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ZAVRŠNI MAGISTARSKI RAD

PUNNING OBSERVED ON THE TV SITCOM *FRIENDS*

KALAMBURI NA PRIMJERIMA TV SERIJE *FRIENDS*

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**Abstract**

The main objective of this paper is to examine the relationship between two concepts: face and one particular form of humor called a pun. What is explored is the effect that punning has on the face – the positive and the negative face on the one hand, and the speaker's and the hearer's face on the other hand. This is performed through the analysis of the corpus comprising puns used in *Friends*, the popular US TV sitcom from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The examples are analyzed by consulting the Incongruity Theory of humor and the Politeness Theory. This paper also discusses the status of puns with regard to the social functions of humor.

The present analysis shows that puns do pose a threat to the face and that participants in a talk exchange play a crucial role in determining the effect of a pun. It is also shown that punning can perform different social functions associated with humor in general.

**Keywords:** punning, humor, face, incongruity, politeness, face-threatening act, cooperation principle, *Friends*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Humor has been the subject matter of numerous research studies in the past few decades, with researchers and scientists from different fields trying to demystify this concept and provide a better understanding of what humor is or can be. Linguistics is not an exception. Different approaches to studying humor have been developed throughout the years and linguists have delved into this topic to explore, understand and explain different forms and realizations of humor. One of these are puns and this interesting form of humor is precisely what this thesis will focus on. We will attempt to explore this phenomenon in detail, by resorting to several theories – the *Incongruity-Resolution* theory of humor and the pragmatic theory of *Politeness*.

These will be applied to a corpus comprising puns used in *Friends*, the popular TV sitcom from the end of the '90s and the beginning of the new millennium. This sitcom started airing in 1994 and soon became one of the viewers' favorites. It ran for 10 years and in this period received numerous awards and nominations, but what remains as the most important award is definitely the huge fan base that contributes to the show's popularity even nowadays, 15 years after its last episode aired and was seen by more than 50 million viewers (Final episode of "Friends" airs on NBC, 2009).

The aim of the analysis is to attempt to find answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: Can puns be used as face-threatening acts to both the positive and the negative face?

RQ2: Can puns pose a threat to the speaker's face?

RQ3: Can puns perform different social functions of humor?

### 1.1 Outline of the paper

Though humor is a concept familiar to everyone, observing it from a scientific perspective requires some previous knowledge with regard to this topic and the theories that investigate it. This is particularly true of the specific kind of humor that will be explored in this paper, namely puns. Therefore, the first part of this paper will provide the theoretical framework necessary for the readers to become familiar with this topic and for the aforementioned analysis of the corpus to be conducted. This part will also include the description of linguistic theories that will be consulted and used for the analysis.

The second part will provide the methodological framework of this paper, explaining in more detail how the present analysis will be conducted. What will also be presented is a description of the corpus, i.e. the sitcom itself and the topics it explored.

The third part will present the analysis of the corpus conducted by consulting the theories presented in the first part. The aim of this analysis is to search for answers to the research questions mentioned above in order to shed some light on the issues they deal with.

The fourth part will summarize the previous ones by presenting the main conclusions reached throughout the analysis. This part will also include recommendations for future research, for which we hope this study will be an inspiration.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 On humor

Defining humor has not been a simple task since it is quite difficult to provide a single comprehensive definition that would be accepted and approved by all. Salvatore Attardo maintains that the most suitable definition is the pragmatic one that humor is the text whose perlocutionary effect is laughter (Attardo, 1994, p. 13). Therefore, we need to distinguish between these two terms. It is also important to bear in mind that laughter can be the effect of something else as well: fear, inconvenience, shame, etc. Palmer (1994) subsumes under the category of humor everything that is or could be funny and argues that all the phenomena that can be regarded as funny share a certain quality which makes them such – it is precisely this quality that he labels as *humor*. Schröter claims that humor is a rather vague concept that does not “belong naturally to any one academic discipline” (2005, p. 71), which makes it perfectly understandable why humor is the subject of research in various disciplines. Morreall (1983) provides a detailed description of the three main classes of humor theories, which will for this purpose be presented only briefly here and later on we will go into more detail with regard to one of these classes, namely the Incongruity Theory. The three classes are:

- Superiority Theory, which postulates that humor is used to express “a person’s feelings of superiority over other people” (Morreall, 1983, p. 4).
- Relief Theory, which focuses on psychological effects of humor in the recipient and regards laughter as “a venting of nervous energy” (p. 20).
- Incongruity Theory, which proposes that humor arises due to the existence of two opposing sets and that the amusement occurs as a result of “something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some other way” (p. 15).

Gaut (1998, p. 175) points out that both the form and the content make something funny, but what he emphasizes about the content is that it “must be held to be true *in some sense*”. He describes the connection between such beliefs and humor, but this is a topic that we will return to afterwards. When it comes to form, humor can be expressed in various ways and different things can be found funny (e.g. someone’s appearance or how they speak); however, we will analyze verbal humor, for which Palmer (1994) says that “the entire impact of the joke relies on its verbal form” (p. 79). To be more precise, our matter of interest will be punning. For the sake of a more comprehensive analysis, we will mention and take into account some characters’ traits and the overall context of the humorous situations that will be analyzed.

## 2.2 Let's have some pun!

Ritchie (2004) begins his discussion of puns by saying that they are a widespread phenomenon, “at least within English-speaking culture” (p. 109). Though the corpus for the present analysis will encompass only English puns (i.e. puns from a sitcom in English), it is worth mentioning that this phenomenon is most likely universal across languages and a survey of studies which focus on puns in various languages can be found in Hausmann (1974).

We will begin our discussion of puns by presenting several definitions in order to get a good basis for a more in-depth description and analysis of this topic. Morreall (1983, p. 70) defines puns as the use of “a certain word in a conversation because it has a secondary meaning that is also somehow connected to the topic at hand (or has a homonym so connected)”. Sherzer describes a pun as “a form of speech play in which a word or phrase unexpectedly and simultaneously combines two unrelated meanings” (2002, p. 29). In one of his recent papers, Attardo (2018) puts more focus on the phonetic aspect of a pun, saying that it is “a textual occurrence in which a sequence of sounds must be interpreted with a reference to a second sequence of sounds, which may, but need not, be identical to the first sequence, for the full meaning of the text to be accessed” (p. 91). Koestler (1964) offers his definition along these lines and says that it is “the bisociation of a single phonetic form with two meanings – two strings of thought tied together by an acoustic knot” (p. 65). Another interesting attempt at defining a pun is that by Hempelmann & Miller (2017), who say that a pun is “that part of the humorous text, possibly an implied and not overtly expressed part, that is compatible with two meanings, possibly not with the same degree of compatibility to both of them, in the given context” (p. 95).

Different as these (and many other) definitions are in terms of details, what they all include is the feature that we will call duality of meanings or senses, which means that they are not limited to words. This is an important point because puns are often referred to as play on words, but in reality, they can be perceived as play on ideas and concepts. Koestler (1964) says that “there is a continuous stretch from the pun through the play on words (*jeu de mots*) to the play of ideas (*jeu d'esprit*)” (p. 66).

