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# “A Show about Language”: A Linguistic Investigation of the Creation of Humor in Seinfeld

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“A Show about Language”: A Linguistic Investigation of the Creation of Humor in  
*Seinfeld*

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the creation of humor in the dialog of the television sit-com *Seinfeld* to gain a deeper understanding of humor techniques in a long format. By analyzing six episodes of the series, it is seen that the Incongruity Theory of Humor, violations of Grice's maxims of the Cooperative Principle, and perspective clashes (such as miscommunications) are essential to the humor throughout each episode.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The Incongruity Theory of Humor is a focus of the field of Linguistic Humor Studies. Using this theory as a guide, the maxims of H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle (the Maxim of Quality, the Maxim of Quantity, the Maxim of Relevance, and the Maxim of Manner) can be used as tools to understand the creation of humor in the conversations of characters in television programs. A method of analyzing characters' perspective clashing, proposed by Bastian Mayerhofer, sheds light on the incongruities of and in characters' conversations in the television programs and how humor is created using these clashes.

This paper deals with one of the most notable American comedies of the last few decades: *Seinfeld*. Created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, the show features characters that deviate from conversational norms frequently, sometimes even marveling at their own ineptitude. However, because of the show's nature as a comedy program, audiences are aware that these conversations are designed to have a humorous effect. The perspective clashes and miscommunications in the show are the result of the characters' interactions with and violations of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle and the humor of the show hinges on these conversations, as the characters' deviations from the audience's expectations. This deviation creates an incongruous experience for the audience.

Additionally, this paper proposes that there are two primary ways in which the maxims can be treated in the television sit-com. The first case shows the way short, individual instances of violations of the maxims can create humor. This case was examined by I.B. Aditya Putra Wardana in the article "The Violation of Gricean Maxims as Verbal Humor in *The Big Bang Theory*." In this examination of the television sit-com *The Big Bang Theory*, Wardana found that all of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle were violated to create humor. Wardana's study

focused on incidences of the characters violating the maxims and did not trace the connection between interactions in which the maxims are violated. However, viewing the humorous violations of the maxims individually does not completely explain the demands for humor that are present in a long format such as an episode of television.

While not all humorous violations of the maxims are important to the episode as a whole, Wardana's study viewed all violations of the maxims in this way. In this study I will propose and describe a second case by analyzing the humorous violations of the maxims in six episodes of *Seinfeld*. This second case differs from the case that Wardana presented in that it will offer a lengthier explanation of the characters' violations the maxims of conversation throughout episodes of the series and propose that perspective clashes resulting from violations of Grice's maxims are an essential part of the humor of the episodes. Each episode contains a violation of a maxim or the characters' interactions with a particular maxim that is repeatedly highlighted throughout the episode. This second case is necessary in the creation of a cohesive storyline, which audiences expect from a television show.

By examining these two cases, this study aims to create a deeper understanding of the way language is used to create humor in the television sit-com. By analyzing successful humorous programs, a clearer idea of what humor is and what is considered humorous can be generated. Unlike some previous studies, I am interested in methods that other writers have used to create humor not only for the purposes of understanding how language was used by successful humor writers but also to provide some insight for future writers. Understanding the choices and styles of past writers is important to understanding our culture and to creating new works. As creating humor is often an elusive goal, careful analysis of successful humorous works is necessary.

## **Research Questions**

This paper addresses three research questions:

1. How is humor created in the dialog of the television sit-com *Seinfeld*?
2. Can the Incongruity Theory of Humor be used to explain the humor of *Seinfeld*?
3. Are Grice's maxims related to the Incongruity Theory of Humor and its role in the television sit-com?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

H.P. Grice's Cooperative Principle describes the conventions speakers follow in a conversation. There is an unspoken agreement between interlocutors to follow the rules of the Cooperative Principle to ensure that meaningful conversation can occur. Grice breaks this principle down into four sets of maxims with accompanying submaxims, they are

1. The Maxim of Quantity
  - a. Be as informative as is required.
  - b. Do not be more informative than is required.
2. The Maxim of Quality
  - a. Make only truthful contributions.
  - b. Do not make contributions for which you do not have evidence of truth.
3. The Maxim of Manner
  - a. Avoid ambiguity and obscurity.
  - b. Be brief and orderly.
4. The Maxim of Relevance
  - a. Make only relevant contributions.

(Grice 26-27).

When speakers do not follow one or more of these maxims, other participants in the conversation can infer that they are doing so purposely. This is called flouting the maxim. In everyday conversation speakers do this to signal something to their interlocutors. The following examples show violations of each of the maxims and the implications of the violation:

1. Violation of the Maxim of Quantity
  - a. "Mother: Have you done your homework for all of your classes yet?"



Son: I've finished my history homework." (Bergmann et al. 281)

