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FLOUTING CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS IN A POPULAR AMERICAN SITCOM *THE THIRD ROCK FROM THE SUN*

The present paper aims at investigating the functions of deliberate violation of Gricean Cooperative Principle and the conversational maxims thereby. The corpus was collected from the six seasons of American TV sitcom *The Third Rock from the Sun* which was broadcast from 1996 to 2001 incorporating 138 episodes overall. Using descriptive and qualitative method we sought to explore which maxims are flouted the most and for which purposes. After a brief account of the fundamental theoretical notions, the examples of conversational turns are classified and discussed, followed by the conclusion drawn based on the previously accounted examples focusing predominantly on the functions of flouting. Furthermore, the shortcomings and advantages of the Gricean approach are underscored and expanded.

Keywords: Cooperative Principle, conversational maxims, flouting, sitcom

Introduction

Human communication would be far less complicated if people constantly spoke what they meant, yet, fortunately for linguists, the actual situation is quite different. Although our choice of words oftentimes matches the intended meaning verbatim, the number of occasions in which we do not really say exactly what we mean is by no means negligible. Thus, the notions of “what is said” and “what is meant” represent some of the fundamental problems in inferential pragmatics research, the cornerstone for which was laid by Paul Grice (1975). Even though they seem completely distinct, the aforementioned notions are interrelated, since it is downright impossible to say something without having meant anything (Wharton, 2002). Grice’s primary concern, regarding the distinction between saying and meaning, was discovering the cognitive mechanism that underlies the process by which a speaker knows how to produce implicit meaning that the addressee will be able to understand (Davies, 2007). In order to explain the mechanism in question the British philosopher introduced the theory based on the Cooperative Principle incorporating four conversational maxims that need to be observed for communication to be successful (Grice, 1975).

The present paper aims at investigating the features of humour in the American TV sitcom *The Third Rock from the Sun* from the perspective of Gricean pragmatics. More

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precisely, the paper explores the functions and purposes of the flouting of conversational maxims following the concept of the Cooperative principle, according to which both speaker and hearer involve in an exchange willing to convey and interpret a message, cooperating thus and making communication efficient (Grundy, 1995). Consequently, conversational maxims help us to determine and interpret the underlying implication of an utterance, yet they can be flouted. However, a deliberate flouting of maxims does not lead to ineffective interaction, since the speaker does not seek to mislead the hearer but wants them to find conversational implicatures, i.e. to interpret the message relying on the context (Thomas, 1995). The aforementioned TV sitcom abounds in conversational exchanges in which maxims are intentionally flouted for the purpose of humour and every character is depicted by the way they interact. Hence, our goal is to explain the actual intentions of speakers by describing conversational implicatures as well as to relate them to the actual personalities of characters which altogether creates the humorous effect on the target audience. After a brief theoretical account, the examples are presented and discussed, followed by a conclusion with suggestions for further research.

The Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims

The Cooperative Principle says “Make your contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Yule, 2000: 145), which means that speakers involved in smooth and meaningful interaction are assumed to be helpful and cooperative. Although it is formulated as a rule, Grice had no intention of telling speakers what to do, yet he was suggesting that in interaction people assume that a certain unstated set of rules is in operation, unless indicated reversely (Hu, 2012). For further specification and comprehension of the principle in question, four conversational maxims need to be introduced and explained (Grice, 1975):

The maxim of quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purpose of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The maxim of quality

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The maxim of relation

Be relevant.

The maxim of manner

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly.

Namely, the underlying idea of maxims is that we believe that people normally say

what is true in a clear and relevant manner, i.e. they provide an appropriate and relevant amount of information sincerely. Generally, communicators follow the principle and the maxims, however, they may likewise disobey them so as to achieve particular effects, without always intending to deceive or mislead (Thomas, 1995), in which case *conversational implicatures* are generated (Grice, 1975). Speakers may fail to observe the maxims by means of violation, flouting, infringing, opting out or suspension (Thomas, 1995), depending on whether the speaker aims to deliberately cause misunderstanding by refraining from using a maxim, whether the speaker persuades the addressee to infer the meaning behind the expressed utterance, or does not intend to do so and still fails to observe the maxim, moreover, whether the speaker indicates linguistically that the exploitation of the maxim will occur and, finally, whether the speaker fails to provide adequate information because they are not expected to for cultural or any other situation-specific reasons.

