

## HUMOUR AS A MEANS OF AFFILIATION WITH VIEWERS: A RELEVANCE-THEORETIC APPROACH<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The primary objective of the present paper is to explicate on how humour can be used as a solidarity-enhancing strategy that releases positive emotions on the part of the viewers in sitcom discourse. The data is derived from the American sitcom *Modern Family* (2009-2020). This piece of research corroborates and elaborates on the assumption that humour is a powerful device, whose role cannot be reduced to solely providing entertainment. One can fulfil a number of social and/ or psychological functions by means of humour, the very presence of which can reduce the negative import of message that otherwise would be regarded as hostile. The qualitative analysis profits from employing one of the leading pragmatic approaches to communication, known as Relevance Theory, which was formulated and developed by Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson. First, I will demonstrate the way in which the cognitive-pragmatic framework can be used to successfully describe the recipient's derivation of humorous and non-humorous effects. Second, I will describe various ways in which the production crew (or fictional characters) can affiliate with the viewers of the sitcom.

**Keywords:** humour, relevance theory, sitcom discourse, solidarity, viewers

### HUMOR JAKO ŚRODEK AFILIACJI Z WIDZAMI: PODEJŚCIE W ŚWIETLE TEORI RELEWANCJI

**Abstrakt:** Głównym celem artykułu jest opisanie humoru jako strategii, która ma na celu zwiększenie poczucia solidarności, które prowadzi do powstania pozytywnych emocji u widza dyskursu serialu komediowego. Dane zostały zaczerpnięte z amerykańskiego serialu *Współczesna Rodzina* (2009-2020). Badanie potwierdza oraz rozwija założenie, iż humor jest ważnym środkiem wyrazu, którego rola w konwersacji nie może być zredukowana jako służąca jedynie rozbawieniu. Rozmówca może wypełnić wiele socjologicznych i/ lub psychologicznych funkcji konwersacyjnych przy pomocy humoru, który obniża negatywny wydzźwięk wypowiedzi. Jakościowa analiza zyskuje dzięki użyciu jednej z wiodących pragmatycznych teorii komunikacji, znanej jako Teoria Relewanacji, która została zaproponowana i rozwijana przez Dana Sperbera i Deirdre Wilson. Po pierwsze, pokażę sposób, w jaki można wykorzystać

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<sup>1</sup> The paper presents some of the results from my PhD dissertation (Wieczorek 2021).

kognitywno-pragmatyczny model do wyjaśnienia jak odbiorca może uzyskać humorystyczne i niehumorystyczne efekty. Po drugie, opiszę różne sposoby, dzięki którym ekipa produkcyjna (lub fikcyjni bohaterowie) mogą zwiększyć poczucie solidarności z widzami serialu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** humor, teoria relewancji, dyskurs serialu komediowego, solidarność, widzowie

## 1. Introduction

The body literature on humour research is, without a doubt, abundant. The first camp can constitute writings that are solely devoted to the study of this phenomenon, be it its comprehension, categorisations of humorous manifestations (and some overlaps between forms) or conceptualisations of various genres. The other camp encompasses writings in which scientists delve into the functions, i.e. cases where humour can be used as a communicative strategy to attain various goals. In other words, the former studies humorous effects created by humour, whilst the latter investigates other effects generated by means of humour. The main thrust of this research subsumes under the latter camp since the production crew's any attempt at humour in order to affiliate and corroborate the common ground with the recipients will be analysed. Nevertheless, the path of comprehension followed by the televisual recipients while accessing to a humorous interpretation will be presented as it is possible that some viewers watch entertainment as a source of amusement, while others highly value additional pieces of information that humorous message may potentially convey.

