

Violations of Grice's conversational conventions as humour in Irish and American television comedies

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Abstract

Scripts of two popular television shows, the American show 'The Simpsons' and the Irish show 'Father Ted', were assessed in the context of Grice's (1975) conventions of conversational coherence. Episodes with similar subject matter were compared. Grice's conventions are appropriate parameters for comparison given that much humour is based on conversational misunderstandings. Chi-squared tests revealed significant differences between the two shows in violations of the conventions of 'Manner' and 'Relation', but no differences in violations categorized as 'Quality' or 'Other'. Specifically, the Irish show contained more violations of the convention of Quality than did the American show, whereas the opposite was true with regard to the convention of Manner. Implications of such analyses of contrived humour for the understanding of language comprehension are discussed.

Introduction

The comprehension of spoken language depends as much on the pragmatics of social interactions as on the phonetics of human speech sounds. As well as being able to isolate speech from background noise, the human listener must also be able to interpret words that are pronounced incorrectly or masked by coughs or lisps; identify sarcasm, metaphors, and idioms without taking them literally; and record the true meanings of unintentionally ambiguous sentences. It would appear that speech hearers possess an ability to preempt the intended message of a speaker, almost before the sentence has been fully enunciated. It is this 'top-down processing' (e.g. Warren and Warren 1970) that has made it so difficult to replicate human speech comprehension using computers (Valentine 1992).

Successful top-down processing depends on a set of shared assumptions between speaker and listener. Knowing that the speaker

is operating within certain acknowledged parameters prevents the listener from having to parse each heard sentence word-by-word before a meaning can be extracted. To have to do so would greatly complicate the understanding of such simple requests as 'I was wondering if you would be able to drive me to the airport in a few minutes'. The rules for the comprehension of such sentences have become known as CONVERSATIONAL CONVENTIONS, the most accepted delineation of which is the so-called 'Co-operative Principle', first described by the American philosopher and linguist H. Paul Grice (1975).

Grice isolated four such conversational conventions. The first was the convention of 'Quantity': speakers should provide no less and no more than the amount of information expected in a given sentence. The second convention is that of 'Quality': speakers should not say things they know to be untrue. The third convention is 'Relation': what speakers say should be accurately related to the overall discourse that is taking place. The final convention is known as 'Manner': speakers should not use unnecessarily complicated or obscure phrases. Conventions can sometimes be violated intentionally such as when the speaker is trying to be evasive (Carroll 1994), sarcastic (Pinker 1994), or polite (Argyle 1994). As such, the accidental violation of conversational conventions can sometimes lead to embarrassment as well as to confusion (Argyle 1994).

Another motive for intentionally violating conversational conventions is humour. Miscomprehension of speech is one of the longest acknowledged sources of humour (Sacks 1971); and puns are among the earliest types of semantic humour appreciated by children (Shultz 1974, Van Kleeck 1982). Joke punchlines routinely involve a well-known phrase that is deliberately placed out of context (and so — technically — is susceptible to miscomprehension) or some other type of verbal ambiguity. The potential for miscomprehension in humorous stories is heightened by the fact that most jokes are plainly pieces of fiction, and so require a suspension of critical analysis on the part of the listener (Sacks 1971).

Of course, these pragmatic conventions imply a distinct possibility of cultural variations. Although hypotheses that languages reflect cross-cultural differences in patterns of thought and perception (e.g. Whorf 1956) have been rigorously challenged by a number of authors (e.g. Martin 1986, Pullum 1991, Pinker 1994), it is hard to deny that culture exerts an enormous influence on at least the superficial elements of spoken language. The study of gender

differences in verbal communication styles (e.g. Tannen 1986, 1990, 1994) demonstrates that the separate developmental environments and interpersonal relationships of males and females are sufficient to lead to observable differences in language usage. It would appear tempting to suggest, therefore, that the same is true of the language usage of populations that develop in different societies. Furthermore, although the Whorfian hypotheses tended to concentrate on lexical and grammatical differences across cultures, the chances of cross-cultural differences in the pragmatics of language comprehension seem equally (if not more) likely.

