

## The Production of Conversational Humor by Flouting Gricean Maxims in the Sitcom *The IT Crowd*

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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the flouting of Gricean maxims found in the production of verbal humor by the characters in the situation comedy *The IT Crowd* seasons one and two. This research aims to identify and classify the flouting of maxims, explain the rhetorical strategies employed, and the functions behind each flouting of the humorous utterances in the sitcom. The qualitative method is used to analyze the data, which are the humorous utterances resulting from the maxim flouting found in the first 12 episodes of the series. In the series, a total of 102 occurrences were identified as maxim flouting. The most frequently occurring maxim flouting is the flouting of the quality maxim, with 56 occurrences (54.90%). The characters produce verbal humor by flouting the conversational maxims using varied rhetorical strategies. Their most preferred rhetorical strategy is an allusion, with 12 occurrences (11.70%). The characters in the situation comedy *The IT Crowd* flout the Gricean maxims to achieve eight different humor communicative functions, which generally fall into three categories: getting closer (positive affect function), expressing themselves (expressiveness function), and distancing themselves from others (negative affect function).

**Keywords:** *Cooperative Principle, humor function, maxim flouting, rhetorical strategy, verbal humor.*

### INTRODUCTION

From spontaneous, witty banter between friends to meticulously scripted jokes in a sitcom series, humor appears to be a significant aspect of human lives. Past studies on jokes and humor, in general, have found a connection between this particular feature of humor and the Cooperative Principle in communication. Cooperative Principle, in a simple term, is a principle in which the participants in a conversation are expected to follow, i.e., contributing as required at the stage at which it occurs, by the acknowledged purpose of the discourse they are engaged in (Grice,

1989, p. 26). Dynel (2008) views the Cooperative Principle and its subordinate maxims (quality, quantity, relation, and manner) as an essential condition for covert communication because it enables the interpretation of implicatures manifested in various forms, which is often exploited in the production of humor. She argues that when the speakers produce intentional verbal humor, they are not observing the maxims but still adhere to the Cooperative Principle through maxim flouting. Grundy (2000, p. 76) agrees with the notion that maxim flouting adheres to the Cooperative Principle, saying, "Whenever a maxim is flouted, there must be

an implicature to save the utterance from simply appearing to be a faulty contribution to a conversation”.

In a conversation, verbal humor can be seen as a cooperative endeavor because the participant is acting for the sake of specific communicative goals, which is produced through the indirectness that is generated from flouting of maxims. Thus, it has the capacity “to amuse and simultaneously communicate the speaker’s meaning” (Dynel, 2017, p. 13). The type of verbal humor which is drawn heavily from the context of the exchange in which it occurs is called *conversational humor* (Attardo 1994; 2001). Conversational humor often “recurs in interpersonal communication” in day-to-day interactions or in fictional works such as dialogues in books, films, or situation comedy (Dynel, 2009, p. 1284). Hence, this research aims to investigate the role of the flouting of Grice’s maxims in the production of conversational humor, using a sitcom as the data source.

This study aims to a) identify and classify the Gricean maxims that are flouted by the characters in the sitcom *The IT Crowd* when producing conversational humor, b) describe how different rhetorical strategies are used in flouting the maxims to produce conversational humor, and c) describe the communicative functions of verbal humor which motivates the maxim flouting. The research focuses only on verbal (conversational) humor; hence, other types of humor made using facial expressions, gestures (e.g., physical humor), and other types of non-verbal humor are not addressed in this research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have investigated the relationship between Paul Grice’s Cooperative Principle with the production of conversational humor. The most notable one is an article written by Attardo (1993), who claims that humor is generated through the violation of Gricean maxims. He posits that verbal humor is non-cooperative because it does not allow information to be conveyed effectively.

In line with Attardo, Xiaosu (2010) contends that maxim violations generate humorous verbalization. He analyzes the conversational implicatures found in situation comedy to see how

the humorous dialogues divert from the rules of the Cooperative Principle. He concludes that the speakers consciously and unconsciously violate the Gricean maxim to produce humor in situation comedy. It is to be noted that he does not differentiate between deliberate or non-deliberate maxim violations which we found to undermine the role of speaker intentions in creating humor.