- b. The son violates the Maxim of Quantity because he does not tell his mother about the homework for all his classes, as she requested. While it is possible that he has finished all his homework, his mother may reasonably infer that he has only finished his history homework and that he has additional homework to do.
2. Violation of the Maxim of Quality
    - a. "Sandy: We need someone to make some sort of cake for the picnic.  
Tom: I can make my family's favorite chocolate cake." (Bergmann et al. 282)
    - b. In this exchange, Sandy and Tom may hold different ideas on what is necessary to make Tom's statement true. Sandy may infer that Tom has made the cake before and so he will be able to make it again. However, Tom may actually lack this previous experience. If Tom is not able to make the cake for the picnic, Sandy will believe that Tom lied to her about his ability to make the cake and thereby violated of the Maxim of Quality.
  3. Violation of the Maxim of Manner
    - a. "Rebecca took the medication and had an allergic reaction.
    - b. Rebecca had an allergic reaction and took the medication." (Bergmann et al. 281)
    - c. Either of these two statements could be a violation of the Maxim of Manner because the conjunction "and" implies that the events are told in chronological order. If Rebecca had an allergic reaction to the medication that she took, but a speaker told a nurse statement (b), the speaker would have violated the Maxim of Manner. Conversely, if Rebecca had an allergic reaction and took the medication to relieve her symptoms, a speaker would violate the Maxim of Manner by saying

statement (a). The speaker must list the events in chronological order or the hearer will infer an incorrect sequence of events.

#### 4. Violation of the Maxim of Relevance

- a. “Alana: Is Jamie dating anyone these days?

Sam: Well, she goes to Cleveland every weekend.” (Bergmann et al. 280)

- b. In this exchange, Sam violates the Maxim of Relevance because he does not directly state whether or not Jamie is dating anyone. However, Alana can infer from Sam’s statement that Jamie’s visiting Cleveland every weekend is in fact related to Jamie’s relationship status. Alana can reasonably assume that Sam is implying that Jamie is in a relationship and she is traveling to Cleveland to visit her partner.

In the examples above, the speaker can violate a maxim to imply a meaning which the hearer may either correctly or incorrectly infer. In a humorous text, however, there are two sets of listeners that need to be considered when a speaker flouts a maxim. Marta Dynel discusses the differences in the experience of the conversation, stating an utterance “may carry different pragmatic effects for each of the hearers” (109). The first set of hearers is the other characters participating in the conversation. In a piece that functions in a mode of realism, the characters will expect a speaker to follow the Cooperative Principle and will respond to a speaker’s flouting of a maxim in the same way a person would respond in real life. The second set of listeners is the audience. The audience has access to a different set of knowledge than the characters on screen. In the context of a television comedy program, they expect the characters to say and do things with the intention of making them laugh (Dynel 110). Therefore, an audience member can

reasonably assume that a violation of a maxim is at least partially motivated by the creation of humor.

However, when watching a realist piece, the audience is still able to perceive violations of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle that deviate from the expected pattern of a conversation as incongruous events. The Incongruity Theory of Humor, in its simplest form, states that humor is realized when “some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our standard mental patterns and normal expectations” (Morreal). In our daily conversation, we assume that most speakers will follow the Cooperative Principle. Although we may lack a conscious knowledge of the Cooperative Principle or be unable to explicitly explain a violation, we have a tacit knowledge of these rules of conversation. If they do not follow the Cooperative Principle, we are generally able to understand the reason for their violation based on context. Additionally, we expect that when a speaker violates a maxim, their interlocuters will understand that the maxims are being violated. In these ways, the audience expects a clarity of communication; miscommunications, particularly those in which the miscommunication is obvious to the viewer, are perceived as incongruous events.

Marta Dynel outlines the Incongruity Theory of Humor in the introduction to *Developments in Linguistic Humor Theory*:

“The *incongruity-resolution*<sup>1</sup> model, for which Suls is primarily credited, is most frequently argued to capture the whole gamut of humour forms from a linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> Dynel uses “incongruity-resolution model” and “incongruity theory” interchangeably (Dynel vii).

perspective. Initially advanced as a psychological model for the experience of *verbal humour* (i.e. humour hinged on language use/text/discourse, such as jokes and riddles) and *non-verbal humour* (e.g. cartoons), the incongruity-resolution framework is typically deployed in cognitive and pragmatic studies on the incremental analysis of jokes.

Understood either as a deviation from a cognitive model of reference (psychological view) or a mismatch/contrast between two meanings (linguistic view), the resolvable incongruity framework is also employed in discussions of other stimuli which may foster humour, such as *irony* in interaction” (vii).

From Dynel’s writing, the Incongruity Theory of Humor can be understood more simply: humor can be created when the reality of a situation does not match our expectations.

Working in this same direction, Bastian Mayerhofer proposed in 2013 that the humor in miscommunication is the result of perspective clashing. Within the frame of fictional works, Mayerhofer offers a deeper analysis of the workings of humor in fiction:

“Originally, literature and drama theory referred to it as dramatic irony or discrepant awareness. Consideration from a cognitive-psychological point of view, however, allows an extended, more universal scope of the concept of perspective clashing in terms of the underlying theoretical frameworks. Here, the term perspective clashing implies that a faulty perspective is mentally compared to at least one distinguishable and incompatible perspective. It is the gap between these cognitive evaluations, with one being superior and not suffering from a wrong belief, which leads to the emotional reaction to humour. Situations and stories which are conducive to perspective clashing can, therefore, be perceived as funny” (230).

Mayerhofer's analysis provides a clearer view into the methods writers may use to create humor in their work. Perspective clashes can be created through misunderstandings, and in the script format, one of the most clearly useful ways of creating these misunderstandings is through conversation and dramatic irony.