Furthermore, the idea that humorous discourse can serve the meaning that transcends the viewer's sheer enjoyment can be detected in many humour-oriented contributions. While some researchers acknowledge this fact only tacitly and make passing remarks (for instance, McGhee 1979, Cook 1982 in Mills 2005, Savorelli 2010), others refer to the ambivalent nature of humour explicitly and make it a centre of their scholarly investigations. The latter believe that humour is a communicative tool that can convey a number of various functions and communicate different propositional meanings (Ziv 1984, Mulkay 1988, Palmer 1994, Holmes 2000, 2006; Hay 2000, Meyer 2000, Holmes and Marra 2002a, 2002b; Martin 2007, Kuipers 2008, Piskorska 2016, 2021; McKeown 2017, Schnurr and Plester 2017). Hay (2001: 72), for example, asserts that humorous manifestations "have a serious component". In a similar vein, Mulkay (1988: 71) reckons that "humour can have serious consequences, in that recipients can attribute to it serious motives, infer from it serious meanings and react to it in a serious manner".

Within functional studies, there are valuable insights into how specific humorous manifestations, such as puns, can serve varied communicative goals in conversations (Norrick 1993, 2003; Oring 2003). In general terms, humour studies is a serious matter through and through, as Savorelli (2010) rightly notes that regarding humorous discourse in terms of its amusement is reductive and erroneous.

Having sketched the background to my study, i.e. effects/ propositional meanings communicated by dint of humour, I would like to explicate the humorous conversations analysed in this piece of research. Communication in sitcom discourse relies on two communicative levels, viz. the *inter-character's/character* and the *recipient's* (Dynel 2011<sup>2</sup>), both of which constitute the participation framework. The (inter-)character's level covers interactions among fictional characters, which are then received and processed by telecinematic recipients on the recipient's level. As a result, Dynel (2011) contends that the structure of fictional conversations is based upon two layers: the fictional layer as well as the collective sender's layer. The collective sender is a group of scriptwriters, directors and producers, etc., all of whom take part in the creation of meaning that is constructed by the audience.

My analysis concerns the humour that occurs the recipient's level, i.e. the propositional meanings gleaned by the audience, which are enclosed within affiliative functions. Canestrari (2010) dubs humour that is intended and directed only at the spectator *off-stage humour*, which is put in opposition to the cases of *on-stage humour* that is characterised by containing metacommunicative cues. It should be highlighted at the outset that the derivation of some or all propositional meanings is largely individualistic and as such it depends upon not only one's eagerness to spend more mental effort in exchange for cognitive rewards (effects) but also psychological state, cognitive predispositions or current mood. This leeway in how a humorous message is to be understood is preserved by a relevance-theoretic notion of weak implicatures (Section 2).

Granted that it is the viewer's perspective that is in the centre of attention here, the very conceptualisation of the recipient seems to be valid. There is no unequivocal stance concerning how various scientists view the position of a viewer with respect to mass mediated discourse. First, Bell (1984) believes that possible audience roles include addressee (known, ratified, addressed), auditor (knows, ratified, unaddressed), overhearer (known, unrated, unaddressed) and eavesdropper (unknown, unrated, unaddressed) and those fall along a continuum where the addressee is the closest to the speaker. Second, Clark and Carlson (1992) state that

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<sup>2</sup> Here I present Dynel's nomenclature, nevertheless it must be stressed that many scientists underlined the significance of bi-partite division of fictional communication, be it in films or situation comedies (for example, Yus 1998, Brock 2011, Messerli 2017).

there are two roles: either of an addressee or overhearer. Third, Bubel (2008) stipulates that a television recipient is an overhearer (an implicit spectator), who is granted the same involvement in discourse as an overhearer in real life. Fourth, Dynel (2011) reckons that a viewer is a recipient or metarecipient, the latter being observant for details, such as the methods used by the production crew to amuse the audience. In my opinion, there is a way to reconcile those competing views, where the viewer's role is defined and redefined with respect to the collective sender's intention. On this approach, the recipient is assumed a dynamic role, where conversations are tailored in such a way so that s/he can become an overhearer, the presence of whose fictional characters are not aware of, or s/he can feel to be like other fictional characters since s/he is directly addressed.

