

Interpreting 'Filler Pause' in Interpersonal Communication: A Study of Situational Comedy *The Big Bang Theory*

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Abstract

Humour as represented vis-à-vis situational comedy in general forms an important aspect of interpersonal communication. Though the reception of humour is often ascribed to personal taste, the extent to which an audience will find something humorous depends upon a multitude of factors, including benchmarks of culture and context. Regardless of the factors, it is observed that situational comedies elicit laughter through non-linguistic strategies. 'Fillers' mark one of the non-linguistic strategies of interpersonal communication. These have varied functions in all possible socio-cultural environments as well as in discourse construction. In addition to being universal in nature, 'Fillers' also facilitate the interpretation process and understanding. Using Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (2002), the study examines the selective communication situations with their interpretation process and understanding (cognitive effects) between the characters of American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. The article contends that 'filler pause' (termed as such in this article) used in a situational comedy have a function to play, namely, they tend to break down the formal barrier in an interpersonal communication and act as a humour trigger.

Keywords

Filler pause, interpersonal communication, humour, Relevance Theory, cognitive effects

Interpersonal communication encompasses several facets, one among which is the relation that exists between humour and short pause or filler used during any type of interaction. This interaction, though less researched, might hold significant relevance for both linguistics and communication theory. Filler pause consists of different combinations of sounds such as um, uh, hmm, etc., and they may proceed, follow or be used simultaneously with humour. The chief verbal fillers taken up for this study are *Um*, *Hm* (*Hmm*) and *Uh*, and these mark as 'filler pause' produced on the part of the characters in a situational comedy namely *The Big Bang Theory* (TBBT). What is worth noting about such usage is that whereas explicitly it gives the impression that the goal of the usage is hesitation or slow processing of information,

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its implicit meaning shows that it is not the case during interpersonal communication. To further establish the usage of filler pause in interpersonal interactive situation, the study considers Clark and Fox Tree's work (2002):

Um and *Uh* should be considered as integral to the information the speaker is trying to convey, although they do not add to the propositional content, or *primary message*. Instead, fillers are part of a *collateral* message in which the speaker is commenting on her performance. (quoted in Corley & Stewart, 2008, p. 5)

The present study attempts to explore filler pause and engage in finding the role it plays in humour interpretation during any instance of interpersonal communication as depicted in popular media. It focuses on the celebrated American sitcom aired first time about 10 years back that has regular use of fillers in nearly all conversations, which can be taken as renderings of a subcategory of humour called as 'filler pause' (termed as such in this article for clarifying the especial function these non-linguistic items play in interpersonal communication). To comprehend the role that 'filler pause' plays in representation of humour, it becomes necessary to first understand what humour is and how it works.

The label 'filler pause' is indeed somewhat misleading in that it is neither about gap in conversation nor confined to the uncomfortable situations. It might appear to be placeholders, and might get represented as such in certain occasions, but it may not always belong to this category. Equally, it can be judged by the usage that it plays other functions at other times. It can also act as sarcasm; however, it is useful to distinguish it from sarcasm as it is not motivated by any ulterior intention. Although it might appear to be so, it is not always a 'confused' talk since it suggests an effort to make the best of a rather difficult situation; for example, one has to answer to a person who is upsetting the person, and one is trying to do something that would minimize the unpleasantness. However, the context of the interaction is very different in filler pause. At this stage, the study would merely observe that it is a part of utterance signalling humorous interaction under difficult circumstances.

A brief explanation will help in comprehending the concept better. Humour though not definable in an academic sense can be explained especially:

'From a psychological perspective, the humor process can be divided into four essential components: (1) a social context, (2) a cognitive-perceptual process, (3) an emotional response, and (4) the vocal-behavioral expression of laughter' (Martin, 2007, p. 5).

