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HUMOUR AS A MULTIFUNCTIONAL STRATEGY TO COMMUNICATE PROPOSITIONAL MEANINGS IN SITCOM DISCOURSE: A RELEVANCE-THEORETIC ACCOUNT

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Abstract

This paper views humour as a conversational strategy, whose potential is to serve a number of different, sometimes divergent, goals simultaneously. It will be demonstrated that the sole purpose of humour rarely lies in amusing the audience. Drawing upon the relevance-theoretic view on communication, the objective of the paper is to report on research into a variety of functions that a conversationalist may possibly attain by dint of a humorous episode in sitcom. On the relevance-theoretic approach, it is assumed that the meaning communicated by the speaker can range from fully determinate to less determinate. It will be shown that whilst the former meaning has to do with the recovery of humorous intention, the latter is related to non-humorous functional information. Overall, the paper shows that the functions served by humour can be grouped into the categories of affiliation, aggression or cognitive benefits.

Key words

Humour; sitcom; relevance theory; functions; affiliation; disaffiliation; weak communication

1. Introduction

There is a great surge in the academic interest in the field of humour, whose scope of study is wide-ranging across a variety of scientific disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, mathematics and philosophy. Research into humorous phenomena in different communicative settings and frameworks has led to numerous proposals, which testify that humour is a concept that has not been explored to its fullest. But more importantly, the ubiquity of mass media has a direct influence upon the orientation of humour studies, since more and more researchers are regarding comicality arising on television or the internet to be worthy of scientific attention.¹ This article offers a relevance-theoretic account of the ways in which humour is used as a means to conveying a great array of propositional, weakly communicated meanings. Therefore, this study argues in favour of the cognitive overload effect (Jodłowiec 1991, 2015; Piskorska and Jodłowiec 2018, Jodłowiec

and Piskorska 2024). The present study indicates that the purpose of a humorous remark transcends pure enjoyment. Such humour is dubbed *speaker-meaning-telic*, i.e. when humour conveys meanings relevant to the present communication (Dynel 2018). The study is dependent upon three pillars: Relevance Theory (RT), functionalist studies as well as participation framework.

Secondly, the data are excerpted from the situation comedy *Modern Family*. It is imperative to precisely describe the interactional aspect used for the analysis by referring to the participation framework (Goffman 1963, 1981). Conversations in any fictional discourse rest upon two communicative levels: the inter-character's level, which comprises communication among fictional characters, and the recipient's level, which covers the audience's interpretations constructed on the basis of televisual characters' exchanges (Dynel 2011; see also Yus 1998; Brock 2011; Burger 1984, 1991, in Bubel 2008: 56–57). It is the recipient's level that lies at the heart of the present analysis. While there are numerous publications on the nature of fictional communication among the characters since they reflect naturally occurring communication through the code of realism (Kozloff 2000; Dynel 2013), there is a dearth of studies into the viewer's stages of comprehension. Thus, this study aims to investigate an area that has been marginalised.

The position of the viewer with respect to fictional communication seems to be an area of contention. Some conceptualise the audience's role in terms of either an addressee or overhearer (Bell 1984; Clark and Carlson 1992; Bubel 2008), whereas others advance the view that the TV recipient is an auditor or eavesdropper (Bell 1984). A different stance is adopted by Dynel (2011), who substantiates the claim that the viewer is a recipient (or metarecipient), being granted access to each and every talk on the inter-character's level. It is also highlighted in relevant literature that the audience's roles may fall along the continuum, ranging from the closest to more distant ones from the speaker (Bell 1984). To reconcile those views, it is better to assume the recipient's role in terms of active viewership, whose position is defined and re-defined by the cinematic interlocutors' intentions and hence the meaning is co-constructed together with the production crew (Bubel 2008).

My claim concerning the recipient's active role is supported by the aesthetics of the sitcom and the nature of conversation in the sitcom. *Modern Family* is shot in a mockumentary style (a blend of the words *mock* and *documentary*), which conveys an impression that what is being watched is the depiction of real events (Hight 2012) through breaking the so-called fourth wall. The instances where actors look directly into the camera are a case in point (Mills 2009). In my opinion, this specific style introduces a variety in addressing the audience. Overall, three basic types of communication can be observed in the sitcom under analysis: regular conversations among interlocutors who do not pay heed to the camera (purely fictional discourse), the interview sequence uttered into the camera (reality-like discourse), and in-between cases where there are regular conversations and suddenly one of the characters peeps into the camera (mixed fiction-reality discourse). As regards the role of the mockumentary aesthetics in relation to functions of humour, the claim is ventured here that some functions are only discovered in private conversations, in which a fictional character maintains direct

eye contact with the viewer, and thus the recipient is more actively engaged in the process of meaning-making.

Thirdly, the body of literature on functionalist analyses is ample. This contribution is couched in the functions communicated by means of humour and consequently, it validates some existing accounts as well as proposes new effects that humour can create upon the recipient. Adhering to the strand of research that makes use of humour to convey a number of functions at once (Ziv 1984; Mulkay 1988; Palmer 1994; Holmes 2000, 2006; Hay 2000; Meyer 2000; Holmes and Marra 2002; Martin 2007; Kuipers 2008; Piskorska 2016; McKeown 2017; Schnurr and Plester 2017), my analysis demonstrates that humour can lubricate personal relationships as well as disrupt social order at the same time, which is conditioned by the viewer's reception.