The fact that puns must be ambiguous is precisely one of their main features. However, this ambiguity alone is not sufficient – if something is ambiguous, it is not automatically a pun and Attardo makes an interesting observation that all words are

“ambiguous, vague, or unspecified” (1994, p. 133) if we observe them out of context, a topic to which we will return later. A simple and quite logical question arises to the statement we made above, namely: what else is required besides ambiguity? The answer also seems simple: the two meanings that are present must be in opposition, i.e. “semantically incompatible in context”, as Attardo (1994, p. 133) puts it. What is important to mention is that this opposition is local: the two senses involved are local antonyms of each other, which means that they are opposite “only within a particular discourse and solely for the purposes of this discourse” (Raskin, 1984, p. 108).

### **2.3 Understanding incongruity**

We now turn to presenting the semantic theory of humor that will guide us in our present analysis of puns. As was mentioned before, we will focus on the so-called Incongruity Theory of humor, the roots of which can be traced all the way back to Ancient Greece and Aristotle. Namely, in his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle mentions that getting someone to laugh can be achieved by setting up certain expectations and then delivering something contrary, precisely the idea that is at the core of the incongruity theory.

However, this idea was not further developed neither by Aristotle nor his followers and critics. It was revived at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century in the works of Arthur Schopenhauer and Immanuel Kant. In his book *Critique of Judgment*, first published in 1790, Kant mentions absurd as an essential part for laughter to occur, stating that it arises due to “strained expectations being suddenly reduced to nothing” (Kant, 2007, p. 161). Schopenhauer presents a similar explanation and mentions incongruity explicitly, but with a small difference, saying that the end result of a joke is not nothing, but simply something that we did not expect. In his view, laughter is the expression of the “incongruity between a concept and the real objects that are, in some respect, thought through the concept” (Schopenhauer, 2010, p. 84); the greater the contrast between these expectations, the greater the ridiculous effect.

Palmer (1994) provides an interesting example from the popular cartoon *Tom & Jerry*. Namely, Tom the cat sets a stick of dynamite for Jerry the mouse, but he himself is actually exploded by it. Since the concept of ‘explosion’ involves the expectation of death, the fact that Tom survives is incongruous and results in humor, as well as the fact that Tom is the one to get exploded, even though it was meant for Jerry. The humorous effect is, therefore, achieved in a similar manner both visually and verbally because in both cases some concepts



must be invoked and exploited. Suls explains the cause of humor as “the discrepancy between two mental representations, one of which is an expectation ... and the other is some idea or percept” (Suls, 1983, cited in Palmer, 1994, p. 95). Chafe (2007) maintains that the humorous effect is achieved due to two essential components and those are absurdity and pseudo-plausibility. Namely, the situation presented in a humorous sentence or text is plausible to some extent and we could imagine a world in which it could exist. The idea is, at the same time, also absurd because it “deviates from what one understands the real world to be like” (p. 90). It is important to note that this absurd world is introduced in the punch line of a joke, whereas the set-up may or may not have elements that are in accordance with the real world or someone’s understanding of it.

What needs to be mentioned at this point is that a single and clear-cut definition of incongruity has not been agreed on by the scholars who are investigating this topic. Ritchie (1999) makes an interesting point that these scholars may not even share the same concept when discussing incongruity.

Another curious question that presents itself is whether incongruity alone is sufficient to achieve humorous effect? We have already established that it is a necessary condition, a claim made by Suls (1972, p. 83), but it appears that there must be something else – *resolution*. Before going into more detail regarding the model that Suls proposed for the appreciation of jokes (and cartoons), we will mention several characteristics that are common to all the proposed models within the Incongruity-Resolution Theory. Namely, De Mey (2005) lists the following points made by scholars who are proponents of this theory, saying that they “a) differentiate between the set-up and the punch line of a joke, b) claim that the punch line does not make immediate sense to the cognitive agent, and c) assume that, subsequently, the cognitive agent somehow finds a ‘resolution’ which allows the punch line to be congruous” (p. 73).

#### **2.4 Incongruity-Resolution Model**

We will now focus on a particular incongruity-resolution model proposed by psychologist Jerry M. Suls, who set the ground for further development of this theory. He argues that a two-stage process occurs for a joke or a cartoon to be understood and perceived as funny (Suls, 1972). It should be noted that throughout this work of his he includes both jokes and cartoons for the explanation of his model and idea, but in the present paper we will refer only to jokes since our matter of interest is the verbal humor, as mentioned earlier.

How does this process occur? During the first stage, the expectations of the perceiver are crushed by the ending of the joke, i.e. the punch line is incongruous with the set-up of the joke. What happens in the second stage is the recipient engaging in a task of problem solving in order to find a cognitive rule which is to explain this incongruity. A cognitive rule is, as Suls states, defined as “a logical proposition, a definition, or a fact of experience” (1972, p. 82). The purpose of this rule is to show that the punch line still follows from the set-up, though it may not seem so at first. In this manner, the incongruity becomes congruous. As Palmer (1994) puts it, “the punch line allows the receiver to make some sense or other of what has gone before” (p. 95). Suls (1972) maintains that these two stages are a must if a joke is to be found funny by the recipient. He also claims that the humorous effect is in a way proportional to the problem posed by the incongruity of a joke. Namely, his view is that the more surprise and incongruity the punch line causes, the greater will be the need of the recipient to resolve this problem. Once this occurs, the joke will be appreciated to a greater extent (p. 91).

Why and how does resolution bear relevance? Attardo (2018) makes an interesting observation on the meaning of the word resolution, which in a way implies that the incongruity that occurs is actually removed. This, however, is not the case. At this point we need to distinguish between resolution and disambiguation. As we have mentioned previously, linguistic units can be perceived as being inherently ambiguous. What happens in non-humorous sentences is that their ambiguity is reduced and eventually eliminated, if the sentence remains cohesive and coherent (Attardo, 1994, p. 133). One of the senses of that linguistic unit is suppressed and this process is referred to as disambiguation. Humorous sentences, on the other hand, preserve both senses. This is contrary to the normal function that the context of a sentence performs and that is to disambiguate. How is this possible? The answer is quite simple: some information that is required for disambiguation is hidden. This implicitness is, as Dascal (1985) mentions, an essential feature of the use of language in humorous sentences. He explains its role by saying that it “lures the addressee into generating a reading of the story that is not explicitly conveyed (nor denied), and which will, at the end, be overthrown” (p. 99). Resolution is, therefore, necessary for the recipient to understand a joke and to see that the punch line follows from its set-up, and this is what makes it a key criterion for humor, together with incongruity.

Having presented the semantic framework, we will now provide the pragmatic framework that we will follow throughout our analysis. Attardo (1994) makes an interesting

observation that puns can only exist in context and it is precisely context that will be our following matter of interest.

## **2.5 Pragmatics**

### *2.5.1 Context*

David Crystal (2008) defines context as a term used to refer to a) “specific parts of an utterance (or text) near or adjacent to a unit which is the focus of attention” (p. 108) and b) “the features of the non-linguistic world in relation to which linguistic units are systematically used” (p. 109). The former definition focuses on the linguistic environment, whereas the latter focuses on the situational. In order to overcome the ambiguity of this term, another term is used to encompass the former definition, and that is *co-text*. We will also follow in these footsteps for the present analysis and reserve the term *context* for what is outside the language. Levinson (1983) describes the term context as covering “the identities of participants, the temporal and spatial parameters of the speech event, and the beliefs, knowledge and intentions of the participants in that speech event, and no doubt much besides” (p. 5). As was mentioned, context is an essential requirement for the occurrence of puns, so our choice to devote considerable attention to it for our analysis seems quite logical and understandable.

