What lies beyond and within humour: A relevance-theoretic approach to propositional meanings in the sitcom *Modern Family*

Magdalena Wieczorek
University of Siedlce, Poland

Abstract

Advancing the proposal that conversationalists frequently engage in humorous communication to convey propositional meanings, the paper aims to employ pragmatic inferential mechanisms specified in a relevance-theoretic framework in order to explicate the viewer's recovery of additional cognitive effects in sitcom discourse. On this observation, it is assumed that processing of humorous utterances may result in the recipient's being amused and/ or in making more insightful observations concerning goals a speaker wishes to attain. For example, an interactant would like to communicate a potentially impolite meaning, which is mitigated by means of humour. The corpus is drawn from the American situation comedy *Modern Family* (2009-2020), created by Steven Levitan and Christopher Lloyd. The focus in the paper is on how the viewer can grasp meanings that are (un)intentionally communicated by the production crew while s/he is sitting comfortably in the armchair. The main thrust of the present paper is twofold. First, extra cognitive effects can be best described in terms of propositional meanings they communicate, which in turn necessitates a relevance-theoretic notion of weak communication. Second, I postulate that accessing humorous effects is just the first step in order to fully understand a conversational episode in the sitcom, granted that viewers may be eager to spend more processing effort in exchange for extra cognitive rewards. It is frequently the case that the recipient's mental representations are strengthened or challenged by the production crew's (cultural) representations. More specifically, it will be demonstrated that the functions of conveying and/ or challenging of social norms, disclosing character-specific information and providing cultural references aim to strengthen or challenge the viewer's personal beliefs.

Keywords: relevance theory; humour; sitcom; propositional meaning; weak communication

1. Introduction

The body of literature devoted to the immediate goal of humour to amuse the audience is extensive, which comes as no surprise given the fact the communicator relays a humorous message to predominantly provide pure entertainment. There is an appealing strand of research that regards humour as a carrier to a number of different meanings that are relevant

to the ongoing conversation. Functionalist literature abounds in the studies of effects that humour can conceivably create on the part of the recipient. While some writings note this fact only in passing, there are many scientists that refer to this explicitly. Some researchers go even a step further, claiming that humour can have an array of functions at once, which makes this phenomenon a powerful conversational tool (Ziv, 1984, 2010; Palmer, 1994; Holmes, 2000, 2006; Hay, 2000; Meyer, 2000; Holmes and Marra, 2002a, 2002b; Martin, 2007; Kuipers, 2008; Piskorska, 2016; McKeown, 2017; Schnurr and Plester, 2017). As will also be demonstrated, besides amusement, another intent of a production crew (a group of scriptwriters, producers, directors, etc.) in amusing the viewers is to build and foster solidarity, which helps to gain loyal viewership. Last but not least, humorous communication is a remarkable means for pursuing discrepant goals, i.e. to display a sense of social cohesion and to subvert authority and status quo (see Section 2).

This study of television discourse is based upon three pillars: Relevance Theory, functionalist studies as well as the participatory framework. First, Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) is a cognitive-pragmatic framework whose core theoretical assumption is that human cognition and communication are relevance-oriented (Sperber and Wilson, 1986 [1995]). This lays foundation for ostensive-inferential communication, being overt and intentional, where it is stated that any ostensive stimulus directed at the recipient conveys the presumption of optimal relevance. On the basis of sitcom discourse, any fictional dialogue that grabs the viewer's attention and directs it on the production crew's (or fictional character's) intention is an ostensive stimulus. More importantly, it will be shown that RT offers a promising explanation of how the recipient accesses humorous and non-humorous (propositional) effects, which does not require additional mechanisms. What the viewer is expected to do is to follow the path of least mental effort, which would be rewarded in terms of effects. It primarily depends upon the interactant and his/ her current psychological state, among others, how much effort s/he is eager to expend. As Piskorska (2016) convincingly advocates, an extensive range of different implications is explored by means of the RT comprehension heuristics.

Second, the participation framework is one of the pillars for the study given the fact it helps to neatly capture the interactional aspect of sitcom discourse and clearly define a research object. There has been an ongoing debate on the roles of all participants who may possibly take part in a speech event, whose focal point is to go beyond the traditional dyad, viz. speaker and hearer. In general terms, irrespective of the fact whether it is natural or scripted (fictional), communication bifurcates into the *inter-character's/character* and the *recipient's* levels (Dynel, 2011[1]; see also Burger, 1984, in Bubel, 2008; Clark, 1996; Yus, 2008; Messerli, 2017). While the former covers interactions among fictional characters, the latter consists of interpretations that the production crew (i.e. directors, producers or scriptwriters, dubbed collective sender (Dynel, 2011)) intends the audience to construct on the basis of conversations held among fictional characters. As a result, there are two layers upon which the

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[1] Although Dynel's model and its nomenclature is presented in this section, her participation framework is not the first move to expound on reception and production ends, as indicated in references.

structure of television discourse is built: *fictional* and *collective sender's*. The present paper hinges upon the latter layer, viz. conversations held between the production crew and the TV recipients. More specifically, it will be demonstrated, employing a relevance-theoretic comprehension heuristic, how the collective sender employs humorous segments in order to make the audience access a variety of propositional meanings.