For the purposes of demonstration, the present study sought to investigate possible differences in the patterns of violation of conversational conventions in two popular television comedy shows. The two shows selected for comparison were the Irish show 'Father Ted' and the American show 'The Simpsons'. The choice of shows was influenced by the fact that both reached mass audiences in their respective markets. This mass appeal suggests that both shows are widely understood by ordinary people and so represent reasonable standards of lexical and linguistic complexity, thereby contributing to the construct validity of systematic comparisons. It is probably also true to say that the shows' popularity is itself a source of interest for many commentators, given the often satirical nature of the scripts. The two shows would appear to arouse a certain social consciousness in the minds of their audiences. Finally, consideration was given to the potential for interest in the findings of the present study, given the popular standing of the two shows. It was felt that the study would be a useful example for, say, students of cognitive psychology, and that the choice of popular shows would contribute to its utility in this regard.

Procedurally, it was hoped that the methodology employed would prove fruitful in the examination of culture differences, and so would be applicable to future, more exhaustive, research in this area. The development of the methodology was based on a number of assumptions and expectations. First, it was expected that much of the humour in these shows would indeed be classifiable in terms of Grice's conventions. Second, it was assumed that the humour content of the shows would be intentionally placed there by the writers, and that, given the commercial successes of the shows in their countries of origin, their humour content would indeed be perceived as humorous by most people. Third, it was assumed that any observable differences would to some extent reflect differences

in culture, either in the usage of language by the writers or in the language usage patterns of the shows' target audiences. Finally, it was assumed that any observable similarities between the two shows would be somewhat influenced by universals of language usage and comprehension, as well as by the undoubted intention of the creators to generate shows that would be exportable to a maximum international market.

Method

Sampling

Videotapes of one episode of each show were examined and transcripts prepared. Production details of the two episodes are given in Table 1 below. Both shows dealt indirectly with the topic of xenophobia. In 'Father Ted', the lead character is accused of offending the local Chinese community and struggles to make amends by demonstrating his appreciation of the culture of that group. In 'The Simpsons', the lead character is accused of offending Australia by swindling one of its citizens and, while visiting Australia in order to deliver a public apology, contrives to further offend the culture and traditions of that country. It was hoped that the thematic similarities of the two episodes would lend validity to their comparison, by placing similar constraints on the writers as to what constituted acceptable subject matter for ridicule. For example, although both episodes dealt broadly with xenophobia, both lead characters were unaware of the nature of their misdemeanours and neither episode featured overt racism.

Each transcript was analysed clause by clause, and violations of Grice's conventions were counted and categorized. Virtually all violations that were included by the scriptwriters were included as points of humour. Although most of the shows' humour content was derived from such violations, two particular types of humour could not be categorized in this way. Obviously, visual humour did not fulfil the requirements of categorization, as it did not appear verbally in the scripts. Neither did humour that relied on background knowledge for its effect. Such humour included references to public figures and other public icons, references to previous episodes, or parodies. As it turned out, very few instances of such extrinsic humour were contained in the two scripts and so, by and large, it was

possible to attempt categorization of over 90% of the shows' verbal humour content in terms of violations of conversational conventions.

Table 1: Production details of the two episodes chosen for analysis

Father Ted		The Simpsons	
<i>Episode Title</i>	'Are you right there Father Ted'	<i>Episode Title (Production Number)</i>	'Bart vs. Australia' (2F13)
<i>Original airing</i>	UK, 15 May 1998	<i>Original airing</i>	USA, 19 February 1995
<i>Writers</i>	Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews	<i>Writers</i>	Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein
<i>Producer</i>	Lissa Evans	<i>Director</i>	Wes Archer
<i>Location Director</i>	Graham Linehan	<i>Copyright details</i>	Matt Groening Productions, 1995, 1997
<i>Studio Director</i>	Andy de Emmony		
<i>Copyright details</i>	Channel Four Television (Hat Trick Production), 1998		

Categorization

The categorization of the scripts by conversational convention was performed by the researcher. In most cases, only full sentences were categorized, but in some cases it was possible to categorize separate clauses. Examples of each category from both episodes follow.

