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Mind Your Language Series from the Standpoints of Applied Linguistics and Humour Studies

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Abstract

The scientific examination of humour is a recent development in Applied Linguistics and other diverse but cooperating disciplines. Though humour research took off only recently, there has been substantial progress in it. Among the variegated genres of humour situation comedy (abbreviated as sitcom) has received less attention than it merits. This paper analyses Mind Your Language, a situation comedy that is based on the EFL class of an adult education college in London. The show was aired as television series and received commendation across the globe. This paper identifies Mind Your Language as a suitable case to study the dynamics of humour in English language classrooms, especially where the learners represent highly diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This paper applies descriptive and analytical techniques to study the humorous aspects of Mind Your Language series for which Attardo's (1994) linguistic theory of humour and Grice's (1975) logic and conversation form the basis. At first, this paper presents the case of situation comedy as a genre of humour and argues in favour of its inclusion in linguistic and scientific research. Then, it presents a review of relevant literature. Next, it lists the questions that outline the scope of the paper. Discussions from the perspective of Humour Studies, semantico-pragmatics, socio-pragmatics and Applied Linguistics follow the questions. The main findings and conclusions appear at the end.

Keywords: Sitcoms; Mind Your Language; Verbal humour; Humour research; Applied Linguistics; EFL Classrooms

1. Introduction

The expression 'situational comedy' or sitcom refers to the performance of a script that has linguistic interactions with humorous effects. Sitcoms have been among the most popular programmes on television networks. The viewers enjoy them and like to identify themselves with the characters. They also like to enact the scenes and replay them whenever possible. Despite being recognized as an exceedingly popular genre of humour, our knowledge of sitcoms is very petit (Juckel et al 2014). The humorous outcomes of sitcoms largely depend on a fine blend of language and context. Therefore, an analysis of sitcoms cannot afford to ignore the lexico-semantic and socio-pragmatic aspects. Mind Your Language (MYL) is a British sitcom that revolves around an adult learning classroom. In what follows, this paper attempts to analyse MYL television series from the standpoints of Applied Linguistics and Humour Research. At first, the paper introduces the genre of sitcoms and discusses MYL as a British sitcom (also known as Britcom). A review of literature relevant to the genre of sitcom along with questions that delimit the scope of the present research follows the introduction. Analyses based on the linguistic aspects and humour theories appear next. The linguistic analysis focuses on the micro aspects including the semantico-pragmatic features of the dialogues and macro aspects including the socio-pragmatic features of this television series. The humour analysis examines MYL through Attardo's (1994) General Theory of Verbal Humor. Then, follow the main findings and conclusions

2. Review of Literature

Situation comedy (sitcom) is a wide-spread genre of humour. It usually involves a set of characters, which repeatedly appear in different episodes and contribute to the humorous effects through their interactions and situations. In contrast, a stand-up comedy has a comedian narrating humorous jokes, stories and incidents. A sitcom may have several episodes each of which has a distinct story with no interaction between the performers and the audience whereas the performer frequently interacts with the audience in a stand-up comedy. It is important to note that sitcoms became popular only when television programmes were possible. However, once it was possible to relay shows far and across sitcoms saw tremendous success and popularity.

Now, sitcoms as instances of televised cinematic discourse offer an exciting area for research in Applied Linguistics and Humour Studies. The genre of sitcoms has been successful in bringing together a wide range of audience. According to Juckel (2016), sitcoms are highly popular yet not well-studied. Though sitcoms are wide-spread the mechanisms on which they operate are not fully explored. Messerli (2017) treats sitcoms as telecinematic discourse in its analysis of sitcom humour as ventriloquism. However, in sitcoms, especially in the present context it would not be very appropriate to treat them as ventriloquism except in a metaphorical sense.