The present paper will merely focus on flouting the maxims, which is a special silent way of having an addressee draw inferences and hence recover an implicature, or what the speaker actually intended to say or implicate (Grundy, 2000).

Even though it is frequently criticized for describing ideal and non-problematic exchanges, the Gricean approach proved to be one of the most influential in modern pragmatics (Thomas, 1995) since it served as a sound basis later expanded into Politeness Theories by Lakoff (1973) as well as Leech (1983), and later into Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986) and followed by numerous Neo-Gricean researchers (Harnish, 1976; Levinson, 1983). The very theory of conversational maxims was endorsed in papers regarding humour and jokes (Attardo, 1997; Norrick, 1993). Attardo (1994) demonstrated that jokes may stem from flouting all the conversational maxims and that analyzing humour through Gricean approach may help to incorporate humour research into mainstream linguistics. Raskin (1985) suggested that jokes, despite disobeying the maxims, remain crucially cooperative and relevant since they carry certain communicative functions.

Studies conducted to investigate the humorous effects of maxim flouting in situational comedies demonstrated that the most frequently exploited maxim is that of quality, followed by relation and quantity, and that the least exploited one was the maxim of manner (Hu, 2012; Paakkinen, 2010; Kalliomäki, 2005; Xiaosu, 2009)). However, previous studies predominantly focused on demonstrating that flouting maxims can produce a comic effect often combining Gricean and other theories as theoretical background, whereas our intention is not only to show which maxims are disobeyed predominantly, but also to concentrate on the functions of the maxim exploitations within the very conversational turns, in a specific context provided by our source, an American TV sitcom *The Third Rock from the Sun*.

A Brief Summary of *The Third Rock from the Sun*

The American TV sitcom *The Third Rock from the Sun* was broadcast from 1996

to 2001 incorporating 138 episodes and it revolves around the everyday situations of four aliens Dick, Harry, Sally and Tommy Solomon, who arrive to Earth on a mission to explore the human race. Dick is the “High Commander”, in charge of the mission, who assumed the role of a physics professor, often egocentric and pompous. Sally is the second in command since she used to be an excellent soldier on her home planet which is why she is not very happy with her role of woman on Earth. Tommy is ironically the youngest in the family, yet he was actually the oldest on their home planet, now he is a teenager with all the problems this may bring. Finally, Harry is said to have come because they had an extra seat, however, it will be discovered that he has a chip inserted in his brain for transmitting the information from the Big Giant Head, their commander from space. Although their mission was supposed to last only a few weeks, it took much longer since Dick met Dr. Mary Albright, a University professor, as well, and fell in love. The rest of the group adapted to the life on Earth themselves, so the humour in the show stems basically from the group’s misunderstandings and unfamiliarity with human customs, conversational rules and life habits.

Research Methodology

Corpus and Method

The corpus of the current paper represents a collection of conversational exchanges carefully selected from the 138 episodes of TV sitcom *The Third Rock from the Sun* by means of introspective-analytical method employed by the author of the paper, as a primary data-gathering instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The exchanges were transcribed and classified according to the flouting of maxims (Grice, 1975) and later analyzed using the qualitative-descriptive method, involving exemplifications and explanations of the relevant material.

Research questions

The present research seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Which maxims are flouted in *The Third Rock from the Sun*?
2. What are the functions and effects of maxim flouting?

Examples and Discussion

Flouting the Maxim of Quality

The examples of flouting the maxim of quality predominantly include ironic expressions, without the intention of misleading or actually lying to the addressee, but to express disapproval or irritation.

Example 1. Season 3 Episode 12; Situation: Dick is annoyed because there is no

entrance for people in wheelchairs next to the place where he usually parks his vehicle. He is arguing with Mary, who is telling him that there is a ramp after all. Nina, the secretary, is listening to them.