At this point, we will ask the following question: how and why is context relevant for puns, and humor in general? Attardo (1994) says that puns occur only in sentences in which there is a conflict between two senses and adds that any ambiguous expression can be exploited as a pun if it occurs in such a context.

It should be mentioned that puns are an example of non-casual speech forms, which means that the speaker is aware of the surface structure of the form they produce (Attardo, 2018, p. 92). They are, therefore, deliberate. Though some puns can be created in advance, what happens usually is that they arise spontaneously in a conversation. This occurs because one of the participants realizes that some previous part of the discourse can have a second interpretation (Partington, 2009, p. 1796). This means that their occurrence is sudden and abrupt and that they, consequently, disrupt the ongoing conversation. It is precisely this disruptive characteristic that distinguishes puns from other forms in which conversational humor occurs (Norricks, 2003, p. 1339). This abruptness and the element of surprise that they carry are the reason why puns, and most forms of humor, fully affect us only once (Morreall, 1983). If we hear a joke for the second time, we will not be surprised by the punch line, and

the same will happen if we somehow manage to predict the outcome and the use of the pun. Suddenness, therefore, is a necessary element that must be present if a pun is to be successful. Morreall (1983) makes an interesting observation on the terms used to discuss humor, saying that they are somehow linked to this feature. For example, we say that a joke “hit” us or that a comedian “knocked someone out” (p. 49).

In order for a pun to be successful, the addressee must also partake in it. Namely, they need to recognize the speaker’s intention to produce the pun and, consequently, laughter, but also to realize “the more specific intentions embedded in the linguistic material of the joke” (Dascal, 1985, p. 96). This task implies that the recipient engages in a task of understanding three different types of meaning: sentence meaning (the speaker’s words), utterance meaning (those words in relation to the context of the utterance) and speaker meaning (the speaker’s intention to utter them in that particular context). The speaker meaning can be conveyed directly (it matches the utterance meaning) or indirectly. In the latter case, it is different from the utterance meaning and the recipient must therefore discover what it is. They do so by following the clues provided in the context. As we have mentioned, implicitness is one of the main features of humorous language since the joke material is such that more interpretations, i.e. more speaker’s meanings, are possible. By following the clues in the context, the recipient construes an interpretation that will, as we have already explained, be crushed in the punch line.

Once the pun is produced, what happens next? The optimal reaction would be laughter, either by the speaker or by the recipient. We have mentioned at the beginning that laughter is the result of humor and it is a complex neurophysiological manifestation; humor, on the other hand, is a mental phenomenon (Attardo, 1994, p. 10). The occurrence of laughter can make an unconscious pun become noticed and once that happens, the attention of the participants is shifted to the pun, as if it was intended (Sherzer, 2002, p. 33). This can also be achieved by the speaker using expressions such as “No pun intended” or “Excuse the pun”.

Laughter is, usually, a sign of the positive effect of a pun or some other humorous form. Cohen (1999) introduces an interesting term and that is the *intimacy* of joking. He suggests that participants in a joking situation form a community, since the recipients partake in it as well by engaging in the aforementioned process of problem-solving (i.e. finding the intended interpretation); if the joke works, it causes amusement and they then respond to it, and so they all become a “community of amusement” (p. 40). Amusement can be described as

“the enjoyment of what is seen as incongruous” (Clark, 1987, p. 31). We can perceive a pun as a good one if it results in such a feeling and response. In order for that to happen, the incongruity cannot be only phonetically-based, but it must arise due to semantic relations between words (Raskin, 1985, p. 116).

However, it is not always the case that a pun causes laughter and there are other ways to respond to a pun. Namely, a quite common response to punning is the groan, either by the recipient or by the punster. Someone can react this way if they have a dislike for puns and punning is by some perceived an inferior type of humor (Attardo, 2018, p. 98). This is probably due to the disruptive character of puns, which makes them different from other forms of conversational humor. The fact that puns are sudden and surprise the recipient implies that they intrude the topical conversation and, consequently, disrupt it. This can be notably frowned upon if the topic and context of the conversation are serious, or are regarded as such by the participant. This is why timing is of great significance if a pun is to be successful and necessary to produce the desired effect, which is practically the point and purpose of humor (Irwin, 2000). In the words of Chandler, one of the characters from *Friends*, “you have to pick your moments” when it comes to punning. Timing is an issue that has not received as much attention and space in the research of humor and Attardo (2001) refers to it as “a weak spot in the linguistics of humor” (p. 208). Norrick (2003) makes an attempt to shed some light on this issue and exemplifies how timing is compounded of multiple factors. Namely, the set-up is characterized by hesitations, false starts, repetitions, and formulaicity, whereas the delivery of a punch line is more rapid and fluid, with information being accumulated and perspective shifted right before it (p. 1353).

Another interesting form of response to punning, and humor in general, is – more humor! Recipients can choose to contribute to the overall feeling of amusement and to the humorous effect by producing another pun/joke and so extend that feeling (see Chafe (2007) for examples). These three types of responses are of the most common ones, but there are unquestionably many more ways in which a pun can be received, and responded to, by someone. This can be affected by the cultural context, and although puns are a universal phenomenon, as we mentioned earlier, it is not the case that all cultures share the same attitude towards puns.

However, one of the main factors which determine the success and effect of a pun are precisely the participants in a humorous context. This is because jokes in general are closely

related to our beliefs, knowledge and understanding of the world, and they “have the power to reinforce, promote, or challenge our way of thinking” (Tapley, 2005, p. 172). Some general conditions must be fulfilled, that is true, but the reason behind the use of puns, as well as the response to it, ultimately depends on the individuals engaged in this process. Punning, and joking in general, can be used for different purposes and Dascal (1985) makes an interesting observation that “the linguistic level is the *vehicle* through which the deeper wishes are expressed and fulfilled” (p. 99). Personality plays an essential role in punning and the attitude towards puns certainly varies from one person to another. Jonathan Swift made a curious remark on punning, saying that it is “a talent which no man affects to despise, but he that is without it” (cited in Crystal, 2001, p. 5).

### 2.5.2 *Why do we use humor?*

One important question that we need to address is the purpose of humor and punning. As Greengross (2008) observes, humor is ubiquitous and studying humor can help us shed light on some aspects of human behavior. Martin (2007, p. 3) says that “being able to enjoy humor and express it through laughter seems to be an essential part of what it means to be human”. This is why psychology is also one of the disciplines that are interested in investigating this phenomenon. So, why do we use humor and what functions does it perform?

Prior to going into more detail on the two functions that will be of greatest significance for this final diploma paper, namely the social and communicative functions, we want to mention an interesting view of humor that Chafe (1987) proposed, saying that humor has a disabling function, both physiologically and psychologically. Namely, laughter, a physiological manifestation of humor, interferes with our normal respiration. Our body’s stability is disturbed and this prevents us from performing any kind of effective actions. He makes a simple conclusion that “while you are laughing, you cannot do anything else” (p. 20). Physiological effects are not our primary interest so we will not go further into this aspect, but what is interesting is that a parallel situation can be noticed if we observe the psychological aspect. In these terms, humor is disabling since it “diverts attention and effort away from any decisive action a person might take” (p. 21). The basis of a humorous state is the inability to take things seriously and this is the reason why taboo topics are quite commonly explored in humor (see Hardcastle & Reisch (2006) for an analysis of *Monty Python* and explanation of numerous humorous contexts which touch upon such topics). Namely, due to the disabling power of humor explained above, such topics are explored in humor because we are

“powerless to implement them or think about them seriously” (Chafe, 1987, p. 23). In this manner, their seriousness and taboo is somewhat reduced.

