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# **Kicking Ass with Style**

Linguistic Humor Strategies in Three High-Grossing Action  
Movie Franchises

**Henrik Valis**

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Supervisor:  
Joe Trotta  
Examiner:  
Monika Mondor

**Title:** *Kicking Ass with Style: Linguistic Humor Strategies in Three High-Grossing Action Movie Franchises*

**Author:** Henrik Valis

**Supervisor:** Joe Trotta

**Abstract:**

Since the 1980s, the American action hero has become increasingly humor-conscious as he disarms the villains through superior strength but also through superior wit. It is the aim of this study to, from a linguistics perspective, investigate the action hero's use of humor in so-called action blockbusters, i.e. high octane, high-grossing action movies. The corpus for this study consists of action movie franchises that have become box office successes and whose heroes are representative of humor in the action genre. Through an analysis of the dialogue in these action movies, based on the theoretical framework of previous linguistic humor studies, quantitative and qualitative data was obtained. Additionally, a test screening was conducted with a test audience to verify the obtained data. The results show a dominance of sarcasm and insults in all three movies as the prime linguistic sources of humor. However, their occurrence could not be quantified in exact terms since the test screening proved the initial hypothesis inconclusive. Instead, their occurrence was estimated by the test audience. The hero uses humor as a social management function, partially to assert his dominance over villains. This he achieves firstly through sarcasm and insults, and secondly through puns and foul language, which the audience typically perceive as funny. Depending on the character, the findings differed in terms of average word per sentence and foul language.

**Keywords:** humor, humor studies, action movies, linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, sarcasm, insults, one-liners, puns

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background**

Within linguistics, the language of humor is a researched topic. In fact, several books and studies cover the topic of humor, both in the general sense but also more specifically as with a specific humor type, i.e. sarcasm or the semantics of humor. These researchers typically use existing framework on humor, and select their corpus from collections of jokes and social observation. However, studies on humor in films are scarce; even more so on the representation of humor that is found in action movies. This may seem odd considering the fact how people often, either directly or indirectly, quote from their favorite action movies when they might say “Go ahead, make my day”<sup>1</sup>, “Say hello to my little friend”<sup>2</sup> or “I’ll be back”<sup>3</sup>. Despite this familiarity with movie heroes that are part of our popular culture, action films as objects of study strike us with their absence.

Starting in the 1960s with the James Bond film franchise, a new age of action films began with the birth of the 'resourceful hero', who is depicted as a “larger-than-life character(...), veritable 'one-man army'; able to dispatch villainous masterminds after cutting through their disposable henchmen in increasingly creative ways. Such heroes are ready with one-liners, puns, and dry quips.” (Action film 2013, Wikipedia [online]). One-liners, puns and dry quips share a common denominator: they all exploit language in order to create humor. This definition of a humor-conscious action hero is a basic starting point for the investigation of this essay.

Eight out of ten of the top-grossing films in the last ten years have been action movies (Yearly Box Office, boxofficemojo.com [online] & imdb.com [online]), which makes it one of the most (if not the most) prominent movie genre in popular culture. We often laugh at these action movies even though they are not categorized as being funny movies. Thus, there appears to be an elusive formula within those successful action movies that explains why they are perceived as 'funny'. In general, it would come as no surprise if a comedy used linguistic humor devices. However, when a movie that is not supposed to be funny turns out to be funny, such as an action movie, how much of that can be attributed to linguistic aspects?

### **1.2 Previous Research**

As mentioned in 1.1, previous research on humor in films is scarce, and is even more so in action films. As it turns out, action films as objects of study do not appear so much in strictly linguistic studies; rather they do so primarily in gender studies and/or sociolinguistics. Midefelt (2013) wrote a research essay on gendered language in action films; though humor was not within the scope of that study, some mentions are made of typical male language and foul language, which is of interest

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1 Clint Eastwood's Harry, from *Dirty Harry* (imdb.com [online])

2 Al Pacino's Tony Montana, from *Scarface* (imdb.com [online])

3 Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Terminator* and other movie parts (imdb.com [online])

for this study. Midefelt also centralizes his study around the movies' protagonists, i.e. the hero, for it is around him that the story revolves.

Furthermore, the Midefelt study (2013) provides a workable method for a quantitative analysis plus some helpful delimitations and basic concepts. The study focuses on gender-based folk linguistic notions, and examines whether these are apparent within the action movie genre. It analyzes measurable variables such as line count and swear words produced, to contrast with gender stereotypes of male and female speech, which is where it primarily contributes to this research paper. Although a gender perspective on action films could be seen as highly relevant (as was the case with Midefelt), the question of how the films become 'fun' remains unanswered. Thus, humor in movies from a linguistics standpoint still to this day remains under-researched, which is why the present work should be considered a tentative pilot study on the subject.

To provide the theoretical grounds for this investigation, Salvatore Attardo's much-cited *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (1994) was chosen as the central reference source for the analysis. Attardo states in the preface that the book is suited for the linguist “looking for empirical results and analytical methodologies to be applied to humor studies or exported from humor studies to other areas” (Attardo 1994: xvii), which is relevant to the present research question. It has chapters with names like 'The Analysis of Puns', 'Resolution in Puns', 'Humor in Context' and provides classifications of humor. Also, a large portion of the book discusses 'Humor Scripts', or 'frames' that describe various settings that establish the grounds in which humor operates.

However, there is no work that presents a panoramic overview of the different humor categories present in the specific genre of action movies. This presents a problem in that an eclectic approach had to be used in order to make a categorization of humor for this study, and to make for a comprehensive interpretation of the data.

### ***1.3 Aim and Research Questions***

The aim of this essay is to analyze the linguistic strategies for the creation of humor, focusing on the hero, in three so-called action blockbusters, that is, action movies that have become box office successes. The present work is a pilot study that aims to investigate how available linguistic theory can help decode and better understand the hero's use of humor in an action movie. To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What humor strategies are used in action movies?
2. Which are the most important linguistic humor strategies used in the selected movies?
3. Can word and/or line count possibly correlate with a certain style of humor, i.e. short

- or long utterances?
4. How do different characters and their personality traits connect to humor use?
  5. Why does the action hero insist on using humor?

#### ***1.4 Scope***

The study is limited to the humor applied by the action heroes in three high-grossing action movie franchises, selected according to criteria presented in section 3.1.

#### ***1.5 Basic Concepts and Complementary Information***

This section deals with concepts and a methodology that are of importance for this study. First, in section 1.5.1 the key concept of a 'humor frame' is introduced, to facilitate its understanding when it appears later in sections 4.2 and 4.3. Second, the use of Wikipedia as a source is discussed in 1.5.2.

##### ***1.5.1 Humor Scripts, Frames***

The concept of 'humor scripts' is important for this investigation. A humor script, also known as a 'frame', "is an organized chunk of information about something ... It is a cognitive structure internalized by the speaker which provides the speaker with information on how things are done, organized, etc." (Attardo 1994: 198). To disambiguate between these semantic scripts from movie scripts, they are henceforth referred to in this investigation as 'frames'. To explain a little further, a specific frame serve as the structural portion of the organization of that specific entity, as interiorized by the individual world.

