



DOI: 10.58734/plc-2025-0006



Alisa Anastasiia Kavetska 

Institute of English Studies, Faculty of Philology, Jagiellonian University

Scripted Misunderstandings and Humour: A Case Study of Monty Python's Dialogues

The major goal of this paper is to explore the pragmatic mechanisms underlying the interpretation of fabricated misunderstandings designed to generate humour. In order to show what is involved, the data selected from Monty Python's productions are analysed. The relevance-theoretic tools (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2012) are deployed to elucidate the pragmatic mechanisms at work. The analysis, based on five aspects of misunderstanding, reveals how engineered miscommunication might happen at either explicit or implicit level of meaning, involving different sources, and repair strategies, and how incongruity, essential to trigger humorous effect, is created as a result. The availability of contextual information, as well as other factors influencing (un)successful inferential outcomes are explored. It is also shown how weak communication, argued to contribute to the punchline effect (Jodłowiec, 2015; Piskorska & Jodłowiec, 2018; Jodłowiec & Piskorska 2024), is at work in processing film dialogues by the viewer.

Key words: incongruity, misunderstanding, humour, relevance theory, scripted discourse

Address for correspondence: Alisa Anastasiia Kavetska

Institute of English Studies, Faculty of Philology, Jagiellonian University

E-mail: alisa.kavetska@doctoral.uj.edu.pl

This is an open access article licensed under the CC BY NC ND 4.0 License.

Misunderstandings are rife in human communication (see Fraser, 1993; Schegloff, 1992) and are an integral part of it (Dascal, 1985). Despite being a captivating research problem, whose analysis could shed light on utterance interpretation mechanisms, misunderstandings have received relatively little attention from pragmaticists over the last 30 years. The studies from 1990s and the first two decades of the 21st century (e.g. Bazzanella & Damiano, 1999; Bosco et al., 2006; Bou-Franch, 2002; Dynel, 2017; House et al., 2003; Padilla Cruz, 2017; Sayer, 2013; Schlesinger & Hurvitz, 2008; Vendler, 1994; Verdonik, 2010; Weigand, 1999; Weizman, 1999; Yus, 1999a, 1999b), employing diverse theoretical frameworks, operationalised the notion in different ways and focused on different aspects of verbal misunderstandings, resulting in various taxonomies. The major focus of the present paper is on a specific type of misunderstanding, namely on scripted misunderstandings that are used in film productions to create a humorous effect.

An important assumption underlying the analysis here is that there is an essential distinction between fabricated¹ misunderstandings and those occurring naturally. Skilfully engineered scripted misunderstandings involving incongruity, as will be shown below, can be used to generate humorous effects.

The structure of this paper is as follows: first, the characteristics of natural and scripted communication are presented with the focus on their implications for the study of misunderstanding. Then, I discuss the way fabricated miscommunication can be used by scriptwriters to create humorous effects, emphasising the way incongruity is generated and exploited in the process. Finally, an analysis of selected misunderstanding cases in some of Monty Python's productions follows. It focuses on the structure and sources of the misunderstandings, the repair strategies, and, most importantly, on the mechanism behind humorous incongruity involved.

Misunderstanding in Natural and Scripted Discourse

It has been a common practice in the literature on misunderstanding to analyse cases identified both in natural communication and works of fiction by applying the same analytic tools (e.g., Dynel, 2017; Tzanne, 2000; Weizman, 1999;). This should not be viewed as analytical sloppiness. Due to the fuzzy boundaries and elusive nature of verbal miscommunication, naturally occurring misunderstandings are difficult to register and collect for analysts, while fictional dialogues are readily available. In effect, the findings yielded by analyses of fictional discourse have often been treated as adequate approximations of what is going on in genuine communicative situations and the workings of fabricated misunderstandings have been (over)generalised to model verbal communication. However, while modern fictional discourse is meant to reflect real-life communication based on

¹ The term is used interchangeably with scripted misunderstanding and denotes what Tzanne (2000) refers to as simulated misunderstandings.

the verisimilitude assumption (Dynel, 2017), and it does share certain features with natural verbal exchanges, there are crucial differences between natural and scripted dialogue data, which need to be taken into account by researchers. This seems to be particularly pertinent in studying misunderstandings. It is, therefore, important to bring to light the distinction between natural misunderstandings, namely, those occurring in natural communication, and scripted misunderstandings, created by authors of fictional discourse in theatrical works, radio plays, sketches, film dialogues, and so on. The main difference lies in the purposefulness of misunderstandings in scripted discourse: unlike natural misunderstandings, which occur spontaneously and create (more or less serious) problems for the interlocutors that may affect communicative success, the scripted ones are intended to be recognised by the audience who are watching a film, a play, or read a book, and serve a purpose, that is, they are meant to induce certain effects in the recipients, most often of a humorous kind. This means that while natural misunderstandings impact communication participants and what goes on in an interaction, prefabricated ones are designed to produce interpretation effects in “ratified eavesdroppers” (Jaworski et al., 2003, p. 8), that is the readers or viewers (see Scripted misunderstandings section for further discussion).

Naturally Occurring Misunderstandings

There have been quite a few attempts to define misunderstanding, with different terms used in the literature on the subject, for example: *pragmatic failure* (Thomas, 1981), *misperception* (Zaefferer, 1977), *misapprehension* (Jefferson, 1972), *miscommunication*² (Tzanne, 2000), and many others. The terms applied reflect the approach adopted and the type of features a particular study focused on (see, e.g., Allott, 2016).

It is commonly assumed that what underlies communication is the presumption of mutual understanding (Callaway, 1992; as cited in Dascal & Berenstein, 1987 *duty to understand* ³), namely, the speaker's expectations of the hearer's ability to identify her ⁴ intentions correctly. In other words, in natural human interactions, speakers are taken to be rational communicators who provide evidence for their intentions by producing utterances, and hearers, by recognising them, generate speaker-intended meanings (Grice, 1975). It is in the speaker's interest that the hearer gets the message that the speaker intends. Breakdowns in communication happen because of some sort of miscalculation on the speaker's side and her inadequate judgement of how the hearer's recognition

² To avoid excessive repetition of the term misunderstanding, the word miscommunication is sometimes used here as a stylistic variant of this term.

³ There are two sides to the “understanding coin”. As Dascal (1999) writes, “The fundamental duties of an ethics of communication are, then, the (speaker's) duty to make herself understood (by the addressee) and the (addressee's)

⁴ In line with broadly accepted convention in pragmatics literature, it is assumed that the hypothetical speaker is female and the hearer is male.

of her intentions will affect the inferential path followed. Besides, it is commonly recognised that verbal utterances are inherently underdeterminate (Bach, 2007; Belleri, 2014; Carston, 2002; Wilson & Sperber, 2012), that is, hearers necessarily need to close the gaps between the utterance's semantic meaning and the full-fledged proposition that is communicated on a given occasion. In particular, the hearer's tasks are to assign references, disambiguate, and fill in ellipted material, relying on the most accessible contextual assumptions in the hearer's cognitive environment. Those assumptions may depart from those accessed by the speaker, which in effect will lead to the wrong (i.e. unintended by the speaker) gap filling, causing a misunderstanding. It is important to point out that misunderstandings in natural communication arise spontaneously and are to a certain extent inevitable.

Taking this into consideration, misunderstanding can be broadly defined as a mismatch between the intended and the interpreted message (cf. e.g., Humphreys-Jones, 1986; Padilla Cruz, 2017; Yus, 1999). In relevance-theoretic terms, it is claimed that the speaker believes that the evidence provided for the hearer in the form of an utterance will bring forth a certain range of cognitive effects, but, as a result of a certain kind of misalignment, the hearer does not get this range of cognitive effects by processing the utterance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995). If the mismatch leads to a breakdown in communication, communicators become aware of the faulty interpretation that surfaces in conversation, and repair can be initiated. However, misunderstanding might also remain unacknowledged, as in the following example (adapted from Yus, personal communication):

(1) Ben: I met Leonardo the other day.

Ann [thinking Ben means Leonardo DiCaprio]: Really? How is he?