Taking the three pillars into consideration, the paper ventures a qualitative analysis of sitcom dialogues, with a view to presenting the whole gamut of the functions conveyed by dint of humour. The analysis benefited from relevance theory, which offers the tools to predict the interpretational stages in the viewer's mind and thus to get a valuable insight into mental processes, which serve a cognitive explanation of the recovery of (non)humorous effects. To be more specific, humour results from the recipient's pragmatic processes aimed at understanding the speaker's meaning, which are geared to finding an optimally relevant interpretation, whereas additional cognitive effects are extracted in the course of the viewer's intention to spend extra mental effort to obtain weak implicatures. The reception, i.e. the meaning(s) gleaned by the audience, depends upon comprehender's preferences and abilities to process the message in the most relevant way, so that a balance of effects and effort is achieved. Consequently, it is possible that some viewers access only humorous effects, while others feel that a sitcom episode, for instance encourages them to comply with a particular role model. This latitude in the interpretation can be best explained using the RT's notion of weak communication and the interactant's eagerness to search for relevance.

The results of the research will encompass not only functions distinguished in earlier studies but also novel functions that emerge from a bottom-up methodological perspective. More specifically, the analysis takes into consideration existing functionalist literature and hence incorporates the functions specified by other scientists as well as attempts to keep an eye on the collected data and tease out new functions. In other words, it is the two methodological perspectives, viz. bottom-up and top-down, which enable the identification of a plethora of functions. As a result, some earlier proposals are corroborated whereas others are refuted with respect to their relevance to sitcom discourse. In addition, it is worth stressing that the effects intended for the viewer depend on a number of factors: the viewer's readiness to spend more mental effort in return for additional cognitive effects communicated in a weak manner (see Yus 2003). Furthermore, granted that assumptions in weak communication are individualistic, their recovery is also dependent upon the recipient's background knowledge that one stores under some concepts which are activated during the process of interpretation (Jodłowiec and Piskorska 2024).

In the next section, the key assumptions underlying comprehension in RT with special emphasis on different effects created on the recipient's part are summarised. Second, some issues directly related to the data collection and analysis are discussed. Next, the results of the analysis are presented with respect to humour's potential to boost solidarity, introduce impoliteness and serve as cognitive play. Finally, conclusions are offered.

2. Relevance Theory and weak communication

On the RT account, verbal communication, like in many pragmatic approaches, takes place along the explicit and/or implicit continuum. The former is dubbed *explicature*, defined as an inferentially completed logical form. There is a degree of explicitness as explicatures can be stronger or weaker, which is dependent upon the level of indeterminacy and thus the recipient's degree of inferencing (Sperber and Wilson 1986 [1995]; Wilson and Sperber 2004; Carston 2004). Implicatures, on the other hand, are propositions that are not communicated explicitly (Sperber and Wilson 1986 [1995]). Implicitness is also a comparative notion that, like explicatures, can be weak or strong. Strong implicatures are propositions, the recovery of which is indispensable to construct the relevant interpretations, and hence the interactant is strongly encouraged to derive them, whereas weak implicatures may not be necessary for the overall interpretation. In other words, the key factor in distinguishing between stronger and weaker cognitive effects is the speaker's intention, i.e. in the case of strong communication, the interactant wishes to convey a determinate meaning, while in the case of weak communication, the speaker wishes to communicate an array of indeterminate meanings. A consequence of the latter is that the communicator does not endorse a vast array of imprecise meanings and hence the interpreter takes full responsibility for their recovery.

As already mentioned, the present analysis of sitcom dialogues profits from incorporating the weak communication notion that proves to be essential to describe humorous effects as well as cognitive effects created by dint of humour. Consequently, there is a differentiation between purely humorous effects and those that are relevant to the ongoing conversation (Dynel 2018). In general, the interpretation of any act of overt inferential communication can give rise to different meanings, ranging from fully determinate to indeterminate, which reflects RT's strong and weak communication. Sperber and Wilson (1986 [1995]: 59) advocate that assumptions, "as a result of communication, become manifest or more manifest to varying degrees". In the case of strongly manifesting an assumption, the interactant makes strongly manifest his/her informative intention. As regards weak communication, the communicator attempts to navigate the hearer towards the intended meaning but the assumptions constructed in the mind may not be identical to or fully overlap with those in the communicator's mind. A case in point being a metaphorical use of the sentence *John has a square mind* (Wilson and Sperber 2004: 270), where the speaker can weakly communicate that one is not eager to change a conservative attitude to certain aspects of life, be it clothing or way of thinking.

In weak communication, the interpreter is not expected to generate a precise set of assumptions but is rather encouraged to access assumptions that are highly relevant to him/ her and to stop the comprehension process as soon as s/he finds the interpretation that satisfies expectations of relevance, which is the basis for the RT comprehension heuristic procedure (Wilson and Sperber 2004: 613). Since the speaker's utterance makes manifest a whole array of weak assumptions, s/he cannot be fully certain about the final outcome of the recipient's process of interpretation.