As regards the conceptualisation and position of the televisual recipient with respect to other participants in different frameworks, there are many studies that sometimes present divergent views. Here I would like to summarise four competing approaches to shed some light on various approaches to audience design[2]. First, Bell (1984) considers a viewer in terms of a referee, the absent third party, whose importance is immense to any interactant as the referee has some bearing upon the speech of the speaker. Second, Clark and Carlson (1992) as well as Clark and Schaefer (1992) reckon that a sitcom recipient can occupy one of the two roles: an addressee or overhearer. Third, Bubel (2008) posits that every fictional unit is devised with an overhearer (implied spectator) in mind whose process of interpretation is facilitated by the use of the same language or code. Consequently, an overhearer in fictional discourse is tantamount to an overhearer in natural talk. Last but not least, Dynel (2011) puts forth that the viewer is a recipient (or metarecipient) on the collective sender's layer. In my opinion, those various views can be, at least partly, reconciled. On this approach, the claim would be championed that the role of the TV recipient is defined and redefined with respect to the collective sender's intention. As a result, a recipient assumes a dynamic role, i.e. s/he can sometimes be an overhearer who remains silent throughout diegetic interactions and, more importantly, of whose presence fictional characters seem to be unaware, whereas s/he can also become a co-conversationalist that is directly addressed by other characters.

This claim is further supported by the nature of communication in the sitcom *Modern Family*. In short, there are three groups of interactions, viz. 1) purely fictional discourse that covers regular communication among fictional interactants who seem to be oblivious to the omnipresent eye of the camera, 2) reality-like discourse where fictional characters are engaged in the interview sequence uttered into the camera, and 3) fiction intertwined with reality, in which regular conversations are held which are interrupted by fictional characters' sudden peep into the eye of the camera. The cases where viewers are involved in the co-construction of meaning in the sitcom (reality-like discourse) have a direct influence upon the propositional meaning(s) worked out by the audience. In particular, some functions are performed as soon as a fictional character makes a direct eye contact with the recipient as if the former participant requested more close involvement from the latter. In other words, a fictional character's swift glance at a telecinematic recipient shows s/he is cognisant of his/ her presence and thus may wish to communicate a message more directly.

To meet the objective of the study, the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 first presents a broader picture of an RT comprehension procedure, with special emphasis on the weak communication as being central to the explanation of non-humorous effects.

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[2]   It should be underlined that there are other two-layered frameworks applicable to cinematic discourse such as Brock (2011, 2015) or Rossi (2011). It is my intention to provide the gist of various views.

Furthermore, this section will perform a qualitative analysis of one humorous dialogue, with a view to showing an importance of weak implicatures and thus propositional meanings that are at the recipient's disposal. In section 3, I concentrate on four functions served by dint of humour, i.e. conveying and/ or challenging of social norms, disclosing character-specific information as well as providing cultural references[3]. Those effects aim to strengthen and/ or challenge the recipient's individual representations. Section 4 draws the main conclusions from the analysis of sitcom units in the light of RT.

2. An RT comprehension procedure and humorous and non-humorous effects[4]

RT is a comprehensive framework which can be utilised to analyse a number of communicative phenomena, for example humour, irony, metaphor, translation and interpreting, language acquisition, second language teaching, media discourse and Internet communication, (im)politeness and phatic communication[5]. As regards the study of humour, it has been proven to be applicable to the analyses of jokes (Yus, 2003, 2017, Wieczorek 2019), puns (Solska, 2012, Yus, 2016), stand-up performances (Yus, 2002, 2016), or novels, to name but a few. The majority of those works agree that humour results from the clash between two interpretations, especially in the realm of jokes and puns. A considerable benefit of studying humour in terms of RT is that its comprehension procedure fits perfectly with incongruity(-resolution) models (Yus 2003). The concept of incongruity, understood in linguistics as a mismatch or clash between two meanings/ interpretations, is regarded as a necessary and sometimes sufficient condition for humour appreciation.

Wilson and Sperber (2004) view utterance comprehension as a two-stage enterprise, viz. decoding and inference. The role of pragmatic inferential processes is to develop a linguistically encoded logical form into a fully propositional form. Granted that utterance that can contain ambiguities or referential ambivalences, inferential enrichment of a logical form is

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[3] The fact that needs highlighting is that the fulfillment of a specific function on the recipient's part entails the communication of a specific meaning.

