Extradicgetic and character laughter as markers of humorous intentions in the sitcom 2 Broke Girls

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Received 2 July 2015; received in revised form 21 December 2015; accepted 24 December 2015
Available online 26 January 2016

Abstract

This study analyses data from one episode of the US sitcom 2 Broke Girls to demonstrate how telecinematic discourse contrasts and explicitly signals intentions on different levels of communication for humorous effect. The presented examples show how the collective senders cue television viewers to follow extradicgetic laughter (the laugh track) and character laughter as markers of humour and humour support to infer humorous and non-humorous intentions and incongruities on different communicative levels, communicative level 1 (CL1) between collective sender and viewers, and CL2 between characters. The data illustrate the heterogeneity of sitcom humour, which is categorised into humour constellations based on the communicative level on which the incongruity is inferred. Subtypes of CL2-humour involve markers that show characters to be intentionally humorous, to fail in their attempts at humour, or to pretend to appreciate humour by employing fake laughter; CL1-humour refers to humour which is marked solely extradicetically and functions without any marked intent within the fictional world. Each of the constellations positions the viewers differently and invites them to laugh with or about sitcom characters, and this categorisation thus also highlights the viewers’ dynamic shifts between different participant roles.

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Keywords: “2 Broke Girls”; Humour markers; Laughter; Participation framework; Sitcom; Telecinematic discourse

1. Introduction

Sitcoms, like all forms of fictional film and television, depend upon the coexistence of several communicative levels or layers of action (Clark, 1996). Viewers follow the interactions of characters on screen and, to a certain degree, pretend to be witnesses situated within the diegetic world of the fictional narrative. At the same time, however, they are “the primary ratified participants” (Dynel, 2011c:48) of the telecinematic communicative setting, engaged in mediated communication with the collective sender¹ of the television broadcast. This double role of the viewer is complemented by two tiers of intentions: (1) based on processes of characterisation, viewers form mental models of characters and accordingly interpret actions based on assumed character intentions; (2) based on knowledge of the fictionality and scriptedness of the cultural artefact they are engaged with, viewers situate intentionality on the level of the collective sender.

How then is this layeredness employed for humour? What relation is there between on-screen character humour and mediated humour between the collective sender and the television audience?

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¹ I will use the term collective sender (Dynel, 2011d; Seewoester Cain, 2013; Brock, 2015) to refer to the conglomerate of all those involved in the production of the fictional audio-visual text, i.e. the cast and crew including writers, directors and actors, among others.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2015.12.009
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Since the layeredness of communication also extends to the humorous intentions that are inferred by viewers as pertaining to the collective sender and/or characters, numerous possibilities arise for sitcom producers to construct humorous incongruities on and across communicative levels. One of the features that distinguishes sitcom humour from that of other live-action film and television comedies is the employment of pre-recorded laughter that is broadcast as part of the audio-visual artefact. As a form of extradiegetic laughter, i.e. laughter which does not have a source within the fictional world, it does not only mark instances of humour, but also more specifically works as a marker for humorous intentions on the level of the collective sender. Similarly, character smiles and laughter can serve as humour markers on the character level. Following such markers, viewers are thus led to situate the humorous intentions on either level. Moreover, the co-presence of communicative levels and of the respective markers may lead to incongruous intentions (see discussion in section 2.2), which can themselves constitute the core of humour: they are instrumental not only as markers, but also in the construction of humour itself.

Previous research on humour in fictional television series includes studies that utilise telecinematic data in the pursuit of more general research aims in humour studies (e.g. Purandare and Litman, 2006; Brône, 2008; Stokoe, 2008). But a number of articles have also focused on the particularities of humour in fictional television (Brock, 2011; Urios-Aparisi and Wagner, 2011), which importantly includes the specific participation settings and roles involved in telecinematic discourse (Dynel, 2011a; Brock, 2015). Research on sitcom humour, as it is undertaken in the latter two articles and also in this study, can demonstrate how the participation structure of televisual comedies is employed in what can uncontroversially be considered one of their main functions: to be humorous to television audiences.2

Based on data from one episode of the US sitcom 2 Broke Girls (CBS, 2012), this study illustrates how constellations of matching and clashing intentions across communicative layers are employed in the construction of humour. It specifically looks at different forms of laughter as humour markers that facilitate humour across layers, and it sheds light on particular ways in which the participation framework of the sitcom is employed in the construction of humour.

2. Telecinematic participation and sitcom humour

2.1. Participation framework of telecinematic discourse

In investigating sitcom humour, this study uses telecinematic discourse3 as data for linguistic analysis. This type of data is understood as naturally occurring (in the sense of Jucker, 2009:1615),4 but as distinct in a number of aspects from the traditional basic setting of language use, i.e. spontaneous face-to-face conversation. Among the most notable differences for this study are that the visible participants (the characters on screen) do not determine the unfolding of their interaction, which is defined by the collective sender; and that self-expression on the part of the collective sender is constrained by the intermediary actors performing on screen.