Frames become relevant to humor studies in that they contain typical information on various topic matters. In other words, frames have specific contents stored within them that become important when perceiving something as humorous. Being knowledgeable with the corresponding information of a frame means being able to understand something as it is intended to be understood.

##### ***1.5.2 On the Use of Wikipedia as a Source***

The repeated use of Wikipedia as a secondary source in an academic paper is a controversial topic. Wikipedia, like any other encyclopedia, "is a starting point for research, not an ending point" (Wikipedia: Academic use 2013, Wikipedia [online]). Thus, it is reasonable to question the validity of the claims in this study that are supported by a Wikipedia source. Nevertheless, an academic reviewer shall always endeavor to have a critical eye, especially when evaluating the reliability of the sources used. However, it remains one of the world's largest references website, and with this follow even harder demands for Wikipedia to deliver a reliable product. This is viewed as a quality assurance, and it is for this reason that Wikipedia is used as a source in this study.

## **2. HUMOR CATEGORIES**

In order to obtain interpretable data on the instances of humor, the study first had to determine which in fact were the prime linguistic humor strategies. Additionally, this section aims to untangle some of the associated problems with humor classification, and so the list of humor strategies that ensues was created to fit primarily with action films. The following section presents and defines the primary linguistic humor strategies present in an action movie. However, it is possible that it can be applied to other movie genres as well.

### **2.1 The Action Movie-Specific Division of Humor Categories**

This section presents and defines the primary linguistic humor strategies in an action movie.

#### **2.1.1 Puns**

Puns, as a linguistic phenomenon, exploit the relationship signifier-signified, where for example one signifier could refer to several signifieds, thus a double meaning is created (Attardo 1994: 109). These may be more or less perfect or imperfect in their phonology and in their spelling. Attardo (1994: 128) borrows an example of a pun from Pepicello and Green (1983: 59):

- (1) “Why did the cookie cry?  
Its mother had been away for so long [a wafer]”.

As seen by the double meaning of the phonetics example 1 (away for → a wafer), a pun deliberately uses the ambiguity of certain linguistic constructions to create an intended humorous effect.

A choice was made to include not only one-word puns in this section, but also what is called the 'one-liner'. This was done to solve problems of overlapping types and to facilitate this categorization. Mihalcea and Pulman (2007: 2-3) define a one-liner as:

a short sentence with comic effects and an interesting linguistic structure: simple syntax, deliberate use of rhetoric devices (e.g. alliteration, rhyme), and frequent use of creative language constructions meant to attract the readers' attention. While longer jokes can have a relatively complex narrative structure, a one-liner must produce the humorous effect in “one shot”, with very few words.

Even though this was written with text-form jokes in mind, the definition is relevant and highly applicable to the corpus of this study.

#### **2.1.2 Sarcasm**

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2013 [online]) defines Sarcasm as “the use of words that mean

the opposite of what you really want to say especially in order to insult someone, to show irritation, or to be funny”. According to Lee and Katz (1998: 10), sarcasm is similar to irony although distinctive in that it has a specific target of ridicule.

Included into Sarcasm are also dry quips. This was done because of problems with overlapping and, as mentioned earlier, an absence of humor classification in movies.

### ***2.1.3 Expletive Attributives, Ejaculations, Clausal and Phrasal Exclamations***

An expletive attributive is an intensifier of the emotional force of language (Expletive attributive, Wikipedia [online]). Although not limited to profane language, it typically includes swear words. In their 2009 study *Swearing in the cinema: An analysis of profanity in US teen-oriented movies, 1980-2006*, authors Cressman, Callister, Robinson and Near gather data and collect research on profane language. Among those authors cited in their article, de Klerk and Selnow relay a few notions that are of interest for this study:

de Klerk (1991) found a relationship between expletives and social power associated with men. Similarly, Selnow (1985) reported that males were more likely to consider the use of profanity as a demonstration of social power. (Cressman, Callister, Robinson & Near 2009: 4)

This quote will also become important for 2.1.4 Insults as there are some noticeable similarities. To further illustrate this humor division, consider the definition below of ejaculation in a linguistic context (Ejaculation – grammar 2013, Wikipedia [online]):

In linguistics, an ejaculation is a short utterance that usually expresses feeling, often incomplete sentences ... usually one or just two words (“Ouch!”, “Christ!”, “Shit!”, “Shoo!”) and in grammar are contrasted with exclamations, which do partake in the “normal” grammatical structure of a language. “God damn it”, for instance, is a clausal exclamation, and “For Pete's sake” and “Up yours” are called phrasal exclamations.

Although technically speaking, grammar studies may differentiate between ejaculations and exclamations, they were united as one humor category as the potential differences between the categories were not relevant for the present paper.

### ***2.1.4 Insults***

In his essay on gendered language in action films, Midefelt (2013: 17) argues that Hollywood action movie screen writers typically have their male protagonist “assert the character's masculinity through a use of what is thought to be a traditionally 'male' mode of speech, i.e. swearing”. This argumentation is accepted for this essay, and has chosen to regard insults and typically threatening language as a tool for being funny at the expense of the victim's humiliation.

It stands reasonable to argue that there is an overlapping between 2.1.3 Expletive



Attributives, Ejaculations, Clausal and Phrasal Exclamations and 2.1.4 Insults, and it is true that the two overlap at times. The distinction to be made between the two is that the 2.1.3 Expletive Attributives, Ejaculations, Clausal and Phrasal Exclamations is the category in which the protagonist communicates with himself, such as yelling a profanity in a panic situation, whereas 2.1.4 Insults, is the humor category used when communicating an insult, such as for example profanity, to another person.

### **3 MATERIALS & METHOD**

This section relays the materials selected and the methods applied for this study. Section 3.1 accounts for how the choosing of the primary material came to be, and why it was deemed the most relevant object of study. Section 3.2 describes the methods through which the material was analyzed, and the chosen methods' ensuing shortcomings. Specific mention of the problems associated with the definition of *what constitutes as a line*, is discussed in section 3.3.

#### **3.1 Materials**

As explained in sections 1.1 and 1.3, this is a study of the American action movies that are characterized by a hero who uses “one-liners, puns and dry quips<sup>4</sup>” (Action film 2013, Wikipedia [online]), thus movies that do not include these elements were not included<sup>5</sup>. Journalist Stephen Hunter (2006 [online]) argues that an action hero moves with confidence and sleekness, and does everything with style and force. This is consistent with the definition of the humor-conscious action hero chosen for this essay, and has thus been accepted as the most relevant object of study.

Instead of looking at single movies that are successful even without receiving a sequel, such as, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Pulp Fiction* or *Fight Club*, all movies in the top-ten on the Internet Movie DataBase Top 250 movies list (*IMDB Top 250* [online]), movie franchises were chosen over such films. Doing so would, at least in principle, eliminate the elements of timing, luck and coincidence when rating a movie's success at the box office. In other words, they could possess some generalizable formula that repeats itself, becoming a success factor. Consequently, the humor patterns may also follow a certain model which could be worthy of further investigation. Being high up on the list of the highest grossing movie franchises is a popularity factor that also equals familiarity with many viewers. For this reason, blockbusters are a formula certain to have worked, thus they are the primary material for this study.