Mind Your Language (MYL) was written by Vince Powell as a television series. It was produced by London Weekend Television and directed by Stuart Allen. The setting is an adult education college in London. The classroom in MYL comprises of ten students representing different nationalities including China, France, Germany, Greece, India, Italy, Japan, Pakistan, Japan and Spain. The student characters in this show deal with cultural differences between their individual culture and English on the one hand and between the cultures of one another on the other hand. The challenge before the course instructor played by Jeremy Brown is to train these students in English. Typically, a sitcom has characters of different types who share an environment due to accidental circumstances. In MYL, the environment is an EFL classroom at an adult learning college in London. The communication failure and misunderstandings occurring frequently in this series depict the real-life pedagogical situations, especially in adult learning and EFL classrooms Marganingsih (2013).

MYL was aired in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a television series that focused teaching-learning of English as a foreign language. According to (Jaffri 2020), MYL was so successful that several versions of this series emerged in America, India, Malaysia and Indonesia in different years and different names. In America, it was named *What a Country* while in Malaysia, it was titled *Oh My English*, and in Indonesia, it was released as *Kelas Internasional* (International Class). The Indian version appeared with the title *zubaansambhalke* (mind your tongue). Arapah (2017) analyses MYL as an EFL sitcom that has depicted racial and gender stereotypes. This study focuses only a single episode of season one but makes an important point concerning the overgeneralization about the dress, speech styles, food habits, etc., in an EFL sitcom representing a diverse group of people. Wu & Chen (?) presents a similar study on an American sitcom named *Friends* in the context of Grice (1975) cooperative principle. In a strikingly different study, Al-Bahrani (2018) extends the incongruity-resolution to the instances of silence/pause in the MYL series. This study offers a long list of probable reasons for which the series has utilised silence and pause. Marganingsih's (2013) thesis concentrates on the communication failures in MYL from the perspective of immigrant participants in an EFL classroom. This thesis identifies instances wherein the humorous effects have been created through the failure of communication due to various linguistic factors such as phonological and lexical variation between the speaker and the listener.

Several sitcoms from England and America have earned critical acclaims around the world. *Big Bang Theory*, *Friends*, *Two and a Half Men*, *The Office*, *Yes Minister*, *2 Broke Girls*, *Modern Family*, *I Love Lucy*, and *Mind Your Language* are just to name a few. Among these, the uniqueness of *Mind Your Language* remains in the challenges of (English) language pedagogy. The MYL series revolves around an English classroom that has linguistically and culturally diverse adult students who are learning English as a second/foreign language. Communications skills in English are required not only in England and America but also in the third world countries where English is required for higher education, employment and technical skills etc. The socio-political, historical and economic reasons that necessitate the teaching-learning of skills in English are well-known. Therefore, courses in English as a second/foreign language are wide-spread in these countries and the challenges are faced by the teachers, institutions and students are also quite familiar. One of the reasons for the success of the MYL series is that it concentrates on such issues to create situations that the viewers would be familiar with. The series is full of comic situations arising due to speech habits, mother influences and learning imperfections of the characters. Therefore, MYL series serves as a perfect case for humour research and applied linguistic at the same time.

The show uses a very creatively-designed script and the situations depicted are very real-like. This series is highly suitable for academic research and it is not a surprise that several thesis and papers are being undertaken on various aspects of MYL series. Marganingsih (2013) makes some valuable observations about MYL series and suggests that the focus of a language classroom should not only be on the students' competence but also on the content the teacher is offering to the students and manner in which s/he is delivering the contents. Mahendra (2020) concentrates on different kinds of ambiguity that occur frequently in the MYL series. An interesting outcome of this study is the distribution of ambiguities at different linguistic levels in the MYL series. It is important to understand that sitcoms and televised cinematic discourses are outcomes of textual scripts. The writer of such a script assumes that the viewers would be familiar with the socio-cultural contexts in which the script would succeed in eliciting laughter (Mansfield 2014).