Ben: He is fine! He's just bought an extension to his groceries shop.

Ann [realizes Ben means another Leonardo]: Great. I am glad he is doing so well.

Here, Ann becomes aware of her interpretation error (faulty reference assignment for the proper name), but she does not let Ben know she had to reinterpret his utterance as more contextual assumptions had become available to her. Unless Ann decides to make it manifest for Ben (or a third party/external analyst for that matter) that a misunderstanding occurred, the misunderstanding will go unnoticed. Such instances will not be available for analysis.

To that effect, a misunderstanding in natural discourse is detected when an interlocutor becomes aware of the mismatch between the speaker-intended communicated message and the hearer's interpretation as evident from the hearer's (verbal) behaviour. The detection is usually instantiated in repair (cf. Humphreys-Jones, 1986). In scripted discourse, however, misunderstandings do not happen accidentally: there is a deliberate trap into which the hearer is supposed to fall. Such misunderstandings are meant to be recognised by the audience to achieve the aim they are fabricated for.

Scripted Misunderstandings

Fictional film discourse is different from natural communication, as along with the dialogue between the characters it involves communication between the scriptwriter and the audience. In this way, it builds on two communicative levels (Dynel, 2014), creating a phenomenon referred to as double-layeredness of film communication (Desilla, 2019; Kozloff, 2000; Vanoye, 1985). The two levels have been referred to in the literature as character-oriented communication and *spectator-oriented communication* (Yus, 1998), *inter-characters' and recipients' levels* (Dynel 2010, 2011), *first-frame interaction and second-frame interaction* (Fetzer, 2006), *fictional and recipient layers* (Wieczorek, 2021), to mention the most frequently used terms.

The first level of communication encompasses actors who communicate with each other on the screen, (most often) as if oblivious to the fact that they are being listened to. The second communicative level involves film viewers, that is, genuine addressees of scripted interactions, for whose benefit the communication takes place. The two levels of communication entail two participatory frameworks, involving the speaker (the character producing an utterance in the film) and two hearer categories: the addressee (also inside the film) and the third party (film audience). The addressee is a hearer to whom a given utterance is being directed by the speaker, that is, the listening character. The third party are referred to as ratified eavesdroppers (Dynel, 2011; Jaworski et al., 2003). This term reflects the fact that even though an utterance is not addressed to them, they are authorised to listen to it and make inferences that follow from the speaker's communicative intention. The audience at the second communicative level is supposed to interpret the film discourse as envisaged by the scriptwriters (Dynel, 2011), following inferential paths engineered by the production crew. Importantly, they often have access to more fine-grained contextual information than do the addressee characters themselves, which indicates that their understanding can be more comprehensive.

The interpretation abilities of the two hearer categories, functioning at two communicative levels, is directly related to the metarepresentational capacities of each group. These capacities can be usefully explored by employing the notion of different interpretation strategies⁵, as developed by Sperber (1994). According to this approach, the addressees of verbal utterances may adopt different strategies to infer the speaker intended meaning depending on how much they trust the speaker's benevolence and competence. If the addressee takes the speaker to be both benevolent, by being willing to share truthful information, and competent in avoiding ambiguity, vagueness, and so on, he stops interpretation as soon as he gets a satisfactory range of cognitive effects. This strategy, termed naïve optimism (Sperber, 1994), is the strategy that the characters of scripted humorous discourse are made to follow. As if unable to form higher-level meta-representations (Wilson,

⁵ This idea was brought to my attention by two of the anonymous reviewers of this paper, for which I am very grateful.

2000), in their inferencing, they follow the path of least effort and (wrongly, when misunderstandings are engineered to arise) assume that the first interpretation that is sufficiently relevant is the intended one, being confident that the speaker could have predicted the most salient interpretation to appear in the addressee's mind. That interpretation is not the interpretation the scriptwriters envisage the audience to end up with, as the latter are trusted to follow a more complex interpretation route.

A slightly more elaborate strategy is *cautious optimism*, in which the speaker is not expected to be competent enough to be able to predict the inferential path the addressee is going to take, but is still assumed to be benevolent, that is, communicating in the *bona fide* manner. The addressee applying this strategy is able to reach the interpretation which is assumed to be intended by the speaker even if the path of least effort yields a different one.

The audience, however, has the capacity for an even more nuanced interpretation strategy called *sophisticated understanding*. This implies a more advanced intention attribution, as the speaker is recognised to be neither benevolent nor competent, and the addressee's task is to discern the speaker's *communicative intention*, based on an elaborate meta-representation.

What follows is that scripted misunderstandings have two distinctive features:

1. They are meant to be detected by the audience (the third party), but can go unnoticed by the participants of a conversation (therefore, they can be covert or latent for film characters, but will be overt for the audience in Hinnenkamp's 2003 terms). Even when communication fails (overtly or not) at the first communicative level, that is, between characters, it is intended to proceed unimpeded at the second level, that is between the scriptwriter and the viewers. Humour-generating mechanisms are dependent on the audience's greater metarepresentational abilities and more sophisticated interpretive strategies compared to those of the characters, which leads to the non-propositional effect of the feeling of superiority the audience experiences over naïve characters. This, in turn, enhances the humorous effect (Brône, 2008).

2. They are intentionally constructed by the scriptwriters; therefore, they are not accidental or spontaneous and always serve some plot-related function aimed at inducing a certain effect in the audience, for example, of a humorous kind (see Weizman, 1999; Wiczorek, 2021). The audience's recognition of a misunderstanding is crucial to their getting the humorous effect (Desilla, 2019). Viewers should be able to grasp the misunderstanding by accessing the character's wrong (naïve) interpretation of an utterance and juxtaposing it with the truly intended interpretation, which may coincide with their own.

Misunderstandings Fabricated for Humorous Incongruity

Scripted misunderstandings may be used in films to achieve various effects. As Desilla (2019) points out, they can serve narrative functions, such as characterisation (e.g., highlighting the difference between characters), or for various plot-related

considerations, for instance, contributing to the story development or leading to turns of events. Detective and mystery productions can utilize misunderstandings for plot entanglement and development. But perhaps even more often, filmmakers employ misunderstandings between characters to achieve comedic effects. This happens when humorous incongruity is involved.

According to one of the leading cognitive approaches to humour, the Incongruity-Resolution Theory, humour resides in the recognition of incongruity, an unanticipated violation of certain expectations of mental patterns, followed by its resolution (Attardo, 2014). The idea that humour results from a breach of expectations can be traced back to Kant, who remarked that “laughter is an affection arising from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Kant, 1790, in Morreall, 1987, p. 47). The term *incongruity* (Ger. die Incongruenz) was used for the first time in the context of mirth by Shopenhauer (1819, in Clark, 1970, p. 25), for whom “the cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity”. McGhee's (1979, in Attardo, 1994, p. 48) definition of incongruity is adopted in the present paper: “The notion of congruity and incongruity refer to the relationships between components of an object, event, idea, social expectation, and so forth. When the arrangement of the constituent elements of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous.” In other words, broadly speaking, incongruity involves a discord between two concepts in the universe of discourse.⁶

It is claimed that the incongruity alone, even though necessary, is not a sufficient element for humour production. It has to be resolved in the act of humour perception (Suls, 1972; Schultz, 1996). However, the term resolution in theories of humour does not imply a total suspension of the incongruity and its transformation into congruous reasoning: Dynel (2011), Yus (2016), Attardo (2017) and many other studies refer to Oring's theory (1992, 2003), which postulates that humorous incongruity does not have to be entirely eliminated at the resolution stage, and only partial resolution results in humour. The resolution coexists with the incongruity and accompanies it (Attardo, 1994). In fact, as Yus (2016) claims, the awareness of the spurious nature of the resolution is one of the main mechanisms of humour: the hearer maintains two different senses while the underlying joke teller's intentions are revealed. It is precisely the perception of the *residual incongruity* (nonsense) that is responsible for generating mirth (Forabosco, 2008).