To create a starting point for a selection of primary material to include in this study, a list of the highest grossing movie franchises (Levy 2013 [online]) was examined. This helped me to

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<sup>4</sup> Macmillandictionary defines *quip* as 'a funny or clever remark'

<sup>5</sup> This delimitation meant the elimination of some successful franchises such as *Star Trek*, *Batman* and *Jaws* because their heroes and/or heroines do not fit into the comedic model as previously mentioned.

determine the highest grossing movie franchises of all time, and also to find examples of movies that are part of our collective experience of popular entertainment in Western culture. The listing of the most successful movie franchises then presents a valid representation of what the world's movie audience like and consume. Further, the movies that were chosen were selected because they were a good representation of comedy in a genre whose primary selling point is action, and not comedy.

The first criterion for inclusion in this study is that the movies also ought to be listed primarily as action films<sup>6</sup>. In other words, they should not be primarily crafted to be funny as are Comedies and Action-Comedies. Therefore, this study does not include a franchise such as *Men in Black* for the reason that it is typically categorized as an Action-Comedy. The genre argument then disregards movie franchises such as *Alien*, *Twilight* and *Rocky* because they are listed as Horror, Drama-Fantasy-Romance and Drama respectively. Further, some movies include many action movie elements, but they do not feature action heroes nor do they exploit comedy in the same obvious manner as those films included in the present examination. Consequently, *Transformers*, *The Fast and The Furious*, *Terminator* and *Superman* were excluded for not meeting these criteria.

To be included in this study, the hero of the movie cannot only make occasional jokes. In other words, movies that do not meet this criterion were discarded from becoming the primary material. *Spider-Man*, *Jurassic Park*, *Mission Impossible*, are perhaps not applying humor consistently and consciously as a tool to connect with their audience. The movies should fit a particular genre while featuring 'the resourceful hero' (described in 1.1).

Because of the limited scope of this study, the investigation focuses only on the American action hero. Because of that choice, a delimitation was made to limit the study to movies that are set in America and featuring an America-native hero. Actually, Hunter (2006 [online]) discusses the action hero since the dawn of the action film, and not one single mention is done of an actor nor a character of other origin than American. Consequently, movies that were set in outer space, or any non-US location for that matter, were then discarded<sup>7</sup>. Interestingly, all three movies in the primary material are set in Los Angeles, CA.

Out of the toplist, the first franchise chosen was the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (Marvel Cinematic Universe 2013, Wikipedia [online]), ranked at fourth place (Levy 2013 [online]), which at the moment of writing consists of seven different movies . In order to delimit the material studied to one individual film, all seven movies were subjected to the rating system given in 'Metacritic' (About Metacritic [online])<sup>8</sup>. Metacritic can be compared to a sort of Amazon.com of rating movies, that gathers “the opinions of the most respected critics writing online and in print to a single

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<sup>6</sup> The Midefelt study (2013: 6) directly quotes Brown (1996: 52) in “the action movie genre has been one of the most dominant genres of popular culture since the early 1980's”.

<sup>7</sup> This discarded *James Bond*, *Star Wars*, *The Tolkien Saga*, *Harry Potter*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *the Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Mummy*.

number”, which then becomes a film's 'Metascore' (About Metacritic [online]). Metacritic collects and constantly updates opinions from respected sources, giving a reliable, up-to-date rating system. The film in the franchise having the highest Metascore was *Iron Man* from 2008, with a Metascore of 79, thus it was chosen for this study. Directed by Jon Favreau, and starring Robert Downey Jr. as the entrepreneur, scientist turned superhero who uses technology to fight evil, *Iron Man* was a big box office success and got nominated for two Academy Awards, plus got another 15 wins and 43 nominations in awards ceremonies for cinematic achievements (*Iron Man*, 2008, on IMDB [online]).

The second franchise chosen was *Die Hard* which, with its 2013 release of *A Good Day to Die Hard*, consisting of five movies in total all starring Bruce Willis, is ranked 24<sup>th</sup> on the all-time highest grossing movie franchises list. The single film with the highest Metascore is the first one, directed by John McTiernan and released in 1988 with the title *Die Hard*. With a Metascore of 70, it outscores its sequels and was therefore chosen for this study. The main character in the films, John McClane, fights bad guys and always has a witty, sarcastic remark prepared to deliver to those who stand in his way (*Die Hard*, 1988, on IMDB [online]).

The third franchise chosen for this study is found in 29<sup>th</sup> place, namely the *Lethal Weapon* franchise. Interestingly enough, all four movies shot between 1987 and 1998 are directed by Richard Donner and star Mel Gibson and Danny Glover. *Lethal Weapon 2* from 1989 has the highest Metacritic score of the franchise, a 70. This franchise differs from that of *Die Hard* or *Iron Man* in that there are two protagonists instead of one. This makes for bantering and a dynamic that stands out for the duo of 'Riggs' and 'Murtaugh', that is certain to contain some key linguistic humor elements (*Lethal Weapon 2*, 1989, on IMDB [online]).

It could be worth commenting the age difference that sets the studied movies apart. As it turned out, the movies with the highest Metascore in each franchise were from 1987, 1988 and 2008, respectively. Although this is not a diachronic study, it is reasonable to suspect that there could be some observable differences (in for example, linguistic humor strategies) occur during a twenty year period. For synopsis and more information about the movies studied, see Appendix 1.

### **3.2 Method**

Because of the limited time and scope available for this study, the analysis was limited to only the utterances of the protagonists. This delimitation is relevant because it was the aim of the essay to study the humor of the resourceful hero, not his accomplices or enemies.

As previously mentioned, no study has provided classifications of humor that can be applied to a linguistic analysis of humor in films. As a consequence, the division of humor presented in 2.1 is composed of humor concepts drawn from a variety of sources, after having studied the primary

material. It needs to be acknowledged that it is difficult to get water-tight definitions of humor types. There is often an overlap between humor categories, so naturally some researchers might address this problem differently. Subjectivity and personal opinion may also cause categorization problems. Nonetheless, the concepts explained provide the model for arranging the results of this study, and they are essential for the understanding of the results.

As for the study, both a qualitative and a quantitative approach were performed. First, the movies were studied with their respective subtitles ready at hand. The total number of lines<sup>8</sup> and words were counted, and were then divided by each movie hero to determine their line and word count as compared to the movies in total. An attempt was made to estimate how much of their lines were actually humorously intended, but this turned out to be a difficult task since it proved too arbitrary and dependent of personal taste, thus unachievable (see section 4.2 where these difficulties are further discussed). Later, word and line count was analyzed against linguistic theory to investigate if any certain humor style could be perhaps explained through variations in these variables.

To solve the problem of addressing what constitutes as 'funny' and 'not funny' respectively, a test screening of the movies was done with a test audience of six people, non-linguists, all male and in the ages of 24-30 years old. It should be recognized that six people alone may not constitute a perfect test audience due to its smallness in size and its absence of women. However, organizing a larger test screening and later organizing its findings would be disproportionate to the limited resources and time available for this study. Additionally, accepting that men primarily are the target group of action films, they should therefore be considered a relevant crowd for the screening of an action movie. For the above reasons, a six man test audience consisting of men only was deemed satisfactory. This audience was given a short briefing regarding the research project, and was then asked to watch selected 30 minute segments from the movies while their spontaneous responses and laughter were recorded when some lines were said.

