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Relevance in Sitcom Discourse: The Viewer's Perspective

Abstract

The present paper draws upon Sperber and Wilson's ([1986] 1995) *Relevance Theory* to undertake a pragmatic analysis of situation comedy (sitcom) discourse. More specifically, special attention is paid to the cognitive interpretative paths the viewer needs to take in order to find a dialogue or monologue humorous. The analysis is premised upon the participation framework, which accounts for the bi-partite division of communication in fictional discourse: the character's (fictional) layer and the recipient's layer, the latter being in the centre of attention.

1. Introduction

Humour is a multifarious and intricate field of scholarly investigation, the history of which goes back to Ancient times, in which humour was primarily a matter of concern to Greek philosophers, in particular to Plato and Aristotle (Perks 2012). The development of various academic disciplines, be it linguistics, sociology, psychology, has led to the growing interest and popularity of humour studies. There are three leading families of humour theories, viz. *incongruity*, *superiority* and *relief/release* (Keith-Spiegel 1972; Raskin 1985; Attardo 1994), which differ in the emphasis and angle. In a nutshell, superiority theories, also referred to as social-behavioural ones, focus on the communicator's sense of superiority over the object of ridicule (butt), i.e. his/her misfortunes, imperfections or foibles. Relief/release theories, also dubbed psycho-physiological, suggest that humour arises in consequence of discharge of emotional (sexual or aggressive) energy (Morreall 1983; 2009). Last but not least, incongruity or incongruity-resolution theories, labelled cognitive-perceptual ones, describe humour as a phenomenon deriving from the hearer's perception of incongruity, viz. two incompatible, inappropriate or illogical elements. The concept of incongruity is central to many theories, and in cognitive terms, can be described as a construct in which a stimulus "diverts from the cognitive model of reference" (Forabosco 2008, 45). For incongruity to

bring about humorous effects it needs to be sudden, unexpected and surprising for the addressee (Forabosco 1992; 2008; Suls 1972; 1983). Given the fact that Relevance Theory offers a cognitive explanation of communicative instances, it converges with the main tenets underlying incongruity theories (Yus 2003).

Conversational humour (CH) is a broad area of research with a plethora of manifestations, such as jokes, puns, comedy, witticism and retorts, appearing in both real-life and fictional communication (Dynel 2009). Focusing on comedy, CH is understood as a mode of communication with various subgenres such as wisecracks, parody, situation comedy¹ (abbreviated as sitcom) or gags (Neale and Krutnik 1990), with sitcom being one of the most frequently studied (Mills 2005). In general terms, it is the audience's subjective judgment as to whether classify a piece of discourse as sitcom or not, however, there are certain characteristic features associated mainly with this genre, i.e. laugh track, shooting style, length, scheduling, actors, performance style or narrative structure (Mills 2005; 2009; Savorelli 2010). These features which are used to identify the genre of sitcom exceed features of other forms of televised programmes such as soap opera or documentaries. Mintz (1985, in Mills 2005, 26-27) offers a succinct definition of sitcom:

a half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite; what happens in a given episode is generally closed off. (...) Sitcoms are generally performed before live audiences (...)

Irrespective of generic elements, sitcom is susceptible to 'hybridisation' (Neale and Krutnik 1990) or 'mutation' (Turner 2001), which denotes the conflation of two different genres fostering various ways in which humour can be created. To exemplify, there are genres like *reality sitcoms* encompassing reality television and sitcoms, or *docu-sitcoms* which are a mixture of sitcoms and documentary films. Secondly, the influx of 'new comedies' leads to the abandonment of emblematic features so that it withdraws the three-camera setup, laugh track (delimiting a vast array of possible reactions the audience may produce) and it reduces the length of episodes (Mills 2005; 2009; Savorelli 2010).