If one follows Martin in case of the steps present during humour, there are three main theories related to this phenomenon:

1. Incongruity Theory of Humour
2. Superiority Theory of Humour
3. Release Theory of Humour

As humour research has developed through the years, several scholars have given varied definitions to comply with the changing trends. Nevertheless, there remains some important works like that of Morreall (1983) who points out that Incongruity Theory deals with humour as a cognitive feature, which was 'an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some other way' (p. 15). Ross (1998), on the other hand, characterizes it with element of surprise, which creates a conflict between what is expected and what is actually said (p. 7). For Superiority Theory, Attardo (1994) described humour to include aggression as one of its characteristics since, many argued, humour existed because of others' mishaps (pp. 49–50). Release Theory of Humour has a more psychological base as

Morreall (1983) writes, the tension held due to social taboos such as sex and violence trigger humour when they are broken because, according to this theory, all the repression that these have caused people is released and that results in laughter (p. 22). The theories discussed in humour literature generally bring forth the fact that there is always a strategy in place whenever there is:

(1) creation or maintenance of in-group solidarity; (2) attack or superiority; (3) need for approval; or (4) removal of attention. This compilation is useful for two reasons. First, it is a parsimonious description. It can accommodate most of the existing theories of humor without contradicting them and, thus, can be used to make comparable theories that previously were perceived as qualitatively different. Second, this description is usable as a framework in the research process, one that predicts and can be predicted, rather than merely a phenomenon to be explained descriptively. (quoted in Francis, 1994, pp. 148–149)

Hu (2012) in his paper ‘An Analysis of Humor in *The Big Bang Theory* from Pragmatic Perspectives’ analyzes the sitcom with the help of two theories, that is, Grice’s *Cooperative Principle* and Sperber and Wilson’s *Relevance Theory*. Considering that both these theories focus on the meaning and interpretation in communication, the present work likewise centres on the interpretation process of ‘filler pause’ as humour triggers and considers the Relevance Theory as an apt framework, and therefore does not discuss the data within any of the above given humour theories.

By and large, the main points discussed here about the role of humour trigger played by ‘filler pause’ in TBBT is that (a) to consider humour as an intrinsic feature of the filler pause, the audience or the scriptwriter; (b) to consider it as part of any other humour discourse; and (c) to decide ‘filler pause’ as different to other aspects of interaction in any situational comedy. Evan Cooper, while discussing the given conditions about situational comedies, remarks that:

First, there is the self-denigrating humor aimed at one’s own culture and its members. Second, there is protest humor that prods, mocks, and satirizes mainstream culture, particularly prevailing stereotypes and prejudices about the outsider group in question. Third, there is assimilationist humor, in which any mention of one’s cultural background is elided and the use of one’s group’s vernacular is avoided [Then] there is what I refer to as culturally intimate humor. Whereas protest humor typically leaves out its own culture in its critique of the dominant society, culturally intimate humor draws on the folkways and lore of a particular culture for its comic inspiration. As it relies on the everyday foibles of individuals within a culture, it both affirms and mocks cultural stereotypes. (Cooper, 2003, p. 514)

The purpose of this study is not to describe the type of humour in situational comedy but to analyze the contextual elements that allow an audience to identify certain utterances as humorous. Like Berman explains the genre,

The sitcom, which has displaced most other forms of video comedy, is supposed to ‘relate’ to its audience. It does so in a number of ways, first by creating characters who are supposed to resemble and to represent the audience. Second, it dramatizes events or conditions (for example the conflict of female liberation with male chauvinism) which provide motivation for a plot. Third, the sitcom suggests an attitude towards things and toward ourselves (Berman, 1987, p. 6).

The focus is on the role of fillers in humour present during interpersonal communication. Further, two questions are formulated based on a recent work by Tabacaru and Lemmens (2014):

1. Is 'filler pause' relevant for the understanding of humour?
2. How 'filler pause' facilitate the audience's humorous interpretation? (p. 12).

From the answers obtained, the study will suggest that the nuances of fillers deployed when characters of a situational comedy like TBBT indulge in interpersonal communication act as humour-triggering element and make the series realistic to the audience. Thus, the goal of 'filler pause' is to communicate for the sake of adding to the humorous effect of the overall interaction.

