaning, a conversation between two main characters of *The Big Bang Theory*, which is a situation comedy that portrays the everyday experiences of characters Leonard, Sheldon, and their neighbor Penny, can be cited. In this episode, Leonard, an academic, attempts to convince Sheldon, who is a fellow academic, to attend a conference with him and present a paper that they authored together. Sheldon is reluctant to oblige; therefore, Leonard unrelentingly continues to persuade him.

> Leonard: Sheldon, we have to do this.
> Sheldon: No, we don't. We have to take in nourishment, expel waste, and inhale enough oxygen to keep ourselves from dying; everything else is optional. (Prady et al., 2008, 4:59)

This scene capitalizes on the dichotomy between the abstract meaning and the contextual meaning of the given utterance. When P1 says that they have to do something, the viewer of the program contextualizes the utterance and realizes that what is meant by "have to" is "should" in reality. Even though obligation is expressed semantically, there is no indication of an inescapable need for them to do what Leonard suggests, and it is apparent to the viewer. Sheldon, however, fails to consider the suggestion from a pragmatic perspective and takes it at face value. Sheldon's adherence to the semantic meaning of the

utterance (i.e., strong obligation expressed by "have to") may strike those viewers who recognize the discrepancy between the semantic and pragmatic meaning of the sentence as entertaining.

Another humorous dialogue illustrates the relevance of context in the interpretation of meaning. The conversation below is from the situation comedy *Blackadder*, and it takes place between two soldiers in the First World War. Considering that most of the episode is set in a trench, the primary associations which viewers make are likely to be of a military nature, with the schema of war being activated. In the scene, however, the theme of religion is unexpectedly brought to the fore when the characters decide to paint a picture of a nun. No nun is shown on screen, but the character Baldrick, a private, is ordered by his commanding officer to pose as a nun for the painter. It is under these circumstances that the following dialogue occurs:

> Baldrick: You know the funny thing is my father was a nun.
> Blackadder: No, he wasn't.
> Baldrick: He was so, sir. I know 'cause whenever he was up in court and the judge used to say, "Occupation?", he'd say, "none."
> (Curtis et al., 1989, 14:35)

A written reproduction of the exchange robs it of its ambiguity, which derives from the fact that the words "nun" and "none" are homophones. From the viewer's perspective, nonetheless, there is no difference between the words, and what is heard twice is /nʌn/. Because the prelude to this dialogue makes explicit reference to nuns, it is to be expected that the string of sounds /nʌn/ will be interpreted initially in relation to the schema of religion. This, then, immediately gives rise to incongruity because the viewer's schema of a nun (i.e., a female monastic) is likely to be in conflict with that of a father (i.e., typically a male parent). Baldrick's statement, therefore, is schematically incongruous, and the incongruity happens to be overt as parts of the sentence are semantically incompatible. The viewer is presented with a seemingly unresolvable conundrum, which is echoed by Blackadder's rapid rejection of the statement. It is the

introduction of a different context, the courtroom, which allows a different schema to be activated and a different interpretation to be formed. As Suls (1983) suggested, laughter is brought to the viewer "when the incongruity is resolved; that is, the punch line is seen to make sense at some level with the earlier information in the joke" (p. 42). In this case, the information presented earlier can make sense only if it is recontextualized. If /nʌn/ is uttered in response to a judge's question about a man's occupation, the word all of a sudden loses its religious connotations and becomes understandable only as a negative pronoun.

The next extract to be analyzed comes from *Only Fools and Horses*, and it is a further illustration of how words can activate various schemata and how those schemata can distort the apparent meaning of an utterance. In the episode "The Long Legs of the Law," Rodney, a young man who lives with his brother and grandfather, is shown as he is preparing for a rendezvous with a policewoman. Incidentally, the very title of the episode is a schema activator: It is a pun that reminds the viewers of the figurative expression (i.e., the long arm of the law) about the power of the police. Because Rodney and his relatives cannot be described as the epitome of a law-abiding family, the prospect of an alliance between Rodney and a member of the police force torments his brother and grandfather considerably. While the constable, called Sandra, is being entertained in the living room of Rodney's family, the anxious grandfather makes a faux pas, which is then wittily neutralized by Rodney's brother Derek.

