Magdalena Wieczorek
ORCID 0000-0003-3701-2884
Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Faculty of Humanities

Humorous and Non-Humorous Effects in Sitcoms: a Relevance-Theoretic Perspective[1]

Keywords: Relevance Theory, sitcom, humorous effect, cognitive effect, non-propositional effect, weak communication

Słowa kluczowe: teoria relewancji, sitkom, efekt humorystyczny, efekt poznawczy, efekt niepropozycyjny, słaba komunikacja

Introduction

Humour research has experienced an upsurge in continuing academic popularity among many branches of science as diverse as philosophy, sociology, linguistics, psychology and even mathematics. A scholarly interest in humour has stimulated the establishment of many renowned journals, such as *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, *The Israeli Journal of Humor Research*, *The European Journal of Humor Research*, and most recent one *The Rivista Italiana di Studi sull'Umorismo* (*RISU*). There is also a wealth of research papers, monographs, edited volumes and special journal issues, which is an ample testimony that humour has not been described to the full. Some humour scholars indentified over a hundred of humour theories (Gruner 1978, Ziv 1984), some of which provide a general idea of humour (for example, its manifestations, functions or techniques), whereas others concentrate on the occurrence of humour in its more limited sense (for example, subversive humour in workplace or juridical humour). Raskin's (1985) *Semantic Script Theory of Humor* (SSTH) is regarded as a cornerstone of a linguistic account of humorous texts, with the emphasis on jokes. The SSTH was later extended into the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH, Attardo and Raskin 1991), which is believed to be applicable to a variety of humorous texts transcending simple-structured jokes. On a general note,

---

[1] The paper is part of a bigger project (PhD dissertation) and hence the analysis it contains is small-scale. The dissertation focuses on various mechanisms and functions fulfilled by dint of humour.

there are three broad families of theories of humour encompassing *superiority theories*, *incongruity theories* and *relief/release theories* (Raskin 1985, Attardo 1994), differing with respect to the object of study:
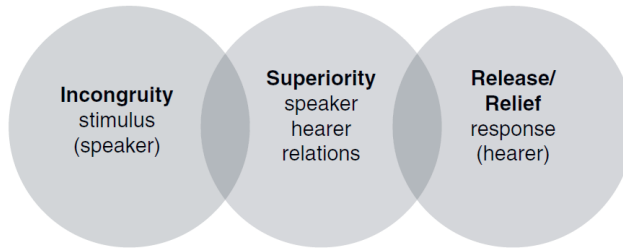

Figure 1. "Map" of humour theory (Attardo and Raskin 2017: 50)

Incongruity-based approaches offer the most universal workings into the occurrence of humour since their theoretical tools can presumably explain any humorous unit (Dynel 2013). It needs to be borne in mind that jokes – a humorous manifestation on the basis of which the majority of incongruity-based approaches are modelled (Attardo 1994) – and humour in sitcom discourse differ greatly. Granted that the internal structure of jokes is bi-partite, i.e. the setting and the punchline, humorous episodes in sitcom discourse may consist of several lines, some of which are not humorous on their own, however when they are intertwined with other lines gain their jocular potential.

The linguistic research into sitcom discourse is marginal (for instance, Quaglio 2009; Bednarek 2010; Dynel 2013). One of the possible explanations for that is that sitcom, as an artefact of popular culture, is treated as a form of "light entertainment" (Bowes 1990, in Casey 2002 et al.: 21), which undermines its real value. Moreover, Mills (2005) reckons that together with an increase in popularity, the cultural status of sitcoms has decreased. As regards sociological studies of sitcoms, the body of literature is quite substantial, for instance Marc ([1989] 1997), Davis (1993), Morreale (2003), or Mills (2005).

