

A linguistic analysis of humor: A look at *Seinfeld*

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Using the Incongruity Theory of humor (Attardo, 2001; Morreall, 1983; Schwarz, 2010) and the Interactional Sociolinguistic Methodology of discourse analysis, we examine the incongruous elements, such as moral short-comings, ignorance, and impersonation used in *Seinfeld* to set up a situation conducive to humor. We analyze the contextualization cues used to support these incongruities, such as genre change, footing alteration, exaggeration, prosody, intonation, marked lexical choices. We present an examination of two scenes taken from the episodes, “The Marine Biologist” and “The Red Dot”. We identify the specific incongruities, and then formulate an in-depth analysis of the contextualization cues and how they are implemented, resulting in humor. Our research provides an original contribution to the field of linguistic studies of humor not only by using a new corpus of data, but by providing an analysis of the contextualization cues implemented to create humor, contributing to the linguistic field of research on humor.

1 Introduction

Humor can be created in various ways, and there are many theories explaining the mechanisms by which humor is created (Attardo, 2001). Our research addresses the specific issue of which contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982) are used and how they are employed to create humor in the hit television show *Seinfeld*.

2 Background

For the scope of this research, we have adopted Paolos’s (1980) definition of humor that states that humor has two essential ingredients: incongruity and an appropriate emotional climate; terminology defined in section 3.1. Paolos iterates that these two ingredients are at once necessary and sufficient in creating humor.

Seinfeld has a unique standing in the realm of American pop culture. Hurd (2006) describes *Seinfeld*’s as the pivotal emergence of a phenomenon in the history American television sitcoms. The phenomenon being the remarkable success of *Seinfeld* and its extraordinary reign as one of America’s most popular sitcoms up to and including its ninth season. This is owed in part to its trans-

generational appeal as well as its ability to cross social, economic, and cultural boundaries in its target audience.

Linguistically, *Seinfeldisms*, the lingo, vocabulary, and phrases coined by the writers of the show, have taken on a life of their own within the American lexicon. This can be seen via direct incorporation with such forms and phrases as *master of your domain* and *yada yada yada*, and via re-analysis, where lexical items take on meanings derived from the original meaning and become productive in the language. Some examples of re-analysis of *Seinfeldisms* are *soup nazi* and *anti-dentite* which could potentially produce examples such as *grammar nazi*: someone who is strict about grammar, and *anti-grammarite*: someone who doesn't care for grammar. The amount of influence that *Seinfeld* has had on American culture is vast, making it a significant corpus for research.

Previous work on related topics include Schwarz's (2010) research on Jerry Seinfeld's stand-up comedy, and Karmen's (1998) research of comedy in television sitcoms. As far as we know, *Seinfeld* is a previously un-researched corpus.

3 Methodology

Assuming the Incongruity Theory (Paolos, 1980; Morreall, 1987; Schwarz, 2010) and the Interactional Sociolinguistic discourse analysis (Gumperz, 1982) as theoretical frameworks, we analyze the discourse from two clips of *Seinfeld* focusing on the following linguistic components used to create humor: genre changes, footing alterations, metaphors, exaggeration, moral short-comings and ignorance.

The Incongruity Theory claims that humor is created out of a violation of an expectation. For humor to result from this unexpected result, the event must have an appropriate emotional climate, comprised of the setting, characters, prior discourse, relationships of the characters, and the topic. Crucially, according to Morreall (1987), the unexpected result must fit within the setting of the given situation. Incongruities laid out under the Incongruity Theory include moral shortcomings, a violation of an understood social code; ignorance, a violation of understood knowledge; impersonation, pretending to be someone or something that you are not; physical deformities, a violation of how we view the way in which we ought to appear; and failed actions, a violation of the successful completion of an action. These incongruities along with an appropriate setting set up the climate in which humor is generated.

The Interactional Sociolinguistic Methodology for discourse analysis (Gumperz, 1982) focuses on the significance of social interactions in discourse; the way in which relationships are formed, power and hierarchies are negotiated, and how identities are built as components which influence the way in which speakers choose their words, structures, and prosodic elements. The way

speakers communicate is ultimately and significantly influenced by the social interaction itself and interlocutors have specific roles to play within these interactions. According to Gumperz (1982), contextualization cues are any linguistic feature that contributes to signaling understood knowledge and presupposition in a given context. Speakers then use contextualization cues to facilitate the meaning they want to convey, while listeners make inferences depending on their understanding of the situation, their relationship to the speaker and how each utterance relates to what precedes and follows it. Given these components of social interaction, the contextualization cues implemented in any given social interaction are context specific and depend heavily on the situation, the interlocutors relationship and previous discourse.