With respect to incongruity, Oring makes an important distinction between the incongruity of “regular” humour, and the additional layer of incongruity inherent in absurdist humour, which “typically cannot be resolved into any situation compatible with normal experience” (Oring, as cited in Attardo, 2014, p. 1). Absurdity relies heavily on incongruity, nonsense and bizarre juxtapositions (Noonan, 2014). It

6 For a comprehensive discussion, see Forabosco (1992), Koestler's (1964) bisociation theory, Suls' (1972) incongruity-based two-stage information-processing model, Paulos' (1977, 1980) catastrophe-theory model, as well as Hofstadter and Gabora's (1989) cognitive model.

involves a breakdown in meaning not at the linguistic, but at the logical (existential) level, that is, the level of content.

The following example of an elephant joke, one from a series of absurd riddles popular in 1960s, demonstrates the workings of incongruity-resolution mechanism:

- (2) How to tell if an elephant has been in your fridge?
The footprints in the butter.

It is obvious that the answer to the question is as nonsensical as the question itself: a fridge does not have enough room for an elephant, an elephant will not try to get into a fridge, and there are no chances of it leaving the footprints there, which are huge and impossible to be impressed in butter that is stored in a fridge. Therefore, the joke contains several incongruities with some resolution: one can usually tell an animal has been somewhere by its footprints. Clearly, the incongruity is not eliminated here, and the resolution phase, in fact, adds to it by introducing yet another incompatibility. But since there is some distorted truthlikeness (referred to as *logical mechanism* in GTVH⁷, Attardo & Raskin, 1991), it is taken to be a playful pseudo-resolution. The workings of multilayered incongruity support the claim that Hołobut & Chłopicki (2017, p. 1) make in their paper on humour in nonsense literature, namely that “nonsense is bound to be humorous”. Monty Python’s productions, selected for the pragmatic analysis here, are prime examples of absurdist humour (also called surreal comedy).

The incongruity-resolution theory of humour, as sketched above, is fully compatible with the relevance-theoretic model of verbal communication (see, e.g., Brône, 2003; Dynel, 2012; Piskorska & Jodłowiec, 2018; Yus, 2016, 2017).

Arguing that people tend to pay attention to phenomena and stimuli that are likely to improve their representation of the world, which basically has to do with obtaining positive cognitive effects (Carston, 2002), Sperber and Wilson define a comprehension heuristic, in accordance with which the comprehender is assumed to follow a path of least effort and stop the utterance interpretation process when a satisfying level of cognitive effects is achieved (Jodłowiec, 2015; Sperber & Wilson, 1986/95, 2002; Wilson & Sperber, 2004). This comprehension heuristic presupposes that saliency and accessibility play a crucial role in generating a context-specific meaning: the most accessible and salient contextual assumptions come into play first, and as soon as a satisfying level of cognitive effects consistent with the speaker’s intention surfaces, it is taken to be the intended interpretation.

The comprehension heuristic explains how underdeterminacy gaps (hinted at above) are filled in, how full-fledged propositions as intended by the speaker are

7 General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo & Raskin, 1991) is a model of humour explicating the workings of jokes as well as other types of humorous texts through the analysis of six Knowledge Resources (parameters): the Script Opposition (involving concept incongruity); the Logical Mechanism (which describes the incongruity resolution strategy involved in the script opposition); the Situation (i.e., the setting of the joke); the Target of a joke (who or what is laughed at); the Narrative Strategy (i.e., the organisation of the text), and the Language (i.e., phonemic, morphemic, syntactic properties crucial for creating the humorous effect).

supposed to be recovered and how implicatures are generated. All these tasks are performed inferentially, they happen very fast and take place at the subconscious (subpersonal) level, with the possible alternative interpretation options not reaching the threshold of the comprehender's awareness.

As a number of studies have shown (i.a., Curco, 1995; Jodłowiec, 2015; Jodłowiec & Piskorska, 2024; Piskorska & Jodłowiec, 2018; Yus, 2016), this psychologically rooted mechanism plays a significant role in processing humorous texts in general and jokes in particular (Yus, 2016), where the existence of simultaneous likely and unlikely interpretations for the same utterance is exploited by the joke teller (or writer) to generate a humorous response in the audience. This means that at the punchline stage the hearer realises that other interpretations of the setup were also possible, but not initially accessible to be recognized as the intended meaning. Jodłowiec and Piskorska (Jodłowiec 2009, 2015; Jodłowiec & Piskorska, 2024) employ the notion of weak communication, which the relevance-theoretic model posits, to explain the punchline effect: the pragmatic mechanism responsible for bringing about the humorous reaction caused by processing the punchline. In a nutshell, as Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995, 2012) argue, communication is a matter of degree, so it can be weak or strong, with different shades of strength between the two extremes.

Unlike strong communication, where speaker-intended meaning comprises one specific assumption (or a very small set of such assumptions) made manifest to the hearer, weak communication occurs when the speaker's overt intention is to make manifest to the hearer a range of assumptions, whose content is partly dependent on the hearer. In other words, the aim of the speaker who is weakly communicating is to convey a whole gamut of assumptions, which are only partly determinate. In some weak communicative contexts, the speaker might merely intend to convey an impression (Sperber & Wilson, 2015) or channel the hearer's thoughts in some direction (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995). In their analysis of joke interpretation, Jodłowiec and Piskorska (2018, 2024) highlight that the punchline not only causes a shift from the initially grasped meaning to the ultimately intended one, but it also "makes a vast range of weakly communicated assumptions highly manifest to the joke recipient" (Piskorska & Jodłowiec, 2018, p. 34), a mechanism called an inferential overload effect. This mechanism presupposes that a great number of assumptions manifesting themselves all at once to the interpreter trigger an affective reaction, released as laughter. Similarly to canned jokes, scripted misunderstandings can yield this kind of effect.

In line with these claims, it is easy to envisage how a fabricated misunderstanding in film dialogue can become an effective tool for creating humour by making the audience entertain two meanings at the same time:

1. The meaning that the speaking character intends to convey (which is simultaneously the one the scriptwriter intends the audience to get);
2. The interpretation of the character who misunderstands, which deviates from the expected one. In this respect, the mechanism underlying misunderstandings

resembles that of verbal jokes: there are two meanings involved, and there is an interpretation “trap” there. In misunderstandings the recipient gets the meaning departing from the one intended by the speaker, while in jokes the recipient gets the meaning incompatible with the punchline. Mirth is evoked as a consequence of partially unresolvable incongruity (as discussed with reference to Oring’s (2008) ideas above) being created by multiple coexisting interpretation options (Dyner, 2009; Forabosco, 2008).

Technically speaking, the creators of humorous discourses skilfully predict, design and manipulate the inferential steps the viewers will inevitably go through (Yus, 2020). This is how the incongruity is engineered in film dialogue:

1. The audience are supposed to recover the interpretation as intended by the speaking character: a meaning which is most likely to be arrived at by the audience who, as relevance theory predicts, are processing a given utterance by following the path of least effort given the contextual constraints present in the discourse, which in the case of films includes non-verbal clues.

2. The viewers are led to find an alternative interpretation, which is either the addressee character’s fallacious interpretation of the utterance, or, as can be seen in the analysis below, the addresser character’s intended meaning unexpectedly surfaces at the resolution stage. This alternative inferential path, which suddenly emerges, involves incongruity and, subsequently through its partial resolution, gives rise to the humorous effects.

The next section offers an analysis of selected misunderstanding cases in Monty Python’s productions to elucidate the workings of humour-creating mechanisms discussed above.

Misunderstanding as a Trigger for Humour in (Selected) Monty Python’s Productions: Case Analysis

Scripted misunderstandings can be used to create humour, as the examples discussed below show. They all come from Monty Python’s productions, in particular Monty Python’s Flying Circus, the film *Life of Brian*, and the TV series *Faulty Towers*, created by Monty Python’s lead comedian John Cleese in co-authorship with Connie Booth. The dialogues presented below were selected with the aim to show misunderstandings revealing different aspects involved in humour production. In other words, the choice of the cases which were included in the paper was motivated by the goal to elucidate the variety of humorous misunderstanding types. The variable set of parameters suggested below can serve as the basis for classifying scripted misunderstandings giving rise to humour.