Quality. The category of Quality included instances in which a character stated something that they knew was untrue. Such situations mainly arose when characters used sarcasm or sought to mislead one another. In this example from 'Father Ted', the second line constitutes such a violation:

Nazi Priest: You know, some people when they see it, they're not too sure. But you seem genuinely interested.

Ted: [nervously] Oh, I am genuinely interested.

In the following example from 'The Simpsons', the apology in the third line is an obvious violation of the convention of Quality (as is revealed in the fifth line):

Bart: I can handle that! I'm an expert at phoney apologies!

Marge: Bart!

Bart: [sheepishly] I'm sorry...

Marge: That's better.

Bart: [to self] Heh, heh, heh.

Relation. The category Relation included situations in which a statement was inaccurately related to the discourse that had been taking place. Deliberately evasive responses, non sequiturs, and responses that revealed a misinterpretation or misapprehension of the previous statement all constituted violations of this convention. For example, in this example from 'The Simpsons', the second line is a violation of the convention of Relation, as the speaker misses the point of the preceding statement:

Boy: It was an emergency call from the International Drainage Commission in Springfield.

Father: Oh my god! There's nothing wrong with the bidet, is there?

Note that whereas the convention of Quality relies on the speaker's *knowingly* giving flawed information, the convention of 'Relation' relies on a speaker's *honest possession* of flawed information.

Manner. Violations of the convention of Manner include statements that utilized unusual or cumbersome structures. In this way, the following line from 'Father Ted' represented a clear example of such a violation:

Dougal: Actually, that's true. I **thought** my Uncle Tommy was wearing black socks. But when I looked at them closely, they were

just very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very dark blue!

Quantity. The category Quantity was by far the broadest of the four and so categorizations based on this convention were sometimes quite arbitrary. Included in the category of Quantity were statements in which a character provided either too much or too little information to be understood. Generally, characters violating this convention were either demonstrating naïveté, under a false impression, or futilely speaking to someone who was uninformed about a particular subject. In other cases, characters would speak in great detail about something that did not warrant such attention. Thus, any instance where a speaker was under- or over-informed in some way constituted a violation of Quantity. An example from 'The Simpsons' follows:

Lisa: Bart, water will only go the other way in the Southern Hemisphere.

Bart: What the hell is the 'Southern Hemisphere'?

In this extract, the first line was not categorized as it was not in itself a line of humour. The second line is a violation of the convention of Quantity in that it demonstrates a misunderstanding that is based on an imbalance of information between the two speakers.

Evaluation and re-evaluation of categories

During the categorization procedure, it became obvious that the convention of Quantity was too broad for consistently satisfactory categorizations to be made. As such, the category was renamed 'Other' for the purposes of comparative analyses. By and large, the categorizations relating to the remaining three conventions were straightforward. It must be presumed that the researcher's subjectivity was influential however. Nonetheless, the analysis was intended to be exploratory rather than definitive and, in any case, it is not clear that alternative methods of categorization would have been significantly superior.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics are given in Table 2. It can be seen that the two shows were quite similar in a number of respects. The similarity of duration obviously reflects the restrictions of commercial television timetabling. However, the similarity of the two shows in terms of script lines and violations may not have been quite as predictable. The extent of these similarities can be illustrated by submitting the relevant data to binomial tests. For example, given an aggregate number of script lines of 373, the observed distribution between the two shows (183 for 'The Simpsons'; 190 for 'Father Ted') is well within the levels that would be expected by chance ($z = 0.31$; $P = 0.7566$). Similarly, given an aggregate number of violations of 241, the observed distribution (116 to 125) is similarly within chance levels ($z = 0.52$; $P = 0.603$).