We now turn to the communicative function of humor. Humorous remarks are present in everyday communication and contribute to the recipient’s understanding of the communicative context. Though the nature of humor is such that it violates the principles of cooperation used in communication and proposed by Paul H. Grice, a topic to which we will return soon, the communicative function of humorous language is multifold. Humor can be used as a sort of hedging device: if someone uses humor, they may be avoiding being taken too seriously and being too committed to what they are saying. It can also be used to convey relevant information about an unfamiliar culture or situation (see Attardo (1994) for more details) or as a method of flirting. An interesting analysis of the difference between women and men’s use of and attitude towards humor in different types of relationship can be found in Bressler et al. (2006). Provine (1996) conducted a study in which he found out that men have the lead in the production of humor, whereas women are more often the ones who laugh. This shows that there are significant differences in terms of gender and the use of language for humorous purposes.

What can be noticed is that the communicative function of humor is evidently linked to its social function and a considerable overlap between these two is inevitable. Attardo (1994, p. 323) lists the four classes of social functions: social management, decommitment, mediation, and defunctionalization. An in-depth explanation of these can be found in this work of Attardo’s but for the present occasion we will briefly describe these four social aspects of humor. Tapley (2005) refers to humor as an important venue of social interaction because it is linked to beliefs and knowledge (p. 197). Humor is a powerful tool which can “strengthen in-group interaction or out-group rejection” (Attardo, 1994, p. 323). Palmer (1994) also comments on the role humor plays in social bonding by creating and preserving group identity. It can influence the participants’ attitudes towards each other because if humor is shared by them it implies that they also share some beliefs or perception of the world. Therefore, humor “emphasizes similarity and promotes solidarity among group members” (Schnurr, 2010, p. 311).

When it comes to decommitment, it is important to mention that “humorous communication is retractable” (Attardo, 1994, p. 325), which means that the speaker has the possibility of backing off from what they said and in that way saving their face (a concept

which we will discuss below). This characteristic might also account for the fact that taboo and repulsive topics are often explored through humor. Mediation is also possible due to this feature of retractability or deniability. This function suggests that humor can be perceived as a transitional device which people use to introduce some topics that are perceived as dangerous or face-threatening. If the speaker realizes that what they said is socially unacceptable, they can deny their responsibility for it by saying that they were simply and only joking. As Chafe (1987, p. 18) puts it, “humor is the safety valve that saves us from the consequences of our natural reasoning when it would get us into trouble”.

Last, but not least, there is defunctionalization. If language is defunctionalized, it means that it “is not used for transmission of information (its principal function) but for playful (ludic) purposes” (Attardo, 1994, p. 328). This function is particularly relevant for puns. It is believed that, since humorous communication suspends the rules of language, speakers are aware of their freedom in these terms and exploit it for amusement.

At the end of our somewhat longer exploration of context there is one more element that we need to mention and those are participants or cognitive agents, the individuals that are at the core of this process as a whole. We have explained several components and aspects that are important for humor, but the thing is that it all starts from the people involved in occurrences of humor. Its very existence, as well as its success, depends on the individual preferences of those involved. Tannen (2005) suggests that “the use of humor makes one’s presence felt” (p. 165) and people can strive to achieve this for different reasons. For example, if someone lacks confidence and feels that their voice is not heard loud enough, they may turn to using humor to change this; the opposite can occur as well, because people who are outgoing and well aware of it, or who perceive themselves (or are perceived by others) as important members of a group can employ humor to enhance this. The individual is, therefore, a crucial part of the humorous context and language usage.

What remains to be discussed in this section devoted to pragmatics are two theories that have had a tremendous impact in this field of linguistics and which will be an essential element of our present analysis. The main concepts that they explore are cooperation and politeness.

### *2.5.3 Cooperation and Maxims*

Talk exchanges are guided by some rules, though we may not always be fully conscious of following them. Conversations are not comprised of random and disconnected



elements, but they are cooperative efforts (Grice, 1975). What the participants in a conversation share is a common purpose or a mutually accepted direction. This is an interesting claim if we think about our previous discussion of humorous environments and the incongruity that is necessary to achieve humor. We have said that the recipient's expectations are constructed so as to follow logically from the set-up of a joke, which means that at this stage the situation unfolds in a direction shared by both the speaker and the recipient. However, once the punch line appears and these expectations are crushed, we see that the two sides did not really have the same direction in mind. Therefore, humor defies this characteristic of talk exchanges that is defined as cooperation.

Grice (1975) proposes that participants are expected to observe the following principle: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (p. 307). This, he labels as Cooperative Principle. He also introduces four categories, under which fall maxims which are to be followed to achieve cooperation. These categories are Quantity, Quality, Manner, and Relation.

The category of Quantity refers to, as its name says, the quantity of information that is provided. The following two maxims are important for this category: 1) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange), and 2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required (p. 308). The status of the second maxim is disputable for several reasons, but the main one might be the fact that a maxim from a different category ensures that the desired effect is produced.

The category of Quality can be explained by a supermaxim "Try to make your contribution one that is true". Two maxims provide further specification: 1) Do not say what you believe to be false, and 2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence (p. 308).

The category of Relation has a single maxim: Be relevant. Though this might seem simple at first, Grice himself comments that numerous problems arise in relation to this maxim and category, such as the existence of different types of relevance or a shift between these types during a conversation (p. 308).

The former three categories refer to the content, but the last one, namely the category of Manner, refers to how things should be said. The supermaxim of this category is: Be perspicuous. Grice provides four maxims which fall under this category, but he notes that

there might be a need for others as well. The four maxims are: 1) Avoid obscurity of expression, 2) Avoid ambiguity, 3) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity), and 4) Be orderly (p. 309).

It should be noted that other maxims can be postulated, which can be concerned with, for example, moral or social aspects of a talk exchange, but the ones that Grice postulates are conversational maxims. They are connected with the purposes that the talk exchange is to serve.

Grice (1975) mentions several ways in which one can fail to fulfill a maxim, but the one that is significant for our present discussion is what he terms as violation of maxims because the general perception is that humorous texts violate one or more of the maxims Grice proposed and we listed above. He explains that if someone violates a maxim, they “will be liable to mislead” (p. 310) and this is precisely what happens in jokes. As we have mentioned previously, the humorous effect is achieved by raising a certain set of expectations in the hearer and then crushing them in the punch line, which means that the hearer is misled to believe something which turns out to be something else. If we apply Suls’ two-stage processing model, we can say that in the first stage of processing a joke, the hearer believes that the conversation is evolving in accordance with the Cooperative Principle and that the speaker’s intention is to fulfill the maxims. This belief is shaken by the incongruity in the punch line, which shows that one or more maxims are actually violated. This would suggest that the speaker is not cooperating and that humorous exchanges are actually non-cooperative. However, this is not true, since the incongruity becomes resolved and the joke makes sense, once the processing ends and the second interpretation is reached. Jokes are understood as being jokes, and not lies, which is a form of non-cooperative behavior (Attardo, 1994).

An interesting solution for this puzzling situation can be found in Raskin’s proposal that there is another Cooperative Principle, which accounts for the humorous use of language. Raskin (1985) proposes four maxims that this CP is based on which carry the same name as, but are different from, Grice’s maxims. Namely, when it comes to the quantity of information provided, Raskin’s Maxim of Quantity instructs that one should “give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke”. Maxim of Quality suggests that in humorous exchanges the speaker is to “say only what is compatible with the world of the joke”. If the speaker is to observe the Maxim of Relation, they will “say only what is relevant to the joke”. Finally, the Maxim of Manner instructs to “tell the joke efficiently” (p. 103).