The viability of the weak communication view to explicate the punchline effect in jokes has been attested by Jodłowiec (1991, 2008), Piskorska and Jodłowiec (2018), and Jodłowiec and Piskorska (2024). More specifically, it is argued that when the punchline makes manifest or more manifest an abundance of assumptions, there is a specific mental state created in the recipient's mind termed *cognitive overload* (Jodłowiec 2008; later dubbed *inferential overload* in Jodłowiec and Piskorska 2024). Never do these weak implicatures achieve the status of being full mental representations hence, humorous effects are derived at the subrepresentational level. This is the reason why many recipients of a humorous story may find it challenging to articulate why something has been funny or amusing. In addition, accessing weak assumptions is largely individualistic and depends upon a number of different factors, such as background knowledge that a person stores in his/her long-term memory (Jodłowiec 1991, 2008), which is labelled *contextual constraints* by Yus (2016).

The inferential overload effect is put forth to explain the punchline effect so, in theory, it should account for humorous effects only in jokes, where there is a clear-cut structure into the setting and the punchline. In sitcoms, it is argued here that humorous turns may be deployed in any place, as jablines in longer texts (Attardo 2001). Yus (2016), for example, believes that the processing of jokes or stand-up performances does not require additional relevance-theoretic mechanisms besides those proposed for non-humorous messages. As a result, the claim can be extended to sitcom discourse, where the mental state created in the recipient's mind when a plethora of weak assumptions are communicated is the same in the case of jokes and other discourse units such as fictional discourse. More importantly, the inferential overload is particularly salient to explain different communicative functions delivered with the use of humour (Piskorska 2016). It is maintained here that a vast number of functions are achieved with the use of humour on the part of the television viewer. These functions make manifest various propositional meanings in a weak way.

3. Data collection and analysis

This section endeavours to expound on the way the data was collected and analysed. The data from the sitcom is used for illustrative purposes, "only demonstrating analytical frameworks" (Bednarek 2010: 4), which means that it is used to validate underlying RT assumptions, especially the weak communication view on humour. In addition, it serves as a means of proposing new functions fulfilled

on the part of the viewer in the sitcom. The analysis is of a linguistic nature and hence it does not aspire to describe cultural or societal dimensions such as differences in inter- and intra-group relations.

The data collection aims to circumvent the problem with subjectivity, at least to some extent. I take into consideration not only the text in its narrow sense (a fictional dialogue in which televisual characters are engaged, Bubel 2011) but also other relevant discursal features connected with action (such as facial expression or direction of gaze). As Kozloff (2000: 99) maintains, taking into account the whole meaning “allows for a tight anchoring of the spectator’s identification with the character, but it also permits the viewer to pick up subtle discrepancies and undertones”. There are additionally a few techniques which can be applied to minimise the researcher’s subjectivity. First, Schnurr and Plester (2017) describe the “member checking” method, in which a researcher can consult with the initiator of a humorous remark to verify the intention, which is difficult in the case of sitcoms. Second, Olbrechts-Tyteca (1974, in Attardo 1994) identifies the mutual guarantee technique, so an episode is regarded as humorous because somebody already noticed its humorous potential, which is partly useful in sitcoms since their main aim is to amuse. In the present analysis I concentrate not only on contextualisation cues but also on, in my opinion, a superordinate cue that the sitcom is classified as comedy according to the *Internet Movie Database*.

I transcribed the data from the sitcom *Modern Family* manually since there are no websites with transcripts available for the analysis. Dialogues and monologues are accompanied by the description of a salient communicative context. Next, I rewatched the episodes to double-check whether the same set of humorous episodes was collected. The next step was to analyse all the dialogues with respect to the functions, which revealed some recurring patterns. The transcribed data does not “feature linguistic transcription conventions, for example, systematic signalling of emphatic stress, paralinguistic features, lengths of pauses, intonation, overlap” (Bednarek 2010: 70).

In general, my data comprises 116 humorous instances from season 8 of *Modern Family*. The underlying reasons for limiting my investigation to one season are that the position of the sitcom in the audience’s awareness is already strong, more humorous units are initiated by any member of the families, in comparison to the first seasons when the children were small, and reviewers reckon that the storylines in this season are well-developed.

4. Functional analysis of humour²

Humour studies abound in functionalist accounts. More importantly, humour serves multifarious ‘serious’ functions which transcend pure enjoyment (Norrick 2010). Savorelli (2010) reckons that regarding humorous discourse in terms of its key role to provide amusement to its recipients is reductive and thus erroneous. Humour research and its functional conception are a serious matter through and through as the humorous mode is not always “without serious intent or devoid of serious implications” (Mulkay 1988: 30). In a similar vein, Graham et al. (1992)

corroborate that studying functions of humour in interpersonal communication provides a better understanding of ulterior motives behind the initiation of humorous talk.