It is in this way that humor is created in *Seinfeld*. Through misunderstandings originating from violations of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle, perspective clashes are created. In conversations, as will be shown, listeners misinterpret speakers' statements, interlocutors hold differing views on the maxims of the Cooperative Principle, and characters intentionally twist the maxims to suit their needs. Because the show is a work of fiction, it is understood that all of these miscommunications are purposefully created by the writers of the show to be interpreted as humorous by the audience. In all these instances of miscommunication, it is crucial that the audience understands that differing perspectives on the conversation exist among the characters. As Mayerhofer states, "At least one perspective is recognised as erroneous, but consequent or reasonable according to each character's perspective. The false belief, despite being false, is recognised to be coherent within the fictional character's perspective" (217). The audience knows that one of the characters' perspectives is incorrect, but the audience must believe that the character could reasonably hold the incorrect perspective.

In the format of the television sit-com, these instances of miscommunication are important and each episode of *Seinfeld* presents the miscommunication more than once. While previous studies in television sit-coms, such as I.B. Aditya Putra Wardana's analysis of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle and verbal humor in *The Big Bang Theory*, focused on isolated incidents of the maxims and humor, these short instances do not fully explain the complexity and length of the sit-com format. Violations of the maxims and the

misunderstandings that originate from characters' treatment of the Cooperative Principle create humorous incongruities, can have bigger effects on the episode, and generate a greater response than a momentary laughter.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

In the analysis of the role of Grice's maxims and the creation of humor in *Seinfeld*, I used a sample size of six episodes. These episodes were randomly selected from the DVD collection *Seinfeld: The Complete Series*. To avoid bias, I reviewed the first six episodes of season seven chronologically: "The Engagement," "The Postponement," "The Maestro," "The Wink," "The Hot Tub," and "The Soup Nazi." Without commercials, each episode in the series is approximately twenty to twenty-five minutes long. The series was originally aired between 1989 and 1998 on the American television network NBC, and all of the episodes I analyzed originally aired between September and November, 1995.

I watched to all six episodes and the instances of the maxims being violated were noted. I transcribed examples from the episodes which included a violation of Grice's maxims. The different types of violations were highlighted and noted for which maxim was violated. Then, I identified recurring patterns in the episodes. Using the Incongruity Theory of Humor, I analyzed the violations of Grice's maxims and the characters' perspective clashes to understand the creation of humor in the episodes.

In addition to the episodes on DVD, the user-generated scripts available from The Internet Movie Script Database were used as an aid. The scripts were cross-referenced to the dialog in the DVD episodes. All quotations used are from the DVD episodes; none are taken from these online scripts.

The main focus of this study was the way in which the violation of Grice's maxims can create humor in the longer format of the television sit-com *Seinfeld*. As the analysis and discussion of the episodes below will show, the episodes that were reviewed were seen to have a consistent manner of using the violations of the maxims in the creation of humor.

## Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion

The following section contains an analysis and discussion of six episodes of *Seinfeld*. In the discussion of the “The Maestro,” I present one example of each of the two cases of the maxims’ ability to create humor. The first example is of the first case, showing a short, isolated incident of humor resulting from a violation of a maxim. This example is similar to Wardana’s analysis of *The Big Bang Theory*.

The remainder of the examples presented are of the more important second case which shows how a violation of the maxims function as a source of humor throughout an episode. Each episode in this study contained a moment in dialog that was a variation of this second case: a maxim was violated, which created a humorous incongruity and a perspective clash between characters which was explored over the course of the episode. The presence of this second case in each of the episodes suggests that this way of using language is one of the key ways in which *Seinfeld* creates humor.

### “The Maestro”

Below are two examples in this episode which I will use to illustrate the differences in the treatment of the violations of Grice’s maxims between the two cases of characters flouting the maxims.

#### Example 1:

- (1) Jerry: So ah, what did you do last night?
- (2) Elaine: Nothing.
- (3) Jerry: I know nothing. But what did you actually do?
- (4) Elaine: Literally nothing. I sat in a chair and I stared.
- (5) Jerry: Wow. That really is nothing.



(6) Elaine: I told ya.

In (1.2), Elaine supplies an answer to Jerry's question that would ordinarily be considered a violation of the Maxim of Quantity. Noticing that Elaine has done this, Jerry prompts her for more information in (1.3). However, (1.4-6) make it clear that Elaine was not violating this maxim. She did not engage in any activities last night and therefore cannot share any further information with Jerry. In these final lines, they both agree that Elaine's initial response (1.2) was a sufficient response to Jerry's question.

The conversation draws attention to the way language is used in everyday conversations. Jerry's initial question in (1.1) can be seen as a question only meant to start a conversation. This phenomenon is called phatic communion. In this view, (1.2) becomes an instance of the Maxim of Quantity being flouted with the purpose of implying that Elaine does not want to talk about what she did last night. However, (1.4) uses an outlandish claim that Elaine did not engage in any activities as a way of reinventing the script of phatic communion. In this way, incongruity between what we can assume the dialog of phatic communion will be and what the characters actually say is created. We expect that Elaine will concede that she does more than "nothing" last night when Jerry prompts her again, but she did not..

This conversation is a unique use of the Maxim of Quantity. Our expectations about the conversation are violated and the segment is found to be humorous because of this incongruity: We expect that Elaine would be providing insufficient information when she states that she did nothing, but instead we learn that (1.2) was a truthful response.