Combining everything we have said above, we can conclude that in the first stage of the processing of a joke, the hearer believes that the speaker is following the Cooperative Principle and maxims proposed by Grice. The punch line brings an unexpected turn and the hearer proceeds to reinterpret the joke to make some sense of it. It is in this second stage that the CP for humorous exchanges is brought into action. This means that once the hearer realizes that the speaker is actually not following the primary CP, they realize what the original intention of the speaker was, namely to produce a humorous effect. Raskin (1985) makes an interesting observation that once the hearer realizes that the primary CP is violated, their next immediate assumption is that the speaker is joking. He explains this by saying that it is more natural to test whether the speaker is joking than to assume that they are, for example, lying and that this is because humor is more socially acceptable. According to him, “joke telling is a cooperative enterprise while lying is not” (p. 104), and this is why the hearer will consider lying as an option only after humor has been rejected as one. This contributes to the claim that humorous exchanges are in fact cooperative, though they may not appear as such at first.

#### *2.5.4 Be polite*

We have mentioned that numerous other maxims can be observed, in addition to the conversational ones that Grice proposed, and “Be polite” can be perceived as one of such additional maxims. This instruction might seem quite simple and straightforward, but what does it actually mean to be polite? What is politeness and how is it achieved? This is what we will explore at this point.

The theory of politeness proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987) made a significant impact on the research of this topic in different disciplines. What they focus on is the concept of face, which is an individual’s self-esteem or “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61). They elaborate by saying that there are two aspects of this concept, namely a positive face and a negative face, and that they are universal in the sense of the mutual knowledge of participants’ face and the need to keep it in mind in interactions.

Positive face implies, as the name says, a positive self-image which is claimed by the speaker, but what is also important for it is the desire for this self-image to be appreciated and approved of by other participants. What needs to be mentioned is that people generally want this to be done by those who are in some way relevant for that desire and not by anyone

(p.63). Negative face, on the other hand, implies the freedom of action and freedom from imposition.

A further point that should be mentioned and that is quite logical is that face can be threatened. This happens due to what Brown & Levinson (1987) label as face-threatening acts, which are in opposition to the face wants of participants. Since there is a positive and a negative face, it is a natural conclusion that there are acts which threaten positive face and acts which threaten negative face. The former indicate that the speaker is not concerned with the hearer's feelings or desires, whereas the latter indicate that the speaker in some way impedes the hearer's freedom of action. Another distinction is that between the threats directed towards the hearer's face versus the ones directed towards the speaker's face. Three factors need to be considered if we want to determine the level of politeness of the speaker (S) towards the hearer (H): relative power of H over S, the social distance between the two, and the ranking of the imposition that will be the result of a face-threatening act (p. 15).

What is important to say with regard to face is that it is emotionally invested and that it can be "lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61). The participants in a conversation actually cooperate to preserve face because it is vulnerable on both sides. This is due to the fact that "everyone's face depends on everyone else's being maintained" (p. 61), so behaving in a way which will maintain the face of the hearer should contribute to saving one's own face and wants. It is important to say that preserving the face can be achieved either by avoiding face-threatening acts entirely, or by using certain strategies that will minimize the threat posed by such acts. This can be attributed to the notion of rationality, which Brown & Levinson (1987) explain as "the ability to weigh up different means to an end, and choose the one that most satisfies the desired goals" (p. 65). Therefore, since we mentioned that the goal of participants is to maintain the face (both theirs and their addressees'), the strategies that they use to achieve that goal will depend on the context and the goal itself (i.e. whether what is being preserved is the positive or the negative face, the face of the speaker or the hearer or both, etc.).

These strategies can be classified into four broad groups, and those are:

1. Bald on record strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 95-101) – the speaker will perform an FTA in this manner if it is clear to the participants that there is a specific and unambiguous intention which led to this. Such situations include:

- a) The efficiency or urgency of the act is more important than the relevance of face (and both participants agree on this, tacitly). For example, if a person is in danger, they will say “Help!” without thinking about the consequences such an utterance will have on their or the face of their addressee because of the obvious urgency that such a situation is characterized by.
  - b) Suggestions, offers and requests that are in the addressee’s interest and pose a quite small threat to their face. For example, if the speaker is to say “You should lie down if you’re not feeling well”, this will probably be understood as a friendly advice and a sign of the speaker’s care for the hearer.
  - c) The speaker is significantly superior in power to the hearer. Saying “You must submit that report by 2pm today!” signals that the speaker clearly does not pay attention to maintaining the hearer’s face and this is an example of the discourse of power. In this case the speaker does not even try to minimize the effect of their face-threatening act towards the hearer and they do this on purpose and knowing well that their own face will not be threatened.
2. Off record strategies (pp. 211-227) – these are characterized by the fact that there is not just a single intention behind performing an FTA and the meaning of the act is in a way negotiable. If the speaker was to say “Oh no, I’ve lost my pen”, the hearer might understand it as a request to lend them a pen, but the speaker has in no way expressed that intention openly. Strategies that belong to this group include using metaphor, irony, understatement, rhetorical questions, tautologies and other kinds of indirect hints regarding the speaker’s intention behind their communicative act.
  3. Positive politeness strategies (pp. 101-129) – they are approach-based and indicate that the speaker in some way wants the same as the hearer and, in order to achieve this, they can treat the hearer as a member of an in-group or a friend. This can be achieved by showing particular interest in the hearer’s wants and exaggerations in their interest, using markers which show that the speaker considers the hearer to be close to them or part of the same group (“dude”, “bro”), avoiding disagreement (instead of saying “No...”, the speaker can choose to say “Yes, but...”), using white lies, claiming reflexivity (offers, promises, etc.) and reciprocity, etc.
  4. Negative politeness strategies (pp. 129-211) – they are avoidance-based and take into account the hearer’s desire for freedom, with the speaker recognizing and respecting the hearer’s negative face. They are characterized by “self-effacement, formality and restraint” (p. 70). This is achieved by using conventionalized indirectness (“Can you

pass the salt?”), hedging, apologizing, using impersonalizing mechanisms (passive, nominalization, indefinite pronouns...), etc.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study is a qualitative one. We will not be interested in statistical data nor will we attempt to gather and provide such data to confirm or contradict some of the ideas explained in the theoretical framework and the research questions that will be presented below. What we will strive to do is provide examples from the corpus which will shed some light on these questions and, hopefully, serve as a basis for future research with regard to the topics explored in this paper. This will be achieved as follows: each example will be analyzed by consulting both the semantic and the pragmatic theories. In terms of semantics, what will be determined is the point of incongruity, followed by an explanation of why and how this incongruity arises and what concepts are played with in a given example. Observing these examples from the perspective of pragmatics and the pragmatic theories presented in the theoretical framework, they will be analyzed by focusing on how the instance of punning presented in a given example affects the self-image of the interlocutors, i.e. their face.

#### **3.1 Corpus**

Due to its nature, this research will not include any participants, nor will an instrument be used to gather quantitative data. Instead, the corpus will comprise examples of puns from the US TV sitcom *Friends*.