Method of Analysis

In order to demonstrate how the script authors effectively employ staged miscommunication to evoke humour, the examples will be analysed in terms of five parameters: overtiness, the level of occurrence, namely, explicit/implicit,

the sources of a misunderstanding, incongruity involved and a repair strategy (if applicable). The inferential paths the audience is predicted to follow in processing humorous-evoking incongruity are also focused on. The parameters selected for humorous misunderstandings' analysis are briefly characterised below:

Overtness

According to Hinnenkamp's (2003) taxonomy, there are three groups of misunderstandings, namely overt, covert, and latent. The first group comprises misunderstandings which are recognised and repaired soon after they arise (within the next couple of conversational turns) and which generally do not lead to a major communicative breakdown, so the flow of conversation is not disrupted. Progressively, the longer the recognition of a misunderstanding takes, that is, the more turns it takes for the misunderstanding to be detected, the more damage it causes to communication and the more difficult it becomes to rectify the conversational purposes. Misunderstandings which are not acknowledged and repaired in the immediate sequential turns after they arise, and which only become apparent as a result of discourse incoherence, are termed covert. They often cannot be repaired fast enough for the interactants to be able to return to the point preceding the wrong inference. The last group labelled latent involves instances of unacknowledged, fully covert, unrecognised and unaddressed misunderstandings. The only manifestation of such a misunderstanding is a vague subjective feeling of the interactant(s) that communication has not been successful and the communicative goals have not been reached. Importantly, as Hinnenkamp (2003) points out, only the overt and covert misunderstandings are available to empirical analysis, as the latent ones are not instantiated at the conversational level. This applies to the analysis of natural discourse, for example, taped recordings of conversations which Hinnenkamp used for his empirical study. By contrast, the situation is different in scripted discourse (see 1.2): all three types of misunderstandings are employed as a tool for humour creation in Monty Python's films. This is because the covert and latent misunderstandings can be unacknowledged by the interacting characters but are nevertheless meant to be recognized by the audience.

Layer of Communication

This category refers to the layer of interpretation within the traditionally accepted pragmatic dichotomy of explicit and implicit meaning, with an additional level of higher-level explicature introduced in RT to account for the speaker's psychological state or attitude towards the proposition conveyed by a given utterance. This means that a higher-level explicature involves embedding the propositional form of the utterance under a higher-level description such as a speech-act description, a propositional attitude description or some other comment on the embedded proposition (Carston, 2002).

While an explicit assumption is the development of a decoded utterance to a

full-fledged proposition, implicit meaning goes beyond it (see 3.1). Explicatures then are derived through decoding and inferencing, with the decoded verbal stimulus inferentially enriched to arrive at the speaker intended meaning. Implicatures are generated through inferencing alone and rely on accessing some contextual assumptions, which together with an explicature allow for the generation of implicated conclusions.

Source

This parameter reflects the triggers of an interpretation error (Bazzanella & Damiano, 1999), the factors potentially contributing to a breakdown in communication. These may lie in the structural characteristics of an utterance, processing circumstances, or limited access to contextual assumptions necessary for the interpretation matching the speaker's communicative intention

The Locus of Humorous Incongruity

As explicated above, humorous incongruity consists in the interpretational clash brought about by the conflicting meanings the audience gets. The sudden shift from the initially taken to an alternative inferential path gives rise to incongruity. In turn, the partial resolution of incongruity brings about humorous effects.

Repair Strategy

Repair, the notion developed by conversation analysts in the works of Schegloff et al. (1977), Schegloff (2000, 2007), and Jefferson (1987), can contribute to humorous effects. It is defined as the way to deal with "recurrent problems in speaking, hearing, and understanding" (Schegloff et al., 1977, p. 361). The repair techniques involve repetition, paraphrase, confirmation checks, clarification requests and comprehension checks (Drew, 1997; Nagano, 1997; Schegloff et al., 1977; Schegloff, 2000;), all of which can intensify humour of scripted misunderstandings.

The analysis here is based on these parameters, and for each example a table summarising them will be presented.

Case Analysis

The first example is taken from the series Monty Python's Flying Circus, episode 16.⁸

(3) Mr. Chigger enters the office of a flying school to make an application for flying lessons. Mr. Anemone, the school representative, is suspended by a wire about nine feet off the ground.

⁸ The scripts for this example, as well as for examples 5 and 6 were taken from an online archive <https://montypython.50webs.com/> Last accessed on 26.12.2022.

Mr. Anemone: Mr. Chigger. So, you want to learn to fly.

Mr. Chigger: Yes.

Mr. Anemone: Right, well, up on the table, arms out, fingers together, knees bent...

Mr. Chigger: No, no, no.

Mr. Anemone: (very loudly) Up on the table! (Mr. Chigger gets on the table) Arms out, fingers together, knees bent, now, head well forward. Now, flap your arms. Go on, flap, faster... faster... faster... faster, faster, faster, faster - now jump! (Mr. Chigger jumps and lands on the floor) Rotten. Rotten. You're no bloody use at all. You're an utter bloody wash-out. You make me sick, you weed!

Mr. Chigger: Now look here...

Mr. Anemone: All right, all right. I'll give you one more chance, get on the table...

Mr. Chigger: Look, I came here to learn how to fly an aeroplane.

Mr. Anemone: A what?

Mr. Chigger: I came here to learn how to fly an aeroplane.

The source of the misunderstanding in (3) is a faulty interpretation at the explicit level. As relevance theory posits, recovering the explicature, that is, the full propositional form of an utterance, involves a number of pragmatic processes that have to do with resolving the underlying underdeterminacies (Carston, 2002). In this case those are reference assignment and disambiguation. According to Jodłowiec (2015, 2021), these processes have to do with “zooming in on the actual referent, precisifying a property, specifying the kind of action that is targeted” (2015, p. 67) rather than the augmentation of the proposition with some “missing” elements, an approach still supported by some pragmaticists (e.g., Recanati 2004, 2010), but rejected by many who treat it as psychologically implausible representation of interpretation processes (Borg, 2016; Jary, 2016; Jodłowiec, 2021). It has been claimed that “[s]emantic underdeterminacy is one of the most common causes of misunderstandings” (Sedlaczek, 2012, p. 144).

Table 1. *“Learning to Fly” Example: Relevant Parameters*

Overtness	Overt – detected by the hearer. Mr. Chigger almost immediately becomes aware of the mismatch between his intended meaning and the interpretation Mr. Anemone has arrived at
Layer of occurrence	Explicature
Source	Wrong disambiguation of the verb fly FLY ₁ - “move in the air without operating any flying device” FLY ₂ - “move in the air by operating a flying device”
Humorous incongruity	The opposition resides between the salient reading (FLY1) and a non-salient (incongruous) reading (FLY2) by the misunderstanding character
Repair strategy	Several attempts of Mr. Chigger to initiate a repair (“No, no, no” and “Now look here”), which fail because of Mr. Anemone’s assertiveness and Mr. Chigger’s submission, probably due to politeness and power relation considerations

To take a closer look at what is involved, in dialogue (3) the misunderstanding stems from the ambiguity of the expression *to learn to fly*, used by the potential trainee in the meaning of “learning to operate a flying machine” and by the trainer in the sense of “learning to move in the air without operating any flying device”, which is evidently the meaning that Mr. Anemone in his role of the flying instructor, suspended by a wire at the ceiling and providing instructions about the required body movements, manifestly intends. This is not the kind of flying that Mr. Chigger is interested in, which he makes explicit in the course of the short dialogue through repair. The discrepancy between the two meanings of *fly* creates incongruity and gives rise to a humorous misunderstanding, with the humour intensified by the array of weakly communicated assumptions conveying the absurdity of the situation: it appears quite perverse that anyone might think of learning to fly in the way the flying instructor does, and the whole idea of running courses that would make it possible for people to learn to fly like birds is preposterous. What plays an important role here is the film makers’ employment of visuals in creating the comic effect. The view of the man as if levitating in the air, clearly mimicking flying, provides obvious evidence of what Mr. Anemone primarily associates with the flying lesson (conveying what Yus (2016) refers to as visual explicature). It gives rise to a number of weak assumptions suddenly becoming manifest, associated with the fact that all instructors would be ready to pull a student’s leg and suggest that they can make wonders and teach everything. The audience discovers the intended meaning and realises there had been misunderstanding simultaneously with the character in this dialogue.