After the actual screening of the movie segments, a qualitative interview took place. The participants were asked what their thoughts and interpretations were of some lines, and if they found them funny even though they did not laugh out loud. The lines they were asked to comment upon were partly lines that would be selected for the qualitative study of some extracts containing linguistic humor strategies. The interviewees were asked to comment in a broad sense on the use of humor in the three different movies. Additionally, they were asked to comment specifically on the use of sarcasm, puns, insults and expletive attributives and whether they regarded any of these as being more predominant and important in any of the movies, and estimate their occurrence on a

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed definition on what constitutes as a line, see section 3.3. Here, some of the problems associated with line definition are discussed. It could be interesting to point out that *Midefelt* (2013) used another line definition.

scale reaching from zero (non-existent) to three (frequent). The intention behind this was to examine if what had been deemed as humorous before-hand, in fact could be supported by the opinion of a test audience. The test screening was then a test of the accuracy of the data previously gathered as funny/humorous.

### ***3.3 Problems concerning what constitutes as a line***

A decision also had to be made about what constituted as 'a line'. For the sake of simplicity of the study, a line was defined as what appeared on the subtitles at a given frame. For this study, a line is the subtitle text visible on the screen at one given moment, not necessarily what the speaker says from beginning to end. This distinction was necessary because of difficulties in discerning when a line begins or ends (does a breathing pause count as an end-note of a line? Turn-taking or interruption from a friend or foe?), so the subtitles<sup>9</sup> became the basis for what constituted a line. In other words, what was written on one single line in the subtitle became *a line* for this study.

This, of course, is not the only possible definition, and it is applied here as a matter of convenience. In actuality, there are a few disadvantages about this definition that can be addressed. Often, humor relies on a few lines that set up one punch line. In these cases, the 'setup lines' were included as being humorously intended even though they had not yet become funny at the moment of uttering. Additionally, when a hero speaks slowly, a single one-liner can actually be split into various lines as they appear in the subtitles. This of course may cause problems, but for the interpretation and comparability of the data, this model (of having one subtitle line count as one movie line) was followed. Consequently, despite the shortcomings this definition of a line made it possible to quantify the results in an accessible way, and have a reliable, verifiable method.

## **4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

This section divides the study into its three components: the quantitative data is found in 4.1; the results from the test screening are presented in 4.2; section 4.3 includes the qualitative analysis where each studied movie is given its own subsection where selected abstracts are studied in more detail.

### ***4.1 Quantitative study***

The three films clearly differ in humor use as could be expected. The word count and total number of lines also differ for each movie. The table below (Table 1) represents the word count and line count from the three respective movies. The table also includes a table row with average words per

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<sup>9</sup> As a pedagogical helper, a sample of how the chosen subtitles look like is presented in Appendix 2. This will explain in part why the chosen definition of a line was deemed superior for this study.

line as spoken by the hero. Initially, this ratio was thought to help explain (at least in part) the types of humor used by the respective characters. Since *Lethal Weapon 2* features a tag team of two heroes rather than one hero, it is divided into a split column.

**Table 1. Line count, word count and words per line average spoken by the hero.**

	Word count by hero / full movie	Line count by hero / full movie	Average words per line as said by hero	Movie runtime including end titles
Die Hard	1858 / 9033	352 / 1557	5,28	127 minutes
Iron Man	3908 / 9702	587 / 1307	6,66	126 minutes
Lethal Weapon 2	Riggs 3006 / 8531	Riggs 468 / 1333	6,42	113 minutes
	Murtaugh 1326 / 8531	Murtaugh 439 / 1333	3,02	

Perhaps the most interesting data found in Table 1 is that of the word count per line average, where the calmer and more careful character of Murtaugh has a 3.02 words per line average. This finding is congruent with his applied diction of generally wanting calm and order, thus giving similar terse imperatives (“shut up” is said 6 times) and using expletive attributives (For example, “shit” appears 14 times, whereas 9 times as an expletive attributive). Interestingly, *Iron Man* features a hero with a 6.66 words per line average who, out of his 9033 spoken words, does not utter a single “shut up” or “shit”.

Another noteworthy statistical fact from the table is that Tony Stark of *Iron Man* has the highest number of words and lines but also the highest number of words per line average. This is consistent with his personality as a witty, educated extrovert who is also a public person. Tony Stark has double the amount of words said as compared to John McClane. One possible explanation for this could be their different characters, where John McClane is a hero “described as being a foul-mouthed, wisecracking, no-nonsense New York cop with an itchy trigger finger and a never-say-die maverick spirit” (John McClane 2013, Wikipedia [online]), whereas Tony Stark of *Iron Man* is the opposite, a “genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist” (*The Avengers*, 2012, on IMDB [online]) who amuses himself with speaking a lot of nonsense. A generally held view is that New York City police officers are not so well-mannered nor are they articulate, as manifested by John McClane who utters a combination of words including the vulgarism *fuck* a total number of 40 times, 7 of which are the insult *motherfucker*. This can be compared to Tony Stark, a Master's Degree Engineer, who does not say a single *fuck* throughout the film even though his insults are numerous. This could point to different choices of insult styles in the representations of different socioeconomic classes, which is consistent with McEnery and Xiao's findings that “the overall frequencies of *fuck* also

show that the distinction between social classes is quantitatively significant” (2004: 243).

Furthermore, quantitative data suggests that gender is also correlated to a person's cursing, especially with the word *fuck*. Although gender can be argued to be a less determining factor for cursing than socioeconomics (as demonstrated by the different representations of socioeconomics and cursing in the studied films), McEnery and Xiao (2004: 249) found that male speakers use the word *fuck* twice as frequently than female speakers. According to Aitchison, male working-class speech is typically associated with roughness and toughness, which some argue are desirable masculine attributes (Aitchison 2013: 75). This could be a possible reason behind the repeatedly vulgar language in *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon*.

Since the *Lethal Weapon* franchise can be categorized as buddy cop movies, it is reasonable to assume that there will be rather much dialogue in it considering it focuses partly on the friendship between two police officers (Buddy cop film 2013, Wikipedia [online]). Further, the relationship between the protagonists is typically an atypical/asymmetrical one, and *Lethal Weapon* is no exception. It stars Mel Gibson as the maverick, and Danny Glover as the by-the-book family man (Buddy cop film 2013, Wikipedia [online]), which then makes it within reason to assume one's behavior and language is wilder, fouler and extreme, whereas the other then is more controlled.

As mentioned earlier in 3.2, and later to be discussed in 4.2, a line-per-line division of the instances of different humor types could not be performed and put in precise statistical data due to the individual perception differences of humor (as demonstrated by the test audience, see 6.2), along with the overlapping of the humor categories mentioned in section 2.1. Thus, percentages of humor instances could be provided. Instead, estimations were made of the instances of humor as they occurred in the movies. Given this caveat, the results of this quantitative analysis need to be taken with great care. Consider now Table 2 below, which presents my own estimations on a scale zero (non-existent) to three (frequent) of the occurrence of the previously presented humor categories in the three movies studied.