3. Questions explored

The MYL series was instantly successful and gained tremendous popularity across the globe. Since it deals with a classroom situation, more specifically the English language classroom, it typically has pedagogical ramifications. It is also important to

understand the linguistic factors that contributed to the success of the series. In this backdrop, the following questions constitute the focal inquiry of this paper:

- a) What are the applied linguistic and pedagogical aspects of the Britcom MYL?
- b) What semantico-pragmatic factors repeatedly elicit humour and laughter in the episodes of MYL series?
- c) What are the socio-pragmatic items that cause the experience of funniness in the MYL series?
- d) What kind of humour theories would adequately explain the humorous aspects of MYL series?

4. MYL through the lens of Humour Studies

From the vantage point of humour research, the genre of sitcom qualifies as verbal humour. Therefore, the models and theories of verbal humour may explain the phenomenon of sitcom adequately. The recent developments in cognitive linguistics have thrown open a host of new models and tools that may also help explain the genre of sitcoms. However, because sitcoms are substantively a phenomenon of interaction and communication, the theories and principles that describe conversations optimally may also explain the genre of sitcoms. Perhaps, for this reason, several scholars have exploited Grice's maxims of conversation and cooperative principle to analyse sitcoms. Ma & Jiang (2013) offers an interpretation of the sitcom *Big Bang Theory* by adopting the adaptation-relevance theory. *Big Bang Theory* is an American sitcom that has received tremendous success in terms of viewership across the world. As observed, neither the adaptation theory nor the relevance theory can account for a humorous instantiation in full measures, as both the theories have their advantages and shortcomings. Therefore, scholars have developed a model called adaptation-relevance model that blends the strengths of both the theories. Ma & Jiang (ibid) adopts this model to interpret the *Big Bang Theory*.

There is an easily identifiable gap concerning academic research on sitcoms. There are several reasons for the absence as observed by Mansfield (2014). However, a vital point to note here is that the absence of committed and sustained research on sitcoms has adversely affected the development of ideas about (verbal) humour. There is no specific theory or model for analysing sitcoms and the research community has to depend on ad-hoc theories and models. Therefore, initiatives aimed at sitcoms can foreground the genre of sitcoms in the research arena and fill the gaps existing in the research literature on verbal humour.

Raskin's (1985) Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH) remains one of the most important references in humour research. It emphasises on semantic aspects of words whereas funniness in an instance of humour may depend on semantic as well as pragmatic factors. Therefore, Raskin and Attardo proposed the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH). Attardo's (1994) GTVH discusses a set of six knowledge resources that may help to understand the mechanisms of verbal humour. Sitcoms belong to the class of verbal humour. Therefore, GTVH is highly appropriate to analyse them. The formal descriptors of GTVH are as follows: Joke = {LA, SI, NS, TA, SO, LM} wherein LA refers to the language, SI stands for situation, NS refers to the narrative strategy, TA stands for target, SO refers to script opposition and LM stands for logical mechanism. According to Khan (2016), GTVH is an advancement over SSTH and proves to be the cornerstone of linguistic research on humour. Therefore, its validity has maintained an upward swing.

5. MYL through semantico-pragmatic lens

There are numerous instances of humorous situations in which the characters are caught. Sometimes the situations are accidental, sometimes they are results of socio-cultural intricacy and sometimes they are results of ambiguity and double entendre. The nature of human language is such that words and sentences are open for interpretations even in routine conversations. This ensures the existence of creative aspects in natural languages on the one hand but on the other hand, it throws tremendous pedagogical challenges. It is found on numerous episodes of MYL that the speakers intentionally or unintentionally utter expressions that can be interpreted in more than one way.

