

HUMOROUS EFFECTS OF SPEECH ACTS IN *MURDOCH MYSTERIES* CINEMATIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Verbal humour is a widespread phenomenon in media communication, materialized in a variety of forms developed in a plethora of contexts, its multifaced manifestations opening the frame for diverse scientific investigations within many disciplines.

The amplitude of the humour research accounts for the interdisciplinary character of this field, which extracts and interprets significant information from linguistics, philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology and even film or literature, the issue of humour bearing a complex relevance to our daily life, our social interconnection and our human nature.

In performing a linguistic study of humorous excerpts from Canadian mystery series *Murdoch Mysteries*, we will include references to its dramatic structure, to characters' speech and the way their profile is built through dialogues, paying attention to the mechanisms of conveying meaning by employing standard language. The analysis from the perspective of verbal interactions elements, interactional competence and interactional skills will provide answers about various aspects of authentic spoken language (mainly dialogues) conceived by the script writers and performed by the film actors by adding further features as accent or pitch.

The linguistic study of humour embraces discussions on semantic mechanisms and cognitive processes, while pragmatic examination focuses on various communicative interactions. Humour researchers bring forward manifold methodological perspectives appealing to pragmatic and cognitive insights of verbal interactions, with the purpose of analysing particular aspects that characterize humorous discourse.

Key-words: *humour, speech acts, Murdoch Mysteries, verbal interaction.*

Introduction

The word *humour*, in its current sense of funniness, as well as theoretical considerations on laughter or comedy, became operational in the 18th century, when the majority of philosophers interweaved impressions and opinions about humour within discussions of another topic. It is most surprising that, even from ancient Greece, most philosophers who debated this concept expressed a negative evaluation of laughter and humour, considering them as signs of inferiority and decadence, while the literary potential of comedy, wit and joking was almost entirely ignored.

Linguists scrutinized the applicability of humour theories particularly on caned jokes or classic forms of conversational humour, later focusing their inquiry on short stories or other pieces of literature. The occurrence of humour in narrative texts has been of interest in the work of well-known linguists, while the approach to this complex phenomenon within the film screenplays opens the way for new perspectives of analysis, in terms of production mechanisms and pragmatic interpretations.

The last millennium compelled theoreticians to redirect their interest on cinematic discourse, which was a recent field that gained popularity among the younger generations due to the possibility of exploiting a new sort of non-literary production. This fertile *terra incognita* facilitated the rediscovery of power dynamics in the context of framing the identity of a character, capitalising the language with its verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal attributes (captured in didascalies) that altogether confer a humorous value to the lines.

Some of the linguistic subfields that emerged in the 1950s and in the 1960s, such as Pragmatics or Semantics, were uncharted territories for most of the linguists that studied humour, as some of the specialists rejected their peers' definitions or terminology. The pragmatic aspect of conversational routine (that deviates its course as puns or sarcasm occur) proves that humour emerges even in the latent forms of communication.

1. A Comparative Approach to Speech Acts

Austin in *How To Do Things With Words* (1962) distinguishes five categories of classes of utterances, grounded on their illocutionary force (a. verdictives, b. exercitives, c. commissives, d. behabitives and e. expositives), provides examples of verbs that facilitate the materialization of the concepts and makes comparison among the five categories.

Torreblanca López (2013) discusses John Austin's innovations, as far as the speech acts are concerned: *the locutionary act*, *the illocutionary act* and *the perlocutionary act*. Lopez points out that Austin, after analysing types of utterances, introduces the notion of *performative* utterances, seen as speech acts that are neither utterances, nor "subject to truth conditions" (2013: 2). After initially elaborating on the distinction between *performatives* and *constatives*, later Austin discards it, in favour of a more general theory of illocutionary forces, which is overlapping and confusing. His follower, Searle, reinterprets his classification, focusing only on illocutionary acts and develops a more precise taxonomy. In *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*,