On the other hand, Dornerus (2005) acknowledges the speaker’s intention by distinguishing between maxim violation and flouting in her analysis of verbal humor production. When studying how different television genres: drama and comedy, she deduces that the scriptwriters from both genres have the characters break the maxims to create certain situations. In comedy series, the characters tend to flout rather than violate the maxims.

Dynel (2008) refutes the notion that humor is non-cooperative. She points out that humor is cooperative despite not following the maxims because it is formed through flouting and not a violation of the maxim. The article shows how maxim flouting adheres to the Cooperative Principle because its formation leads the hearer to the implied messages, hence appropriately contributing in a way that the participants must acknowledge the conversation goal.

Addiningrum (2018) and Savkaničová (2013) conducted research on the mechanism of conversational humor production from two approaches: maxim non-observance and rhetorical strategy. The two pieces of research demonstrate how maxims can be either flouted or violated through different rhetorical strategies. Addiningrum, who focuses on the flouting of maxims, modifies a typology of rhetorical humor strategies based on Cutting’s (2002) and Berger’s (1993) theories and categorizations. On the other hand, Savkaničová’s results show that irony works in the frame of the Cooperative Principle through the speakers’ non-observance of the Gricean maxims. The key finding in her research is that ironical reading can be achieved by either violating or flouting the maxims; thus, one non-observance of maxims can cooperate to create humor.

A study by Andersen (2013), based on an American situation comedy, *Community*, focuses on

how the speakers flout the Gricean maxims in relation to the characters' personalities. He discovers that certain characters flout a particular Gricean maxim more or less than others because the speakers with different personalities have different communicative uses of the implicatures. The result shows that various cases of maxim flouting are done with different social motives such as showing discontent, insulting, passing on information, etc.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several theories and concepts are adopted and applied in the data analysis in this research. The leading theory used for this research is Grice's (1989) Cooperative Principle. The study of humor is closely related to the pragmatic concept of the Cooperative Principle because non-observing the conversational maxims is often utilized to achieve the humorous effect, especially in a humorous discourse

### Implicature

Grice (1989) describes implicature as what the speaker means apart from what is said. He proposes two different types of implicature, namely conventional and conversational implicature. The former can be inferred from the sentence of the utterance without taking account of the context (Thomas, 1995), such as the expected contradiction after the conjunction *but*. On the other hand, conversational implicature is the implied meaning that "arises only in a particular context of utterance" (p. 58). Therefore, utterances with the same sentence can have different meanings.

### Context

In the conversation, context is an essential aspect of meaning interpretation because it limits the possible implicatures carried by the speaker's utterance. Huang (2007, p. 13) describes context as "any relevant features of the dynamic settings or the environment in which a linguistic unit is systematically used". Based on its source, Cutting (2002) categorizes context into three: (1) situational, (2) background knowledge, and (3) co-textual context. Situational context refers to the physical surroundings in which a conversation occurs.

Background knowledge is a set of assumptions shared by the interlocutors, consisting of cultural knowledge or shared experience. The last one is co-textual or linguistic context, which comprises the surrounding utterances within the conversation.

### Cooperative Principle

Paul Grice (1989) postulates that effective conversation can only be carried out when interlocutors are assumed to acknowledge and observe certain social conventions, called the Cooperative Principle, i.e., by contributing to the exchange as required at the stage when it occurs (p. 26). Subsequently, he introduces four maxims that interlocutors are assumed to observe.

#### *Maxim of Quality*

The maxim requires the speaker to:

1. Not say what you believe to be false;
2. Not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (Grice, 1989, p. 27)

#### *Maxim of Quantity*

1. Make your contribution as informative as required;
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (p. 26)

#### *Maxim of Relation*

1. Be relevant (Grice, 1989, p. 27)

Birner (2013, p. 54) expands on the meaning of 'being relevant' that the speaker's utterance has relevance with others preceding it, and, overall, with the current textual context and/or the situational context.

#### *Maxim of Manner*

The maxim of manner relates to how something is said, of which the interlocutors are expected to be clear in their utterances by:

1. Avoiding obscurity of expression;
2. Avoiding ambiguity;
3. Being brief;
4. Being orderly. (Grice, 1989, p. 27)

## Non-observances of Maxims

It is to be acknowledged that failing to fulfill the conversational maxims is a common occurrence, which might be deliberate or not deliberate. There are two main ways a speaker can deliberately fail in observing the maxims: violation and flouting.