The case in Example 1 is different from other, more important uses of the maxims to create humor. Example 1 has no effects on the remainder of the episode. In the next example, a maxim is violated with greater consequences.

Example 2a:

- (1) Kramer: Oh, Tuscany, huh? Hear that, Jerry? That's in Italy.
- (2) Jerry: I hear it's, ah, beautiful there.
- (3) Maestro: Well, if you're thinking of getting a place there, don't bother. There's really nothing available.
- (4) Jerry: Huh?

In this exchange, Maestro (2a.3) violates the Maxim of Relevance. Jerry had made no indication that he was interested in purchasing real estate in Tuscany. The implication of Maestro's statement is that he does not want Jerry to be in Tuscany, where Maestro owns a house. In (2a.4) Jerry is confused by Maestro's statement, not understanding (or refusing to understand) the implicature of the statement. This exchange has greater consequences on the remainder of the episode.

Example 2b (later in the episode):

- (1) Jerry: Um, did he mention to you why I called?
- (2) Giggio: Si, the house in Toscana.
- (3) Jerry: Yeah, right, right. So, is there anything there to rent?
- (4) Giggio: Si. Two million lira. You give me the check.
- (5) Jerry: I didn't actually want to rent it.
- (6) Giggio: The keys, here are the keys. You give me the check. Two million lira.

Seventeen hundred Americana. Molto generoso.

In this second exchange, Jerry is seeking only to prove that Maestro was lying to him (prove that he was violating the Maxim of Quality in addition to the Maxim of Relevance). The extreme measure Jerry has taken to prove that Maestro was violating these maxims earlier in the

episode is a source of humor. Though Maestro's statement was face-damaging, Jerry is not expected to investigate the claim any further. Moreover, the initial interaction with Maestro results in Giggio perceiving that in (2b.3) Jerry is using implicature to request to rent his house in Tuscany. This miscommunication results in Jerry's paying Giggio a large sum of money to rent his house.

Applying the Incongruity Theory of Humor, it is seen that humor is created through Jerry's extreme reaction to Maestro's statement (2a.3). It is not expected that someone would take extreme measures to investigate a face-damaging statement. Maestro's statement also leads to humor later in the episode in the difference between Giggio's interpretation of Jerry's request (2b.3) and the meaning Jerry is trying to convey. Although the audience understands that Jerry is only requesting information about the availability of housing in Tuscany, Giggio does not interpret his statement this way. This miscommunication is an instance of perspective clashing that originates from Grice's maxims. From Giggio's perspective, Jerry is requesting to rent a house, and this is a reasonable inference from Jerry's statement (2b.3). However, Giggio does not strictly follow the Maxim of Relevance when he infers this meaning and responds accordingly. This difference in the characters' understanding of the conversation is a humorous perspective clash.

Comparing Example 1 to Example 2 shows some key differences between the use of the violations of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle. Example 1 has no further consequences in the episode, while Example 2a leads to Example 2b later in the episode. Example 1 is a contained instance of humor while Example 2 is a transition in the story line that is essential to the creation of the television sit-com. These longer instances are a necessary part of *Seinfeld*

because the television sit-com has a longer run-time that it must fill with unified humorous dialog and situations to satisfy the audience's expectations.

Having established the difference between the first case of the maxims being violated and the second, in the discussion of this and subsequent episodes, I will only examine the more important, second type of the violation of the maxims as it relates to the creation of humor.

### **“The Engagement”**

In this episode, George and Jerry make an agreement that they will strive to develop stronger relationships with the women they have been dating. The agreement is reached in the following example.

Example 3a:

- (1) George: I am really gonna make some changes. Yes. Changes.
- (2) Jerry: I'm serious about it.
- (3) George: Think *I'm* not?
- (4) Jerry: I'm not kidding.
- (5) George: Me too.
- (6) (they shake hands on their decision to make changes in their love lives)

In this interaction, the two friends shake hands at the end of their conversation. This gesture is generally assumed to convey that a deal has been made. It is expected that both characters understood the meaning of the gesture and the general terms of the agreement that had been made (i.e. they would both develop a better relationship with their romantic partner). We also expect that the characters will follow through on their promises by improving their relationships with their partners or that if they fail, they will apologize to the other. However,

one of the men is not as serious in his commitment to the agreement as the other man, and this creates a clash in perspectives.

This conflict becomes apparent later in the episode, after George acted upon their agreement by becoming engaged and Jerry reneged on the agreement by breaking up with his girlfriend.

Example 3b:

(1) George: What about the pact?

(2) Jerry: What?

(3) George: What happened to the pact? We were both gonna change. We shook hands on a pact. Did you not shake my hand on it, huh?

(4) Jerry: You stuck your hand out, so I shook it. I don't know about a pact. Anyway, you should be happy you're engaged. You're getting married.

In this interaction, Jerry goes back on his word. He claims that the handshake had no implied meaning. It is obvious that Jerry is flouting the Maxim of Quality when he lies about the handshake having no greater meaning. In everyday conversation, we would not expect Jerry to respond in this way when George asks him about the pact. We would expect for Jerry to apologize for failing to follow through on the deal. Instead, Jerry denies that the action of shaking George's hand has any significant meaning. By doing this, he flouts the Maxim of Quality to avoid admitting that he has broken the deal and, more pointedly, to avoid admitting that he was not able to successfully change his lifestyle in the way that George was.