4 “The Marine Biologist”

The “The Marine Biologist” episode takes place at the beach and the coffee shop in which the characters of the show frequent. The characters in this scene are George, his girlfriend, Jerry, Kramer, Elaine, and the whale. In this episode, George meets a girl and tries to impress her by lying and claiming to be a marine biologist. While at the beach, they come across a suffering, beached whale. Having established himself as a marine biologist in his girlfriend’s eyes, George must continue in this role finding himself obliged to save the poor animal in order to keep up appearances. Surprisingly, he sets out to save the beached whale and succeeds.

Impersonation is the form of incongruity primarily used in “The Marine Biologist”. Impersonation is when something or someone seems to be something that they are not. The characters persona and the impersonated persona are viewed as opposites, not expected to go together, i.e. incongruous. A marine biologist is adventurous, self-motivated, and educated, while George is unemployed, lives with his parents, is unambitious, and doesn’t know a fish from a mammal. Following Paolos’s (1980) definition of humor these essential ingredients, the incongruity of impersonation and the appropriate emotional climate laid out in the scene, create humor because they both fit into the given context of the story line.

In the clip we analyze, George is recounting the story of the whale rescue to Jerry and Kramer, joined later by Elaine. We examine several layers of incongruity and the linguistic components that are implemented to help create them, and subsequently help create the humor.

4.1 Analysis

We focus on the various contextualization cues implemented to render the intended humorous result. The primary linguistic tool utilized to support and

solidify George's impersonation of a marine biologist is the genre change to a narrative style of discourse. We identify and analyze the contextualization cues implemented to support this genre change.

The clip starts out with 20 seconds without dialogue signaling the segue into George's epic tale. Some of the contextualization cues under analysis here are prosody, pitch change and intonation.

[20 seconds silence]
1 *So I started to walk into the water*

Figure 1.

In line 1, Figure 1, the long pause in dialogue is utilized to build up the anticipation and importance of what is about to be proclaimed; the silence before a story of epic grandeur. When George starts his story, line 1, the timbre of his voice lowers, his voice exhibits very little change in pitch, and the contour of his speech becomes melodic. Working together these contextualization cues enable George's genre change to a narrative style of speech.

The next contextualization cue we analyze that supports George's genre change to a narrative discourse style is the use of marked lexical choices (Gumperz, 1982).

8 *h'I >I don't know if it was **divine intervention** or the **kinship of***
 all living things
17 ***THE SEA WAS ↑ANGRY THAT DAY MY ↓FRIENDS***
38 *I I could barely see from the waves [**crashing down upon me(.)**]*

Figure 2.

In the examples in Figure 2, George's explicit use of words not commonly used in every day discourse in American society, like **divine intervention**, **kinship of all living things** and **crashing down upon me**, signal a change in discourse style allowing the listener to infer that, through the use of these lexical choices, the discourse style has been altered from that of the preceding dialogue. These contextualization cues further support George's genre change to a narrative style of discourse, which in turn supports the incongruity of George's impersonation of a marine biologist.

Another illustrative example of the contextualization cues utilized to support George's role as an impersonator is footing change, a process through which a speaker outwardly expresses an altered identity or altered relationship with the listener (Goffman, 1981). George alters his relation to the listeners in the following example, Figure 3:

9 *things< but I tell you Jerry AT THAT MOMENT (1.0)*
 10 *I was a ↓marine biologist [(2.0)]*

Figure 3.

In his moment of heroism, George is not merely playing the role, but becomes fully convinced of himself in that role by explicitly stating, line 10, his change in relationship to the listener, which is both the audience and Jerry.

Finally, there is an additional layer of incongruity that encompasses the whole show, and ultimately sets up the entire scene. George is a failure in so many regards; evidenced by him being unemployed and living with his parents, but here, in this moment, he is a success. He succeeds in saving the mammal's life; unexpected, but a fitting result given the layout of the show. It is this incongruity between failure and success, George's personality, and his successful resolution to the situation that allows George to employ all of these linguistic components in a convincing way.

4.2 Conclusion

Our analysis pinpoints several of the linguistic elements which enable George to convincingly impersonate a marine biologist creating the humor of the scene. Through our analysis of "The Marine Biologist", the incongruity impersonation is made apparent as well as the linguistic tools, used by the speaker to signal meaning and how contextualization cues are interpreted by the listener, in order to come to an understanding of the intended meaning of the utterances given the surrounding discourse and context of the scene. From a change in genre, to his marked lexical choices, and to the over-arching incongruous concept of George as a failure in all aspects of life contrasting with his unexpected success as a marine biologist, the contextualization cues are tools that are used in this scene serve as effective linguistic tools highlighting and enhancing the incongruities put in place through context and set up.

5 "The Red Dot"

The setting for this scene is George's workplace, and the characters involved are George, his boss, and the office cleaning lady. The scene takes place in the boss's office, where George is confronted about alleged inappropriate conduct: having sex with the office cleaning lady on his desk in his office.