Searle (1979) comments on Austin's classification: "they are not classifications of illocutionary acts, but of English illocutionary verbs. He also states that "[t]here is no clear or consistent principle or set of principles on the basis of which the taxonomy is constructed" (1979: 9-10), which generates an overlapping of the categories. Moreover, he provides an alternative classification, related to Austin's taxonomy, including *assertives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives*, *declaratives* (1979: 12-26), which we chose to apply in our analysis. Our motivation lies in that Searle bases his classification on three criteria: "the 'essential conditions' (Searle's term for the intentional goal), "the sincerity conditions" and "direction of fit" - whether the words copy the world as in statements or the world copies the words (Levinson 2017: 205). Consequently, his taxonomy of speech acts consists of: "*representatives* (assertion-like), *directives* (questioning, requesting, etc.), *commissives* (promising, threatening, offering), *expressives* (thanking, apologizing, etc.), and *declaratives* (blessing, christening, etc., which rely on special institutional backgrounds)" (Levinson 2017: 205 in Huang 2017).

Searle's ideas are enriched by the contribution of two other specialists, Kiefer and Bierwisch (1980) in *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*, a compilation of several authors' studies that highlight the connection between speech acts and syntactic meaning, semantic structures and illocutionary force, locutionary meaning and indirect speech acts. The volume also includes a set of methodological remarks on speech acts theory.

A critical interpretation of Austin and Searle's theory belongs to Fish (1976), whose article "How to do things with Austin and Searle: Speech act theory and literary criticism" in *MLN* 91(5), discloses its flaws within linguistics and literature. Some of these limitations subsume the fact that it cannot assist stylistics, neither can it distinguish between literature and non-literature, or discern between a work of fiction and real-life discourse. He concludes that "[i]f Speech Act theory is itself an interpretation, then it cannot possibly serve as an all-purpose interpretive key." (1976: 1023).

Inspired by Grice and in line with Searle's influential approach based on the role of utterer's intention, Bach and Harnish (1979) propose another classification focusing on the speaker's intention. They clarify the distinction between *conventions* – actions that are equivalent to something else when they are carried out in appropriate circumstances, and *rules* – involving socially expected behaviour (Bach and Harnish, 1979: 121). On the fundament of these notions, they differentiate between *communicative* and *conventional* illocutionary acts: "Communicative illocutionary acts succeed by means of recognition of intention, whereas conventional ones succeed by satisfying a convention" (Bach and Harnish, 1979: 110).

2. Methodology and Research Questions

This paper aims to reveal how illocutionary speech acts elicit humour in the interlocutor (another character or characters) or in the audience and how the perlocutionary acts enhance amusement. It also aims to build and update a mental representation of humour, which can be appreciated only if film scripts are regarded as a whole.

The method employed in this article was the speech act analysis of a humorous excerpt of cinematic discourse, within the framework constructed by the characters.

The research questions of this paper are:

- a. Can speech acts be interpreted as instances of humour?
- b. Which of the subcategories of illocutionary speech acts is the most frequently used in the texts analysed?

After an exhaustive search of standard transcription systems, we decided to follow the Jefferson Transcription System (Galița, 2011: 44), whose symbols are, in fact, a conversational analysis code that facilitates the reading of an audio fragment, or a script in this particular case. Our special contribution relies in applying the Jeffersonian system on an audio-visual fragment extracted from *Murdoch Mysteries* Series and even refreshing the system with up-to-date symbols in our research paper.

The applicative part is based on a fragment selected from season 12, episode 1, in which, after having identified its humorous potential, we first transcribed it as a plain text, and then placed the Jeffersonian symbols. Next, following a contextualisation of the most important adjacency pairs, we delved into identifying and analysing the illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts, according to Searle's taxonomy. Unlike Austin, his categories are more precisely designated and more clearly explained.

3. Symmetrical and Asymmetrical Verbal Interactions

A person's social status allows them to speak up their mind, to restrain their thoughts or express themselves freely. The dynamics of language and the roles accepted by interlocutors within a social setting determined Vion (1992) to reconsider symmetrical and asymmetrical verbal interactions. Symmetrical interactions minimize discrepancies between interlocutors, by assertively displaying empathy and respect. Participants possess equal power, since this type of interaction occurs between friend, kins or co-workers.