In this section of dialog the conflict between the characters' interpretations of the deal is also explained. George's engagement was an extreme step and a sign of his commitment to his deal with Jerry. However, Jerry did not view their spoken agreement as being serious and goes

another step in the opposite direction by suggesting that the handshake was meaningless as well. The characters' clashing perspectives on not only the terms of their agreement but also the cultural convention of shaking hands creates a humorous incongruity in this scene because we would expect for both men to remember and acknowledge the terms of their deal or to apologize if they fail or forget.

The handshake is discussed one final time in the episode:

Example 3c:

- (1) George: You know, it was really wrong of you to back out on that deal.
- (2) Jerry: I didn't make a deal. I just shook your hand.
- (3) George: Yeah, well that's a deal where I come from.
- (4) Jerry: We come from the same place.

In this conversation, Jerry and George again debate the meaning of the handshake. The subtext of the conversation is, of course, their agreement to further their relationships with their romantic partners. George's frustration with Jerry is clear in this exchange, but Jerry still refuses to admit that the handshake had any importance, flouting the Maxim of Quality once more. Meanwhile, George's frustration with not only Jerry's renegeing on the deal but also his engagement heightens the conflict between the two characters as we see their perspectives once more. This conflict is a result of the miscommunication and continues to be a humorous incongruity in this section that occurs on (3c.4). In this line, we could expect that Jerry would tell George that he comes from a culture in which the handshake has no meaning, but instead he states that he and George come from the same place. Since they are from the same culture, we would expect for Jerry to admit that the handshake was a sign that a deal had been made, but he

refuses to admit this. Defying our expectations in this way creates incongruity and the exchanges is found to be humorous.

### **“The Postponement”**

This episode uses the Maxims of Relevance, Quality, and Quantity to create humor. Here, Elaine confides in the rabbi regarding her feelings about George’s engagement.

Example 4a:

- (1) Elaine: I’m not a very religious person, but I do feel as if I’m in need of some guidance here.
- (2) Rabbi: Would you care for a snack of some kind? I have the Snackwells which are very popular but I think that sometimes with the so-called “fat free” cookies people may overindulge, forgetting they may be high in calories.
- (3) Elaine: Thank you, I am not very hungry. Anyway, um, this friend of mine, George, got engaged.
- (4) Rabbi: How wonderful.
- (5) Elaine: Yeah, yeah, well, for some reason, um, I find myself just overcome with feelings of jealousy and resentment.

Confiding in a rabbi or any other religious figure is supposed to be a conversation of trust, acceptance, and helpful guidance. The rabbi’s statement in (4a.2) violates the Maxims of Relevance and Quantity because Elaine made no indication about wanting a snack and the rabbi gives too much information regarding the snack he offers. Elaine then must redirect the conversation in (4a.3). She uses “Thank you, I am not very hungry,” to politely turn down the rabbi’s offer and to follow the Maxim of Relevance. (“Anyway” functions to change the topic of conversation while operating within the Cooperative Principle.) In this part of their conversation,

we would not expect for the rabbi to give so many details about the snacks when Elaine has stated that she needs help. Instead, we would expect a religious leader to be focused on the needs of the person who is asking them for help and to listen attentively to their problems without mentioning anything irrelevant to their situation.

Then, in (4a.4), the rabbi follows our expectations. When we are told that a friend is getting married, we are generally happy and congratulate the person on their engagement. In (4a.5), Elaine goes against this by stating that she is not happy to hear that George is engaged. Instead, his engagement has caused her to feel negative emotions.

Later in the same conversation, the rabbi violates the Maxim of Quantity again.

Example 4b:

- (1) Elaine: You see the thing is it should have been me. You know, I'm smart. I'm attractive.
- (2) Rabbi: You know my temple has many single functions.
- (3) Elaine: No, no, it's okay.
- (4) Rabbi: My nephew Alex is someone who is also looking, perhaps...
- (5) Elaine: I don't think so.
- (6) Rabbi: He owns a flower store. Very successful.

Elaine is seeking a person to confide in and while the rabbi's comment in (4b.2) was an attempt at helping to resolve her problems, the rabbi insists on telling Elaine more information about his nephew than Elaine wants (4b.4, 6). Although marrying the rabbi's nephew would seem to solve Elaine's problem, Elaine did not want the rabbi to solve her problem. She only wanted a confidante to help her deal with her emotions. These two views of the purpose of the



conversation are a clash of perspective. It is easy to imagine that the rabbi could reasonably expect that Elaine wants a solution to her problem but she does not.

Both (4a) and (4b) show that the rabbi does not follow the model of the helpful listening ear that religious leaders are expected to be in a confessional conversation. Instead the rabbi steers the conversation away from what his follower Elaine has come to discuss, violating the Maxim of Relevance, and offers too much information on topics that she has indicated she is not interested in discussing, violating the Maxim of Quantity. Both of these characteristics of the rabbi's speech conflict with the ideal of the guiding religious leader and, thus, create an incongruity between our ideas of a rabbi and the rabbi that is portrayed in *Seinfeld*.