Any possibility of double interpretation, not just lexical ambiguity, which may potentially give rise to incongruity, can be exploited to create a humorous misunderstanding. Here is another example of misunderstanding arising at the level of what is explicitly conveyed, which comes from *Faulty Towers*⁹, a sitcom about a hotel aired in the late 1970s.

(4) A dialogue between a hotel guest and a maid.

Hotel guest: Hello! Girl, there's no paper in my room. Why don't you check these things? That's what you're being paid for, isn't it?

Maid: We don't put it in the rooms.

Hotel guest: What?

Maid: We keep it in the lounge.

Hotel guest: In the lounge?

Maid: I'll get you some. Do you want plain ones, or ones with our address on it?

Hotel guest: Address on it?

Maid: How many sheets? Well, how many are you going to use?

Hotel guest: Manager!

9 The script was taken from https://sublikescript.com/series/Fawlty_Towers-72500/season-2/episode-1-Communication_Problems. Last accessed on 27.12.2023.

Maid: Just enough for one? Tell me.

Hotel guest: Manager! Manager!

Manager: Yes? (...)

Hotel guest: There you are! I've never met such insolence in my life! I come down here to get some lavatory paper, and she starts asking me the most insulting, personal things

I've ever heard in my life!

Maid: I thought she wanted writing paper.

This example illustrates the kind of misunderstanding that Dascal (1985, p. 451) characterizes in the following way: "B's perception of the conversational demand differs from A's own perception of the conversational demand established by his utterance." In (4) the first meaning to strike a balance between the cognitive effort exerted and the benefits obtained to reach optimal relevance in the maid's mind, given the contextual constraints available to her, is that of writing paper, whereas the guest intends to inquire about lavatory paper. The two competing interpretations seem equally plausible in the setting. While the characters remain unaware of the clash of meanings, the viewers recognise the misunderstanding in the course of the dialogue. Entertaining two interpretations simultaneously and following the persistent miscommunication between the maid and the guest, where each makes comments with the reference to the type of paper she has in her mind, adds to the incongruence of conversation, and subsequently gives rise to humour. Phillips (2000, p. 34) claims that filmmakers skilfully manipulate the audience's access to information by changing the degree of explicitness of dialogue between the characters. Weak communication effects are brought about here by such assumptions as the alleged stupidity of hotel service taken for granted by guests, people talking at cross-purposes unable to accept another person's perspective, toilet paper being a taboo commodity and an indispensable necessity at the same time, and so on.

Table 2. *Paper Example: Relevant Parameters*

Overtness	Covert – delayed detection by the hearer The maid does not become aware of her interpretational error until the guest explains the situation to the manager
Layer of occurrence	Explicature: unintended disambiguation
Source	Wrong resolution of vagueness of paper as used in the hotel guest's utterance PAPER ₁ – lavatory paper PAPER ₂ – writing paper
Humorous incongruity	A clash between the expectations of discreetness in such a sensitive face-threatening area as personal hygiene and the maid's inappropriate straightforwardness as perceived by the guest
Repair strategy	Delayed self-initiated self-repair

The third scripted misunderstanding case selected for the analysis is taken from the film *Life of Brian*. This production abounds in miscommunication. In fact, as Benko (2012, p. 9) rightly points out, “the humour in *Life of Brian* does undermine religion by making religious leaders look like pompous buffoons and religious truths the result of misunderstanding and misinterpretation”. Thus, verbal as well as non-verbal misunderstandings between the characters are effectively employed for achieving satirical effect throughout the whole plot.

(5) The leader of People's Front of Judea (PFJ), one of many independence movements against Roman occupation of Judea, is trying to give a motivational speech in front of the party members.

Reg: They've bled us white, the bastards. They've taken everything we had, and not just from us, from our fathers, and from our fathers' fathers.

Loretta: And from our fathers' fathers' fathers.

Reg: Yeah.

Loretta: And from our fathers' fathers' fathers' fathers.

Reg: Yeah. All right, Stan. Don't labour the point. And what have they ever given us in return?!

Xerxes: The aqueduct?

Reg: What?

Xerxes: The aqueduct.

Reg: Oh. Yeah, yeah. They did give us that. Uh, that's true. Yeah.

Commando #3: And the sanitation.

Loretta: Oh, yeah, the sanitation, Reg. Remember what the city used to be like?

Reg: Yeah. All right. I'll grant you the aqueduct and the sanitation are two things that the Romans have done.

Matthias: And the roads.

Reg: Well, yeah. Obviously the roads. I mean, the roads go without saying, don't they? But apart from the sanitation, the aqueduct, and the roads--

Commando: Irrigation.

Xerxes: Medicine.

Commando: Huh? Heh? Huh...

Commando #2: Education.

Commando: Ohh...

Reg: Yeah, yeah. All right. Fair enough.

Commando #1: And the wine.

Commando: Oh, yes. Yeah...

Francis: Yeah. Yeah, that's something we'd really miss, Reg, if the Romans left. Huh.

Commando: Public baths.

Loretta: And it's safe to walk in the streets at night now, Reg.

Francis: Yeah, they certainly know how to keep order. Let's face it. They're the only ones who could in a place like this.

Commando: Hehh, heh. Heh heh heh heh heh heh heh.

Reg: All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?

Xerxes: Brought peace.

Reg: Oh. Peace? Shut up!

In (5) the misunderstanding occurs at the level identified in relevance theory as higher-level explicature: the level of interpretation which has to do with identifying the illocutionary force of an utterance in speech-theoretic terms. The vagueness of the illocutionary intention that the utterance expresses is often exploited for staging a humorous misunderstanding, as Brône's (2008) study of a corpus of British TV series confirms. What is involved in this polylogue is the misinterpretation of a rhetorical question as a genuine one. Thus, a wrong illocution is assigned to Reg's question, as the crew fails to recognise his communicative intention as the expectation of agreement, not a request for information and a genuine answer which his listeners readily provide. Only the viewers, capable of identifying the interpretation that Reg might have thought would be relevant enough to his interlocutors, can appreciate the miscommunication involved.

Rhetorical questions are not real questions, as they are not aimed at deriving certain information from the audience (Rexach, 1998). They intentionally assert an implicit proposition, and, along with requesting information, express their very answer, which in an appropriate context becomes immediately obvious to the hearer. Therefore, the goal of rhetorical questions is to implicitly communicate the truth of the statement that answers it. Moreover, the relevance of this type of questions lies in communicated implicatures stemming from the obvious answer, reflecting rhetorical questions' argumentative role as persuasive assertions (Raeber, 2016). With reference to (5), Reg's communicative intention expressed by the question is to strongly implicate the assumption the Romans have not

Table 3. *Romans Example: Relevant Parameters*

Overtness	Overt – detected by the addressee character Reg notices the discrepancy between the intended force of his utterance along with his expectations of accord and agreement and his interlocutors' reaction
Layer of occurrence	Higher-level explicature: recovering unintended propositional attitude Implicature: not accessing the implicated meaning
Source	Misinterpretation of force - wrong illocution assignment: a rhetorical question is interpreted as a genuine one; Hearers' inability to access speaker's implicated meaning
Humorous incongruity	The discord/mismatch between the speaker's implicated message <i>the Romans have given us nothing apart from hardship</i> and the implicature the audience derives from the numerous answers to the speaker's questions, which is exactly the opposite: the Romans have given them a lot and have improved their lives significantly
Repair strategy	Failed self-repair: multiple repetition of the question

given the people of Judea anything good, and this intention is not recognised by the hearers, who take it to be a genuine question and provide answers that contradict the implicit content of the rhetorical question. The audience, however, recognises the speaker-intended meaning from the beginning of the dialogue.