My analysis indicates that there are twenty-one functions carried out by dint of humour, which are teased out on the basis of an analysis of the extracts collected from the sitcom. The functions identified in *Modern Family* include: highlighting shared experiences, disclosing character-specific information, sharing, advising, soliciting support, defending, metalinguistic humour, discourse management, controlling behaviour, conveying and/or challenging social norms, reducing and/or fostering and/or avoiding conflict/tension, releasing tension/coping, providing linguistic and/or non-linguistic play, providing cultural reference, showing off and conveying a serious message. The functions are then divided into specific categories, namely those which aim to enhance solidarity (affiliative humour), those which are anchored in impoliteness (disaffiliative humour) and those which provide cognitive benefits (psychological functions).³ In addition, these functions are determined along their performance in conversation, i.e. whether they are used with a view to boosting positive affiliation, inflicting a face damage/threat or enhancing cognitive repertoire on the part of the viewer. The list of the possible effects created upon the viewer reflects the production crew's intention to encourage the recipients to recover a satisfying range of weak assumptions. Last but not least, the underlying premise for this study is one of the relevance-theoretic assumptions concerning comprehension, namely that any stimulus, being a turn uttered in a sitcom, activates the recipient's mental processes that lead to the recovery of explicit and/or implicit meanings.

It needs to be underlined that while most of the above-mentioned functions were already identified in the literature, five functions of providing linguistic play, providing non-linguistic play, providing a cultural reference, disclosing character-specific information and metalinguistic humour are new effects proposed in this article. The present paper outlines the results from my larger project, which is an unpublished PhD dissertation (Wieczorek 2021).

4.1 Weakly implicated solidarity

One of the primary objectives of interspersing humour in either spontaneous or fictitious communication is to ratify the bond with the co-conversationalists, foster in-group cohesion and thus create the situation in which the interactants' cognitive environments cross-cut one another. Provoking positive emotions in the viewers leads to beneficial consequences on one's mental processes as positivity helps, among others, form unusual cognitive associations (Fredrickson 1998), which is essential in entertainment discourse, as the content of humorous episodes frequently relies on the viewer's ability to find novel associations that lie behind incongruity (Suls 1983; Forabosco 1992).

A solidarity-enhancing function is identified as soon as humour occurs, even when the fictional characters are engaged in impoliteness. The bedrock for sitcoms is that they are supposed to provide entertainment for viewers and hence it is not the audience whose mental well-being is threatened. The production crew

intends to create *humour communities*, i.e. “audiences who enjoy(ed) a particular syndicated television situation comedy” (Carrell 1997: 14-15). In order to connect with the viewers by virtue of amusement, it has been found out that the production crew may employ the following communicative functions: highlighting shared experiences, disclosing character-specific information, sharing, advising, soliciting support, defending, metalinguistic humour and discourse management. It must be underlined that different viewers can access different pieces of information, subsumed under those functions, nevertheless it is possible that none of the functions are satisfied, granted that they are communicated by means of weak implicatures.

On the basis of the following dialogue, I would like to explain the machinery behind the viewer’s access to the humorous interpretation (humorous cognitive effects) as well as additional solidarity-based cognitive effects (weak implicatures). In dialogue (1), there is a combination of five solidarity-enhancing functions. In general, this dialogue exemplifies the situation in which parents’ preoccupation with their offspring’s achievements and inflated ambitions that they frequently demonstrate is ridiculed:

- (1) **Context:** During Lily’s (Cameron’s adopted daughter) ballet recital, a woman sitting in front of Cameron stood up and blocked his view of Lily, which made him sad and angry.

Cameron: [into the camera] Last night, *I was robbed*. That’s right. There I was at Lily’s dance recital, breathlessly anticipating my baby’s first-ever ballet solo. (...) That horrid woman robbed me of my proud daddy moment and forced me to lie to my daughter. (S08E11)

Humour is contingent upon Cameron’s use of hyperbole about being robbed the other night. The viewer, in order to find his turn relevant, should employ the process of lexical adjustment (Wilson and Carston 2007), where the interpretation of hyperbole *to be robbed* is broader than the denotation of the concept *robbed* since *to be robbed* literally means that the person’s possessions were unlawfully taken from them or that the person was deprived of something (needed or deserved). This piece of information is part of the encyclopaedic properties of the word *robbed*. Granted that the RT comprehension of hyperbole involves a higher degree of departure from the encoded meaning of the word than approximation, the viewer needs to look for a more general meaning in a given context, which is also hinted at in Cameron’s explanation of this robbery. As a result, Cameron hyperbolically says that during Lily’s recital he was robbed, i.e. made unable to witness, of proud daddy moments. In other words, Cameron’s turn leads to the construction of two concepts on the basis of the homonym *robbed*, both of which are relevant to analyse his turn: *ROBBED** (literally to be physically assaulted and robbed of possessions) and *ROBBED*** (to deprive a person of being able to do something). These two concepts are not created simultaneously. The former is created as soon as Cameron starts discussing this robbery, whereas the latter concept is accessed when Cameron provides an explanation about the robbery.

The recipient is supposed to formulate the implicature that Cameron values his daughter's performances and feels furious about the fact that he was made unable to see her dance at the recital.

As regards the group of affiliative functions, the viewer can relate to similar experiences and interest as fictional characters on screen. More specifically, the implicit information that can be gleaned on the basis of Cameron's monologue is that any parent highly values any proud moment in his/ her child's life and wants to experience it, thereby the dialogue implicitly serves the function of highlighting shared experiences (Hay 2000). Furthermore, it is important to note that this function can be easily performed on the recipient's part since any viewer is connected by an emotional bond with his/ her family or friends.