[4] The paper discusses some of the findings from my PhD dissertation (Wieczorek, 2021), whose objective was to describe all the additional cognitive effects the production crew would like to attain on the part of the television recipients. It was demonstrated that humour in the sitcom was utilised with a view to satisfying the following functions: highlighting shared experiences, disclosing character-specific information, sharing, advising, soliciting support, defending, metalinguistic humour, discourse management, controlling behaviour, criticising, conveying and challenging social norms, fostering/ reducing as well as avoiding conflict, releasing tension/ coping, providing a linguistic and non-linguistic play, providing a cultural reference, showing off and conveying a serious message. In general terms, those are various effects to affiliate with different audiences, the long-term results of which is to corroborate the common ground and thus maintain constant viewership. For the sake of space, the focus here is put on the functions of conveying and/ or challenging social norms, disclosing character-specific information as well as providing cultural references, which have the capacity to provide the clash between the recipient's and production crew's representations.

[5] Consult Yus' comprehensive online bibliography that contains literature on RT, which is regularly updated and is conveniently sorted according to the area of research: https://personal.ua.es/francisco.yus/rt.html.

necessary. In addition, the interactant supplies contextual assumptions and follows the RT comprehension heuristic procedure to obtain the meaning a speaker intends to communicate:

Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure
a) Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.
b) Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned).

(Wilson and Sperber, 2004, 613)

Wilson and Sperber (2004, 613) detail the hearer's task to access the speaker's meaning by identifying three subtasks in the comprehension process:

Subtasks in the overall comprehension process:
a) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content (in relevance-theoretic terms, EXPLICATURES) via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution, and other pragmatic enrichment processes.
b) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual assumptions (IMPLICATED PREMISES).
c) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual implications (IMPLICATED CONCLUSIONS)

What the originators of RT underline is that the construction of explicit meaning, identification of contextual assumptions and derivation of implicit meaning runs in parallel and thus is not ordered sequentially. Sperber and Wilson aver that comprehension is an online process, in which the recipient's search for the speaker's meaning is constrained by not only the presumption of relevance but also individual expectations about potential relevance of a stimulus. In view of this, the hearer's specific expectations and general presumption of relevance contribute to hypotheses about explicatures and implicatures via backward inference (Wilson and Sperber, 2002, 2004).

On the RT account, implicatures are straightforwardly explained as propositions that are not communicated explicitly. They are divided into *implicated premises* and *implicated conclusions*. Premises are assumptions retrievable from memory or constructed on the basis of assumption schemas, both of which can provide context. These premises help in the construction of the speaker's intended interpretation. Implicated conclusions, on the other hand, are created on the basis of premises and explicature (Sperber and Wilson, 1986 [1995]). Implicitness is a matter of degree, thus, implicatures are stronger or weaker. Strong implicatures are essential propositions that must be created to formulate a relevant interpretation and hence the hearer is expected to derive them. In contrast, weak implicatures may not be crucial for an overall interpretation and consequently are drawn on the interpreter's sole responsibility (Sperber and Wilson, 1986 [1995]; Wilson and Sperber, 2004). All the inferential processes mentioned in the comprehension procedure can be exploited for the sake of humorous effects in jokes, where the setting (initial part of a joke) creates certain expectations of how the text can develop, but the punchline invalidates those expectations and forces the hearer to formulate a highly relevant interpretation (Yus, 2003). One of the merits of explaining humour through the lens of RT is that its heuristics squarely converges with

incongruity-based approaches to humour (Suls, 1972), the importance of which is generally accepted among humour scholars.

The weak communication account is particularly salient for the explanation of not only humorous effects (Jodłowiec, 1991, 2008; Piskorska and Jodłowiec, 2018), but also additional cognitive effects derived by a sitcom recipient. It has been argued to facilitate the processing of humour in verbal jokes where the punchline makes manifest or more manifest[6] a wide array of weak assumptions. The mental state created when those assumptions suddenly arise in the recipient's mind is termed *cognitive overload* (Jodłowiec, 2008). Granted that those weakly communicated implicatures will never become full representations in the hearer's mind, they can help to clarify why many people find it difficult to explicate why specific jokes lead to amusement.

Although the viability of weak communication is tested in jokes where the humour-inducing element occupies final position, this notion is pertinent for other humorous phenomena. In other words, an affective response elicited by an array of weak assumptions is the same in the case of jokes and other forms of discourse, such as fictional discourse. It will be demonstrated that the cognitive overload has the potential to comprehensively account for all propositional meanings that the recipient supposedly accesses. A humorous episode in (1) is a good candidate for a practical exemplification of the cognitive overload effect for the realisation of propositional meanings in a weak way:

(1)   **Context**: Phil organises a bachelor party for his father and he invites his father-in-law, Jay.