Here, the incongruity is evident from the very beginning of the verbal exchange and persists throughout the polylogue. Repair plays an important role in maintaining incongruity and therefore facilitating humour. It might be hypothesised that the humour in this piece is reinforced and amplified by means of prolonged attempts by Reg to drive his idea home, namely, to resolve the misunderstanding. He accepts the answers but tries to shift the hearers' interpretation of the question to its rhetorical force. More and more answers create greater incongruity and lesser plausibility of the question ever being accepted as a rhetorical one with the expected implied meaning the Romans have given us nothing apart from hardship. The comical effect culminates in Reg's utterance "All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?", when the first part of the utterance totally negates the implicated meaning of the question.

Let us now consider an example of latent misunderstanding, which also comes from *Life of Brian*.

(6) A dialogue between a group of characters who are listening to Jesus giving the Sermon on the Mount but standing too far back in a noisy crowd to hear properly.

Gregory: Could you be quiet, please?

Jesus: They shall have the earth...

Gregory: What was that?

Jesus: ...for their possession. How blest are those...

Mr. Cheeky: I don't know. I was too busy talking to Big Nose.

Jesus: ...who hunger and thirst to see...

Man #1: I think it was 'Blessed are the cheesemakers.'

Jesus: ...right prevail.

Mrs. Gregory: Ahh, what's so special about the cheesemakers?

Gregory: Well, obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.

Mr. Cheeky: See? If you hadn't been going on, we'd have heard that, Big Nose.

Unlike the cases discussed above, this is an example of a latent misunderstanding, that is, a misunderstanding which goes unnoticed by the participants of the conversation. It would not be identified in natural communication and can be employed to create humorous incongruity because of what has been referred to in 1.2. as double-layeredness of film communication: only the viewers detect the misunderstanding.

Table 4. *Cheesemakers Example: Relevant Parameters*

Overtness	Latent
Layer of occurrence	Explicature (arriving at an erroneous proposition): cheesemakers is taken to be a metonymy for all manufacturers of dairy products Implicature: weakly implicated assumptions contribute to incongruity
Source	Mishearing (noise in the channel) + wrong implicated meaning retrieval
Humorous incongruity	A clash between a serious discourse about spiritual matters, reflected in the original famous phrase "Blessed are the peacemakers" and down-to-earth issues of farmers' life, activating a range of implicated assumptions by "Blessed are the cheesemakers".
Repair strategy	None

As Dynel's (2017) research reveals, it is a common humour technique employed in sitcoms to use foolish utterances signalling misunderstanding of something obvious to the majority of people. The characters "fail to grasp what is communicated and cannot even acknowledge their misunderstandings with the benefit of hindsight, as people tend to do in real-life interactions" (Dynel, 2017, p. 69). Therefore, latent misunderstandings are often employed by scriptwriters to generate superiority-based humour for the audience (Brône, 2008).

The trigger of misunderstanding in (6) has to do with mishearing because of a "noise in the channel" in code-model terms: the hearers are standing too far to hear properly. Gregory, who apparently is very much interested in Jesus's message, is desperately trying to make sense of the words "blessed are the cheesemakers" and arrives at a range of satisfying cognitive effects by taking cheesemakers to be used metonymically for *all manufacturers of dairy products*. This interpretation is manifestly just as absurd as the misquoted phrase but opens up a range of implicitly communicated assumptions that become accessible to the viewers, for example, *people are hardly capable of leaving their earthly, down-to-earth thinking, things related to food and eating are prioritised and easily elevated to the sacred level, people tend to hear what they want to hear*, and so on. The humorous effect is achieved due to an erroneous explicature that the naïve addressees in the film manifestly arrive at and its incongruity with the actual words of Jesus's sermon on the mount, as well as a range of weakly communicated implicatures that this interpretation makes manifest to the film viewers.

What is involved in the humorous verbal exchange in (6) is Greg's attempt to explain the words of Jesus in terms of ideas that are very close to simple-minded farmers. A range of weakly communicated implicit assumptions related to the importance of very basic, down-to-earth issues, very remote from non-material, spiritual considerations become manifest to the viewers. Thus, a great contrast between the seriousness of the sermon discourse and prosaic issues of farmers' life unleashes the whole range of weak implicatures.

The last example to be analysed here comes from Monty Python's Flying Circus¹⁰.

10 The script was taken from https://www.quotes.net/mquote/802376?fb_comment_id=1120644147996378_2145142525546530. Last accessed on 03.04.2023

(7) The Montgolfier brothers are preparing for the first ascent in a fire balloon.
 Jacques: This is a great moment for us, Joseph.
 Joseph: It is a great moment for France.
 Jacques: Ah, oui!
 Joseph: First ascent in a hot-air balloon, by the Montgolfier brothers - 1783. I can see us now... just after Montesquieu and just before Mozart.
 Jacques: I think I'll go and wash ...
 Joseph: Good luck.
 Jacques: Oh ... it's quite easy, really ... I just slap a little water on my face, then...
 Joseph: No... good luck for tomorrow.
 Jacques: Oh I see, yes. You too. Yours has been the work.

Table 5. *Washing Example: Relevant Parameters*

Overtness	Overt
Layer of occurrence	Explicature: retrieval of unintended proposition Implicature: unintended contextual assumptions became manifest
Source	Arriving at an unintended full propositional form of the utterance because of the coexistence of two explicature possibilities fitting the context: 1. GOOD LUCK WITH WASHING 2. GOOD LUCK WITH THE FLIGHT TOMORROW
Humorous incongruity	A dissonance between an important situation (a great invention, engineering breakthrough) and a trivial matter of personal hygiene
Repair strategy	Negation and restatement of a full propositional form of the initial utterance

Here, the source of misunderstanding is a wrong explicature generation in processing the utterance “Good luck”, where Jacques interprets it to be a wish of luck with his washing instead of the wish of luck for the fire balloon ascent intended by Joseph. The two competing explicature possibilities appear to be equal in effort-effect balance given the contextual assumptions brought to bear in the interpretation, as Joseph’s utterance “good luck” can either refer to the initial topic of the conversation or be an immediate reaction to Jacques’s statement “I think I’ll go and wash”. A discursual confusion of the topic is fabricated here in order to trigger humour, as the audience is made to follow Jacques’s erroneous interpretation and then shift inferential reasoning by accepting Joseph’s repair “No... good luck for tomorrow”.

Similarly to example (6), what makes (7) humorous is the incongruity between the seriousness of an important event and a trivial topic of personal hygiene. Jacques’s implicated assumption that one does not really need luck to wash, with the subsequent explanation of what washing is all about convey further implicated ridicule of the 18th century low hygiene standards. A gamut of weak implicatures related to washing as an activity requiring engagement and effort, reserved for certain occasions and not performed too often, may come to mind. This type of intellectual humour involving implicated assumptions that

have to be retrieved from background knowledge (in this case, the knowledge of certain historical facts) may not be available to everyone and demands exerting cognitive effort on the part of audience which is balanced off by a reward in the form of satisfaction associated with grasping the humorous intent.

Conclusions

The major aim of the present study is to demonstrate how the relevance-theoretic account of humorous interpretations involving incongruity resolution and weak communication effects explains the use of misunderstandings in comedic discourse as a mechanism generating mirth. Several scripted misunderstandings from Monty Python's productions were analysed with a view to demonstrating how the humorous outcome is engineered. Afforded by the double-layeredness of film communication, a distinctive feature of fabricated misunderstandings is that, unlike the naturally occurring ones, they are deliberate and meant to be recognised by the audience. That is why not just overt and covert, but also latent misunderstandings, which go unnoticed and do not surface in communicative exchanges between interlocutors in natural conversations, can become efficient tools of humour generation in scripted dialogues.