Background of the Study

The main plot of the situational comedy wherein the interpersonal communication will be highlighted is set in Pasadena, California, and it revolves around five main characters and their lives as it is at their work place and home. As the main protagonists, there are two physicists as roommates, Leonard Hofstadter and Sheldon Cooper. Sheldon and Leonard are gifted scientists who received their PhDs at a young age and, within the context of the programme, work as physicists and professors at Caltech where they perform research related to experimental and theoretical physics, respectively. As their co-workers at the university, there are two more characters, Howard Wolowitz, an aerospace engineer, and Dr Rajesh Koothrappali, an Indian particle astrophysicist. Another significant member of the cast is Penny from Nebraska, a neighbour of Leonard and Sheldon and a waitress at the Cheesecake Factory, who aspires to be an actress/screen writer. In the later seasons, two more characters were introduced to balance the male characters Sheldon and Howard, a neurobiologist named Amy Fowler and a microbiologist/part-time waitress named Bernadette, respectively.

It is seen that despite its spectacular popularity and many current research conducted on the series, little research till date is related to 'filler pause' that facilitates humorous response from the audience. This article is concerned with few illustration of such usage related to 'filler pause'.

Theoretical Framework

Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson (2002) suggest the Relevance Theory as a well-formed theory following Grice's thought. Grice's Cooperative Principles' most important claim, which is followed by the Relevance Theory as well, is that the very act of communication creates expectations, which it then exploits. The Relevance Theory develops Grice's claim about how relevance is an important factor for understanding choices made during any communication event and the 'cognitive effects' it has on participants. The theory proclaims two principles:

The Cognitive Principle of Relevance, which states that 'Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance' (p. 251).

The Communicative Principle of Relevance, which states that 'Every act of ostensive inferential communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance' (p. 256).

The given *Communicative Principle of Relevance* is applied to the phenomenon of 'filler pause' and its interpretation as it can be said to be a part of interpersonal communication. As discussed in Lahiri and Chakravarty (2011), wherein the principle was applied in the area of literary criticism, it was specified that

‘the discourse initiator wants the discourse recipient to consider what is being communicated as the most relevant, which constitutes—“cognitive effects” and which may be applied for interpreting any communicative event’ (p. 38).

The present article considers ‘filler pause’ as another instance of communicative event which can be analyzed with the help of Relevance Theory (RT) scholars have discussed many facets connected with communication; however, a filler pause has never been explained within the framework. To further understand the interpretation process of any communication event, Furlong states that

‘the basic property of any utterance is to create its own relevance and that it demonstrates how any recipient is able to understand the initiator’s intended meaning as the “mutual expectation” facilitates in reducing the area of search for the intended meaning’ (Furlong, 2002, p. 335).

In other words, when the audience perceives an interpretation of intended meaning and finds that interpretation to meet their need for relevance, then they accept that interpretation and stop processing the message for further meaning. To enumerate the Relevance Theoretic Comprehension Process in stages as the ‘path of least effort’ is followed by both the scriptwriter and the audience:

1. The scriptwriter develops his/her dialogues as to make them relevant for the audience.
 - (a) Relevance is created through the use of ‘ostensive stimulus’ and
 - (b) ‘Ostensive Stimulus’ is also based on the audience’s possible choices and capabilities.
2. The audience with the assumption of relevance searches for probable meanings
 - (a) According to the availability of stimulus given by the scriptwriter and
 - (b) Accepts that meaning which satisfies their assumption of relevance.

Relating Davies’s concept of meaning interpretation by hearers in spoken discourse as quoted in Lahiri and Chakravarty (2011) to the instance of interpersonal communication depicted in popular media, it can be seen that the audience assumes an instance of ‘filler pause’ as part of communication, and hence has meaning and can act as a humour trigger. Later, if the instance of ‘filler pause’ seems not humorous, the audience might search for other non-conventional humorous interpretations for the same. As a result, for the audience, the scriptwriter providing an uninterpretable (meaningless) text is not optional and thus not expected. Now, collating this to humour-triggering ‘filler pause’, the study first discusses the process of interpretation that occurs during traditional use of humour, further explaining the act of humour-triggering that has surfaced with the introduction of the concept of ‘filler pause’.