The data is collected from the American situation comedy (sitcom) *Modern Family* (2009-2020). The show depicts the family life of the Pritchett-Dunphy-Tucker clan living in a suburb of Los Angeles. Feuer (2001: 69) notes that “the sitcom seems to require the presence of a quasi-familial structure in order to satisfy the needs of the viewer”. It may partly answer the question why family sitcoms enjoy immense popularity, despite the fact that the format is not new. More importantly, it can also offer a plausible explanation as to why the sitcom serves a variety of solidarity-based functions on the recipient's part.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 I wish to describe a relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure in order to show how the cognitive-pragmatic framework is used to describe humorous and non-humorous effects. Section 3 contains a summary of the previous literature on the interrelations between the use of humour and the feeling of solidarity. In other words, it will be shown that humour is a means of affiliation, helping to form an in-group. Section 4 will present a qualitative analysis of one extract taken from *Modern Family* to show a plethora of solidarity-based functions that can be a primary reason why the viewers are keen on following good and bad moments in the lives of the Pritchett-Dunphy-Tucker clan. The last section offers conclusions.

## **2. An RT's comprehension procedure and sitcom discourse**

The bedrock for this study is the assumption that relevance-theoretic pragmatic mechanisms would explain the recipients' processing of the message in the most salient way. Consequently, the relevance of fictional dialogue does not only lie in the recipient's amusement but also in his/ her accessing to effects that foster solidarity. It must be underlined that those two different effects, viz. humorous and non-humorous, are a result of the telecinematic viewer's search for relevance. As a result, s/he may stop the process of comprehension at humorous effect, nevertheless, s/he may proceed and attain other cognitive effects.

In general, Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) is a wide-ranging framework that has been extended in many different directions. As regards the study of humour within an RT model, many researchers agree on the fact that humour, especially in jokes and puns, is an outcome of the recovery of two interpretations. In this way, an RT machinery works in parallel to the incongruity-resolution model provided by Suls (1972), where incongruity that emerges while processing the initial part of a humorous text needs to be resolved at the punchline stage (Yus 2003). I consider that this proposal, to a considerable extent, can be extrapolated to the research into scripted conversations. A dialogue in a scene consists of micro-turns, where the initiation of a humorous intention can be easily noticed and as a result, this would lead to the construction of the first interpretation. Another fact in favour of the similarity between other forms of humour and sitcom is that punchlines in sitcoms do not always occupy the final position, which is the case in longer humorous texts, such as narratives. This phenomenon, in Attardo's (2001) parlance, is referred to as *bathtub placement*<sup>3</sup>.

Returning to RT, Wilson and Sperber (2004) consider that verbal comprehension consists of two phases, i.e. decoding and inference. The role of the recipient's pragmatic inferential processes is to enrich a logical form, being tantamount to an encoded sentence meaning, and thus construct a fully-fledged proposition intended by the speaker. In order for enrichment to be possible, one needs to access to contextual assumptions since a message may contain, for example, ambiguities or referential ambivalences to be eliminated. It needs to be noted that an RT comprehension procedure is mandated by the communicative principle of relevance and the presumption of optimal relevance. The communicative principle of relevance underlines that each and every utterance, which in an RT nomenclature is dubbed an *ostensive stimulus* (any act that grabs our attention), sets up a certain clear expectation of being relevant, i.e. producing a cognitive reward (effect) at lowest mental effort possible (Wilson and Sperber 2004). In addition, the presumption of optimal relevance underpins that an ostensive stimulus is worth the recipient's processing mental as well as it is more relevant than other stimuli in terms of the interactant's preferences and abilities (Wilson and Sperber 2004). The comprehension heuristic guiding the recipient towards the recovery of the speaker's intended meaning is as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> As much as corresponding elements between sitcoms and various manifestations of humour are interesting, this point will not be discussed further. It is only to note that the path of comprehension of sitcoms and humorous types is not so different, and this is why the same linguistic models can be applied.

### **Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure**

- a) Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.
- b) Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned) (Wilson and Sperber 2004: 613).

The hypotheses mentioned in clause (a) of the comprehension procedure, be it ambiguity resolution, reference assignment or implicature, can be exploited for the sake of humorous effects in jokes (Yus 2003). More specifically, the initial part of a humorous text, i.e. the setting, raises in the hearer certain expectations of the way in which the text can develop, which are then invalidated by the subsequent portion of the text (the punchline). This invalidation forces the recipient to find another interpretation that has not been taken into consideration at first but is highly relevant in a given context. This claim is also relevant for sitcom discourse for the reasons discussed above, i.e. the structure of a humorous dialogue in sitcoms is not distinctly different from a joke.