The principal objective of the present paper is to demonstrate that humour in sitcom discourse is not only deployed for the sake of the viewers' amusement but also it communicates a number of other propositional meanings that are not inherently humorous. In other words, it is crucial for the present analysis to discover what lies beneath humour. As has already been corroborated in relevant literature, comedy discourse requires *duality reading*, which means THAT interpretation is constructed on the basis of the humorous layer (and the recipient's amusement), while the other interpretation hinges upon the serious layer (Cook 1982, in Mills 2005: 36). In a similar vein, Hay (2001: 72) reckons that humorous units "have a serious component", which explains the fact that "humour can have serious consequences, in that recipients can attribute to it serious motives, infer from it serious meanings and react to it in a serious manner" (Mulkay 1988: 71).

What requires highlighting is the claim that these non-humorous meanings that the audience can possibly glean are recovered on the strength of weak communication. Consequently, the recipients are not strongly encouraged to derive those assumptions as well as their recovery does not hinder or obstruct one's amusement. Furthermore, different televisual recipients may discover different meanings as these meanings would not achieve the status of full representation in their minds.

Last but not least, it is also relevant to the present discussion on humour in sitcoms to carefully define the object of my study. In particular, it is argued that communication in fictional discourse can be scrutinised with respect to two communicative layers: *spectator-oriented communication* and *character-oriented communication*[2] (Yus 1998; Clark 1996; Dynel 2011). The former comprises (non)verbal messages that are communicated directly to the recipient without any interaction between two or more interactants, while the latter encompasses face-to-face conversation established between two or more interlocutors. The present piece of research concerns the spectator-oriented communication, and more specifically the humorous as well as non-humorous meanings construed by the recipient. It seems indispensible to discuss both layers of communication, since artificial (diegetic) communication facilitated among fictional characters conditions the meaning(s) gleaned by the TV viewers (Dynel 2011).

The paper is structured as follows: first, the central claims of Relevance Theory are summarised in order to draw a broader context to the qualitative analysis; second, the sitcom *Modern Family* is characterised to acquaint the readers with the people present in the show, the methodology of the study is offered as well; third, the analysis is undertaken with a view to describing the totality of meanings that the recipient can access while watching the sitcom.

Relevance Theory: its core concepts and relevance to humour

Relevance Theory (henceforth referred to as RT) is a post-Gricean framework, devised by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986 [1995]) and presented in their seminal book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. The concept of *relevance* is a technical term, which is characterised as "a property of inputs to cognitive processes that makes them worth processing" (Wilson and Sperber 2002: 230). Inputs may take the form of external stimuli, such as a smell, sound, or internal representations, both of which are subject to inferential processing. Relevance is a comparative notion, which is assessed against two determinants: effort and effect:

Relevance of an input to an individual:

Other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of the input to the individual at that time.

---

2 These layers are differently dubbed by a number of scholars.

Other things being equal, the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual at that time. (Sperber and Wilson (1986 [1995]: 153; Wilson and Sperber 2004: 609)

It is held that both communication and cognition are relevance-oriented. As regards the cognition part, human minds choose to attend to inputs that can be processed in such a way to attain a balance of cognitive effects (worthwhile benefits) and mental effort (cost). Moreover, cognition is prone to maximise the relevance of an input directed towards an interactant, which is described within the *Cognitive Principle of Relevance*. As for the communication part, the comprehension process is contingent upon inferring the communicator's intention on the basis of a perceptible or inferable stimulus. It is also crucial to note that it is believed that any stimulus conveys the presumption of being optimally relevant to the comprehender, which is enclosed within the *Communicative Principle of Relevance*:

Communicative Principle of Relevance:

Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance. (Sperber and Wilson 1986 [1995]: 158; Wilson and Sperber 2004: 612)

Presumption of optimal relevance:

(a) The ostensive stimulus is worth the audience's processing effort.
(b) It is the most relevant one compatible with communicator's abilities and preferences." (Sperber and Wilson 1986 [1995]: 268; Wilson and Sperber 2004: 612)

In RT terms, verbal (ostensive-inferential) communication is initiated when the comprehender extracts a linguistically encoded meaning, which undergoes the process of enrichment to attain a fully-fledged proposition intended by the communicator. The hearer searches for the communicator's intended interpretation and stops his/her comprehension process when his/her expectations of relevance are satisfied (Wilson and Sperber 2004).

Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure

Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.

Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned). (Wilson and Sperber 2004: 613)

As presumed in the RT comprehension heuristics, there are several pragmatic processes which can be implemented to recover the relevant meaning: ambiguity resolution, reference assignment or enrichment, all of which can be exploited for the sake of humorous effects (Yus 2003). The reason why the

hearer is eager to spend mental effort on processing a stimulus is his/her belief that the input conveys the presumption of relevance.

Moreover, it is held that communication is a matter of degree: some propositions may be strongly implicated, while others are weakly implicated, and hence being more or less determinate. This point bears immediate saliency to my analysis of the derivation of weakly communicated assumptions in sitcoms. *Strong implicatures* are those whose recovery is essential to get the intended meaning (as these are highly manifest by the communicator in a given context). *Weak implicatures* are derived on the hearer's sole responsibility since s/he is provided with a vague evidence to deduce the speaker's intentions.

It is Jodłowiec (1991, 2008) who champions the claim that the processing of a punchline (a jocular turn that is usually placed at the end of a humorous text) of a joke creates an emotional state in the recipient's mind as soon as a vast array of weak propositions are potentially represented. This state is dubbed *cognitive overload* (Jodłowiec 2008; Piskorska and Jodłowiec 2018). Although the punchline effect explained in terms of the cognitive overload was originally proposed for jokes, it is also pertinent to other forms of discourse, i.e. sitcoms. It needs to be highlighted that weakly communicated assumptions are conveyed at the subrepresentational level and hence never become full mental representations. Also, as it is the case with any weak implicature, the recipient cannot be certain whether other recipients construct similar or quite disparate assumptions as their recovery is conditioned by a number of crucial factors, such as psychological state, background knowledge, age, sex or cultural background (Piskorska and Jodłowiec 2018, Yus 2016).

Wilson and Carston (2019: 38) corroborate that weak implicatures are outputs of the interpreter's inferential processes, whereas "imagery and affective states are automatically activated by-products of linguistic and pragmatic processes, which may nonetheless be intentionally encouraged by creative uses of language". The latter implicatures are referred to as *non-propositional effects*. In my opinion, these effects have an important bearing on how to approach the viewers' sheer enjoyment derived from watching a piece of humorous discourse since this pleasurable feeling (affective state) is the main reason why viewers flock in front of the TV screen. As will be shown in the analysis, the special mechanism of the cognitive climax (a cognitive overload) used to explain humorous effects occurring on the recipient's layer conjoined with non-propositional effects and RT comprehension procedures can offer a coherent explanation for the abundance of various meanings, besides humour, emergent on the recipients' part.

Modern Family as exemplification data

The extracts from the American sitcom *Modern Family* (ABC; 2009–2020) are used to support my theoretical claims. First, all the humorous units potentially amusing to the recipient were collected. This was accomplished on the basis of the assessment of various factors: the emergence of incongruity, creation of

surprise and the cues used to introduce the humorous frame. Second, the data was analysed with respect to conversation arising at the fictional layer, humour occurring at the recipient's layer, a relevance-theoretic path of comprehension exploited for the sake of comic effects and a plethora of various propositional meanings.

Modern Family is a family situation comedy that depicts daily life of the Pritchett-Dunphy-Tucker clan, which is a testimony that that family ties are quite twisted, nevertheless, family is the most valuable phenomenon in the world. The Pritchett family consists of the patriarch Jay Pritchett (in his early 70s), his sensual young wife Gloria Ramirez-Pritchett, Gloria's son from her first marriage, Manny, and Jay and Gloria's son Joe. Their relationship represents the idea that a beautiful woman is not always with an older man because of his money, but that she finds the feeling of security and belonging when by his side.

