

STRATEGIES CREATING HUMOR IN FILM DIALOGUE

Viorica Condrat

Dialogue production in a film is an intricate process as it has the aim not only to transmit a genuine conversation involving two or more people, but also to create a specific effect upon the viewer. Thus, the screenwriter while creating a seemingly spontaneous interaction between the characters makes use of everyday communication strategies. It should be mentioned that it becomes even more challengeable to design a humorous dialogue. On the one hand, the verbal interaction is governed by specific communicative needs of the interlocutors, on the other, the screenwriter is trying to arouse a particular reaction in the viewer through this conversation. The present article analyzes the strategies applied by the screenwriter in creating humor in the American film "New in Town".

Some erroneously think that a film is exclusively what one sees, nothing more than a skillfully edited sequence of moving pictures. Indeed, it is difficult to deny the importance of the perfect shot of the sunset and its dramatic significance in revealing the emotional load of a certain moment in the characters' lives. Yet, the moment might be spoiled by the wrong word in the wrong place and the totality of that moment is lost.

Film dialogue is a special type of dialogue which is created in such a way as to produce a specific effect on the off-screen listener. On the one hand, it is not the genuine conversation taking place between two or more people, it is a 'particular kind of imitation of people talking' (Kozloff, 2000: p. 29). On the other, dialogue in films is aimed at a particular audience and expected to be perceived as a seemingly accurate speech occurrence.

In Sarah Kozloff's opinion: 'film dialogue has been purposely designed for the viewers to overhear' (Kozloff, 2000: p. 15). The meaning of the word 'overhear' in this case is extremely significant as it emphasizes the intruder's role reserved for the viewer: the one who sees and hears everything but does not interfere; the one whose invisible presence does not change the progress of the plot in any way.

However, one should not undermine the viewer's significance in the process of dialogue creation. The screenwriter is the one to initiate the dialogue with the viewer, thus, the film becomes the channel through which their communication occurs. It is an intricate process where the screenwriter wants the viewer to collaborate in the evolving story in front of him.

Proceeding from the assertion that "the word in living conversation is directly, blatantly oriented toward a future answer word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in

the answer's direction" (Quinn, 2006: p. 117), we assume that the author of a script arranges his lines in the answer's direction so that the spectator understands his communicative goals and is able to decode the intended meaning.

There are researchers who perceive literature as 'another form of communication' (Holquist, 2001: p.66), claiming that "literary texts, like other kinds of utterances, depend not only on the activity of the author, but also on the place they hold in the social and historical forces at work when the text is produced and when it is consumed" (Holquist, 2001: p.66). We may assume that the script may also be regarded as 'another form of communication', where the screenwriter is the initiator of the dialogue governed by the specific context he lives in.

Upon analysis, we see that most scripts are to a certain degree context-bound and their understanding depends on the knowledge the viewers supposedly possess. In this way the 'consumption' of the intended message will be influenced by the viewers' social and intellectual background. The screenwriter proceeds from the assumption that his message will be decoded correctly by his viewers, expecting a concrete feedback from them. Something which may be tracked by the way the film was received by the critics and the public.

Just like in the case of the authors of literary works (Condrat, 2009: p. 113), the screenwriter carefully selects the strategies to communicate his intentions. His strategies are both linguistic and extralinguistic. However, as a rule, a screenwriter is always indirectly conveying his message.

LoCastro states: "one fact of human communication is that more often than not interactants do not say directly what they intend to mean" (LoCastro, 2006: p. 118). In her opinion, this urge for indirectness "may allow the speaker to assess how well the addressee can understand the intended meaning, thus *joining* the speaker as a member of a select group" (LoCastro, 2006: p.124). It is also worth mentioning that such a strategy helps create humor in conversation, and, consequently, in films as well.

Yet, in this off-screen conversation, the screenwriter does not have an immediate feedback the way it happens in real-life dialogue, for example, he will not hear the laughter. Nevertheless, he will make use of those strategies from real-life situations which, in his opinion, will allow him to lead the addressee towards the 'answer's direction'.

We would like to prove our thesis on the example of the American comedy 'New in Town' written by C. Jay Cox and Ken Rance. This is the story of a self-made woman from Miami who has the characteristics of a feminist and who gets to a conservative town from Minnesota expecting to make some major changes in a dairy company but ends up changing her own perception of life.