> Granddad [to Sandra]: Rodney's got a police record.
> Derek: Yes, er, Walking on the Moon! Have you… you know… you've heard that one, haven't ya? Yeah, yeah, I'll play it for you later on if you like. (Sullivan & Butt, 1982, 17:18)

When the grandfather mentions a police record, he activates the schema of criminal records in the viewers. Coupled with the family's fear of the police and the fact that not everything in their flat is legally theirs, the utterance unquestionably leads the audience and the policewoman to believe that Rodney has been known to engage in illicit acts. Wishing to remedy the situation, Rodney's brother is able to think of a sharp riposte that challenges the schema used to interpret the first

utterance. In order to understand how Derek's response alters the meaning of the grandfather's utterance, the viewers of the program need to be familiar with The Police, which were an English rock band in the 1980s. If a viewer does not know about the band, they may not be able to change the schema in relation to which the utterance is interpreted. For those, however, who can use different schemata to make sense of the grandfather's statement, the utterance becomes amusingly ambiguous: What was believed to be a criminal record is, in a fraction of a second, schematically converted into a sound recording on vinyl.

In addition to context and schemata, the Cooperative Principle is utilized by second-person parties when they formulate their interpretations of what a first-person party meant by an utterance. The strength of Grice's (1975) theory lies in its description of the logic and the automaticity of interpretation. Although conversational implicatures can be understood with reference to the Cooperative Principle, other instances of language use (i.e., utterances without deliberate implicatures) may also be made comprehensible through the theory. Because the Cooperative Principle describes how speakers use language in normal circumstances, the theory can also be used for the description of communication breakdowns. An example of humorous communication breakdowns can be cited from a comedy sketch show entitled *The Two Ronnies*, which featured a now-classic sketch that was based on miscommunication between a shopkeeper and a customer in a hardware shop. Upon entry into the shop, the customer makes his way to the counter, and the following dialogue ensues:

> Customer: Four candles.
> Shopkeeper: Four candles?
> [The shopkeeper proceeds to place four candles on the counter.]
> Shopkeeper: There you are. Four candles.
> Customer: No. Four candles.
> Shopkeeper: Well, there you are. Four candles.
> Customer: No. Fork 'andles. 'Andles for forks.
> [The shopkeeper removes the candles from the counter and replaces them with a pitchfork handle.]
> Shopkeeper: Thought you were saying four candles. There you are. (Mullins et al., 1976, 25:33)

The elements of this conversation are likely to be consistent with the viewer's schema of a retail transaction: A customer asks for articles in a shop and is subsequently being served. Not even on closer inspection does the conversation seem to deviate from the expected norms of communication as most of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle are observed. The exchange is conducted in good faith, and the utterances which are used to communicate the participants' intentions do not violate the maxim of Quality; it is, after all, difficult to ask for something in a shop dishonestly. The viewer of the program may deem the dialogue somewhat terse, but the brevity of expression ought not to be seen as a violation of the maxim of Quantity because customers are normally expected to communicate with shopkeepers concisely and efficiently and also because the name of the article one wishes to obtain should be sufficient information for a shopkeeper to supply it— whether pleasantries are also exchanged in the process is not relevant from the perspective of communicative success. The lack of gratuitous language use also means that the maxim of Relation is fully satisfied: The participants talk about the transaction and nothing else. It is the maxim of Manner which appears to be violated in the exchange, and this is both the source of misunderstanding and the source of humor. Once again, the written transcript of the exchange is deceptive because the customer never, in fact, says that he wishes to purchase four candles. What he says is /ˌfɔːk ˈændlz/, and herein lies the violation of the maxim of Manner. The non-standard pronunciation of the word "handle" does not satisfy the maxim in that it does not "avoid obscurity of expression" and is not executed "with reasonable dispatch" (Grice, 1975, pp. 46–47). It is debatable whether the maxim of Manner is violated intentionally because the customer is portrayed as a speaker of a dialect of English which is characterized by aitch-dropping (i.e., the omission of the voiceless glottal fricative word-initially). The customer may or may not be aware of the ambiguity that can derive from the idiosyncrasies of the dialect he speaks, but this is impossible to determine. (By contrast, the writers of the comedy sketch were evidently aware of the potential for ambiguity.) The viewer and the shopkeeper formulate their interpretation of the utterance in unison; therefore, they are both confused when it emerges that what is provided is not what the customer asks for.

