Why do we laugh? A semiotic analysis of British comedy duo sketches

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Abstract

Comedy has long been analysed from a pragmatic perspective with the predictable conclusion that we laugh because one of the four Gricean maxims has been violated. However, the wording of Grice's maxims is so loose and flexible that more or less any joke would violate one of his maxims and thus the 'Cooperative Principle'. So, we are still left mediating the meta-pragmatic question of what it is that lies behind verbal incongruity that makes us actually laugh? This article analyses the notion of incongruity from a Peircean semiotic perspective and focuses exclusively on a selection of British comedy duo sketches whose humour is derived overwhelmingly from discursive, lexical and socio-phonetic incongruity. On the basis of classic British comedy due sketches at least, there is some mileage in perceiving incongruity as a semiotic misalignment or 'indexical shock' which subverts our basic social expectations by indexing non-presupposed contexts. We laugh because our verbal norms are not only challenged, but are turned upside down and torn apart. Moreover, we laugh because the social identities that the speech acts aim to index non-referentially often clash or conflict immediately with those of his or her interlocutor's.

Key Words

Introduction

More or less neglected until the arrival of Bergson (1900) and Koestler (1964), humour studies have become a burgeoning sub-field of late (Attardo 2020; Hemplemann 2019; Billig 2005).[1] There have been attempts to formalise humour (The General Theory of Verbal Humour, GTVH, Raskin 1985; The Linear Theory of Humour, Attardo 1994 etc.), and comedy has increasingly caught the attention of cognitive linguists, cognitive psychologists, social anthropologists and social theorists. This article does not intend to formalise humour further,[2] but instead analyses a number of British comedy duo sketches by intertwining pragmatics and Peirceian semiotics. The argument will be primarily that British comedy duo sketches rely overwhelmingly on the notion of 'incongruity' as a means of comic effect, and that this 'incongruity' should be perceived as a form of semiotic misalignment or indexical clash between the interlocutors. I thus tackle the question from the Gumperz-Hymesian ethnographic tradition with its extensions in contemporary linguistic anthropology, and in particular the work of Michael Silverstein (1976: 11–55; 1985: 219–59; 1992: 311–23; 2003: 193–229). This article works off the premise that presuppositions and inferencing should be the objects of ethnographic observation rather than objects of formalist analysis. It is hoped that this micro-analysis might lead to a more in-depth and intercultural understanding of the Peirceian semiotics of humour.

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1 I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions. Any outstanding errors are my own.

2 Even if the sketches I analyse in this paper may indicate a homogeneity in the rhetorical mechanism they use to make us laugh, I do not have immutable faith in formalised methods of studying humour or indeed in attempts to 'model humour'. Comic practices around the world are far too varied to be boxed up and put in a single model.

It has long been agreed that incongruity alongside other notions such as superiority and relief is a major source for comic effect (Bergson 1900; Freud 1955 [1905]; 1928: 1–6; Hobbes 1651 (1982)). But, why is incongruity in itself so funny? This question is typically tackled from a cognitive perspective and mutually incompatible frames of reference or it might be unpacked using pragmatic theory (sometimes in association with Schegloffian conversation analysis). Grice (1975: 41–58) gave us the tools (or the terminology at least) to analyse what happens when his so-called Cooperative Principle is not upheld. Conversation that is 'cooperative' is said to comply with his four maxims: (1) Maxim of quantity: to be as informative as required, but not more than that; (2) Maxim of quality: to be truthful, don't say things for which you lack evidence; (3) Maxim of relation – irrelevant information should be omitted; (4) Maxim of manner – the speaker should be clear, brief, orderly and avoid obscure expressions.