Like most pragmatic frameworks, RT corroborates that verbal communication occurs on an explicit and/ or implicit levels. Those two different levels are elucidated and specified in the comprehension procedure:

### **Subtasks in the overall comprehension process:**

- a) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content (in relevance-theoretic terms, EXPLICATURES) via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution, and other pragmatic enrichment processes.
- b) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual assumptions (IMPLICATED PREMISES).
- c) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual implications (IMPLICATED CONCLUSIONS) (Wilson and Sperber 2004: 613)

What Sperber and Wilson emphasise is the fact that the comprehension is an online process, where the subtasks are not ordered sequentially. On this approach, the hearer is required to retrieve explicit meaning, appropriate contextual information and implicit meaning with regard to his/ her background of expectations that can change together with the progression of conversation/ utterance. In other words, those hypotheses are constructed in parallel.

As regards explicit and implicit meanings, RT maintains that the derivation of explicatures is as equally inferential as implicatures. An explicitly communicated content, or in short explicature, is a proposition that is a combination of the decoding and inference phases. It can become an input to further inferential pro-

cesses. An implicature is a proposition that is not communicated explicitly. It bifurcates into *implicated premises* and *implicated conclusions*. The former are assumptions used to create the context and are derivable either from memory or on the basis of assumption schemas. The latter are formulated on the basis of premises and explicature.

Implicatures are a matter of degree and thus some implicit propositions are strong while others are weak. A strong implicature is the one that is crucial in order to arrive at the speaker's intended interpretation and thus it would match the recipient's expectations towards the relevance of a message. A weak implicature, on the other hand, only helps the hearer to satisfy his/ her expectations of relevance, however it is not crucial since an utterance can communicate a range of possible implicit content (Wilson and Sperber 2004). A case in point of weak communication can be the following situation:

(1) **Context:** Peter and Mary go on holiday to Italy and during their visit in one of the museums, Mary utters a turn to Peter.

MARY: I'm tired. (Wilson and Sperber 2012: 41)

Mary's utterance may lead to the emergence of various weak implicatures in Peter's mind that can include one or some of the following:

(1a) Mary's enjoyment of this visit is diminishing.

(1b) Mary would like to cut short their visit to the museum.

(1c) Mary would like them to go back to their hotel after this visit to the museum, rather than visiting the Duomo, as they had planned. (Wilson and Sperber 2012: 42)

Given the fact that Mary does not give a direct evidence of her intentions, Peter is supposed to adjust the meaning in a given context to properly understand her turn. Nevertheless, those implicatures are derived on Peter's sole responsibility, and as a result Peter needs to infer that Mary is tired to a certain degree that at least one of the implicatures is warranted.

The explanation of humorous and non-humorous effects that the recipient of sitcom is supposed to experience is provided through the lens of the weak implicature view. This concept yields promising results because of its viability to explicate two types of effects, viz. purely humorous and those communicated by means of humour. Second, it also explains freedom in reception, viz. different viewers may access to different implicatures. In order to better grasp the emergence of weakly implicated assumptions in jokes, Jodłowiec (1991, 2008, 2015; Piskorska and Jodłowiec 2018) propounds the notion of cognitive overload that accounts for the mental state in which the punchline in a joke makes manifest or

more manifest a “constellation” of weak implicatures. Those assumptions can rarely become fully-fledged, despite the fact that the recipient can suddenly have access to them.

As posited above, the way in which humorous effects are created in jokes and sitcom discourse is roughly similar and thus the same claims and proposals can be applied. The cognitive overload account is particularly relevant to expound on the fact that humour is a carrier of various propositional meanings. In spite of the fact that the focus of attention here is on solidarity-based functions and thus what kind of propositional meanings those functions entail, below I would like to demonstrate a variety of meanings that a telecinematic recipient can grasp:

(2) **Context:** Alex has problems with her concentration after having suffered from mononucleosis. She fails to solve a crossword.