Analysis

The ‘filler pause’ of the kind discussed here has probably been referred to as hesitated talk or only as placeholders in the past. In TBBT, filler pause is a frequently occurring phenomenon during interaction. The analysis will be focused on RT’s description of implicature–inference instances from a corpus of selected scenes in which the implied meaning does not meet the inferred one. In the case of conversations being portrayed in TBBT, certain conversations are casual conversations, such as the ones held between friends, specifically friends who are neighbours and in close contact. The friend and neighbour’s use of filler pause may be part of a special kind of talk for the reason that they engage in conversations more often, plus in several different situations. Besides, here the subject of the interaction may only occasionally

be about difficult topics. A friend could pleasantly embarrass the other by asking him/her about, say, whether a tomato is a fruit or a vegetable and laugh at his/her ignorance. In return, the mortified friend might pretend to be casual, and turn the conversation away from the topic, thus not falling into the trap. Filler pause is used for something to talk about when the situation becomes uncomfortable, and no one is supposed to take offence. As compared to other categories in an interaction, filler pause is often quite short and quite expectedly not exceeding just a few brief sequences of utterance.

The sample was compiled randomly from the sitcom's seasons one to four. The transcription is partly self-made and partly taken from WordPress. Only four instances of 'filler pause' in the transcripts (Big Bang Theory Transcripts, n.d.) were chosen to validate the contention. The first season was chosen because these episodes set the tone of the comedy and provided the original verbal repertoire of the coming seasons; thus, their style to manage and create humour was less repetitive and formulaic than the one in the later seasons. Further details of this category will be elucidated with the help of instances from the series under discussion.

In the first episode of the series after meeting Penny for the first time, Sheldon and Leonard invite her to lunch at their apartment. The lunch invitation takes place as a culminating point to Sheldon and Leonard's brief sperm bank narrative (the starting of the first episode with Leonard and Sheldon sitting at a sperm bank to donate sperm), and it also marks as the introduction for the whole series along with the introduction of Penny to the group:

(a)

L: [speaking to Penny] We brought home Indian food [laugh] and I know that moving can be stressful and I find that when I'm undergoing stress that good food and company can have a comforting effect. [Laugh] Also, curry is a natural laxative and I don't have to tell you that, you know, a clean colon is just one less thing to worry about. [Laugh]

S: Leonard, I'm no expert, but in the context of a luncheon invitation you might want to skip the reference to bowel movements.

P: Oh, you're inviting me over to eat?

L: *Uh*, yes.

P: Oh, that's so nice. I'd love to.

L: Great.

P: So, what do you guys do for fun around here?

S: Well, today we tried masturbating for money. [Laugh] (TBBT, s01e01)

In the preceding dialogue, the audience may find it humorous. The reason behind this can be manifold. The neighbourly relation is established when Penny responds to the invitation given by Leonard as he by saying in so many words the benefits of sharing food goes beyond the regular invitation. Then the dialogue proceeds in the manner of confusion as Penny does not follow drift of the invitation. But in contrast with normal humour, here the 'filler pause' is in fact pronounced by Leonard who with his *Uh* points out the mistake in his manner of invitation and provides context for humour.

Understanding the humour in these contexts is to perform an analysis of how the use of fillers in the dialogue of the characters is produced to be intentionally humorous. This then induces the audience to response with laughter. Identifying the 'filler pause' within the context of the series, however, is somewhat difficult. Not everyone who listens to these fillers will experience them as humour triggers, but those who understand them as such will generally follow the same process as elucidated below.

If one follows assumptions made within the Relevance Theory, the audience reaches the stage where the first possible meaning construction of the previously mentioned example that they have constructed suddenly fails due to the miscommunication between the characters, and the audience must revise their

interpretation. Therefore, they construct a second interpretation, and it provides ‘cognitive effects’ of wider and more appropriate range than that of the first possible meaning construction. Based on RT, one can see that since it is a slow process of interpretation enunciated with the help of the ‘filler pause’, therefore the discovery of the next possible meaning construction leads to a sense of achievement in the audience. In the same way, the slow processing and then productiveness created out of the next possible meaning construction provide the interpreter with a feeling of incongruity, so this in turn may create a sense of pleasure as an answer to the slightly longer set of assumed meanings. Hence, the previously mentioned feeling of incongruity developed through slow interpretation process holds an important place in the analysis of the ‘effects’ created through filler pause (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004).