    Phil: Dad's bachelor party's gonna be epic. (…) Boom! Chicken wraps, white wine, fudge.
    Jay: *Is this a bachelor party or a party where ladies sit around watching "The Bachelor"*? (S08E15)

On the recipient's level, humour is dependent upon the turn provided by Jay. By means of lexical adjustment[7], the recipient should construct two concepts based on the double meaning of the phrase *bachelor party* that Jay explicitly states: *BACHELOR PARTY** (an all-night stag party) and *BACHELOR PARTY*** (a party during which people watch a dating television series called *The Bachelor*). The viewer should construct the explicature that, in Jay's opinion, Phil's party resembles the one for women, i.e. with chicken wraps and white wine. Jay intends to indirectly criticise Phil for organising a boring stag party. The explicitly communicated meaning may make the audience construct some warranted implicature that Jay may have preferred a more traditional stereotypical stag party with excessive amounts of alcohol and unhealthy food, visiting strip clubs, and preferably, being able to reminisce only part of this

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[6]   Sperber and Wilson (1986 [1995]) argue that an assumption is manifest in a given discourse context when it is perceptible or inferable, which means that a recipient is able to represent it mentally and hold is as (probably) true. Since manifestness is a matter of degree, some assumptions can be more manifest than others and thus they are more likely to be entertained by the recipient.

[7]   On an RT account, lexical adjustment is a type of free enrichment processes, whose result is an ad hoc concept, i.e. an occasion-specific sense of words/ phrases whose meaning is fine-tuned in a specific context (Wilson and Carston, 2007).

wild night. There is a high degree certainty that those assumptions are evidenced in the viewer's individual store of assumptions.

Apart from deriving genuine amusement, Jay's comment can "force" the recipient to spend more mental effort and thus extract some or all of the propositional discourse meanings (in brackets, I label the functions involved):

- a recipient can believe that it is better sometimes to criticise implicitly in order not to hurt one's feelings (highlighting shared similarities; Hay, 2000)
- Jay likes criticising his son-in-law Phil (disclosing character-specific information)
- a recipient can be advised that guests at the bachelor party expect a lot of alcohol, dancing and unhealthy food (advising)
- criticism, though implicit, can lead to the end of conversation or is used to take control of the flow of conversation (discourse management; Norrick, 1993)
- criticism in the form of mockery can be used to communicate a meaning, for instance an attempt to correct one's deviant behaviour, and hence it is not always used for its own sake (controlling one's behaviour; Hay, 2000)
- Jay's shameful behaviour towards Phil with whom many viewers affiliate can convey the meaning that it is not acceptable to criticise others (criticising; Hay, 2000, Holmes and Marra, 2002a)
- it is not socially acceptable (or, not highly recommended) when a father-in-law criticises his son-in-law (challenging social norms; Ziv, 1984)
- implicit criticism can mitigate a conflictive situation (reducing conflict/ tension; Martin, 2007)
- neutralised acts of criticism can be used to release tension or deal with the problem at hand (releasing tension/ coping; Ziv, 1984, Hay 2000)
- criticism can take the form of a linguistic play, which mitigates the negative import (providing a linguistic play)
- the relationship between a father-in-law and a son-in law indicates a clash between the former who always criticises and the latter who tries his best (providing a non-linguistic play)
- a stereotype about stormy relationship between a father- and son-in-law is strengthened; older people are difficult to be satisfied/ are highly critical (providing a cultural reference)
- implicit criticism can become a sign of one's mental power (showing off; Martin, 2007)
- people tend to criticise when their expectations towards actions of others are not fulfilled (conveying a serious message)

It must be highlighted that lack of the recovery of the above meanings does not endanger the definitional purpose of sitcom dialogues, which is amusement. That is to say, those additional cognitive effects are derived independently of humorous effects. In other words, I would like to make a claim that while some viewers may aim at easy relevance and hence derive humorous effects, other recipients may not only find humorous turns amusing, but also find pleasure in accessing other effects communicated by dint of humour, for instance when

viewers' and production crew's beliefs held in cognitive environments are corroborated. This is what Solska (2023) dubs *depth of processing*: "the processing of utterances can be shallow…or reflective, as when we pause and ponder an utterance, applying and reapplying the relevance-driven comprehension procedure in search for additional meanings that might not be instantly manifest" (Solska, 2023, 144).

3. Strengthening and challenging the viewer's individual representations

This section endeavours to discuss several ways in which the production crew[8] feels eager to affiliate with the TV recipients by strengthening and/ or challenging their individual representations, which capitalise on humour. By this token, humour either corroborates or invalidates similarities in cognitive environments, which along RT lines are mental representations. More specifically, the article discusses the effects of conveying/ challenging social norms, disclosing character-specific information and providing a cultural reference that hinge upon the dichotomy of strengthening and challenging the recipient's representations. In this section I provide the analysis of seven humorous episodes from the sitcom *Modern Family* in order to elucidate the above-mentioned division.