**Table 2. Estimation of instances of humor types in the movies examined**

	Die Hard	Iron Man	Lethal Weapon 2
Sarcasm	3	3	Riggs 3 / Murtaugh 2
Puns	2	2	Riggs 3 / Murtaugh 1
Insults	3	2	Riggs 3 / Murtaugh 1
Expletive attributives, Ejaculations and Exclamations	3	0	Riggs 2 / Murtaugh 3

Though the above figures are subjectively-based estimations of the occurrences of humor

types, this table provides a rough estimation of how often each type occurs in the selected movies. In the following sections, the shortcomings of this type of quantification will be explored.

#### 4.2 Test screening

The results from this screening plus its questionnaire showed different findings in perceived humor intent from the initial hypothesis. This discovery made it unmanageable to quantify and make further percentages of humor appearances in the movies, since the initial claims (of for example which lines were sarcastic, insults, or even 'fun' for that matter) became no longer valid. The opinions of the test audience rendered the perception of humor as something ambiguous that could not be explained through quantification. Thus, a percentage of for example, humorous utterances considered sarcastic is not tenuous due to the mismatches between the study's initial calculations and the test audience's responses. What this study does do, however, is to make evident the fact that it is difficult to deal with quantitative data on humor. It is too subjective and individual to become quantitative evidence. As consumers of humor we have biases and possess different frames and language skills that shape our interpretation of humor. Nonetheless, the audience were asked to rate on a scale zero (non-existent) to three (frequent) the occurrence of certain humor types in the three movies. The findings are as in table 3 below (The parentheses represent the mismatches from my initial estimations).

**Table 3. Occurrence of different humor categories rated 0-3 in three action films.**

	Die Hard	Iron Man	Lethal Weapon 2
Sarcasm	3 (3)	3 (3)	Riggs 3 (3) / Murtaugh 3 (2)
Puns	1 (2)	1 (2)	Riggs 2 (3) / Murtaugh 2 (1)
Insults	3 (3)	2 (2)	Riggs 3 (3) / Murtaugh 2 (1)
Expletive attributives, Ejaculations and Exclamations	2 (3)	0 (0)	Riggs 2 (2) / Murtaugh 3 (3)

As table 3 indicates, sarcasm and insults are prime sources of humor used by the impolite American action hero as perceived by the test group. Why an action hero is using that much humor could perhaps be explained by the social management function of humor (Attardo 1994: 323). This theory states that a speaker who integrates humor wants to achieve a communicative goal, and that the same person's use of humor in speech “affects the perception of his overall communicative 'image' by the other participants” (Attardo 1994: 322-323). Using Hunter's definition of “the perfect action guy” (2006 [online]), the viewer wants to see in him “pure grit, true-blue dedication, toughness but fairness, and you want him to convey the idea that he'll be the first man



up the hill and the last man off it.” (Hunter 2006 [online]), we can assume that a movie hero uses humor to strengthen this communicative image of him being the 'the perfect action guy' (as described in section 3.1). The social management function of humor states that we apply humor in part so that we can strengthen in-group bonding or out-group rejection, which can be applied to creating a distance between the good guys and the bad guys. Further, there are a two instances of the social management functions of humor that can explain the data from table 3. First, the use of insults may be explained by 'social control' – using humor “as a social corrective by embarrassing or intimidating members of the group” (Attardo 1994: 323). Second, 'social play' viewed as using humor as means of “aggression and domination for men” (Attardo 1994: 324), can absolutely be a reason behind John McClane's dry-quipping, belligerent way of communicating with his adversaries, as observed in his use of sarcasm and insults.

As for puns, their occurrence is perhaps less than expected. All films contain puns, but they are of minor incidence as compared to sarcasm or insults. Perhaps the stand-out punning incident occurs in *Lethal Weapon 2*, where both protagonists seemingly use puns (and other types of humor) to “establish common ground” (Attardo 1994: 324) and attack racism. In other words, they use humor to establish their territory as anti-racist when dealing with the white supremacist South Africans. Example 2 below is one of several similar examples that generated laughter among the test audience.

- (2) PIETER VORSTEDT: Riggs? You Martin Riggs?  
 MARTIN RIGGS: Of the Chicago Riggses.  
 What's your name?  
 Pieter Von... Vor...  
 Fuck, I'll just call you Adolf.  
 Are you Arjen Rudd? Aryan...?  
 (Lethal Weapon 2 subtitle, lines 638-642)

As observed especially in the misreading of *Arjen* into *Aryan*, these puns are metalinguistic in how their sounds invoke semantic associations (Attardo 1994: 168-169) with white supremacist views. The puns will further be analyzed in structure and content in the section 4.3 (Qualitative Study – A Comparison and In-Depth Analysis).

All participants in the test audience agreed that *Iron Man* has the more clever script and the most well-wrought dialogue. The audience argued that this could perhaps be explained by its relatively recent production, thus it feels more modern<sup>10</sup>. The word *clever* can perhaps be applied partially to *Iron Man*, as illustrated in its very limited use of expletive attributives. This data

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<sup>10</sup> It is highly possible that movie scripts have developed to take on a more sophisticated form today, since the market for subsequent viewings has increased (through, e.g. DVDs, TIVO, computer archives, etc, though an investigation of this angle is beyond the scope of this study.

becomes clearer when compared to the application of expletive attributives by Murtaugh in *Lethal Weapon 2*. Tony Stark finds alternative ways of intensifying the emotional force (Expletive attributive 2013, Wikipedia [online]) behind his communication rather than using bad language. Despite *Iron Man's* being 'linguistically superior', the test audience asserted that much humor lies in the timing and delivery of the lines and not only the words being said. Thus, a linguistics-only approach to humor in movies will inevitably fall short if these variables are not accounted for.

To elaborate further on the use of humor in *Iron Man*, it is sometimes easier to pick out 'chunks of text' or longer extracts to highlight an incidence of humor. Tony Stark, more than the other heroes, uses False Priming<sup>11</sup>, a humor principle aimed at misdirecting the information at hand. This is a process that requires the previous mentioning of setup information, both short information such as "Give me a Scotch, I'm starving." (Iron Man subtitle, 2008. line 420) and longer information as in the following excerpt (example 3):

- (3)      SOLDIER:                      Sir, I have a question to ask.  
             TONY STARK:                    Yes, please.  
             SOLDIER:                        Is it true you went 12 for 12...  
    with last year's Maxim cover models?  
             TONY STARK:                    That is an excellent question. Yes and no.  
    March and I had a scheduling conflict,  
    but fortunately, the Christmas cover was twins.  
    (Iron Man subtitle, lines 12-16)

The test audience was positive to this being funny even though they did not state it explicitly as being funny for the way it misdirects the listener, as false priming does. I think this is an interesting example both of how False Priming is a present linguistic humor strategy, but it also shows how more lines than just the punch line<sup>12</sup> are fundamental in order for something to become funny. This can be seen as an application of the "incongruity-resolution" (Attardo 1994: 143) model of humor, there the later part of the joke resolves or justifies the previous incongruities. In addition, when such humor strategies entailing a higher word and line count are applied, the word count total of a film will rise consequently, as in the case of *Iron Man*.