Among the members of the Pritchett-Tucker family there is a homosexual couple: Mitchell Pritchett (Jay's son) and Cameron Tucker, who adopted a girl from Vietnam. They are shown as loving parents who would do anything to raise their daughter well. Moreover, they identify positive virtues that certainly transcend their sexual orientation.

The Dunphy family is nuclear: Phil (a real estate agent), Claire (Jay's daughter; a housewife who has recently returned to work as CEO in her father's closet company), and their three children – Alex (the most intelligent), Haley and Luke (not so intelligent). Phil, the father, boasts about his perfect parental techniques and he delivers many humorous turns which are hinged upon his stupidity. Claire usually makes important decisions and needs to deal with her husband's attempts to amuse others, which sometimes puts her in embarrassing situations. Her strong personality is frequently put in opposition to Mitchell's sensitivity as if Claire was more manly than her brother.

Weak (non-humorous) implicatures in the sitcom

This section is devoted to a pragmatic analysis of selected excerpts from *Modern Family* in order to demonstrate that the cognitive overload effect and RT comprehension heuristics enable to explain the derivation of humorous and non-humorous effects accessed by a TV recipient. The analysis of each episode is divided into the conversation occurring on the fictional layer and humour occurring on the collective sender (production crew) layer (Dynel 2011). It is also illuminated how incongruity-resolution models apply. In addition, the analysis includes a list of possible meanings that are constructed by the audience.

What is quite interesting about communication in the sitcom under scrutiny are different types of conversations. The first type constitutes regular exchanges between two or more characters, without them peeping through or gazing into the eye of the camera. That is, an actor behaves as if s/he was not cognisant of the viewer's presence. The second type comprises interviews in which the fictional characters look directly into the camera, reducing the distance between them and the viewers and hence enabling the two parties to establish a more

intimate relationship. Generally, only one or two (rarely three) characters take part in these interviews. The third type is the combination of two "ways" of communication in which what is communicated in standard conversations and what is communicated in private conversations is quite disparate.

Humour in example (1) is conditioned upon the production crew's exploitation of the recipient's process of enrichment given "[t]he presence of semantically incomplete or manifestly vague terms" (Sperber and Wilson 1986 [1995]: 189). The outcome of the process of enrichment is called *explicature*, which is defined by relevance theoreticians as an assumption that is seen as a development of a logical form into a fully contextualised proposition.

(1) Context: Phil is going to be on the news so he decided to put on some make-up in order to look flawless in the eye of camera, which is criticised by the family. Claire, Phil, Alex and Haley are in the kitchen.	
Claire:	[startled] What did you do to your face?
Phil:	Just a little color to make my eyes pop. [all the family stand with their jaws wide open] Like yours are now.
Haley:	*Is this how we find out you're transitioning*? Oh, please don't pick a young name. The world doesn't need a 50-year-old Jasmine.
Phil:	Trust me, this'll look completely normal on camera.
(…)	
Phil:	Oop. [noticing that he left a lipstick mark on the mug] Looks like *I need to reapply*.
Claire:	*To clown college*? (S08E04)

It needs to be highlighted that humour does not occur on the fictional characters' layer here (it is frequently the case that the actors do not try to amuse each other because sitcoms are produced for the sake of the viewers' amusement). The situation that takes place on the fictional layer is that Phil has just applied heavy stage make-up in order to look perfect on the news. Putting on red lipstick, blush on cheekbones and dark eye shadow on eyelids is not positively assessed by Claire and Haley. His daughter, Haley, compares her father to a person who has just decided to undergo a sex change operation. She mocks him by making a request that he should not choose the name Jasmine as he is too old for this name. When Phil notices that he left a lipstick mark on his mug, he states that he needs to reapply. Claire makes sure that Phil considers his reapplication to a clown college.