These traits continue in the rabbi's conversations with other characters throughout the episode:

Example 4c:

- (1) Jerry: Good evening, Rabbi.
- (2) Rabbi: Good evening. And how does this evening find you?
- (3) Jerry: Well, Rabbi, well.
- (4) Rabbi: I trust you are here to see your friend, Elaine.
- (5) Jerry: Yeah, that's right.
- (6) Rabbi: I hope she's feeling better.
- (7) Jerry: What do you mean?
- (8) Rabbi: She didn't tell you?
- (9) Jerry: No.
- (10) Rabbi: Well it seems the engagement of her friend George has left her feeling bitter and hostile.

(11) Jerry: Is that so?

(12) Rabbi: Yes, in fact she told me that she wishes she was the one getting married.

In this section, the rabbi violates the Maxim of Quantity by revealing the information that Elaine had confided in him earlier. The rabbi's violation of this maxim is incongruous because we expect for a confidante, like a religious leader, not to disclose the information that is shared with them. Instead, the rabbi tells Jerry about his conversation with Elaine. Revealing this information to Jerry also creates a perspective clash between the rabbi and Elaine. Elaine would view her conversation with the rabbi as private; however, the rabbi obviously does not see that the information should be kept to himself. This perspective clash is generated by the rabbi's violation of the Maxim of Quantity.

The rabbi reveals this information again in the episode on his television show that George and George's fiancée are watching:

Example 4d:

(1) Rabbi (on TV): A young lady I know, let's call her Elaine, happened to find herself overwhelmed with feelings of resentment and hostility for her friend, let's call him George. She felt that George was somewhat of a loser and that she was the one who deserved to be married first. She also happened to mention to me that her friend had wondered if going to a prostitute while you're engaged is considered cheating. His feeling was they've never going to see each other again, so what's the difference. But that is a subject for another sermon. Now, I'd like to close with a psalm.

From the rabbi's speech, we would expect for him to conceal the identities of the people in the story by using any names except "Elaine" and "George," but he does not. This is an incongruous occurrence and a violation of the both the Maxim of Quality and Quantity. The rabbi flouts the

Maxim of Quantity by revealing information about Elaine and George, and he flouts the Maxim of Quality by suggesting that he is changing the names when he is not.

Furthermore, the rabbi indicates that the George in the story was interested in prostitutes, but George had not mentioned prostitutes. By blending the true story of Elaine's jealousy toward George with the fictitious details about prostitutes, the rabbi implies this false scenario is true. This is a violation of the Maxim of Quality because the rabbi misleads his audience into believing something which is not true, and this is obviously not a conclusion *Seinfeld* viewers could expect for the story.

The rabbi's refusal to follow the maxims of the Cooperative Principle causes incongruities throughout the episode by his consistently acting in a manner that conflicts with the idea of the trustworthy and comforting religious leader. The rabbi in this episode is not a person in which his followers could confide personal information or seek guidance.

### **“The Wink”**

At the beginning of this episode, George accidentally squirts grapefruit juice into his eye, making him wink involuntarily. This body language causes his statements to be misinterpreted by his interlocutors because winking is generally understood as a way for a speaker to signal that he or she is flouting the Maxim of Quality. In “The Wink,” there are multiple examples of George's winking changing the meaning of his statements. Though George does not intend to flout the Maxim of Quality, his conversational partners assume that he is flouting this maxim because of this body language.

Example 5a:

- (1) Wilhelm: He's been coming in late all week. Is there something wrong?
- (2) George: No, not that I know of. (winks)

(3) Wilhelm: Really? Make sure he signs this [birthday card]. Oh, look George, if there's a problem with Morgan you let me know.

(4) George: Morgan? No. He's doing a great job. (winks)

(5) Wilhelm: I understand.

In this conversation, Wilhelm interprets (5a.2) as George's way of signaling that there is something wrong with his coworker Morgan. This happens again in (5a.4) as George tries to communicate that Morgan is a good employee. George's involuntary winks are interpreted as signaling that his words are violating the Maxim of Quality. Because of his eye movement, Wilhelm thinks that George does not approve of Morgan's work. Although audiences know the true reason for George's winking, Wilhelm does not. Additionally, because George's eye is involuntarily moving, we would expect Wilhelm to see that there is no connection between the movement and George's words. We could also expect that George would explain that he has injured his eye. However, neither of these things occur. Wilhelm misinterprets George's speech because of George's winking (and seeming violation of the Maxim of Quality) and this creates a perspective clash as each character leaves the conversation with a different view of the meaning of their exchange.

Later, Kramer suggests selling the birthday card that Wilhelm had instructed George to have the other employees sign. The card has become valuable because George works for the baseball team the New York Yankees, and the card was signed by the players.

Example 5b:

(1) George: Yeah, like I'm going to risk my job with the New York Yankees to make a few extra bucks. (winks)

(2) Kramer: No, of course not. (winks back)

Once again, because George winked after his statement (5b.1), his interlocutor thought that his words were flouting the Maxim and Quality and could not be taken literally. In this conversation, Kramer winks back at George to signal that he saw George's wink and would interpret his statement (5b.1) as if he were lying. This creates the same perspective clash that was present in George's conversation with Wilhelm: the men leave the conversation with different understandings of the information that was exchanged. The miscommunication is revealed to George later in the episode after Kramer has sold the card.

Example 5c:

- (1) George: What is this?
- (2) Kramer: Your cut of the loot. Stubs gave me two hundred dollars for the autographed birthday card that was inside.
- (3) George: Who told you to sell the card?
- (4) Kramer: You did.
- (5) George: No I didn't!
- (6) Kramer: No, not in so many words but I believe we had an understanding. (winks)
- (7) George: I was not winking you idiot. That was the grapefruit. It's like acid. I need that card back. It's Mr. Steinbrenner's. I was responsible.