As we will see, the British comedy duo sketches that will be analysed violate primarily the Maxim of Manner, but there has to be more to it than that. One might formulate that we laugh at these sketches whose humour is primarily verbal because we are being constantly tripped up by all kinds of linguistic incongruities (the notion of relevance could also be invoked here) that fail to observe this maxim. More specifically, these verbal incongruities might comprise the use of unconventional expressions or humorous muddling of idioms that often result in a double-entendre, serial misunderstandings due to hypercorrection or use of polysemous words, the parodying of platitude usage implied in certain situational discourses that have become highly conventionalised, a shocking juxtaposition of radically different discourses etc. We could of course leave the analysis at that, but that would surely be a half-baked interpretation. Saying that we laugh because a theoretical maxim is violated has become commonplace in the literature (Attardo 1993: 541), it is clichéd even and is not in itself an adequate explanation. Raskin (1992) tried to accommodate Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) by saying we should perceive different hierarchies of CPs, but this is not particularly helpful for most comedy would continue to violate this principle at one level of the hierarchy at least. Grice's vaguely worded pragmatic theory is undoubtedly a useful abstraction, but it has limited value when it comes to analysing comedy. Jokes convey fictitious events and therefore already violate the Maxim of Quality. So, what is *actually* going on? What lies *behind* these 'violations'? Why do really laugh at verbal incongruities?

Comic situations aside, we as speakers and listeners, align ourselves semiotically with interlocutors. When I speak of semiosis, I don't mean denotative Saussurean interpretations of form and meaning, but instead I have in mind notions of connotative Peircean semiotics which act as a hypostatic object prevalent in higher-order ontologies (Keane 2018: 64–87). That is to say we have a series of social expectations regarding broader indexical instantiations, and these expectations are grounded in our own linguistic ideologies. What is more, these expectations are particularly pronounced in the context of watching comedy because the listener is already attuned and well-disposed towards the comic experience. Comedy is a two-sided, cooperative social act that plays with, manipulates and inverts the listener's social and semiotic expectations. We are primarily no longer concerned with signs that communicate messages, but ones that serve ulterior purposes such as to amuse or shock or that even send messages which might appear absurd (as we will see in some of the sketches that are analysed within). A form of social intimacy and solidarity is, of course, created when the ruffling of these social and semiotic expectations and defunctionalisation of the sign is shared.

Theoretical approach

Putting indexicality at the centre of this upsetting of presupposed contexts plays into notions of linguistic and semiotic ideologies (Keane 2018: 64–87; Leonard 2021a: 30–48; Leonard 2021b: 141–58; Silverstein 1992: 311–23) for it disavows representationist ideologies (and their subject-object dualisms) which attempt to semanticize language and culture. The language ideologies paradigm developed in the 1990s shows how language usage is accompanied by meta- forms of ideological beliefs (Kroskrity, Schieffelin & Woolard 1992). Developed subsequently, semiotic ideology refers to the set of beliefs and assumptions we have regarding the function of signs and what the consequences of their use might be. Semiotic ideology aids us in understanding what people make of their comic experiences, but semiotic ideologies don't necessarily map onto different semiotic systems. As Keisalo (2016: 101–21) notes, language use might imply a semiotic ideology, but it is not necessarily the same for different users of the same language in different situations.

Ideology construes indexicality (Silverstein 1992: 315), and such ideologies based on indexicality manifest themselves in various ways such as in the sociolinguistic notion of 'accommodation' where speakers in class societies in particular 'accommodate' to their interlocutor by making small sub-conscious socio-phonetic adjustments to index social proximity between the speakers (which might not otherwise be there). These very small adjustments ensure that the socio-phonetic 'form' is more aligned to that of the listener. More prevalently, semiotic alignment is ensured through lexical choice. We tend to 'cooperate' by choosing words to describe phenomena which we believe would dovetail with the listener's. If a layman asks us about our research, we do not tend to launch into an in-depth abstract monologue replete with inaccessible jargon. Instead, we lay out our research interests in accessible terms that are most likely to be understood by the listener. This tendency towards semiotic alignment is surely more or less universal. Those who unknowingly do not comply with such Gricean maxims might be considered to be autistic for they are perceived to lack social awareness.

Semiotic alignment can also be observed at the discursive level using very conventional or one might say stereotypical comedic scripts (ordering food in a restaurant,

being served in a shop, making a speech). For instance, if a priest is standing at the pulpit giving a sermon or discussing a reading from the Bible, we implicitly have a whole series of complex social expectations regarding the discursive forms that he will employ and which values he will aim to index in his speech. We might assume that his language will be formulaic and biblical with archaic turns-of-phrase such as 'and he said unto her'. The supposed semiotic alignment between register choice and utterance would be subverted and violated if he were to suddenly break into rap, use slang and profane language. It would be considered *a priori* wrong and inappropriate.