Second, the function of disclosing character-specific information is satisfied as soon as the characters disseminate various items of information about their personality type or reasons for displaying specific behaviour or factors that motivate them to attain goals. In an RT vein, the recipient's already stored assumptions about a character can get strengthened or revised or some new assumptions are made mutually manifest (Sperber and Wilson 1986 [1995]). Consequently, Cameron's monologue may strengthen the recipient's various pieces of knowledge concerning his sensitivity, love for his daughter as well as proneness to getting angry easily. Nevertheless, when the viewer first encounters Cameron in the sitcom, this piece of information is new.

Third, the recipient may feel that one of fictional characters passes on a piece of sensible advice (Hay 2000) concerning, mostly social life. More specifically, while witnessing some social blunders happening on screen, the recipient acquires the knowledge about how s/he may avoid them in own life or how future actions may be performed better. The way in which this function is fulfilled on the basis of Cameron's monologue is that the recipient is advised on how people should not be treated (hence the reverse action is expected), i.e. they ought to become considerate, for example to make it possible for other parents/ people to witness some concert or recital. In other words, humour consists in the viewer's feeling of being indirectly advised.

Cameron's turn also serves the function of sharing (cf. Hay 2000), whereby a fictional character grants the recipient an interview held directly into the camera so as to confide some secret. Those interviews further promote intimacy and thus the viewer feels trusted. In extract (1), Cameron shares his feelings about the devastating event that he regards in terms of robbery. As a result, the recipient gets the information about the feelings caused in others when one is not considerate.

Last but not least, humour in the monologue is used with a view to the characters' soliciting support and compassion in the audience about some personal predicament. It was labelled solely in the interviews, creating an intimate relationship with sitcom viewers. The monologue provided by Cameron can be an indicator of his hope that the recipient will develop sufficient understanding and show support to him in times of hardship.⁴

As posited by Jodłowiec and Piskorska (2024), the punchline of a joke, and in my opinion, any sitcom turn, manifests a host of weak assumptions, leading to the overload effect. In extract (1), the viewer may access the following: homosexual

people are widely regarded as sensitive and hence are expected to get overly emotional, parents greatly value their child's accomplishments, parents usually want to witness any important moment in their child's life, and people should show consideration for other people.

4.2 Weakly implicated impoliteness

The scholarship on disaffiliative humour in fictional discourse demonstrates that the fictional characters frequently engage in impoliteness, which induces a humorous response from viewers. Despite a higher frequency of verbal aggression in fictional discourse than in naturally produced conversation, the recipient is not taken aback by the presence of talks inconceivable in real life (Dynel 2015). There are various methods of how the recipient may rationalise deploying impoliteness in a fictionalised world, for example the abundance of uncanny utterances may be attributed "to the speaker's frame of mind or exceptional wit" (Dynel 2015: 158). I believe that these impolite talks are judged as humorous by the recipients because they are not the ones who have been belittled or demeaned. In other words, whilst the production crew lays on lavish entertainment for the recipients, they also foster disaffiliative relationships with the characters.

In general, the communicator in *Modern Family* may wish the viewers to access the following impoliteness-based functions: controlling behaviour, criticising, conveying and/or challenging social norms, fostering/ reducing or avoiding conflict. Some of those disaffiliative functions communicated by means of humorous communication fall along the continuum of cases, which is conditioned by the viewer's reception, that is the strength of the message. A case in point can be the functions of criticising and advising, i.e. the recipient can feel advised on how to behave or criticised for misbehaviour.

The conversational episode below can potentially satisfy one, all or none of the six impoliteness-based functions,⁵ which are explained below. The premise for marking impoliteness functions in the collected dialogues is that there may be (veiled) hostility among the characters that is diffused, which can be potentially amusing for the viewers. The recipients, consequently, get the information on how conflicts can be provoked or settled. As for the impoliteness in (2), Phil expresses pride in building the Tower by referring to it as *finally...something...I can be proud of* while hugging his daughters. The recipient can derive the implicit meaning that it is not his daughters that are a good reason for being gratified in life, but rather tangible projects that are a source of pleasure and fulfilment:

- (2) **Context:** Phil decides to make his dreams come true and build Dunphy Tower. Phil and his daughters, Alex and Haley, are at the construction site.

Phil: Breathe it in, girls. My journey begins today. *Finally bringing something into this world I can be proud of.* [the girls look discontent]
[Phil talks into the camera]

Phil: As children, the Wright Brothers dreamed of flying machines. Oprah dreamed of hiding presents under chairs. And I dreamed of building something magnificent. Well, recently, Jay and I bought a vacant lot on which we are building Dunphy Tower.