According to Wilson and Sperber (2002), a stimulus is considered relevant when it connects with contextual assumptions to yield cognitive effects (benefits) from processing it. More specifically, a potentially relevant stimulus is when it leads to the derivation of *positive cognitive effects*, understood as worthwhile inputs to our representation of the world. Consequently, the interpreter's attention is devoted only to those stimuli which are more relevant than others. Cognitive effects are attained as soon as a new piece of information combines with a contextual assumption by means of strengthening, abandonment or revision of existing assumptions or connecting with an old assumption to give rise to contextual implication (Wilson and Sperber, 2004). As for the interrelationship between different cognitive effects and humour, Yus (2002, 2005) advances the view that humour in stand-up comedies frequently dwells upon the comedian's strengthening or challenging of the audience's individual cultural information. I would like to extend this claim by suggesting that not only cultural representations, but also any individually held information, for instance concerning system of beliefs, can be bolstered or questioned. This claim would be substantiated in the analytical part of this section.

In Yus' (2005) parlance, the interpreter's personal representations are strengthened when a similar assumption is made mutually manifest by a comedian during the performance. Next, the hearer's personal beliefs can be challenged when an existing assumption, commonly held by many people, is made mutually manifest, which markedly differs from an assumption made by a humourist. Whilst the process of challenging requires the transfer of assumptions from a collective (or, comedian's) storage to audience's personal storages, the process of strengthening is reverse, viz. from private to collective. As for the viability of this proposal to

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[8] It is assumed here that the production crew wishes to affiliate with viewers in order to maintain dedicated viewership.

analyse a sitcom, there seems to be a lack of certainty whether a given humorous segment strengthens, challenges or refines one's (cultural) representations, given the fact that it is unfeasible to predict the recipient's individual background knowledge. Consequently, such studies which show a plethora of different effects (for example, sharing stereotypical information) created upon the viewer are valuable since these point to various strategies that the production crew employs in order to appeal to a large audience around the world.

The last issue that requires mentioning is the private/ metarepresented (cultural[9]) beliefs dichotomy, as it cross-cuts the strengthening/ challenging dichotomy (Yus, 2002, 2005). Private beliefs bifurcate into intuitive, being acquired through perception and inference, and reflective, being attained through communication. Metarepresented beliefs, on the other hand, are presumed to be widely held by a specific cultural group. The reason why this distinction is relevant for the explanation of non-humorous effects is that different audiences may derive quite disparate cognitive effects, and thus, some views aired by the production may be consistent, while others may be inconsistent, with those endorsed by the telecinematic recipients. In RT terms, some cases would illustrate considerable overlap between the production crew's and recipient's cognitive environments (strengthening), whereas others would exemplify the lack thereof (challenging). To illustrate this, the humour in the sitcom usually resides in Jay's mocking his homosexual son Mitchell, by comparing his behaviour and personality to a woman. As long as a recipient shares the same negative opinion and has the inclination to pass derogatory remarks towards homosexual people, his/her private representations would be consistent with a metarepresented belief expressed by the production crew[10]. In addition, those representations would be strengthened by Jay in the sitcom. Marking this humorous segment as a case of strengthening of a private representation is only possible when the production crew and viewers share the same belief about, for instance, homosexuals. However, when the recipient's and production crew's representations are not compatible, then such cases are marked as examples of challenging of personal beliefs.

The propositional meanings in the humorous segment (2) analysed below are pivoted on the pattern of strengthening and challenging certain beliefs. More specifically, it fulfils the functions of conveying and challenging social norms at the same time, though such cases are rare in my data. Furthermore, Meyer (2000) rightly puts forward a claim that enforcing social norms produces a dividing effect upon the hearers, as laughter can discipline and thus divide the audience into those who misbehave and those who comply with the code of proper conduct. In extract (2), humour on the recipient's level[11] is dependent on Mitchell's use of creative metaphor to vividly describe Cameron's addiction to sugar. To start with, the phrase

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[9] For the reason explained in this section, I put the word *cultural* in brackets, although the author referred only to cultural representations.

[10] Even though it is Jay who derides his son, the recipient may attribute Jay's utterances to the production crew. That is to say, to maintain the clarity of which communicative level is studied (see the Introduction), I refer to the production crew whose potential beliefs are shared through fictional characters' mouths, however the recipient's interpretations are constructed on the basis of dialogues of specific fictional characters.

[11] It needs to be underlined that humour on the recipient's level very rarely converges with humour on the fictional layer, since comedies are designed for the benefit of viewers.

Days of Red Vines and Roses is a blend of the two references: *Days of Wine and Roses* (the film depicting a couple struggling with addiction to alcohol and chocolate) and *Red Vines* (a brand of red licorice candy). Having specific information about the meaning of those names leads to the derivation of emergent properties: addiction to alcohol is similar to addiction chocolate; not only an addicted person but also his/ her next of kin suffer; when talking about addiction, one may choose not to talk about it directly. As a result, the recipient can glean the meaning implicated by Mitchell: Cameron is as addicted to sweets as alcoholics are to alcohol:

(2)   **Context**: Cameron, Mitchell and their daughter play the trick-or-treat game. Mitchell notices that his partner indulges in sugary sweets.