Both of those differences directly link to the communication setting of telecinematic discourse, which takes place on two levels of communication (Clark, 1996; Dynel, 2011c; Piazza et al., 2011). The collective sender communicates with television viewers via the seemingly self-contained space of the diegetic world, in which characters interact for the benefit of the audience. The onscreen communication thus comprises a second communicative level that depends not only on the first level, but also on the willingness of the viewers to suspend their disbelief and to engage, together with the collective sender, in a conventional form of joint pretence (Clark, 1996). Thus, viewers and the collective sender jointly construe a subordinate layer for the fictional characters and (inter-)actions. Following Brock (2015), I will refer to this subordinate layer as communicative level 2 (CL2) and to the superordinate layer between collective sender and viewer as communicative level 1 (CL1).

The participation role of viewers has been likened to that of Goffman’s (1979) overhearers (Kozloff, 2000; Bubel, 2006, 2008; Bednarek, 2011). I follow Dynel’s (2011d) view here, however, that first and foremost, television audiences need to be conceptualised as ratified participants in telecinematic discourse (see also Brock, 2015). This is crucial for the understanding of sitcom humour, for even though sitcom viewers engage with the fictional world, they are aware that onscreen character interactions are fictional, scripted, and intentional in the sense that they are governed by the planning, producing and editing processes of the collective sender.

This is not to deny that on CL2 there is a fully-fledged fictional world with characters interacting as if they were engaged in spontaneous talk. While viewers clearly have no manifest presence on that fictional layer, they witness characters, events and scenes as if they were taking place outside the telecinematic context. In this sense, viewers do play the role of

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2 In the same vein, Mills (2009:49) defines sitcom as “a form of programming which foregrounds its comic intent.”

3 Telecinematic discourse is the term used by Piazza et al. (2011) to refer to the language and communication of film and television.

4 Naturally occurring in this sense refers to “data that has not been elicited by the researcher for the purpose of his or her research project but that occurs for communicative reasons outside of the research project for which it is used” (Jucker, 2009:1615, emphasis in original).
unrated participants, and they perform participatory actions (Clark, 1996:19) which are preconditioned by production processes on the side of the collective sender. Brock (2015:32) describes these sender-side processes as the construction of “a fictitious participation slot,” which is achieved by conventional telecinematic techniques.

Compared to earlier models of the telecinematic participation framework, Brock’s recent discussion of the participation settings of television sitcoms and other comedy genres quite rightly stresses that the viewers’ participation role is “fluid and dynamic” (Brock, 2015:31), and that audiences need to be conceptualised as being located “on two communicative levels all at once” (33). This is crucial not only for an accurate representation of the communicative setting of telecinematic discourse, but even more so for the understanding of sitcom humour, which depends not only on incongruities within layers, but precisely on the co-presence of communicative levels and on their simultaneous accessibility to the viewers.

2.2. Humorous incongruities and communicative levels

This paper understands humour as a result of incongruity and thus follows what within linguistics is generally deemed the most accepted of the three canonical strands of humour theories (see for instance Veale, 2004). Incongruity can be described quite generally as “invol[ing] some kind of difference between what one expects and what one gets” (Berger, 1987:8). Concepts similar to that of incongruity have been rendered in different terms, such as Bateson’s (1953:3) “implicit presence and acceptance of [. . .] paradoxes,” Koestler’s (1964) bisociation, i.e. “the perceiving of a situation or idea in two habitually incompatible frames of reference” (Suls, 1983:40), or Raskin’s (1985) and Attardo and Raskin’s (1991) script opposition. One of the most convincing accounts of the workings of incongruity is Suls’ (1972) incongruity-resolution model, which I briefly present here to illustrate this particular understanding of humour.

Working on the basis of jokes and captioned cartoons, and explicitly including narrative humour more generally, Suls’ (1972) theory describes humour in the form of specific cognitive problem-solving processes, which occur in two stages: (1) the disconfirmation of perceiver expectations and (2) the finding of a semantic, logical, or experiential rule that can reconcile the incongruity perceived in (1) (Suls, 1972:89). The first stage presumes that recipients use the input they are presented to construe a narrative schema. Based on this schema, they form predictions for the narrative they are processing, against which they measure subsequent information. But humour can only be understood and appreciated if the first stage results in the recognition that the ending of the narrative sequence is incompatible with the schema-evoking beginning, and the second stage leads to the identification of a suitable cognitive rule that can connect schema and incongruous element.

Suls’ (1972) account describes humour-appreciation processes and thus focuses on incongruity in a cognitive sense. However, the trigger for the relevant cognitive processes resides in the information that is being processed, and cognitive incongruity is then based on (potential) incongruity between different stimuli. In its analysis of sitcom humour, this study investigates the latter form of incongruity, while it can only assume that detecting incongruous stimuli will lead to such cognitive processes in recipients as they are described in Suls’ (1972) model.

