

## **A Pragmatics Analysis of Humor in *The Big Bang Theory Season 6*: a Representation of American Social Issues**

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### **Abstract**

This research utilizes pragmatic approach to analyze humor in *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6* sitcom by the characters to reveal American social issues. The research objectives were to identify the types and the functions of humor, thus those were to reveal American Social Issues. This research employed qualitative method. This research was done by 2 instruments which were the researcher as the key instrument and the data sheet as the secondary instrument. The techniques to collect the data were the researcher watching the situation comedy, determining 3 episodes, browsing and printing the transcript, taking the notes, and classifying and categorizing the collected data from transcript into a data sheet. The findings of this research were eleven types of humor employed in the sitcom, namely anecdote, fantasy insult, irony, joke, observation, quote, roleplay, self deprecation, vulgarity, and wordplay. Next, the three of the functions also employed by the characters; they were to express superiority, to relieve tension and to interpret incongruity. In addition, the four main American social issues were revealed in this research; they were racial or ethnicity issues, bullying, gender and religion issues. Besides, there are several issues or topics which are also discovered in this research such as music, food, fishing, other people business and matter, problem with the HRD office, small talk, and excitement of the characters which are categorized as other issues.

Keywords: pragmatic analysis, humor, *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Humor in the social interaction usually emerges in casual talk even though it is puzzling and complex. Humor which has pleasant effects is usually followed by laughter as Ross (1998:1) explained that humor is something that triggers someone to laugh or smile. It is in line with Maemura and Horita's statement (2011:822), humor and laughter is widely believed as phenomena that have positive

effects. However, humor is not merely for entertaining someone or carrying some light subject matters. In fact, humor frequently allows a serious topic of casual conversation in stressing the meaning become less visible or less accountable. So, there are specific messages beyond the humor which definitely depend on joke-teller's intention.

Despite the joker's intention and their indirect messages, humor is strongly linked to the culture. Besides, as stated by

Reimann (2010:23), the idea of humor amusement is rarely interpreted and is very personal and also related to context and culture. Therefore, the joke-teller has to give attention to those aspects to be able to express an interchangeable humor. However, the joke-tellers and the audience sometimes overlook those prominent aspects, so that there is a humor failure.

In regard with the joker's intention, context, and culture, humor can be perceived by pragmatics. Pragmatics deals with the ways language carries contextual meaning and its speakers. In this study, context is the key to know the meaning of an utterance because a contextual utterance influences the interpretation of a listener. Therefore, utterances are not only contained grammar and structure, but also contextual meaning which can make listener do things. Furthermore, by investigating humor under pragmatics view, recent conditions of the joker as well as audience are exposed. Humor, then, has perceived as the portrayal, description and criticism of social life including its issues in softer ways than it has to be. Social life issues which are conveyed in humor surely exist.

In summary, a real visualization of humorous frames which expose certain social issues appears in situation comedy (sitcom). Through sitcom's humorous frames, humor aspect and social issues can

be analyzed. Hence, a good example of a sitcom is an American successful sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory* which discusses various themes of everyday life issue.

In this research, there are three problems with regards to the humor performed by the characters of *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6*. The first is the types of humor occur among the characters. The second problem is functions of humor contents employed by the characters. The last problem is related with the American social issues that are revealed through humorous discourses among the characters.

This research has three objectives, which are to identify the types of humor which occur among the characters, to describe the functions of humor contents which are employed by the characters, and to reveal the American social issues which are revealed through humorous discourses among the characters in *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6*.

This research offers some benefits. Firstly, the research findings will enrich and give additional knowledge to the study of pragmatics, especially on the study of humor. For the students of English Language and Literature, this research can be a source of reference for similar research, and for the common readers, this research is to lead people to have critical

thinking of humor content in TV's or radio's comedy program.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach. The meaning of qualitative research method is proposed by Bradley (1997:31) who says that qualitative research is a method for collecting and analyzing data from a phenomenon that is easier to be extracted into words instead of numbers. Furthermore, this kind of research, based on Berg (2001:6), has a major aim to give answers from certain questions by applying organized procedures. In conducting this research, there are two instruments used: the researcher as the key instrument and the data sheet as the secondary instrument.