[Mitchell and Cameron talk into the camera]
Mitchell: Cam doesn't react well to candy.
Cameron: Which is why I never eat it. Except on Halloween. And I admit, in years past, I may have overindulged.
Mitchell: Which leads to a crazy high followed by a tearful, self-loathing crash. *It's a Days of Red Vines and Roses.* (S08E05)

The two functions related to social norms include the one that strengthens while the other challenges viewers' social norms. As Meyer (2000, 320) remarks, "[h]umor allows a communicator to enforce norms delicately by leveling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with an audience". Although the production crew may introduce a conflict situation to the viewers by breaking the widely accepted cultural norms, such cases of challenging are not regarded as hostile, given the fact those conversational "moves" are cloaked under humour (see workings on humorous frame, e.g. Coates, 2007). As for the conveying-social-norms function, it covers humorous segments whereby the production crew's system of beliefs intersect with the recipients', corroborating their thorough understanding as regards social norms. One of the patterns where the function was assigned encompasses cases in which the fictional character's unacceptable behaviour is critically appraised by others, prompting the recipients to conform to norms. Example (2) is a case in point. The propositional meanings that the recipient gleans on the basis of (2) would be tantamount to: it is a norm/ typical behaviour that a person addicted to any substance suffers when s/he lacks something s/he loves; it is a norm that a close friend or family member is mad because of others' addiction and thus sympathises with their beloved ones when they are in a difficult situation.

As regards challenging social norms, private assumptions should clash with assumptions made mutually manifest in the sitcom. Such cases are frequent, which can explain why the content of the sitcom appeals to a large audience: the telecinematic recipients are enchanted by witnessing the world being markedly different from their own life, for instance the one in which blistering verbal attacks do not sever relations among family members. The weakly communicated meaning that a recipient can access is that it is not socially acceptable that a partner, instead of supporting an addicted person, goes as far as to openly criticise him/ her.

The disclosing character-specific information function is marked when a fictional character expresses personal beliefs or attitudes towards socially valid issues. As soon as a recipient acquires some knowledge concerning any fictional character, conversational

segments that follow in subsequent episodes either strengthen or challenge and eventually lead to the revision of already held assumptions. In other words, the recipient is cued to modify certain details about a fictional character or store new items of information. The propositional meaning communicated in dialogue (2) reinforces the recipient's private belief concerning Cameron that he is quite sensitive and is prone to tearful moments.

The last function that predicates on the strengthening/ challenging dichotomy is providing a cultural reference. Such humour results from referring to stereotypes that perpetuate in culture as well as to cultural artefacts, such as famous films, books, or people. An additional effect that the fulfilment of this function entails is that such comedy discourse establishes authenticity, as it is more embedded in a real cultural context. A humorous unit presented above communicates a propositional meaning on the basis of strengthening of the stereotype concerning homosexuals that they are regarded as effeminate individuals whose personality is woman-like, for example they are likely to cry a lot. In addition, Mitchell's turn alludes to the film *Days of Wine and Roses*, implicating that Cameron's addiction to sweets is as devastating to his family as addiction to alcohol.

One of the reasons for performing the conveying-social-norms function is to corroborate mutual understanding and hence underline the things that the production crew and viewers have in common. Another set of instances in which this function was assigned encompasses the units in which the fictional characters conform to the pattern of social norms that are widely acceptable and probably held by most members of society. Extract (3) draws upon a norm that if a boy wants to be successful in picking up a girl at the party, he may make a humorous remark, as girls love to laugh.

(3)   **Context:** A girl at the party does not understand why Manny wears the Trumbo costume (it looks as if Manny, aka Trumbo, is writing in a bathtub).

A girl: Rambo?
Manny: No, Trumbo. Dalton Trumbo. He wrote in the bathtub.
A girl: Why?
Manny: Maybe, as a screenwriter, *he knew he was going to take a bath on the back end.* [chuckles]

Humour results from Manny's use of the punning phrase, which can be interpreted in a double way. The phrase *to take a bath* requires a relevance-theoretic process of lexical adjustment, the result of which are two ad hoc concepts, viz. TAKE A BATH* (to have a shower) and TAKE A BATH** (to lose money in a business deal). Both concepts are relevant in the context of the present conversation as Manny would like the girl to move back and forth between two possible interpretations of the phrase. It is also possible to say that the explicature which should arise in the viewer's mind consists of the information enclosed within the latter concept, i.e., Dalton Trumbo was convinced that being a screenwriter will make him lose money eventually.

The dialogue in (3) also serves the function of disclosing character-specific information about Manny who is unlike his peers in everything he does, such as in choosing a costume. Most teenagers would probably choose a more recognisable figure, such as a famous actor or superhero from Marvel comic books. As regards the providing a cultural reference function, Manny's turn mentions Dalton Trumbo, an actual screenwriter. Nevertheless, the recipient's

storage of assumptions may lack information about Trumbo and, in order to preserve amusement, the production crew included Dalton's description in Manny's turn.