The absence of the word-initial /h/ sound creates incongruity, and the clarification provided by the customer constitutes the resolution, which results in hilarity.

The same sketch features many a similar misinterpretation, which, once established as a pattern, generates a sense of wariness in the second-person parties, who are the viewer and the shopkeeper. Similarly to the previous situation, the perspectives of the viewer and the shopkeeper are identical, though only the shopkeeper is able to shape the dialogue through his participation. For identifying the cause of miscommunication, the Cooperative Principle can also be called upon in the dialogue below, wherein the customer asks for pumps.

> Customer: Pumps.
> Shopkeeper: Pumps.
> Customer: Pumps.
> Shopkeeper: Hand pumps, foot pumps? Come on.
> Customer: Foot pumps.
> Shopkeeper: Foot pumps. Foot pumps. Can't see any foot pumps. Oh. Must tidy up in here.
> [The shopkeeper proceeds to place a foot-operated bicycle pump on the counter.]
> Shopkeeper: There we are.
> Customer: No. Pumps for your feet. Brown pumps, size nine.
> (Mullins et al., 1976, 30:42)

Although the structure of this excerpt is similar to that of the previous one, the reasons for the misunderstanding are not the same. Some of the same conditions apply as in the previous excerpt: The maxims of Quality and Relation are fully satisfied for the same reasons as before. In contrast to the utterances in the previous piece of the conversation, what is said in this snippet does not appear to violate the maxim of Manner. The customer asks for pumps, and pumps are what he wants; therefore, the utterance is made in accordance with the Gricean principles, and there is little room for ambiguity. Nevertheless, the customer's bid to acquire pumps goes awry when he receives bicycle pumps

instead of footwear. After analyzing how the exchange unfolds, the viewer might arrive at the conclusion that less is said than what is necessary. In Gricean terms, this is a violation of the maxim of Quantity as the customer fails to make his "contribution as informative as required" (Grice, 1975, p. 45) and consequently does not make himself understood. The realization that insufficient information was imparted initially prompts the customer to remedy the situation by adding the information about the color and the size of the pumps. With the additional information, the shopkeeper is able to activate his schema of footwear and interpret the request for pumps with reference to that and therefore arrive at the intended meaning. This allows "pumps" to be recognized as a homonym and to be placed within its intended context. The viewer is likely to make the same realization as the shopkeeper, with the only difference being that the former is entertained by the ambiguity, whereas the latter is annoyed.

As mentioned earlier, the Cooperative Principle can also be exploited in creating conversational implicatures. This can be illustrated by a dialogue from *The Big Bang Theory*. In the episode from which the exchange below is taken, neighbor Penny, who is in the red and therefore needs to rationalize her finances and cut costs, informs Leonard that she is contemplating moving house. As a prelude to this exchange, Leonard earlier suggests that Penny quit her acting lessons in order to save more money. Penny, an amateur thespian who desperately awaits a breakthrough in her career, rules out the possibility of canceling her acting lessons and urges Leonard to help conceive of alternative ways of supplementing her income. Then the following dialogue results:

> Leonard: Well, I'm sure the guy living with Sheldon wouldn't mind moving in with you.
> Penny: Oh, Leonard, honey, if we started living together, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off you.
> Leonard: Really?
> Penny: And you thought my acting lessons were a waste of money! (Lorre et al., 2009, 13:12)