Mary Albright (explaining to Dick that there is a ramp for people in wheelchairs):
The ramp is on the south side.

Dick: It might as well be in Portugal.

Nina: Because it's so far away?

Dick: No, Nina, because Portugal is an ancient land of fascinating maritime culture...

In example 1 the speaker flouts the maxim of quality for he is obviously telling a lie, since he clearly does not mean to say that Portugal is a fascinating country, that is, he is being ironic, expressing thus annoyance and disapproval towards the question. Having the speaker's personality in mind, he might as well be expressing superiority and domination towards the addressee, since she is his secretary and throughout the show their exchanges are characterized by harsh and even disrespectful language.

Example 2. Season 3 Episode 12; Situation: Dick is giving a speech to his students related to the issue of the lack of entrance for the disabled although he became aware that there is an entrance yet not on the side he would want it to be on.

Dick: Mary, look! It appears that the mob loves me.

Mary: That's always a good sign.

Example 2 shows another instance of the speaker flouting the maxim of quality since she does not believe that the love of the mob is a good sign. Again, by means of irony the speaker is expressing a negative attitude towards the other speaker's actions.

Example 3. Season 1 Episode 3; Situation: Nina and Mary are talking about Dick's sudden change of behavior.

Mary: Exactly when does puberty end for a man?

Nina: Six months after death.

The exploitation of the quality maxim is obvious in example 3 since nothing can happen six months after someone's death, let alone puberty, which ends far earlier in a man's life. By uttering this sentence anyhow, Nina wishes to criticize man's irrational behavior typical of puberty (in this case Dick's change of hair colour, sudden desire to see younger women and wear leather pants).

Example 4. Season 3 Episode 18; Situation: Dick and Mary are talking about their lives and working at the University.

Dick: Do you ever wonder if maybe you've made a wrong choice in life, you know, with your job?

Mary: No, no. I always wanted to teach half-baked morons at a second-rate University.

By failing to observe the maxim in example 4, the speaker expresses dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, also by use of irony, since no one actually wishes to work with intellectually challenged people at a less respected University.

Example 5. Season 1 Episode 8; Situation: Dr. Henley is a respected University professor, yet he is not highly appreciated among his colleagues because he is awfully sarcastic and mean at times. He is attending a party at Dean Sumner's house.

Dean Sumner's wife: Dr. Henley we so admire your accomplishments.

Dr. Henley: Well, I admire your courage, Mrs. Sumner. An audubon print over the mantel passing for art... That takes guts!

Bearing in mind that the speaker's personality is characterized by egocentrism and constant sarcasm, the flouting of the maxim of quality is expected since the speaker enjoys making fun of others expressing his superiority thus. Clearly he does not admire the courage of the hostess, which is evident from the continuation of the utterance.

Example 6. Season 3 Episode 3; Situation: Sally had just broken up with Don, but she found another boyfriend soon enough. She is talking to Don about her new love, while Don is still in pain.

Don: No need wasting precious seconds pining over Don.

Sally: Exactly!

Example 6 represents the flouting of the maxim of quality since the speaker does not actually mean what he says, as a matter of fact, he wants to stress the importance of his feelings since he clearly still has feeling towards Sally, who is apparently ignorant of them. Without realizing the irony, Sally confirms Don's statement. The example demonstrates one of many instances of misunderstanding resulting from the four aliens' inability to process human irony. Such examples are very frequent sources of humour in the show.

Flouting the Maxim of Quantity

By providing insufficient or excessive information speakers are assumed to disobey the maxim of quantity which is common in the corpus of the present study.

Example 7. Season 3 Episode 4; Situation: Dick is having dinner with Mary's parents for the first time.

Dick: Martha, this is the most delicious exquisitely flavored palate-teasing dish I've ever tasted! What do you call it again?

Example 7 demonstrates the speaker's desire for approval and acceptance by the addressee, since by expressing the superlative and only one epithet the speaker could already have expressed admiration towards the taste of the meal, yet he opts for further description that results in the deliberate exploitation of the maxim of quantity.