The show portrays a group of six friends: Monica Geller, Rachel Green, Phoebe Buffay, Chandler Bing, Ross Geller, and Joey Tribbiani. At the beginning of the show, they are in their twenties and living in New York, trying to achieve success both on their professional and personal paths. They go through all their struggles together and the viewers have the opportunity to follow their paths and see how their perceptions, decisions and choices change throughout the years. What is important to emphasize is that the show is an example of “art imitates life” situation, since the situations presented and the topics explored reflect the life in America at that period of transition from one millennium to another and, in a way, from one mindset to another. Numerous important (and somewhat taboo) topics are present throughout all the ten seasons, including love, same-sex marriage, relationships and age difference, parenting, career goals and the path to success, etc. This is probably one of the main reasons why the show became so popular at the time it aired: its real-life aspect made it possible for millions to see their own struggles in the stories of the characters from the show and to find reasons to laugh at those struggles, because that makes it easier to overcome them.

#### 4. CORPUS ANALYSIS

What we will begin our discussion with is the relationship between puns and politeness. We have presented an overview of the theory of politeness and discussed in more detail face-threatening acts, as well as situations in which such acts can be or are performed and strategies used to threaten the positive or negative face of either the hearer or the speaker. Where do puns, and humor in general, fit into this?

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 67) mention that some acts can be used as a threat to both the positive and the negative face, including interruptions and strong expressions of emotions, among others. This observation is of particular interest for us since we have mentioned that one of the main features of a pun is that it interrupts the normal conversation. In the interaction presented below, the group is in the coffee house and Chandler is pressured by Phoebe and Monica to call the girl he had a date with the night before:

(1) Chandler: [hangs up right after he dialed the number] I got her machine.

Joey: Her answering machine?

Chandler: No, interestingly enough, her leaf blower picked up.

(S1, E20, The One With the Evil Orthodontist)

In this example, we can observe several features of pun – first and foremost, its suddenness. Namely, the conversation was developing naturally and there was no original intention for this use of a pun. However, the opportunity presents itself once Joey asks if Chandler referred to the answering machine, though it was rather obvious that he did. Chandler seizes this opportunity to make a pun, thereby interrupting the talk exchange that they were engaged in. We can, therefore, say that the two essential parts of a pun – its set-up and its punch line – were provided by two different characters. Namely, the set-up of the pun is seen in the first two lines. The question asked by Joey raises certain expectations with regard to the answer to that question and these are in line with the idea that people follow the Cooperative Principle when interacting with others. In this case, if we were to assume that Chandler is doing so, it would be expected of him to simply reply affirmatively, even though the question itself was not really necessary, but Chandler's response crushes these expectations and this is precisely where the punch line lies. The incongruity that is essential for the pun is found in Chandler's response, where he plays with different concepts related to the word machine. Once the pun has been produced, the speaker remains silent for a rather



short period of time, offering no explanation for his incongruous utterance, which Attardo (1994, p. 310) suggests can be perceived as “a sophisticated way to incite laughter”. It is precisely during this small interval that the hearer is supposed to perceive the incongruity and reinterpret the utterance, this time with the assumption that the speaker was following the Cooperative Principle for humor, which ultimately leads to the intended interpretation.

By using this pun, Chandler performs a face-threatening act towards his interlocutor, in this case Joey. Let us observe how and which face is threatened. One of the key character traits of Joey is that he is not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, which is shown by the question he asks in this short dialogue, given that it was absolutely unnecessary due to the context of this interaction. However, that is who Joey is, and by asking this question he is actually showing that he is interested in the ongoing situation and conversation. He is, therefore, presenting his positive face. Chandler, though well aware of what Joey is like, does not take that into account but uses the pun. If he was to preserve Joey’s positive face, he could have simply answered that it was indeed the answering machine and continue with his story. Choosing to do otherwise poses a direct threat to Joey’s positive face. Chandler’s response exemplifies one of his major character traits and that is the use of humor and sarcasm to a much greater extent than the rest of the group. This is a topic that we will briefly touch upon later.

What about the relationship between punning and the negative face? Can puns be used as a threat in this case? We will use the following example to discuss this question. This scene is part of the episode in which Monica and Rachel play against Chandler and Joey to see which pair knows the other better. Monica and Chandler decide to raise the stakes in this bet and the conversation proceeds as follows:

(2) Rachel: [Chandler has just set the stakes at \$200] Monica, I don't want to lose two hundred dollars!

Monica: We won't!

[To Chandler]

Monica: Three hundred!

Rachel: Monica!

Monica: I'm just trying to spice it up!

Rachel: OK, so then play for some pepper! Stop spending my money!

(S4, E12, The One With the Embryos)

We have mentioned above that expressing strong emotions can be seen as one way of threatening face and this interaction exemplifies that. Namely, Rachel is at first not comfortable with Monica wanting to play for more money and she expresses her concern when Monica raises the stakes to \$200. However, once the stakes have been raised to \$300, Rachel strongly disagrees with this proposal and in that way threatens Monica's freedom of action, i.e. her negative face. The incongruity occurs as Rachel replies that Monica should play for some pepper if her desire is to spice things up. She plays with the meaning of the phrase *spice something up*. In cooking, if you want to spice a meal up, you would usually add some pepper to it. Monica, on the other hand, obviously had in mind the other meaning of this phrase, namely "to make something more interesting", in this case their bet.

What can also be observed on this example is how a pun can perform some social functions of humor. In this case, we can argue that the function of the pun is to convey some norms – not necessarily social norms in general, but norms relevant for the speaker and for the group. Namely, Rachel evidently finds Monica's behavior unacceptable and the pun contributes to her attempt to have Monica realize the same thing, i.e. that the stakes being raised to \$300 is simply irrational at that moment.

The pun that Rachel produces does not interrupt the conversation entirely because she goes on to express her strong disregard for Monica's proposal and states her opinion about it in a clear and direct manner, thereby performing a direct face-threatening act without worrying about politeness and face wants of her interlocutor. What should be mentioned is that Monica threatens Rachel's face with the proposal to raise the stakes to \$300, but since our focus is on the relationship between punning and face, and not face alone, we will not analyze that aspect here.

What these examples show, therefore, is that puns can be used as a face-threatening act to both the positive and the negative face of the hearer. How strong that threat is depends on the context of course. In the first example, though the face-threatening act is performed, the scene proceeds with the characters simply continuing to discuss what Chandler should do next. The context, therefore, cushions the effect of the threat. On the other hand, the second example shows how the context can actually contribute to the strength of the threat. After she

uses the pun, Rachel continues by telling Monica directly that they should not play for that much money. The effect of the threat is, therefore, intensified by the co-text. The overall context of the situation contributes even more to the strength of this face-threatening act because none of them earns so much that they can easily spend \$300 on a bet and Rachel is well aware of this when she performs the FTA.

We have seen that puns can threaten both the positive and the negative face of the hearer, but our focus now shifts to the speaker. Can one or both of their faces be threatened when they decide to use a pun? Some examples will be presented below to discuss this issue.

(3) [Chandler lights a cigarette]

Phoebe: Chandler, what are you doing?

Monica: Chandler!

Joey: You're smoking again?

Chandler: Well, actually yesterday I was smoking again, today I'm smoking still.