The relevance-theoretic analysis reveals how a breakdown might be staged at either explicit level (e.g., due to disambiguation which mismatches the speaker-intended proposition or force); or at implicit level to fabricate humorous incongruity, unresolvable in the case of surreal comedy productions. The relevance-theoretic analysis advanced here aims to reveal how miscommunication might be staged at either the explicit level (e.g., due to a mismatch of how the underdeterminacies in the decoded utterance get resolved by the hearer and how the speaker intended them to be resolved) or at the implicit level (because of a range of implicatures that a certain utterance makes manifest to the viewers) to fabricate humorous incongruity. The cases selected for the analysis demonstrate how inferential traps may be created and exploited to evoke humour. The inferential traps are part of the film discourse and affect character-oriented communication. Spectator-oriented communication, on the other hand, relies on the viewer being capable of engaging in a more refined comprehension process, which enables them not only to see the traps into which film characters fall, but also to reach more fine-grained interpretations of the film discourse, based on their metarepresentation abilities and more sophisticated comprehension path followed.

Two important ingredients responsible for making misunderstanding humorous as shown in the analyses above are a (partial) incongruity resolution and weak communication effects. This indicates that for a misunderstanding to be humorous it must necessarily involve incongruity and weak communication. Natural misunderstandings rarely meet both criteria, so they fail to generate mirth.

While previous work done on scripted misunderstandings (Brone, 2008; Desilla, 2019; Tzanne, 2000;) focused on the analysis of the structure and different types of misunderstandings, to the best of my knowledge no research on the mechanisms

underpinning scripted humorous misunderstanding has been conducted. The goal of the present study was to show how scriptwriters skilfully employ different aspects of verbal misunderstandings to generate humour. Identifying two essential qualities of comic misunderstandings, the present analyses explain why miscommunication in which the two are not present does not evoke humour. A further exploration of how humorous and non-humorous scripted misunderstandings differ would be another interesting line of research. Also expanding research into humorous misunderstandings by analysing examples from different genres might be insightful: scripted misunderstandings might appear in fictional works other than film, for example, novels, plays, and so on, so these are also worth examining. The present study was very limited in scope, and larger scale research would certainly be desirable.

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The Authors report no conflicts of interest.

Funding

The Authors report no sources of funding.

Research Ethics Statement

The study did not involve participants.

Data Availability Statement

Data associated with the current study will be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

This paper and the research behind it would not have been possible without the enthusiastic support, knowledgeable advice, and great attention to detail of my academic supervisors Prof. Maria Jodłowiec (Jagiellonian University in Krakow) and Prof. Francisco Yus Ramos (University of Alicante).

References

- Allott, N. (2016). Misunderstandings in verbal communication. In A., Rocci & L., de Saussure (Eds.), *Verbal communication* (pp. 485–507). Walter De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110255478-025>
- Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic theories of humor*. Mouton De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110219029>
- Attardo, S. (ed.) (2014). *The encyclopedia of humor studies*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483346182>
- Attardo, S. (2017). The GTVH and humorous discourse. In W., Chlopicki & D., Brzozowska (Eds.), *Humorous Discourse*. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Attardo, S., & Raskin, V. (1991). Script theory revis(it)ed: Joke similarity and joke representation model. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 4(3-4), 293–347. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.1991.4.3-4.293>
- Bach, K. (2007). Regression in pragmatics (and semantics). In Burton-Roberts, N. (Ed.) *Pragmatics*, 29–30. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bazzanella, C., & Damiano, R. (1999). The interactional handling of misunderstanding in everyday conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31, 817–836. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(98\)00058-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(98)00058-7)
- Belleri, D. (2014). *Semantic under-determinacy and communication*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137398444>
- Benko, S. A. (2012). Ironic faith in Monty Python's Life of Brian. *Journal of Religion & Film*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.16.01.06>
- Borg, E. (2016). Exploding explicatures. *Mind & Language*, 31(3), 335–355. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mila.12109>
- Bosco, F., Bucciarelli, M., & Bara, B. (2006). Recognition and repair of communicative failures: A developmental perspective. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38, 1398–1429. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2005.06.011>
- Bou-Franch, P. (2002). Misunderstandings and unofficial knowledge in institutional discourse. In Walton, D. & Scheu, D. (Eds) *Culture and power: Ac(unofficially)knowledging cultural studies in Spain*. Peter Lang.
- Brône, G. (2008). Hyper- and misunderstanding in interactional humour. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40, 2027–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2008.04.011>
- Callaway, H. (1992). Meaning holism and semantic realism. *Dialectica*, 46 (1), 41-59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-8361.1992.tb00084.x>
- Carston, R. (2002). *Thoughts and utterances. The pragmatics of explicit communication*. Malden, MA <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470754603>
- Clark, M. (1970). Humour and incongruity. *Philosophy*, 45(171), 20-32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181910000958X>
- Curco, C. (1995). Some observations on the pragmatics of humorous interpretations. A relevance-theoretic approach. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 7, 27–47.
- Dascal, M., & Berenstein, I. (1987). Two modes of understanding: Comprehend-

- ing and grasping. *Language & Communication*, 7(2), 139–151. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0271-5309\(87\)90004-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0271-5309(87)90004-8)
- Dascal, M. (ed). (1985). *Dialogue: An interdisciplinary approach*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbcs.1>
- Dascal, M. (1999). Some questions about misunderstanding. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31(6), 753–762. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(98\)00059-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(98)00059-9)
- Desilla, L. (2019). Happily lost in translation: Misunderstandings in film dialogue. *Multilingua*, 38(5). <https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2018-0123>
- Drew, P. (1997). "Open" class repair initiators in response to sequential sources of troubles in conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 28(1), 69–101. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(97\)89759-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(97)89759-7)
- Dynel, M. (2009). Beyond a joke: Types of conversational humour. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 3(5), 1284–1299. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-818X.2009.00152.x>
- Dynel, M. (2010). How do puns bear relevance? In M. Kisiełewska-Krysiuk, A. Piskorska & E. Wałaszewska (Eds.), *Relevance Studies in Poland. Exploring Translation and Communication Problems*. (pp. 105–124). Warsaw University Press.
- Dynel, M. (2011). Stranger than fiction. A few methodological notes on linguistic research in film discourse. *Brno Studies in English*, 37(1), 41–61. <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2011-1-3>
- Dynel, M. (2012). Garden paths, red lights and crossroads: On finding our way to understanding the cognitive mechanisms underlying jokes. *Israeli Journal of Humor Research: An International Journal*, 1, 6–28.
- Dynel, M. (2014). Isn't it ironic? Defining the scope of humorous irony. *Humor*, 27(4), 619–639. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2014-0096>
- Dynel, M. (2017). "Is there a tumour in your humour?": On misunderstanding and miscommunication in conversational humour. In R. Giora & M. Haugh (Eds.), *Doing pragmatics interculturally: Cognitive, linguistic and socio-pragmatic perspectives on language use*. (pp. 55–78) Mouton de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110546095-004>
- Fetzer, A. (2006). "Minister, we will see how the public judges you.": Media references in political interviews. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38(2), 180–195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2005.06.017>
- Forabosco, G. (2008). Is the concept of incongruity still a useful construct for the advancement of humour research? *Łódź Papers in Pragmatics*, 4(1)/ *Special Issue on Humour*, 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10016-008-0003-5>
- Fraser, B. (1993). No conversation without misinterpretation. In H., Parret (Ed.). *Pretending to communicate* (pp. 143–153). De Gruyter.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole, & J. L. Morgan. (Eds.), *Syntax and Semantics* (pp. 41–58). Academic Press.
- Hinnenkamp, V. (2003). Misunderstandings: Interaction structure and strategic resources. In J. House, G. Kasper & S. Ross (Eds.), *Misunderstanding in so-*