At first glance, there is a mismatch between Leonard's question and Penny's answer because Penny seems to refer back to something which is not touched upon by the immediate context. The extent of the irrelevance of Penny's utterance is such that the viewer cannot help but wonder why she decides to talk about her acting lessons all of a sudden. As soon as acting is equated with falsity, the viewer realizes that Penny opted for the non-observance of the maxim of Relation in order to convey a conversational implicature: Namely that what she told Leonard was said in jest, and Penny's remark, therefore, is sarcastic rather than sincere. The fact that what Leonard initially perceives as flattery is in fact slight mockery may turn out to be a source of mirth for the audience.

Indirect speech acts may also be employed by comedy writers for humorous effect. This is demonstrated by a conversation that takes place earlier on in the same episode of *The Big Bang Theory* between Penny and her other neighbor Sheldon. In the course of the discussion, Penny points out that she is indebted.

> Penny: I'm just a little behind on my bills because they cut back my hours at the restaurant and my car broke down.
> Sheldon: If you recall, I pointed out the "check engine" light to you several months ago.
> Penny: Well the "check engine" light is fine. It's still blinking away. It's the stupid engine that stopped working. (Lorre et al., 2009, 3:03)

When Sheldon mentions that he noticed that the check-engine light was blinking and indicated this to Penny, he alludes to a speech act made earlier: He was giving advice to Penny by drawing her attention to the fact that a warning light was on. The locution that he refers to was, in all likelihood, a sentence such as "Your check-engine light is on." The utterance per se is no more than a descriptive statement about a light in the car's dashboard, but the illocutionary force behind it was a suggestion that can be summarized as follows: You should take your car to a garage to have the engine checked. Sheldon's speech act violated the maxim of Quantity in that he said less than what would have been required for his words to be understood as intended; therefore, the perlocution

was not in line with the illocutionary force. In other words, the advice fell on deaf ears. What may entertain the outside observer is the fact that Penny did not take cognizance of the intended meaning of the speech act (i.e., she did not realize that it was advice rather than a statement of fact), and, even in retrospect, she fails to make the connection between the check-engine light's blinking and the engine's breakdown. The misunderstanding could have been avoided if Sheldon had made the speech act clearer by using a performative verb (e.g., "I suggest you take your car to a garage").

Conclusion

The paper set out to investigate the processes that underlie the interpretation and comprehension of linguistic humor. It has been demonstrated that pragmatics plays a crucial role in the interpretation of meaning—be it everyday conversations or linguistic humor. The examples presented above have offered a glimpse into the different ways in which viewers of humorous television programs can engage with the linguistic content on multiple levels. The distinction between a pragmatic understanding and a semantic understanding of meaning appears to be a prerequisite for the comprehension of some dialogue in television comedy. Context and schemata seem to be vital in the comprehension of pragmatic meaning, and language use can become humorous by virtue of being interpreted with reference to various schemata. Moreover, Grice's Cooperative Principle was shown to be capable of accounting for humorous breakdowns in communication as well as for conversational implicatures that can be exploited by comedy writers to comic effect. The paper also touched upon the use of speech acts in comedy and illustrated how they can result in humorous misunderstandings. It has been argued that entertainment is drawn from comedic material through audience engagement: Instances of humorous language use are greeted with laughter when viewers resolve a perceived linguistic or schematic incongruity. This requires that viewers engage in an analytical procedure, though the analysis of humorous language use takes place largely automatically. Should the audience fail to use multiple criteria to analyze humorous television programs, much of the potential for amusement may

remain unfulfilled. Even though situation comedies are not written specifically for the purpose of linguistic analysis, a pragmatic approach to the understanding of the workings of linguistic humor on television can almost always reveal interesting details about how jokes operate and in what ways viewers may be entertained by them. The analysis of the process of understanding linguistic humor has also demonstrated that the pragmatic theories which were employed to analyze the extracts provide a legitimate abstraction of language use, thereby lending validity to the theories.

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