The primary goal of the present contribution is to perform a pragmatic analysis of humorous effects in sitcom discourse. More specifically, attention is paid to verbalisations which exploit various kinds of ambiguity to evoke amusement in the audience. Ambiguity is understood as a global phenomenon, hence this piece of research encompasses all instances of sitcom dialogues which bring about a possibility of inducing humorous effects. A global viewpoint is put in opposition to a local understanding, which is more specific and targeted at one of the manifestations, for instance enjoyment of humour via one-line jokes. In other words, a global view concentrates on any humorous manifestation, be it

puns, jokes, witticisms, while a local one focuses on one manifestation, e.g. jokes. The paper is hinged upon the theory of relevance, which provides a theoretical background for the study of sitcom discourse. In this theory, no special pragmatic mechanisms other than those postulated for other forms of verbal exchanges are proposed. In particular, it is argued that humour resides in the following mechanisms: enrichment and inferencing coupled with layering and relating concepts, exploitation of reference assignment, playing with collective cultural representations and assumptions from processing previous discourse. The labels of the mechanisms in the study are adopted from Yus's (2016) research, and were originally proposed for stand-up performances. It seems that one of the categories is broad and can be grouped to other more specific ones², namely the third mechanism encompassing strategies used by a comedian who builds a humorous turn on the exploitation of interpretative processes which aim at turning a proposition into a fully contextualised meaning.

As exemplification data, I employ instances of dialogues from the American sitcom *Modern Family*, which has all the features of new comedy, i.e. single camera setup, no laugh track/canned laughter, duration of one episode between twenty to twenty four minutes. Furthermore, each episode of *Modern Family* revolves around one main storyline and thus it exemplifies *closed series*. This type of series does not require dedicated and constant viewership since what happens in one episode hardly requires the knowledge from previous episodes or seasons (Savorelli 2010). The ABC's series premiered in 2009 and it is classified as a family sitcom since it depicts the mundane daily life of the Pritchett-Dunphy-Tucker clan – three close families (blended, nuclear and same-sex). Moreover, *Modern Family* is shot in a mock-documentary style (Roscoe and Hight 2001), which is achieved by fictional characters' looking directly into the camera and giving the audience a sense of active participation in the scene where they occupy a designated and privileged position of knowing everything.

2. Participation framework

In a long-established prototypical model of communication we have a speaker-hearer dyad, i.e. the producer and receiver of the message (Shannon and Weaver 1949; Jakobson 1960). This design has proved to be only partially suitable to mass-mediated communication since this type of interaction enables more than two participants to attend a communicative event. It is Goffman (1981) who first emphasised the necessity of tailoring the model to cover "podium events" – occurrences divergent from the reception and production sides, covering events played in front of live and mass media audiences. He mainly concentrated on the reception part, dubbing it the participation framework, but he also enumerated the roles the producer of the utterance may perform: animator, author, principal.

Greatly inspired by Goffman's scientific investigation, a host of scholars have underlined the importance of dividing televised communication into two ends of media communication (Yus 1998), communicative levels (Dynel 2013; Brock 2011), circles (Burger 1984; 1991, in Bubl 2008, 56-57) or frame interaction (Fetzer 2006). In a nutshell, the first *character's/inter-character's* level comprises communication among fictional characters which is analysed by the audience on the second *recipient's* layer. Hence, fictional discourse is contingent on the two layers: fictional characters' and collective sender's. It is the collective sender – a group of producers, directors, scriptwriters – who is responsible for the meaning gleaned by TV viewers. The types of humorous verbalisations teased out for the sake of this research are contingent on the recipient's layer, hence the viewer's cognitive processes are of paramount importance.

The duality of communication in film discourse influences the level of shared cognitive environment. In the case of viewer-collective sender layer, the recipient of fictional discourse is aware of all assumptions being mutually manifest assumptions which give rise to mental representations⁴. A fictional character, on the other hand, can process a minute quantity of all assumptions. A successful interpretation is the one in which the recipient accesses a humorous interpretation intended by the production crew. However, this process may be obstructed by a *positive/negative contextual constraint* which “accounts for non-propositional qualities of the interaction that *underlie* communication and hence *constrain* the successful outcome of the speaker's humorous intent (for example, the hearer's sense of humour, the hearer's beliefs, the speaker's (in)ability to tell jokes, etc.)” (Yus 2016, xvii). A contextual constraint is coupled with a *positive/negative non-propositional effect*, which refers to one's affect, viz. feelings, emotions or attitudes developing in the course of interpretation positively or negatively adding to relevance (Yus 2016).