In RT terms, humour on the recipient's level is contingent upon Phil's micro-turn in which he expresses pride in building Dunphy Tower. To be more specific, the derivation of humorous effects lies in the audience's formulation of implicature, computed on the basis of contextual assumption as well as the hearer's search for relevance. First, the recipient formulates the explicit interpretation that Phil considers Dunphy Tower as the only meaningful thing he has ever created. This interpretation, however, does not explicitly provide the audience with the reason why his daughters look discontent or what causes the clash between his words and the audience's feeling of uneasiness (upon hearing that the Tower, not family, is regarded as meaningful). A further process of comprehension involves accessing encyclopaedic information about the feeling of pride as well as the valuable things a person can create in life. This creates an implicated premise that can be tantamount to the information that when a person has a child, s/he regards him/ her as the most important achievement in the world. Consequently, since this premise forms the context in which Phil's turn should be processed, the viewer can construct the strongly implicated conclusion that Phil has never thought of his children as his achievement because his pride in building the Tower overshadows his children as achievement. This meaning is further reinforced by Phil's monologue where he implies that the Dunphy Tower is as important an achievement as the Wright Brothers' flying machine.

The first weakly communicated information directed at the viewers may be the production crew's intention to employ humour as a social corrective, whereby an individual whose disruptive behaviour needs to be altered is ridiculed (the controlling behaviour function). Granted that in sitcoms it is hardly feasible to exert any social control over viewers, humour can become an indirect means of rectifying the behaviour of the viewers. The information communicated by the controlling function may take the form: *the viewer is supposed to take either the reverse action or the same action*. Dialogue (2) exemplifies the first controlling situation. As a result, the audience's behaviour connected to children should be more appreciative as it is difficult to understand why a parent does not prioritise his/ her children as their greatest achievement (the family should always come first).

An interesting feature of some of the conversational episodes is their potential to both convey as well as challenge social norms simultaneously, a case in point being dialogue in (2). The variation in reception results from the recipient's *private beliefs* and the *metarepresented (cultural) beliefs* (Yus 2002, 2004, 2005) disseminated by the production crew. The function of conveying social norms is satisfied as soon as the production crew explicates social norms that are widely accepted by most members of a particular society. In the extract above, it is a norm for a person to regard their own achievements as a matter of pride. This is why erecting Dunphy Tower is compared to, for example, inventing a flying machine by the Wright Brothers. As for the function of challenging of social norms, Phil reverses

the viewer's system of beliefs as he implies that being the investor of Dunphy Tower makes him prouder than being a father to three children.

In addition, the dialogue may serve the function of criticising, where the production crew voices legitimate criticism, the negative import of which is mitigated/ neutralised by means of humour. Phil's monologue (2) exemplifies his inappropriate behaviour towards children, shaping the viewer's attitude by demonstrating undesirable behaviour. As a result, his boasting about the Dunphy Tower warrants reprimand.

As for the inferential overload effect and subsequent weak assumptions, they may include: people/ parents sometimes may unintentionally say something that is socially unacceptable and are oblivious to the fact that they have hurt others, when people become emotional, they cannot fully control what they say, and when people become emotional, they can reveal what they really feel.

It has been corroborated in the functionalist literature that humour can be an instrument designed for a number of conflict-based situations, such as fostering conflict. The production crew certainly does not intend to exacerbate tense situations where face-threatening acts are not mitigated and even worse, not sanctioned, which can negatively influence constant viewership. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that any such attempt is moderated by means of humorous keying. One of the functions subsumed under the conflict-based effects is when a humorous episode fosters conflict between the production crew and the viewers, whereby the recipient feels that this adversarial behaviour is intended for him/ her. Phil in extract (2) is pictured as an inconsiderate parent whose attitude towards his family is frequently off-hand. When a recipient behaves in a similar way in real life and is aware that Phil's turns deride such parenthood, such humour may give rise to a conflictive situation with the production crew. In other words, when a recipient feels that his/ her behaviour is ridiculed in the sitcom, there may appear negative feelings towards the characters or the sitcom in general. The turns subsumed under fostering conflict additionally show to the viewer that such an attitude may potentially end in quarrels, the negative outcome is presumed by the recipient.

4.3 Weakly implicated cognitive benefits

The last group of functions communicated by means of humour is the one in which the recipient entertains humour as an intellectual activity "that accompanies the production and enjoyment of humor" (Ziv 1984: 70). The cognitive benefit functions are connected to putting the televisual recipients in a pleasurable mood (Martin 2007) that can broaden/ build one's intellectual, social and psychological resources (Fredrickson 2009).

On the basis of the data analysis, six functions were identified: releasing tension/ coping,⁶ providing linguistic and non-linguistic play, providing a cultural reference, showing off and conveying a serious message. All of those functions can possibly be satisfied on the part of the viewer, being a witness to dialogue (3):

- (3) **Context:** Gloria is preparing food in the kitchen on the occasion of Manny's (her son) graduation. Manny and Jay are in the kitchen.

Manny: [to Gloria] Don't make a big deal.

Gloria: My baby's graduating. He won the award for Integrity and Character. "No absents, no tardies, respectful to students and teachers alike."

Jay: *My school had an award like that, but instead of a sash, that kid got a punch in the mouth.* Proud of you, though.