The show depicts the characters to have a substantial influence of their mother tongue and native culture when they interact. The vocabulary and pronunciation are adjusted to expose the culture include speech habits and styles and communication traits. Consider for instance the substitution errors at the level of pronunciation:

- a) /r/ - /l/ in the dialogues delivered by Su Lee and Taro
- b) /l/ - /r/ in the dialogues delivered by Su Lee and Taro
- c) /v/ - /w/ in the dialogues delivered by Anna Schmidt

- d) /θ/ - /z/ in the dialogues delivered by Danielle Favre
- e) /ð/ - /z/ in the dialogues delivered by Danielle Favre

Taro tends to add /o/ to content words resulting in his speech appearing as the following: With respect to young ladies ... (with respect to young lady's ...). Similarly, Giovanni Capello played by George Camilleri tends to add /i/ when he addresses Mr Brown as Professori.

The substitution of lexical items and words is also evident in the show. Ali Nadim played by Dino Shafik replaces the word 'present' with 'gift' in the expression 'present sir' and 'fountain' with 'waterfall' in the expression 'fountain pen' leading to hilarious outcomes. Word order mismatches and confusion of pronouns are also observed, especially in the dialogues assigned to Ingrid Svenson.

The frequent repetition of some dialogues and catchphrases is hilarious. For the viewers, it contributes to the identification of characters. Consider for instance, oh blimey by Ali Nadim, a thousand apologies by Ranjeet Singh, hanji (yes, please) by Jamila, por favour by Juan Cervantes, and routine corrections of Mrs Courtney as Miss Courtney. There are occasional occurrences of irony and sarcasm too especially in the conversation between Mr Brown played by Barry Evans and Miss Courtney played by Zara Nutley and between Ali Nadeem and Ranjeet Singh. It is interesting to note that even Mr Jeremy Brown, who teaches the English language, is driven to use utterances and expressions that are structurally perfect but contextually violating the maxims of conversation.

The show has several instances of a misunderstanding occurring due to under extension and overextension of meaning and use of words. For instance, Jamila's response to the word 'free' written on packages and promotional literature in stores, leads her to behave in a way that would make her a shoplifter or an offender.

6. MYL through the socio-pragmatic perspective

Grice (1975) provides four principles/maxims of conversation that are in operation in social interactions contributing to the success or failure of communication. One might wonder how and why the Gricean maxims of conversation and cooperative principle relate to sitcoms. If observed from the standpoint of observance and violation of conversational maxims, the sitcoms offer an exciting case of local adherence and global violation and vice versa. A sitcom, in general, and MYL, in particular, is based on interactions wherein adherence of maxims and cooperation between the interlocutors played by different characters appears to be disturbed for the larger purpose of cooperation between the performers and the viewers. The communication represents the proficiency of interlanguage that is neither completely successful nor totally failed while there are frequent instances of contextual mismatch between the speaker and the hearer. The cooperative principle is absent among the performers. However, it is present between the performers and the viewers, who expect and enjoy the absence of cooperative principle among the performers. Thus, MYL becomes an inexhaustible resource for research from cross-cultural perspectives and interlanguage pragmatics.

The show has received criticism for racial and gender stereotypes. Jamila Ranjha always appears in saree with knitting needles. She lacks confidence. Through this portrayal, the show has overgeneralised the womenfolk of Indian and Pakistan. In contrast, Danielle is portrayed as a person with modern dress and hypersexual behaviour that may not always be true of French women that she tries to represent. Taro representing Japan is portrayed with a camera indicating that the people in Japan are highly tech-savvy. Su Lee representing a Chinese national is portrayed as a person obsessed with the communist ideology. Juan Cervantes representing Spain is portrayed as a person who is always merry-making.