Modern Family is a sitcom whose humorous effects largely draw upon reinforcing or challenging the recipient's individually held beliefs, for example family life, relationship among siblings or parents, or treatment of minority groups (concerning the function of providing a cultural reference). Mills (2009) reckons that sitcoms are an important vehicle for the demonstration of cultural capital. Not only do viewers like watching events that are distant from their own life, as already stated, but also they derive pleasure from becoming cognisant that individual cultural representations are shared by others. The latter situation Yus (2005) dubs the *joy of mutual manifestness*, which corroborates common ground between the recipients and humourist. Extract (4) strengthens a common stereotype of men being keen on impressing each other and thus choosing to speak of women in derogatory terms.

(4)   **Context:** Phil meets a well-known weatherman on the news, which makes him overly excited. Rainer finds out that Phil is an estate agent and tries to find a common language with him.

> **Rainer:**   You know, I think you sold my neighbor's house, Doris Jacobs.
> **Phil**:   [trying to recall] *Uh, white, mid-century, big back porch*?
> **Rainer:**   That's her.

Following an RT comprehension procedure, the recipient needs to find a referent for Phil's description of Doris Jacobs' house, which is white, has a big back porch and dates back to mid-century. Rainer's last line introduces incongruity and makes the viewer backtrack in order to find a contextually salient interpretation. Humorously switching a referent from the description of the house to the woman, Rainer intends to amuse Phil and build positive relations. The recipient employs an RT process of reference assignment and derives the explicature: Phil's reminiscence fits both the house and woman interpretations. Besides the explicitly communicated content, there are many weakly communicated implicatures: men ridicule women to show mental power, men like to talk about women in terms of objects, or men prefer to talk about women in derogatory terms when there is no woman in the vicinity.

In addition, Rainer's clever remark fulfils the function of challenging social norms. The information that the recipient should derive is that it is not a socially acceptable norm that men should engage in conversation where women are treated unfairly, or are seen as inferiors whose roles in society are defined in terms of objects.

There are also humorous units which contribute to strengthening of the same stereotypical assumption throughout the season, i.e., Colombian doctors, or doctors in third-world countries in general, are under-qualified. More specifically, while analysing dialogue (5) it seems that being an orthopaedist in Colombia does not require any medical training in medical school and, as such, you may become an orthopaedist right after having graduated from junior high school. In (6), Jay admits that after having graduated, Manny may as well go to Colombia and become a radiologist, thus no medical training seems necessary. What is more, excerpts (5) and (6) provide a challenge of social norms: it is not a norm that one does not have to be medically qualified to become a doctor.

(5)   **Context:** Javier, Manny's biological father, comes to Jay and Gloria's to take his son to celebrate his achievements and graduation.

Javier: Manny, the first member of my family to ever graduate from high school.
Jay: Wait a minute. *Don't you have a brother in Colombia who's a doctor*?
Javier: Yes.
Gloria: *He just does orthopaedic surgery, no brain or heart.*

(6)   **Context:** Jay congratulates Manny on his graduation day from high school.

Jay: [to Manny, smiling] Congratulations on the first of what I'm sure will be many diplomas. *Unless you want to skip all that and move to Colombia and become a radiologist.*

The comic effects in extract (5) derive from the clash between Javier's brother being an orthopaedic surgeon in Colombia and the fact that Manny is the very first member in his entire family to become a high school graduate. The function of disclosing character-specific information is also strengthened when Gloria accepts the way things are undertaken in Colombia. As regards humour in (6), it is based upon the clash between Manny's chance of becoming a radiologist in Colombia and the recipient's knowledge that it takes many years of training to become a specialist. Jay's turn additionally strengthens the information about him that he is fond of teasing.

On the opposite pole of the continuum of strengthening and challenging of stereotypes there are cases in which humour subverts the widely held stereotypes. Extracts (7) and (8) reverse the stereotypical information: the former subverts the usual way of speaking about children that parents always underline child's positive features (7) or that it is not typical of women to drink alcohol (8).

(7)   **Context:** Lily's positive grade record makes her parents astonished as they expected that it should have been much worse. The school principal advises her parents to move Lily to a more challenging curriculum.

Mitchell: I know! All these years we thought that she was, uh God, what's the word?
Cameron: *Different? Peculiar? Odd? Mean?*
Mitchell: So many words. But she was just really smart. Holed up in her room every day after school, she wasn't …
Gloria: *…plotting to kill us?*
Cameron: I was gonna say daydreaming.