Humour on the recipient's layer is based on a clash between two interpretations of the verb *reapply* that the viewer needs to construct: "to apply more make-up" and "to apply to a college where people are taught how to become a clown". In RT terms, the verb *reapply* requires the process of enrichment: *apply for* [clown college] and *apply* what [make-up]. Phil's complaint that he should reapply opens up a possibility for Claire to mock. As soon as the recipient enriches the verb *reapply* in accordance with Claire's intention, the relevance is established as the viewer discovers a different way of understanding Phil's turn.

As noted above, humour does not only serve to amuse its recipients but may carry informative content outside the humorous frame, which can be described in terms of weak implicatures. It needs to be highlighted that different viewers may derive similar or quite disparate assumptions (Piskorska and Jodłowiec 2018, Wilson and Carston 2019). These meanings can be read as different ways in which the audience may relate to the characters in the sitcom. Extract (1) may communicate the following (but it is not limited to) assumptions:

- teasing can function as a social corrective tool to urge a person to alter deviant behaviour, for instance to remove make-up (Bergson 1905 [2010]),
- applying of make-up by a man can be understood as his desire to become a woman (implicated by Haley's reference to her father's transition),
- people excessively care about their outward appearance,
- there is a popular myth that everything looks different on television, hence heavy make-up will become no-make-up make-up,
- Claire's and Haley's behaviour may be used to highlight some shared experiences between the fictional characters and the viewers: either they needed to scold a member of the family or they were scolded for misbehaviour,
- men should not put on make-up as they can be compared to a clown or transgender person,
- biting comments can be used to show off one's cleverness, just like Claire,
- biting comments can be used to convey social norms (Haley's and Claire's comments).

Humour in example (2) is conditioned upon the production crew's exploitation of the recovery of implicature. More specifically, incongruity resides in a clash between a credible scenario of contracting a disease (spreading via saliva) and a highly improbable one.

(2) Context: Alex has contracted infectious mononucleosis, which is also known as "the kissing disease" since it spreads through saliva. Her sister wonders how it is possible that Alex has acquired the infection as she is only interested in her studies at California Institute of Technology (Caltech).	
Haley:	*How do nerds even get mono? Did you all practice by kissing the same pillow*?
Alex:	Shouldn't you be at work by now?
[Haley speaks alone into the camera]	
Haley:	I got fired. My plan was to hide it from my parents until I got a new job, but with smarty-pants Alex home, I had to be more careful, or she was going to figure it out. Her being super-sick is coming at a really bad time for me. (S08E02)

The communicative event on the fictional layer is that the siblings Haley and Alex are in kitchen when Haley notices that her sister feels unwell because of having contracted mononucleosis. Haley is quite surprised that Alex has caught a disease that is transmitted through saliva and wonders about the transfer. Haley works on the assumption that Alex, as any scientist, does not have a partner with whom she can kiss. Therefore, the most probable scenario concerning Alex's mononucleosis is that she was kissing the same pillow with other fellow researchers.

As regards humour on the recipient's layer, Haley's first question creates in the viewer initial expectations of relevance that Alex would provide a precise answer on how well-educated people can contract an infectious disease. This question also implicates a clear disparity between scientists and non-scientists as if these two groups of people can catch diseases in various manners. In other words, Haley treats Alex like a different human being that may contract mononucleosis by kissing the pillow that an ill person was kissing.

The viewer may formulate the following weakly communicated implicatures:
- enjoying a harmonious relationship between sisters is not always easy as some tension may grow,
- the viewer unfamiliar with the disease called "mono" is able to deduce how it is transmitted, for example by kissing,
- scientists are believed to be unable to build personal social life as they are utterly devoted to research ,
- scientists can frequently become targets of humorous comments as they are treated like outsiders ,
- the only romantic relationship a scientist is able to establish is with a life-less object,
- a disparity between a smart and dumb person can result in dumb person's making a biting comment to compensate for his/ her lack of scientific achievements,
- a dumb person can sometimes show off his/ her mental power or wisdom.