This macro-theme is indirectly conveyed in the story, whereas, irony is the major communicative strategy helping create humor. Apart from irony, the humorous effect is produced by other means, such as: word play, metaphors, hyperboles, repetitions, etc. There are also

extralinguistic features involved in the process of humor generation, beginning with the social and historic context and ending up with the actors' play.

As stated, irony is very important in this film. Apart from being a rhetorical device, irony stands for a well-thought communication strategy selected by the speaker in order to obtain the intended reaction from the part of the hearer. Or, on the contrary, to hide the intended meaning from the listener, but not from the overhearer, as in the case of the film.

In order to assert our statements we would like to analyze a few passages from the film which will exemplify the communicative strategies used in the movie.

Ms. Hill: I'm looking for Blanche Gunderson. My assistant, Cathy, called.

Blanche: You must be Miss Hill. I'm Blanche Gunderson.

Ms. Hill: You're my executive assistant?

Blanche: Oh, heavens no. I'm just a secretary. Did you want me to find you one of those?

Ms. Hill: We'll see.

Trudy: What you need to find is a place to live.

Blanche: Right. This is your realtor, Trudy.

Trudy: Trudy van Uuden at your service. That's with too u's. A double u, not a w.
I'll drive. What do you say you follow with Ms Hill?

Blanche: Oh, good idea.

Example 1

This is a passage from the beginning when the main character gets acquainted with her new 'executive assistant'. This dialogue traces both the social statuses of the female characters and their different perceptions of life. Thus, when Lucy Hill meets her 'executive assistant' she is shocked to find, in fact, 'just a secretary'. Her surprise should be analyzed on the suprasegmental level, as her intonation shows her dissatisfaction and disbelief that there are such women as Blanche in the world. Having a strong feminist bias she cannot understand women who, in her belief, are weaker.

On the other hand, we can see that Blanche is not familiar with the subtleties of the politically correct English, thus, her language reveals her openness and lack of hypocrisy. She refuses to pretend to be somebody she does not feel she is, that is why she exclaims 'Oh, heavens, no.' She is ready to find one 'executive assistant' if her boss asks for it.

Lucy Hill's reply is ironic. She has already labeled her new acquaintance and thinks it is just a matter of time till she fires her secretary. That explains her answer and the use of future simple denoting a certain degree of probability. Blanche does not realize that if she tries to find Ms. Hill 'an executive assistant she will lose her job.

The third interactant in this conversation is Trudy van Uuden, who indirectly introduces herself. In her attempt to enlighten the conversation she tries to make a joke by using word play, which is not understood by Lucy Hill.

We can draw the conclusion that the first short verbal encounter resulted in a conversational failure as the participants did not manage to understand each other. Their different social and

cultural background prevents them from realizing their communicative goals even in this short dialogue. As a matter of fact, its length is influenced namely by this communicative failure.

Blanche: Oh, your luggage all matches. That's so nice. Say cheese. Are you a scrapper?

Ms. Hill: Excuse me?

Blanche: Oh, there's Merle. Hey, Merle. That's our mailman Merle. That's what we call him, Mailman Merle. Because he delivers the mail and he's our mailman. So you know? Oh, yeah. Do you keep a scrapbook? Because I do. I'm a scrapper, see. We even got a club. I got a mini in my bag here. Ok, this here, is our dog, Winston Churchill. He's dead. He was a bit of a drooler, I'm afraid. And this here is my kitty Snowflake. She's dead too. We had to put her down on account of that kitty-leukemia thing. You should've seen the kinds of things she was barfing up on our couch. Poor thing. Bless her heart. She's not dead in the picture though. She's just sleeping.

Ms. Hill: Could I look at that later maybe? Okay?

Blanche: So... Are you married? Do you have children?

Ms. Hill: No, no. I'm not married.

Blanche: Oh, you're still young, you know? Relatively. I mean you still got time, I suppose. Do you eat meat, or are you just one of those vegetarian people?

Ms. Hill: No, I'm not a vegetarian. Why?

Blanche: Because it's your first night in town. Don't think we're gonna let you go hungry. You're coming to my house for dinner. Nothing fancy, of course. Meatloaf. Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?

Ms. Hill: Isn't that what you've been doing?

Blanche: Have you found Jesus?

Ms. Hill: Well, I didn't know he was missing. It was just a joke.

Blanche: Normally we don't joke about Jesus around here. But I can see how you'd think that was sort of funny. Imagine Jesus gone missing. Imagine.