Kramer explains to George that he noticed his wink in (5c.6). George then explains that he was not winking and, therefore, was not flouting the Maxim of Quality. He did not want Kramer to sell the birthday card. Again, we would have expected George's involuntary blinking to be recognized as having no connection to his words or for George to have explained his eye injury to Kramer in their first conversation. Instead, Kramer misinterprets George's speech and sells the card.

Because of this miscommunication with Kramer and following his earlier miscommunication with Wilhelm, George has the following interaction with Steinbrenner (another of George's bosses).

Example 5d:

- (1) Steinbrenner: Morgan, Morgan, you know his name is conspicuously absent from this card. Almost like he went out of his way not to sign it.
- (2) George: Oh no, Morgan is a good man sir.
- (3) Steinbrenner: You can stop kowtowing to Morgan. Congratulations, you got his job.
- (4) George: Wa, uh, thank you sir, you know I am not quite sure I'm right for it.

In this interaction, it is seen that George's miscommunication with Kramer leads to Morgan's inability to sign the card. Because of this and George's unintentionally saying that Morgan was not a good employee earlier in the episode, Morgan is fired and George takes his job.

Throughout the episode, incongruities are created between what George intends to say and how his interlocutors interpret his statements because George involuntarily winks when he is speaking. Though it would normally be appropriate for his interlocutors to assume that he is signaling that he is flouting the Maxim of Quality, George's winking is unintended and the miscommunication is created. The ultimate conclusion of this miscommunication is George's uncomfortably accepting a new, better job. Another incongruity is created as George is unhappy with the job because his promotion was the result of a mistake in communication. This creates an incongruity because a person usually does not get a new job due to his own mistake and a person is usually happy when they receive a desired promotion. These are the direct result of the miscommunication surrounding the Maxim of Quality in George's conversations with Wilhelm and Kramer.

### “The Hot Tub”

In this episode, George leads his boss to believe that he is feeling too much stress in his new position at work. This misrepresentation is a violation of the Maxim of Quality and has consequences throughout the episode. The audience knows that George is not actually stressed from George’s conversation with Jerry at the beginning of the episode:

Example 6a:

- (1) Jerry: I thought the new promotion was supposed to be a lot more work.
- (2) George: Yeah, when the season starts. Right now, I sit around pretending that I’m busy.
- (3) Jerry: How do you pull that off?
- (4) George: I always look annoyed. Yeah, when you look annoyed all the time, people think that you’re busy. Think about it. ... In fact Mr. Wilhelm gave me one of those little stress dolls.

By acting annoyed George convinces his boss that he is working hard; this is a violation of the Maxim of Quality and goes against our expectations because we do not expect that a person would lie to their boss (or if they did lie to their boss, we would not expect them to brag about it so openly). Wilhelm’s responding by giving him a stress doll serves to show that Wilhelm truly believes George’s lie.

Later in the episode, George receives a new assignment to entertain a group of business associates for Wilhelm. At first, George is obviously uncomfortable with the amount of expletives and the informal, relaxed culture of the group, but he soon accepts the conventions and begins to use them himself. His acceptance and adoption of these norms when talking to Clayton is shown to connect to the lie he presents to Wilhelm (described in 6a).

Example 6b:

- (1) George (on the phone with Clayton): You tell that son of a bitch no Yankee is ever comin' to Houston. Not as long as you bastards are running things.
- (2) Clayton: Her, uh, speak up George, I can't hear ya!
- (3) George (yelling): You tell that son of a bitch no Yankee is comin' to Houston! Not as long as you bastards are running things!
- (4) Wilhelm: George! George, get a hold of yourself!
- (5) George: Mr. Wilhelm...
- (6) Wilhelm: What's the matter with you?!
- (7) George: Well I-I...

Because George lied to his boss about the amount of stress he was feeling, Wilhelm assumes that George's loud voice and expletives are a result of his stress. He interprets George's statement as being aggressive and socially unacceptable. Wilhelm was primed to interpret George's statement in this way because George had allowed Wilhelm to believe he was stressed. This is a violation of the Maxim of Quality. Additionally, although audiences know that George is not stressed, Wilhelm does not. This creates dramatic irony in the episode.

This dramatic irony can be explained using Mayerhofer's idea of perspective clashing. This violation of the Maxim of Quality creates two different views of George's statements (Wilhelm's view and George, the client, and the audience's). George and the client know George's words are appropriate, but Wilhelm believes that they are appropriate.



### “The Soup Nazi”

The Soup Nazi also creates an unusual culture in his restaurant. The Soup Nazi enforces a strict adherence to the Maxim of Quantity and refuses service to customers who provide too much information.

Example 7a:

(1) Elaine: Hi there. Um, uh— Oh! Oh! Oh! One mulligatawny and, um... what is that right there? Is that lima bean?

(2) Soup Nazi: Yes.

(3) Elaine: Never been a big fan. Um... you know what? Has anyone ever told you you look exactly like Al Pacino? You know, “Scent of a Woman.” Who-ah! Who-ah!

(4) Soup Nazi: Very good. Very good.

(5) Elaine: Well, I—

(6) Soup Nazi: You know something?