#### **4.3 Qualitative Study – A Comparison and In-Depth Analysis**

Because numbers do not explain everything, and because sometimes there is an overlap in classifying humor, the decision was made to analyze selected extracts in detail. Humor is, after all, perceived differently, so this attempt was made to decode the humor used and to see what and how

11 False priming - "the stylistic device, also known as 'the garden path effect', by which the expectations set up by the text mislead the readers into activating the "wrong schema" or making irrelevant inferences, often with humorous effect" (Goatley 2012: 322)

12 The Macmillan Dictionary defines *punch line* as 'the last few words of a joke, including the part that makes the joke funny'.

each movie franchise used linguistic humor devices.

#### 4.3.1 *Die Hard*

*Die Hard* is unique in the way that its hero is not a man on a mission to do good, rather he finds himself unwillingly in a terrorist attack. John McClane must use deadly force to protect himself and the hostages taken by the terrorists (Greydanus [online]). Additionally, we are told of the complicated relationship John McClane has with his wife, and as the story unravels we experience this crisis with him. In this sense, humor might be seen as a coping mechanism. One social management function of humor, called *repair*, may be of explanatory value with *Die Hard* as it describes how “unpleasant situations may be defused by humorous comments, connoting positive attitude, in-group bonding, and levity” (Attardo 1994: 324). Examined in this sense, humor 'neutralizes' brutality. This is seen in one scene where a shoeless John McClane is put in a death threat situation and forced to take the life of a villain, whereupon he says “Nine million terrorists in the world... and I got to kill one with feet smaller than my sister” (*Die Hard* subtitle. Lines 430-431). This sarcastic remark, it seems, works well despite the hero's brutal act of killing another man, to strengthen the bond with the audience and create a sympathetic effect using the repair function of humor (Attardo 1994: 323, 325).

Another linguistic humor device that becomes of interest in *Die Hard* is frames. As mentioned in 1.5.1, frames can be said to denote the governing rules and specific information of a situation (Attardo 1994: 198-200). In other words, possessing the relevant frame of a situation or of a set of ideas means being knowledgeable of them. Actually, in *Die Hard*, a large portion of the communication (such as example 4 below) is governed by a frame that contains information on American popular culture and cowboys on TV.

- (4) HANS GRUBER: You know my name, but who are you?  
Just another American  
who saw too many movies as a child?  
Another orphan of a bankrupt culture...  
..who thinks he's John Wayne, Rambo, Marshal Dillon?
- JOHN MCCLANE: I was always partial to Roy Rogers, actually.  
I liked those sequined shirts.
- HANS GRUBER: Do you really think you have a chance against us, Mr Cowboy?
- JOHN MCCLANE: Yippee-ki-yay, motherfucker.  
(*Die Hard* subtitle. Lines 643-650)

The popular culture references created problems for the L2 English speakers of the test audience who were not familiar with the names *Marshal Dillon* and *Roy Rogers*. Nor did they have any idea that *Yippee-ki-yay* was an old cowboy exclamation usually employed for when excited. However, this did not prevent them from laughing. In the test screening, 4 out of 6 viewers reported that

*yippie-ki-yay, motherfucker* was indeed humorous despite their not possessing the adequate frame. Nevertheless, it can be argued that an insult, or expletive attributive, such as *motherfucker* is comedic on its own<sup>13</sup>. In addition, the test audience were mostly aware of *Yippie-ki-yay motherfucker's* being a catch phrase of John McClane's from its appearance throughout the movie franchise *Die Hard*. This is not a counterargument against the must be of the 'cowboy frame', but rather an argument that the viewer may possess a different frame that has interiorized complementary information such as John McClane's common catch phrases. In other words, various frames can co-exist as was the case with the L2 test audience. Although those who in the test audience laughed at example 4 did not possess the 'cowboy frame'<sup>14</sup>, they were still able to laugh because *yippie ki-yay motherfucker* is building on previous information (from having seen other movies in the *Die Hard* franchise) which seemingly adds “an extra degree of funniness” (Attardo 1994: 299). Perhaps the most defining passage of the linguistic humor strategies of *Die Hard* is example 5.

- (5) JOHN MCCLANE: All right, you motherfucker, you made your point!  
 Let them pull back!  
 HANS GRUBER: Thank you, Mr Cowboy. I'll take it under advisement.  
 ...[]...  
 JOHN MCCLANE: Fuck it.  
 Let's see you take this under advisement, jerkweed.  
 Geronimo, motherfucker.  
 Oh, shit!  
 (Die Hard subtitle. Lines 883-885, 891-884)

First, John McClane delivers one of his favorite insults *motherfucker* to enforce the emotion of his statement to the villain Hans Gruber. Hans Gruber responds with a sarcastic comment and claims he will take McClane's words under consideration, where in reality, he will not. John, in the middle of the crisis he is in, utters the ejaculation *fuck it*, prepares a bomb to inflict damage to the villains, drops a sarcastic comment with an exclamation point expletive attributive *Let's see you take this under advisement, jerkweed*, and sets off the bomb. Throwing an evil eye toward where the bomb will detonate, John McClane says *Geronimo, motherfucker*, with a sly voice and a smug half smile. Later, once the bomb has detonated and fire and smoke is coming John's way, he utters an ejaculation *oh, shit!*. This extracts demonstrates a key humor strategy in *Die Hard*, namely that of having two different registers providing a “comical confusion” (Alexander 1984: 58-62). Attardo (1994: 235-236) quotes Alexander to describe this humor technique of using conflicting registers “... selecting a lexeme or phraseological unit from a different style level than the context would predict”. This is a form of false priming, but given the stark contrasts between a knowing sarcastic

13 For more information, see section 4.2 and the social management functions 'social control' and 'social play'. Additionally, section 2.1.4 (Insults) explain in part how swearing is commonly used by an action hero.

14 The 'cowboy frame' is short for a frame that holds information on cowboys and indians, Roy Rogers and American television etc.

comment (*Let's see you take this under advisement*) to an insult of vulgar language (*jerkweed*), it seems reasonable to assume that a register-based approach works better. Although the writers were probably unaware of the linguistics of it, this unorthodox mixture of registers provides an extra indicator of sarcasm (Attardo 1994: 236). As for the contrasts between *Geronimo*<sup>15</sup> and *motherfucker*, it is possibly a play of villain Hans Gruber being the raiding, anti-American Indian, and John McClane then being the enforcer, the cowboy American who intends to provide order against his rebellions<sup>16</sup>. As a result, *Geronimo* evokes certain information and emotions to later be deflated by introducing *motherfucker* (Alexander 1984: 60), and two clashing registers have successfully worked together to create humor.