- cial life: Discourse approaches to problematic talk* (pp. 57–81). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315838663>
- Hofstadter, D., & Gabora, L. (1989). Synopsis of a workshop on humor and cognition. *Humor*, 2(4), 417–440.
- Hołobut, A., & Chłopicki, W. (2017). Editorial: Humour in nonsense literature. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 5(3), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2017.5.3.holobut>
- House, J., Kasper, S., & Ross, S. (Eds.). (2003). *Misunderstanding in social life: Discourse approaches to problematic talk*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315838663>
- Humphreys-Jones, C. (1986a). *An investigation of the types and structure of misunderstandings*. [Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation] University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. <http://theses.ncl.ac.uk/jspui/handle/10443/195>
- Jary, M. (2016). Rethinking explicit utterance content. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 102, 24–37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2016.06.003>
- Jaworski, A., Thurlow, C., Lawson, S., & Ylänné-McEwen, V. (2003). The uses and representations of local languages in tourist destinations: A view from British TV holiday programmes. *Language Awareness*, 12(1), 5–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658410308667063>
- Jefferson, G. (1972). Side sequences. In D. Sudnow (Ed.), *Studies in social interaction* (pp. 294–338). Free Press.
- Jefferson, G. (1987). On exposed and embedded correction in conversation. In Button, G., & L., John (Eds.), *Talk and Social Organisation* (pp. 86–100). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800418226-006>
- Jodłowiec, M. (2009). Relevance and misunderstanding. In E. Tarasti, P. Forsell & R. Littlefield (Eds.), *Communication: Understanding / Misunderstanding. Proceedings of the 9th Congress of the IASS-AIS - Helsinki-Imatra: Acta Semiotica Fennica XXXIV*. Imatra: International Semiotics Institute/Helsinki: Semiotic Society of Finland, 651–661.
- Jodłowiec, M. (2015). *The challenges of explicit and implicit communication: A relevance-theoretic approach*. Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-05190-2>
- Jodłowiec, M. (2021). Explicit import revisited: A critical appraisal of explicatures. *Studies in Polish Linguistics*, 16(3), 163–185. <https://doi.org/10.4467/23005920SPL.21.008.14262>
- Jodłowiec, M., & Piskorska, A. (2024). Dynamism of context: A case of joke interpretation. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 21(3), 431–449. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ip-2024-3006>
- Koestler, A. (1964). *The act of creation*. Macmillan.
- Kozloff, S. (2000). *Overhearing film dialogue*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520924024DeGruyter+2>
- McGhee, P. E. (1979). *Humor: Its origin and development*. Freeman.
- Morreall, J. (1987). *The philosophy of laughter and humor*. State University of New York.

- Nagano, R. (1997). Self-repair of Japanese speakers of English: A preliminary comparison with a study by W. J. M. Levelt. *Bulletin of Language Science and Humanities*, 65-90.
- Noonan, W. (2014). Absurdist humor. In S. Attardo (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of humor studies*. (pp. 1-4). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483346182>
- Oring, E. (1992). *Jokes and their relations*. University Press of Kentucky. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203787892>
- Oring, E. (2003). *Engaging humor*. University of Illinois Press.
- Padilla Cruz, M. (2017). Interlocutors-related and hearer-specific causes of misunderstanding: Processing strategy, confirmation bias and weak vigilance. *Research in Language*, 15(1), 11-36.
- Phillips, P. (2000). *Understanding film text: Meaning and experience*. British Film Institute.
- Piskorska, A., & Jodlowiec, M. (2018). Weak communication, joke targets and the punch-line effect: A relevance-theoretic account. *Studies in Polish Linguistics*, 13 (1), 25-44.
- Raeber, T. (2016). Distinguishing rhetorical from ironical questions. A relevance-theoretic account. In M., Padilla Cruz, (Ed.). *Relevance Theory: Recent developments, current challenges and future directions*. (pp. 173-192). John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.268.07rae>
- Recanati, F. (2010). *Truth-conditional pragmatics*. Clarendon Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199226993.001.0001>
- Recanati, F. (2004). *Literal meaning*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511615382>
- Rexach, J. (1998). Rhetorical questions, relevance and scales. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 11, 139-155.
- Sayer, I. M. (2013). Misunderstanding and language comprehension. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 70, 738 – 748. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.01.118>
- Schegloff, E. (1992). Repair after next turn: The last structurally provided defense of intersubjectivity in conversation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 97(5), 1295-1345. <https://doi.org/10.1086/229903>
- Schegloff, E. (2000). Overlapping talk and the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language in Society*, 29(1), 1-63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500001019>
- Schegloff, E. (2007). *Sequence organization in interaction: A primer in conversation analysis*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511791208>
- Schegloff, E., Jefferson, G., & Sacks, H. (1977). The preference for self-correction in the organisation of repair in conversation. *Language*, 53(2), 361-382. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.1977.0041>
- Schlesinger, I. M., & Hurvitz, S. (2008). The structure of misunderstandings. *Pragmatics & Cognition*, 16(3), 568-585. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pc.16.3.07sch>

- Schultz, T.R. (1996). A cognitive-developmental analysis of humor. In A. J. Chapman & H. C. Foot (Eds.), *Humour and laughter: Theory, research and applications* (pp. 11-36). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203789469-2>
- Sedlaczek, M. (2012). Nieporozumienie a relewancja. Klasyfikacja i definicja nieporozumień w świetle teorii relewancji [Misunderstanding and relevance. A classification and definition of misunderstandings in the light of relevance theory]. In B. Sierocka (Ed.), *Via Communicandi. Prace z Antropologii Komunikacji i Epistemologii Społecznej, Wydział Nauk Społecznych i Dziennikarstwa Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej*. (pp. 133-161). Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut.
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986/1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sperber, D. (1994). Understanding verbal understanding. In J. Khalfa (Ed.), *What is intelligence?* Cambridge University Press.
- Suls, J. (1972). A two-stage model for the appreciation of jokes and cartoons. In J. H. Goldstein & P. E. McGhee (Eds.), *The psychology of humor* (pp. 81-100). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-288950-9.50010-9>
- Thomas, J. (1981). *Pragmatic failure* [Unpublished MA thesis]. Lancaster University. https://www.academia.edu/7094473/Thomas_pragmatic_failure
- Tzanne, A. (2000). *Talking at cross-purposes: The dynamics of miscommunication*. John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.62>
- Vanoye, F. (1985). Conversations publiques. *Iris*, 3(1), 99-188.
- Vendler, Z. (1994). Understanding misunderstanding. In D. Jamieson (Ed.), *Language, mind, and art*. (pp. 9-21). Kluwer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-8313-8_2
- Verdonik, D. (2010). Between understanding and misunderstanding. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42(5), 1364-1379. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2009.09.007>
- Weigand, E. (1999). Misunderstanding: The standard case. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31, 763-785. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(98\)00068-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(98)00068-X)
- Weizman, E. (1999). Building true understanding via apparent miscommunication: A case study. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31, 837-846. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(96\)00057-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(96)00057-4)
- Wieczorek, M. (2021). *Humour as a carrier of meaning in sitcom discourse: A data-based study from a relevance-theoretic perspective* [Unpublished PhD thesis]. University of Warsaw.
- Wilson D. (2000). Metarepresentation in linguistic communication. In D. Sperber (Ed.), *Metarepresentation. A multidisciplinary perspective*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2022.12>
- Wilson, D., & Sperber, D. (2004) *Relevance theory*. In L. R. Horn & G. Ward (Eds.), *The handbook of Pragmatics* (pp. 607-632). Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470756959>
- Wilson, D., & Sperber, D. (2012). *Meaning and Relevance*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139028370>

- Yus, F. (1998). A decade of relevance theory. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 30, 305-345. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(98\)00015-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(98)00015-0)
- Yus, F. (1999a). Towards a pragmatic taxonomy of misunderstandings. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 38, 218-39.
- Yus, F. (1999b). Misunderstandings and explicit/implicit communication. *Pragmatics*, 9(4), 487-517. <https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.9.4.01yus>
- Yus, F. (2016). *Humour and Relevance*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/thr.4>
- Yus, F. (2017). Incongruity-resolution cases in jokes. *Lingua*, 197(1/2), 103-122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2017.02.002>
- Yus, F. (2020). Disambiguation should not exist (but it does in humour). *9th International Symposium on Intercultural, Cognitive and Social Pragmatics*.
- Zaefferer, D. (1977). Understanding misunderstanding: A proposal for an explanation of reading choices. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 1, 329-346. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(77\)90027-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(77)90027-3)