In addition to processing and resolving incongruities, Suls (1972) adds, it may be necessary to recognise input as intentionally funny in order to “make[] laughter admissible and appropriate” (84). Suls does not discuss this aspect any further, but his remark points to a distinction between humorous and serious talk that is commonly approached in terms of interactional framing. Bateson’s (1953) notion of play has been widely discussed in humour research (see Dynel, 2011b). For the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to assume that participants can signal to each other that “this is play” (Bateson’s, 1955/1972:179) and in so doing can establish a play frame that distinguishes itself from serious talk precisely by making humour and laughter admissible. To establish such a humour-facilitating frame, participants can use markers that help to make humorous intentions identifiable as such.

Based on this discussion of the participation framework of telecinematic discourse and an incongruity theory of humour, a few theoretical aspects of sitcom humour become evident. If the communicative setting of a sitcom involves several layers, and if incongruities at the core of humour are dependent on the speech event in which they occur, it follows that the surprising element that triggers humour may be perceived as occurring within CL1 or CL2, and as being incongruous with the context on either CL1 or CL2. In other words, humorous intentions may occur on either of both, or across the two communicative levels.

This begs the question how viewers understand humorous intentions on CL1 and CL2. Intentionality and intention-reading, and the role they play in communication, have been discussed widely in pragmatics (e.g. see Haugh, 2008, 2013; de Jongste, 2013). Here, I follow the view that understanding interlocutors involves recognising and inferring intended meaning based on their utterances. In the case of sitcom humour aimed at the viewer, understanding humorous intentions means that the viewers’ inferential processes within an established play frame lead them to an incongruity which they assume was intended by the collective sender to be perceived as humorous by the viewers. The establishment of the play frame itself is achieved by a number of external and internal humour cues, such as TV programme listings or indeed the

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5 See Attardo (1994) for a detailed history of humour theory from a linguistic perspective.
laugh track (for further discussion of these cues see Brock, 2009:181–182). In the case of humour aimed to induce amusement in other characters on CL2, the viewers infer that the collective sender intends the speaking character on CL2 to intend to be humorous, and that the collective sender intends the characters on CL2 to demonstrate that they are inferring or have inferred the speaking character’s humorous intentions.

2.3. Laughter as a marker of humorous intent

Rather than focusing on the cognitive steps that viewers take in inferring humorous intentions, this study focuses on markers that facilitate the recognition and understanding of scripted humour, and more specifically on laughter as a humour marker. Humour markers are understood here as intentionally communicating humour (Attardo et al., 2011b:197), either of the previous or ongoing turn, be it to the viewers alone (in the case of extradiegetic laughter), or to CL2-participants and viewers alike (in the case of character laughter). Recent research on potential humour markers has refuted some of the theoretical assumptions about how humour is marked prosodically and multimodally in interaction (see overview in Attardo et al., 2011b). Attardo et al. (2011a), for instance, found only minor prosodic differences between humorous and serious turns in conversation, and conclude: “[S]o far, we have identified only one fairly reliable marker of humorous intention, a smiling or laughing expression, with the proviso that potentially canned, narrative jokes are the exception to this” (Attardo et al., 2011a:242).

While smiles or laughter cannot unambiguously mark humour (see discussions in Olibrechts-Tyteca, 1974; Attardo, 1994; Hay, 2001; Vandaele, 2002; Bell, 2009), they have been shown to establish and ratify a humorous mode (Haakana, 2010). Laughter in particular has been understood as “the idealtypical expression of the emotion of amusement” (Kuipers, 2006:8) and as forming an adjacency pair with joking (Norrick, 1993:23). In this sense laughter can be regarded as the preferred response to humour. However, Glenn’s (2003) review of psychological research points to a shift away from viewing laughter as a response to and therefore an indicator of humour, and towards what Morreall (1983:55) calls a “two-way causality between our feelings and the behavior expressing those feelings.” Laughter, in this view, is not only a response to, but can itself trigger humour, which also means that “people are more likely to laugh when others around are laughing” (Glenn, 2003:26).

Interestingly for the case of sitcom humour, the same proverbial contagiousness of laughter has been found to hold not only in face-to-face conversation, but also in the case of pre-recorded studio-laughter, which has been shown to lead to more laughter (but not necessarily higher funniness ratings) in audiences (Glenn, 2003:27; see also Provine, 1992, 2005).

Extradiegetic laughter, i.e. laughter on the laugh track of a sitcom, “is a record of the ‘live’ responses of those who witnessed the event” (Mills, 2009:14), but may also be produced differently (see Becker, 2008; Bore, 2011). As it usually entails “large groups of people laughing” (81), it is clearly distinguishable from individual character-laughter that may be audible at the same time. Mills (2009) regards the laugh track as “the aural embodiment of the audience” (102), which signals to television audiences that the collective sender’s intentions are humorous and that others indeed found the respective instance to be funny.

As the reaction of another audience, the laugh track can be understood as contagious and thus as facilitating viewer laughter. Since laughter is also instrumental in the establishing and maintaining of a play frame, the laugh track also serves to reiterate the humorous intent of the genre of the sitcom (Mills, 2009:93). Most importantly, however, the laugh track as part of the sitcom text marks the intentions of the collective sender to be humorous. Its presence must always be understood as planned and therefore as directly pointing to the collective sender’s humorous intentions. For this reason, it was also used to identify CL1-humour in the data analysis (see section 3.2).