Table 2: Some descriptive statistics relating to the two shows

	Father Ted	The Simpsons
Length of episode	23 min 12 sec	19 min 32 sec
Scenes	17	21
Script lines	190	183
Scripted characters	10	18
Script lines per character	12.50	6.44
Violations of conversational conventions	125	116

Differences in the violation of conversational conventions

The statistics in Table 3 below show the frequencies of violations of conversational conventions. The row totals reveal that the two episodes were remarkably similar in terms of the number of violations that were included ($n = 116$ in 'The Simpsons'; $n = 125$ in 'Father Ted').

The distribution of violations by category among the two episodes was examined by applying a chi-squared goodness-of-fit test to the four column totals. This revealed that the distribution of violations by category was significantly different from that which

could be expected by chance ($X^2 = 17.24$; d.f. = 3; $P < 0.0001$). Examination of the relevant standardized residuals showed that the categories of Quality and Other accounted for the significance of chi-squared, whereas the categories of Relation and Manner had no such impact (see Table 4).

Table 3: Frequency of violations of Grice's (1975) conventions of conversational coherence as humour in 'Father Ted' and 'The Simpsons'

Show	Category of conversational convention				Totals
	Quality	Relation	Manner	Other	
Father Ted	18	20	42	36	116
The Simpsons	16	41	27	41	125
Totals	34	61	69	77	241

Table 4: Goodness-of-fit test statistics relating to analysis of violations of conversational conventions aggregated across the two shows

	Category of conversational convention			
	Quality	Relation	Manner	Other
Column totals (O)	34	61	69	77
Expected Frequencies (E) $\Rightarrow X^2 = 17.24$; d.f. = 3	60.25	60.25	60.25	60.25
Totals	3.38*	0.10	0.15	2.16
* Standardized residuals ≥ 1.50 indicate major contributors to the significance of chi-squared.				

Table 5 shows the relevant chi-squared statistics for the two shows. It can be seen that the frequency of violations of conversational conventions by category across the two shows deviates from chance to a statistically significant extent ($X^2 = 10.67$; d.f. = 3; $0.01 < P < 0.02$). The standardized residuals reveal that the major contributors to the statistical significance of chi-squared are the frequencies of violations of the category Relation in the case of both shows, and of the category Manner in the case of 'The Simpsons'. It can also be seen that the standardized residual for the category Manner in the case of 'Father Ted' is very close to the 1.50 threshold and, in any case, well above the remaining residuals. This would

suggest that this cell-frequency is also a major contributor to the significance of chi-squared.

Table 5: Statistics relating to chi-squared test for two independent samples applied to the frequency of violations of conversational conventions by category, across the two shows

Show		Category of conversational convention				
		Qual	Rel	Man	Oth	
Father Ted	O	16	41	27	41	⇒ $X^2 = 10.67$ d.f. = 3; 0.01 < P < 0.02
	E	17.6	31.6	35.8	39.9	
	R	0.38	1.67*	1.47	0.17	
The Simpsons	O	18	20	42	36	
	E	16.4	29.4	33.2	37.1	
	R	0.40	1.73*	1.53*	0.18	

O = column totals (observed frequencies); E = expected frequencies; R = standardized residuals
* Indicative of major contributors to the significance of chi-squared.

Thus, it can be concluded that the two shows differ significantly in the frequency of violations of the conventions of Relation and Manner, but do not differ significantly in the frequency of violations of the other two conventions.