Moreover, following Furlong (2011), wherein she describes interpretation of literary wit with the help of Relevance Theory, the study discusses interpretation of ‘filler pause’. It is stated that ‘filler pause’ encourages the audience to become a participant, even co-developer, in the humour interpretation process. Therefore, a successful interpretation of filler pause amuses the audience in much the same way that general falling down over a banana peel would. The more slowly they perceive the characters’ speech and resolve the intended humorous interpretation, the more highly they rate their own quickness, and that leads to the humorous effect. According to the previous discussion on the interpretation of humour assisted by filler pause, follows the inferential process:

1. First, the audience gets motivated to choose and understand one possible meaning construction or search from a set of possible meaning constructions available to them.
2. Second, the first attempt at possible meaning construction leads to ‘adequate contextual effects to justify the efforts’ (Furlong, 2011, p. 140) by the audience and as they put effort towards reaching the probable meaning or the set of probable meaning constructions available to them.
3. Third, finding out sets of possible meaning constructions leads to continuous creation of this said ‘contextual effects on its own’ (Furlong, 2011, p. 140). This process then helps in understanding of the main or the most available meaning present in the context and further helps the audience in interpreting of the complete humorous act.

However, the incongruous aspect of ‘filler pause’ accounts for the disappointment the audiences’ feel when the characters during their interaction fall short in some way, and this facilitates in perceiving of present humour, and then further use of ‘filler pause’ marks slowness and this resolve the confusion presented by humorous utterances.

Consider some other set of extracts from TBBT. The dialogues are between some other characters from the series, which render and capture the sense of the humorous effect to the extent required for the present analysis.

The context of the filler talk under discussion here is the visit to the local departmental store by the neighbours, Sheldon and Penny. Penny is a struggling actress and Sheldon is a theoretical physicist at the local university. There are conversations like the one in the following excerpt, where the situation in itself is not very funny but, then again, the use of the filler *Uh* and attempt of changing the subject adds to the humorous effect for the audience:

(b)

S: This is great. Look at me. In the real world of ordinary people, just living their ordinary, colourless, workaday lives.

P: Thank you.

S: No, thank YOU. Thank you, ordinary person. Hey, you wanna hear an interesting thing about tomatoes?

- P: *Uh*, no, no, not really. Listen; didn't you say you needed some eggs?
- S: Yes. But anyone who knows anything about the dynamics of bacterial growth knows to pick up their refrigerated foods on the way out of the supermarket.
- P: Oh, OK well, maybe you should start heading on out, then.
- S: No, this is fun. Oh, the thing about tomatoes, and I think you'll really enjoy this, is they're shelved with the vegetables but they're technically a fruit.
- P: *Hm*, interesting.
- S: Isn't it?
- P: No, I mean what you find enjoyable.
- S: Oh boy.
- P: What now?
- S: Well, there's some value to taking a multivitamin, but the human body can only absorb so much; what you're buying here are the ingredients for very expensive urine.
- P: Well, maybe that's what I was going for.
- S: But then you'll want some manganese... (TBBT, s01e04)

The two characters are not aware of each other's frame of interest and this leads to a situation of miscommunication. It's not only Sheldon's unfamiliarity with the regular world that caused this but also, perhaps, Penny's lack of attention in Sheldon's area of interest. This is a distinct instance where the communication is not successful because the characters have difficulty in comprehending due to lack of shared knowledge. Shared knowledge, however, is a concept not defined within the situational content of the exchange. A question may be raised that with the incongruous aspect of the interaction, there is no relief for the audience or the characters wherein they realize the gap and finally with the realization laugh at their own relief. How is it, then, that the audience is amused and laughs so much? Mills (2005) enunciates that situational comedy as a genre has the feature which emphasizes on getting laughter as a response from the audience. As for humour trigger, one can reiterate by saying that to help clarify the humorous meaning to the audience, the 'filler pause' *Hm* act as an intentional marker, which primarily causes laughter because that is the intended reaction expected from the audience.