The asymmetrical interactions gravitate around creating differences and even maximizing them, depending on the higher or lower position held by the emitter and the recipient. The interaction depends on disparities such as age, gender, hierarchy, seniority, personal income and materializes as arguments and conflicts primarily between employer and employees. The competition between interlocutors hinders the equilibrium set by the participants in a previous context and impede any form of cooperation (Bonta, 2014:10).

4. The Humorous Effect of Using Language as an Expression of Power in *Murdoch Mysteries*

Each episode of *Murdoch Mysteries* series has its plot and narrative elements, while the setting is sometimes changed, according to the development of the action. Even if each episode has internal unique elements, they are connected under a frame of continuity that allows viewers to recall details from previous episodes in a way that affects the expectations and interpretations of the jokes in the series.

The excerpt extracted from season 12, episode 1 that we chose to analyse illustrates the idea that speech acts uttered in asymmetrical interactions have the potential to generate humour. From a pragmatic point of view, one can notice the crucial importance of context, implicature and inference that includes an array of significances interpreted by interlocutors from their position of higher or lower authority, as well as the viewer who is familiarised with the plot.

Throughout the series, Detective Murdoch is assisted by other characters, usually the constables within the precinct. Murdoch's immediate superior, Inspector Thomas Brackenreid, who is the chief of Police Station number 4, is a straightforward Yorkshireman and an old school copper, so he keeps a harsh attitude to his subordinates, especially to Higgins, who rarely puts some effort into his duties. The context of this episode involves exactly Constable Higgins who is about to get married to a gentle woman called Ruth, whose wealth facilitates Higgins's advancement in higher society. The problem is that his wedding preparations interfere with his job, and nobody seems to know where to find him. Inspector Brackenreid, who is strict about the daily schedule, and overlooked Higgins's professional errors many times before, reaches a point when he can no longer accept his lack of involvement. He takes position and reprimands Higgins, whereas his wife, Margaret Brackenreid, offers her services to the couple as a wedding planner.

The exchange of speech acts between the Inspector and the Constable alternates the symmetrical and asymmetrical verbal interactions, marking their effort to justify themselves and have the last word, to the amazement of the other policemen and to the public's delight.

Constable Higgins: >Morning.<

Inspector Brackenreid: !£Ah↓, Constable Higgins! Nice to see you↑!£

Constable Higgins's expressive speech act (an informal morning greeting) triggers Inspector Brackenreid's ironic greeting. At a paraverbal level, we can notice how Inspector Brackenreid's apparent cheerfulness baffles the audience and gets unnoticed by the naïve Constable Higgins who expects the Inspector to be in high spirits. The two exclamations express Inspector Brackenreid's mockery by the use of the interjection *Ah!* that suggests surprise. The character's linguistic choice has both practical reasons (Brackenreid notices that Higgins has finally decided to come to work) and affective reasons (Brackenreid implies that he is familiarised with his subordinate's future as a member of a rich family and his possible resignation).

Constable Higgins: Oh!. £Thank you↑, sir.£

Inspector Brackenreid: <£Will↑ you be staying LONG?£>

Constable Higgins: I don't know yet, sir. >Why, did Ruth↑ call? Does she need↑ me?<

The Constable's answer includes asymmetrical polite address forms (*sir*) and his unsuspecting reply to Brackenreid's greeting implicates Higgins's ignorance caused by his impending nuptials. The exchange of lines amuses the audience, since they predict a possible rage outburst from the Inspector.

Brackenreid's exploratory question, also using politeness markers, requests further clarification, hence its declarative nature. The irony is underlined by the implied uncertainty as far as the rules in a police station with its shifts and beats are concerned. The audience infers the Inspector's unnatural level of courtesy due to the continuous aspect of the verb *stay* and the polite function of the modal verb *will*. The emphasis on the adverb *long* covers Brackenreid's complaining about Higgins's habit of neglecting his duty.

At the same morphological level, the uncertainty expressed by constable Higgins contrasts with the seriousness of his job through the negative auxiliary verb *don't* and the adverb *yet*. Higgins's nervousness emerges in his expressive speech acts as his speaking rate increases, and pitches in his wife's name, *Ruth*, and by the use of the verb *need*, these being key-words that reveal Higgins's excuse for skipping his job.