**Alex:** Ugh. What is wrong with me? I *feel so fuzzy*.

**Haley:** Oh, *stop being so hard on yourself. It's just arm hair*.

**Alex:** [sighs] I can't figure out this crossword puzzle. I...I think mono turned my mind to mush.

On the fictional layer, Alex calls herself *fuzzy* as she cannot guess a crossword puzzle. Haley misunderstands Alex's message as she derives the meaning of *fuzzy* that Alex's skin is covered with hair. Then, Alex explains that it is her concentration that she has problems with.

On the recipient's layer, the humorous effects derive from Haley's having misunderstood Alex's complaint about being fuzzy. The recipient needs to establish the relevance between Alex's complaint of feeling fuzzy and Haley's comment that she should not criticise herself as it is only arm hair. The word *fuzzy*, being a homophone, requires from the viewer the construction of two concepts, each of which is relevant to the intentions of Alex and Haley: FUZZY\* (being confused) and FUZZY\*\* (covered with soft short hair), respectively.

The propositional meanings that the recipient can construct can potentially include the following, nonetheless they are not restricted to (the functions that a humorous turn satisfies are put in brackets):

(2a) It is difficult to get on with a dumb sibling. a sister-sister relationship can sometimes be peaceful, where one complains about being too hairy, while other tries to comfort her (highlighting shared experiences)

(2b) Alex is very smart, Haley is quite dumb (disclosing character-specific information)

(2c) It is sometimes better to comfort a person, not to argue, and hence viewers are advised on how to carry on positive family relationships (advising)

(2d) It is better not to argue with a sibling (avoiding conflict)



- (2e) The third party can be amused with a linguistic play (providing a linguistic play)
- (2f) Mononucleosis may have negative long-term effects upon one's psychological capabilities (conveying a serious message)
- (2g) A humorous remark can help one either to take control of the flow of conversation or influence conversation (discourse management)
- (2h) A sibling can help one to cope with a problem at hand (releasing tension/ coping)

Granted that weakly implicated assumptions can vary from the recipient to the other, the construction of the above propositional meanings is independent of the formulation of a humorous interpretation. In other words, serving the definitional purpose of sitcom dialogues, being amusement, is just a step in order to process a message in the most salient way and this is largely conditioned upon one's needs to spend more mental effort that will be rewarded in terms of cognitive benefits.

### **3. Existing research on humour and affiliation**

There is a wealth of classifications in which researchers categorise various functions of humour. Richly varied though those functionalist studies are, their common denominator is that humour is an effective communicative strategy, the use of which can help attain discrepant goals, such as evoking in-group and out-group feelings. In addition, it seems that an inseparable feature of amusement is positive feelings that humour entails. That is to say, any attempt at humour is a sign that communicators are on the same wavelength. This section is devoted to the description of humour as a strategy that is used to boost solidarity since this is the main purpose of this contribution.

Before summarising some of the existing conceptualisations with a special emphasis on affiliation, let me point to two key differences between the functionalist approaches and my research. First, some researchers describe humorous functions on the basis of naturally occurring conversations or of unknown data, whereas my research concerns scripted communication from the sitcom *Modern Family*. Second, the previous studies concentrated on the speaker-hearer interactions, in which the hearer is the party directly addressed to by the communicator. One of the benefits of those investigations is that the speaker can be certain, to an extent, of the hearer's path of comprehension. In my work, by contrast, I would like to concentrate on how a televisual recipient can process the message. On the one hand, a recipient in front of TV is taken into account while fictional dialogues are devised by scriptwriters, on the other hand s/he has access to a wider context and hence a different meaning is gleaned by the hearer and television recipient.

The view on humour as a tool to build and foster solidarity is endorsed by many researchers (Martineau 1972, Ziv 1984, Attardo 1994, Hay 2000, Zajdman

1995, Holmes and Marra 2002a, 2002b, Meyer 2000, Martin 2007). More specifically, Martineau (1972) remarks that humour can solidify in-group and out-group relations, even if it contains disparagement of own group. Ziv (1984) does not overtly mention the function of solidarity, however, the sub-function of the social category contains the traces of solidarity in which humour is used as a key to establish the common ground and gain affection. In Attardo's (1994) social management sub-function, we may find two micro-functions which aim to forge social bonds, namely *ingratiation* as it can "foster liking" (Long and Graesser 1988: 54, in Attardo 1994: 324) and *social play* since it is used to "strengthen social bonds and foster group cohesiveness" (Long and Graesser 1988: 57, in Attardo 1994: 324). These two strategies are also explicated in Martin (2007). Meyer's (2000) uniting function contains the strategy of mutual identification, which builds group coherence.