3. Relevance and humour

Sperber and Wilson ([1986] 1995) first presented Relevance Theory (henceforth referred to as RT) in the book entitled *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, and it has been continually developed not only by its originators but also supporters, i.e. Carston (2002) and Blakemore (1987). The theoretical assumptions of RT can be divided into those concerning cognition and those relating to communication, and their common denominator is that they are relevance-oriented⁵. As regards cognitive capabilities, subsumed under the Cognitive Principle, these are used to maximise relevance, which means that people are equipped with a module trading off cognitive effects and mental effort. As for communication, described within the Communicative Principle, it is held that every ostensive stimulus brings about a presumption of its optimal relevance, which means that any stimulus is

presumably worth processing effort and it is compatible with one's preferences and abilities. As has been noted in the Introduction section, the same set of principles underpins both serious and humorous communication so that the search for humour appreciation is treated as any other effect. Every fictional dialogue is presumably worth the audience's processing effort, which can often be increased in the case of humour.

Drawing upon Sperber and Wilson's ([1986] 1995) inferential model of communication, a number of studies have been conducted to come up with ample evidence that RT offers conceptual tools to analyse various forms of conversational humour. Specifically, the relevance-theoretic lines⁶ have been adopted to the analysis of jokes (Yus 2003; 2008; 2012a; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b; Jodłowiec 1991a; 1991b; 2008; Curcó 1995; 1996a; 1996b; 1997; Higashimori 2011), puns (Solska 2012), stand-up monologues (Yus 2004; 2005), longer humorous texts exemplified by novels (Larkin Galiñanes 2000; 2005), humour elicited in audio described context (Martínez-Sierra 2009) and humour in general (Piskorska 2016).

As for the research into situation comedy within RT, it has been marginalised probably due to the fact that the genre itself has been treated as a form belonging to 'popular culture', which is not serious and hence unworthy of scientific investigations (Mills 2005; 2009; Neale and Krutnik 1990). To my knowledge, there are two contributions dealing with sitcoms (Hu 2012; Ma and Jiang 2013), amounting to between five to seven pages, which unfortunately do not undertake in-depth analyses of humorous instances. On a critical note, the former article first concentrates on maxim non-observance in the extracts from *The Big Bang Theory*, which has already been carefully carried out by Attardo (1990; 1993; 1994) and later by Dynel (2008). In the second part, it is explicated that humour arises from two sources of the clash between: 1) maximal and optimal relevance (contingent on the addressee's failure to access an optimally relevant interpretation so that s/he does not follow the path of least effort), 2) ostension and inference (deriving from the hearer's inability to draw appropriate inferences). Moreover, the analyses of fictional dialogues from the Gricean and relevance theoretic perspectives are quite laconic. The latter contribution by Ma and Jiang (2013) conflates Relevance Theory with Adaptation Theory to argue that there are three cases in which humour can emerge: 1) contradiction of optimal relevance and background information, 2) derivation of weakly communicated assumptions (which the authors do not explicitly mention), and 3) derivation of contextual assumptions which do not match optimal relevance. These humorous manifestations are not exhaustive and the topic deserves a more systematic exploration.

4. The analysis of *Modern Family*

In this section, I would like to discern humorous manifestations as analysed from the point of view of the recipient who watches a televised programme and draws inferences on the basis of the dialogues and monologues held by the actors.

4.1. Enrichment coupled with layering and relating concepts

One of the possible strategies used by a collective sender to make the audience laugh is to exploit the process of ad hoc concept construction, which is not linguistically conditioned but pragmatically constructed and inferred. Hence, an ad hoc concept is formulated on-line on a specific occasion. In particular, “speakers can use a lexically encoded concept to communicate a distinct non-lexicalized (atomic) concept, which resembles the encoded one in that it shares elements of its logical and encyclopaedic entries” (Carston 2002, 322). The construction of ad hoc concept feeds into the explicit content of utterance (Wilson and Carston 2007). An ad hoc concept can be enriched via the process of ‘narrowing’ or ‘broadening’. These processes aim to pragmatically enrich a logical form, the result of which contributes to an explicitly communicated message (a.k.a. explicature) (Sperber and Wilson 2008). The search for the intended interpretation is constrained by the presumption of relevance. Lexical narrowing operates when the denotation of the concept is narrower than the decoded meaning (communicated by the interlocutor), i.e. it contains a fraction of denotation of a lexicalised item, while lexical broadening occurs when the derived meaning goes beyond the decoded concept (Sperber and Wilson 2008; Wilson and Sperber 2012).