Inspector Brackenreid: £No. Now, get your >good boots< on.
>Two↑ days foot patrol< in the Ward. With EXTRA hours to make
up↑ for the time that you missed.£

Constable Higgins: Sir, I can't↓ do that. I have <things↑ I need to
take care of>.

Inspector Brackenreid: £You will do that↑, and you↑ will do
WHATEVER <I tell you to↑>.£

Constable Higgins: Sir↑, I'm getting married↑. <I can't risk
getting INJURED before↑ the wedding↑>.

Brackenreid continues the dialogue on asymmetrical premises in his intention to control the interaction. As he is placed in a higher rank, he uses directive speech acts by giving orders (the imperative *get*, followed by verbal elliptical constructions). The use of the adjective *extra* reinforces the asymmetrical relationship of superiority, his passive-aggressive attitude being reflected by his grim smile while uttering the directives. The other constables in the precinct perceive its tint of funniness due to the Inspector's delivery, which is formulated like a reward, instead of being formulated as a penalty. Following the turn-taking system, Higgins initiates a kind of negotiation-like language exchange building his objection on other assertive speech acts (the negative modal *can't*, the modal *need to*). The noun *things* builds a vague argumentative frame as long as the constable's issues reveal their shallow nature. The assertive speech acts gradually distributed within argumentation do, in fact, disobey a direct order which the audience finds funny for the reason that Higgins defies his superior and behaves as an aristocrat without being married.

Higgins's defying attitude prefigures a conflict, since the Inspector rejects his superfluous arguments and he focuses his speech on further directives which

contain the relative pronouns *that* and *whatever*, supported by the modal *will* which reflects the speaker's volition.

Assuming that his previous argumentation produced ambiguity and that the Inspector missed his point, Higgins attempts to defend his position by resorting to reformulation and supplementary arguments by means of the assertive speech act (the clause *I'm getting married*) and the expressive speech act (the clause *I can't risk getting injured*).

The humour in this context is rendered by the perlocutionary effect of Higgins's way of expressing himself in a manner suitable for an ecstatic lady that expects to marry, rather than a police officer.

Inspector Brackenreid: You're risking↑ getting >INJURED right now↑<.

While Higgins infers that he can negotiate the schedule, his interlocutor restates Higgins's excuse, underlining a dash of reproach, intermingled with an obvious commissive speech act that denotes a threat (the verb in present participle form *risk* and the verb in gerund form *get*, which express an immediate effect of his disobedience; the adjective *injured*, used for dramatic effect, and the adverb *right now*, with its precise connotation). The humorous effect is provided by the fact that, taking into account Brackenreid's behavioural history, his threat might be materialised.

Another Constable: [Ruth] is on the telephone.

(Western showdown music) (Telephone Ringing)

Inspector Brackenreid: >Don't you bloody↑ dare<.

(Telephone Ringing) (Snarling)

Constable Higgins: (Picks up the phone) Roo↑-poo↓.

Inspector Brackenreid: (Grabs the receiver) <Goodbye↑, Roo↑-Poo↑>! (Slams the phone down)

In this fragment, the humorous side of the conflict resides in a juxtaposition of verbal and paraverbal elements. The future bride violates the procedure and calls at the station house for minor personal issues, much to Brackenreid's despair. Therefore, the Inspector commands Higgins to ignore his fiancé's phone call by a commissive speech act, empowered by the use of an imperative with negative aspect (the negative auxiliary verb *don't* and the verb *dare*) and the adverb *bloody*. The nonverbal aspects (snarling and slamming the phone) increase the humorous effect. Higgins calls Ruth by her pet's name (Roo-poo), which is highly inappropriate in a formal context, this being the reason why Inspector Brackenreid responds angrily to this expressive speech act. Higgins's ostentatious behaviour pushes the social limit of keeping personal affairs private, as he no longer feels inferior to the Inspector, but the Inspector replies to this disrespectful attitude with a sarcastic greeting. The contorted repetition of Higgins's line can be interpreted as an order-like directive, even though the verb is elliptical, for the reason that the Inspector wants to finish the conversation.