Sheldon is portrayed as being unaware of or unable to recognize social norms and regular interpersonal features of sarcasm. He follows strict personal routines perhaps one of the most immediate factors that marks him as noticeably not like the group. For example, after Penny accepts the invitation for lunch discussed earlier, Sheldon displays his obsessive ritualistic compulsions:

(c)

S: Um, Penny.

P: Yeah?

S: That's where I sit. [Laugh]

P: So sit next to me.

S: [beat] No, I sit there. [Laugh]

P: What's the difference?

S: What's the difference?

L: Here we go.

S: In the winter, that seat is close enough to the radiator to remain warm and yet not so close as to cause perspiration. In the summer it's directly in the path of a cross breeze created by opening windows there and there. It faces the television at an angle that is neither direct, thus discouraging conversation, nor so far wide as to create a parallax distortion. I could go on, but I think I've made my point.

P: Do you want me to move?

S: Well. [laugh]

L: Just sit somewhere else.

S: [beat] Fine. [Sheldon wanders the apartment, clearly distraught, looking for a comfortable place to sit.] [Laughs]

L: Sheldon, sit! [Sheldon immediately seats himself.] (TBBT, s01e01)

This is the context of the last extract taken up for study, wherein the conversation takes place amongst the three participants, Penny, Sheldon and the new character Amy who met Penny for the first time. Almost the entire dialogue follows in the same vein; therefore, this extract can be seen as a representative of the character Amy:

(d)

P: So, *Um*, Amy, Sheldon tells me you're a neuro... something-or-other.

A: Neurobiologist. Your 'check engine' light is on.

P: Yeah, it's okay.

A: But the light indicates...

S: Don't bother. I've wasted many an hour tilting at that particular windmill.

P: *Uh*, what is that scent you're wearing? It smells great.

A: Dandruff shampoo. (Little pause) I have dry scalp.

P: Ah. Well, your hair looks very nice.

A: Are you a homosexual?

P: No, no, I'm just giving you a compliment.

A: *Hmm*. would have been more flattered if you were a homosexual.

P: Guys, how 'bout some music?

S: Oh, no, I wouldn't care for that.

P: Amy?

A: No, thank you.

P: Okay. Uncomfortable silence it is. (Pause)

Hey, Sheldon, have you told Amy what it was like for you growing up in Texas?

S: No.

P: Well, why don't you tell her?

S: All right. (Turning to Amy) It was hell.

P: Any follow up, Amy?

A: (thinking a little) No. (Pause)

P: I myself grew up in Nebraska. Small town outside of Omaha. Nice place, mostly family farms, a few meth labs.

S: I'm sorry, how is this better than uncomfortable silence?

P: I don't know. I was just trying something.

S: Muggles. (TBBT, s04e01)

Before discussing the extract, one must first focus on the manner of the interaction, which seems to revolve round social rules of conversation. Mastley (2014) writes about Amy in 'Relevance Theory and Constructed Female Nerddiness in CBS's *The Big Bang Theory*' and how she represents humour in the series:

...Comedy comes from the characterization of Amy as a socially incompetent individual and the assumption is made that nerds are unable to navigate simple social conventions such as playing the game truth or dare. Thus, the underlying joke is based on her identity as a nerd, not the actual lines she delivers. It is not what she says that

is necessarily funny; it is her misunderstandings that are funny, and this misconstruing of information relies on her construction as a hyper-nerd. The assumption is that her character is unable to decipher the social context of 'normal' conversation because she is given the identity of nerd and ultimately this implies that *actual* nerds suffer from the same social awkwardness. (Mastley, 2014, pp. 8–9)