Humour in the last example exploits the viewer's process of lexical adjustment. This process is described in the following way: "a one-off process, used once and then forgotten, creating an ad hoc concept tied to a particular context that may never occur again" (Wilson and Carston 2007: 238). The process of lexical adjustment in extract (3) is activated by a pun-like word *hookah*, which is phonetically similar to the word *hooker*. That is to say, incongruity is contingent upon the clash between two interpretations: promoting a hookah bar, which is a place where customers can smoke water pipe, and being dressed up like a hooker.

(3) Context: Haley wants to set up own business in which she and her friends would promote different clubs on social media. She asks the parents for help. Alex is the third party.	
Haley:	*We made $500 last night for promoting a hookah bar*.
Claire:	[regretfully] I remember when you were a little girl. You told me you wanted your job to be "princess" I would kill for those days.
Alex:	[writing on paper since she cannot talk because of mononucleosis] "*Is that why you're dressed like a hookah*?" (S08E03)

On the fictional layer, Haley brags about the fact that she earned $500 at promoting a hookah bar last night, which turns about to be a high-powered job. Claire recollects the days when Haley's dream job was to become a princess (a non-existent profession in real world). Haley's sister, Alex, always uses any

opportunity to tease her sister and she draws others' attention to Haley's job and the way she is dressed up.

On the recipient's layer, the viewer is believed to be amused when Alex writes down the word *hookah*, which is phonetically similar to the word *hooker*. Consequently, the recipient needs to activate the process of lexical adjustment, the result of which are two different concepts: *HOOKAH** (a bar where customers can smoke water pipe) and *HOOKER** (a term for a prostitute). What needs to be underlined is that the two concepts are constructed on the basis of two encoded concepts that lead to the emergence of a punning effect (Solska 2012). So as to understand Alex's tease, the recipient (and Haley) needs to derive the implicature that the job of promoting bars on social media is not decent as Haley looks as if she sleeps with men for money.

There are some weakly implicated propositions that the viewers may extract:
– teasing is used to comment upon Haley's business idea: it is intended to ridicule her idea about how to earn a living,
– teasing may also be used to discourage a person from engaging in a particular type of activity (social corrective function),
– showing a sister-sister relationship: it is not all roses,
– the smartest sibling takes advantage of his/her intelligence and uses it to target a brother/sister.

Conclusions

The present contribution demonstrated that humorous discourse communicates two types of meaning: the one that is concentrated on amusing the viewers by dint of humour and other is focused on accessing propositional effects, with the latter leading to *the cognitive overload effect*. The analysis drew upon Sperber and Wilson's RT, which proves to be applicable to the research into the language of sitcoms. It is shown that sitcom is analysed as any type of ostensive-inferential communication and that the recipient can access a whole gamut of propositional meanings by means of a humorous remark. Combining the comprehension heuristics (and all the enrichment processes that the viewer may employ in order to derive the communicator's intended meaning) and the notion of weakly communicated propositions sheds new light on the emergence of humour on the part of the viewer.

References

Attardo, Salvatore. 1994. *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. New York: Mouton.

Attardo, Salvatore and Raskin, Victor. 1991. Script theory revis(it)ed: Joke similarity and joke representation model. *Humor* 4 (3–4): 293–348.

———. 2017. "Linguistics and Humor Theory." In *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, Salvatore Attardo (ed.). New York, London: Routledge, 49–63.

Bednarek, Monika A. 2010. *The Language of Fictional Television*: *Drama and Identity*. London/New York: Continuum.

Bergson, Henri. 1905 [2010]. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.* London: Macmillan and Co.

Casey, Bernadette, Neil Casey, Ben Calvert, Liam French, and Justin Lewis. 2002. *Television Studies: The Key Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge.

Clark, Herbert. 1996. *Using Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davis, Murray S. 1993. *What's so Funny? The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.