The listener is therefore set up with a pre-primed script in mind comprising routine phonetics, reliable meanings and predictable discourses and then the scene is typically reconfigured in a way to maximise comic effect. Our social expectations regarding which identities the speaker aims to index are turned upside down and then the comedian flips back subsequently to the old discourse or sociolinguistic register and the listeners' semiotic expectations are once again realigned. However, it should be noted that in the sketches analysed in this paper incongruity is shown to result in humour alone and resolution is only complementary to this.

Background to British comedy duo sketches

The comedy sketches which I discuss tend to be concerned with verbal art and manipulation of verbal norms and less so social norms, identity politics and taboo which is arguably more of a concern for contemporary comedy (and certainly stand-up comedy). As with the mapping of social norms, disambiguating verbal norms is, I would argue, inherently semiotic for they are embedded in rich connotational frameworks which are irreducibly dialectic in nature. Many would agree that this kind of humour has long been an inextricable part of Britishness – a sense of openness to mockery, sharp satire and an appreciation of puns and verbal play.

I primarily chose these sketches because they are amongst the many comedy sketches that I grew up watching, and also because they are representative of quintessentially British comedy duo humour. It was only once I started watching them from an analytic perspective that I truly appreciated the sense in which their humour overwhelmingly hinged on the notion of incongruity. Such comedy gives us a better understanding of how language actually works. Linguistically, the jokes are often extremely sophisticated: for instance, there are sketches in The Two Ronnies and Monty Python where one speaker will speak either entirely in anagrams or spoonerisms; another may end every sentence with a double-entendre. Neologisms abound in many of the sketches. They may take a sociolinguistic trope such as turn-taking and abuse it to an absurd degree so that Fry finishes every one of Laurie's sentences with some kind of implicature-generating innuendo. The humour often stems from the fact that

the duo takes a very conventional setting, and then recycles the platitudes that tend to be used in such a context to a preposterous and hyperbolic extent. Subconsciously, we are all aware that certain discourse and conversation pieces are platitude driven but the comedy really brings to the fore what we have noticed and what we are subconsciously aware of but have not really noticed. These scenes themselves are thus highly semiotic. We laugh at the jokes for we think we enjoy some kind of immunity because we believe our wit indexes a different kind of consciousness. At this point, one might invoke the notion of superiority as a reason for why we laugh.

Britain has a long history of comedy duos (Morecambe and Wise, the Two Ronnies, Fry & Laurie, Smith and Jones, Hale and Pace, Little and Large – just to name a few). Before they even begin to speak, there is often something contrastive and funny about these duos: the Two Ronnies – both men named Ronnie, one tiny and the other comparatively large; Fry & Laurie – Stephen Fry often plays the verbose, effete intellectual type whereas Hugh Laurie is more inclined to play the upper-class twit. This kind of duality runs through the sketches.

The data

Sketch 1:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X40CQIh6q5Y

The first sketch comes from Fry & Laurie, a well-known comedy duo that were particularly popular in the 1990s. The scene is at the vet's and is a conversation between two pet-owners who are radically different in their speech, personality and association towards their respective pets. Stephen Fry plays a rather camp (he wears a wig), effeminate pet-owner who speaks in hyper-affective terms to the pets whereas Hugh Laurie plays a grumpy, gruff man who apparently has no interest in talking to his neighbour and who has, as we subsequently discover, come to have his Burmese cat put down. As is so often the case with their comedy, this is a parody of situational discourse and all its folk ontologies for it mocks platitudes used in pet-directed speech ('they can understand every word you say, you know'). Pet-directed speech (PDS) shares much with baby talk (diminutives, reduplication, vowel hyperarticulation, anthropomorphisation etc.) and features of this speech typification are here exaggerated to the point they become barely intelligible.

Fry indexes his emotions into speech events by using a whole list of diminutives and reduplication which become increasingly outrageous as the sketch proceeds.

Table 1. Indexing emotions through PDS.