The perlocutionary speech act is a consequence of mixing verbal (words), paraverbal (accelerated tempo) and nonverbal elements (snarling and slamming): the confrontation between the Inspector and the Constable parodies a shoot-out scene from a typical Western movie in which the sheriff faces a bandit.

Constable Higgins: >Why did you do that↑?<

Inspector Brackenreid: >Because you're on the job↑< and when you are↓ >you listen to me↑<! And <if you don't↑> you'll be working on <your bloody↑ wedding day>!

Constable Higgins breaks the code of asymmetrical relationships by ceasing to call his superior *sir*. Brackenreid ignores Higgins's reproach and answers his open question (that is both an attempt to find out the interlocutor's opinion and an expression of indignation stirred by the Inspector's intrusion in his family matters) with a series of directive speech acts. At the paraverbal level, we can notice that Brackenreid accelerates his tempo when he utters directive speech acts (he alternates the first-person personal pronouns *I* and *me* with the second person personal pronoun *you* as a strategy of restoring his position and reclaim his power and status) and he decelerates when he utters commissive speech acts (when he threatens Higgins). Brackenreid expresses his disdain for the upcoming event, which is a sacred moment in a Christian's life, by attaching the adjective *bloody* to the possessive adjective *your* and the noun phrase *wedding day*.

Constable Higgins: £Well, we↑ won't have to worry about that↓ anymore↑£. <From this day forward>, >Henry Hieronymus Higgins< listens to no↑ man! <I RESIGN>.

Inspector Brackenreid: >You're FIRED!<

Constable Higgins: (Chuckling) £I said it first.£

Inspector Brackenreid: (Snarling) >Get out↑!<

Higgins defies his superior and triggers an effervescent exchange of lines from the fisty Inspector. In the first line, the Constable uses the personal pronoun *we* with the purpose of eliminating any asymmetrical relationship between himself and his superior. Another humorous detail in Higgins's speech is his middle name, *Hieronymus*, which means "with a sacred name". He particularly selected it for the sake of possessing a noble name and for the sake of the impressive resonance created by the alliteration.

Higgins aims to offend the inspector with his declarative speech act *I resign*, but the Inspector backfires with the declarative speech act *You're fired*, which recalibrates the asymmetric relationship between the two. The Constable's shallow reaction to the news contrasts with the gravity of the situation, since he turns into a kind of play and childishly corrects his boss, implying a level of superiority. Devoid of other arguments and overwhelmed with fury, Brackenreid concludes the asymmetric interaction with an abrupt directive speech act meant to prove he, as a superior, has the last word.

Constable Higgins: You know↓, you were lucky↑ to have me↑. <I gave the best↑ 10 years of my life↑ to this place↓, and what'd I get in return? NOTHING!

Inspector Brackenreid: >You received payment↑ when you didn't even↓ deserve↑ it!<

Constable Higgins: <Oh, I deserved↑ it>, being bossed↑ around for no↓ reason. >Day in↑, day out↓, listening to you↑ prattle on and on<. No. Oh! And as for your wife, >I wouldn't trust her to plan< <£afternoon tea↑£>!

Inspector Brackenreid: WHY YOU LITTLE↑...

Detective Murdoch: <Perhaps a drink↑ is in order↓>.

Unexpectedly, instead of showing submission, Higgins, in a euphoric moment, arrogantly continues the dispute by exaggerating his professional merits. His choice of the adjective *lucky* is prompted by his subjectivity, while he builds his objections on the superlative *the best*, meant to suggest his dedication to the job. Higgins goes on with a reproach expressed through a rhetorical question and reinforces his position of power by offering the obvious answer to the question: the pronoun *nothing* as an elliptical expressive speech act.