Extract (1) below exemplifies the case in which the viewer needs to first enrich the adjective *big* and then construct the intended ad hoc concepts BIG* and BIG** on the basis of the encoded word *big* in order to meet the expectations of relevance. It is the operation of two interpretative mechanisms (enrichment and ad hoc concept construction) and the clash between these two ad hoc concepts that give rise to humour:

Context: Phil’s father came to visit his son, Claire and their three children. Phil intentionally forgot to apprise Claire of his father’s impending visit, which infuriates Claire. She decides to call Phil in front of Phil’s father to give vent to her anger without letting his father know what they are talking about. While talking, she strokes Phil’s father’s dog, the presence of whom amplifies Claire’s displeasure.

- (1) Phil: He wasn’t supposed to show up for a few more days.
Claire: Well, guess what he brought us. A dog to keep. Yes! Yes.
 (...)

Phil: Am I in trouble?

Claire: Oh, really, really big.

Phil: Okay, I'm a little scared. How bad is this?

Claire: Oh, well- We have a new rule- no sleeping in the bedroom. (S01E21 Travels with Scouts)

As for the participation model, we can see a clear-cut division between the two levels of communication, viz. what is communicated on the fictional characters' layer is divergent from the meaning gleaned by the recipients in front of the TV screen. The third party, Phil's father, is supposed to understand Claire's turns in which she mentions the phrase *no sleeping in the bedroom*, which comes to be interpreted as a rule applying to the dog, while the adjective *big* refers to the size of the dog. On the other hand, the addressee, Phil, who is not heard by his father, knows that the phrase *no sleeping in the bedroom* refers to Phil's complete ban on his presence in their bed whereas the word *big* refers to the seriousness of the situation. It is on the recipient's layer that the viewer can entertain these two interpretations at once since s/he has a bird's eye view on fictional communication.

Analysing the dialogue within RT, I would like to first focus on Claire's word *big*, which forces the viewer to follow a different interpretative path from the phrase *no sleeping in the bedroom*. Firstly, the TV recipient is required to enrich the semantically incomplete word *big* as referring both to "the dog" or "the problem". Since s/he is in a privileged position of witnessing a sitcom scene, there are two simultaneous meanings derived by him/ her: "big dog" and "big trouble". Secondly, the viewer can construct the ad hoc concepts BIG* and BIG** as formulated via the process of narrowing by the third party (Phil's father) and the addressee (Phil). That is to say, Phil's father constructs the ad hoc concept BIG* which denotes a physical appearance of the dog (literal interpretation) – big enough to be taking up a great deal of living space. A markedly different ad hoc concept is constructed by Phil since it is more figurative: BIG** points out to the significance of this problem with his father bringing the dog with him.

As regards the phrase *no sleeping in the bedroom*, the viewer needs to make inferences in order to derive the production crew's intended interpretation, which resides in fleshing out the semantic representation of Claire's utterance. The two different interpretations are derived on the strength of the two radically different contexts, viz. Phil understands the phrase as referring to him and his ban on sleeping in the bedroom while Phil's father interprets it as a strict restriction imposed upon the dog.

Both the viewer and the communicator (Claire) are well aware of the duality of the two ad hoc concepts since Claire herself purposefully makes Phil and Phil's father create a different concept for the encoded words/phrases. As regards Claire, she is not supposed to find her turns laughable and make them relevant because her current emotional state works as a negative constraint. As for the recipient, the

production crew guides the viewer's pragmatic inferences to lead to the extraction of two competing ad hoc concepts, which gives rise to humour.

4.2. Reference assignment exploited

Another way of enriching a logical form into a fully contextualised proposition is through the process known as 'reference assignment/resolution'. The result of this process is not merely recovered by decoding but it needs to be evaluated inferentially (Sperber and Wilson [1986] 1995) so the hearer/viewer needs to rely on both linguistic and non-linguistic information. Reference assignment is automatically initiated when there are some personal/spatial/temporal referents to be filled. In extract (2) there is the play between two meanings of the referent for the phrase *spicy and curvy diva* depending on the specific intention each fictional character has in mind but an overall humorous effect is granted to the viewer.