PDS tools	Examples
Diminutives	Kitty-puss; Sunday afternoonies; vettie-loo; sore-throatie
Reduplication	mogg-wogg; tom-tom; pooper-scooper; nasty-parky; tommy-to-toastie; Banksy-wanksy
Anthropomorphisation	Mr Bermie

This exaggerated PDS discourse is amusing to the point that it is even shocking such as when even terminal cancer is rendered into a childlike diminutive and absolutely incongruous 'cancy-wancy'. Tapping on the cage and speaking to the cat, Fry says:

'Have you got cancy-wancy, Mr Bermie? Is your little heart going to be made to stoppy-wot-wot? Are they going to go kiddie chum-chums? Are they going to put your coldie-woldy bodie-wod in the groundie-wound, are they?'

Fry's exaggerated euphemisms ('a visit from the smack-fairy') and anthropomorphisation ('Mr Bermie') are contrasted with Laurie's blunt, laconic and deadpan statements 'I brought him in to be killed'. The humour comes from the parody of PDS (a style of speaking to which most pet-owners can surely relate to), but principally from the absolute contrast in the 'ways of speaking' (Hymes 1974) between the two pet-owners and the different emotional values that these ways of speaking index. Laurie responds to Fry's diminutives and hypercoristic filled speech with one-word exclamations such as 'Christ' and 'God' whilst shaking his head. Nearly all Fry's passages violate Grice's Maxim of Manner, but the humour comes not so much from these violations as from the contrastive styles of speech and what they connote semiotically. Laurie is shocked and appalled that his neighbour in the clinic is addressing his cat in this childlike, affective manner. His social expectations as listener have been thrown into disorder. There has been a socio-semiotic misalignment which is arguably bilateral for Fry is equally taken back by Laurie's cold, terse manner. Neither accommodates to one another stylistically, and it is almost as if the speech of each interlocutor is meant for somebody else. There is a disjunct, an indexical clash and discursive disaccommodation. The sketch ends on an absurd note when Fry's dog is heard telling the vet that 'his owner should be put down'.

Sketch 2:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbY8MH1TpEw

The second sketch is the only performance in my data that isn't actually a comedy duo, but I wanted to include it nonetheless for it exhibits a semiotic misalignment at a discursive level *in extremis*. Here we have the comedian, Rowan Atkinson (widely known throughout the world for playing the character of Mr Bean) acting the part of a priest. Atkinson, Fry & Laurie, Monty Python and The Two Ronnies would often use the role of church vicar in their comedy sketches. One could speculate what the reasons for this might be: in part, I suspect, all these comedians as *provocateurs* like to poke fun at institutionalized religion and its rituals, but I wonder if the main reason is simply that the role of the church vicar was appealing for

the 'way of speaking' is itself rather ritualized and fixed. The clergy are often very manicured personas. Atkinson is perhaps mocking the notion that vicars often believe in the sacramentality of words too, and violations of these lexical and discursive norms would therefore likely to be disproportionately incongruous.

Our social expectations regarding the language and social behaviour of the clergy are that he (normally represented by a man in the sketches) speaks in a formal, conservative way using formulaic, biblical language and that his speech acts will presumably index Christian values. Upsetting this rather staid picture, Atkinson in particular likes to introduce indexically charged signs such as sexual innuendos into these sketches, mocking perhaps social taboos and testing the limits of local cultural structures.

As with so many comedians, Atkinson wants to transgress social norms and such transgressions index unexpected values and identities that sit at odds with the image of a vicar wearing a cassock and holding a bible. There is a connotative semiotic play-off here between rational perceptions of a culture and revealed alternatives. As always, this kind of parody is based on very keen cultural observations.