(7) Elaine: Hmmm?

(8) Soup Nazi: No soup for you!

(9) Elaine: What?

(10) Soup Nazi: Come back one year! Next!

The Soup Nazi does not appreciate Elaine’s additional contribution to the exchange (7a.3). He dismisses her attempt at conversation by refusing her order and banning her from his restaurant (7a.8, 10). The Soup Nazi’s refusal of conversation is vastly different from the usual experience of a customer at a restaurant. Businesses thrive on their customers’ support, so the quick judgement the Soup Nazi passes on his customers that attempt conversation is incongruous to the real-life experience of a customer buying soup.

The Soup Nazi himself doesn't use any more words than are necessary. His final line in this section (7a.10) is not grammatically correct, but it is understandable. Instead of saying, "You can come back in one year! I'll take the next customer now!" the Soup Nazi eliminates the extraneous words, showing that he not only prefers that the amount of information in a conversation be trimmed down to only the most necessary bits, but also that one should only use the most necessary words to express ideas.

The only exception to the Soup Nazi's strict enforcement of the Maxim of Quantity is Kramer:

Example 7b:

- (1) Kramer: And then they just ran off with the armoire, just like that.
- (2) Soup Nazi: Ohh! This city....
- (3) Kramer: Well, my friend is awful disappointed is all. You know, she's very emotional. ...
- (4) Soup Nazi: All right, now listen to me. You have been a good friend. I have an armoire in my basement. If you want to pick it up, you're welcome to it. So, take it, it's yours.
- (5) Kramer: How can I possibly thank you?
- (6) Soup Nazi: You are the only one who understands me.

In this exchange Kramer tells the Soup Nazi how his "friend's" armoire was stolen, but Kramer does not tell him that the friend in this story is Elaine. Normally, this would follow the Soup Nazi's desire for as little information as possible, but in this instance the Soup Nazi would have preferred to know that it was Elaine to whom he was offering free furniture.

The Soup Nazi is angered when he learns that he gave an armoire to Elaine:

Example 7c:

- (1) Elaine: Hi. You know, Kramer gave me the armoire and it is beautiful. I mean, I just can't tell you how much I appreciate it.
- (2) Soup Nazi: You? If I knew it was for you, I never would have given it to him in the first place! I would have taken a hatchet and smashed it to pieces! Now, who wants soup? Next! Speak up!

In 7c the Soup Nazi learns the negative repercussions of his strict adherence to the Maxim of Quantity. It is this abnormal relationship with the Maxim of Quantity that is explored in this episode. It creates the initial incongruity in the relationship between the restaurant and its customers and evolves throughout the episode. Based on the Soup Nazi's previous interactions, we would not expect him to desire more information from customers. However, in (7c.2), the Soup Nazi wishes that he had known that Elaine would receive the armoire; this line creates a humorous incongruity using the audience's knowledge of the Soup Nazi's character.

Overall, the Soup Nazi's strictly enforcing the maxims on his interlocuters is also an incongruous experience. One does not expect that a conversational partner will harshly punish them for meandering off-topic occasionally or for offering extraneous information. However, the Soup Nazi does this, and it negatively affects his relationships with his customers who are afraid of him and, thus, give him the name "Soup Nazi." The episode is held together by these incongruous attitudes toward the Maxim of Quantity.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

By analyzing these six episodes of *Seinfeld*, it can be seen that Grice's maxims have a role in creating humor throughout the episode, not just in short instances. Throughout the episodes characters violate these maxims. These violations both defy our expectations of the conversation and lead to characters' holding clashing perspectives concerning an interaction. In each episode, there is a violation of a maxim that is important to the episode as a whole. This violation is mentioned multiple times in the episode.

### Review of Research Questions

In the dialog of *Seinfeld*, humor is created through violations of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle. When a maxim is violated for humor, the interaction between the characters does not follow our expectations. The violation of the maxims creates a perspective clash between the characters that is explored throughout the episode as the initial violation is referenced in multiple conversations.

The Incongruity Theory of Humor can be used to explain the humor of *Seinfeld* because the characters' conversations and interactions go against our expectations. While this defiance of expectations does not follow the patterns we expect, it is easy to see that the events of the show are not so unexpected that the show could be called unreal or surreal. The events seem possible in the real world but are not the most probable outcomes. The unexpected events are incongruous but not absurd.

The Incongruity Theory of Humor can be used to explain the humor that results from characters violated Grice's maxims. We expect that conversational partners will follow the maxims. If a person violates a maxim, their interlocutor will correctly understand their reason for violating the maxim and the implicature they intend. However, both of these expectations are

repeatedly defied throughout the episodes. This creates a humorous incongruity between the way we expect the conversation will occur and the way the conversation actually occurs.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While the sampling was random, it is possible that the episodes analyzed here were not a representative sample and that not all episodes of *Seinfeld* use the same methods to create humor. Other theories of humor could potentially be used to explain the humor in other episodes. Also, while *Seinfeld* is a well-known American sit-com that was popular during its original airing, it is also possible that other sit-coms create humor in different ways. Sit-coms from other cultures may also use different methods to create humor. Further investigation of television sit-coms is necessary to fully understand the humor and methods of creating humor in the format. Future research could analyze every episode of *Seinfeld* to identify all methods of creating humor, and analyses of many more sit-coms are necessary to develop a more complete understanding of the form.

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