Context: Cameron and Mitchell talk directly into the camera about their plans for the weekend. While Mitchell decides to spend quality time with his father (Jay) watching meteor shower, Cameron is eager to arrange a meeting with Gloria (Jay's wife).

(2) Cameron: I mean, when Mitchell made plans with his father, I figured, why not spend the evening with Gloria? I've always wanted to be good friends with her. On paper, we should be good friends. Look at us. One spicy, curvy diva (...)

Mitchell: And Gloria. (S01E18 Starry Night)

To a certain degree, the same relevance-guided path of comprehension is followed by Mitchell and the viewer, hence the two parties can glean the humorous meaning. On the recipient's layer, Cameron's turn containing the word *diva* should activate in the viewer's mind the interpretation that it is Gloria who is the right referent for the phrase *one spicy curvy diva* since, generally, it is women who can be called *divas* while the adjectives *spicy* and *curvy* describe a female body. As soon as Mitchell provides his turn, the viewer knows that s/he has been fooled by the fictional character (and collective sender) (Yus 2003) into assigning the wrong referent and hence s/he is required to reinitiate the relevance-seeking procedure. In other words, Mitchell's turn invalidates the viewer's meaning by mentioning Gloria so he necessarily implicates that it is Cameron who can be described by the phrase *spicy and curvy diva*. What Mitchell wants to achieve is to make Cameron and the viewer assign a different referent for the phrase since Cameron is quite chubby so he may be described as *curvy*. It may be due to the fact that

the meaning of *diva* may be used to denote homosexual men who are keen on behaving in an exaggerated manner.

4.3. Playing with collective cultural representations

In order to induce a humorous response in the viewer, the collective sender frequently resorts to the creative use of language (Partington 2006; Dynel 2013; Wieczorek 2015), which, as exemplified below, can be achieved via the coinage of a word bearing a marked resemblance to the existing phrase. More specifically, one of the recurrent mechanisms in mass mediated communication is the viewer's realisation that some representations which have been believed to be held privately are in fact shared collectively by a number of individuals (Yus 2016). Undoubtedly, it can be best corroborated in the genre of stand-up since people in the audience get the feedback immediately from others who attend this activity. As for the private-public dichotomy in sitcoms, it is pertinent due to the fact that the collective sender has a sub-module of a mind-reading ability (Sperber and Wilson 2002) and knows exactly which assumptions can be stored in recipients' minds and thus exploits this knowledge to induce a humorous response. There is a difference between the mind-reading ability in the case of naturally occurring talk and fictional communication, however, in both cases, the communicator consciously or subconsciously can exploit the hearer's/viewer's tendency to find relevance.

Context: While Claire is pictured as a parent who is quite overprotective and controlling, Phil is indulgent and easy-going. In the extract, Phil tries to linguistically explain why mothers and hence Claire behave in this way.

(3) Phil: I'm actually gonna take a different approach, but...

Claire: Actually gonna insist that you don't.

Phil: Claire, I know you've got your methods, but so do I. And I'm sorry, but I'm not a micromanager. Trust me, I can provide Luke with the tools and guidance he needs without, uh, smothering him.

Claire: You think I smother our child?

Phil: It's not your fault, honey. "Mother" is part of the word. You never hear of anyone being "sfathered" to death. (S01E18)

The collective sender builds up the relationship between the word *mother* and the phrase *to smother to death*, which cognitively prepares the recipient for the phrase *to sfather to death*. In other words, the communicator (Phil), in his last turn, intends to provide relevant information prior to creating the element of surprise. In relevance-theoretic terms, the viewer encounters a newly-invented phrase *to*

sfather to death, which is non-existent in the English language, and hence s/he needs to backtrack to find relevance on the basis of the preceding parts of Phil's utterance. Accordingly, the phrase *to sfather to death* can be properly understood on the strength of the existent phrase *to smother to death*. As a result, the viewer constructs the explicature⁸ of Phil's last verbalisation: the reason why mothers and hence Claire curtail children's freedom is that there is such a phrase in the lexicon. The extract can be viewed as humorous by the viewer since it draws upon the exploitation of stereotypical information concerning women and men and their dedication to children.

4.4. Assumptions from processing previous discourse

A very broad category of humorous manifestations is premised on the assumption that the viewer establishes relevance and gets humour when s/he accesses some contextual assumptions from previous scenes, episodes or even seasons. Dialogue (4) typifying this mechanism also employs a different tool – phonological ambiguity, which has to be resolved.