Humour in (7) is based on Mitchell's inability to offer at least one feature of Lily's character that is deemed positive and Cameron's effortlessness in providing Lily's negative characteristics. While the viewer makes an assumption that Cameron would find suitable praising adjectives, as is constantly strengthened in the sitcom that Cameron is blindly in love with their daughter, he starts enumerating Lily's traits such as being odd, mean or peculiar and that she probably spent a lot time in her room to attempt at Mitchell's and Cameron's murder. In addition to reversing a stereotype, this dialogue challenges a social norm: it is not a norm that parents regard their child as a possible murderer or a mean human being. Moreover, the function of disclosing character-specific information is performed as the viewer is afforded an insight into Cameron's mind, which subverts the existing assumption: he is

aware of Lily's strange behaviour, which contradicts Cameron's usual view of Lily as the most astonishing daughter.

Let us study the last dialogue in which humorous effects capitalise on two possible interpretations of the phrase *wine country*, which, for the proper understanding, requires the process of ambiguity resolution. There is an incongruity between the recipient's meaning of a wine country being a place where wine tasting is organised, and the meaning assigned by Phil and Claire, being the trampoline where Chardonnay is served.

(8)   **Context:** Gloria, Claire's stepmother, wants to spend more time with Claire after having agreed to look after the high school children at the ball.

Claire: Sure, it's the least I could do, because tomorrow you are going to help Luke with his homework while *I visit wine country*.
Gloria: [gasps] I want to go.
Phil: That's just what she calls *lying on the trampoline drinking Chardonnay*.

The viewer should be amused when s/he finds out that a normal activity of drinking wine on a trampoline is referred to in creative terms. Creativity manifests itself in the incongruity between drinking Chardonnay on a trampoline and visiting wine country. In other words, instead of stating it bluntly, Phil chooses the phrase *wine country* for "drinking wine on a trampoline". Taking the contextual information about Claire as being eager to drink wine and the viewer's background knowledge about Claire that she is shown drinking alcohol on numerous occasions, the character-specific information is strengthened. Furthermore, this dialogue serves the function of challenging social norms, as it is not socially acceptable that mothers, or women in general, drink alcohol.

4. Conclusions

While there are many works devoted to the description of humorous effects in RT, the issue of how humour can be used to communicate a variety of propositional meanings in sitcom discourse has been sidelined. The present paper attempted to plug part of this gap. My major aim was to describe additional cognitive effects provided by means of humour in a weak way, pivoted on strengthening and challenging of individual representations held by televisual recipients. Strengthening encompassed episodes where the production crew's and viewers' cognitive environments cross-cut each other. As a result, humour is not only used with a view to providing amusement, but also to corroborating shared cognitive environments. Challenging included cases where the metarepresented beliefs were divergent from the recipient's individual beliefs. The challenging-representations units can also create a positive effect upon viewers since people can be entertained by watching events that are different from those they witness in real life. An interesting string of research in the context of challenging of the recipient's beliefs is undertaken by Kuipers (2006 [2015]), who investigated the interrelations between social class and taste cultures. More specifically, she claims that taste cultures are relative to differences in status and power. Highbrow comedy, in her parlance, is more intellectually challenging, ambivalent, with avant-garde features and relies heavily on cultural capital than popular and easily accessible lowbrow humour. While highbrow comedy

challenges the viewers, which is the reason why highly educated people appreciate it, lowbrow comedy is produced for the sake of amusement. In addition, those two humour styles are mutually exclusive: "people who like popular humor are generally puzzled by highbrow comedy, whereas people who favor intellectual humor look down upon popular humor" (Kuipers, 2006 [2015], 100), although highbrow style lovers are not necessarily fully aware of lowbrow humour. An area of further research is to determine the target audience of *Modern Family*.

Special attention was paid to four functions that hinge upon the strengthening/ challenging dichotomy, which include conveying and/ or challenging of social norms, disclosing character-specific information and providing cultural references. That is to say, all those functions have the potential of either strengthening of the viewer's personal assumptions, as the information communicated in a humorous episode converges with the one disseminated by the production crew, or challenging of the recipient's personal beliefs as soon as a humorous dialogue makes manifest quite disparate information from this held privately by a TV recipient. Moreover, determining whether specific humorous segments convey or challenge certain information was unfeasible since viewers' private beliefs condition his/ her reception. What is more, any researcher and production crew will find it difficult to fully envisage the recipients' private beliefs, although there is a mutual agreement on what is customarily held by members of society. Nevertheless, in RT, it is believed that a communicator has a mind-reading ability, which comes in handy to predict how a piece of discourse can be interpreted (Sperber and Wilson, 2002). Since the target audience of any fictional discourse is not uniform, it is important for the communicator to predict what kind of a stimulus will be highly relevant in a given context. The production crew, at least to some extent, makes conscious accurate predictions about the meanings to be elicited and conveyed in scripted communications. To rephrase, among others, scriptwriters consciously predict mental states of the viewers as well as guide their comprehension process to safeguard the recognition of humorous intention and possibly other cognitive effects.

Another line of further investigation, besides determining the target audience of *Modern Family*, is to describe other functions of humour, which are potentially contingent on the strengthening/ challenging recipient's beliefs such as humour as a means for developing the knowledge of the presented world.

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