The data of the research were in the form of words, phrases, clauses, sentences which were taken from the contextual dialogues performed by the characters in *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6*. The source of data was *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6*, especially the episodes *The Fish Guts Displacement*, *The Santa Simulation*, and *The Egg Salad Equivalency*. All the data in this research were from the transcript of the series.

Consequently, To collect the data, the researcher watching the situation comedy, determining 3 episodes, browsing and printing the transcript, taking the notes,

and classifying and categorizing the collected data from transcript into a data sheet. Those techniques were applied to investigate the types and the functions of humor in the data. Automatically, the American social issues which are contained in the humor could be analyzed as well. Later the appropriate and accurate data were acquired from applying this technique.

Meanwhile, to analyze the data, the researcher used referential analysis which is a technique of analyzing in which the data are analyzed regarding to the several theories. Therefore, to analyze the data, researcher did four steps, i.e.:

1. classifying the collected data into the data sheet,
2. consulting the classified data in the data sheet to the supervisor and discussing the data with several colleagues from linguistics students,
3. analyzing the classified data by counting the numbers of data in each category to find the frequency of the data appearance in each category, and
4. describing the analysis and writing the report as well as the conclusion

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are eleven types of humor appears in *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6*. They are anecdote, fantasy insult, irony, joke, observation, quote, roleplay, self

deprecation, vulgarity, and wordplay. Next, there are three functions of humor in *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6*; to express superiority, to relieve tension and to interpret incongruity. Besides, the four main American social issues were revealed in this research; they were racial or ethnicity issues, bullying, gender and religion issues. Besides, there are several issues or topics which are also discovered in this research such as music, food, fishing, other people business and matter, problem with the HRD office, small talk, and excitement of the characters which are categorized as other issues.

For more detailed description, several explanation of how humor take place by employing types and function in the TV series, so that it can reveal American social issues is stated below.

Initially, the following dialogue shows anecdote humor.

An instance of report talk in the interruption is presented below.

**Stuart** : *I gotta tell you, this, this is the most holiday fun I've had since my therapist changed my anxiety medication and I stopped caring about the blood in my stool.*

**Howard** : Good story.

(Datum 43)

Stuart intends to share his excited feeling about the game that they are

playing now. He compares his holiday activities now with his previous holiday by sharing his own experience in medical treatments of his anxiety. He tells detail experience of medication, even his personal experience which is so inappropriate to be told since it contains vulgar elements. It definitely surprises the hearers who is unexpected that topic will appear in that kind of ambience. So, it creates the humor among the hearers.

The dialogue below shows the use of fantasy.

**Leonard** : *It's locked, but suddenly the door behind you slams shut and now the walls of the room start closing in.*

**Stuart** : *That's not good. My character and I both have claustrophobia.*

(Datum 36)

Leonard's narration is supported by Stuart who is adding the imaginary condition. It is funny because he relates fantasy with the reality, *That's not good. My character and I both have claustrophobia*. The conversation which is actually only in a game creates fantasy humor because it contains impossible as well as imaginary events and supporting of the hearer.

The dialogue below is an irony humor which contains sarcasm element in it.

**Mr. Rostenkowski** : I tried to back out, too. My wife said I had to go.

**Howard** : *Really? Your wife makes you do stuff? You're a big, scary cop.*

**Mr. Rostenkowski** : *You're an astronaut, and your wife makes you do things, and she's only four feet tall.*

(Datum 25)

. Howard asks his father in law in rhetorical way that his mother in law easily commands him to do what she wants in fact he is a big guy as well as a cop. He adds that his father in law is a scary cop. Howard's question has contrary meaning from the real condition and the hearer will know that it is irony sarcasm because the hearer has the same background knowledge of this situation.

Mr. Rostenkowski replies his comments with another irony sarcasm humor. He replies with bitter and sharp comments with contrary meaning with the reality; Mr. Rostenkowski replies to Howard that he is an astronaut, and his wife makes him do things, and she's only four feet tall.

An example of observation taken from the data collected is described as follows.

**Leonard** : Come on, Sheldon. You know all the Christmas stories, and the carols, you've got an eggnog moustache going on there. Just admit it. You're

getting a little Yuletide spirit.

