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Journal of Pragmatics xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

journal of  
**PRAGMATICS**

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# Extradiegetic and character laughter as markers of humorous intentions in the sitcom *2 Broke Girls*

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Received 2 July 2015; received in revised form 21 December 2015; accepted 24 December 2015

## Abstract

This study analyses data from one episode of the US sitcom *2 Broke Girls* to demonstrate how telecinematic discourse contrasts and explicitly signals intentions on different levels of communication for humorous effect. The presented examples show how the collective senders cue television viewers to follow extradiegetic laughter (the laugh track) and character laughter as markers of humour and humour support to infer humorous and non-humorous intentions and incongruities on different communicative levels, communicative level 1 (CL1) between collective sender and viewers, and CL2 between characters. The data illustrate the heterogeneity of sitcom humour, which is categorised into humour constellations based on the communicative level on which the incongruity is inferred. Subtypes of *CL2-humour* involve markers that show characters to be intentionally humorous, to fail in their attempts at humour, or to pretend to appreciate humour by employing fake laughter; *CL1-humour* refers to humour which is marked solely extradiegetically and functions without any marked intent within the fictional world. Each of the constellations positions the viewers differently and invites them to laugh with or about sitcom characters, and this categorisation thus also highlights the viewers' dynamic shifts between different participant roles.

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**Keywords:** "2 Broke Girls"; Humour markers; Laughter; Participation framework; Sitcom; Telecinematic discourse

## 1. Introduction

Sitcoms, like all forms of fictional film and television, depend upon the coexistence of several communicative levels or layers of action (Clark, 1996). Viewers follow the interactions of characters on screen and, to a certain degree, pretend to be witnesses situated within the diegetic world of the fictional narrative. At the same time, however, they are "the primary ratified participants" (Dyrel, 2011c:48) of the telecinematic communicative setting, engaged in mediated communication with the collective sender<sup>1</sup> of the television broadcast. This double role of the viewer is complemented by two tiers of intentions: (1) based on processes of characterisation, viewers form mental models of characters and accordingly interpret actions based on assumed character intentions; (2) based on knowledge of the fictionality and scriptedness of the cultural artefact they are engaged with, viewers situate intentionality on the level of the collective sender.

How then is this layeredness employed for humour? What relation is there between on-screen character humour and mediated humour between the collective sender and the television audience?

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term *collective sender* (Dyrel, 2011d; Seewoester Cain, 2013; Brock, 2015) to refer to the conglomerate of all those involved in the production of the fictional audio-visual text, i.e. the cast and crew including writers, directors and actors, among others.

Since the layeredness of communication also extends to the humorous intentions that are inferred by viewers as pertaining to the collective sender and/or characters, numerous possibilities arise for sitcom producers to construct humorous incongruities on and across communicative levels. One of the features that distinguishes sitcom humour from that of other live-action film and television comedies is the employment of pre-recorded laughter that is broadcast as part of the audio-visual artefact. As a form of extradiegetic laughter, i.e. laughter which does not have a source within the fictional world, it does not only mark instances of humour, but also more specifically works as a marker for humorous intentions on the level of the collective sender. Similarly, character smiles and laughter can serve as humour markers on the character level. Following such markers, viewers are thus led to situate the humorous intentions on either level. Moreover, the co-presence of communicative levels and of the respective markers may lead to incongruous intentions (see discussion in section 2.2), which can themselves constitute the core of humour: they are instrumental not only as markers, but also in the construction of humour itself.

Previous research on humour in fictional television series includes studies that utilise telecinematic data in the pursuit of more general research aims in humour studies (e.g. Purandare and Litman, 2006; Brône, 2008; Stokoe, 2008). But a number of articles have also focused on the particularities of humour in fictional television (Brock, 2011; Urios-Aparisi and Wagner, 2011), which importantly includes the specific participation settings and roles involved in telecinematic discourse (Dynel, 2011a; Brock, 2015). Research on sitcom humour, as it is undertaken in the latter two articles and also in this study, can demonstrate how the participation structure of televisual comedies is employed in what can uncontroversially be considered one of their main functions: to be humorous to television audiences.<sup>2</sup>

Based on data from one episode of the US sitcom *2 Broke Girls* (CBS, 2012), this study illustrates how constellations of matching and clashing intentions across communicative layers are employed in the construction of humour. It specifically looks at different forms of laughter as humour markers that facilitate humour across layers, and it sheds light on particular ways in which the participation framework of the sitcom is employed in the construction of humour.

## 2. Telecinematic participation and sitcom humour

### 2.1. Participation framework of telecinematic discourse

In investigating sitcom humour, this study uses telecinematic discourse<sup>3</sup> as data for linguistic analysis. This type of data is understood as naturally occurring (in the sense of Jucker, 2009:1615),<sup>4</sup> but as distinct in a number of aspects from the traditional basic setting of language use, i.e. spontaneous face-to-face conversation. Among the most notable differences for this study are that the visible participants (the characters on screen) do not determine the unfolding of their interaction, which is defined by the collective sender; and that self-expression on the part of the collective sender is constrained by the intermediary actors performing on screen.

Both of those differences directly link to the communication setting of telecinematic discourse, which takes place on two levels of communication (Clark, 1996; Dynel, 2011c; Piazza et al., 2011). The collective sender communicates with television viewers via the seemingly self-contained space of the diegetic world, in which characters interact for the benefit of the audience. The onscreen communication thus comprises a second communicative level that depends not only on the first level, but also on the willingness of the viewers to suspend their disbelief and to engage, together with the collective sender, in a conventional form of joint pretence (Clark, 1996). Thus, viewers and the collective sender jointly construe a subordinate layer for the fictional characters and (inter-)actions. Following Brock (2015), I will refer to this subordinate layer as communicative level 2 (CL2) and to the superordinate layer between collective sender and viewer as communicative level 1 (CL1).

The participation role of viewers has been likened to that of Goffman's (1979) overhearers (Kozloff, 2000; Bubel, 2006, 2008; Bednarek, 2011). I follow Dynel's (2011d) view here, however, that first and foremost, television audiences need to be conceptualised as ratified participants in telecinematic discourse (see also Brock, 2015). This is crucial for the understanding of sitcom humour, for even though sitcom viewers engage with the fictional world, they are aware that onscreen character interactions are fictional, scripted, and intentional in the sense that they are governed by the planning, producing and editing processes of the collective sender.

This is not to deny that on CL2 there is a fully-fledged fictional world with characters interacting as if they were engaged in spontaneous talk. While viewers clearly have no manifest presence on that fictional layer, they witness characters, events and scenes as if they were taking place outside the telecinematic context. In this sense, viewers do play the role of

<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, Mills (2009:49) defines sitcom as "a form of programming which foregrounds its comic intent."

<sup>3</sup> Telecinematic discourse is the term used by Piazza et al. (2011) to refer to the language and communication of film and television.

<sup>4</sup> *Naturally occurring* in this sense refers to "data that has *not* been elicited by the researcher for the purpose of his or her research project but that occurs for communicative reasons outside of the research project for which it is used" (Jucker, 2009:1615, emphasis in original).

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