(S3, E17, The One Without the Ski Trip)

In this scene, Chandler, Phoebe, Monica and Joey are in the boys' apartment. Chandler used to smoke before but the group urged him to stop. The stressful break-up of Ross and Rachel's has affected the entire group so Chandler started smoking again, which is revealed in this scene. The set-up to this punch line is Joey's question, which raises certain expectations. Since this question is actually declarative in form, it is not understood as Joey asking whether it is true that Chandler has started smoking again. There is no need for that because him lighting a cigarette shows quite clearly that he has. Instead, what might be expected of Chandler, for example, is to provide an explanation for why he has started smoking again. The punch line occurs in Chandler's answer and presents us with an instance of incongruity, in which his play on words crushes the expectations raised by the question asked. He plays with the concept and perception of time, or to be more precise with different words used to express different aspects of that concept.

So, does this answer of Chandler's pose a threat to his face? We have said that interlocutors want their positive face to be appreciated and approved by other participants of the talk exchange. In this case, Chandler's positive self-image is already threatened by the fact

that he has started smoking again, knowing rather well how his friends feel about it. When they see him smoking, he does not offer an explanation but chooses to use humor to answer this question only intensifies this threat. The group protests even strongly against his action which, consequently, threatens his negative face. We can, therefore, say that Chandler's wordplay contributes to both of his faces being threatened.

This instance of punning is another example of how puns can be used to perform some social functions. In this case we can observe how two such functions can be performed by a single pun, namely social management and decommitment. How does this occur? Chandler realizes that he is being verbally attacked by his friends so in order to defend himself he is introducing humor to try to make the ongoing situation less unpleasant. This does not prove to be rather successful since the scene proceeds with them confronting Chandler about this issue and strongly disapproving of him starting to smoke again.

In our theoretical introduction, we have devoted considerable attention to the context and its relevance for the use and reception of puns. The seriousness of the situation or of the topic discussed seems to significantly affect how the participants in a talk exchange react to the use of puns. In the example presented above we see how Chandler's pun is not well received precisely because of the overall context: he has started smoking again and his friends do not approve of this, to say the least. In the following example, we can observe how the nature of the ongoing situation affects and determines the reaction to a pun. In this scene, Chandler and Joey have taken Ross to the hospital because he was hit by a puck at a hockey game the three of them went to. They are in the emergency room:

(4) [To the receptionist]

Chandler: Listen, it's kind of an emergency. Well, I guess you know that, otherwise we'd be in the predicament room.

[The receptionist glares at him]

Receptionist: [on phone] Hold on. [To Chandler] Fill these out, sit over there! [Tosses him some forms]

(S1, E4, The One With George Stephanopoulos)

In this example, Chandler produces both the set-up and the punch line. We can observe how he realizes that the word *emergency* presents an opportunity to make a humorous

comment so he decides to seize this opportunity and play with its meaning and the concept of an emergency room in hospitals. Anyone who comes there obviously has an emergency and not just a simple predicament, which is defined as “a difficult, unpleasant, or embarrassing situation” (Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998, p. 644). Chandler, therefore, plays with these different concepts and refers to a non-existent predicament room, which is precisely where the incongruity lies. Something from the real world, i.e. the concept of an emergency room, as well as the context of the situation, is taken as a basis to introduce something present only in the world of the joke. The reason why Chandler produces this pun is to indirectly suggest to the receptionist that she should be paying attention to the arriving patients and not to the conversation she is engaged in on the phone (she has called a number to complain about a particular candy bar). In this manner, punning is once again used for the purpose of social management, whereby Chandler tries to draw the receptionist’s attention to the urgency of the situation they are in. Therefore, we can argue that this is an example of punning being used as a social corrective and to convey social norms, indirectly marking the hearer’s, in this case receptionist’s, behavior as unacceptable.

Chandler himself laughs a little once he produces this pun, but the receptionist’s reaction is anything but positive. One of the reasons could be the very context, the fact that they are in an emergency room in a hospital and this is usually not perceived as a place suitable for the use of humor. Another reason might also be that the receptionist does not appreciate anyone telling her how to do her job and the fact that this pun actually threatens both her faces: her positive self-image and her freedom of action. This example, therefore, also shows how punning can function as a face-threatening act. It is not a threat expressed directly, but the implied meaning is understood by the receptionist so she reacts in this defensive manner. Once again, what is also shown is how individuals contribute to how an instance of punning is perceived and received and how great is their role in this overall process.

We will provide another example which leads us to a similar conclusion, both with regard to the overall context and to the individual participants. In this scene, the group is in the boys’ apartment when Ross receives a call from the museum he works in:

(5) [on the phone]

Ross: Whoa, whoa whoa! Australopithecus isn't supposed to be in that display. No! No! No! Homo Habilis was erect, Australopithecus was never fully erect!

Chandler: Well, maybe he was nervous.

(S2, E15, The One Where Ross and Rachel... You Know)

This was supposed to be his first date night with Rachel, whom he had been in love with since high school. However, there has been a problem with some displays and Ross needs to go to the museum to fix it. Therefore, from Ross's perspective, the situation is rather serious and problematic, because he wanted his first date with Rachel to be perfect but they need to change their plan at the very beginning of the night. On top of that, those displays are his responsibility so he needs to make sure everything is done right. He tries to explain to his colleague on the phone why the display is wrong and the word *erect* refers to the evolutionary feature and difference between the Australopithecus and the Homo Habilis. Chandler notices the opportunity to play with different meanings of this word and comments by implying the other meaning of the adjective, that referring to male genitalia. This is precisely where the incongruity lies and Chandler's comment is where the punch line is located. All of the above leads to Ross not appreciating Chandler's pun and choosing to ignore it, whereas the others laugh. This example shows us the importance of the context but also the importance of individual perspectives because we see that what is serious to one person in a particular context, does not need to be perceived as such by the others. Participants in a talk exchange, as we have mentioned, play one of the greatest roles in how that talk exchange will develop.

The former example is interesting for another reason and that is the topic it touches upon. We have mentioned above that this sitcom dealt with numerous controversial issues and taboo topics of the time and sex has throughout history been perceived as such. There are plenty scenes in this sitcom in which different aspects of this topic are mentioned or discussed and this is quite often accompanied by the use of humor. As we have stated above, humor is used in conversation to reduce the seriousness of such a topic, which can be exemplified by multiple situations in this show, one of them being presented below. In this scene, the rest of the group is in the coffee house and Ross arrives, asking if he could try out on them the very first lecture that he will give at the New York University as a guest lecturer. He starts by simply reading from his notes and the others then give him some suggestions on how he could improve his lecture. Joey mentions that he has never seen anyone stare so hard at a piece of paper that did not have naked women on it and the scene proceeds by him suggesting that Ross should use some visual aids, for example naked chicks. Ross realizes that this interaction will not be particularly helpful to him and decides to leave:

(6) Ross: I don't even know why I bother to talk to you guys about it. Y'know what? I'm just gonna do it on my own. With no naked chicks!

Chandler: That's the way I did it 'til I was 19.

(S6, E4, The One Where Joey Loses His Insurance)

The pronoun *it* clearly refers to the lecture that Ross will give, but Chandler once again sees the chance to introduce humor in yet another situation. He plays with the meaning of this pronoun and refers to the act of pleasing oneself in a sexual manner. The incongruity occurs because Chandler invokes a concept that was not thought of prior to his pun, though the same items are used. The use of humor makes talking about such taboo topics much easier and this consequently contributes to the participants learning more about each other and strengthening their relationships. We can, therefore, conclude that punning is another manner of creating social bonds and preserving group identity.

Despite their disruptive nature, puns can also perform a communicative function and one such example will be presented below. In this scene, the six friends have just finished playing poker:

(7) Chandler: Rach, Rach, we gotta settle.