Since all character dialogue is designed for television audiences by the collective sender, character laughter is also planned and controlled, and it can be understood as an implicit characterisation cue (Bednarek, 2010:101–102). This means that it is not only a response to humorous turns by other characters, but also influences the viewers’ formation of mental models of the characters and situations of the fictional CL2. Mental models have to be understood as “cognitive representations of our experiences” (van Dijk, 2008:61), which in the case of sitcoms refers to the cognitively constructed fictional reality in which viewers perceive characters to interact. Since CL2-participants have no access to CL1, character laughter cannot in itself mark the collective sender’s humorous intentions. However, it serves to give the viewers clues about character intentions, as when a speaker laughs while making an utterance, or clues about character assessment of the previous turn.

3. Data and method

3.1. The sitcom 2 Broke Girls

To illustrate how sitcoms use their communicative setting to construct humour, and the role that humour markers play in sitcom humour, this paper presents examples from one episode of the US sitcom 2 Broke Girls (22 min). This episode,
selected as a random sample of the sitcom, is titled “And the pre-approved credit card” and was broadcast on November 5, 2012 as the fifth episode of the second season. The particular sitcom was selected as a random representative of US American sitcoms still on the air and broadcast by a major network. 2 Broke Girls is generally described as common or even old fashioned (McNamara, 2011), and it is safe to assume that humorous instances similar to the ones observed here may also be found in other sitcoms.

The examples involve the two main characters of the sitcom, Max and Caroline who are waitresses at a diner; the diner’s Korean owner Han, whose height is sometimes the target of humour; Earl, the cashier; and Darius, Earl’s son who is trying to start a new career as a comedian. The scenes are set in the kitchen of the diner; the diner itself; and a Comedy Club. The sitcom is set in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. In interactional terms, the communication can be characterised as showing very little overlap between turns, but substantial gaps, which are often filled by the laugh track.

3.2. Identifying humour in 2 Broke Girls

Using the software ELAN, a tool that facilitates multi-modal transcription of video material, the dialogue of the episode was transcribed and all instances of extradiegetic laughter were identified. While the laugh track can generally be described as homogeneous, there are differences in length and volume between the individual instances of laughter. However, these differences were not taken into account for the current study. Based on the theoretical assumptions discussed in section 2, the laugh track was employed as a tool to identify humorous intentions by the collective sender. Whenever a turn construction unit (TCU) is followed by extradiegetic laughter, that TCU is categorised as intended to be humorous by the collective sender. These cases will be referred to as humorous turn construction units (HTCUs). In contrast, whenever a TCU is not followed by extradiegetic laughter, it is considered to be non-humorous with regard to collective sender intentions, and is excluded from further analysis.

Subsequently, all HTCUs were analysed qualitatively with a focus on humorous intentions on the character level. Viewers are assumed to be able to detect humour markers employed by characters and to infer humorous character intentions based on those markers (see section 2.2). The second step consisted of analysing HTCUs with regard to laughter by the speaking character. In a third step, laughter by other characters in the scene was identified. While there are different types of laughter and smiles that can be distinguished by viewers and thus also by the researcher (e.g. see Ekman, 1992; Flamson and Bryant, 2013), only three markers were differentiated in this analysis: ‘laughter’, ‘fake laughter’, and ‘no laughter’. Fake laughter was distinguished from genuine laughter based on context and explicit character statements (see excerpt 3 in section 4.2.2).

If laughter was employed by the speaking character, it was taken to mean that viewers can infer CL2-intentions to be humorous by means of an intradiegetic cue. If another character, e.g. addressees, laughed in direct reaction to the HTCU, this was thought to signal recognition and appreciation of humour by that character.

Based on these three analytical steps – (1) identification of HTCUs based on extradiegetic laughter, (2) categorisation of HTCUs based on laughter displayed by the speaking character, (3) further categorisation of HTCUs based on laughter displayed by other characters – 178 HTCUs were identified, analysed and sorted into mutually exclusive categories. The goal of this analysis is to explore the different types of humour constellations as they are apparent in this and presumably other sitcoms. The frequency of each constellation within the analysed episode is indicated in Table 1 in section 4. However, it should be noted that the distribution of constellations might vary significantly in other sitcoms and even in other episodes of 2 Broke Girls. This case study of sitcom humour identifies different humour constellations, but makes no claims about their typicality, which will have to be established in future studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humour constellation</th>
<th>Laugh track</th>
<th>Speaking character</th>
<th>Other characters</th>
<th>N</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>CL1-humour without marked CL2-humour</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>No laughter</td>
<td>No laughter</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>CL1-humour without marked humorous intent of CL2-speakers, but with marked humour uptake by other characters</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>No laughter</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Successful CL2-humour</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Failed CL2-humour</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>No laughter</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>CL2-humour involving fake laughter</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>Fake laughter</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HTCUs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Instances of humour

Based on the methodological procedures described in section 3.2, all HTCUs are by definition intended to be humorous on CL1, and the categorisation of humour that is suggested here solely hinges on the humour markers as they are displayed by characters on CL2. An HTCU will be considered an instance of CL2-humour if humorous intention is marked for the speaking character. Conversely, if no humorous intentions for the speaking character are marked, it is assumed that the humorous intentions in these cases are outside of the fictional layer. This form of humour is therefore termed CL1-humour.