**Sheldon** : *Oh, don't be silly. Christmas is a bunch of baloney created by the tinsel industry. Why is this so important to you?*

(Datum 45)

Leonard forces Sheldon to admit that he like Christmas since he knows well the Christmas story, the carols and the Christmas foods. Sheldon refused Leonard's assumption by stating observation humor.

His rebuttal is based on Leonard's statement before and it is a unique statement in the form of one-liner. The comment happens in the non-humorous situation and the contains of the humor is usually not explicitly said by a man because it has criticizing message since Sheldon says that Christmas is a bunch of baloney created by tinsel industry.

Furthermore, the detail explanation of the function of humor to express superiority is presented in the conversation below.

**Penny** : Step one, worms.

**Howard** : *Ew!*

**Penny** : *Okay, right there, ew is one of the things you're not gonna want to say in front of your father-in-law. It's right up there with icky and get it away. Now pick one up.*

(Datum 18)

The irony type of humor in the conversation between Howard and Penny is entailed with the expressing superiority function. Penny shows her superiority implicitly by creating irony humor since what Penny has done should be done by the boys. Penny is actually the victim of this situation because she is looked down as the woman who acts like a man but then she could manipulate the humor as her weapon to counterattack the boys. She can govern Howard but covers with the ridiculous attitude of Howard that makes it humor.

An instance of how the relieving function is applied in the humor is described below.

**Howard:** I've never even been fishing. This is gonna be a disaster.

**Raj** : *If you don't want to look foolish doing something, you should practice. Do you know how many Beef Wellingtons I made by myself before I invited you guys over? I'll give you a hint. You can see them here, here and here.*

(Datum 16)

Spontaneously, Raj shares his own story that is in the form of anecdote. He intends to comfort Howard but his suggestion leads to the humor. Raj's anecdote surely can relieve the tension among them because of Howard's problem. It is included to the healing

category of the relieving tension function of humor.

A description of the last function of humor which is to interpret incongruity is described below.

**Raj** : (pose while rolling his eyes like he talks to his friends with his eyes)

**Howard** : *You look like my little cousin when he's dropping one in his diaper.*

(Datum 55)

Howard insults Raj by comparing him with his little cousin when he is dropping his diaper. The insult humor appears in line with the function humor of interpreting incongruous moment which in this case is Raj's ridiculous attitude. It is impossible thing that he is able to talk to a woman by that way. So, it is definitely beyond the hearer's expectation.

An instance of humor that expresses ethnicity issue in *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6* is presented below.

**Sheldon** : I don't see why I'm the one being persecuted here. Dr. Hofstadter, he was bragging about his sexual desirability to anyone who would listen. You know, and Howard Wolowitz, he spent two years using university resources building a six-breasted sex robot. *Oh, and at the office Christmas party, I heard Rajesh*

*Koothrappali refer to you several times as Brown Sugar.*

**HR Woman** : (writing) Hofstadter... Wolowitz... and the last one was Rajesh Koothrappali?

**Sheldon** : Yes. *No, yeah, but in his defense, that wasn't racist. He's also brown.*  
(Datum 72)

The conversation between Sheldon and HRD woman, Janine causes ethnic issue because Sheldon reports that Raj calls Janine several times as brown sugar. It offends the skin color by mentioning Janine as brown sugar. The issue of racial is reflected in the word brown sugar and the fact that Janine is an African-American. Moreover, Raj is from India who has brown skin color also. Therefore, Sheldon in hurry clarify to Janine that it does not mean to be racist because Raj is also brown. This sentence strengthens the racial issue in their conversation.

A bullying issue is employed in the dialogue between Raj and Leonard as follows.

**Raj** : How could you do that to me? You know I've been working it with Alex for weeks.

**Leonard** : *Working it? You can't even talk to her.*

**Raj** : *I talk with my eyes.*  
(Datum 54)

Leonard's statement after he asks a rhetorical question to Raj is a verbal bullying because he offends Raj who cannot talk to a woman directly unless he

has alcohol in his body system. His statement attacks Raj and makes Raj the butt of the conversation.

A conversation containing bullying issue done by Sheldon is presented below.