### *Violation*

Grice describes the violation of a maxim as “a quiet or unostentatious” non-observance of a maxim, in which the speaker will be held accountable for misleading the hearer (1989, p. 30). The reason is that speakers hide the fact that they do not observe the maxims, nor the Cooperative Principle, from the hearer “by lying or withholding information or pretending in a covert manner” (Nemesi, 2015, p. 256).

### *Flouting*

The overtness of maxim flouting is due to the speaker’s intention to convey more than his utterance’s surface meaning. The blatant display of maxim non-observance leads the hearer to the notion of additional meanings or (conversational) implicatures (Mey, 2001). Below is an example taken from Mey (2001, p. 78) of a conversation between a middle-aged woman and a young doorman of a discotheque. The doorman refuses to let her in without showing her ID.

(1) Doorman: “Sorry, ma’am, then I can’t let you in.”

Woman: “But I’m twenty-nine and the mother of four!!”

Doorman: “Yes, and I’m the pope’s grandfather and have six kids.”

The doorman’s last statement, which is self-evidently false, is uttered with an intention for the hearer to find the implied meaning (i.e., the woman’s reasoning is seen as not true).

It can be indiscernible whether the speakers flout or violate the maxim because it lies in their intention and whether they expect the hearer to search for another meaning or take it as it is (Cutting, 2002, p. 36).

## Conversational Humor

Conversational humor is a part of a conversation that connects heavily to the context and semantically contributes to the exchange (Attardo 2001; Dynel 2009). It is contextually dependent, which is often realized in spontaneous, humorous talks that consist of various linguistic units; for example, witticism or one-liners might come in the forms of multiple words, phrases, or other textual units (Dynel 2009). In any of its forms, conversational humor adds meaning to the communication beyond humorous effect.

## Communicative Functions of Humor

Humor has an essential role in the interpersonal relationship of those who engage in it. Attardo (1994) claims that humor has the potential as both a prosocial tool that encourages solidarity or, in contrast, a disguised aggressive behavior. Graham et al. (1992) seem to echo the notion that humor is multifaceted when they introduce a typology called *Uses of Humor Index-11* that categorizes communicative functions of humor into three overarching functions of positive affect, negative affect, and expressiveness which are described in eleven specific uses.

### *Positive Affect*

Positive affect is the prosocial use of humor which involves: reducing tension, being playful, and developing bonds. DiCioccio (2012, p. 95) views positive affect as the “expression of affection” in which humor is used to foster a connection with others. Below is an example taken from Holmes and Marra (2002, p. 70).

(2) Sandy was the chairperson for the project team of a large organization in New Zealand. Before starting a project meeting, she made a humorous remark about Neville. She said, “We should start traditionally and have Neville tell us a story about his weekend.” Her remark was followed by laughter from other team members and Neville indulging her request.

The situation shows how banter is used for a positive affect. Sandy, the chairperson, uses humor to

show playfulness and promote team solidarity by playfully teasing Neville about his idiosyncrasy.

### ***Expressiveness***

The Expressiveness function of humor includes disclosing difficult information, allowing others to know about oneself, letting others know likes/dislikes, avoiding telling others about oneself, and expressing one's feelings. For example, someone has been criticized for leaving a wrong date on a memo at work, to which he responded, "*I find it hard being perfect at everything.*" (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p. 75).

### ***Negative Affect***

The negative affect or anti-social uses of humor consist of demeaning others, saying negative things, and putting others in their place. Graham et al. (1992, p. 164) believe that humorous remarks are used to hide overt aggression or other anti-social interaction, which would make the conversation more "socially acceptable". Below is an example from Holmes and Marra (2002, p. 73)

- (3) Troy: How far do you get before you know it's a personal call?  
Peg: Right at the end.

Both Troy and Peg are members of a company. They are skeptical about the company's proposal to record incoming telephone calls. In the example, Peg contributes a humorous utterance in the form of a reply to Troy's question to challenge the proposal and subsequently belittle the organization.

## **METHODS**

### **Data source**

In this research, the data source is the twelve episodes of seasons one and two of the sitcom entitled *The IT Crowd* (Atalla, 2006-2013) streamed from Netflix (<https://www.netflix.com/id-en/>). The series premiered on Channel 4 on February 3, 2006, and ended after four seasons on September 27, 2013 ("The IT Crowd", n.d.). Each episode has a varied duration of between 24 to 26 minutes, and the total duration of the twelve episodes is around 288 minutes.