Table 1 gives an overview of the humour constellations the analysis brought forward. As can be seen from the table, any type of humour constellation is constituted by a unique combination of laughter presence/absence in each of the three positions (laugh track, speaking characters, other characters).

4.1. CL1-humour without marked humorous intent of CL2-speakers

Humour without marked humorous intent for CL2-speakers is marked extradiegetically, but involves no laughter by the speaking character. It can either involve solely extradiegetic markers, or it can include laughter by other CL2-characters as an intradiegetic marker of humour recognition and appreciation.

4.1.1. CL1-humour without marked CL2-humour

Excerpt 1 shows what can be described as the prototypical humour-pattern in 2 Broke Girls as well as in other similar sitcoms.6

Excerpt 1: 2 Broke Girls, Season 2, Episode 5, 00:00:00–00:00:27

Setting: the kitchen of the diner in which Max (M) and Caroline (C) work as waitresses.

17 M: ±-warms a lipstick with a lighter-----±
<LT>=Hahahahahahaha</LT, 0.9>

2 C: ⟨(enters the kitchen)⟩ U::h, ↑↑what’s happening right now?
<LT>=Hahahahahaha[ha_ha_ha_ha_ha_ha_ha_ha_ha_ha]<</LT, 0.7>

3 C: [↑↑Max, are you] smoking crack?
<LT>=HAHAHAHA[HAHAHAHAHA]⟩</LT, 1.2>

4 M: ⟨[It’s ↑not ↓crack,]⟩ it’s ↑lipstick. I can’ afford cra:ck
<LT>=HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA</LT, 1.3>

5 M: [I’m] at the end of my good↓lipstick and I can’ afford to buy a
↓new one so I’m going all breaking ↑bad.
<LT>(0.2).HA[[HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA]]=</LT, 1.6>

6 C: ⟨[↑Breaking bad? (0.3) We’re]⟩ more like broke and
=[sa(h)d]. ↑You’re freebasing lipstick=
<LT> [Hahahahahahahahahahahahaha]</LT, 1.0>
=an’ ↑look (0.9) this ↑heel is starting to wobble.

Based on the criterion of extradiegetic laughter as a marker of CL1-humour, there are 6 HTCUs in this excerpt. First of all, the frequency of extradiegetic laughter in this and all other excerpts indicates that humorous turns are the rule rather than

6 See Appendix for transcription conventions.
the exception in this sitcom, and in fact, all TCU but the very last one are humorous in this excerpt. There is a simple pattern of a turn, followed by a gap in the CL2-interaction, which is filled by extradiegetic laughter, followed by the next turn, and so on – a back and forth between utterances on the character level and markers on CL1. It is also notable that there are no gaps between HTCUs and extradiegetic laughter. On CL2, on the other hand, the first five instances of humour are not marked by laughter. Neither does the speaker indicate that her intentions are humorous, nor does the addressee mark that she would recognise humorous intent. In the absence of any indication, explicit or implicit, that the interacting characters mean to be funny or recognise the speaker as intending to be funny, the viewers will infer that no humour is intended on CL2 and that the marked HTCUs are humorous over the characters’ heads.

To explain the humour in HTCUs 1–6, we may first of all look for incongruity on CL2. In the case of HTCU 2, for instance, the communicative event, i.e. two waitresses at their work place, raises expectations that are then juxtaposed with the waitresses’ linguistic and non-linguistic actions. These actions are understood to be incongruous with the waitressing schema based on visual cues, which implicate that Max is doing something that is opposed to what waitresses normally do. Viewers, at this point, are unlikely to fully understand Max’s actions, but they will perceive it as being at odds with how waitresses usually behave in a restaurant kitchen. In the subsequent humorous turns, HTCUs 3 and 4, the ill-fitting element is narrowed down to drug-consumption and then more specifically to smoking lipstick as a drug, which accentuates the clash between Max’s work environment and non-work behaviour.

However, a different type of mismatch, directly linked to the telecinematic participation framework, is also apparent, viz. an incongruity concerning different (humorous) intentions. Based on their knowledge of the sitcom genre and the cues provided by the collective sender, of which the laugh track is a prime example, viewers expect that the fictional layer will contain instances of humour. Accordingly, when the respective TCU are marked on CL1 as being humorous, it comes as no surprise and is fully compatible with the play frame and the viewers’ expectations. At the same time, the absence of humour markers on CL2 indicates that CL2-participants in these cases have no intention to be humorous. They are of course part of the jointly constructed fictional layer and as such governed by the collective sender, but within that game of joint pretence, they are engaging in communication which is framed not as play, but as serious. This has implications for how the viewers’ participation role needs to be conceptualised in telecinematic discourse. Understanding the viewer as immersed and fully aligned with the characters would mean that they fail to recognise or appreciate CL1-humour. If viewers do recognise CL1-humour and at the same time engage in joint pretence, it follows that they must be, as discussed in 2.1, simultaneously imagining to be immersed in the fictional world, i.e. part of CL2, and appreciative of the main communicative level between the collective sender and themselves.