#### 4.3.2 Iron Man

The opposite of the blue-collar hero of John McClane is Tony Stark, a wealthy, successful second generation arms manufacturer who enjoys the company of fancy women and fast cars. In *Iron Man* from 2008, we accompany Tony Stark in his origin story from being a profit-driven arms dealer, to having a friend die in his arms and tell him “don't waste your life, Tony” (Iron Man subtitle. Line 407), to later using his intelligence and engineering skills for humanitarian means, becoming the superhero Iron Man. All the while, he does so with an arrogance and selfishness but at the same time “displays a sense of humor ... [Iron Man] is a wise-cracking superhero ... retains a rascal's charm to the end and finds a heart without losing his brainy edge” (Hart 2008 [online]). Perhaps this brainy nature of his wit and humor could be explained partially through what Attardo calls sophisticated humor (1994: 216), as often limited-access knowledge and/or complex processing is required to grasp the humorous content, as is visible in this extract (example 6):

- (6) SOLDIER: Is it cool if I take a picture with you?  
TONY STARK: Yes. It's very cool.  
TONY STARK: All right.  
TONY STARK: I don't want to see this on your MySpace page.  
TONY STARK: Please, no gang signs.  
TONY STARK: No, throw it up. I'm kidding.  
TONY STARK: Yeah, peace. I love peace.  
TONY STARK: I'd be out of a job with peace.  
(Iron Man subtitle. lines 18-23)

This dialogue takes place in the opening act of *Iron Man*, when a star-struck soldier who is escorting Mr. Stark asks him to pose for a photo. When the soldier's friend seizes the camera, he

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15 The Apache Indian clan leader who fought against American and Mexican Forces for the freedom of his people, but ultimately surrendered to American authorities. Also used as an exclamation by soldiers to announce their absence of fear in the face of danger, such as jumping out of an airplane (Geronimo 2013, Wikipedia [online])

16 It is only hypothetical and it goes beyond the scope of this study to investigate whether this truly is the writer's intention, but if so this dialogue then would include what Attardo refers to a special type of frame known as Encyclopedic Knowledge (1994: 200)

makes the typical V sign<sup>17</sup> hand gesture, whereupon Tony comments *Please, no gang signs* and the same soldier puts his hand down. Tony's witty sarcasm is too quick for the soldier to recognize he was joking, so he tells him he can put his hand up again. His sarcasm is so rapid in delivery that his peers have a tough time processing it. In other words, the *No, throw it up. I'm kidding* was used as a special metamessage (Hamian 1998: 94) of “I was not being serious”, which in this case was needed for understanding his jocular style of speaking. Consequently, the soldier once again makes the V gesture with his hand and Tony comments *Yeah, peace. I love peace. I'd be out of a job with peace*, a seemingly ambiguous statement by a weapons manufacturer. This is a typical quip of Tony Stark, applying (sophisticated) humor that requires possessing the same limited-access knowledge and/or information processing ability as the speaker himself (Attardo 1994: 216). His humor is selfish and aware at the same time, a charm and jocularity that meet brains and intelligence. Possibly, the total word count of 3908 and 6.66 average words per line<sup>18</sup> could be another indicator for the difficulties in processing his humor.

### 4.3.3 *Lethal Weapon 2*

The second installment of the *Lethal Weapon* franchise is perhaps the most punning of all three movies chosen for this study. Although the humor strategies in an action movie overlap (as shown in table 2 in 4.2), such as different combinations of sarcasm + insults + puns + Expletive attributives, Ejaculations and Exclamations, *Lethal Weapon 2* stands out for its bigger employment of puns as a linguistic humor device.

- (7) MURTAUGH: You get into [Arjen] Rudd's office?  
 RIGGS: Yeah, I got up there.  
 Aryan Crud and his  
 Brown Shirts turned up...  
 (Lethal Weapon 2 subtitle. Lines 973-975)

As example 7 demonstrates, police officer Martin Riggs, fed up with the bad guys' racial slurs against his black colleagues, knowingly delivers a pun when he calls *Arjen Rudd* by the name 'Aryan<sup>19</sup> Crud<sup>20</sup>'. These 2+2 words are an example of paronyms which “phonemic representations are similar but not identical” (Attardo 1994: 111). In Vittoz-Canuto's Taxonomy (Attardo 1994: 127), 'Arjen → Aryan' would be classified as paronyms on the syntagmatic axis – paronyms based on one or several phonemes, and 'Rudd → Crud' would be also on the syntagmatic

17 The V sign typically stands for V as in Victory, but was during the counterculture movement adopted as a hand gesture that symbolizes peace (V sign 2013, Wikipedia [online])

18 See section 4.1 quantitative study, the table on word count and average word per line

19 The Macmillan dictionary defines *Aryan* as 'used for describing people from northern Europe, especially tall people with blonde hair and blue eyes. This word is connected with Nazi theories of race.

20 The Macmillan dictionary defines *Crud* as two things: 1. dirt, or a similar unpleasant substance, and 2. something that you dislike or consider unpleasant

axis – paronyms based on addition of one or two phonemes. As this dialogue confirms, puns do not have to be perfect homonyms to work. In fact, *Lethal Weapon* further exploits the signifier in example 8:

- (8) VORSTEDT: After this, it gets bloody.  
You tell your people to back off.  
Don't be a smart "kaffir".  
Maybe we let you live, huh?  
Come on, let's go.  
.....  
RIGGS: Are they all gone? The bad guys?  
Did you get them?  
MURTAUGH: They been "de-kaffirated".  
(*Lethal Weapon 2* subtitle. Lines 317-319, 1326-1327)

Here, after Riggs and Murtaugh have eliminated the racist bad guys who previously called him and his black colleagues *Kaffirs*<sup>21</sup>, Murtaugh responds with a laughter saying they have been *de-kaffirated*. As is evident, it is a rhyme-based exploitation of the signifier (Attardo 1994: 127) where decaffeinated → de-kaffirated. Perhaps a different kind of pun can be found in the classic one-liner from the dramatic finale of the film (example 9):

- (9) MURTAUGH: Drop it, asshole!  
ARJEN RUDD: Diplomatic immunity!  
(shoots him to death, the bullet pierces his diplomat ID badge)  
MURTAUGH: It's just been revoked.  
(*Lethal Weapon 2* subtitle. Lines 1308-1310)

This becomes more difficult for a linguistics only approach, given as the unfolding events of the situation have all the importance for Murtaugh's *It's just been revoked*. Attardo recognizes that puns are not only spoken or written, but can also be graphic (1994: 109), but no further mention is made if whether graphic puns could explain this more signified-based pun. One possible interpretation is that Murtaugh exploits the signified of *revoked*<sup>22</sup>, thus suggesting a similar and relating meaning through polysemy.

### ***5 Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research***

A linguistics only approach to humor is difficult to apply to movies since there are many other variables that play into humor, such as e.g. variations in directing, producing and acting. Concepts that are especially important to the understanding of humor in action movies are 1. possessing the

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21 "The word *Kaffir* was used in the former South Africa to refer to a black person. Now an offensive ethnic slur, it was formerly a neutral term for South African blacks" (kaffir [racial term] 2013, Wikipedia [online])

22 The Macmillan dictionary defines *revoke* as 'to officially say that something is no longer legal, for example a law or a document.

right frames, and 2. possessing a sufficient knowledge of the linguistic code (the test audience for this study had English as their L2). Generally, cockiness tended to be funny. A linguistics only approach to humor is also insufficient when some phrases have successfully made it into our knowledge of popular culture as with the example of *yippie ki-yay motherfucker* (*Die Hard*, 1988, on IMDB [online]). Thus, a strictly linguistic explanation to humor in a film does not seem relevant when dealing with a catch phrase as with the example from *Die Hard*.