Solidarity enhancement is also evident in the studies of a specific humorous genre, such as jokes and puns. Zajdman's (1995) research does not take into account humour as a strategy of boosting solidarity but Brown and Levinson's (1978 [1987]) positive politeness strategies, which Zajdman adopts, are used to express friendliness. Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) advocate that teasing and joking can take the form of bonding, especially when the interlocutors unite against the butt (on the interdependence between teasing and humour see Norrick 1993, Zajdman 1995). In addition, Holmes and Marra (2002a) contend that subversive humour can be used to maintain positive personal relations and solidarity. In summary, humour is used to cultivate interpersonal relations, to create mutual understanding and hence mutual language, as well as to display a sense of closeness and social cohesion.

#### **4. The use of humour to boost solidarity with viewers of *Modern Family***

This section focuses on the description of humour as an affiliative technique used to communicate a variety of propositional meanings, which are constructed by recipients of the sitcom *Modern Family*, using the RT notion of weak implicatures. The rationale behind concentrating on solidarity-based effects is that these are the most frequent in my data given that it is a family sitcom<sup>4</sup>. In general terms, the present findings demonstrate that the production crew (fictional characters) can employ affiliative humour with a view to fulfilling one of the following functions: highlighting shared experiences, disclosing character-specific information, shar-

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<sup>4</sup> The contribution offers the result of a bigger project, where the functions of humour were categorised into solidarity-based, impoliteness-based and psychological benefits. It should be underlined that some functions subsumed under psychological benefits can also demonstrate solidarity.

ing, advising, soliciting support, defending, metalinguistic humour, discourse management, providing a linguistic play and providing a cultural reference.

It can be stated that interspersing humour in either spontaneous or fictitious communication is to ratify the bond with the co-conversationalists and thus create the situation in which the interactants' cognitive environments cross-cut one another. The cognitive environment is an RT concept that denotes an individual's mental representations (Sperber and Wilson 1986 [1995]). When the same representations are held by all conversational participants, those assumptions are strengthened in conversations. However, when a communicator airs beliefs different from those expressed by others, such representations can be abandoned or can modify one's cognitive environment. Fredrickson (1998) believes that arousing positive emotions in the recipient encourages him/ her, among others, to form unusual cognitive associations, which I believe is crucial in humorous discourse since one needs to resolve incongruity that requires finding novel associations.

A solidarity-enhancing function on the recipient's part is performed as soon as there is a humorous turn, despite impolite remarks passed between fictional characters. This claim is premised on the assumption that it is not the audience whose mental well-being is threatened. The humorous segment below (3) is used to illuminate some of the solidarity-based functions mentioned in the Introduction to this section. Let me discuss the propositional meanings that a viewer can potentially derive by means of humour, together with their functions, as well as what kind of comprehension path is followed in order to access to humorous effects:

(3) **Context:** Jay shares his personal harrowing experience concerning the celebration of Father's Day for the past few years.

**Jay:** [into the camera] When I think of the last few Father's Days, I quake with rage. Hey, maybe put a little thought into it. Maybe we don't order the pizza. [...] I'm sorry, but who made *Father's Day the dirty stepchild of holidays?! We don't even have a song.* (S08E01)

Humour is based on Jay's creative metaphor in which he claims that Father's Day is the dirty stepchild of holidays. Through the process of lexical adjustment<sup>5</sup>, the viewer is required to construct two concepts that are encoded in the word *stepchild*: *STEPCHILD\** (a child born to a wife or husband during a previous relationship, frequently considered less important) and *STEPCHILD\*\** (a holiday that is perceived to be less significant by the children). The initial concept is the viewers' background

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<sup>5</sup> Lexical adjustment, in RT, is a process creating an ad hoc concept, i.e. an occasion-specific meaning, whose denotation can be narrower or broader than the encoded meaning of a word or phrase. Its goal is to fine-tune the meaning with respect to the current context (Wilson and Carston 2007).

information about who a stepchild is, whereas the second one refers to Jay's intentions. The implicature that Jay communicates is that Father's Day is the worst celebrated day by children.