Example 2

The second example is created following the same strategy. The screenwriters emphasize the gap existing between these two women. Blanche tries to be polite and to start a conversation: she praises the matching luggage, she tries to make Lucy see the funny side of calling the mailman Merle, and she tells her interlocutor about her hobby. In this way, she makes an attempt to make Lucy be part of her community.

This conversation is once again a failure. Due to her openness, Blanche sees nothing wrong in asking some personal questions. Her honesty can be seen in the way she tries to make a self-repair turn 'Oh, you're still young, you know? Relatively. I mean you still got time, I suppose'. She realizes that she has made a mistake and resolves to change the topic of conversation. She indirectly tries to invite the new-comer to dinner. Then, she again makes a gaffe. This time, she prepares her interlocutor by directly stating that she is going to ask a personal question.

Lucy is very reserved and in her answer: 'Isn't that what you've been doing?', she actually wants to be left alone. So she gives an indirect dispreferred reply, which is not perceived by Blanche. Her pretence prevents her from being honest. However, she is relieved when she hears the question, as, in her opinion, it is not a personal question. We can see that religion is something she does not care much of. Whereas, Blanche's serious reaction emphasizes their difference once again. So this dialogue is another communication failure.

Another example is the scene when Lucy Hill comes to dinner and meets the male protagonist Ted Mitchell. Lucy tries to be sociable and have a conversation basically void of any meaning, just to have the semblance of a conversation:

Ms. Hill: So, Ted, do you live around here?

Ted: Yeah.

Example 3

However, their conversation is another failure. This time the issue of gender talk was masterly revealed in the characters' dialogue by the screenwriters. What seems to start as an amiable ritualistic socializing moment ends up in a row.

Lucy cannot understand how a rational adult can prefer living in New Ulm to the splendors of a metropolis. Thus she tries to persuade her interlocutors by bringing forth examples of the advantages of living in the city: 'Well, I mean, the cultural advantages alone. Museums, opera, ballet, theater. Not to mention nightlife' or 'Do you know I was in a restaurant, and Justin Timberlake walked in?', or 'You know who else was there, Bobbie? Fergie. I bet you like her music, huh?'

Bobbie's reply was a dispreferred response to Lucy's statement.

Bobbie: My dad won't let me like that stuff.

Ms. Hill: Well, you seem old enough to decide for yourself what you like.

Ted: Excuse me? Women like that just selling themselves as sex objects? What kind of a role model is that for young girls?

Ms. Hill: I think that any examples of strong successful young women are vital.

Ted: And that's how you measure success? By how provocative a woman can be? We'll pass on that. We'll listen to country.

Example 4

Lucy once again cannot understand how a young girl can be told what to listen and what not to listen by her father. She wants to make her understand that it is high time she made decisions by herself. However, her father disagrees and is blatantly expressing his disapproval. He criticizes the stereotyped image of the singers and models who, in his viewpoint, spoil the young generation. Thus, he is the typical representative of the patriarchic society, who will not accept the changing mores of the time, which can be seen in the last line in this example.

The conversation goes totally wrong and the two interactants end up shouting and offending each other. So once again, this is a case of a communication failure. They constantly mock and are ironic in everything they say. None of them want to see the other's side or to doubt their own beliefs.

Ms. Hill: Greetings, New Ulm. I'm here to usher in a new phase. This is a great opportunity. I'm here to reconfigure for the initialization of Rocket Bars. This will be an exciting utilization of new branding.....for capitalizing on a highly profitable demographic.

Stu: Cut to the chase. We don't give a fart on a muggy day what you're making us make. Tell us how many you're planning on laying off.

Ms. Hill: Management at Munk Foods in Miami has sent me here.....to conduct mechanization and modernization procedures.

Stu: Yeah, you Munck-ees all say that crap. But every time one of you comes, we end up losing jobs.

Ms. Hill: Well, I'm interested in the jobs we'll create. If you're not, that's fine, but I'll expect you to implement the changes.....in a timely manner.

Example 5

This example shows another technique used in this dialogue: double-speak. Lucy Hill is the ruthless person who will do anything to get to her goal. However, she cannot directly state her purposes because of the scandal that may appear after the employees find out that they might be fired. That is why she prefers to hide her intentions under such pompous phrases as: ‘to usher in a new phase’, etc. Her vocabulary is also a bookish one, as she wants to impress her audience by her use of so many sophisticated words.