The character seems to decide the choice of linguistic humor strategies, but all heroes in this study relied heavily on sarcasm and insults, and to some extent on puns and foul language. This may be connected to the social management functions of humor mentioned in section 4.2. The average word count per line is not a flawless indicator of style of humor, even though correlations were observed between a low average and the use of expletive attributives, ejaculations and exclamations as with the case of Murtaugh in *Lethal Weapon 2*. Taking into account these findings but also considering the selected movie franchises' financial successes, it is highly probable that other American action films featuring a male, humor-conscious hero use similar, if not the same, humor strategies.

With the quantitative data of this essay, little differences could be observed between Riggs in *Lethal Weapon*, the suicidal cop who lives in a trailer, and Tony Stark, the highly intelligent engineering genius in *Iron Man*. Judging by total words and lines, plus the average words per line index, they appear almost the same. Thus, only a qualitative analysis will tell them apart. But even the qualitative findings show similar results as they both primarily use sarcasm. So, what sets the socioeconomic aspects apart between the blue collar-type heroes Riggs & Murtaugh and John McClane from the elite, white collar character of Tony Stark, appears to be the use of expletive attributives, ejaculations and exclamations and especially foul language. The use of vulgar language by these male working-class protagonists may be connected to language-associated prestige and gender, where women typically gravitate towards the standard prestige form (overt prestige) and men typically gravitate towards the rougher, less standard and less prestigious form of speaking (covert prestige) (Aitchison 2013: 74-75). The hero would then alter his speech to establish a certain identity through the social significance that language has.

As pointed out above, a more intricate investigation into the definition of what constitutes as a line should be done so as to produce more quantifiable results, and to facilitate the connection of possible quantitative and qualitative results. A possible research question could be 'can a variable like "register" correlate with average word per line in an action movie'.

Ideally, these findings should be contrasted against British or non-American Action films to see if they rely more on e.g. puns and dry humor, rather than sarcasm, insults and expletive attributives as seems to be the case in American Action films. Additionally, the data on word and



line count and especially the words per line average should be contrasted against a British/non-American Action movie, to see if there are differences in their linguistic humor strategies as compared to the Americans'.

In conclusion, the humor strategies applied in an Action movie are not used exclusively for this genre. The idea, however, was to investigate the mismatch, and see how a seemingly non-humorous genre exploited humor. The action heroes of this study are absolutely humor-conscious. Even though the linguistic humor strategies could not be quantified (because humor turned out to be 'too subjective'), the study has showed that the action hero exploits language to 'get the job done with style'.

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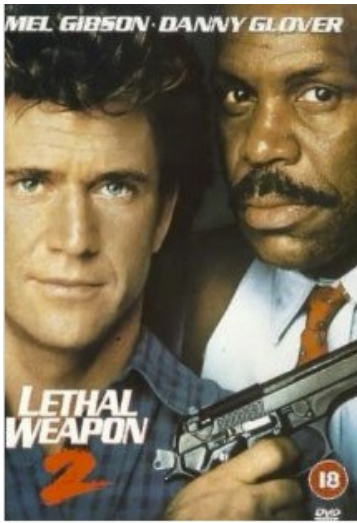
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# Appendix 1

Details of the selected films studied from each franchise.



## Lethal Weapon 2 (1989)

Top 5000

**R** 114 min - Action | Thriller - 7 July 1989 (USA)

**Your rating:** ★★★★★★★★★★ -/10  
**7.2** Ratings: **7.2**/10 from 95,106 users Metascore: 70/100  
Reviews: 152 user | 69 critic | 13 from Metacritic.com

Riggs and Murtaugh are on the trail of South African diplomats who are using their immunity to engage in criminal activities.

**Director:** Richard Donner  
**Writers:** Jeffrey Boam (screenplay), Shane Black (story), 2 more credits »  
**Stars:** Mel Gibson, Danny Glover, Joe Pesci | See full cast and crew »



## Iron Man (2008)

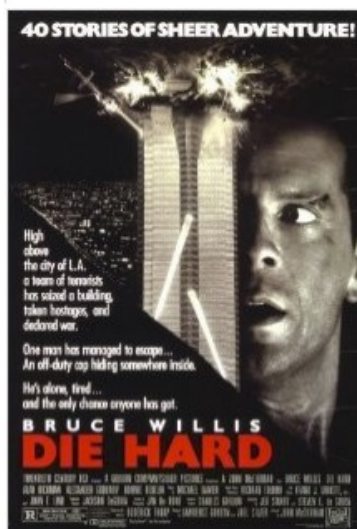
Top 5000

**PG-13** 126 min - Action | Adventure | Sci-Fi - 2 May 2008 (USA)

**Your rating:** ★★★★★★★★★★ -/10  
**7.9** Ratings: **7.9**/10 from 456,331 users Metascore: 79/100  
Reviews: 985 user | 464 critic | 38 from Metacritic.com

When wealthy industrialist Tony Stark is forced to build an armored suit after a life-threatening incident, he ultimately decides to use its technology to fight against evil.

**Director:** Jon Favreau  
**Writers:** Mark Fergus (screenplay), Hawk Ostby (screenplay), 6 more credits »  
**Stars:** Robert Downey Jr., Gwyneth Paltrow, Terrence Howard | See full cast and crew »



## Die Hard (1988)

Top 5000

**R** 131 min - Action | Thriller - 22 July 1988 (USA)

**Your rating:** ★★★★★★★★★★ -/10  
**8.3** Ratings: **8.3**/10 from 417,566 users Metascore: 70/100  
Reviews: 661 user | 207 critic | 13 from Metacritic.com

John McClane, officer of the NYPD, tries to save wife Holly Gennaro and several others, taken hostage by German terrorist Hans Gruber during a Christmas party at the Nakatomi Plaza in Los Angeles.

**Director:** John McTiernan  
**Writers:** Roderick Thorp (novel), Jeb Stuart (screenplay), 1 more credit »  
**Stars:** Bruce Willis, Alan Rickman, Bonnie Bedelia | See full cast and crew »

## Appendix 2

A sample view of the design of the subtitles used in the study.

953	01:06:18,520 --> 01:06:20,920	1. Line number.
Just get out of here		2. Seconds during which the line is visible
954	01:06:21,160 --> 01:06:24,560	3. Words being said in that line.
"kaffir" lover.		
955	01:06:29,240 --> 01:06:30,600	
Fenie		
956	01:06:30,840 --> 01:06:32,280	
meenie		
957	01:06:32,520 --> 01:06:34,960	
minie		
958	01:06:35,200 --> 01:06:37,680	
Hey, Moe!		
959	01:06:40,120 --> 01:06:43,000	
Sorry, Adolf.		
960	01:06:43,720 --> 01:06:46,800	
Pick them up with your hands.		
961	01:06:47,040 --> 01:06:48,600	
Big smile.		
962	01:06:48,840 --> 01:06:51,680	
Big smile!		