The types of incongruities we focus on in this episode are moral shortcomings and ignorance. The act of engaging in sexual intercourse in an office workplace is an understood violation of American moral codes of conduct,

as proofed by the public's reaction to the "Zipper Gate" scandal: alleged 'sexual relations' between acting President Bill Clinton and intern Monica Lewinsky. The second incongruity, ignorance, is the violation of some understood knowledge. There are a variety of contextualization cues used in this scene as George tries to defend himself against the accusation; these contextualization cues work together making apparent the incongruities in the given context of the scene in order to create humor.

5.1 Analysis

The incongruity ignorance can be seen in George's reaction to his boss's question, *Is that correct?*, referring to whether or not the accusation was valid, Figure 4. George responds by saying *Was that wrong?*. This is incongruous for a few reasons. First, George answers a question with a question: a dis-preferred response to an adjacency pair (Goffman, 1981; Gumperz, 1982) violating our expectations of discourse norms. Second, he lies, not about his behavior, instead about his lack of knowledge of the inappropriateness of sex in the workplace. This is evidenced from the rising pitch throughout the utterance, an indication of lying (Vrij, 2000).

6	Boss	<i>Is that cor[↑rect [(3.5)]</i>
7	Audience	<i>[laughing] ((increases with length of pause))</i>
8	George	<i>((constricted voice))↑Who said ↑that (.)</i>
9	Boss	<i>↑She ↓did (2.5) ((silent pause))</i>
10	George	<i>((↑entire phrase)) <↑was ↑that <u>wron:g</u>? [(2.0)</i>

Figure 4.

In English, prototypical questions can be indicated with rising pitch at the end of an utterance (Gumperz, 1982), but in this instance, the entirety of line 10, is delivered at an elevated pitch, with the tone and timbre of George's voice being tight and constricted. There is also extra emphasis and length given to the word *wrong*, which we analyze to be George effort to point out that it was the (un)acceptability of the action that he was ignorant about.

There are several contextualization cues employed that contradict George's lack of ignorance of the violation of social code describes above in American culture. The use contextualization cues in order to create distance between George and the alleged action he committed, is the main thread of George's defense. George uses pronominalization, the process by which a noun is referred to as a pronoun creating distance between the speaker and the entity; footing change, described in section 4.1; and prosodic contour and intonation.

Pronominalization is used as a way of establishing distance between

George and the act of sexual intercourse. While George's boss explicitly uses the words *sexual intercourse*, Figure 5, line 3, George instead references his behavior four times with the pronoun *that*, lines 10, 12, 17, and 22. We analyze *that* to signal three separate meanings. The distinction can be seen between the *that* functioning as a complementizer, line 2, and the *that* which co-references *sexual intercourse*, line 17, where the latter is more truncated than the former. Shortening of word length, as well as the pronominalization, serve as mechanisms to draw attention away from the actor-action relationship. In line 22, George is making his argument that if everyone is doing *that*, i.e. sexual intercourse, then why can't he. Here, *that* is not truncated but instead given emphasis by the use of rising pitch, as George tries to make his case that sex in the workplace is widely held to be socially appropriate. This signaling of *that* being acceptable or not is realized through the shortening of the *that* in line 17, interpreted as unacceptable, in contrast with the emphasized *that* in line 22, George's effort to signal that *that* is acceptable.

Another case of pronominalization is seen in line 16, Figure 9. George's reference to *anyone* or *anything* further helps him establish distance with having had sexual intercourse in his office, by utilizing a nameless third party entity, *anyone*, indicating the person who failed to inform him about *anything*, the rule against having sexual intercourse in the office.

2 *it's come to my <at[tention> that you and the cleaning*
 ↓*woman(.*)
 3 *have engaged in <sexual intercourse> (.)*
 10 *((↑entire phrase)) <↑was ↑that wron:g>? [(2.0)]*
 12 *((↑entire phrase)) <↑should I not have done that>? [(.)]*
 16 *because if< ↑anyone> had said <anything> to me at ↓all*
 17 *when I first started [↓here= <that that': sort of thing*
 22 *[I tell ya](.) >people do ↑that ↑all: the time< [(2.5)]*

Figure 5.

Via footing change, the incongruity of ignorance is manifested through George's identity alteration to that of a person ignorant of social and moral norms, steering his boss's attention in the direction of his feigned lack of knowledge of social norms. George overtly changes his footing by claiming ignorance, Figure 6, line 15.

15 *>I gotta plead ignor[↓ance on this thing =*

Figure 6.

7 Further Research

In further research, we would like to address the discussion of whether or not the language itself is what is humorous or is the language acting as venue for humor to be expressed by.

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Appendix

Jefferson's (2004) transcription glossary with incorporated symbols for the discourse alterations: genre change, footing change, exaggeration, and metaphor.

Glossary of Transcript Symbols

(.)	pause
(0.0)	seconds of a pause
[laughing]	laughing
CAPS	loudness
↑	upward intonation
↓	downward intonation
=	no pause between utterances

:	elongation
:	shortened
(())	transcribers notes
-	really long
> <	faster utterance
< >	slower utterance
_____	stress/emphasis