**Sheldon** : Now, there's no need to get defensive. I'm not unsympathetic to your plight. *My father used to say that a woman is like an egg salad sandwich on a warm Texas day.*

**Alex** : What?

**Sheldon** : *Full of eggs and only appealing for a short time.*  
(Datum 64)

Gender issue appears from wordplay that is employed by Sheldon. The stereotype of the presence of women in society is transmitted from generation to generation. The wordplay humor exposes the reality that the role of women is underestimated by equating women to an egg sandwich which is appealing for a short time. It proves that a woman is considered as a complementary for short time in man's life and he is free to looking for another one after he feels bored.

An example of religion issue taken from the data collected is described as follows.

**Raj** : Can we change the subject? *Spiders give me the jeebie-jeebies.*

**Howard**: *It's heebie-jeebies.*

**Raj** : *I know, but that sounds anti-Semitic.*

(Datum 5)

Howard corrects Raj's word because Raj modifies the right word which is actually heebie-jeebies. The words heebie-jeebies are related to express an anxiety of something. Furthermore, Raj comments to Howard's correction; he does not want say the correct word because he thinks it sounds anti-Semitic. It surprises Howard because Howard is a Jewish. So, a simple topic can be related to religion and it can offend certain party.

The datum below presents dialogue in which Sheldon performs an other issue of other people's business.

**Sheldon** : Ladies, ladies, please.  
*We're not here to talk about Penny, okay? We're here to talk about me. Uh, I mean Einstein Von Brainstorm. Oh, darn it! All right, I guess the cat's out of the bag. Let me explain what's going on. Ricardo is really Leonard.*

(Datum 61)

The humor in Sheldon statement has topic about other's people problem or other people's business. It is such a common topic in society when a group talks about other people's matter. It becomes a hot issue if the other's matter is worse matter. Therefore, this issue can be a good way or a bad way because it may stirs negative effects.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

### Conclusions

Firstly, in the conjunction with the first objective of this research that is to identify the types of humor which occur among the characters in *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6*, all humor types are deployed by the characters in the sitcom. The eleven types of humor are anecdote, fantasy insult, irony, joke, observation, quote, roleplay, self deprecation, vulgarity, and wordplay. All of the types are well performed by the characters to evoke the humorous event in the frame, so that every humorous conversation and scene is not boring and monotonous for the hearer

Secondly, in relation to the second objective of this research which is to describe the functions of humor contents which are employed by the characters in *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6*, all functions are completely discovered. There are three functions of humor types in this sitcom; they are to express superiority, too relieve tension, and to interpret incongruity. The first function which is to express superiority is used to help someone to escape from a certain topic and to attack somebody in the light way without offends the hearers. The second function, to relieve tension is applied by the characters to reduce the intense situation which makes the hearer panic or serious so it can be a healing method for a certain circumstance. Besides, this

function can be employed as a disguise from attack and accept resistance. The last function that is to interpret incongruity is utilized as a response to an incoherent event or topic that suddenly happened.

1. Thirdly, the last objective of this research is to reveal the American social issues which are revealed through humorous discourses among the characters in *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6*. There are four big issues which are uncovered in this sitcom based on the previous findings. There are racial or ethnicity issues, bullying, gender and religion issues. In addition, there are several issues or topics which are also discovered in this research such as music, food, fishing, other people business and matter, problem with the HRD office, small talk, and excitement of the characters which are categorized as other issues. Therefore, it can be concluded that *The Big Bang Theory: Season 6* contains not only four big major of social issues, but also the other topic or issues which are only small talk in order for entertaining only.

### **Suggestions**

To linguistics students, Humor has a wide coverage so it is an interesting phenomenon within linguistics study. Therefore, conducting a research about humor can be another alternative. When conducting a research of humor, students

can focus on the functions of humor which means the speaker actually has an implicit purpose for the hearer behind his or her humor which is employed in the conversation.

To English lecturers, Humor is often found in the daily life. It is even an element that must appear in daily conversation. However, humor is rarely discussed thoroughly in the class. Therefore, it is better to show clearly how humor appears by watching sitcom. It is because they can portray the detail application of humor, so that students find an interesting way to study humor.

To other researcher, various approaches can be engaged to analyze humor. This research utilizes pragmatic approach to answer the objectives. Other researchers who are interesting to take humor as the main topic of a research can employ other approaches to expose any different aspects of humor. Moreover, other researchers can also relate humor with a certain culture and social setting.

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