The borders of humorous intent – The case of TV comedies

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Abstract

In this article, some communicative issues concerning the borders of humorous intent are modelled. In a theoretical section, the relationship between humorous intent, Neo-Gricean maxims and phases of humorous discourse are discussed. Here, a HUMOUR MAXIM is proposed to be the communicative equivalent of humorous intent. For this maxim, a principle of delayable fulfilment is introduced. Then, humorous intent and its absence are identified in two participations frameworks which arise from certain formats of TV comedies: a sitcom within a sitcom and candid camera comedies. Finally, some concrete constellations of humorous intent are discussed: humorous intent in the audience only (involuntary humour), humorous intent signalled, but not realized, and humorous intent withdrawn.
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1. Introduction

In televised comedy, humorous intent seems to come with the genre itself – the announcement of a show as a sitcom, a comedy panel show or as stand-up comedy triggers an assumption in the audience of the producers' intent to amuse, as well as an expectation of humorous content. While the signalling of humorous intent via genre convention appears to be sufficiently reliable to allow for successful humorous communication, there are a number of aspects in connection with humorous intent which are less than obvious, but of crucial importance nonetheless: above all, it is necessary to consider the communicative consequences of a detection of humorous intent for the recipient. This concerns not only pragmatic properties of the audience's expectation of humour (Raskin, 1985:103; Brock, 2004:Chapter 4.3; Dynel, 2009)[1] and the adequate modelling of participation frameworks (Goffman, 1981; Levinson, 1988; Clark/Schaefer, 1992; Dynel, 2010; Dynel/Chovanec, 2015)[2] for a variety of cases, but also the identification and communicative impact of the borders of humorous intent. In candid camera comedy, for instance, humorous intent is present only in the team filming an innocent victim secretly or under false pretences, but not in the victim. In fact, the presence of humorous intent in the TV team and its absence in the victim are central to the candid camera genre. The audience, too, has a prominent role in determining the borders of humorous intent, as not everything that is sold as humorous is also experienced as funny. This leads to

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[1] A central question here is how the pragmatic processing of humour differs from non-humorous communication. This concerns genre and knowledge patterns as well as communicative maxims and inferencing.

[2] Goffman (1981) and researchers following his tradition are interested in the respective status of people participating in or witnessing communicative events. For this, categories such as *animator, author, addressed recipient, over-hearer* and *eavesdropper* as well as *ratified* and *unratified recipient* (Levinson, 1988:169) are discussed.

constellations like ''humorous intent signalled, but not experienced'' or different evaluations of humour on various communicative levels. These phenomena defy the assumption of an all-embracing humorous intent for TV comedy.

In the following section, humorous intent is modelled pragmatically within a Neo-Gricean framework, including a Humour Maxim. Then this model is applied to some comedy formats which come with different participation frameworks, where humorous intent and its absence play a considerable role in defining the respective genre. Finally, a few concrete cases of humour are analyzed and discussed in the context of humorous intent and its borders.

In the context of this paper, the term *humour* covers any communicative or perceptive process in which the recipient experiences amusement, including parody, satire, black humour, etc. It also includes cases of involuntary humour where humour is unintentional on the part of the producer and only constructed by the recipient (see section 4 below). *Failed humour*, by contrast, describes a constellation where a producer's humorous intent is not realized in the recipient.

2. Humorous intent in a Neo-Gricean framework: the Humour Maxim

The starting point for a discussion of humorous intent in TV comedies is a simple participation framework for sitcoms. On Communicative Level 1 (CL 1),[3] we find the real communication between everyone involved in the production of the sitcom, i.e. scriptwriters, director, actors, camera crew, make-up artists, etc. – who can be conveniently summed up as the *collective sender*[4] – and the TV audience. Communicative Level 2 (CL 2) contains the communication within television, which in the case of sitcoms consists of scripted dialogue among fictitious characters, as depicted in Fig. 1. For other comedy genres, e.g. candid camera shows, the communication on CL 2 may not be scripted and may have real people rather than fictitious characters communicating.

On CL 1, we can assume that there is institution-based humorous intent on the part of the collective sender. This intent is signalled quite clearly in the programme schedule, in voice-over announcements, etc. The TV viewers will normally be aware of this, and humorous intent will be a fairly stable resource for interpretation, which does not mean, of course, that the audience will necessarily find the programme funny – if the material does not stand up to the claim, then this results in failed humour. For the recipients, this institution-based humorous intent translates well into a Neo-Gricean Humour Maxim – ''Regard the ongoing communication as funny'' (Brock, 2009:182) – which in humorous communication replaces Grice's Truth Maxim, although in reality, the situation is often more complex than a simple replacement of Truth by Humour. In satire, for instance, the formula ''Truth via Humour'' seems to be more appropriate. Grice's remaining maxims mainly stay the same, although at least the second Manner Maxim – ''avoid ambiguity'' (Grice, 1975:46) also needs some reformulation, as ambiguity is indeed a common mechanism in humour and therefore often desired in this context.

The Humour Maxim, which may be seen as an abstraction from a person's experiences with concrete patterns and cases of humour and is thus an acquired communicative resource, has a number of properties which are vital for ensuring successful humorous communication. As it is situated on a more abstract level than concrete text patterns of humour, it is useful whenever a recipient is confronted with unknown text patterns. This way, it also supports innovation in humorous communication, e.g. new formats of TV humour. More importantly, however, it explains the existence of meta-humour, where a humorous effect is produced by not fulfilling the expectation of humour, as in the case of nonsense jokes or in the sitcom *Count Arthur Strong* (2013), where we see a failed old comedian unsuccessfully trying to amuse his friends. If the Humour Maxim appears to be unfulfilled, then this may be a case of flouting, and the Gricean implicature model allows for a particularized implicature (Grice, 1975:56) in the direction of meta-humour. This interpretation could proceed as follows:

1. Humorous intent is announced or otherwise signalled
2. Text patterns for humorous communication and Humour Maxim are activated
3. Text is delivered
4. Text does not produce mirth within known text patterns of humorous communication
5. Failed humour?
6. Humour Maxim does not appear to be suspended, so recipient considers whether producer may be flouting it
7. Taking into account various kinds of information, including contextual cues, recipient may arrive at meta-humorous reading, particularly if other factors confirm this.

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[3] For different communicative levels in literature and media, see Gülich/Raible (1979), Brock (2004), Burger (2005), Bubel (2008), Dynel (2011a,b) and others.

[4] For a discussion of the term *collective sender*, see Dynel (2011b:1634). This term is useful when a TV show is seen as a combined effort, made up of many people's contributions.