What is most evident in the interaction is the unease of tone. Here are two similar types of people like Sheldon and Amy who are not inept in conversation talking to a socially active Penny who is a willing conversationalist to be following the rules set by the former two. Following Mastley, the audience perceives the dialogue as it involves the emergence of increased 'processing effort' at the use of word *Um*, when the interpretation is slowed down, as there is a wait for Penny to finish her speech. The audience has been anticipating a clear-formed question. They have probably already completed 'neurobiologist' with the word 'neuro...' and the 'filler pause' stresses on the fumbling by the speaker. The slow release of the expected meaning from the set therefore cause the possible lowering of relevance of the made assumptions in the audience. Consequently, the audience continuously revisits their set of possible meaning constructions and that is not only of the given word but also for the entire dialogue. The given slow utterance from Penny and revision from the audience lead to the discovery of a humorous interpretation of the dialogue. Penny's attempt to follow the maxim of standard interpersonal communication leads to her use of 'filler pause'. In the second case of 'filler pause', the audience will not instantly realize it to be an example of inapt response by Amy. The possible inability in understanding by the audience occurs due to the fact that normally Penny's compliment should not produce such a response and the filler *Hmm* initiates the audience towards the inappropriate answer given by Amy. The processing takes a while because the possible meaning is not made manifest by Amy's utterance, which in most instances will not create 'contextual effects'. So, the use Amy's *Hmm* acts as a trigger to initiate the process of meaning interpretation. In place of the first possible meaning construction, which is unsuccessful, the audience restates the meaning construction and summarizes that Amy takes her opinions seriously and her inappropriate seriousness leads to the humorous interpretation.

After description of possible inferential process during understanding of humour with help of 'filler pause', two points could be made applying the Relevance Theory:

1. The inferential process, which leads to humorous interpretation, follows the need for relevance by the audience.
2. The discourse initiator (script writer) intends the discourse recipient (audience) to follow this process and it is based on the *Communicative Principle of Relevance*.

Now, what is interesting about these points is that the audience will not fully interpret the humour created by the scriptwriter unless the points are followed. First, they must follow the inferential process, that is, the slowness of the first interpretation, the receiving of the second and the final comprehending of the range of humorous interpretations assisted by 'filler pause'. Second, the assumption about discourse initiator and recipient is based on the Relevance Theory and it's concept of Ostensive Inferential Communication to be where the discourse initiator communicates the intention to communicate. The given analysis highlighted that for 'filler pause' to act, as humour trigger in interpersonal communication, there is a significant amount of cognitive effort required from the audience. Furthermore, the humorous interpretation is created only when the 'extra' effort is put forward by the audience by being patient towards the characters' use of filler pause in their interpersonal communication.

To summarize the analysis, Relevance Theory facilitated the usage and possible interpretation of 'filler pause' in any instance of interpersonal communication, especially with respect to humour

triggering. In addition, as a part of its claim about the inferential communication, the Relevance Theory postulates that the first possible meaning construction which is comprehended by the discourse recipient is also the first one of the set holding the meaning, then the discourse recipient should choose that construction as the only one for the said meaning. ‘Filler pause’ utilizes this feature of inferential communication but does not follow it, at least not at first; it expects the audience to be patient and wait for the slow coming forth of the second interpretation. This approach proposed that there is no special pragmatic strategizing involved during the use of ‘filler pause’ because there is no difference in regular over humour such as a ‘friend stumbling, and missing a step’ and between humorous effects created via ‘filler pause’ in interpersonal communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the article has dealt with a kind of humour trigger, which is called as ‘filler pause’, and has discussed in some detail a particular instantiation of it, namely the representation of interpersonal communication in situational comedy. It notes the disruption of relation of effort and effect as mentioned in the Relevance Theory with the generation of interpretations slowly for the audience that needs to be discussed further within other disciplines of humanities, especially psychology and cognitive science as one instance of a humour triggering in interpersonal communication.

In reviewing the interpretation of humour in popular media context, it was seen that the practices employed by the scriptwriter of a given series tend to be based on an established pattern (Limon, 2000). The present series, like any other popular media programmes, depended on a pattern that was established over time and was repeated when the audience appreciated it. That being the case, it seems that examining the use of a particular instance of the use of ‘filler pause’ is an interesting point to base the analysis on. All the seasons of the series consisted of around 20 episodes, each as a result by analyzing the few episodes from the first four seasons. It was possible to understand the pattern of TBBT’s instances of ‘filler pause’ and draw conclusion as to how it was significant in the development of the situational comedy.

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