The sketch revolves around a reading from the Book of John (2.1–11) where Jesus is said to have turned water into wine. At the beginning of the sketch, Atkinson reads the passage from the Bible containing all the biblical (and archaic) phraseology as expected. But as the sketch progresses, it is clear that Atkinson intends to mix up and conflate the biblical discourse with that of the magician and thus create an indexical shock because it creates another order of effective indexicality that is ironic in relation to the first (Silverstein 1992: 315). The intention is, of course, to make fun of the notion that wine can be turned into water. This conflation manifests itself with all manner of discursive incongruities which once again feed into platitudes that might be uttered in the event of observing a magic trick. One example being 'he should turn professional' – a comment that would be apt watching the magician Paul Daniels who is mentioned at the end of the sketch, but that is totally absurd and inappropriate in the context of a prophetic or biblical reading.[3]

Other obvious examples of this discursive conflation and semiotic misalignment are: 'thine one-liners are as good as one's tricks'; 'And Jesus said unto her 'put on a tutu'; 'put her in a box and cleft her in twain'; 'and the servants did know whence the wine cometh and they applauded loudly in the kitchen'. Atkinson maximises incongruity in this last sentence juxtaposing archaic phraseology with amusing non-biblical images. The penultimate quote is particularly funny for the language is so splendidly archaic ('cleft her in twain' can be found in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), but the image is that of a prototypical televised magic trick. The response to this is 'and the crowd went absolutely bananas' – a colloquial expression that might be heard amongst a group of teenagers,

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3 Paul Daniels was a well-known magician and TV personality in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s.

but that is absurdly incongruous in a biblical reading. As the sketch progresses, the tone becomes increasingly satirical. When the water is turned into wine, the servants respond: 'how the hell did you do that?' Do you do children's parties?' The latter question being once again a question typically aimed at a magician.

So, this entire sketch comprises a series of indexical shocks, an unstable mutual interaction of meaningful signs and presupposed associations, for the viewers' expectations are scrambled with the immediate juxtaposition of colloquial and scriptural phraseology, and the intermingling of platitudes with biblical discourse. The connection between the sign and its meaning is no longer neat and linear as in Saussurean denotational semiotics, but is laminated and mediated. Our metapragmatic awareness is such that when we see Atkinson dressed as a vicar, we presuppose there is going to be some kind of discursive subversion, but the anticipation of this does not appear to dilute the subsequent comic effect. All language users form habits of linking forms with meanings, and in comedy of this sort which is so tied to subtleties in language (even more so in some of the 'absurd' Monty Python sketches), the linking that the viewer is required to undertake becomes increasingly idiosyncratic and is far removed from the Chomskyian notion of 'ideal speaker-listener'.[4]

Sketch 3:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20hcYXBqnPg

If the two previous sketches could be described as explicitly 'verbal', then the following sketch could be described as explicitly linguistic for it comprises a socio-phonetic parody of British upper class speakers or what one might call speakers of conservative RP. This particular Two Ronnies sketch was performed in the 1980s when the relevant variety of conservative RP was more prevalent than it is today. This variety of English is characterised by certain very salient vowel phonemes such as inter alia: the /æ/ sound, as in *land*, replaced with a vowel close to [ɛ]; /ɔː/ instead of /ɒ/, so that 'often' and 'orphan' are homonyms; and the aʊ diphthong becomes aɪ with the result that 'house' sounds like 'hice'.

The sketch features two ostensibly upper-class looking English gentlemen wearing bowler hats who meet in a department store. They are old friends and when they meet, they both hypercorrect to appear more 'upper class' than the other. The hypercorrection is so extreme and absurd that they become mutually unintelligible and have to resort to phonetically unambiguous synonyms to make themselves understood. The sketch is of course a blatant parody of the British class system, ridiculing in particular socially ambitious middle class Britons who sometimes

aim to appeal to middle-upper or upper class speakers by changing how they pronounce certain vowel sounds. The sketch starts with:

Charles: 'I always come here for the old spice [spouse]'. Aubie thinks that Charles comes to the department store to buy the deodorant called 'Old Spice', but he actually comes to buy things for his 'spouse' (wife). In this variety of English, the two words are homonymous.

Aubie starts talking about his wife and says that she is a 'sly' [Slough] person. Charles responds with: 'I wouldn't say that, a little devious perhaps', but Aubie means that she is from the town called Slough. Charles talks about their old mutual friend Rupert Kimberly-Dimbleby from Wimbledon (Kimbers-Dimbers-Wimbers) who Aubie claims has a new girlfriend called Dulcimer Pageant. Aubie says that they got into trouble because they were 'fined' [found] in the park for she was beside him on the 'grind' [ground]. Charles says he didn't know what K-D-B saw in her and Aubie responds that she had a wonderful 'mound' [mind] to which Aubie responds, 'well, she had two wonderful 'mounds' [minds]. And, so on.