Brackenreid's assertive speech act reminds Higgins of his professional blunders. The implicature of this speech act is that the Inspector underlines his generosity towards the ungrateful constable, who defies his boss due to his current situation. Higgins fights back by providing a counterargument under the form of a representative speech act that includes the interjection *oh*, the first-person personal pronoun *I*, the verb *deserved*, the phrasal verb in a continuous form *being bossed around*, and the idiom *for no reason*. The Constable further deploras his working conditions, as he expresses his malcontent with the series of repetitions *day in, day out; on and on*, implicating that his value was never appreciated and presenting himself as a victim of Brackenreid's abuse.

The peak of the humorous effect occurs in the final blow that reaches a personal level, when Higgins directly insults his superior's wife by displaying a contemptuous attitude regarding Mrs Brackenreid's organizational skills, in an attempt to counterbalance the Inspector's verbal offensive. The striking merger of terms belonging to different lexical (police affairs and serving tea) fields ironically denotes the speaker's disrespect and rudeness, proving the speaker's inability to build a viable argumentation. This attitude fuels the Inspector's anger, who resorts to threats and prepares himself to hit his subordinate. The implicature of the Inspector's commissive speech act (the expression *Why you little*) is that Higgins's behaviour is so despicable that he is no longer worth bothering to insult. The perlocutionary effect of Higgins's speech acts irritate the Inspector and determine Brackenreid to take the matter in his own hands, as prepares himself to give Higgins the beating of his life.

A humorous twist materializes when Detective Murdoch, who is a devout catholic and disapproves Brackenreid's alcoholism, friendly intervenes with a subtle directive speech act (*Perhaps a drink is in order*) that interrupts the upcoming fistfight and urges the Inspector to have a drink to calm his nerves. The

adverb *perhaps* is used with the exact opposite meaning, implicating that it is imperative for the Inspector to mitigate his aggressiveness before he does something he might regret.

In the light of the ideas presented above, the answer to the first research question underlines that the humorous effect is perceived both by the other characters witnessing the scene and by the viewer who is familiar with the context of the series and the character's temper, therefore anticipating their possible reactions and lines. In this cinematic discourse, both participants try to prove their verbal power by building their arguments on the foundations laid by their opponent, taking turns and adjusting their discourse to the course of the dispute.

Bearing in mind that the general and imprecise taxonomies suggested by various scholars are an impediment in identifying means of building humour, the analysis of speech acts provided a debatable answer for the second research question. In the limits of this article, we applied Searle's taxonomy on the selected fragments although the variety of approaches concerning speech acts open the way to further inquiries.

The speech act that occurred the most in this fragment were the directives (8 times), likely due to the reason that the plot takes place in a police station and a natural manner of speaking was giving orders to one's inferiors. The other speech acts (representatives, commissives, and expressives) appeared approximately the same number of times (5 times), whereas declaratives were uttered only 3 times. In a nutshell, in some instances, an expressive speech act might be funnier than a declarative speech act or the other way around, thus their unpredictable nature and improbability of identifying the most common speech act with humorous result.

Conclusions

In this article, we conveyed a succinct description of speech acts and a comparative approach to the most renowned taxonomies of illocutionary speech acts. We demonstrated how the use of (a)symmetrical verbal interactions and language as an expression of power that have the potential to generate humour.

As indicated by our analysis, the characters' efforts of maintaining a social position led to the identification of asymmetrical verbal interactions delivered through a set of speech acts which are mostly directives (Brackenreid's linguistic choices) or assertives (Higgins's linguistic choices).

We can conclude by using Thomas P. Kasulis's words in his *Introduction* to the journal article *Philosophy and Humor*, published by University of Hawaii Press in July 1989. According to him: "Humor is no joke. It plays an important role in our understanding of ourselves, our society and our world at large. It cools our tempers and warms our hearts. [...] It stimulates the imagination and provokes new insight".

The Jefferson Transcription System: Symbols and Their Meaning

"Jeffersonian Transcription" is an analysis code universally used by academics who scrutinise speech patterns. The most extensive version of the Jefferson Transcription System was promoted by the British website

www.universitytranscriptions.co.uk. The most used symbols and their meaning are presented in the next paragraph as follows:

>word< = increased speaking rate

<word> = decreased speaking rate

↑ word = pitch up

↓ word = pitch down

WORD = words or syllables louder than the rest of the speech

£word£ = smiley voice.

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