Manny: Why do all your stories involve a punch in the face, a shifty European, or a broad who's been around the block? (S08E22)

Humour is based on the hyperbolic use of the term *award*, the understanding of which necessitates the pragmatic process of lexical modulation. In order to find Jay's turn relevant, the recipient should first access the meaning of the encoded concept *award* that can be received at school, which entails getting a top prize. Moreover, the contextual assumptions are crucial for the overall interpretation, which include Gloria's underlining the significant contribution her son made during his school years as well as Jay's explicit explanation of the aftermath of getting such a prize during his school years. The last element indispensable for uncovering the underlying meaning intended for the viewer, connected to amusement, is the recipient's pragmatic expectations of relevance that guide mental processes until reaching the highly relevant interpretation. The result of fine-tuning of the word *award* corresponds to Gloria's and Jay's idea of a prize, correspondingly: *AWARD** (the prize denotes something positive given to a person in order to approve of one's achievement) and *AWARD*** (the prize denotes something negative of being verbally and/ or physically abused by other pupils). What needs underlining is the fact that Jay is clearly ironic in referring to an award that a good student could receive during past times in the form of a punch in the face (see Piskorska 2014 on humorous irony). Consequently, in order to formulate the explicature on the basis of Jay's turn, the recipient needs to uncover Jay's mocking attitude and that he may be echoing his opinion that getting a punch in the face is not a positive award for good behaviour and thus an award should always be something positive. In addition, the recipient can also access the implicit interpretation: good grades may cause other pupils to feel envy, which may lead to violence.

Humour is primarily a cognitive endeavour, which actively engages the comprehenders' mental processes to recover the intended meaning(s). The function of humour in which the viewer is provided with a (non)linguistic puzzle leads to a psychological shift that should be pleasurable (Morreall 1983). There is a general function of providing a puzzle,⁷ which bifurcates into linguistic and non-linguistic play. In other words, the recipient needs to resolve a puzzle, which can be of a linguistic or non-linguistic nature. The first, providing linguistic play, is connected to the effect of novelty and surprise and is prompted by what Partington (2006) dubs *colourful language*. In other words, it refers to all linguistic means that the production crew employs to afford the audience genuine amusement. Such uses of language are creative and innovative, which may encompass metaphors, similes, puns, sarcasm or irony. In extract (3) above, the production crew

creatively employs one of the strategies in which humour results from assigning of a new meaning to an existing phrase/ word. More specifically, the meaning of the noun *award*, in layman's terms, entails a person being positively influenced by some actions, e.g. receiving a gift a person has dreamt of. As soon as Jay starts his turn, he reminisces his school days when children his age rewarded a student with good grades by punching him/ her. Consequently, an *award* is connected to the recipient negatively benefiting from the action.

The providing non-linguistic play function encompasses all the cases where humour is consequent upon the creation of non-linguistic incongruities that are still puzzling or surprising, catching the viewer off-guard. In Jay's turns, the viewer may perceive a couple of different clashes/ incongruities: the clash between being positively vs. negatively rewarded for attaining excellent grades and the clash between a believable and normal personal anecdote vs. the one that is always twisted and repeatable.

A different way in which a conversational episode can be weakly relevant to the recipient is when it serves the function of providing a cultural reference. Such humour depends upon stereotypes that perpetuate in culture (Mulkay 1988) or cultural artefacts, such as well-known films, books or people, etc. Cultural representations may be spread in two ways: strengthening or revising of personal information, viz. the recipient's individual cultural beliefs are convergent or divergent in comparison to the production crew's metarepresented assumptions. Humour in the dialogue above hinges upon some stereotypical information that good pupils are frequently bullied at school, a stereotype that Jay strengthens.

Furthermore, a humorous episode may fulfil the function of conveying a serious message, which squarely converges with the serious import of the sitcom. This proposal was implicitly validated in literature where it was claimed that comedy discourse calls for a *duality reading*, where one is connected to the humorous layer (and hence deriving pleasure) and the other to the serious layer (Cook 1982, in Mills 2005). In *Modern Family*, this function primarily focuses on portraying the behaviour of people, that is, how people generally act and react in different situations and predicaments. As a result, dialogue (3) shows that it is usually the case that child's good grades can become a reason for ridicule/ physical aggression, which conveys the moral that one's eagerness to gain knowledge should never be an excuse for violence.

The fifth cognitive function is the one where humour is a platform for showing off one's wisdom and intellect. Its potential result may be either fostering solidarity (and hence impressing the audience) or initiating aggression as a result of one's wish to display superiority (and thus only appearing to be more intelligent than others). The function of showing off is believed to have the potential to promote solidarity on the grounds that the viewer and the character may feel to be on the same wavelength. The dialogue presented in this section is an epitome of Jay's feeling of superiority as he believes that it is clever to reverse the standard state of affairs connected to getting an award for good grades, which involves being physically assaulted. In short, Jay's recollection is a testimony of quasi-wit as he should not be proud of such behaviour.

The last effect that may be weakly implicated in this dialogue to the recipient is the releasing tension/ coping function. Any entertainment discourse, in general, is a place where the recipient is set at ease and keyed to be in a positive emotional state in order to deal with adversity and distress in real life. Jay's turns represent the way of conduct that is not socially acceptable and thus it can be used to release the viewer's tension in the form of laughter.⁸ In other words, the television recipients may find it amusing when Jay implicitly criticises Manny for being one of those students who could have got a punch in the face.