In terms of incongruity, CL1-humour is thus characterised by two co-existing viewer roles that follow two incompatible sets of intentions: The viewers in their role as primary ratified participant of CL1 infer humour based on CL1-markers of CL1-intentions; in their role as pretend-witnesses of the fictional world, they are an unratified part of the serious interaction on CL2.

4.1.2. CL1-humour without marked humorous intent of CL2-speakers, but with marked humour uptake by other characters

Excerpt 2 takes place 7 min into the same episode of 2 Broke Girls and illustrates a different type of CL-1 humour.

**Excerpt 2: 2 Broke Girls, Season 2, Episode 5, 00:07:01–00:08:18**

Setting: the diner in which Max and Caroline work as waitresses. Max (M), Han (H, the owner of the diner), Earl (E, the cashier), and Darius (D, Earl’s son) are sitting in a diner booth.

59 M: So Darius what was Earl like as a dad? Musta been great, huh? I bet he packed the coolest lunches, a joint for recess and a gin an’ juicebox? [Ha]  

    <LT>[Ha]hahahahahaha  

      =ha[[hahahahahahahahaha]] </LT, 1.9>  

60 D: [[Oh yeah yeah, he was a] great dad! I mean he was always there- (0.6) except for my chidhoo(h)d! [HAHAHAHA. You gotta] laugh! [[AHHAHAHAHAHAHA]]  

61    <LT> [HAHAHAHAHAHAHA] </LT, 1.7>  

    <LT>[[hahahahahahahahaha]]</LT, 1.5>
HTCU 68 is preceded by Darius telling his father, Earl, that he quit his job to become a professional comedian. Earl reacts by laughing and then explicitly evaluating Darius’ turn as humorous (“see he’s funny”, 69). The viewer can already infer that Darius has no humorous intentions based on the absence of any humour markers, but this is made explicit when Earl declares that it was not a joke.
This type of humour is similar to what has been described in section 4.1.1, but it entails humour markers in the turn of a reacting character on CL2. The initial TCU is not followed by extradiegetic laughter, and therefore not marked on CL1 as humorous. The laugh track only sets in when Earl has started laughing on CL2. This underlines first of all the hierarchy between communicative levels: Whereas humour markers on CL1 can identify an HTCU in the previous turn, CL2-laughter cannot. Earl's laughter is inferred not as a marker of Darius' humorous intentions, but as a marker that Earl (erroneously) recognised and appreciated what he thought was a joke made by Darius. There are no conflicting intentions in this type of humour: Absence of humour markers on both levels for the first turn indicates that it is a non-humorous TCU, and the viewer has no reason to infer humour on either level. Subsequently, however, extradiegetic laughter marks Earl's reaction as humorous, i.e. the incongruity is inferred in the differing character understanding of how the ongoing CL2-interaction is framed: Darius intends to establish a serious frame, and Earl's reaction is incongruous, because his response would only be appropriate in a play frame.

4.2. CL2-humour

Humour on the second communicative level is understood as successful if the markers on CL2 implicate that the speaking character intends to be humorous and that these humorous intentions have been recognised and appreciated by one or several of the characters in the fictional world. It is categorised as failed if the viewer can, based on humour markers, infer humorous intentions in the speaking character, but no markers of recognition or appreciation can be detected in the addressed characters. Finally, the presence of fake laughter is regarded as a marker of characters on CL2 pretending to appreciate humorous intentions that they must therefore recognise, but do not in fact appreciate.

4.2.1. Successful CL2-humour

Excerpt 2 contains a number of humorous remarks by Max (59) and above all by Darius (60, 63, 65), which are all instances of successful CL2-humour. They are marked on CL2 as being intended by the speaker who laughs audibly and visibly. They are also marked as being received favourably by other characters, who react to the HTCU by laughing. Finally, as are all HTUCs, successful CL2-humour is also marked by extradiegetic laughter.

While the focus is on laughter as a humour marker in this paper, the phrase "you gotta laugh" needs to be highlighted in this context. Here and elsewhere in this episode it is used by the character Darius to explicitly claim his previous TCU to be a joke. Throughout the data, this explicit marker always occurs together with speaker laughter, i.e. it never marks humorous intention on its own. As in excerpt 1, CL2-laughter is echoed by extradiegetic laughter, which then marks that the collective sender indeed intends the respective TCU to be humorous.

In these cases, the viewer's participation role comes closest to being that of an overhearer. Since CL2-participant reactions and intentions are aligned with CL1-humour markers, the incongruity the viewers find humorous are the same as those the CL2-participants presumably laugh about. Rather than being incompatible, the two communicative levels can be assumed to reinforce each other. Character laughter followed by extradiegetic laughter, or vice versa, functions as a telecinematic representation of contagious laughter.

4.2.2. Failed CL2-humour

Excerpt 3 displays a different type of participation constellation.