Semiotically speaking, hypercorrection is used here as form of non-referential indexicality for the hypercorrected phonemes do not contribute to the semantico-referential value of the speech event, but instead index a desired social identity and in doing so introduce semantic ambiguity. The irony is that when both interlocutors engage in this over-application of phonological rules they can no longer understand each other and their respective wishes to appeal to a higher sociolinguistic register are rendered absurd and cancel each other out. One might argue that they both aim to index a higher social class through speech, but ironically end up indexing linguistic insecurity. Either way, this sketch shows how the indexical and the denotational are dialectically connected to one another: a hypercorrected phoneme indexes an upper register, but fails a Searlian like felicity condition for the denotation is unintelligible.[5]

Sketch 4:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8ko2nCk_hE

The next sketch is from Fry & Laurie again. As is so often the case, it is a parody of situational discourse. This time, we have a drunk man in a bar complaining about his wife using a series of stereotypical platitudes ('she doesn't understand me'; she has never understood me'; 'I don't know why I bother with women'). The whole conversation amounts to a continuous violation of turn-taking rules with Fry finishing each of Laurie's sentences with a double entendre often in the form of a sexual innuendo or an absurd non sequitur. All these double en-

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4   Whilst not a feature of this particular sketch, readers interested in analysing Rowan Atkinson's humour might be interested in his preponderance to use what has been termed 'approximate comparison constructions' [about as X as Y] to maximise ironic effect. In this regard, Lehmann (2021: 133–58) is recommended reading.

5   Searle (1969) set some detailed rules known as 'felicity conditions' for an illocutionary act to achieve its purpose.

tendres relate to objects that Fry (the barman) offers the lone customer (Laurie).

Laurie: 'Alright, other men can boast a healthier looking…..'
Fry (offering Laurie a stool to sit on): 'stool'
Laurie: 'lifestyle'
Laurie: 'she is always going on and on about my appearance. It is not as if she is an oil painting. Frankly, she is….'
Fry (offering Laurie a choice of crisps): 'plain' and 'prawn flavoured'
Laurie: 'A least if I were'
Fry (offering Laurie a cigarette): 'a fag?'

Being a parody of situational discourse that we can all relate to or have heard before, the comedians' skill derives from the ways in which utterances index typifiable speaking personae (Agha 2005: 39). Laurie has effectively embarked on a monologue, a platitude driven rant with predictable content. We know immediately from the context (a drunk sitting alone on a bar stool) that this is a kind of talk that has come to be socially recognised as indexical of speaker attributes. The relevant attributes are that the speaker wants a sympathetic listener and nothing else. The humour comes from a series of indexical shocks mainly relating to Fry's responses – the humour of which is totally lost on Laurie because his expectation is that Fry will just listen to him.

Instead of using speech and mannerisms that would index a sympathetic listener and accommodate receptively to his customer's conversational needs, Fry offers him a long list of endless bar snacks and accoutrements none of which the punter wants and all of which finish Laurie's statements with an innuendo. We laugh because of the complete lack of semiotic alignment between the two speakers. Once again, they speak at cross purposes to such an extent as if they are talking to themselves. What is remarkable about this sketch is the skill in which the comedians reproduce the exact social voices linked to this specific register. This process sometimes known as enregisterment (Agha 2005: 38–59) feeds into the regularity of non-linguistic signs as well. Together, they index a universe of pragmatic features which over time have become recognised to be associated with this kind of talk. Socio-pragmatic features have become signalling devices.