Besides the weak assumptions communicated as soon as one of the above-mentioned functions is performed, the recipient may access the following implicatures: people tend to recollect their personal stories to add a flicker of excitement or school children bully other children because they are more successful.

5. Conclusions

The principal objective of the present study has been to delineate humour as a multifunctional strategy designed to express a number of propositional meanings intended for the recipients of the sitcom *Modern Family*. Granted that the viewers are as diverse as the number of people in the world, it was my intention to present a full range of meanings that can be communicated by means of humour, some of which can become full representations in the recipients' mind. As for the recovery of the humorous interpretation, the viewer follows the path of least effort to obtain intended cognitive effects. To attain the main goal of the paper, my study resorts to the relevance-theoretic tool of weak implicatures, which explains the derivation of additional cognitive effects by means of humour (see Piskorska and Jodłowiec 2018). One of the reasons for the production crew's implicitly communicating a plethora of meanings is to provide the material that may appeal to a large audience.

My aim was to demonstrate how the relevance-theoretic tools can be employed to comprehensively characterise inferential mechanisms involved, mainly, in processing a humorous episode to obtain non-humorous effects. It was demonstrated that the weak communication view offers a promising explanation to delineate propositional meanings communicated by means of humour. One may wonder whether there is a need to offer a new relevance-theoretic tool to explain those specific effects. In my opinion, as I hope to have shown, RT should not be extended in this direction at the point of study since the concept of weak communication successfully expounds on the functions that can be satisfied on the viewer's part.

An interesting point associated with the functions of humour discerned in *Modern Family* concerns the new effects that emerge in the course of undertaking the bottom-up analysis, which includes disclosing character-specific information, metalinguistic function, providing linguistic and non-linguistic play, and providing a cultural reference. The disclosing character-specific information function helps the viewer get inside the fictional characters' minds to determine what motivates their behaviour and what they really feel about painful situations. The

linguistic and non-linguistic play functions refer to incongruity mechanisms, whose role is to offer a striking juxtaposition of meanings/ behaviours, etc. The cultural reference function encompasses the instances in which humour hinges upon the recipients' knowledge of stereotypes and cultural artefacts. It should be added that providing a cultural reference can be both an intended goal itself and a means conducive to achieving an affiliative function. The last metalinguistic humour function is performed with a view to explicating the way the English language should be used. That is to say, the recipient is offered a piece of advice about the use of language itself, i.e. the language is used to talk about language.⁹

Notes

¹ One of the reasons why the research into situation comedy was marginalised is that genres of popular culture were considered insignificant to become an object of serious scientific investigations (Neale and Krutnik 1990; Mills 2005, 2009).

² The article partly presents the results from my unpublished dissertation (Wieczorek 2021).

³ Hay's (2000) classification of the functions of humour with several strategies constitutes the basis for my analysis.

⁴ The monologue does not meet the functions of defending, metalinguistic humour and discourse management, subsumed under affiliative functions in my research. In short, humour as a defence mechanism refers to all the cases where the interactants wish to protect themselves from any danger, the strategy of which encompasses, among others, exaggerating one's pitfalls or avoiding disclosing personal information. Second, the role of metalinguistic humour is to provide a commentary about the language itself. In the sitcom under scrutiny, there are few conversational segments that offer a recipient a piece of advice on how to use the English language. Third, discourse management is a function in which a humorous segment is used with a view to administering discourse, such as changing the topic of conversation.

⁵ Since the paper presents partial results from my research, there are two more impoliteness-based functions that other dialogues serve, viz. avoiding and reducing conflict, but are not relevant in extracts used in this article. As for the former, the audience is demonstrated how a conflictive situation can be mitigated. In particular, the character conceals his/ her true emotions or refrains from uttering any criticism. As for the latter, the fictional characters show the means that can be employed to avert serious conflicts. The function was assigned in the cases where the characters provide an unreasonable explanation or provide implicit criticism.

⁶ The reason why it is stated here that releasing tension/ coping is subsumed under the functions serving cognitive benefits is that it is a psychological function, which helps the recipient to cope with problems. I would like to thank the reviewer for pointing this out to me.

⁷ The function of providing a puzzle for the recipient is captured by the workings of incongruity mechanisms, given the fact that there needs to be some kind of incongruity in order to offer an intellectual puzzle.

⁸ There are a number of writings on how aggression can lead to amusement (see, for example Hay 2000, Culpeper 2005, Dynel 2015, Sinkeviciute 2019).

⁹ There is no extract from the sitcom presented in this paper that performs the function of metalinguistic humour. Since it is a new effect, I would like to have a look at the following extract, in which Mitchell advises his partner Cameron on how to

use the English language, i.e. he should not use synonyms since many people may find it redundant:

Cameron came home earlier to celebrate Father's Day with Mitchell.

Cameron: Yeah, I just wanted us to all be together today.

Mitchell: Aww!

Cameron: In spite of your *thoughtlessness and insensitivity*.

Mitchell: Okay, those mean the same thing, but okay.

(...)

Lily: Grams left us all something in her will, even you.

Mitchell: She left me something! Aww.

Cameron: Even though you're *stubborn and pigheaded*.

Mitchell: Okay, again. (S08E01)

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