### **Data**

The data used for the research were humorous utterances produced by the characters of *The IT Crowd* that flout the maxims of the Cooperative Principle. In addition, the data also included contextual information (situational, background knowledge, and co-textual or linguistics) of each dialogue and the timestamp of its occurrence. For convenience, the data were copied from the SRT files, the subtitle files consisting of the dialogues, the sequence of their appearances, and timestamps, downloaded from *Subimdb.com* instead of transcribing the dialogues.

### **Methods of Collecting and Analyzing the Data**

The first step in collecting the data was to watch the episode of *The IT Crowd* using the English subtitle with the SRT file displayed in the notepad. This step was taken to understand the story while checking the accuracy of the dialogues. When there was an inaccuracy, the dialogues in the SRT file were corrected to match the ones on Netflix. Then, the episode was re-watched, focusing on identifying the maxim flouting in the characters' humorous utterances. When a maxim flouting appeared, the dialogues with its timestamp were copied from the SRT file into a document with the addition of its context. In writing down the relevant data, data coding was used to indicate which season and episode the dialogue came from, along with the timestamps. Each datum is accompanied with the context's information written in italics font type and the relevant utterances and the timestamp in bold.

The first step in data analysis was to classify the collected data based on the type of Gricean maxims flouted and the rhetorical strategies used. In categorizing the rhetorical strategies, a modified typology was created from a combination of previous works by Grundy (2000), Cutting (2002), Dynel (2009), and Birner (2013). Table 1 below presents the 22 rhetorical strategies applied in the analysis.

The next step is to categorize the communicative functions based on Graham et al. (1992). Lastly, the sorted data were calculated to find the frequencies of maxim flouting, rhetorical strategies used, and humor communicative functions of conversational humor found in the sitcom.

Table 1. Modified categories of rhetorical strategies

No.	Strategies	No.	Strategies
1.	Allusion	12.	Pretended misunderstanding
2.	Banter	13.	Put-down
3.	Excessive information	14.	Paradox
4.	Hyperbole	15.	Pretended Misunderstanding
5.	Insufficient information	16.	Put-down
6.	Irrelevant statement	17.	Register class
7.	Metaphor	18.	Retort
8.	Meiosis	19.	Rhetorical Question
9.	Neologism	20.	Sarcasm
10.	Obscure expression	21.	Semantic Phraseme
11.	Paradox	22.	Simile

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Gricean Maxim Flouting and the Rhetorical Strategies Used**

Based on the data analysis, 102 occurrences of Gricean maxim flouting were found. The most commonly flouted maxim in *The IT Crowd* sitcom was the maxim of quality, with 54.90% or 56 cases out of 102 in total, of which the characters most often use verbal irony as the rhetorical strategy to flout. Then, the maxim of manner with 27 cases (26.47%), was most commonly flouted by using allusion. Next, the maxim of relation with 11 cases (10.78%) was most often flouted by using irrelevant statements. Lastly, the maxim of quantity (7.84%) was most often flouted by using excessive information. The details are presented in the following table.

Table 2. Frequency of the flouting of Gricean maxims and the rhetorical strategies used in *The IT Crowd*

Maxim Flouting	Rhetorical Strategies	Frequency		Total	
		N	%	N	%
Quality	Verbal Irony	11	10.78	56	54.90
	Metaphor	8	7.84		
	Rhetorical Question	7	6.86		
	Banter	6	5.88		

	Hyperbole	6	5.88		
	Sarcasm	6	5.88		
	Semantic Phraseme	5	4.90		
	Meiosis	4	3.92		
	Put-down	2	1.96		
	Paradox	1	0.98		
Quantity	Excessive Information	5	4.90	8	7.84
	Insufficient Information	3	2.94		
Relation	Irrelevant Statements	6	5.88	11	10.78
	Retort	3	2.94		
	Pretended Misunderstanding	2	1.96		
	Allusion	12	11.76		
Manner	Simile	8	7.84	27	26.47
	Neologism	3	2.94		
	Obscure Expression	2	1.96		
	Punning	1	0.98		
	Put-down	1	0.98		
		<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>100</b>	

N = number of occurrences

**Quality Maxim Flouting**

The characters commonly flout the maxim of quality under the disguise of being untruthful to communicate further meaning in their humorous verbalizations. A characteristic of the quality maxim flouting is overt untruthfulness, “the expression of what the speaker believes to be untrue, of which he means to be transparent for the hearer” (Dynel, 2013, p. 406). The example below shows how the maxim of quality is flouted by using verbal irony.