**Excerpt 3: 2 Broke Girls, Season 2, Episode 5, 00:18:07–00:18:32**

Setting: a comedy club. Darius (D) is on stage. Max (M) and other characters are part of the audience.

D:  

↑Who out there has a ↑Smart car?  

*smile---------------------------------*  

(0.6)  

±§-look at each other with a straight face----->  

D:  

Cos ↑I don't think it's ↑smart to drive a half a ↑car.  

-----------------------------------------±§ *-smile-------->  

(0.8)
In HTCU 158, a range of markers indicate that Darius, standing on the stage of the comedy club, is making an attempt at humour. He smiles in synchrony with the lexical items that are most important for the incongruity, i.e. with “Smart car” and “backpack.” His position on stage can be inferred to be that of a comedian based on knowledge about comedy clubs. Finally, the phrase “you gotta laugh” again serves as a marker of humour intentions. Based on these markers, viewers are also likely to expect uptake of humour by the characters in the fictional world. In this case, however, there is no laughter that would mark recognition or appreciation of humour by any characters. The audience on screen react with silence and, in the case of Earl, with a frozen smile that both displays a readiness to react favourably and a failure to actually do so. In other words, the viewers can infer from the character reactions that they do not understand Darius’ joke, or that they do not find it funny.

Shifting the focus to CL1 and extradiegetic laughter, there is silence for 1.2 s after the attempted joke, and laughter as a humour marker only appears after the close-up of Earl’s frozen smile. As can be seen in the other two excerpts, there is usually no gap between HTCUs and extradiegetic laughter, which is to say that it marks as humorous what immediately precedes it. It is clear then that in this case it is not Darius’ attempt at humour that is marked on CL1 as humorous intent, but his failure to elicit the preferred response from his audience, as displayed in Earl’s facial reaction. In terms of the participation framework, the incongruity is thus between the inferable humorous intentions displayed by the CL2-speaker and the dispreferred response by the other characters. In other words, CL1-humour is based on failed CL2-humour in this instance.

### 4.2.3. CL2-humour involving fake laughter

HTCU 156 in excerpt 3 is similar in that it is also based on failed CL2-humour. However, in this case, there is not just an absence of marked humour appreciation, but there is an actual marker of failed humour, viz. fake laughter. While it is already easily recognisable for the viewer as fake based on the difference to genuine laughter by the same character as well as by the fictional narrative leading up to the scene, Max’s reaction here is also explicitly identified as fake (“I ran out of fake laughter”, 157). The participant reactions in failed CL2-humour without fake laughter are difficult to infer when it...
comes to distinguishing lack of recognition from lack of appreciation. All that is visible in those cases is that humour has failed, be it because the respective participants fail to understand it, or because they understand it, but are not amused. In this example, however, fake laughter marks not only failed CL2-humour intentions, but also that the reacting character, in this case Max, has recognised the humorous intent, does not find the attempt at humour amusing, but consciously compiles with a preferred response. This response, however, is clearly distinguishable from genuine laughter, and as such constitutes an unsuccessful attempt at responding favourably to the intended humour. The set-up for humour on CL1 is based on the failed attempt at humour by the speaking character, but the extradiegetic laughter following the fake laughter indicates that ultimately the incongruity is to be found in the realisation of Max’s laughter, which does not meet expectations as to how laughter should sound. In other words, rather than marking Max’s appreciation of Darius’ joke, her laughter does the opposite: it indicates that his joke makes it impossible for her to respond in the preferred manner and thus marks a lack of humorousness she perceives in his performance.

5. General discussion

The three excerpts from 2 Broke Girls presented here illustrate five different constellations of humour, which serve to demonstrate some of the ways in which the participation framework of the sitcom is employed for humour. They make clear, first of all, that such constellations cannot be captured in an analysis of sitcom humour that ignores the co-existence of communicative levels. They also show that viewers, for whom any occurrence of humour is ultimately designed, are not simply overhearers: They need to be aware of the layeredness of the communication setting of telecinematic discourse and simultaneously be engaged with both CL1 and CL2 to appropriately detect markers of humorous intentions on both levels.

As Brock (2009:182–184) points out, processing a humorous incongruity as such is already a metacommunicative act in the sense that the viewer is cued not only to follow the on-going actions, but also to reflect on whether they confirm or disconfirm raised expectations. The mechanisms of humour within the layered setting of the sitcom, however, go beyond what is captured by metacommunication in the form of reflection about communicative processes and re-conceptualisation of experienced situations. In this context, meta-humour has been brought forward as one particular humour constellation in sitcoms (Brock, 2009, 2015; Gillon, 2011), and this is supported by the constellations of failed CL2-humour and CL2-humour with fake laughter. However, not all sitcom humour is meta-humour, and this study has attempted to capture both some of the extraordinary as well as more ordinary instances of humour as are likely to be found in most sitcoms.