We can see the contrast between her way of presenting **her** ‘truth’ and the foreman’s way of mocking everything she says. Being in the business for a long time, Stu Kopenhafer understands what underlies under her seemingly beautiful speech. That is why he cuts her short and his speech is rude. He makes a pun calling the people from the Miami office ‘Munck-ees’, thus evidently showing his position of a man who will fight for the company and its workers.

Yet, Lucy is very ambitious and she makes sure that she is the one who tells the last word in this conversation. She refuses to see Stu’s side and gives him (and all the other employees) no freedom of choice.

This other example of communication failure was realized with help of the distinct stylistic registers used by the interactants. It produces a humorous effect on the viewers and helps get a better understanding of the characters’ personalities.

The entire film is constructed around such communicative failures based on utterances loaded with an ironic meaning. Definitely, the genre of the film governed the script as well as it has a happy ending where the female character realizes how wrong she was and changes at the end.

We would also like to analyze some ironic utterances from the film to show how humor was created.

Underlying Meaning	Ironic Expression	Apparent Meaning
I will strongly consider this suggestion.	<i>We'll see.</i>	Opposite, politeness (lie).
I'm outraged that you decide everything for your daughter.	<i>Well, you seem old enough to decide for yourself what you like.</i>	Seemingly similar, but it was actually aimed at the father (unsympathetic and dissatisfaction).
She is the one who will steal from the poor as a CEO.	<i>You better count the silverware before she leaves.</i>	Opposite, (sarcasm)
I will make some radical changes which means that most of you will be fired.	<i>Greetings, New Ulm. I'm here to usher in a new phase. This is a great opportunity. I'm here to reconfigure for the initialization of Rocket Bars. This will be an exciting utilization of new</i>	Opposite, the choice of bookish vocabulary (lie)

	<i>branding.....for capitalizing on a highly profitable demographic.</i>	
Stop lying and tell the truth. We are not fools.	<i>Cut to the chase. We don't give a fart on a muggy day what you're making us make. Tell us how many you're planning on laying off.</i>	Seemingly similar, the use of informal vocabulary to make his coworkers part of their private community (mockery and dissatisfaction)
I have the power to do everything I think is best for the company.	<i>Management at Munck Foods in Miami has sent me here.....to conduct mechanization and modernization procedures.</i>	Opposite, the bookish vocabulary (lie).
Stop talking about that and get to work.	<i>Yeah, well, I doubt that your tapioca recipe is gonna affect the plant.</i>	Opposite (dissatisfaction).

We can see that in most cases while using irony as a communicative strategy the speakers try to produce a particular effect on the listener. They may lie, show their total disapproval of something, mock somebody or joke. Yet, if we consider the underlying meaning, we can see that they realize their intentions indirectly as they do not openly state what is on their mind. Whereas, in the case of the last example, it is also a case of dramatic irony, as it was Blanche's tapioca that actually saved the plant.

It is worth mentioning that the analyzed examples in this article produced a humorous effect on the viewers. All the people whom we asked to watch the film pointed to these examples as humorous and interesting. So while the main characters were not laughing, the 'overhearers' were enjoying themselves. Thus, we can state that the dialogue between the screenwriters and the viewers was a successful one as the encoded message was understood by the latter.

To sum up, communication failures of the interactants as well as irony served as a strategic technique to create humor in the film 'New in Town'. Indeed, the characters lively dialogue helped the viewers decode the screenwriters' intended messages. They touched upon such vital issues as: gender discrimination, religion, social status, cultural background, snobbism, and double-speak. They followed the rules of the genre offering the long-expected happy-end to the viewers.

REFERENCES:

- Condrat, Viorica, Conversaiton Analysis in 'Hills like White Elephants' by Ernest Hemigway. // *Limba și context. Revistă de lingvistică, semiotică și știință literară* vol. II. Bălți: Presa universitară bălțeană, 2009
- Condrat, Viorica, Literature as Dialogue. // *Strategii actuale în lingvistică, glotodidactică și știință literară* vol. II. Bălți: Presa universitară bălțeană, 2009
- Holquist, Michael, *Dialogism. Bakhtin and his World*. Second Edition. Routledge, 2002.
- Kozloff, Sarah, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, University California Press, 2000.

LoCastro, V. *An Introduction to Pragmatics. Social Action for Language Teachers*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2006

Quinn, E., *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms*. Second Edition. Facts on File, Inc., 2006.

Tannen, Deborah, *Talking Voices. Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.