Example 8. Season 4 Episode 4; Situation: Back in her primary school days Mary spelt the word *because* wrongly at the spelling competition as *b-e-c-a-w-s-e*, now her mother is mockingly asking her why.

Martha: Magpie, why'd you miss such an easy word?

Mary: Because.

Dick: She can say it, she just can't spell it.

The utterance in example 8 is uninformative for the participants in the interaction

thus flouting the maxim of quantity, yet having the context in mind the utterance is a particular word play alluding to the fact that she could not spell the word in question. The flouting creates the comic effect for the audience and for the interlocutors themselves it shows that the speaker has not overcome the former problem so it expresses a kind of refusal to speak, dissatisfaction and disappointment.

Example 9. Season 4 Episode 23; Situation: The Big Giant Head (the commander in space who sent the four aliens on the mission in the first place) is coming to visit the Solomons for the first time. They are at the airport welcoming him.

Dick: Welcome, oh great and glorious leader whose presence in which we, your humble and insignificant subordinates, are barely worthy of asking?

Big Giant Head: Right. This is some body I picked up...

The flouting of the maxim in example 9 is an instance of circumlocution intended to express false humility, respect and obedience towards the superior, considerably higher in hierarchy.

Example 10. Season 5 Episode 1; Situation: Vicky, Mrs. Dubchek's daughter, has had an affair with the Big Giant Head and now she is pregnant. Everyone is afraid of the outcome of her labour and whether the baby would be an alien species.

Sally: Look at it it's so cute!

Harry: Vicky's baby is a baby!

Example 10 is especially intriguing because it would not be interesting if the main characters in the show were not aliens from space. Of course the speaker is stating the obvious and is thus uninformative, yet, given the circumstances, the flouting of the maxim is justified since the speaker is surprised and startled even, however, relieved since he obtained the confirmation since he was afraid the baby might turn out to be an alien.

Example 11. Season 1 Episode 2; Situation: Dick is talking about Tommy's day at school. Tommy is a teenager, his hormones are raging, and he previously spoke about Dina's breasts going up and down as she was jumping in the gym.

Tommy: I had my first makeup session.

Dick: Good for you.

Tommy: It was with Dina my lab partner.

Sally: Dina? The one with the...?

Tommy: Oh yeah...

Tommy is aware what Sally is talking about since he described it thoroughly a few days ago, and they now know how to refer to the same person. The information left out is "breasts jumping up and down". Evidently, the speakers provide less information than is required for an outsider to understand what they are talking about in example 11, however, the function of the utterances is to show how well acquainted the speakers are with their own lives and thoughts, so their intention is not to mislead or disable communication but to express mutual comprehensibility.

Example 12. Season 6 Episode 18; Situation: After breaking up with Dick, Mary got involved with Liam, Dick's alien enemy from space. Mary is in love and Dick is

trying to talk her out of it.

Dick: Oh Mary I just don't want you to get hurt. Liam is just not what he appears to be.

Example 12 demonstrates the flouting of the maxim of quantity since the speaker does not provide enough information for the hearer to draw her own conclusion based on the objective evidence. The speaker must not reveal the truth because he would compromise his own position and expose his own real alien identity, yet he still tries to achieve his goal of talking the hearer out of the relationship. The function of this flouting is avoidance and evasion.

Flouting the Maxim of Relation

By flouting the maxim of relation the speaker deliberately chooses to diverge from the topic, aiming to achieve various effects, by no means being irrelevant.

Example 13. Season 1 Episode 9; Situation: Dick is expecting Mary and her brother to come.

Dick: Sally, the Albrights will be here any minute! Now, this is a special occasion. Where's the salmon moose, the duck terrine, the smoked chub?

Sally: You know, Dick, I have a cleaver in my hand.

In example 13 the speaker is deliberately not being relevant to the question since she disapproves of the other speaker's attitude and intention. She thus expresses threat by flouting the maxim of relation.