In this vein, humour in 2 Broke Girls can first of all be separated into CL1-humour without marked humorous intent of CL2-speakers and CL2-humour. Since the main level of communication is the one between collective sender and viewers, and since extradiegetic laughter on the laugh track was used here to identify humorous TCU, humour is always situated on CL1. However, the distinction lies in how the humorous incongruities are constructed on CL2. Thus CL1-humour without marked humorous intent of CL2-speakers describes those constellations in which the viewers have no reason to infer that humour was intended by the speaking character. They either understand the situation on CL2 to involve no humour (CL1-humour without marked CL2-humour), or to be based on characters on CL2 misconstruing the speaking character’s intentions as humorous (CL1-humour without marked humorous intent of CL2-speakers, but with marked humour uptake by other characters). CL2-humour, on the other hand, is based on humour within the fictional world, whether failed or successful, or involving fake laughter.

Distinguishing the different humour constellations in the sitcom is important because each constellation positions the viewers differently, and together they illustrate the dynamic shifting of viewers between different positions. In the case of successful CL2-humour, the viewers are positioned as aligned with the characters on CL2 who show their appreciation of the speaking character’s humorous intent by responding with laughter. When it is echoed by extradiegetic laughter, this laughter is then transferred to CL1, which can be understood as an instance of contagious laughter, and thus as a reinforcement of humour. However, the incongruity on CL2, which must be inferred as the trigger for the reacting characters’ laughter, is also the incongruity which is marked by extradiegetic laughter, and about which viewers are supposed to laugh. It follows that the intention of the collective sender in these sentences are for the viewers to laugh with the CL2-speaker and -participants.

Failed CL2-humour is different, because rather than aligning viewers with reacting characters, it separates the two. Whereas the speaking character’s intentions are marked as humorous by CL2-laughter, the other characters are shown to either fail to recognise or appreciate the humorous intent. When this failed attempt at humour is marked by extradiegetic laughter as humorous on CL1, the viewers locate the incongruity between the successful performance of humour they know and the unsuccessful realisation they have just witnessed. This is a case of meta-humour, since it involves humour based on the performance of and knowledge about humour.

The case of CL2-humour involving fake laughter goes even further. The CL2-speaker intends to be humorous, which is marked as being recognised by the other characters. When they respond with fake laughter, they show awareness not
only of humorous intent, but also of what they know to be the preferred response, which they then consciously produce. The viewers, on the other hand, do not only realise that the humour attempt was unsuccessful, but also that this was realised by the responding characters, that these characters feign appreciation, and that the resulting laughter is recognisably false, which makes it incongruous with what it wants to achieve: to be understood by the speaker as a genuine appreciation of his/her joke. In this case, meta-communication about humour can already be inferred within CL2, and extradiegetic laughter triggers metacommmunicative processes about that meta-communication about humour, viz. meta-meta-humour. The collective sender’s intention here is for the viewers to laugh about the reacting characters in so far as they produce a response which is incongruous with conventional humour uptake.

In instances of CL1-humour without CL2-humour, there is no humour inferable within CL2, which is represented by the absence of any humour markers for the speaking or other characters on CL2. The humorous incongruity is thus on CL1, which means that characters’ actions as they are perceived by the viewers are incongruous with the viewers’ world knowledge and the ensuing expectations. Since there is no humour within the fictional world here, viewers by definition laugh about the characters or the situations they encounter rather than with them.

Finally, CL1-humour without marked humorous intent of CL2-speakers, but with marked humour uptake by other characters describes humour that is not marked as intentional by the speaker, but that is marked as perceived to be intentional by other characters. Accordingly viewers perceive two different interpretations of the same situation, a speaking character trying to frame their TCU as serious, and another character inferring the speaker’s intentions as humorous. The humorous incongruity thus lies in this mismatch between CL2-participant interpretations.

The list of constellations presented here gives an overview of the variety of humour constellations that may be employed within one episode of a sitcom. The frequency of these constellations, and thus the typicality of certain types of humour for the sitcom genre, will have to be established in future research, which will have to use a larger dataset and possibly a more fine-grained distinction of laughter and smiles as humour markers. The exploratory categorisation of sitcom humour as it is presented here expands the understanding of humorous incongruity to include the particular realisations of humour in the participation framework of the sitcom. It also makes apparent the dynamic nature of the participant roles the viewers are required to play in order to recognise and appreciate different forms of sitcom humour.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Daria Dayter, Miriam Locher, and the two reviewers for their helpful comments, as well as to the editors for including my contribution in this special issue.

Appendix. Transcription conventions (based on Jefferson, 2004; Mondada, 2014)

[] overlapping speech (including laughter)
(.) short gap between utterances
(0.3) gap between utterances in seconds
= latch
: stress
\ indicates lengthening of the previous sound
\^ \ shift to high or low pitch
\,.?! punctuation indicates usual intonation
haha laughter
HAHA loud laughter
<LT> beginning of extradiegetic laughter
/<LT, 0.3> end of extradiegetic laughter, followed by indication of length of laughter in seconds
* ± ^ symbols to identify participants
*----* delimits action/facial expression by participant
*----* action continues on subsequent line(s)
----* action ends
34 number in left-hand column refers to humorous turn construction unit in the data

References


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