7. MYL through the lens of language pedagogy

Mansfield (2014) illustrates several reasons that qualify sitcoms in pedagogical settings. Considering humour in classrooms, Hellman (2007) offers seven ideas that can reduce anxiety among the learners and increase the learning outcomes. These ideas are also known as Stu's Seven Simple Steps to Success. Among these, Hellman also discusses 'guerrilla humour' referring to an act that is highly spontaneous and takes the learners by surprise. Instances of guerrilla humour are also visible in the MYL series. There are also instances of spontaneous and inadvertent humour (see Vaid 2002) and guerrilla humour (see Hellman 2007) that offer an excellent tool for pedagogical outcomes. Khan (2012) discusses the efficacies of humour in language classrooms and advocates judicious use of humour for maximizing pedagogical outcomes. The language classrooms have heavily depended on mastery of structural aspects of language. The inclusion of MYL series in the toolkits of EFL teachers will surely contribute to the pragmatic awareness of the learners and contribute to the mastery of intended skills. This series is more for the language teachers and course instructors than the learners. The course instructor of an EFL classroom can make the students examine the show and

find out all possible places where corrections are required. Alternatively, since these shows are enacted, their scripts may also be available, the course instructor can ask the students to examine the script and suggest the corrections (Mansfield 2014).

8. Main findings

MYL show manipulates all identifiable levels of language use to extract the humorous effects by creatively causing a gap between the said and the intended. The show is full of instances of seemingly communication failures that occur at the level of phonology, pronunciation, morphology, semantics and pragmatics. The present study observes that the instances of humour in MYL arise from several linguistic factors.

At the phonological level, the systematic substitution of /r/ with /l/ by the characters representing Chinese and Japanese mother tongue influence creates humorous effects. Such mistakes also point to the occurrence of rule-based and predictable errors. At the semantic level, it is observed that words of polysemous and homonymous nature caused inadvertent mistakes in interactions with humorous effects.

At the lexical and semantic level, it is observed in the show that the characters mismatch words and pick up wrong meanings and have problems with synonymous terms. The dialogues in this show throw numerous instances of lexical and structural ambiguities. The characters also exhibit the difficulties that polysemous, homonymous and idiomatic expressions faced by the learners.

The characters in different episodes show difficulties with sense and reference and deictic expressions as they inadvertently pick up the meaning by overgeneralization highlighting the invisible gaps between the said and the intended.

At the level of socio-pragmatics, the maxim of relevance is the most violated maxim in the MYL series. It is often observed in the dialogues involving a character asking a question and another character replying to that. The apparent mismatch between the speaker's intention and the hearer's response results in the experience of funniness as it creatively alters the coordination between the question and answer.

At the pedagogical level, it is observed that this sitcom informs the viewers, especially those associated with (English) language classrooms to pay a lot of attention to language in use rather than the formal rules of grammar.

In MYL series, the linguistic factors like mismatches between the speaker's intention and hearer's response and variations in language have significantly contributed to the success of the script/text. Therefore, this series and the like can be best studied through linguistically derived humour approaches such as GTVH. It is found out that the language and situation component of GTVH can adequately explain humour aspects of MYL

9. Conclusions

Considering the instances of language manipulation including wordplay and ambiguities the MYL series is suitable not only for humour research but also for research in Applied Linguistics. This paper examined *Mind Your Language*, a popular television series, as a sitcom in general and as a Britcom in particular. Establishing sitcom as a genre of humour that merits proper attention in humour research, this paper examined *Mind Your Language* series from the applied linguistic and pedagogical perspectives. It also analysed the semantico-pragmatic and the socio-pragmatic aspects of the television series. The main findings of this paper are useful for pedagogical settings such as English language and linguistics classrooms. A major takeaway in MYL series for the practitioners of Linguistics is that language classrooms cannot be complacent with teaching-learning of merely a set of formal structures. Instead, the teaching-learning of the socio-pragmatic aspects merit an equal space. For the students of humour research, the major takeaway is that MYL as a British sitcom presents an exceedingly hilarious text through a fine blend of language and contexts. The sociolinguistic aspects including a detailed study of stereotypes prevailing in this series are relevant but they were beyond the scope of this paper. The ideas discussed in this study can further develop if there could be a corpus-based analysis of the patterns of dialogues and discourse strategies across various episodes of the MYL series. A lot more remains open for future investigations.

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