Discussion

The findings of the present study can be summarized as follows:

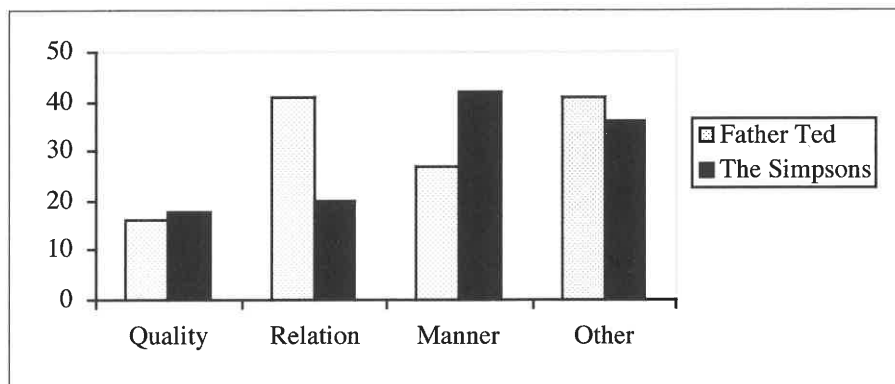
1. The two shows differed substantially in the number of violations of the convention of Relation, with the Irish show 'Father Ted' containing more than twice the number of such violations than the American show 'The Simpsons' (0.01 < P < 0.02; see Figure 1 below and Table 5 above)
2. The two shows also differed substantially in the number of violations of the convention of Manner, with the American show containing nearly twice as many such violations as the Irish show (0.01 < P < 0.02; see Figure 1 and Table 5)

3. The patterns of Relation and Manner violations in the two shows were virtually mirror-images of each other, given that no statistically significant difference between the two categories was discernible when the two shows were aggregated (see Table 3)

4. Violations based on the convention of Quality were approximately evenly distributed across the two shows (see Table 3), and were significantly less prevalent than violations in the other three categories ($P < 0.001$; see Table 3)

5. Violations categorized as 'Other' were also evenly distributed (see Table 3), and were significantly more prevalent than violations in the other three categories ($P < 0.001$; see Table 3).

Figure 1: Frequency of Grice's (1975) conventions of conversational coherence as humour in 'Father Ted' and 'The Simpsons'. Comparative differences in Relation and Manner are significant



These findings demonstrate both similarities and dissimilarities between the employment of conversational conventions by scriptwriters in Ireland and in the United States. These parameters possibly reflect those of the target audiences of the two shows (namely, the communities of English-language speakers in Ireland and the United States). Two points should be borne in mind. First of all, apparent differences between cultures may be associated with the environmental aspects of languages and thus may reflect the 'nurture' side of the nature-nurture debate. Secondly, apparent similarities between cultures may be reflective of underlying linguistic

or pragmatic universals (and thus reflective of the 'nature' argument), but of course may also simply reflect internationally recognized (and extensively market-researched) trends and fashions that are very much part of the environmental influences on language usage (cf. Cameron 1995). In this context, tentative conclusions can be drawn from this study as to the usage of conversational conventions in the two countries.

It would appear that the convention of Quality is of similar importance to both cultures. When producing television comedy shows, the writers of 'The Simpsons' and those of 'Father Ted' did not differ in the extent to which they used this convention in their attempts to create humour. This is not so much a surprise given that this convention can be associated with morality (Green 1989). Violations of this convention are widely accepted to be immoral acts, whereas violations of the other three conventions are at worst interpreted as indicating rudeness or impoliteness. It is probable that of the four available conversational conventions, the convention of Quality was perceived to be the least compatible with humour. This is consistent with the fact that this convention was the least violated in both shows ($P < 0.001$).

The convention of Relation appeared to be particularly favoured by the writers of the Irish comedy, 'Father Ted'. In fact, there were over twice as many violations of this convention in the Irish show than in the American one ($0.01 < P < 0.02$; see Figure 1). Such a vivid difference may well be idiosyncratic. However, it may also be due to a culture difference in the treatment and use of misinformation. It can be postulated that the ridicule of characters who misunderstand situations is more acceptable — or at least more humorous — to Irish audiences than to American ones. The precise sociocultural reasons for this are matters for speculation. Nonetheless, this finding is particularly intriguing in the context of some theories of conversational coherence that suggest Relation to be the only true conversational convention (e.g. Sperber and Wilson 1986). Such zealous formulations of 'Relevance Theory' are often criticized for ignoring the cultural and social differences in speakers' motivations (e.g. Talbot 1987). The findings of the present study lend support to such criticisms.