Sketch 5:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LopIroSjsU

The final sketch could almost be perceived as a parody of orderly Saussurean semiotics. This is another Fry & Laurie sketch. Comedy aside, Stephen Fry is of course greatly interested in language and whilst slightly absurd, viewers should not be so surprised that with this sketch he is perhaps attempting to turn upside down how we think about language. The scene is at a police station, thus once again a rather conventionalised setting where people's ex-

pectations regarding how the conversation might ensue are quite fixed. This time, any preconceived image of a conversation at a police station is not only subverted through multiple violations of Gricean maxims, but taken to another semiotic dimension in that ridiculous gestures replace the name and address that the policeman asks for in order to complete his report. The policeman played by Fry is filling out an accident report and asks for some information about Laurie's vehicle. Then, he needs the name of the driver. Laurie responds by saying 'Derek' and then pauses, takes out his pen drops it onto the desk – a gesture which is meant to denote his surname. When Laurie is asked how he spells his surname, he says 'it is as it sounds'. When pushed, he goes onto spell it as 'nippl-e', but refuses to recognise and apparently understand the standard pronunciation of the word 'nipple' as a phonetic rendition of his surname. Even more absurd is his address which is: No.22, followed by a tap dance and a light slap on Fry's left cheek.

At this point, this whole Montypythonesque sketch could be perceived as a rather absurd parody of the conventionality of signs we use in verbal language despite English spelling conventions being often unphonetic and idiosyncratic. So many words are *not* spelt 'as they sound'. As with the previous sketches, the comedy revolves around a series of misunderstandings but this time there can be no understanding for totally unconventional signs have replaced words in the theatre of the absurd. The policeman and the man reporting the crime are left in some kind of semiotic altercation with Fry ending up beating Laurie over the head with a cricket bat which he perhaps assumes Laurie might understand as some kind of verbal command. This is meant to be perceived to be a sort of emphatic or expletive rendition of Laurie's surname which ends with a gentler slap on the cheek.

There can, of course, be multiple meta-semiotic construals of data like this, but it seems that all these sketches' registers comprise social indexicals based on interactional tropes that index stereotypic social personae. What is striking is that the speakers are not attuned to the necessary register alignments or what you might call patterns of congruence. In fact, they are often, it would seem, completely unaware of them. Hence, they challenge the listener's expectations with regards to register for the semiotic mapping process is corrupted somehow. This final sketch takes this notion of indexical corruption to an extreme and, of course, absurd degree, and seems to be almost mocking the fact that anybody would wish to subscribe to a plain vanilla denotational ideology of language.

Conclusion

As Blommaert (2014: 1) reminds us, the 'total linguistic fact' is ideologically mediated and indexically organised, and British comedy duo sketches seem to bring these two qualities to the fore. Any analysis of comedy based on multimodal semiotic facts challenges the ideology that language exists primarily because it produces denotational meanings. Comedy is loaded with indexicals and exhibits

instead the connotative complexity of language. Many of the sketches analysed in this article are based on complex misunderstandings, verbal and discursive ambiguity and multi-tiered and often conflicting indexicality between the interlocutors. British comedy of this kind takes mainstream platitudes and Hymesian 'ways of speaking' and subverts them by muddling and merging discourses. The result is, of course, incongruity, and behind this incongruity are often a series of indexical shocks: the hypercorrecter who cannot be understood despite wishing to gain entry to a perceived higher social class; the priest who indexes Christian values at the beginning of his sermon, but by the end has usurped the performativity of a magician; the over-emotive pet-owner who wishes to spout love and affection, but ends up being despised for his discursive hyperbole; the drunk man on the bar stool who just wants a sympathetic ear but instead gets lewd non sequiturs in return; the man who uses ridiculous gestures in place of words. My argument has been that these British comedy sketches are fractured and layered, and that it is primarily these indexical shocks embedded in the respective meta-pragmatic layers that make incongruity such a rich source of humour.

In this article, I have just scraped the surface of the semiotic treasure trove that is British comedy duo sketches. Analysing an admittedly limited sample of sketches, I have aimed to show how indexicality whilst primarily a pragmatic notion can be employed as a semiotic tool to help us understand why we are amused. Socialisation is a process where we assign situational and indexical meanings to particular linguistic forms (Ochs 1996: 410). When these meanings become highly conventionalised with, say, particular social voices, emphatic stresses or diminutive affixes, then they can easily become fodder for comedy. We laugh when these conventionalised indexical meanings are subverted, decontextualised and juxtaposed with a 'way of speaking' that works to highlight the indexical nature of all these typifiable utterances. We end up with what is essentially a case study of the instability of social meaning.

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