(4) [S1E2] 00:01:52,916 --> 00:02:07,490

**Context:** *In the IT Department, Moss and Roy are watching a Public Service Announcement (PSA) about the new 20-digits number for the national emergency line, which is a lot longer than the 3-digits number (999) used to be. The PSA insinuates*

that the new number is easy to remember. The conversation below happens after the PSA ends.

Moss: **Well, that's easy to remember!** 0118 999 881 999 119 725...3!

Roy: I don't know why they just couldn't keep it as it was!

Moss uses verbal irony to flout the maxim of quality, for his intended meaning is the opposite of what he says. Moss becomes blatantly untruthful when he asserts that the 20-digit number is easy to remember because it displays contrast with the contextual surrounding of the ironic utterance, which is the norm that a 20-digit number is hard to remember. By using verbal irony, the utterance would incite humor due to the ridiculousness stemming from the incongruous relation between Roy's expectation and Moss's actual comment.

### **Quantity Maxim Flouting**

The characters who flout the maxim of quantity are deliberately being under-informative or over-informative in their utterances. Hence, the inappropriateness of their humorous contribution leads the hearer to the speaker's implied meaning. The example below shows how the use of excessive information flouts the maxim of quantity.

(5) [S2E2] 00:20:52.760 --> 00:21:19.117

**Context:** *The CEO of Reynholm Industries, Denholm Reynholm, jumps to his death after the police show up to investigate him on the irregularities in the company's pension funds. Denholm Reynholm's son, Douglas, takes over the company after his public suicide. Moss and Roy are unknowingly assisting Douglas in deleting the implicating files his father leaves in his office. The dialogue below happens after they set up Douglas's computer.*

Douglas: Yes, one last thing. How do I erase files like this one here marked "pensions"?

Moss: Um... just like this.

Douglas: All gone, wonderful, thanks, guys. I'll be working very closely with your department, **and I have a feeling I'll be needing you for a lot more than just deleting incriminating files.** (laughs) I just mean files.

Roy: OK, we'd be better off.

Douglas's utterance is regarded as flouting the maxim of quantity because he implies another meaning by being over-informative. After Roy and Moss aid him with his computer, Douglas adds superfluous information about the IT team deleting incriminating documents. If Douglas merely wants to express gratitude for Roy and Moss's favor, the information is not required; he can stop at the first part of his utterance, "All gone, wonderful, thanks, guys." When he discloses the information, he almost reveals the truth about his father's corruption by implying the allegation is indeed true. The humor arises due to Douglas's unnecessary and unexpected addition about his father, which generates an incriminating implicature about the allegation, which he later reassures as a mere joke. The previously sensitive information treated as something playful or non-serious provokes laughter due to the relief from the interlocutors' nervousness.

### **Relation Maxim Flouting**

The characters who flout the maxim of relation have the intention to lead their hearers to implied meanings through humor by giving unrelated information, in the form of an irrelevant statement or witty retort, or by pretended misunderstanding. This intention is perceived through their utterances' unprovoked deviation from the topic of conversation. The example below shows how the maxim of relation is flouted through an irrelevant statement.

(6) [S1E2] 00:18:41,383 --> 00:18:46,896

**Context:** *The IT Department is on fire. While searching for the extinguisher, Roy asks Moss about its whereabouts. Moss looks at the extinguisher case that is on fire while commenting about its country of production.*

Roy: Where is the precinct extinguisher?