Rachel: Settle what?

Chandler: The... Jamestown Colony of Virginia... You see, King George is giving us the land, so...

(S1, E18, The One With All the Poker)

Once again, Chandler is the one who perceives the possible incongruity once Rachel asks this question and decides to use this opportunity to produce a pun. He decides to shift from one concept linked to the verb *settle*, namely that related to money, to another one which is completely unsuitable in this situation. What is important for our analysis of this example in terms of punning is that Chandler uses it as a sort of a hedging device. Namely, by choosing to use the pun, we can say that he tries to avoid being too serious and too committed to his statement presented in the first line above, probably due to the way Rachel responded and the fact that she did not understand what needed to be settled. In terms of social functions, one that is performed here is decommitment and another one is mediation, whereby humor is used

as a transitional device to introduce a topic that might be more serious or face-threatening. In this case, the girls have lost the game and they owe the boys money for it, and asking someone to give you money is never an easy task, even if it is your own or the money you have earned. Chandler, therefore, tries to mitigate the potential threat and seriousness of this situation by resorting to humor. Though that is the intended function of his use of punning in this situation, we can notice that this attempt is not quite successful because it does not really amuse Rachel or make her laugh. Her reaction, which includes silence and a facial expression that clearly shows she did not find his pun funny, are influenced by her perspective of the overall situation. Once again, we see how individuals constitute an essential part of the humorous exchange, be it for producing humor or reacting to it.

One more social function that punning can have is that of defunctionalization. In the following example, Chandler enters the apartment and finds Ross, Joey and Monica talking about something:

(8) Chandler: What are you guys talking about?

Ross: Uhm... Rachel and I hired a male nanny.

Chandler: You got a man who's a nanny? You got a manny?

(S9, E6, The One With the Male Nanny)

As we have explained before, defunctionalization implies language being used for playful purposes only, and not to transfer information. Chandler's comment exemplifies precisely that: his intention was not to provide any additional information, nor to ask for any, but simply to play with the words *man* and *nanny*. The incongruity of this situation lies in the fact that the general view of the profession of a nanny was that it is reserved for women. In this case, the pun used does not really invoke different concepts, but it simply plays with the forms of these two words.

What we need to mention about the use of puns in this sitcom is that the majority of them are used precisely by Chandler, as is clear from the fact that our corpus is mostly comprised of such examples. He himself explains why he resorts to using humor so often by saying that he started using humor as a defense mechanism once his parents got divorced (Season 3, Episode 17). He was nine at the time so we can conclude that this event greatly shaped the person he has become. There are numerous examples in the show where he uses



humor in uncomfortable situations, or when he does not know how to react to something or respond to someone. We will provide one such example below:

(9) Cathy: You have really great hair!

Chandler: Oh thanks, I grow it myself!

(S4, E7, The One Where Chandler Crosses the Line)

In this scene, Chandler is having his hair cut by Cathy, Joey's new girlfriend, whom Chandler has started falling in love with and who also secretly likes Chandler. None of this is yet expressed explicitly. Cathy has come to Joey's apartment to wait for him there since they are supposed to go out that night but Joey is late due to some car trouble, so Cathy and Chandler are alone in the boys' apartment. This scene is a perfect example of Chandler using humor when feeling uncomfortable because from his point of view humor makes any such situation a little easier to handle. In addition, humor also helps him overcome his insecurity, the roots of which are probably also in his childhood, and makes him feel like he is part of the group and that his presence is truly felt. This is even discussed in an episode, where Joey mentions that being funny is Chandler's thing, after he gets upset and jealous that Monica, who is his wife at that time, refers to one of her colleagues as the funniest guy ever. This statement of hers is perceived by Chandler as a threat to what he is, and to his position in this group of friends. We will not go into much detail with regard to these psychological aspects of an individual's decision to use humor because psychology is not our primary field of interest. Still, this is certainly an interesting issue, the analysis of which could be taken up by someone more experienced in the field of psychology. Our hope is that such an analysis will be conducted and that its findings will contribute to a better understanding of punning, both with regard to this corpus but also in general. For this present analysis, this is where we will end our brief reference to psychology.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Being a concept that is familiar to and used by people across the world, humor is also becoming a rather popular topic for research in various fields. Numerous aspects of humor are being studied in order to find answers as to why and how we use it, how it affects us, how we react to it, etc. Different formal realizations of humor have been investigated for this purpose, but we decided to focus on a rather peculiar one – punning.

We were interested in investigating the relationship between puns and politeness, or to be more precise between puns and the concept of face. Our analysis of the corpus has shown that puns do function as face-threatening acts. If we focus on the distinction between the positive and the negative face, this analysis has shown that both can be threatened when a pun is used in a conversation. Some of the examples used for this analysis show that this threat can be intensified in the continuation of the talk exchange, but it can also be minimized if the interlocutors choose to do so. Therefore, what needs to be taken into account are definitely the participants in a conversation, since their reactions determine the outcome.

Another distinction that we decided to observe is that between the face of the speaker and that of the hearer. The conclusion that we have reached based on the examples from the corpus is that puns can pose a threat to both. We have seen that the speaker can choose to threaten their own face, either positive or negative, by purposefully producing a pun, and an interesting observation is that a single instance of punning can simultaneously threaten both faces of the speaker. Something curious to consider is that a pun that presents a threat to the hearer's face is more often than not also a threat to the speaker's face. This is presumably because puns are a form of humor that is often frowned upon and not that well received; therefore, by deciding to use it, the speaker risks having his face threatened if their interlocutors do not react positively to it. Consequently, this confirms our claim that participants in a talk exchange play a crucial role in how that talk exchange will proceed or how some parts of it will be perceived.

We have also paid considerable attention to the purpose of humor and we were interested to see whether puns, as a rather unusual and peculiar form of humor, can perform different social functions that are associated with humor in general. Our analysis has shown this to be true. We have seen that puns can be used as a hedging device and to express speaker's decommitment from what they are saying. Another function that can be performed by puns is that of mediation, whereby punning can be used to transition from one topic to

another one that might be more serious or one that might pose a bigger threat to the hearer's face. Once again, the analysis has shown that how successful the use of punning for these purposes is depends on the interlocutors and on their perception of that talk exchange and the context related to it. Finally, puns, as form of play on words, can be used precisely for that purpose – to play with the language. We have seen that no particular information needs to be conveyed and that the reason behind the use of puns can be simply to produce a humorous effect, in which case they do not necessarily pose a threat to either the speaker or the hearer.

Though this analysis has shed some light on these concepts, there certainly are some aspects that remain in the dark and that could be used for further research. One interesting question is the reason behind one's decision to produce a pun, even though they are aware of the threat that such an act poses both to their and to the face of their interlocutors. This, naturally, seems like a question suitable for some other discipline, not necessarily linguistics. Furthermore, we have mentioned that punning has always been regarded as a low form of humor but is this true even nowadays? Though talk exchanges in sitcoms are not the same as natural conversations, they are a rather suitable ground for such a research and a comparative analysis of a more recent sitcom with an older one might provide some interesting answers to the aforementioned question. Furthermore, we have mentioned social functions of humor, but this is a topic that definitely requires more space and research. How successful are puns when it comes to performing those functions and what does this success depend on? What effect do culture and tradition have on the effect puns have and people's perception of them? These and many other questions remain to be answered and our hope is that this paper will prove to be a good starting point or a source of inspiration for further research with regard to this broad topic.

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