The convention of Manner provided a striking mirror image of the convention of Relation. In this case, there were nearly twice as many violations of this convention in the American show than in the Irish one ($0.01 < P < 0.02$; see Figure 1), with no significant

differences in the overall number of violations of each category across the two shows ($P > 0.05$; see Table 3). Once again, this variation may be idiosyncratic. However, it is possible that American audiences find lapses in perspicuity more humorous than do their Irish counterparts. Whether or not this demonstrates a difference in language competency on either side of the Atlantic can be debated, but it would appear possible that Irish audiences simply find cumbersome constructions less amusing. It is sometimes remarked that Americans prefer wordplay when it is straightforward (for example, crossword puzzles based only on definitional clues), whereas British readers prefer puns, anagrams, palindromes, and the like (e.g. Bryson 1990). Of course, whether this British taste can be generalized to the Irish, and whether this in turn can be seen as indicative of a greater tolerance for unclarity, is highly speculative. (In any event, it should be borne in mind that 'The Simpsons' enjoys a certain amount of success with Irish audiences as well as with American ones, and so it would be wrong to overstate the dissimilarities between the show's audiences.)

The convention of Quantity appears to be difficult to define specifically, and so was abandoned for the purpose of the present study. However, it is noteworthy that of the four conventions, the convention of Quantity is often alleged to possess an ethnocentric bias in favour of Western Europeans and North Americans (Mey 1993). It is often remarked that some other cultures appear to value proficiency rather than parsimony in language (Mey 1993). In particular some linguists have long argued that the use of conversational implicatures can often overrule the convention of providing no more and no less information than is necessary (e.g. Keenan 1976). It may be this unclarity that contributed to the difficulty in categorizing Quantity violations in the present analysis.

Two improvements in methodology are suggested for future studies of this type. First, it would be preferable to analyse a larger sample of scripts than was assessed in the present study. Although the use of single specimen episodes allowed for the control of extraneous factors by choosing shows with similar subject matter, it will have increased the probability of idiosyncratic differences. Second, the use of multiple raters would reduce the possibility of self-fulfilling prophecies or other such biases in the script-categorization procedure. This element of control would be greater enhanced by the use of blind or double-blind procedures. Like many other studies of this type, the present analysis made use of a single

rater on the grounds of costs and convenience. Subject matter of future studies could incorporate other (less widely accepted) theories of conversational coherence (e.g. Horn 1984, Sperber and Wilson 1986). Attention could also be paid to the use of hedges and other such devices that reveal the speaker's awareness of (and, to an extent, serve to disable) certain conversational conventions.

In general, the continuing study of both conversational coherence and humour can make considerable contributions to our understanding of the language process. The comprehension of humour poses interesting problems for general theories of language comprehension. Whether such comprehension operates in a predominantly bottom-up or top-down way will ultimately be established through the study of such apparent contradictions. How it is that obviously false utterances can be recognized as jokes rather than lies bears great relevance to the acquisition of language and the ways in which languages should be taught. As argued by Carroll (1994), such figurative uses of language are universal and ubiquitous and so the field 'cannot be dismissed as a peripheral concern' (p. 141).

The separation of 'what can be taught' from 'what comes naturally' is also of great importance to the study of language, and is most easily achieved through the examination of cross-cultural differences and international pragmatic 'accents' (Yule 1996). If speakers of one language live on two different continents but prove to be separated by certain language usages, then it must be concluded that those aspects of the language are the products of culture rather than something intrinsically human. (Nonetheless, these aspects are useful to consider in the context of cross-cultural communication.) However, if we find individuals from substantially different cultural backgrounds who demonstrate similar subtleties in the appreciation of humorous, figurative, and ambiguous language, then it would appear ever more likely that common innate factors underpin the miracle of that most human of abilities — the ability to comprehend the spoken word.

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