Example 14. Season 1 Episode 3; Situation: Dick dyed his hair black since he wanted to look younger.

Dick (after dyeing his hair): How do I look?

Sally: Dick, hm, ok, if somebody were helping you with an experiment and things went array and you became horribly disfigured you wouldn't hold that against them, now, would you?

Clearly in example 14 the speaker does not want to answer the question and choose to flout the maxim of relation by avoiding the direct answer, probably to avoid being rude and hurting the other speaker's feelings.

Example 15. Season 4 Episode 14; Situation: Mary and Dick have had a fight and now Dick is trying to turn everyone against her at the University.

Dick: Mary and I have had a falling out, we're over, and I'd like to get a good plot going against her. Got anything on that?

Judith: Dick, I have a class.

The speaker flouts the maxim of relation in example 15 since she does not want to participate in the proposed scheme. She deliberately chooses to stay unbiased and uninvolved by avoiding to directly answer the question.

In both examples 16 and 17, by failing to observe the maxims in order to avoid the answer in both cases to hide some information. Thus, one of the functions of flouting the maxim of relation can be avoiding the truth.

Example 16. Season 3 Episode 12; Mrs. Dubchek is famous for being very seductive and fond of men, but also for keeping her age a secret. Don, the gatekeeper at a night club and Sally's boyfriend, surprised at seeing her real age in the ID card is now asking about it.

Don: You were born in 1968?

Mrs Dubchek: I don't want the boys to be intimidated by my experience.

Mrs Dubchek obviously avoids confirming her age by evading the direct answer, wanting to hide the truth about her age as always. However, the speaker gives a tacit confirmation by using the word "experience" which may mean that the speaker admits to being born in the specified year.

Example 17. Season 1 Episode 5; Situation: Tommy came back from school and Sally is asking him about his day.

Sally: So, Tommy, how was your science fair?

Tommy: Remember that frog I reanimated? Well, it kind of developed the taste for human flesh. And someone's gotta go see my science teacher tomorrow.

Tommy avoids the direct answer to the question since he is probably feeling guilty and knows that there is nothing positive to report about his day at school.

Example 18. Season 3 Episode 9; Situation: Dick came back home from work and wants to eat.

Dick: Where's dinner?

Tommy: Sally's not home yet.

In example 18, the speaker does not answer the question directly and apparently gives irrelevant information. However, the utterance is not actually irrelevant since Sally is the only person who does the cooking in the house. Thus, the speaker's flouting has the intention to remind the interlocutor that there can be no dinner if Sally is not at home, at the same time refusing to assume any responsibility.

Flouting the Maxim of Manner

Speakers flout the maxim of manner if they use ambiguous or obscure expressions, i.e. if they use inappropriate linguistic means.

Example 19. Season 4 Episode 8; Situation: Tommy likes Alisa who sat next to him during their chemistry class. He is embarrassed and confused.

Alisa: We've been in the class all year and we've never met.

Tommy: No, we have not never met.

Example 19 shows flouting of the maxim of manner, since the speaker is not being orderly, by inserting the "not" adverb, and giving a linguistically inappropriate sentence, since the correct sentence in Standard English would be "No, we have never met." or "No, we haven't met." The function of the flouting is to express confusion and embarrassment characteristic of someone who is in love.

Example 20. Season 1 Episode 7; Situation: Mary is going to a party without Dick who desperately wanted to come.

Dick: Hey, Dr. Albright, you forgot your, you forgot your... meee!

The flouting of the maxim in example 20 expresses regret by means of inappropriate

linguistic expression, since the use of object pronoun “me” is not found after a possessive determiner “your” in Standard English. Nevertheless, the intonation clearly shows that the speaker feels sad and disappointed.

Example 21. Season 1 Episode 7; Situation: Mary has had a fight with Dick and now they take revenge on each other. Nina chooses to be take sides with Mary.

Dick: Nina, you work for me, too, and when I ask you to do something you are to do it immediately no questions asked!