Moss: (*rolls eyes, shaking head*) **Made in Britain!**

Moss is flouting the maxim of relation when he does not directly answer Roy's question but instead provides him with seemingly unrelated information. In the example, Roy is asking Moss about the extinguisher's whereabouts. Instead of answering the question, Moss makes a statement about how the fire extinguisher is made in Britain. Although the reply might not seem relevant to Roy's question, it conveys

Moss's implicit answer. By observing Moss's gesture, one might infer that he uses the term "made in Britain" with a negative connotation. Likewise, when people say a product is "made in China," it usually carries a negative connotation that the referred product is poorly made, thus ineffective and useless (Schniederjans et al., 2004); the term "made in Britain" might carry the same connotation for the Britons. Therefore, as a fellow Briton, it should be sufficient for Roy to conclude that Moss implicitly tells him not to look for the extinguisher because, as a product made in Britain, it is useless. The humorous effect is created by Moss's sudden jab at Britain's product which is unexpected in their current severe situation.

### *Manner Maxim Flouting*

The characters flout the maxim of manner by using simile, allusion, put-down, pun, and neologism. Using these strategies, the speakers blatantly create unnecessarily ambiguous and unclear utterances because their conversations aim beyond relaying information, namely provoking humor. The example below shows how the maxim of manner is flouted by using allusion.

(7) [S1E3] 00:15:56,170 --> 00:16:09,790

*Context:* Daniel is on the quiz show "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" when he calls Jen for help in answering a question. Unfortunately, Jen chooses the wrong answer. In the IT Department office, Moss asks Roy whether he sees the episode when Jen walks in. That instant, Moss turns his attention to Jen to make fun of her.

Moss: Anyway, did you see it?

Roy: What?

Moss: "Do you want to be a Millionaire?"

Roy: "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?"

Jen: (*walks in*)

Moss: Ah! (*turns to Jen, pointing*) "Who wants to be a person who is wrong?"

Roy: Whoa, whoa, whoa... What's happened?

Moss flouts the maxim of manner by being unclear when he alludes to an episode of "Who

Wants to be a Millionaire?". Daniel, who participated in the quiz show, lost the challenge because Jen chose the incorrect answer. Moss, who is aware of her blunder, teases her by deliberately misquoting the title of the show to match her situation: "Who wants to be a person who is wrong?". From this allusion, the hearers know Moss implies a different meaning due to the deliberate misquotation in his utterance. Jen, who knows all the sources of the references, would correctly conclude that Moss's misquotation is actually a quip concerning her public mistake on the show. In the example, Moss flouts the maxim of manner because he intentionally uses misquotation for humorous effect.

### **Communicative Functions of Conversational Humor**

There are three main communicative functions in the characters' humorous utterances, namely positive affect, expressiveness, and negative affect. Each has its own subcategories, which arise from the characters' flouting of the conversational maxims. Table 3 below presents the frequency of the communicative functions of humor in the sitcom. The table shows that the flouting of the conversational maxims was produced to serve all the three communicative functions of humor with approximately the same frequency.

Table 3. Frequency of the communicative functions of humor in *The IT Crowd*

No.	Functions	N	%
1.	Positive affect	40	39.22
2.	Expressiveness	36	35.29
3.	Negative affect	26	25.49
<b>Total</b>		<b>102</b>	<b>100.00</b>

### *Positive Affect*

The positive affect function of humor is further divided into three sub-functions: being playful, reducing tension, and developing a bond. All these three sub-functions were found in the sitcom. Table 4 below presents the frequency of the three sub-functions. The table shows that the most frequent use of positive affect humor is to be playful (55%), then to reduce tension (32.5%), and the least is to develop a bond (12.5%).



Table 4. Frequency of positive affect functions of humor in *The IT Crowd*

No.	Positive Affect	N	%
1	Being playful	22	55.00
2	Reducing tension	13	32.50
3	Developing a bond	5	12.50
<b>Total</b>		<b>40</b>	<b>100.00</b>

The results suggest that because situation comedies are light entertainment (Potter, 1990), they focus on the characters' silliness in various scenarios to amuse the audience with little emphasis on the plot. Consequently, the humorous interactions found in the sitcom consist dominantly of playful humor that is easier to perform without being constrained or affecting the story, unlike the other functions. Below is an example of how a Gricean maxim is flouted in order to be playful.

(8) [S2E4] 00:00:51,280 --> 00:00:58,955

**Context:** *Jen and Peter, a co-worker, are going out. In the IT Department office, both are talking about their first meeting with Roy and Moss. They meet at a market where Peter helps Jen picking out fruits that fall out of her bag. Jen jokingly says she has to give Peter her number because it would be rude not to.*

Jen: **It just seemed rude not to give him my number.**

Peter: Hey! I thought you asked for my number.

