

SECONDARY
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The Construction and Negotiation of Meaning in Interaction: A Pragmatic Approach through How I Met Your Mother

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the basic assumptions in modern linguistics is that the construction and interpretation of human language is such complex an issue that meaning extends beyond the reach of the field of semantics. In fact, as pointed out by Jenny Thomas (1995:1), “speakers frequently mean much more than their words actually say”. Hence, the study of meaning from a purely linguistic perspective (i.e. from a semantic approach to meaning) would mean overlooking paramount aspects upon which human communication is based.

Generally speaking, semantics is not enough to reach actual meanings (i.e. speaker or writer’s meaning). Pragmatics, otherwise, is a linguistic area concerned with the exploration of meaning beneath semantic literalness, taking into consideration the essential role of extra-linguistic information surrounding messages. To put it differently, “pragmatics concentrates on those aspects of meaning that cannot be predicted by linguistic knowledge alone and takes into account our knowledge about the physical and social world” (Quoted from Peccei, 1999:5) , that is to say, context.

Therefore, the phenomenon of meaning understanding is to be studied taking special consideration to communication in contextualized interaction, as it is right there that actual meaning (i.e. speaker and writer’s utterance meaning) lies. Nevertheless, it must not be failed to be noticed that the analysis of how human language is constructed and interpreted in context “requires reference to the users and their intentions (...), that is, speaker’s and addressee’s reflexive beliefs and intentions about each other’s beliefs and intentions” (Quoted from Green, 1989:3).

On the whole, and according to George Yule “pragmatics is the study of how more gets communicated than is said” (1996:3) in a particular context and by considering participants’ beliefs and goals.

Paying heed to the above explained, it can be stated that texts of dialogic nature are particularly interesting to be studied from a pragmatic perspective, as the construction and negotiation of meaning is closely tied to speaker’s meaning and contextual meaning beyond literalness. Among dialogic nature, sitcoms or other comic soap operas and TV series such as *How I Met Your Mother* are incredibly fascinating to be pragmatically analyzed, for they are commonly said to be an almost endless source of occurrences of, as Yule stated, “how more gets communicated than it is actually said” at a lexical or sentence level.

Sitcoms such as *How I Met Your Mother*, might be a more than suitable starting point to study occasions in which addresses are to construct and negotiate meaning by having previously deconstructed the obvious and superficial meaning (i.e. semantic meaning) to consider the really important significance (speaker’s meaning). Broadly speaking, by analyzing a short script of one of the episodes of this sitcom, it could be found traces of pragmatic presence and the relevance of it in human communication.

Roughly speaking, this essay is aimed to verifying whether humor is context-dependent or not and, if so, to what extent humor and comic situations are concerned with speaker’s meaning and contextual meaning in interaction. In addition, and in a more specific way, this analysis will try to demonstrate the

hypothesis that pragmatic mechanisms used by addressees to infer or decode meaning are to lead to a 100% success in the inference of speaker's meaning.

As a consequence, several pragmatics notions will be applied to a transcript of a script to be pragmatically analyzed (e.g. deixis, reference, presupposition, implicatures, speech acts, politeness, etc) so as to validate or refute this initial hypothesis –these are the underlying factors upon human communication in interaction is based.

For the purposes of this essay, the whole of this project is divided into different sections as follows: Section (2) provides the theoretical framework of the field of pragmatics, followed by a methodological part. Section (3) explores the results and discussion of the most representatives examples extracted from the text used to the verification or not of the initial hypothesis. I will conclude with some comments on the relevance of pragmatics in the construction and negotiation of meaning in sitcoms and the connection between humor and speaker's and contextual meaning.