Nina: (laughs inappropriately loudly)

The speakers’ inappropriate laughter in example 21 and hence the inappropriate way of responding to her boss exploits the maxim of manner in order to express negative attitude, disobedience and even rebellion.

Example 22. Season 4 Episode 12; Situation: Mary and Dick are in their office discussing paying taxes. Dick has never heard of it, but pretends he knows everything about it.

Dick: Well, Nina does all my filing. Nina, bring me my return.

Nina: Your return?

Dick: My return. My return. (to Mary) You see what I have to deal with? (louder)

My return!

In example 22, the speaker’s repetition of the same expression without any additional explanation hints to a possible flouting of the maxim of quantity by being uninformative for the addressee, yet the use of inappropriate suprasegmental features of the utterance as a means of requesting something points to the flouting of the maxim of manner. The example is ambiguous and proves the points of scholars who criticized Grice’s approach because of the overlapping of maxims (Thomas, 1995; Mooney, 2004). The function of the aforementioned flouting is disguising the lack of knowledge on the part of the speaker and anger at the same time.

A twofold interpretation is by no means an exception, since many examples, including the ensuing Example 24, allow at least two possible alternatives in terms of maxim violation. It should be pointed out that it often happens that speakers flout more than one maxim within one and the same utterance.

Example 23. Season 23. Season 3 Episode 5; Situation: It’s Halloween. Mrs. Dubchek is trying to guess Harry’s costume.

Mrs. Dubchek: And Harry you’re an alien.

Harry: No, I’m not! Yes I am.

The speaker’s utterance in example 23 is obscure, thus flouting the maxim of manner, yet it is clear. Harry does not deliberately intend to mislead the addressee, but he is afraid that he might be discovered and hesitates even though the interlocutor has no intention of revealing the speaker’s real identity, since she is not even aware of it. The flouting can further be explained by taking Harry’s personality into consideration, which is quite insecure, hesitant and uncertain in almost every single situation.

Example 24. Season 3 Episode 12; Situation: Tommy was refused admission to a popular night club, since he is under age. He is disguised as an older man and is again

trying to get in.

Tommy: Hello, I am an adult of legal age and I have come to patronize your establishment.

The flouting of the maxim of manner results from the speaker's inappropriate use of vocabulary. Namely, in order to represent himself as somebody else, the speaker opts for too formal vocabulary for the situation he is in, because obviously this choice of words could never be expected in front of a night club. Someone would expect a sentence such as "I want to go in" without mentioning the age, yet that is not what the speaker utters here. In this case the purpose of deliberate flouting is deception.

Conclusion

To summarize, the exploitations of the maxims in *The Third Rock from the Sun* had of course one fundamental function – to provide humour for the target audience, yet our purpose was to further investigate their functions and we came to the conclusion that the maxims may be flouted for different reasons, i.e. the speakers wanted the addressees to infer the implied meaning without directly expressing it. Similarly to previous research (Khosravizadeh & Sadehvandi, 2011; Hu, 2012; Zhang, 2012), our corpus showed that the most frequently flouted maxims were maxims of quality (35 recorded instances), relation (29 instances) and quantity (22 examples). However, the maxim of manner should not be disregarded since it was flouted in a considerable number of examples (14), which was not the case in the previous studies, which possibly results from the uniqueness of the sitcom since the characters are aliens not entirely familiar with human communication etiquette. The maxim of quality was preponderantly flouted for the purpose of expressing disapproval, criticism, disappointment, superiority, mockery, annoyance and irritation. The functions of disobeying the maxim of quantity were mostly expressions of surprise, confirmation, false and sincere appraisal, humility, understanding and sometimes even ridicule. The maxim of relation was flouted to express threat, disgust and surprise, as well as to avoid the answer. Finally, the prevailing functions of flouting the maxim of manner are the expressions of hesitation, confusion, disapproval, anger, avoidance and occasionally even regret.

Future research may include the analysis from a different theoretical perspective so as to overcome and overcome the possible limitations of the approach employed in the previously presented study as well as to provide potential clues to the functions of maxim violation exceeding the scope of Gricean theory.

SOURCES

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