Context: All family is gathered at Jay and Gloria's house. Earlier the same day Manny (Gloria's son) and Luke (Phil and Claire's son) had a fight in school. Phil gets inquisitive about the reason behind their school scuffle. It turns out that Manny poked fun at Luke for having the same second breakfast whereas Luke laughed at Manny's Colombian accent and at Gloria being a "coal digger".

(4) Luke: I made fun of him because his mom used to dig coal.

Gloria: What?

Manny: He said you were a coal digger.

Phil: Okay, I think we can move on.

Gloria: Who said I was a coal digger?

Luke: That's what my mom told me.

Alex: What's a coal digger?

Phil: Sweetheart, he heard it wrong. It's "gold digger". (S01E05 Coal Digger)

The recipient of the dialogue is first presented with the ambiguous phrase *to dig coal*, which achieves little relevance given no premises in Luke's turn, which could navigate through the meaning. The only reasonable interpretation is the literal one: Gloria was a blue-collar worker who was hired in the coal mining industry, which is further reinforced by Manny's and Gloria's repetition of the phrase *coal digger*. Finally, Phil "helps" the viewer to find relevance by disambiguating the phrase *coal digger* as *gold digger*, the meaning of which is that Gloria is an attractive woman who has nothing to offer besides her looks and the reason why

she married Jay is his money. The overall relevance is also prompted by accessing contextual information from previous encounters with Gloria and Claire, and in particular the assumption that Claire believes Gloria married her father because she was looking for a well-off man.

5. Conclusions

To recapitulate, the main aim of the present contribution was to perform a relevance-theoretic analysis of some pragmatic mechanisms deployed in situation comedy discourse (Sperber and Wilson [1986] 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2004; also Carston 2002). In particular, it is the viewer's perspective which was adopted in that piece of research in order to show which cognitive mechanisms are activated in the course of interpretation of fictional communication. The data was culled from the American sitcom *Modern Family* whose primary objective is to create humour in the viewer. It has been argued that humour is contingent upon the application of the following mechanisms: enrichment and inferencing coupled with layering and relating concepts, exploitation of reference assignment, playing with collective cultural representations and assumptions from processing previous discourse. In order to retain transparency of the studies, the starting point for the analysis is the bifurcation of communication in fictional discourse into the characters' and recipients' layer, with the latter being the point of reference. What the viewer sees on the screen is dependent upon the meanings attributed to fictional characters by the collective sender. Very frequently the interpretations gleaned by each participant on the two layers are divergent and in that case I have provided the two paths of comprehension.

Notes

- 1 Marc (2005) argues that situation comedy should be dubbed 'comic drama' or 'narrative comedy' to describe its content and structural facets.
- 2 It is not meant to be a critical remark since Yus (2016) does not intend to put forth a clear-cut taxonomy.
- 3 Throughout the paper I employ Dynel's (2011) terminological nomenclature on the participation-based model, however, it is not to say that it is the first conceptualisation. To my knowledge, it is Burger (1984; 1991, in Babel 2008, 56-57) who can be seen as the precursor of double communication.
- 4 In the study I concentrate on mental representations, or interpretations that a traditional viewer may derive.
- 5 Relevance is a comparative notion which is evaluated in terms of cognitive effects and mental effort: "relevance is a property which need not

- be represented, let alone computed, in order to be achieved” (Sperber and Wilson [1986] 1995, 132).
- 6 Consult Yus’s comprehensive online bibliography service of literature on Relevance Theory, which is regularly updated: <https://personal.ua.es/francisco.yus/rt.html>.
- 7 On the characters’ layer, participants bifurcate into *ratified* and *unratified* ones. The former are the speaker and ratified listeners/hearers, who are licensed to communicate and work out the meaning. The group of ratified listeners are categorised into an addressee (at whom the message is directed) and the third party (any individual present during speaker’s verbalisations). In addition, there are two types of unratified participants, i.e. eavesdropper and bystander – the only difference between them being that interactants are conscious of bystander’s ability to hear (Dynel 2011).
- 8 Despite the wording, explicatures and implicatures are both inferred (Jodłowiec 2015).

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