Jen: (*laughs*) I'm not a slut.

Jen flouts the maxim of quality because she wants to be playful in relating her story. Jen is recounting the event when she and her boyfriend meet; as a storyteller, she wants to entertain the hearers and keep their attention on her by using humor. When she says, "It just seemed rude not to give him my number," she does not express a hostile intention towards Peter but engages him in a humorous conversation. The dialogue above shows Peter accepting her invitation and participating in the humorous talk when he teases Jen by challenging her previous utterance. This exchange of jocular mockeries shows playfulness between the interlocutors as both engage in a humorous sequence that places the utterances' meanings as untrue, hence not genuinely aggressive. Therefore, by flouting the maxim of quality, Jen achieves the purpose of being playful.

### **Expressiveness**

The expressiveness function of humor is further divided into two sub-functions: self-disclosure and disclosing difficult information. These two sub-functions were found in the sitcom. Table 5 presents the two sub-functions, with the self-disclosure (72.22%) being much more frequently used as the reason for the characters flouting of the conversational maxims in their humorous utterances than the disclosure of difficult information (27.78%).

Table 5. Frequency of expressiveness functions of humor in *The IT Crowd*

No.	Expressiveness	N	%
1	Self-disclosure	26	72.22
2	Disclosing difficult information	10	27.78
<b>Total</b>		<b>36</b>	<b>100.00</b>

The characters of *The IT Crowd* were found to talk about themselves in various situations, no matter whether they were prompted or not. This seems to suggest that their tendency to disclose themselves is related to the fact that the series is a comedy because the characters often tell others about their witty opinions or outrageous facts about themselves, which gives rise to comic effects. Below is an example of how a Gricean maxim is flouted to disclose information about oneself (or self-disclosure).

(9) [S1E4] 00:01:50,323 --> 00:02:04,114

**Context:** *In the morning, at the IT Department office, Jen, Moss, and Roy have a small talk about the heavily pregnant receptionist on the 3rd floor. Roy, who is oblivious to the news, confesses something about himself.*

Jen: Receptionist 3rd floor, Gloria what's-her-name... have you seen her baby?

Roy: I didn't know she was pregnant.

Jen: She was out to here!

Roy: **Yeah, I thought she was stealing office equipment, that's how I got that monitor home.**

Roy flouts the maxim of quantity to confess his transgression as an employee. When Jen is surprised that he does not know about Gloria's pregnancy, he seizes the opportunity to disclose something about himself. Roy tells the others that he thought Gloria was not pregnant but like him, smuggled a piece of

office equipment under her clothes. The speaker knows that by admitting his transgression in a humorous tone, the others are less likely to take it seriously due to the uncertainty associated with the truth of humorous utterance. The humorous flouting allows the speaker to be non-committal and withdraw his statement if the others criticize his action. Therefore, he can protect himself from the risk of social consequences of others' disapproval of his disclosure.

### ***Negative Affect***

As shown earlier, in the sitcom, the negative affect was the least frequently used. A possible cause for this is probably the constrain of the workplace setting of *The IT Crowd*. Since the characters are co-workers, they are expected to portray a plausible cooperative and friendly demeanor towards each other. Therefore, the characters are limited from excessively using humor with the aim to verbally harm others or any other intentions depicting discordance. Table 6 below shows three specific negative or anti-social reasons why the characters flout the conversational maxims in their humorous utterances. The most frequent use of negative affect humor is to belittle others (57.69%), then put others in their place (30.76%), and say negative things (11.54%). Example (10) shows how a Gricean maxim is flouted to belittle others.