By means of using the concept *stepchild*, the function of providing a linguistic play is satisfied on the recipient's part. The propositional meaning that the hearer can glean is that any father is aware of the fact that it is Mother's Day or Children's Day that is more important than Father's Day. One of benefits of a linguistic play is the active engagement of recipient's mental process and thus spending more mental processing effort to attain a satisfactory level of relevance, i.e. being amused.

Extract (3) serves the function of providing a cultural reference. The premise for this effect is the deployment of cultural information, which may take the form of stereotypes that perpetuate in culture or of cultural artefacts, such as famous films or people. There is an increased frequency of conversational units in *Modern Family* that strengthen or reverse common stereotypes. The propositional meaning, and thus stereotypical information that the televisual recipient can construct is that any father would like to be as much important to a child as a mother.

In order to affiliate and hence build positive relations with the viewers, the production crew may wish to highlight shared experiences, similarities, or interests. Reflecting on the things that the recipient and fictional characters have in common tests the recipients' and fictional characters' cognitive environments' compatibility. On the basis of Jay's turn, the recipient can devise a weakly communicated meaning that the recipient and Jay share the same experience in which children do not care as much about Father's Day as about Mother's Day, which ratifies collectivity.

A different effect that can become a means of fostering solidarity is when the function of disclosing character-specific information is fulfilled. This conversational move is advantageous given the fact the recipient gets a chance to obtain a remarkable insight into the fictional character's views and attitudes towards religion, politics and a number of socially important issues. This helps the viewer to know a character, with whom s/he may affiliate or disaffiliate. The latter case is possible on account of the fictional character's airing some views with which a viewer strongly disagrees. In excerpt (3), Jay releases a piece of information that he is prone to showing intense emotions, which clashes with a public persona Jay creates: a tough patriarch, not eager to disclose feelings, which he considers unmanly.

The function of sharing is yet another effect where a fictional character self-discloses some information about oneself. The main difference between the previous function and sharing is that the latter was marked in confession (interview-like turns) uttered directly into the eye of camera and besides, they communicate different meanings. Jay, in example (3), confides some secret concerning his true feelings, which further boosts intimacy and thus the viewer feels to be trusted.

Humour in the sitcom can be used with a view to passing on a piece of valuable advice on family life and relations between family members. Given the fact that Jay emotionally describes his predicament concerning Father's Day, the recipient can feel that s/he is advised on how one should treat a father, i.e. in a similar manner that a child treats his/ her mother. As a result, the propositional meaning is that fathers should be given and demonstrated as much love as mothers are.

Last but not least, a fictional character can resort to soliciting support and compassion in the audience about a perplexing problem. This function boosts solidarity since the viewer is the only person capable of developing empathy. It may seem that the functions of soliciting support and sharing are identical since both of them are pinpointed in confessions. Nevertheless, the meanings gleaned on the basis of those functions are quite disparate. A humorous turn uttered by Jay may lead to the derivation of the weak implicature that Jay places absolute trust that the recipient will find a way to help him.

## 5. Conclusions

The main aim of the present paper was to describe an array of propositional meanings communicated by dint of humour, which can be used to affiliate with the viewers of the sitcom. The analysis profited from the RT notion of weak communication that serves a plausible explanation of how one humorous segment can be differently interpreted. The functions that convey an affiliative goal include: highlighting shared experiences, disclosing character-specific information, sharing, advising, soliciting support, defending, metalinguistic humour, discourse management, providing a linguistic play and providing a cultural reference. Moreover, the propositional meanings that are gleaned by means of each function were discussed.

As can be noted, there are quite a few intentions within one humorous unit at the fictional character's disposal that convey the reinforcing function. It needs to be highlighted that the derivation of propositional meanings is independent of accessing to humorous effects. Regardless of extracting only humorous or more positive cognitive effects, this difference in reception is conditioned by the recipient's eagerness to spend more mental effort to gain more cognitive reward.

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