Dynel, Marta. 2011. "I'll be there for you: On Participation-based Sitcom Humour." In *The Pragmatics of Humour across Discourse Domains*, Marta Dynel (ed.). Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 311–333.

———. 2013. Humorous phenomena in dramatic discourse. *The European Journal of Humor Research* 1: 22–60.

———. 2018. *Irony, Deception and Humour: Seeking the Truth about Overt and Covert Untruthfulness*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Gruner, Charles R. 1978. *Understanding Laughter: The Working of Wit and Humor*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

Jodłowiec, Maria. 1991. What makes jokes tick. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* 3: 241–253.

———. 2008. "What's in the punchline?" In *Relevant Worlds: Current Perspectives on Language, Translation and Relevance Theory*, Ewa Walaszewska, Marta Kisielewska--Krysiuk, Aniela Korzeniowska and Małgorzata Grzegorzewska (eds.). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 67–86.

Hay, Jennifer. 2001. The pragmatics of humor support. *Humor* 14(1), 55–82.

Marc, David. [1989] 1997. *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture.* New York, NY: Blackwell.

Mills, Brett. 2005. *Television Sitcom*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Morreale, Joanne. 2003. *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Mulkay, Michael. 1988. *On Humor: Its Nature and its Place in Modern Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Piskorska, Agnieszka and Maria Jodłowiec. 2018. Weak communication, joke targets and the punch-line effect: A relevance-theoretic account. *Studies in Polish Linguistics* 13(1), 25–44.

Quaglio, Paulo. 2009. *Television Dialogue: The Sitcom Friends vs. Natural Conversation*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Raskin, Victor. 1985. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company.

Solska, Agnieszka. 2012. The relevance-based model of context in processing puns. *Research in Language* 10(4), 387–404.

Sperber, Dan and Wilson, Deirdre. 1986 [1995]. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell.

Wilson, Deirdre and Carston, Robyn. 2007. "A Unitary Approach to Lexical Pragmatics: Relevance, Inference and Ad Hoc Concepts." In *Pragmatics*, Noel Burton-Roberts (ed.). Palgrave-Macmillan, pp. 230–259.

———. 2019. Pragmatics and the challenge of 'non-propositional' effects. *Journal of Pragmatics* 145: 31–38.

Wilson, Deirdre and Sperber, Dan. 2002. Truthfulness and relevance. *Mind* 111 (443): 583–632.

———. 2004. "Relevance Theory." In *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, Laurence Horn and Gregory Ward (eds). Oxford: Blackwell, 607–632.

Yus, Francisco. 1998. Relevance theory and media discourse: A verbal-visual model of communication. *Poetics* 25, 293–309.

———. 2003. Humour and the search for relevance. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35(9), 1295–1331.

———. 2016. *Humour and Relevance*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Ziv, Avner. 1984. *Personality and Sense of Humor*. New York: Springer.

Abstract

Humorous utterances can be divided into those which are created for their own sake (that is, to amuse others), dubbed *autotelic humour*, and those which communicate truthful and/ or untruthful meanings germane to the ongoing conversation, dubbed *speaker-meaning-telic humour* (Dynel 2018). The present paper carries out a qualitative analysis of humorous units in sitcom discourse with a view to delineating a number of propositional meanings, which can be potentially derived by the TV recipients. Special attention is confined to one of the most powerful tools used to explain humour in various humorous manifestations, i.e. *weak implicatures* (Sperber and Wilson 1986 [1995]; Wilson and Sperber 2004). It is believed here that pragmatic COMPREHENSION mechanisms proposed within Relevance Theory and the notion of weakly communicated assumptions are two sides of the same coin since these account not only for the viewer's recovery of a humorous interpretation but also of an array of non-humorous propositional meanings. Moreover, the participatory framework has been employed as an additional parameter to show the difference in the reception of a dialogue by fictional characters and the viewers.