Table 6. Frequency of negative affect functions of humor in *The IT Crowd*

No.	Negative Affect	N	%
1	Belittling others	15	57.69
2	Putting others in their place	8	30.76
3	Saying negative things	3	11.54
<b>Total</b>		<b>26</b>	<b>100.00</b>

(10) [S2E5] 00:01:04.200 --> 00:01:06.555

**Context:** *Someone had put lipstick on Roy as a prank when he was unconscious at a bachelor party. The following day, he is unknowingly walking to the office with the lipstick still on his lips. Before coming to the office, he purchases a newspaper at a newsagent. The elderly newsagent makes a comment when he sees his face.*

Newsagent: (*smirks*) **Morning, beautiful!**

Roy: (*stares at the newsagent weirdly*)

The newsagent is an older man who is probably not familiar with the idea of men wearing make-up. Therefore, when he comes across Roy wearing lipstick, he perceives it as a fault in Roy's conduct for behaving in a feminine fashion despite being a man. He then feels the need to ridicule Roy for his "inappropriate" behavior and is inclined to do so because he is more elderly, thus of higher status. It is evident in his sarcastic use of the word beautiful. The word "beautiful" is more strongly associated with a description of feminine beauty used toward women (Moon, 2014). Hence, directing it towards a man can be considered an emasculating insult rather than a compliment. Therefore, the newsagent delivers an insulting remark within a seemingly positive "compliment" to belittle Roy, which flouts the maxim of quality.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of humorous utterances found in the situation comedy *The IT Crowd* shows a relationship between maxim flouting and rhetorical strategies in conversational humor production. The characters of *The IT Crowd* seasons one and two produce verbal humor in conversations by flouting all four Gricean maxims.

Certain maxims are flouted more frequently than the others because they co-occur with more varied rhetorical strategies when creating conversational humor. As the most employed rhetorical strategy in the series' humor production, allusion only co-occurs with the flouting of the maxim of manner. It was discovered that 19 out of 20 kinds of rhetorical strategies found in the sitcom only co-occur with one particular maxim, namely: verbal irony, metaphor, rhetorical question, banter, hyperbole, sarcasm, semantic phraseme, meiosis, paradox, excessive information, insufficient information, irrelevant statement, retort, pretended misunderstanding, allusion, simile, neologism, obscure expression, and punning. The only exception is the put-down strategy where its use causes either the flouting of the maxim of quality or manner; and its corresponding implicatures. The data reveals that each rhetorical strategy gives rise to an implicature

of particular maxim(s) flouting. Therefore, a certain maxim flouting frequency is parallel to the variety of the co-occurring rhetorical strategies employed. Evidently, the maxim of quality with the most variety is also the most flouted, while the maxim of quantity with the fewest variety is the least flouted.

The communicative function plays a decisive role in the speakers' decisions in choosing the suitable rhetorical strategies to employ when creating humorous verbalizations. A speaker chooses a rhetorical strategy to generate a particular implicature in accordance with the humor communicative function they wish to achieve. The characters in the situation comedy *The IT Crowd* flout the Gricean maxims to achieve eight different humor communicative functions, which generally fall into three categories: getting closer (positive affect function), expressing themselves (expressiveness function), and distancing themselves from others (negative affect function). The characters most often flout the Gricean maxims to get closer to the other characters. The preference for positive affect function is because the source is a situation comedy that emphasizes the characters' comical acts in multiple scenarios. Therefore, because playful humor is easier to perform without affecting the story, it allows the characters to amuse the audience frequently.

The result of this research highlights an aspect of conversational humor. Conversational humor has a role in conversation not only because it is connected to the context of the conversation and meaningfully contributes to the communication (Attardo 2001; Dynel 2009) but also because it is generated with an intention to fulfill a specific communicative function intended by the speaker. The mechanism of the conversational humor production involves choosing suitable rhetorical strategies to generate the implicature (of a particular maxim) needed for fulfilling the speaker's goal, whose success would entail a humorous effect for the interlocutors.

Compared to the previous research, specifically that of Andersen (2013), we found one key difference in the motivation behind maxim flouting in comedy series. Unlike *The IT Crowd* characters that flout the maxims for mostly positive affect functions, her research shows that the characters of her subject

research, the sitcom *Community*, most often flout the Gricean maxims to fulfill negative affect function, such as by insulting others, turning someone down, expressing discontent towards others, or reprimanding others' bad behaviors. Despite the similarity of the research subjects of situation comedies, the reasons for the characters' maxim floutings show a contrasting result. The probable cause of this divergence is the differences in the shows' contexts. While Andersen studies an American sitcom, this research studies a British one. In addition, it may also be due to *Community* sets in a community college with younger less-professional characters portraying friends rather than co-workers. It can be an interesting topic for further research to conduct a comparative study about how different settings in sitcoms affect the characters' motivations to flout the conversation maxims.

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